

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: A peek at Camilla and Eloise~

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Once they've completed their training for the day and broken off, Camilla heads for the Darkwoods. She doesn't go too far in to be fair, barely a ten minute run. Just far enough into the woods to expect relative privacy from the denizens back in town.

As soon as she finds a nice small clearing, the Knight Bachelorette draws her sword from its sheath and falls into a stance. And then she begins working her way through every technique she knows, swinging and slashing and stabbing with her sword in a practiced series of movements that get faster and faster as she repeats them.

... The Dark Elf's comments wouldn't be so irritating if there wasn't some truth to them, after all. The fact was, Camilla had begun to fall behind... and she knew it. She'd stagnated and stopped truly trying to grow and it had somehow led to her being the weakest true warrior in all of Last Hope. Sure, she was still stronger than most of Last Hope's residents, even the ones who had taken up arms against the King of the Forest's pack, but that didn't mean much.

Not when she was completely and utterly surpassed by her Lord at this point.

Back at the start, when Thomas had first requested she train him, Camilla hadn't thought much of it. She certainly hadn't put her full effort in because if she had, she might have killed him. No, she'd brought herself down to his level, or maybe a little above it considering how hard she'd walloped him sometimes early on.

However, he'd grown in leaps and bounds even at that point, hadn't he? She'd watched him go from completely ignorant in how to wield a spear, to being able to exterminate an entire goblin tribe alongside her without either of them taking a single injury.

Still, she definitely hadn't been working on herself back then. She hadn't thought there was much of a need. Her skills were still sharp as was her blade... sharp enough to handle the threats to Last Hope that might crop up anyways, or so she'd thought.

And then the King of the Forest showed up and Camilla had realized just how wrong she was. She and Thomas had thrown themselves into training then and it was the first time in a long time that Camilla had tried to go beyond her current skill level. Rather than hone her skills, she'd actually been trying to get stronger and faster and tougher, because she knew if she didn't... the King of the Forest would kill her and Thomas and the rest of Last Hope soon after.

Unfortunately, while she'd managed one solid strike against the massive monstrous Dire Wolf when they'd finally gone to fight him, she'd been taken out of the fight almost immediately after and it had fallen to Thomas to carry the day, not only saving her life but everyone else's in the process.

Surviving that fight... it had lit a fire in Camilla. She swore it did. She'd rededicated herself to her training after recovering, determined to get strong enough... and also determined to keep apace with Thomas because by that point she was in very real danger of being surpassed by the young man.

That should have been impossible to be clear. For a man of Thomas' age to pick up a spear for the first time and be a better fighter than her, a knight who started training with the blade when she was a child, in mere months... it was beyond the pale.

It was also the reality Camilla found herself in. And when everything regarding Sevinarya had come to light and Lord Thomas had made the deal regarding the Spider-Queen, that reality had become crystal clear. No matter how hard Camilla had pushed herself in those three weeks they hunted in the Darkwoods, Thomas pushed himself harder.

Until eventually, he'd left her behind entirely. Literally at that, with them eventually having to split up simply because he could move faster and cover more ground by himself.

To say Camilla had felt useless would be an understatement. But it got a whole lot worse when Sevinarya had joined them and started making her comments. This past month the Dark Elf had been... irritatingly obedient and submissive, seemingly accepting her place at the very bottom of the social hierarchy with an ease that still confounded Camilla to this day.

After all, Sevinarya was apparently a Princess according to what Thomas had told them in private. A disowned one now, and one who had run away from home and her responsibilities in the first place, but a Princess nevertheless. For her to go from that to following every order given to her with barely any hesitation... it didn't make any sense.

However, even as she'd accepted her place beneath the rest of them, she still hadn't shut up. She'd continued to make comments... and most of those comments were directed at Camilla, pointing out her inadequacy and the fact that she'd fallen behind.

Lord Thomas might have put Camilla in charge of Sevinarya, but when it came to fighting, the two women knew where they stood with one another. Sevinarya was just plain better than her, no matter how much it infuriated Camilla to acknowledge it.

... She just had to get stronger. She just had to train harder. Hence these... extra training sessions. Even though she was feeling exhaustion already from sparring with Thomas, Camilla knew she wouldn't improve without pushing past her limits some more. Her Gift of Swordsmanship had stagnated because she'd rested on her laurels for so long, confident in her own capabilities. But now... now she knew how she measured up to those around her.

The worst part of all was that when she and Thomas fought one-on-one... Camilla could feel herself improving faster than at any other time. Originally, she had been the one teaching him... but now somehow their positions had become

reversed and so long as she had his dedicated attention, Camilla could swear she was getting stronger with every bout they had.

Unluckily, when he had her and Sevinarya fight him together like today, she didn't get that same feeling. The energy became flipped again, with Thomas being the one struggling and ultimately improving because they were kicking his ass by working together so effectively.

... It wasn't like Camilla could just ask Thomas to fight her one-on-one for her benefit alone though. The sparring was supposed to be for him at the end of the day... not her. Nor was she going to ask him how he'd improved so rapidly, even if she was confident that the Gift of Leadership he was supposed to have shouldn't have made it possible.

It wasn't her place to ask such things. Her Lord had to have some secrets, after all.

For a brief moment, Camilla thinks back to the tome in her room. Under Thomas' orders, she's been sending falsified, bland reports for months now. And there hasn't been another visit from the Capital since the poisoned cookies despite the fact that it's been another two months since the three month mark where she was supposed to make sure Thomas had an 'accident'

Lady Marlow should be getting frustrated with her at this point... right? And yet, they've received no couriers in town. What is happening back in the Capital? The longer the silence from there continues, the more unsettled Camilla gets.

But then, that's why she has to continue her training. Even if Thomas is stronger than her, even if Sevinarya is faster than her, Camilla still has her pride as a knight. She will prove herself still useful to her Lord. She will prove Sevinarya wrong.

No matter what it takes.

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Eloise Harper hums as she moves around the kitchen, beginning the preparations for dinner. Despite spending the better part of the last year serving as Last Hope's Acting Mayor in her father's stead, she really did still love cooking. She just loved the town even more, so she'd done everything in her power to help out.

These days though, she had more of her time back than ever. She and her father were still working together since even a month after he was cured, he wasn't fully recovered. However, he was more than capable of doing a goodly amount of the work these days, freeing her up to pursue other things.

Speaking of her father... Eloise tilts her head to the side and smiles as she hears both Thomas and her father talking in the living room. She can't quite make out what they're saying, but she's not too bothered by that and is happy to leave them to their conversation.

Having her father back... it was like a dream come true, frankly. Even if for a while it had felt a bit like a nightmare, trapped in Sevinarya's web as the Dark Elf manipulated her into lying to Thomas and Camilla and even all of Last Hope while dangling her father's cure in front of her face.

There were plenty of times when Eloise had been weak enough to wonder if the cure wasn't even real. Times where she'd wondered if the conversations with her father, few and far inbetween as they were, were some grand illusion cast by the Dark Elf or something.

But... no. In the end, it had all turned out to be real. Sevinarya, albeit under duress, had held up her end of the bargain.

Speaking of the Dark Elf... Eloise watches as Sevinarya slinks into the kitchen and slumps down at the table. The elven warrior looks exhausted as she sprawls in a chair. Arching a brow, Eloise stares at her for a long moment, long enough for Sevinarya to register her presence and go absolutely still. Then, she smiles.

"Looks like Lord Thomas put you through the wringer."

Sevinarya huffs at that, averting her gaze.

“... He made me and the Knight fight him together today.”

Eloise’s eyebrows rise at that. Both Camilla and Sevinarya? Together? That was...

“We won every bout.”

Ah... that sounded more accurate. Even someone with zero martial experience like Eloise could look at Lord Thomas’ progress since he arrived in Last Hope and recognize how utterly ridiculous it was. The nobleman had gone from barely being able to run the length of the town to killing monsters like the King of the Forest in mere months.

There was also how quickly he’d taken to the cooking lessons she’d been giving him for months now. His initial dishes were barely edible... but these days, he could easily make something were eating, if not as good as her own cooking. But Eloise suspected that if he’d truly put his mind to learning to cook from her and not just done lessons here and there, he would have surpassed her just as he surpassed Camilla.

Still, Camilla and Sevinarya together... yes, it made sense that Thomas would still have lost. But then...

“And yet, you appear to be exhausted while Lord Thomas is out in the living room talking easily with my father.”

Sevinarya’s eyes narrow at the observation.

“... He doesn’t know when to quit, our lord. He just keeps pushing and pushing and pushing. It’s nonstop with him. He’s relentless.”

Mm, relentless. A good word for Lord Thomas Marlow, Eloise thinks to herself. At the same time though...

“And yet, I also don’t see Camilla anywhere. I wonder where she’s gotten off to.”

Eloise keeps her tone mild but in truth, they both know where Camilla has gone. The woman might have journeyed into the Darkwoods to hide her activities, but seeing her disappear for hours on end had worried Thomas so he’d had Sevinarya follow and check on her at one point.

Still, the bland reminder has Sevinarya scowling a bit. After all, if Thomas is easily speaking with Eloise’s father and Camilla has gone to do more training in the Darkwoods... then Sevinarya has no excuse for being lazy, doesn’t she?

Smiling beatifically, Eloise flicks a hand towards two empty buckets nearby.

“Go and fetch some more water from the Well for me, will you Sevinarya?”

Even though it’s been a month at this point and Sevinarya has still never refused an order, Eloise expects the Dark Elf to talk back every single time. And yet... just like every other time, Sevinarya grunts but nevertheless gets to her feet and grabs the buckets. Then, she gives Eloise an expectant look for a second.

When Eloise says nothing else, the Dark Elf just shrugs... and vanishes into the nearest shadow. Eloise hums, busying herself with further meal prep around the kitchen, until eventually Sevinarya reappears again five minutes later with two full buckets of well water.

“Set it down right there.”

“Right.”

It’s still so strange to her, how... submissive Sevinarya is. And yet, Eloise can’t really bring herself to be too hard on her or do things like demand Sevinarya not use her Gift and go about things the hard way just to spite her. Lord Thomas had even asked Eloise if she wanted him to send Sevinarya away, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

Maybe it's because her anger at the Dark Elf's actions runs up against her gratitude at her father's cure. Or maybe it's just pity. Lord Thomas had described the events that had taken place in the Dark Elf Hideout in full, eventually. It sounded horrible.

They'd gone in expecting to pull off a rescue and walked right into a nightmare. Indeed, just hearing about it second hand was enough to give Eloise a couple of nightmares of something similar happening to Last Hope.

So yes, she couldn't bring herself to be too hard on Sevinarya. The Dark Elf might have terrorized her for months and held her father's life over her head for just as long... but that was in the past now. She was one of them for better or for worse.

With that in mind...

"Grab one of those buckets and bring it over. Start washing and cutting these vegetables."

Sevinarya grunts... but does as she's told without complaint. And Eloise smiles as she finds herself working side by side with a woman who she'd once feared more than anything in the world. Funny how things work out sometimes...

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A/N: How positively domestic. I'm sure everything will remain as fluffy and lovely as this forever~

Please let me know what you think either on Patreon or Discord! Your feedback, suggestions, and ideas for this story are keeping the inspiration flowing in a big way!