

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

A/N: This is an experiment to see what people think of this first chapter. This is not a permanent project as of yet, I just want to know if it resonates with you guys in any meaningful way. More details about the story itself can be found in the closing Author's Note.

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It's a jarring bump in the road that rather rudely wakes him up from his slumber. Which is a problem, because the last thing Thomas remembered was falling asleep in his own bed in his own home. No roads, no bumps, no moving of any kind to be seen.

... Was he being pranked? Had someone stolen his bed straight out of his room and put it on a moving vehicle of some kind? No, that would be ridiculous, the mattress would never fit through the door with him still on it. More likely, he'd been drugged and then kidnapped out of his bed entirely.

Which is why he refrains from opening his eyes at first, instead trying to get a read on his situation without letting his would-be kidnappers know he's awake. Though the more he feels things out, the more confused he gets.

For one, he's not restrained as far as he can tell. It feels like he's laying down on a cushioned bench of some sorts, not quite the backseat of a car but rather than harder surface of the back of a bus maybe? For two, his clothes... well for starters, he's wearing too much of the damn stuff.

Thomas always slept in just boxers. He ran hot and sleeping in any more layers than that usually led to him sweating buckets at night. But right now it feels like he's wearing multiple layers of clothing. An undershirt,

something on top of that, a long-sleeved jacket. Hell, he even has shoes on.

Who the hell had drugged him, dressed him, and kidnapped him, but not bothered with the most important part of restraining him? Unless, of course, he was trapped wherever he'd woken up and so actually tying him up wasn't deemed necessary. And if that was the case, then he might as well open his eyes and look around at this poi-

"I can tell that you're awake."

The cold, disapproving feminine voice that tears Thomas out of his thoughts is like ice water down his spine. His eyes finally do snap open and his entire body sits up so fast he feels like he might have given himself whiplash in the process. Truth be told, he's not entirely sure why he suddenly feels like a kid with their hand caught in the cookie jar. He's a full grown man after all and the victim of a kidnapping to boot!

Thomas opens his mouth to say as much... but no words come out as he finally lays eyes on the owner of the voice and is struck rather speechless in the process.

To start with, that's a whole lot of woman seated on the other side of what he can only describe as an old timey carriage. He's on one bench while she's on the other... and the first thing that comes to mind is 'muscle mommy'. Well no, if he's being brutally honest, the first thing that comes to mind is probably 'tits', but only because she clearly has a rather large rack hidden under the sculpted leather cuirass she's currently wearing.

Actually, on second glance he's not sure how much of a 'muscle mommy' his captor really is. Sure, she looks large and in charge at first, but how

much is real and how much is just a combination of her icy glare and the leather armor, Thomas can't quite say.

With metal epaulets and long leather clad legs crossed over one another as she rests a sheathed sword in her lap, she cuts quite the imposing figure, to say the least. But given her knee-high boots have heels on them, Thomas is left wondering just what her height would be without those heels... and what she might look like with all of the armor and what not off.

"Cease undressing me with your eyes or I will make you."

Okay, to be clear he's not a pervert just because he's imagining her naked, thank you very much. SHE'S the one who brought it up. Also she's the one who kidnapped him! That said, she's also the only one in this situation who's armed so... Thomas very carefully raises his gaze up above her neckline, instead meeting the busty red headed warrior's blue eyes instead.

"... Sorry. I don't know what's going on."

See? He could be diplomatic. Unfortunately, his earnest honesty is rewarded with another scowl from the carriage's other occupant.

"We are almost to our destination, Young Lord. Shouldn't be more than an hour now."

Uh... Young Lord? Destination? Thomas glances around the interior of the vehicle again. It's definitely got the old timey carriage vibe to it. Not the back of a modern truck, but rather something out of the Medieval Ages or Victorian Era, where everything was literally horse powered instead of just theoretically horse powered.

Finally, he looks down at himself... and gapes at what he sees. His clothes can only be described as ostentatious, old fashioned, and noble-like. He was right to think he had gone from going to sleep in just boxers to waking up in multiple layers... but it went beyond that by a fair amount and indeed, looking at himself gives Thomas the first indication that something has really, truly happened to him and this isn't some sort of prank.

Because... he's too skinny. Too skinny by half. Not that he's skin and bones mind you, but rather, he's pretty sure he went to bed a hundred pounds heavier than he is now. This body he's in is not nearly as obese and dramatically overweight as the body he fell asleep in.

"Oh for fuck's sake..."

Shifting from across the carriage pulls his attention back to the red head, even as his exasperated exclamation leaves his lips in a muttered curse. Scowling at him, she narrows her eyes thoughtfully.

"Is this some sort of ploy, Lord Thomas? Next you will tell me you don't remember anything, hm? Perhaps you will claim not to remember who I am or even who you are. Certainly, you'll claim you do not recall what you did to earn this punishment."

Punishment. After setting aside the fact that his name apparently hadn't changed, Thomas latched onto that last word specifically. Don't tell him this was some sort of RPG bullshit where you started the game waking up in a dungeon cell or the back of a prison wagon for some vague crime that was never actually elaborated on.

Still, she's sort of taken the words right out of his mouth, hasn't she? He can't even be honest with her now, not without her just thinking he's quite literally pulling the gambit that she's accusing him of. And yet... what better

option does he have? If this isn't some dream, if this is really what he thinks it is... well, Thomas has to get information where he can, right? And besides, as much as the red head seems to disdain him, she also keeps showing a reluctant deference at the same time...

"You keep calling me 'Lord'. So let's start there. Whatever I've done, whatever punishment I'm in for... are you here as my warden or as my servant?"

There it is. A tightening around the eyes that gives the game away or so he hopes.

"... Your commands will be followed only within reason and only so long as they do not run counter to the commands that your Lord Father and Lady Mother gave me before we departed from the Capital. If you attempt to abuse any perceived authority over me, I am fully empowered to discipline you, Young Lord. So I would tread very carefully."

Okay, well that was already more information than Thomas had previously, now wasn't it? If he believed what seemed more and more likely to be the case, that he'd been transported to another world in his sleep, then he could take some of what she'd just said and start putting together puzzle pieces.

Number One, this body had apparently belonged to nobility and had a 'Lord Father and Lady Mother' in a Capital City somewhere. Number Two, it sounded like this body had committed some grievous sin that caused a banishment... if not a complete disownment. He was still a Lord and apparently still entitled to a servant of decent caliber, but he was not entitled to full obedience.

Fair enough, he would keep things light and breezy then.

“Okay. Please tell me your name.”

The red head’s eyes narrow and her nose scrunches as she growls.

“Lord Thomas-!”

But he cuts her off with a raised hand before she can continue.

“Obviously it’s just the two of us here so I can only rely upon your honor as a servant of my parents, but please... is such a simple command really something you aren’t expected to follow?”

It’s a gamble between pissing her off enough that she ‘disciplines’ him and playing upon her perceived honor... but it’s a gamble that works. As much as the red head bristles, the mention of honor does cause her to straighten up a fair bit completely unconsciously. And after a moment of silence, she breathes through her nose and answers him.

“I am Dame Camilla Ackinworth, Knight Bachelorette of the Order of Saints.”

Thomas blinks. Had she basically just labeled herself a ‘Lady Knight’ there? A dozen different fictional representations of ‘Lady Knights’ flash through his mind’s eye and it takes every ounce of his willpower for his gaze not to dip back down to Dame Camilla’s chest. He manages it though! Barely.

“I see. Thank you. Now please tell me who I am.”

Camilla’s face goes almost as red as her hair.

“I can’t believe you’re really trying this, Lord Thomas. Do you truly have so little shame?”

He pleads the fifth. Of course, seeing as she likely wouldn’t understand such a phrase, Thomas just smiles wanly and shrugs instead. After a long drawn out moment of silence, Camilla huffs again and answers him.

“You are Lord Thomas Marlow, Second Son of the Ducal House Marlow. Though at this point your status as a Marlow hangs by a thread... as you well know. You have stained your family with your actions long enough, Lord Thomas. This is your last chance.”

Then, Camilla smiles. It’s not a nice smile, but rather one that actually makes Thomas shiver as the malevolence casts a dark shadow over her otherwise beautiful features.

“But please, feel free to squander this final opportunity as swiftly as you have all of the others. The quicker you prove yourself to be incapable of change, the quicker I can wash my hands of you and return to the Capital to continue tending to the members of House Marlow worthy of my service.”

Damn. What the fuck had the previous owner of this body done? From the sound of things, Thomas really didn’t want to know. In fact, he wasn’t even going to ask that, he could tell doing so might push the limits of the Dame’s willingness to answer any questions at all. Instead...

“Tell me more about this final ‘chance’ then. I suppose it has to do with wherever we’re going, yes? What is our ultimate destination?”

Was he being thrown into a war, maybe? Perhaps he was being conscripted into some army against his will in some battle against an

enemy nation. Or as happened so often in these types of stories, some otherworldly foe like demons or fae or whatever?

That would fucking suck, Thomas had to admit. Even if he had lost a hundred pounds overnight, he still wasn't much of a fighter. In fact, he hadn't been in a single fight in his entire life... and judging by the soft hands of this new body, he doubted that 'Lord Thomas Marlow' had been either...

"We are on our way to the town of Last Hope, where you will be taking up leadership of the town and steering it away from its steady decline towards complete destruction."

What. Oh no. Say it ain't so. Surely this wasn't that kind of story? Surely this wasn't a... Thomas shudders in horror... 'region management' story.

To be fair, he'd read a few of that genre in his day that he quite enjoyed. It wasn't a bad story idea on the face of it. However, there was just one problem with him being expected to lead an entire town of people and steer them away from 'complete destruction'.

... Namely, he didn't know a single thing about uplifting a fantasy society like all of the main characters of those region management stories tended to do. Thomas didn't know how to make a printing press. He didn't know how to optimize crop yields or anything like that. He didn't know how to invent new farming tools that would revolutionize a small town's economy like always happened in those kinds of stories.

Thomas wasn't some special engineer or history buff or anything like all of those fictional main characters. He was just your average twenty-first century human being... meaning that he lived a sedentary lifestyle and spent way too much time online playing frivolous video games and

consuming copious amounts of entertainment while the world steadily went to shit around him.

Swallowing thickly and doing his best to ignore the rather foreboding town name of 'Last Hope' of all things, Thomas focuses back on Dame Camilla and asks the next most pressing question.

"And... uh... how exactly am I supposed to lead a town if I don't have any leadership qualities? Feels a bit like I'm being set up to fail here."

Dame Camilla furrows her brow and wrinkles her nose again. Quite cutely, Thomas might add, but he definitely isn't saying so out loud. Regardless, after a moment she just scoffs.

"You will succeed or fail on your own merits Lord Thomas. If you cannot make something of yourself and of Last Hope even with your Gift, then you truly are not worthy of it."

For a moment Thomas starts to despair, because obviously that's not a very good answer. But then his panicking mind catches upon something she said... he could swear he heard the inherent capitalization of the word 'Gift' there in her tone.

"My... Gift?"

Now Dame Camilla truly does look downright incredulous at him. Then, her face smooths out and she shakes her head with a sigh.

"This is really the game you want to play, Young Lord? Feigning memory loss of all things to try and get out of your punishment? I'm afraid you are in for a poor time... your Lady Mother already informed me of your previous antics. You have used the poor memory excuse before and it will not work

again. Though this is on an entirely different level. Yes, your Gift of Leadership. The same Gift that all nobility have. Just as I have the Gift of Swordsmanship.”

Right, Thomas was officially on the ‘Fuck Lord Thomas Marlow’ train. The guy who had this body before him had even tried the amnesia trick? Jesus Fucking Christ, what sort of low life was he?

That said, as soon as Camilla starts mentioning Gifts of Leadership and Swordsmanship, Thomas turns his attention inward. After all, it was relatively normal for situations like this to come with some sort of ability, right? Some sort of System or Status or Power that would give Thomas a new lease on life and a leg up on the competition.

A Gift of Leadership sounded pretty cool, but what were the details? What did that truly give him?

Mentally ‘saying’ all the usual words like System and Status and Character Sheet doesn’t bring anything up, unfortunately. However, when Thomas specifically focuses on the word ‘Gift’ with the intention of wanting to know what *his* gift is... that’s when he gets somewhere.

The knowledge blazes across his thoughts, crystallizing into focus in his mind’s eye. Thomas blinks as he ‘reads’ his Gift.

It’s... not the Gift of Leadership like Camilla claimed he should have. It’s something else entirely. Something he doesn’t quite know how to take.

Gift of Relentless Potential: So long as you keep striving, you will never stop thriving.

... Not exactly the instruction manual that Thomas was hoping for. Could he get a debug console or something for this shit? No? Great...

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A/N: So basically the idea of this fic is sort of a subversion of your average 'town management' story. Where someone is isekai'd into the villainous noble's son who gets banished to some backwater to 'rule' over it and try to prove themselves one last time.

And then they proceed to do so by reinventing things like the printing press and other modern conveniences except in this fantasy world that has never seen any of the like before, effectively revolutionizing the world in the process.

THAT is not what's going to happen in this fic. Rather, the MC just doesn't know how to really go about doing any of those things, he doesn't even know where to really start. Instead, he's going to have to be a regular ole isekai MC and start training and fighting and leaning on his Gift of Relentless Potential to help fight off the various threats that plague the town of Last Hope.

Along the way, he'll probably wind up turning heads and boinking some babes as he proves himself to be more than just whatever scum the previous owner of his new body was.

So yeah, let me know what you think, both of this first chapter and the story idea in general. Feedback in this case will literally decide whether or not I continue this story more and potentially make it into my next free write.

Admittedly, I do not feel like I've done a very good job with any of my Original Free Writes. The Age of Chaos was half as popular as The Soul Engine, which was half as popular as Breaking Providence. So maybe I'm just not cut out for original writing Imao. But we'll see.