

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

**A/N: Thomas wakes up on the first morning of the rest of his life.**

**-x-X-x-**

He sleeps terribly, but then Thomas had sort of been expecting that. The bed isn't bad by any means, but it definitely isn't up to the standards that his twenty-first century brain is used to. Frankly, it's probably not up to his new body's standards either given that the original Thomas Marlow had been a spoilt asshole at best and a malicious monster at worst.

That part was pretty much confirmed at this point, seeing as he'd gone ahead and read the rest of the journal from front to back last night before finally going to sleep. Every entry had been more self-centered and self-aggrandizing than the last. The previous owner of his new body had been exactly as bad of a person as Camilla disdained him for being now... and Thomas still wasn't entirely sure whether the other man had actually poisoned his brother or not.

What he did know was that the original Thomas Marlow had all but made it his mission to be on his worst behavior as the years went on and he stopped caring about gaining his parents' approval. One could blame the Lord and Lady Marlow for that, Thomas supposed... but just reading the copious amounts of whining self-victimization sprinkled throughout the journal had made it a lot harder to sympathize with his predecessor.

The original Thomas had everything he ever could have wanted, all the opportunities in the world, and from the sound of things even an older brother who actually loved him and wanted the best for him. Never mind whether his aristocratic parents loved him or not, he still had an amazing life by all the reasonable standards of this fantasy world.

Oh, but because he was punished for getting caught in gambling dens and for stealing things to pawn from the family home, he was somehow the victim. Because he'd been caught running with a gang of boys and engaging in

protection rackets and other forms of skullduggery and had his allowance reduced to a pittance as a result, he was the one who was maligned and mistreated.

It was that last part that left Thomas even more uncertain than ever before on whether his predecessor had poisoned his brother or not. From what he'd been able to tell from the dates, it had only been about three months from the cutting of the original Thomas Marlow's allowance to the incident that led to his banishment.

And if he really had found himself cut off from the family's coffers and unable to sneak out more things to sell and pawn off for coin... then killing off his brother and becoming heir to House Marlow might have been a ploy to get access to said money again.

But it wasn't like there was any confession or anything in the journal about that particular crime. He hadn't plotted or planned out his brother's poisoning from what Thomas could tell... and he had plotted and planned out other rather incriminating escapades in previous journal entries, things that if read, would certainly be proof enough that he had committed those crimes if he did in fact go through with them.

So what was it? Did Lord Thomas Marlow poison his brother or not? Would Thomas ever find out one way or the other? Perhaps not... the only one who knew anything about the Capital and House Marlow was Dame Camilla after all, and she seemed quite convinced of his guilt.

Regardless, Thomas sleeps terribly... but gets up with the crack of dawn anyways. After all, today is the first day of the rest of his life, of his new and fresh start. The Gift of Relentless Potential is clear... so long as he continues to strive, he will continue to thrive.

Vague as that might seem, Thomas nevertheless has high hopes, which is why he makes his way to the kitchen only to run into Eloise, who is already up and cooking. He's a little surprised, having been hoping to just find something easy

and simple to eat in the pantry before heading out... but instead, he winds up eating the most delicious breakfast of his life, filling and hearty.

Since she's there, he also asks if she has any tasks for him... but Thomas isn't shocked when her answer is a stammered, hesitant no. After all, it's been less than a day... and she's still trying to wrap her head around the fact that he wants her to order him around anyways.

Ultimately, Thomas sticks with his original reason for waking up at the crack of dawn. Once he's scarfed down the tasty breakfast she made, he lets Eloise know he's going for a run and heads out the door even as she gives him a baffled, confused look.

He's serious though, as strange as the idea might seem to a working woman like her. The truth is, Thomas is currently in the best shape of his life... and all because he'd gone to sleep an overweight, twenty-first century layabout two days ago and woken up as a much slimmer, fantasy layabout yesterday.

That said, just because he's in the best shape of his life doesn't mean he's in good shape. His body is still soft and clearly unused to hardship, just like a nobleman's would be. He has no definition to speak of and barely any muscle, and Thomas just thanks his lucky stars he's not as fat as he was previously.

That was probably in large part because of all of the shady shit the original Thomas Marlow got up to, but even with all of his dubious and illegal actions, he had clearly never really gotten his hands dirty. No callouses on his knuckles from fighting, nothing to show he got in any sort of scrapes.

No, from reading between the journal's lines, it sounded a lot like his only purpose in the 'gang' he ran with was to provide money. Probably why they dumped his ass the moment he was rendered all but penniless by his family's last punishment before this one.

Thomas had tried to start with some pushups as soon as he rolled out of bed, but that hadn't really gotten anywhere. He'd made himself do twenty before finally stopping for the time being and making his way downstairs.

So here he was running... only to immediately run into another problem. Namely, his shoes weren't made for this. His shoes were made for a nobleman, for walking around on polished floors and what not and standing at parties and galas and balls for hours on end. They were not made for running down dirt packed roads through a small town like Last Hope.

... Which is why he decides to take them off. Better to go barefoot than kill himself with bad shoes right? Or at least, Thomas figured as much. It still hurt of course, especially since the roads were not completely free of small rocks and pebbles, but he avoided most and frankly it was a different kind of hurt... a good kind of hurt.

That's what Thomas tells himself anyways, even as he pushes himself to do three entire circuits of the town of Last Hope. Specifically the dozen or so buildings, not the farmlands as well. He'd work his way up to including the farmlands, he figured.

Of course, by the end of the first circuit, he already wants to stop. By the end of the second, he feels like he's dying. He keeps going anyways though, completing the third and all but collapsing on the doorstep of the Mayor's House with his shirt clinging to his sweat-covered chest and his hair mussy and sticking to his scalp.

Leaning back against one of the wooden beams holding up the house's patio, Thomas lets his racing heart calm down, his breathing slowing as he just... rests for a moment.

He'll do it again before the end of the day, he tells himself. Before the sun sets on the horizon, he'll run three more circuits of the town... so he better start preparing for that to happen now. Because its not enough to just workout... he has to be *striving*. He has to keep going. He can't stop until he gets results.

He-

"What are you doing?"

Thomas blinks... and then tenses up when he registers the voice as Camilla's. Slowly craning his neck, he looks back to see the red haired knight standing there in the doorway, scowling down at him incredulously.

"... Dame Camilla. Good morning to you."

Her eyes narrow and flick over his person, ultimately landing on his feet. Her lips purse for a moment... before she snorts derisively.

"Tried to run, did you? And how well did that work out for you? Did you attempt to go back down the road only to realize its not protected enough for a traveler to survive it on foot? Or did you aim to flee into the Darkwoods only to turn and come crawling back here the same moment you heard your first growl?"

Thomas slowly blinks tiredly up at the warrior woman. It takes a bit for her accusations to truly pierce his tired thoughts. And when they finally do... he finds he simply doesn't have the patience for it.

"Fuck you."

Camilla looks taken aback and briefly surprised before barking out a laugh.

"Only ever in your dreams, Young Lord. Still, now you know better, I suppose. There's no escaping Last Hope. You're stuck here now, so you might as well get used to it."

? One could take her words to be relatively benign, but damn if he didn't find himself over-analyzing every word out of Camilla's mouth now that he knew the original Thomas thought she was sent with him to eventually kill him. Then again, was he reading too much into things? Bah... he's not going to live his life in fear. He'd already made that decision.

"I'll keep that in mind then, Dame Camilla."

His tired acquiescence in the face of her words seems to leave her wrong-footed for a moment as she stares at him strangely. Then, she gets her scowl back on her face and grits her teeth.

“I’m going to go train. Try not to die in the meantime, Young Lord. And don’t you dare make that poor girl draw you a bath, you hear me? You can do it yourself and if I hear you didn’t, there will be consequences.”

Sheesh. He really wasn’t anything but a criminal in her eyes, was he? She might pay lip service by calling him ‘Lord’ and what not, but in reality, she saw him as more of her prisoner than her superior. Whatever. So long as he kept striving, he would continue thriving. All he had to do was keep putting one foot in front of the other and eventually he should surpass even Dame Camilla. And then they would see who was superior to whom...

In the face of his silence, Camilla huffs and walks off, going who knows where to ‘train’. For a brief moment his curiosity IS piqued and he wonders if he can get her to train him... but in the end, Thomas gives it up as a last cause. There’s no way she’d ever deign to make him more capable of defending himself or potentially threatening others. And he definitely doesn’t want to give her an excuse to ‘accidentally’ kill him, especially if that IS something she’s eventually aiming to do.

Instead, once she’s out of sight Thomas pushes himself to his feet, swaying for a moment before finding his footing. He rolls his shoulders and shakes his body loose... and just for the briefest of moments, he feels like he’s moving a bit better... a bit faster.

Is he just imagining things, or is that the Gift of Relentless Potential rewarding him for pushing himself past his limits on his morning run? Either way, he knows one thing for sure. He can’t stop now.

Wiping his feet off as best he can, he puts his shoes back on and steps back into the house. Finding Eloise takes a moment... and perhaps Camilla was prophetic because the first thing the brunette does when she sees him is gasp in shock.

“M-My word! Lord Marlow, you’re caked in dirt and sweat! Please, let me draw you a bath r-right away!”

But Thomas just shakes his head as he holds up a hand.

“There’s no point. I’m not done getting dirty yet, Eloise. My run was fine... but now I need something to do. I’ll earn a bath later tonight... first and foremost, set me to work.”

Eloise’s mouth opens and closes soundlessly for a long moment before she finds her voice.

“I... I couldn’t possibly.”

“Please, Eloise. I know I’m not much yet... I’ll probably muck things up a bit at first, and I don’t have nearly the conditioning that the common folk of this town have from living out here on the fringes for all your lives. But I’m ready and willing to learn. Even if it’s just learning how to squat properly when I pick up a heavy box so I don’t hurt my back.”

For a long moment, Eloise still doesn’t look sure of things. But finally, biting her lower lip, she slowly nods.

“... Yes... there’s some things you could help with around town. If you... are really willing to get your hands dirty.”

Smiling, Thomas lifts up his hands, pretending to make a show of looking them over.

“These hands? They haven’t seen a speck of dirt in their entire existence.”

He pauses, letting Eloise grow uncertain... then, he lets his smile widen and chuckles.

“No time like the present to start though, right?”

She smiles back, giggling nervously and nodding along... and then she puts him to work. And Thomas starts to get firsthand experience on just what it takes for a community like this to survive on the edge of both the Rotlands and the Darkwoods.

Spoiler Alert... it's not easy roughing it in the boonies. But then to be fair, nothing worth doing is ever easy. And the harder things are, the more adversity Thomas overcomes, the stronger he should grow.

Hopefully, anyways.

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**A/N: It begins!**

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