

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

A/N: Preparing Last Hope.

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In the days following the first attack, there was good along with the bad, Thomas found. The rest of Last Hope shared Eloise's opinion that they would rather stand their ground and face certain death over evacuating and becoming refugees. That was... bad. However, they were also more than willing to take up arms in defense of their homes, as well as submit to training in how to fight at his and Camilla's hands. That was good!

Alas, the first attack was far from the last. Thomas had hoped it would be, obviously. After what Eloise had said about the King of the Forest not being able to sustain himself this close to the Darkwoods' edge, there was a flicker of a thought that the beast would realize as much itself and venture back deeper into the Darkwoods.

Unfortunately... it quickly became obvious why that wasn't happening. It was because the King of the Forest and his pack were using Last Hope as their lunchbox. They were on a field trip, seeing the sights, and whenever they needed a bit of extra sustenance that the very edge of the Darkwoods couldn't provide, they would just head on over to the human town for a quick bite to eat.

At least once a day, a Dire Wolf would sneak out of the Darkwoods and make an attempt on one of Last Hope's precious farm animals. That was bad. But at least the King of the Forest himself had yet to show up again since that first day, implying that he had retreated deeper into the Darkwoods and was content to let his pack do the heavy lifting. That was good!

Of course, ultimately this back and forth of bad and good... it really didn't give a proper showing of the details regarding just what they were dealing with here. Thomas knew that, but it helped to be able to point to the good in order to keep from despairing over the bad.

In the end... all they could do was keep trying and he was glad to see that Last Hope's denizens agreed with that mentality. Even Camilla seemed ready to knuckle down, the two of them extending their daily spars to both morning and night now, the best times for it after spending much of the midday helping to train the townsfolk in drills and techniques.

Beatrice the Blacksmith had produced dozens of spears in just a couple of days and every able-bodied man (and woman with a physically enhancing Gift of any sort) had taken up those spears and began learning at his feet.

That part, Thomas hadn't been sure about at first. Was it truly better for him to be trying to train the townsfolk over an actual warrior like Camilla? But all it took was remembering how his early 'training sessions' with Camilla had gone to know that he really couldn't afford to let her accidentally kill a townsfolk at this point with her extremely brutal 'teaching methods'.

Instead, he'd taken up the mantle of instructor... and somehow, it was kind of just working? He didn't know what the fuck he was doing at first, admittedly, but within the first few days, he started to find a rhythm of sorts. It took an embarrassingly long time to realize what was happening... the Gift of Relentless Potential was bolstering him even in this.

It honestly made him feel a little dumb... all the way back at the start, when he'd first arrived in this world months ago, Thomas had only been capable of thinking of increasing his personal strength with his Gift. Do a bunch of labor, get stronger and hardier and faster. Easy as that.

But he hadn't even thought of the real applications of a Gift like this until he'd started taking lessons from Arnold and Eloise. And now here he was, having only started spear fighting about two months ago, teaching a bunch of farmers and townsfolk how to fight... and it was just working.

He had no decades of experience or skill to pass down. He had no lesson plans made up for most efficient teaching. He had zero experience being a teacher at all in fact. And yet... and yet, their improvement was noticeable. Session after

session, day after day, Thomas could visibly see his students getting better just as he too was getting better when it came to how to instruct them.

It didn't make sense. It was pure, unmitigated bullshit. Even Camilla, one of the worst teachers he'd ever met, noticed how ridiculous it was. And yet... they didn't really have time to question it, did they?

Success was success, and in this case his success meant that on the seventh day since the attacks started, a farmer actually managed to successfully stab a Dire Wolf in the throat with his spear, rather than just driving the beast off. Their enemies had suffered their first true casualty in this 'war'.

The whole town went on high alert after that, because while everyone did celebrate the victory, they also anticipated it would bring the King of the Forest down upon their heads. That they had chosen to stand tall and fight back... well, it stood to reason that they wouldn't exactly scare away a creature like that so easily... but they might provoke it into attacking entirely.

That doesn't happen though, thankfully. But neither do the attacks on the town stop. Instead, the Dire Wolves start arriving in twos and threes, far more than any one farmer, even armed with a spear and bulging muscles from their Gift of Farming, can hope to hold off.

In response, Last Hope institutes a Town Watch in which at least half a dozen armed men are patrolling the town's border with the Darkwoods at all times. It's the same sort of thing that they already had in place for whenever the goblins would try to raid Last Hope in the past, but now it was constant, with people taking shifts and switching in and out while everyone else in town picked up the slack from whatever they would have been doing otherwise.

The problem, of course, was that none of this was sustainable. Last Hope was self-sufficient in its entirety, needing no extra supplies from anywhere else in the Kingdom and surviving entirely by its own means. However, it could not continue to do so if it was under constant attack. Especially not when the farm animals were being targeted so aggressively, reducing things like the eggs, milk, and meat that Last Hope relied upon to round out its diet.

Not a single human had been killed by a Dire Wolf yet, but it was really only a matter of time and Thomas knew that. And even if it wasn't, Last Hope was being bled by inches all the same, until eventually they would find themselves at the point of no return... if they weren't already there.

Training the men and women of Last Hope to fight like he did, for as successful as it had proven so far, wasn't going to save the town so long as the King of the Forest and his massive pack lingered so close to the edge of the Darkwoods. Thomas knew that. Just as he knew their only real hope was a surgical strike. Him and Camilla entering the Darkwoods and doing to the King of the Forest exactly what had been done to the goblin tribe.

If they could kill the massive, hulking monster of a Dire Wolf, then maybe, just maybe, the rest of the pack would scatter and return back into the depths of the Darkwoods. It was a long shot for a number of reasons obviously, but it also felt like the absolute best chance they had.

There was just one issue that made it less of a long shot and more downright impossible.

"My spear won't even be able to puncture that thing's hide."

Camilla grimaces and shakes her head.

"No, I suspect not."

She glances down at her sword and Thomas does the same. He'd never really thought about it... but Camilla's sword looks different from any other form of iron or steel he's seen since arriving in this world. Its cloudy and shimmers in a way that his spears, both the blunt and the sharp ones, do not. In fact, it shimmers in a way nothing in all of Last Hope doesn't... save for perhaps the magical lanterns that light the edge of the town.

That's because Camilla's sword is made of an aptly named metal called 'Magic Steel'. Tougher, stronger, and sharper than normal steel by far, it's apparently

also extremely expensive because only the best Blacksmiths can refine it into being and then work it into tools and weapons.

Camilla's sword is a family heirloom apparently, passed down through the generations. It's also their best weapon against the King of the Forest... if she can get close enough to use it on the hulking beast. Her ranged techniques aren't likely to do much more against the King's hide than his spear is, after all.

"... There's no way Beatrice is capable of making me a Magic Steel weapon, is there?"

Grimacing, Camilla shakes her head.

"I highly doubt it. Those who can refine Magic Steel are extremely rare. Those who can craft with it are less so, as utilizing the material requires a little bit less skill than creating it does apparently. However, I would be shocked if there was any source of Magic Steel in this town aside from my sword..."

Grimacing right back, Thomas slowly nods, processing this and considering options... then, he rises to his feet.

"Well, no point in guessing is there? Let's go ask. One way or another, at least we'll know."

Camilla doesn't look nearly as hopeful as he sounds but Thomas doesn't begrudge her that. After all, sometimes he doesn't believe himself when he's trying to be upbeat as possible. But hey, fake it till you make it, right? Besides, the look on Camilla's face if Beatrice did turn out to be some sort of secret massively overpowered Blacksmith would be priceless, wouldn't it? And that very thought is enough to make Thomas smile broadly as they head on over.

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"Was wondering when you would come by about that."

Wait, what? Thomas blinks and shares a genuine look of disbelief with Camilla as Beatrice stands beside her Forge with a dour look.

“Hold on... don’t tell me... do you mean to say you can actually create Magic Steel, Beatrice?”

The hulking woman snorts derisively, her bare arm muscles bulging as she crosses said arms over her chest and shakes her head.

“Nay.”

And just like that, their hopes are dashed again.

“But I can craft with it.”

Thomas perks back up at that, eyes widening in excitement... only to remember Camilla’s words from before.

“Ah, well... we still might be out of luck. I’m not going to ask Camilla to let you melt down her family heirloom just so you can make something for me, after all.”

He shoots Camilla a smile, making it clear that it would never even be an option for him. She looks conflicted for a moment... before deciding on gratitude as she nods to him.

“Nah, that’s fair. But I do have this.”

Thomas and Camilla both stare on as Beatrice reaches behind her Forge and a moment later pulls open a small chest. She flicks it open and reaches inside without much reverence, lifting up an ingot of the same sort of cloudy shimmering metal that Camilla’s sword appears to be made of.

He’d been right... the look on Camilla’s face is priceless as she beholds the new source of Magic Steel, her jaw dropping open and her eyes bulging out of her head.

“H-How did you get that?!”

Beatrice just shrugs.

“Grandfather made it. He was some big hot shot back in the day before he decided to come out here and settle down in Last Hope. I’m only as good as I am because of his lessons when I was just a lass. Never got good enough to make more, but I can craft with the stuff, yeah.”

Beatrice tosses the small chest aside and holds the ingot aloft while giving him a raised brow.

“Not enough here for a proper sword, unfortunately. Too much for a single spear. I could make you a few spears though, maybe? Or whatever you think is best.”

Staring at the small ingot consideringly for a long moment, Thomas slowly shakes his head.

“I... I have a better idea, if you think you’re up for it.”

Beatrice looks interested... and as he describes what he wants, she begins to grin wolfishly, clearly game for his proposal. Camilla, meanwhile, watches on from the side, listening in as Thomas outlines precisely what he needs.

Before, despite his forced exuberance and blatantly feigned optimism, Thomas would admit that a gnawing part of him had felt increasingly hopeless. Sure, Camilla’s sword was Magic Steel... but even she had to admitted that she wouldn’t stand a chance against the King of the Forest in a one on one fight. They needed a team up. They both needed to be able to hurt the damn thing in order to actually have a chance at winning.

Now though, as they leave Beatrice behind so she can get to work, Thomas actually feels a little lighter in his steps. The exuberance and optimism is no longer fake or feigned.

Maybe, just maybe... they actually stood a chance.

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A/N:

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