

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

A/N: The boss music is intense.

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For a long moment that seems to drag on forever, everything seems frozen in time. Thomas' thoughts race as it all feels like it slows down. If the hulking Dire Wolf, practically bigger than a carriage, leaps out from the treeline... what are they supposed to do?

Hell, he doesn't even have his actual spear on him right now. Its just the blunted training spear, which to be fair Thomas would consider good enough for dealing with most of your average beasties. He could kill a dozen goblins with the blunt end of his training spear and even gives himself good odds for dealing with a normal Dire Wolf as well.

This thing though is not a normal Dire Wolf. He's not even sure his actual spear would be enough to puncture it's hide. If the durability and thickness of its hide directly increases with size... then it'd be like trying to kill a human with a fucking toothpick.

Camilla is probably their best hope of actually being able to damage it... so Thomas would probably just have to be the bait. Get loud, get shouty, and try and draw 'aggro' like he was a Tank in some MMORPG from back on Earth. That way, Camilla might be able to actually hurt the damn thing with her blade... while it was taking a bite out of him the size of his entire fucking torso.

Still, he'd do it. Even if it meant certain death, Thomas couldn't imagine himself turning and running now. Not and leave the residents of Last Hope to their fate. He'd gotten to know all of them too well for that at this point... and he'd put too much effort into becoming a warrior to turn into a coward in the eleventh hour.

Of course, just as this determination is crystallizing in his mind's eye... the massive, hulking monster stops growling and stops baring its teeth. Instead of

leaping out from the treeline... it pulls back as the original Dire Wolf finishes dragging poor Beth the Cow's corpse out of sight into the shadows of the Darkwoods.

As it pulls back, so do all of the other Dire Wolves, pairs of red eyes flicking out by the dozens as the town of Last Hope seems to receive a stay of execution... for the moment at least.

Only once the biggest Dire Wolf is completely gone does that aura, that feeling of terror, go with it. The difference in the air is palpable and Thomas feels like he can finally breathe again. Beside him, Camilla slumps, panting heavily and cursing under her breath.

"... shit..."

Shit is right. Neither of them were ready to face that sort of thing... and yet, looking around the farm, at the family that just lost a cow and the broken fence the Dire Wolf smashed through to get at Beth... how were they going to stop this from happening again?

Some of the other residents of Last Hope arrive soon after that, but they're far too late to do much beyond helping the farmer and his family start cleaning up the mess left behind and calming the remaining farm animals down. As well as the farmer's wife, who at that point was practically in hysterics.

Thomas can't really blame her though... he still feels a cold sweat down his spine whenever he even thinks about what they just faced.

Hours later, after all is said and done and things have quieted down, they finally get some answers from Eloise. Sitting down at the kitchen table with her while Camilla peruses the original Thomas' journal at long last, he listens to what the mousy brunette has to say.

"The King of the Forest..."

Eloise's eyes are wide and her face is pale as both have been since the Dire Wolf was described to her. She swallows thickly and begins to explain.

"I've only heard stories from my father, mind you. But... it sounds like that's what you saw. Back when Last Hope was just getting started, back before the dangers of the Darkwood were fully known, there were a lot more settlers... a lot more people who thought they could expand the Kingdom's borders, make lives for themselves out here on the frontier."

Eloise's eyes flick over to the nearest window, through which the looming Darkwoods can be seen off in the distance.

"... According to my father, there was a plan for another town like ours, only it was going to be deeper into the Darkwoods. We weren't always intended to be the last stop on the road, despite our... auspicious name. The plan was to continue to expand, to use Last Hope as a sort of launching off point for expeditions that would explore... and eventually conquer the Darkwoods."

Grimacing, Eloise shakes her head.

"It didn't turn out well. None of them did. The expeditions lost more than they brought back in value in both people and supplies and the attempt to settle a town within the Darkwoods itself... it lasted a month before the last survivors came back speaking of all the monsters they faced. And among them... among them, according to my father, was the King of the Forest. A massive, hulking Dire Wolf bigger than all the others."

Fiddling nervously with her skirts, Eloise bites her lower lip for a moment before letting out a shuddering breath.

"But that... that was over a week away from here. All efforts to... to conquer the Darkwoods ceased after that failure. The path that we cut through to try and make a road that went from Last Hope to the new town... it was overgrown again within a month. Father always said that they took all of that as signs not to try and poke the Darkwoods further. And in all my life, there's been no sightings

of the King of the Forest. Not by any of our small amount of hunters, nor by Arnold the Apothecary.”

Fuck... to hear Eloise say it, something had clearly roused this monstrous type of Dire Wolf from his slumber. And frankly, Thomas can only think of one thing. He looks over to Camilla to see her looking up from the journal and back at him, much the same in her eyes.

“We did this, didn’t we?”

As Camilla grimly nods, Eloise looks between them both, confused.

“What? What do you mean? You didn’t do anything!”

Sighing, Thomas shakes his head.

“But we did, Eloise. We exterminated that goblin tribe just the other week. We slaughtered them to the last and while we burned what we could, we left behind a whole lot of dead bodies... meat. What if we drew the King of the Forest over to this part of the Darkwoods? This might have been our doing...”

But Eloise is just as quick to shake her head right back.

“I-I don’t believe that. There are plenty of goblin tribes in the Darkwoods, that was just the closest to us. Meanwhile, the King of the Forest should have been located much, much deeper in. Killing those goblins shouldn’t have been enough to draw it to us... frankly, it shouldn’t even be this close to the Darkwoods’ edge!”

Running her hands through her hair, the Mayor’s daughter begins to pace.

“Father always said that the deeper you got into the Darkwoods, the bigger everything got. Not just the trees, not just the plant life... but the monsters too. Bigger wolves and spiders and every other creature you can imagine. Until you got so deep that the trees were further over your head than the tallest building

humans had ever constructed, and you might come across animal tracks so big you could stand in them without touching the sides.”

Thomas’ mouth goes dry at that description. It sounded like there were some seriously huge kaiju deeper into the Darkwoods. But to be fair, even from Last Hope one could see the sort of trees she was talking about far, far in the distance. On a clear day, Thomas could make out trees as tall as skyscrapers what must have been hundreds if not thousands of miles away.

“The King of the Forest, at least according to father, was one of those bigger beasts... maybe chased out of his own native environment and into a further edge of the Darkwoods. But that edge would be bigger than anything that humans have ever explored, a massive amount of space. And it would still only really be enough to support one creature of the King’s size.”

Stopping her pacing, Eloise crosses her arms over her chest with a grimace.

“That’s why... that’s why it doesn’t make sense that the King of the Forest is venturing this close to Last Hope now. Everything he needs to sustain himself should be in the opposite direction from us. The King and his pack... they can’t survive off of the border of the Darkwoods.”

Her ominous words hang in the air for a moment before Camilla finally breaks her silence.

“Not without taking from us, you mean.”

When Eloise just grimaces harder and looks to the side, Camilla takes a deep breath.

“... In the end, as interesting as this all is, it’s not very relevant. The King of the Forest is here now... and he and his pack are threatening this town. I don’t imagine you all are willing to pack up and evacuate, are you?”

The incredulous look on Eloise’s face is answer enough, though she still vehemently shakes her head.

"What? No, of course not! Are you mad? We can't just... this is our home. Nobody here has anywhere else to go! We're not just going to abandon this place!"

Camilla stares Eloise down though, not giving up just yet.

"Not even if it means certain death? Not even if the choice is between living as refugees and dying here in your home?"

Eloise looks conflicted for a moment... before straightening up and scowling fiercely and defiantly.

"It... it won't come to that. Last Hope will persevere, just as it always has."

Thomas looks between the two women, afraid for a moment that he'll have to intervene. But far from being offended by Eloise's obstinance... Camilla actually grins after a moment.

"Alright then. It would seem Lord Thomas and I have work to do."

Huh? Thomas straightens up as Camilla turns to him.

"We need to accelerate your training... as well as begin training the townsfolk in how to fight too. And the Blacksmith... she needs to start making weapons immediately. The Tanner can start making makeshift pieces of armor."

Right... she was right. Last Hope had to be fortified against further attacks. Because after today, Thomas had no doubt in his mind that there would be more. And next time, it might be a person who died rather than a cow. Maybe if they gave the townsfolk enough training, they would be able to handle themselves against some of the smaller (albeit still huge) Dire Wolves.

And at the same time... he was Last Hope's best chance of surviving the King of the Forest, wasn't he? Him and his Gift of Relentless Potential were Last Hope's

ace in the hole. In just three months, Thomas had gone from a flabby, weak, spoiled nobleman to a warrior with a toned physique and a killer instinct.

He just had to push his Gift harder. Faster. Further. And that started with doing exactly as Camilla was suggesting and rallying the people of Last Hope. One foot in front of the other. To retreat was failure. To stay stagnant was certain death. But so long as Thomas continued to strive... he would continue to thrive. He had to hold onto that belief, because at this point it was all he had going for him.

Swallowing past the lump of fear in his throat, Thomas gives Camilla a sharp nod.

“Right then. Let’s go and get started.”

She graces him with a smile upon seeing his resolve, nodding back as they turn and head for the door. Thomas shoots Eloise one last glance as they leave, throwing his best attempt at a reassuring smile her way too. They’d win. They had to.

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Eloise watches Camilla and Thomas walk back out of the house fretfully, wringing her hands as she bites her lower lip. This was bad... this was so bad. She-

“Well, wasn’t that all suitably heroic~”

Torn from her thoughts, Eloise whirls around to see ‘Shadow’ leaning against the far wall of the kitchen. It’s the first time that the Dark Elf has revealed herself anywhere save for her father’s office or his bedroom and for a moment Eloise fears Thomas or Camilla will come back in and see her.

... But that fear passes as the moments drag by, replaced by relief and certainty instead.

"It's good you're hear. The King of the Forest was seen on the treeline! You owe us protection... you need to drive the King away or... or failing that, kill him!"

Shadow tilts her head to the side, her long ears twitching for a moment before she chuckles and pushes off the wall, sauntering forward.

"Oh? Do I need to do that, sweetheart? Do I really?"

Eloise's eyes widen as the Dark Elf gets closer and closer. What... what was she saying?

"I'd much rather see what your little Lordling and his minder do if I'm being honest. I would hate to deprive them of their fight after they showed such determination in marching off to their deaths."

Suddenly... it dawns on Eloise. All of what she'd told Lord Thomas and Dame Camilla was true, after all. Their extermination of the goblins never should have drawn the King of the Forest this far from his normal stomping grounds. It didn't make sense that he was this close to the edge of the Darkwoods unless...

"You. You did this. You brought the King here."

Shadow pauses at that for a full second, as much of an admission as Eloise needs, frankly. Though she still tries to play dumb.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, darling."

Bristling, Eloise grits her teeth.

"I'm not stupid, you know. The King of the Forest should never have been this far out. Last Hope faces many natural threats from the Darkwoods, but the King shouldn't be one of them. You made this happen. Why? We have a deal!"

For a long moment, the Dark Elf stays quiet, studying Eloise. Then, she chuckles again and moves forward, invading Eloise's personal space and walking circles around her.

“Clever little human. You’re right, we do have a deal... a deal you’ve been hoping to nullify ever since your Lordling and his minder arrived. I guess we’ll see once and for all whether you need me and my girls after all, sweetie. Maybe I’ll even deign to save you... once your Lordling and his minder are dead.”

Eloise’s eyes widen as Shadow circles around her, running a finger along her collarbone. And then... just like that with her final words lingering as she hits Eloise’s blind spot... her touch vanishes and so does she. Eloise whips around, but she’s completely gone.

A tremble runs through Eloise then... tears rushing to her ears as her lower lip wobbles. She... she doesn’t want Thomas or Camilla to die. But if she tells them the truth, the likelihood of them abandoning her and Last Hope rises significantly.

More than that... the treatments for her father will stop. He’ll die, guaranteed.

There’s nothing she can do. Except... except hope that somehow, Thomas proves to be more than Shadow is expecting. The Dark Elf underestimates him and Camilla... Eloise is sure of that. She’ll be surprised by the end of all of this, or at least the Mayor’s daughter hopes so anyways.

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A/N: Poor Eloise, stuck between a rock and a hard place... one might say she... needs a hero~

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!