

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

A/N: Response to first chapter was stellar, so have a second! This isn't quite a daily free write yet though to be clear... if it does become one, I'll probably spend a week building a backlog lol. Right now I'm literally writing these chapters freeform and then posting them up almost immediately after I finish them.

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

Actually, as Thomas rereads his 'Gift' again and again, some of his initial irritation fades away. Setting aside the vagueness and cute wordplay, wasn't this exactly the sort of 'cheat skill' that someone in his situation could expect to have?

In fact, he had to wonder how the original Lord Thomas Harlow had turned out to be such a disappointment and failure that he earned a banishment to the ass end of nowhere if THIS was his 'Gift'. Was he just extremely lazy or something? Or... more likely, the original owner of this body actually did have the Gift of Leadership that Dame Camilla mentioned, and it was only when Thomas took over that he gained this Gift of Relentless Potential.

Either way, it wasn't what the red head sitting across from him expected him to have. But it was better. He just had to-

The carriage suddenly comes to a jolting stop, pulling Thomas out of his internal musings as he blinks and looks around.

"Wha- why did we stop?"

Wordlessly, Camilla leans over and pulls aside the curtains covering the carriage's windows. Whatever she sees brings a satisfied if grim look to her face as she nods.

“We're here, Young Lord. Do not try to embarrass yourself. Remember that you still represent House Harlow in every single action you take. For now.”

With that said, she throws the carriage door open and hops out, leaving the door hanging ajar for him to follow. Swallowing thickly, not quite sure what to expect from what little he knows so far, Thomas nevertheless pushes off of the cushioned bench and crawls out of the carriage.

He's a little shaky on his feet, not just because this body is not his own, but also because this clothing is like nothing he's ever worn before. Trying to walk in it shows that fact more than sitting around talking ever could and he very nearly slips and faceplants in the mud just outside of the carriage.

Nearly... but not quite, thankfully. Instead, he stumbles but manages to right himself, wondering if maybe this body has muscle memory and that's why he's not tripping all over himself or feeling more distinct dysmorphia at the moment.

Regardless, once he's made sure he's not going to fall flat on his face any time soon, Thomas takes a look around at their surroundings... and immediately blanches at what he sees. There's one word to describe this new place he's found himself in... and that word is *bleak*.

The town of Last Hope lies sprawled out before them, a smattering collection of around a dozen buildings from what he can see. Farms, meanwhile, surround the town on most sides. Beyond those farms though, the land is... desolate for lack of a better word. Plagued and diseased both come to mind though too the more Thomas peers out at it.

There are blue lights along the edges of the farms that he's able to identify as lanterns from squinting for a moment. They seem to be spread out in such a way that it creates an invisible border for the town, a border that holds back the desolation outside of Last Hope.

Back the way they came looks at least a little bit nicer, with lamp posts along the road with more of those glowing blue lanterns. The desolation at least doesn't continue all the way back down the road, eventually stopping and seeming to give way to green farmlands off in the distance. Their carriage, likewise, had its own set of lanterns on it too so whatever the blue light lanterns are, they're very clearly important and possibly even magical.

Finally, off just beyond the further edges of Last Hope... is a massive, dark, foreboding forest that stretches far into the distance, as far as Thomas' eye can see. And the trees only get taller and bigger too the further away it gets, almost like it rises up the side of a mountain... but if that's the case, then the mountain range in question seems to stretch both directions beyond the horizon.

Last Hope is a town tucked between desolation and darkness, a town that maybe should have been named 'No Hope' or something instead. And supposedly HE was expected to run this place? To keep it from falling into ruin? Fuck him, he was so fucking screwed.

A sudden splattering of mud on his legs pulls Thomas out of his catastrophizing and he turns to see that Camilla has pulled luggage out of the carriage... and tossed the trunks down onto the ground beside him.

"Your things, Young Lord."

Her contemptuous tone makes it clear she won't be carrying the luggage for him for even a second. Thomas ruefully notes that she's clearly NOT sworn to carry his burdens, even as the carriage they'd arrived in starts to move again, the driver already turning the horses back around the way they came.

Thomas watches the carriage go with no small amount of envy. On the one hand, it wasn't like he knew what was back down the road anyways, nor did it sound like his new identity was wanted back in 'the Capital'. On the other hand, just another glance at Last Hope and its surroundings is enough to tell him this really probably is the last place he wants to be.

“Tch. What a sorry welcome.”

Turning to Camilla, Thomas furrows his brow before realizing what she means. Sure, she might not like him... but he is ‘Lord Harlow’, the second son of a noble family, and apparently this town’s new leader if she’s to be believed. And yet... there’s just one person waiting for them at the edge of town.

The young woman who steps forward to greet them is the epitome of the mousy brunette in Thomas’ opinion. She’s got brown hair done up in twin braids, freckles scattered across her cheeks and is shorter than him by at least half a foot if not more. On top of that, she’s wearing a worn but quite functional dress that goes down to her feet.

Gripping the dress with both hands, the brunette proceeds to curtsy for him while bowing her head.

“Well met, Lord Harlow. Welcome to Last Hope. I am Eloise, the Mayor’s daughter. I hope your ride was smooth and without issue?”

She’s definitely nervous, Thomas quickly deduces. But it doesn’t feel personal at least. Which means unlike Camilla, Eloise has no preconceived notions about what sort of person Thomas is supposed to be. He could work with that. He could definitely work with that. Smiling pleasantly, he prepares to knock Eloise’s socks off... but before he can do so, Camilla interrupts.

“Where is your father, girl? He should be out here meeting the Young Lord himself.”

Thomas resists the urge to facepalm even as Eloise stiffens up and flushes, eyes darting between him and Camilla in a way that makes it clear the Dame is ruining his first impression for him.

“S-Sorry, yes... unfortunately my father has been very busy preparing for the transition of power to L-Lord Harlow here. He extends his apologies my Lord, I swear it.”

Camilla growls but before she can make things worse, Thomas holds up a hand and cuts her off.

“No apologies necessary, Eloise. I understand completely. That said... there’s no need to rush such things. Just because I’m here now doesn’t mean this town no longer has need of a Mayor. I’d love to meet with your father as soon as possible so we can discuss how to best move forward.”

His eloquence seems to shock both Eloise and Camilla into silence for a heartbeat. Meanwhile, Thomas is seeing his first glimmer of hope since realizing his ‘Gift’ might not be so bad after all. See, if Last Hope already had a Mayor... then why shouldn’t that Mayor just keep working?

He didn’t need to take over just because he was nobility. Instead, he could have Eloise’s father continue doing the lion’s share of the work while he focused on other things! The town seemed like it was doing fine enough, so rather than Thomas running the place into the ground in a fortnight, he would just let the expert continue doing his job! Problem solved!

“I-I’m not sure...”

“That wouldn’t-!”

Both Eloise and Camilla try to talk at the same time, but Thomas overrides them both by clapping his hands together. He was technically in charge here, right? So what he said goes.

“No point talking about any of this without the Mayor present! Please Eloise, escort us to your father immediately so we can get all of this figured out!”

Feeling rather cheery, even with the dreary surroundings, Thomas even smiles as he reaches down and yanks his luggage out of the muck, holding one trunk in each hand and ignoring the strange look Camilla gives him so he can stare pointedly at Eloise.

“Well? Let’s get going!”

Everything was finally starting to look up!

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Thomas stares at Mayor Harper for a long moment in silence. Then, he looks back to Eloise who stands there wringing her hands and avoiding his gaze. Then, he looks back to her father, the Mayor. Or rather, more specifically... he looks *down* at the man, who is currently laid up in bed sleeping.

That in and of itself wasn't much of a problem, though in most circumstances Thomas would feel weird about standing over another man while they were asleep in their bed. These weren't most circumstances. Instead, Eloise's father was... old. Very, very old. And clearly on his way out the door where life was concerned.

Which was a little confusing, because Thomas wouldn't have pegged Eloise as any older than twenty herself. And yet...

"Are you sure this is your father and not your grandfather, Eloise? Or maybe your... great-grandfather?"

His incredulous questions are answered, surprisingly, by Dame Camilla instead of the silent Mayor's daughter.

"He has Rot Lung. Its aging him quicker."

Ah fuck, fantasy diseases. Potentially *magical* fantasy diseases at that.

"It's not contagious, is it?"

Camilla gives him a weird look before slowly shaking her head.

"No. It can only be contracted through prolonged exposure to the Rotlands, combined with ignoring the obvious symptoms and not seeking proper help."

That last part seems to finally break Eloise out of her self-imposed silence, if only to protest the negative characterization of her father.

“We didn’t ignore anything! My father was the only one who could keep the lanterns operational and prevent Last Hope from being overrun by the Rotlands all this time! He sacrificed his own health for this town! He gave everything to keep it from falling to the Rot!”

For a moment, Thomas fears Camilla will take offense to being talked back to. But as much as she seems to disdain him, the red headed knight is not in fact a bad person. Sympathy flickers in her blue eyes and ultimately she just inclines her head wordlessly, letting Eloise have the final say.

Eloise, meanwhile, seems to realize she just mouthed off to a full-fledged knight and takes a step back, almost shrinking in on herself even as she shoots concerned glances towards her sleeping father.

In the ensuing awkward silence, Thomas clears his throat.

“Just... so we’re all on the same page, I assume the Rotlands is all that desolation just outside of the borders of the town’s farmland?”

Camilla shoots him a glare while Eloise just looks confused but slowly nods. Thomas snorts in amusement at the confirmation.

“Right. Next you’ll be telling me that the big dark forest on the other side of town is called the Darkwoods or something.”

There’s another pause... before Eloise tilts her head to the side.

“Uh... yes? That’s what it’s called, my Lord.”

Thomas slowly blinks as he processes that. The Rotlands and the Darkwoods, sandwiching the little town of Last Hope between them. Good lord, it was just so damn cliched.

Camilla chooses that moment to step up to him, her voice low but furious as she all but growls at him. Now that they're both out of the carriage, she's really not that much taller than him. And privately, Thomas is pretty sure that its those heeled boots she's wearing that are giving her the extra few inches of height to make it so her eyes are level with his forehead.

Still, she looms over him all the same, a fair bit intimidating as she rests one hand on the pommel of her sword while whispering in his ear.

“Are you seriously trying to continue the memory loss gambit, Young Lord? Don't you think it's far past time to give up on that? The carriage is gone. You're here. *We're* here. Man up and start thinking about your next steps.”

From Camilla's point of view, that was honestly very fair. But of course, from Thomas' point of view it felt very unfair. Especially when he'd actually thought for a moment that he'd found a solution to his problems in Mayor Harper.

Someone had to run this place and it really shouldn't be him. There *had* to be someone more qualified, right? He was not ready to be responsible for all these people. He wasn't even really ready to be responsible for himself.

Although... that did make him wonder how long the Mayor had been laid up in bed like this. The town hadn't looked too worn down when he was outside. Rustic, yes... falling apart, no. So was Mayor Harper's condition just something that happened in the past couple weeks, or was there someone out there who had been picking up the slack while the Mayor had gotten worse and worse?

“Um... my lord, I apologize for the attempt at subterfuge... and I will accept any punishment you deem fit. I just ask that you allow me to finish moving my father from the house. I have made arrangements for both of us to live elsewhere now that you're taking up residence. The town provides and... and I just ask that you not take out my impudence on my father, please.”

Thomas stares at Eloise for a long moment, her words running through his head over and over again. Most specifically he finds himself turning over the latter words more and more. She'd 'made arrangements'. The 'town provides'.

... You know, if there was someone who had been handling things here in Last Hope while the Mayor's condition worsened more and more, it would have had to be someone close to home. Someone who knew how to run a town, someone who knew how Last Hope worked. Someone... who learned by growing up at her father's feet as HE ran the town all these years.

"My... my Lord?"

Oops, he's sporting a wicked sort of smile right now, isn't he? It's not that Thomas plans to do anything untoward, really. It's more that he thinks he's found the solution to all of his problems.

"Your apology is accepted, Eloise. As far those arrangements you made... cancel them. Neither you nor your father need to go anywhere."

Eloise blinks while Camilla stiffens.

"I... I don't understand."

Making sure his smile is as benevolent as possible, he gestures around the place, a gesture meant to encapsulate the entire building, not just the bedroom they're standing in. They've relocated to the Mayor's House after all, and while it's no mansion or anything like that, it's definitely the biggest building in the entire town.

"This place is more than big enough for all of us, is it not? How many bedrooms does it have?"

"Ah... uh... f-four, my Lord."

Nodding along, Thomas hums.

"Perfect. Dame Camilla and I will take the two that are empty. This is your family's home after all and I would be an utter monster to kick you and your

father out of it in his final years. No, you can both stay here. I won't hear of anything else."

He adds that last part just in case she continues to try to protest out of some misguided sense of duty or something. Thomas figures making it a 'command' will allow her to accept the generosity easier. He wants to be on Eloise's good side after all, especially if she's as important as he thinks she is.

Unfortunately, she doesn't look overjoyed or even like she's particularly overflowing with gratitude. Instead, trembling a little bit, she glances from him to her father and back again... and then gathers up her skirts for another curtsy.

"A-As my Lord wishes... o-of course."

Hm, not quite the reaction he was hoping he'd get, but ah well. Either way, he shrugs.

"We'll find our rooms ourselves. You feel free to stay here and tend to your father. You and I will talk later, Eloise."

"... Y-Yes. Yes, my Lord."

Feeling rather good about himself, Thomas leads the way out of the bedroom and back into the hall, with Camilla following closely behind him. He's mentally patting himself on the back still for his astonishingly good social maneuvering... when suddenly there are hands on his collar, yanking him around and pushing him up against the nearest wall.

Thomas finds himself eye to eye with Dame Camilla as the Lady Knight holds him against the wall, a snarl marring her beautiful features and something dangerously fatal flashing across her blue eyes. Thomas freezes up under her gaze, almost feeling like any wrong move at this point and she would kill him on the spot. Was this... magical killer instinct or something?

"Let me make something perfectly clear, Young Lord. If you touch a single hair on that young woman's head, if you make her do anything she does not want to

do... I will take my sword and shove it up your ass so far it comes out your mouth. Do you understand?"

Frozen up by the danger, it takes Thomas a second to parse the threat. When he finally does, he sputters in disbelief and no small amount of indignation.

"What?! What are you even talking about?! I'm not going to *force* myself on Eloise!"

Camilla's eyes narrow and she searches his face carefully for a long moment before beginning to frown. Her brow furrows as she continues to stare at him far past the point of sensibility. Finally, she scowls.

"You accept her apology, insist on her and her father continuing to live here, and institute no punishment for her lying to you. And you expect me to believe that you weren't intending to use her father's ailing presence and her previous trespass to extract sexual favors from her?"

For fuck's sake, when she put it that way... was that really how it looked from the outside? Thinking back to Eloise's reaction and the lack of effusive gratitude and gratefulness... yes. Yes it was. Both her and Camilla had taken all of the wrong cues from his attempt at generosity. Camilla because she thought she knew him to be a monster and Eloise because she'd been raised to expect nobles to just do whatever they liked.

Of course, Thomas had no intentions of doing anything like any of that. Growling, he reaches up and grabs Camilla by the wrists. Her own grip on him remains ironclad, but he's not trying to pull her away so much as he's attempting to convey that he means every word out of his mouth.

"I don't expect you to believe anything from me, Dame Camilla. But it is the truth. Whatever you think of me, whatever crimes you believe I have committed, I have no intention of forcing myself on any woman, Eloise or otherwise. *That* is the truth."

There's another pause as Camilla stares at him wordlessly for a moment. Finally, she lets go of his collar and releases him from her grasp.

"... See that you don't, Young Lord. See that you don't."

With that, Camilla stalks away down the hall and Thomas grimaces, rubbing at his neck a bit.

Fuck... just what sort of bullshit had the original owner of this body gotten up to before he got here?

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A/N: So that's Chapter Two. We meet Eloise in this chapter, who will indeed be an important character going forward. And we learn more about the town of Last Hope and its surrounding geography!

Let me know what you think please, this story isn't quite a daily free write yet, but I might make it one if I continue to get constructive/positive feedback!