

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

A/N: The Dire Wolves are advancing...

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“So, whatcha reckon the Lord and Dame are planning to do about the wolves?”

“Last I heard, they’re plannin’ to take the fight to into them Darkwoods.”

“What?! But that’s suicide!”

“For the likes of us simple farm folk maybe, but not for them. Nobles and Knights are something else, don’tcha know?”

The night is dark and the moon far from full as the four men traverse the edge of Last Hope’s border with the Darkwoods. One carries a torch in his hand to light the way, while the others all hold spears at the ready, their eyes darting this way and that as they look for any sign of Dire Wolves that might be about to attack them.

However, they’re on patrol and that means they don’t stop moving, even as they keep a slow and steady pace. Eventually they’ve moved on out of sight... and only once they’re completely gone from view and their voices have faded into the distance do the six pairs of red eyes open in the Darkwoods’ edge.

Slinking out from the treeline one by one, the half dozen Dire Wolves make their way across the ground towards the nearest farm. Each is a hulking beast bigger than a man and all six of them together could have almost certainly overwhelmed the four men that had just walked by on patrol.

However... the Dire Wolves have learned to avoid the fire and the sharp metal and seek out easier, far safer prey. Even as Last Hope’s defenses have grown, the Dire Wolves have simply gotten smarter and smarter. That’s why this half a

dozen large pack of them encounters basically no resistance as they creep up on an unsuspecting farm.

There are no enemies before them, behind them, or to the sides. However... they're all still animals at the end of the day in spite of their frightening intelligence. To be fair... even humans have a problem with looking up sometimes.

The only sign that something is wrong comes from a faint 'shink!' sound through the air, followed by the thump of something on the ground behind them. The first Dire Wolf whips around as do the other five... no, the other four. Because the thump was the sound of their sixth's head being hewed from his shoulders and dropping to the ground, followed by the decapitated Dire Wolf corpse teetering for a moment before collapsing onto its side.

Standing over the dead Dire Wolf is one of the humans... one of the more dangerous humans at that. He wields one of the long sticks with metal on top just like the others do, but he wields them with much more strength and aggression and power.

Only, this time the stick with the metal on top looks... different. The metal bit looks bigger and thicker and instead of poking holes in them with it, the large round edge drips with blood from where its sliced right through the sixth Dire Wolf's neck.

All five Dire Wolves snarl and growl, baring their teeth as they prepare to take the human with everything they have. In response, he bares his teeth as well, grinning as he meets their inevitable charge with a lunge of his own. And then that strange new metal on the stick flashes out and all the Dire Wolves know is oblivion.

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Magic Steel Halberd is a bit of a mouthful, Thomas reflects. But that IS what it is. Beatrice didn't have enough Magic Steel to make him a sword, but there was

too much for just a spear and it would have felt like a waste of her and her family's sacrifice to not use all of it.

Hence... it was time to upgrade to a polearm. And what better polearm than one with as much capacity for hacking as there was piercing? He could still stab and thrust with the best of them of course, but he could also now swing and expect the strength in his arms to carry him through said swings. It made for an excellent executioner's weapon, allowing him to decapitate normal Dire Wolves before they could even register that he was there.

Making it had taken Beatrice a day, followed by several days of Thomas getting acquainted with the new armament. It was... surprisingly easy. Whether that was because he had the spear fighting foundation to build off of or whether his Gift simply responded better to more stressful situations, Thomas had found himself picking up the fundamentals of the halberd in no time at all.

He'd had to drop the shield and go back to two handing his new Magic Steel weapon of course, but that was ultimately a small price to pay for the sheer versatility of the weapon. Even the wood that made up the halberd's shaft was stronger, taken from the Darkwoods and treated with a special technique that Lahn the Tanner had known of.

All in all, his new weapon was a killing weapon... and after testing it for a week, he knew he was ready to put it to a real test. Especially given that the Dire Wolves were escalating.

"S-Surely this isn't the way... wouldn't it be better to make them come t-to us, as we've been doing?"

It was on one particular morning that Thomas and Camilla had gotten up and began preparing themselves for what just might be their final trek into the Darkwoods together. Their survival was most definitely not assured, and there was no denying the danger of what they were about to attempt.

Eloise had been watching them get ready in worried silence, but that silence is finally broken, her concern reaching a boiling point until she was fit to burst.

Turning to the Mayor's daughter, Thomas smiles softly and shakes his head.

"I wish that were the case... but it just won't work. I can train the people of Last Hope to defend themselves and their neighbors, but the more Dire Wolves that come crawling out of the Darkwoods, the more overrun the town becomes. At this point... we're being backed into a corner."

Even last night, while Thomas was dealing with that pack of six Dire Wolves and Camilla was off watching a different part of town AND there were two groups of townsfolk patrolling... a couple of other wolves had still managed to sneak through and savaged yet another kitchen coop.

His new weapon was cool and all, and Thomas felt stronger and faster than ever... but no amount of defense was going to get the King of the Forest's pack to back off. It was like they were being controlled by the Greater Dire Wolf on some sort of instinctive or mental level, being pushed to risk themselves on near-certain death when they could have just gone deeper into the Darkwoods to find more fertile hunting grounds.

Camilla nods in agreement, even as she checks her sword over one last time before sheathing it at her side.

"Lord Thomas is right. He and I can't be everywhere at once. And while it is not always advisable to face the enemy on their own turf... better that than be forced to split our attention between fighting the King of the Forest and protecting the townspeople."

Thomas grimaces. That was another good point. If the King of the Forest were to attack right now, he didn't actually think he'd freeze up like last time. He'd be able to actually stand his ground and put up a fight. Thomas had to believe that, otherwise this entire expedition that he and Camilla were about to embark on was pointless.

However... in a battle here in Last Hope between him and Camilla and the King of the Forest, Thomas would be far too worried about everyone else. From

Eloise to Arnold to Beatrice and all the others... he'd made far too many friends among the denizens of Last Hope to not be afraid for them in such a situation.

No, as counterintuitive as it might have seemed tactically, this really was their best option. Much like they'd done with the goblin tribe, by having just him and Camilla go and hunt down the King of the Forest, they freed them from any potential shackles regarding defending those weaker than them. It let them truly let loose.

Eloise understands this, Thomas thinks... she just frets. Of course she does, if they fail here... well, Last Hope is pretty much done for. If they die, the town dies with them. And also, Thomas likes to think Eloise is afraid for them on a more personal level as well. Even if its been months now since that cheek kiss she'd given him, he liked to think they were very good friends if nothing else... she would be sad to lose him, probably.

Gracing her with his most reassuring smile, Thomas nods his head.

"Don't worry, Eloise. We'll triumph over the King of the Forest. You can count on it."

Does he believe a single word he's just said? Maybe... but the last thing he's going to do is let even an ounce of uncertainty make its way into his voice. He does stop short of giving the Mayor's daughter a thumbs up, however. Not only would she not even know what the gesture meant, he figured the cheesy grin he sends her way is more than enough.

Eloise forces a weak, trembling grin of her own right back, swallowing hard as she watches Thomas and Camilla finish packing and then follows them to the door. Thomas shoulders a bag even as Camilla does the same. Armored and armed as they both are, they've also got enough supplies for a proper Wolf Hunt... including dozens of potions from Arnold the Apothecary, many of which Thomas had helped the older man craft himself.

They walk through town, picking up stragglers as they go... and by the time they make it to the edge of Last Hope with the Darkwoods right behind them, Thomas

turns back to see they've gathered quite the crowd. A town like Last Hope didn't exactly go around hiding things from one another, so news of Beatrice's reveal had quickly made the rounds and everyone had been suitably impressed and awed by his new weapon.

Likewise, Thomas and Camilla's plan to venture forth and take the fight to the King of the Forest had been pretty public for over a week now, so nobody was surprised to see them going at this point. Instead, some faces are drawn and weary, some are just a mite hopeful, and still others are impotently angry, as though they wish it hadn't come to this, or that they themselves could do more.

Thomas pauses for a moment as Camilla shoots him a look. Hah, she still didn't know he didn't have the Gift of Leadership, even after everything. Maybe she expected him to give a speech? Well...

"Everyone, listen up!"

The entire town straightens and perks up at that, giving him their undivided attention. Thomas flashes another big wide grin full of pearly whites at all of them.

"These past few months with you all have been some of the best months of my life. Thank you for welcoming me into your lives, from the bottom of my heart. Now let me go earn all of your kindness."

It wasn't even a lie either... while he'd certainly had a greater degree of comfort back on Earth, not to mention the hundreds of quality of life 'features' that being transported to a small town in a fantasy world had lost him... Thomas wouldn't trade this experience for anything in the world. For the first time in his life, he felt like he had a purpose. And if this was the end... so be it.

"Bah! You ain't have to earn nothing you foolish boy!"

Of course, then Beatrice has to go and ruin it by piping up. Thomas begins to frown, only for others to immediately start backing her up.

“That’s right! Best damn Lord I ever met!”

“Blew us all out of the water with YOUR kindness, ye did!”

“Aye! And don’t talk like you ain’t gonna go and win either! Haven’t seen you fail yet, Lord Marlow!”

“Nay! Unstoppable, the lad is! Unbeatable!”

Thomas blinks rapidly, somewhat taken aback by the effusive praise that, at least to him, feels like it’s coming out of nowhere. And yet... nobody is disagreeing with the sentiment. In fact, it seems to be rather unanimous.

Before he can muster up a response, Eloise suddenly breaks from the crowd, running forward right up to him. Thomas stands frozen like a deer in headlights all the way up to her skidding to a halt a couple feet away. For a second, he actually thought she was about to kiss him... but no.

Instead, she glares hotly at him, staring him down like he’s personally offended her.

“They’re right you know. You don’t owe any of us anything, least of all your life.”

For a second, he thinks she’s going to tell him not to do it, to try and talk him out of it... but Eloise is too smart for that at least. Instead, she just scowls, hands bunched into fists at her sides.

“S-So... you’re not allowed to die, alright? You go in there; you find the King of the Forest... and you win! Okay? You’re only allowed to win!”

Thomas can’t exactly help the fond smile on his face as he inclines his head and chuckles.

“... Your wish is my command, my lady.”

Eloise blushes harder at that. Deciding to spare her any further embarrassment, Thomas settles for one last wave to the other townsfolk and then a nod to Camilla as the two of them turn back to the forest's edge.

"Shall we, Dame Camilla?"

"... Aye Lord Thomas. Let's go."

And with that, they're off. The fate of Last Hope rests upon their shoulders. No pressure or anything like that.

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A/N: No pressure at all!

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!