

Madman Butterfly: a Life in Holidays

Issue #5: Love and War

“Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”

—Nelson Mandela

It had been a long January, and had become a difficult February. Hector's story had kept Thomas and his family out of serious trouble, but the investigations were quite thorough and terribly intrusive. Thomas had found giving Sarah space easy for about the first three weeks, but being out of school and an ongoing subject of public speculation left him with few options for where to spend his time. He didn't want to bother Lena too much at first, and by the time cabin fever had set in, she had found a guy she wanted to spend a good deal of private time with. He was proud of himself for being ambivalent about this development, although his feeling mature about not being stung by it was somewhat undermined by the fact that he had come to realize he was unbothered while he occupied himself by hitting harder bits of produce into a compost bin with a baseball bat. Lena had offered to get on Sarah's case after week four as the tension became more and more palpable with each visit, but Thomas didn't feel like pushing it. Sarah's offer of being there if he needed her had seemed to turn back to “don't need me at some point.”

The problem was not that there was no conversation happening, but that it was becoming more frequent and increasingly impolite. Things seemed to go sour on the 19th of January. Thomas had told Sarah that President McCain had opposed making MLK Day a federal holiday in 1983, as he gave a commemorative speech. It was the first thing he'd said that wasn't a necessary conversation. She looked over to glare at him, saying nothing. That seemed to...unstop something that had been building in her.

Tom had taken to talking to Thomas in reflections, and Thomas had started talking more openly with his own spirits. They all quickly learned to keep quiet—well, Jesus, pushed as usual—when Sarah was home. She was hostile to Tom, but had also become frustrated by Thomas talking to no one. He supposed it did look uncomfortably like madness, but she was snapping at him like she'd used to, the way she'd stopped doing after she'd knocked the wind out of him at the old house. The regression bothered him more than the avoidance, and he found himself cringing whenever she was frustrated or just mildly bothered by any inconvenience, worried there was some boiling point she might reach that would put him in her sights even if he hadn't done anything in particular. It was a familiar feeling from back when he still thought there was some perfect path to avoiding setting off his parents, if only he could find it. That was worse than regression; he'd never found himself hiding away from her like he had begun to. Annie had been kinder, but she didn't know how to mother Thomas anymore. She found herself talking to him more like a coworker than family, or sitting on the sidelines and trying to play referee when Sarah started being too petty. She'd taken a jab at Thomas' bored humming that had struck him

with a nasty bout of overawareness, stopping himself and glancing over his shoulder whenever he did.

She almost felt guilty at how well she was doing. Her husband had been spotted boarding a bus in another town and had not come back. Some expected her to collapse. She was instead unburdened. His absence came with complications, but none of the worries could outweigh the relief. She would have to sell the house and move into an apartment, but she decided to keep the process secret for now, waiting until Sarah was on her way out before telling her youngest children. Thomas would still have his own room.

When Thomas did go out, he had noticed the rest of the world was starting to treat him differently, too. He had begun to grow peach fuzz, and his dress code relaxed as his aimless period dragged on. The clean-cut, if odd, boy was becoming a haggard-looking teenager, long-haired with the faint impression of a mustache and dark circles under his eyes. He didn't get much sleep. Tom was a nocturnal hunter. Tom had agreed to use a light touch in his judgments and devourings. He consumed from every strata of civilization, but his diet was heavy in rich foods, and some meals naturally invited much scrutiny, but there was always a plausible explanation for the deaths. Which made all the clues to the transgressions that put them on the menu even more perplexing. The SBCDT was fifty-fifty on it being the work of either a sophisticated, international operation or an extremely loose, decentralized network. Tom was fast, but he still had to travel, and so the globetrotting could take up a whole night as he looked for the most wicked and unrepentant souls. Sheriff hadn't even recognized him at first when they finally crossed-paths again. Only having the official story and thinking that perhaps the boy had been right to be so deadset on getting Eddie, even if his approach was ill-advised.

"You look rough, Thomas," Sheriff said.

"You look like a fuckin' lump as usual, Dom." Thomas said without breaking his stride. That was the day Sheriff Smith decided not to run for reelection, rather than get angry, maybe send ex-Deputy Hernandez a nice gift basket with a note about her being right. Not like Bower could take his spot. Dominic Smith could shake off a child's insult—eventually—but youths knew enough about the world and too little about restraint to knock the wind out of him. It was a little arbitrary; Thomas had called him useless not long ago, but it felt different this time. There was a disappointment with the old insults, a wounded hope. Now the young man simply hated him, and Dom thought he might have a decent reason to. Tom and Thomas were tied in terms of county law enforcement force reduction, different as their techniques might be.

It was the second day of February when the last vestiges of Thomas' childhood started to burn down. He had been absentmindedly flipping through what seemed like an excessive amount of coverage of a woodchuck, even the most famous one, when Jesus became agitated.

“You know the season of me is kicking off soon, and people are talking about an animal,” Jesus said.

“What?” Manuel asked.

“Lent,” John said.

“Oh, right,” Manuel said.

“Oh, right? Do you have an idea what it’s like to be most celebrated as a baby? Meanwhile, commemoration of my works are, whatever. Most people can only be bothered to give up sweets, if anything, and they all make exceptions for Valentine’s Day when it comes after. I get preempted by the most Hallmarked of holidays. It’s very hard to intervene on humanity’s behalf when that’s what you get up to.”

“I thought you gave up on intervention,” John said.

“I gave up on the plan, but trust me, things would be a lot worse if I wasn’t talking to my father, he suddenly grew serious, “they will get worse.”

“You have said as much before,” John said, bushy eyebrows raised.

“It can always get worse,” Jesus said glumly before rallying, “How freaked out would people be if I made that varmint talk?”

“...Very?” Manuel offered.

“But you don’t think I can do it, Thomas. But I won’t be tested. But I might do it if you ask nicely.”

“Can you please leave me out of your bullshit?” Thomas asked. His language had grown saltier in the past month. Didn’t seem much point keeping clean when he was party to murder with some regularity.

“You should take your own advice,” Sarah said from the top of the basement steps. He had forgotten it was a Saturday despite his mother being home. She had been the secretary for some nine-to-five, five-day-a-week business for almost a decade by that point. She used to think the forced niceness wore her out, making it hard to keep kind at home. Maybe it did, but much

less now that the biggest drain was gone. She poked her head out from the kitchen to keep an eye on the two siblings. Thomas turned the TV off and apologized.

“You wouldn’t have to be sorry if you didn’t do it in the first place,” Sarah told him. Annie Durango flinched, recognizing one of her own barbs that had lost any truth through overapplication to genuine errors.

“Sarah, honey, come on. He’s trying.” Annie pleaded meekly. Thomas had reeled in conversing with the possible spirits from his peak, as many slip-ups as he had.

“Oh. Great. As long as he’s trying. Trying to kill as few people as possible. Trying to not talk to thin air like a psycho. He’s trying so hard. It never stops, but he tries.” Sarah said.

“I don’t like it either-” Thomas started.

“But you’ll keep doing it.” Sarah interrupted.

“Sarah, let’s not say anything we can’t take back,” Annie said.

“Like what? That I can’t do this. I tried too. I really tried. I tried to tell myself that it’s not you, but it’s always there, isn’t it? And my dead boyfriend. I tried to not think about him as much, but now I feel like he’s always here, and it feels like you’re making me insane because you don’t even know that he is, but I feel it. I can’t look in the mirror without wondering what I’ll see. I tried to not say you make me feel sick when I look at you and think of all those things in you, and all the terrible things they do. I tried to tell myself that I was safe, but I don’t know. It was bad enough being your sister, but I always knew I’d have my own life when I got out of this miserable fucking town, but now the whole world’s depending on this other part of you. I’m nobody, and it’s like I can’t even breathe when you’re around anymore. I tried to wish that everything that made you like this hadn’t happened, more than I wished that you weren’t like this, but I can’t. I’m sorry it happened, but I don’t feel as bad as I feel like things would be better if you had died. I tried, but I can’t be around you. I can’t live with you in my life. I loved you, I’ve been trying, but I don’t. You have to leave me alone.”

Sarah was talking through gasping sobs by the end. Annie had put her hands, both comforting and firm, on her shoulders, trying to calm Sarah and also push her away.

“You said...” Thomas said, trailing off.

“Grow up, Thomas! Sometimes people change their minds. That’s not a fucking problem, it’s life! If you’re so smart, you should be able to figure out why. Seems obvious to me, think it over the next time people are dying around you.”

“Sarah, you need to stop. This isn’t going to make you feel any better.” Annie said as she grabbed her daughter by the face, trying to tear her gaze away from her other child, who seemed dazed. Sarah slapped her hands away, and Annie grabbed her more forcefully by the shoulders, trying to physically restrain her as she tried to get in her brother’s face.

“Hey, Tommy, how does Manuel feel about how you could have at least saved him if you had let it all out earlier. Ask him that. You don’t save anything, though, do you? Not him, not anyone you were in time for if you start Armageddon either, huh? Couldn’t help him, couldn’t die and help everyone else.” Sarah started coughing from the strain on her throat and feeling of dehydration from too salty tears running down into the corners of her mouth. Annie forced Sarah’s face into the crook of her own shoulder, holding her head there until she stopped trying to yell and broke down into unintelligible weeping. Thomas stared blankly into space as he walked towards the front door.

“Go to Lena’s. I’ll call,” his mother said, wishing for the first time since her husband was made to leave that she did have some able partner to look after her other child, but Thomas would survive while Sarah was in crisis. That’s what she hoped, and with only one pair of shoulders, had to take a gamble.

“I did say have come to turn-” Jesus began before John’s fist made a solid connection with his temple. It would have made Thomas feel better just a few minutes ago, but he had no appetite for conflict anymore. Least of all between an old zealot and what was once the subject of his fervent devotion. Two old men remembered more as symbols than people, grappling in an age so remote from their own it might as well be another planet, a victim of the now trying to pull them apart. Thomas didn’t take his bicycle, he walked slowly at first, pacing steadily increasing until he was running faster than he ever had, he kept running until he was at Lena’s street where he sat on the curb and stared at all the big houses, each more bespoke in basic design than the rows of bungalows he had grown up in, than the standard floor plan apartments he had often visited when he had peers. He didn’t see beauty in the uniqueness or the uniformity; he saw madness in how close their borders were, how simple it would be to walk across the street, and take from each other. He felt the day that was truly grasped, rounding the corner on a pale horse, only arriving because the way things were a little too comfortable for enough people to choose a different way until they didn’t have any choice but to change or die. However, it turned out he doubted there would be much mercy for the Lenas or Charlies of the world, the necessary, unfortunate sacrifices of a better world still built on the bones and blood of the world that came before, just like how the world that came before had built its foundations. It was the thought that kept him from wanting to burn it all down. Didn’t they deserve something better than ashy emptiness? He thought of the bones in the valley in Ezekiel. Maybe there was some way to break the foundations by putting the breath of life back into it. Maybe that was a nice

thought that didn't mean anything at all. He got up and knocked on Lena's door on trembling legs, her words not managing to break through the fog as he went to sit on the couch. There was a young man he didn't recognize at her side. His mind flipped through other verses. She was not exactly respectful of her elders.

Thomas moaned and wrapped his fingers around the back of his neck, anguish in his voice as he asked her, "What are they going to do to you?"

"Nobody's doing anything, Thomas. Why don't you try and take a deep breath?" Lena asked.

Thomas curled up into himself. All the things he learned about not causing problems and when to cause problems clashing in his head. He felt a terrible guilt, showing up on her doorstep in this state, but had no idea how to shake it off.

"What'd she say?" Lena asked.

"Don't," Thomas said, anything more coherent falling apart on the way from thought to speech. Lena intuited the meaning anyway.

"I promise not to yell at her. For right now, anyway. We could use a little privacy, James."

The unknown man made his way to her room. Thomas found he could remember the words almost exactly.

"Jesus," Lena said, for once, this didn't come with some snide little quip, "I'm sorry, Thomas."

"Who would you like to stay with after the divorce?" A voice that wasn't Thomas asked, but there wasn't any less bitterness in it. Thomas did laugh mirthlessly. It was the first time Tom had seemed at all human to Lena, and she felt pity for both of them.

"As long as nobody makes me choose, I'd rather not. I'm going to see her. I won't tell her you told me. But she's my friend, and I have something to help you sleep. You look like you could use it. James is a nice guy, just ask if you need anything," she said. She got some old sleep medication from when she had a bout of insomnia and gave Thomas the maximum adult dosage, figuring that it wouldn't be able to hurt him. She waited for him to take them with some cold water before she left. Thomas lay on the couch in a twilight state until he found himself falling through a phantasmagoria of horrors, human and divine, the faces of loved ones suffering in each new flash of misery. It felt like the dream he had before he met Talbot. He woke to Roman

restraining him and Lena pouring ice water over his head. Thomas put up his hands to show he was calm.

“Goddman, kid, that must have been a hell of a dream,” Roman said, winded and impressed by the force of Thomas's thrashing. Like a man possessed is how he would describe it when he told a drinking buddy how his back got tweaked the next day.

“Whew. Okay, no sleeping pills for you.” Lena said, trying to inject some levity into what had been a grim day. The sun had fully set, and James presumably gone home for the night.

“Hell of a side effect. Real Pentecostal shit.” Roman said, hobbling off to the fridge.

“What’d he mean?” Thomas asked once the man was out of earshot.

Lena leaned towards him, “You were calling out people’s names. Tom was, uh, he was saying something too.”

Thomas looked inward, but Tom seemed to be shrugging off a similar stupor. Jesus stood in the moonlight by a window. The humor had gone out of him. He stared into space. Manuel was sitting on the floor, head between his knees. John was absent. Thomas took off his hoodie, using it as a towel to dry off his shaggy hair.

“How’d it go?” he asked Lena. He tried to be casual, but there was a pit in his stomach.

“Do you want me to be honest? Really honest? Like really, really honest?”

The cold dampness suddenly stopped bothering Thomas, “Might as well be.”

Lena rubbed his back between the shoulders, “She hates you, bud. I think it’s just because she needs to while she works things out. But...I don’t know. You’re going to be staying over here for a little while.”

“I thought we were getting better.”

John walked into the room from the kitchen, “Grief isn’t a path you walk down, Thomas. It’s like making your way through a dark forest. You can get lost all over again after getting your bearings, and melancholy besets you at all times, striking when you least expect it.”

“Leave me alone, you stupid, sad old man. I don’t think anyone would be singing about your soul marching on if you know what a mope you’d be.” Thomas and Tom told him.

“Eesh. Who was that?” Lena asked.

Thomas told her it was John and what he said.

“Might not want to bite his head completely off, you two. He’s not wrong. I don’t know. I don’t know much at all, I don’t think, but I knew if this was going to happen, it was going to be bad. It’s a lot she’s been dealing with, and it’s always more with your family, no offense. I think this was finally too big for her when she had time to think about it. She needs a break.”

“From me?” Thomas asked.

“Unfortunately,” Lena said, “Family drama is kind of a new experience for me, though, so I’m still up for anything, if you were worried about me also getting mad. I’ll try most things once.”

“I don’t have to stay. I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t think you can. I’ve had a friend try to kill themselves before. I’d rather keep you busy than go through that again.” Lena said. The usual lightness of her tone, the subtle uptalk that made her sound ever enthusiastic, was gone. It was a serious talk between equals. Thomas felt less like he had passed a milestone and more like he had put a foot in the grave. She grabbed his jacket and finished drying his head off.

“When was the last time you cleaned this?” She asked.

“Couple of weeks,” Thomas said.

“Mhmm. Well, one rule I do have is that you need to keep your hygiene up. You’ll feel a little less nasty if you’re less groddy.”

“Yeah.” Thomas agreed. Words weren’t coming easily.

“Are you scared of falling asleep again?” Lena asked.

Thomas nodded.

“Makes sense. I’ll stay out here with you tonight. I’ll wake you up if it seems really bad, so try for me, okie-dokie? And I think Tom should see how long he can go between meals, you know? I don’t think it’s good for your mental whatever to be going through that right now.”

“Alright,” Thomas said, pacified by a paralysis of the mind.

“Alright from both of you?” Lena asked.

Thomas and Tom nodded. Thomas lay down on the couch. Lena sat beside him. Without consciously deciding to do it, Thomas put his head on her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair. She had only been on the outer orbit of his life until recently, but already, he recoiled when a morbid part of his mind tried to imagine the world without her. At some point, he drifted off, opening his eyes when it was morning again. She was awkwardly slumped over, having fallen asleep with him there rather than moving him. The thought of her being gone overwhelmed him this time. He wiped the tears from his eyes, waking her up. She ruffled his hair before he got up.

“Fucking woodchuck,” he mumbled as he watched her get breakfast, pulled back down into sleep, unable to stay up now that he had caught up on a little.

He slept through most of the next couple of days, only getting up long enough to stay clean and help with household tasks and homework enough to avoid seeming like an ungrateful guest. James erred more towards physical than intellectual pursuits, but he wasn’t stupid. Thomas would describe his main issue as nobody had taught him how to learn well, and he tried to ameliorate it by teaching him some memory techniques he’d picked up. Lena was well satisfied with them getting along, although Thomas detected that it was a relationship not meant to survive their graduation and moving apart. It was something sweet with a short shelf life. Tom did keep quiet, but they did go out. The nightmares kept coming; there were ill omens in the air, a thing like Tom could see plainly, but whose meanings were obscure. Strange, sudden gales that came in waves of seven. A hint of rain aroma, subtle enough to avoid detection by a bloodhound, on cloudless days. They did not leave the town’s county, but they patrolled it by night, then day, when Thomas somewhat recovered. Tom had eaten irregularly in January, preferring to swoop in on group affairs. He had been truthful in saying he didn’t get hungry, exactly. It was more like his bones were going hollow at the possibility of not eating. Disintegration, rather than wasting. It hadn’t started until he had seen some green seeping along the town’s mainstreet as he looked out for colors beyond the human spectrum, from above or below, and had to restrain himself from acting. He might never be hungry if he lived in total isolation, but then his duty would be unfulfilled, then filled by something else. An authority passed judgment; his nature chafed lethally against not doing so, if he kept not doing so in perpetuity. It was a trap. Die and be replaced, live and kill. Thomas was struck with doubt he’d never faced before.

Thomas had wandered out to Charlie’s place on his day patrol when he saw feds questioning the man. Thomas stayed back until they left. Charlie was unusually still as he approached, not regarding Thomas until the boy spoke, staring out at the dawn’s horizon instead.

“What was that about?”

“Oh, you know how it is. You, not the royal you. Give a man permission to snoop, and he’ll snoop over all kinds of things he shouldn’t. It’s like throwing a fox in a pigeon coop and expecting it not make a meal of it. They’ve been looking into all kinds of things, trying to figure out what happened. Somebody looked into me. I’m an interesting fellow, turns out. But I’ve always been steady in pursuit. And I’ve been pursued. All this attention at my age makes me blush.” Charlie said, a little more tired-sounding than usual.

Fresh guilt washed over Thomas. Tom’s lips twitched at the thought of biting into those white tendrils, but that would hardly help things. His feeling of insubstantialness increased at that consideration.

“Chicken coop?” was all Thomas said.

“No. Chickens are mean suckers. Peckers, I suppose. If I were a fox, I’d get out of there.” Charlie said, a pleased smile spreading across his lips as he still managed to bait the boy, who seemed like he’d been off, going through his own troubles and changes. Then he was unusually serious.

“Heard a little about your sister. Your mother told me, in case you came to me or mine for help.”

“Oh, that’s not why I’m here. I was just passing by before I saw those guys bothering you.”

“Oh, I’m never bothered. Pointless being bothered. I’m calm, or I’m in motion. I have some advice anyway.”

“Thought you didn’t want to be my male role model.”

“I don’t, but I like to lecture the youth on occasion. Rounds out a slow day. Don’t forget she’s still young, too. I was young once, I think, and I handled plenty of business I shouldn’t have. I still had my moods, though. Made youthful mistakes. Speaking from experience, it happens to the best of us. Don’t be mad back. It won’t help. Even if it doesn’t work out, walk away with love.”

“Short for a lecture, Charlie,” Thomas said.

Charlie shook his head in mock sorrow, “It’s the video games. I have to make these things fit your attention span, or you’d never learn at all.”

“My attention is all over right now. See you ‘round, Charlie.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Charlie said with complete seriousness. Thomas decided against apologizing. It wouldn’t be fair to burden the man with an explanation of why he felt he should.

It was the morning of Valentine’s Day when Thomas finally received an update from his mother as she stopped by Lena’s to look in on him. They’d chatted on the phone before, but this was the first time he saw her in person. Sarah had been shaken perhaps most by what Tom had done to their father. She didn’t want to be close enough to be told to feel better. Wherever they each ended up staying, it didn’t seem like they would meet again before she left for college. Normally, Annie would think it was a ludicrous arrangement, but extraordinary circumstances made it sadly understandable. Lena was visiting her and informed him of the same sentiment when she arrived home, also that her parents would be back for March. They’d cross that bridge when they got to it. Thomas felt the ground beneath his feet collapse a little more each day. A numbness had set in. Earlier in the week, his files had been confiscated from his storage by the SBCDT. The facility charged him for repairs. He’d taken the last of his money out of his account and burned it. He hadn’t been eating. He didn’t need to anymore, and Lena refused payment for taking him in.

He’d been bothered by a young street preacher with a fancy haircut when he decided to light it on fire. Lots of talk about abortion, the fags, and loose women. He threw it into the man’s collection box a couple of bills at a time, then the wad at the man as he tried to save it.

“You know you can’t take that with you,” Thomas said after he kicked the whole thing over, hot change rolling away down a street drain. Rip was one of the onlookers. He didn’t recognize the boy. It was just some wild, long-haired youth in his retelling to Crystal. She shook her head at the state of the town, feds everywhere, accomplishing nothing except harassing men like her father, while the citizens got more fed up, acting up over all the bad, strange things that kept happening. Maybe they ought to visit Rip’s family sooner than planned.

It was early afternoon when Thomas noticed James was not showing up. It was a Saturday, and school was no issue.

“Are you guys doing something later?” he asked Lena as she did schoolwork at the dinner table.

“We’re not doing anything until tomorrow. James thinks it’s better to celebrate the day after, miss the crowds and the pressure. It’s more romantic to do it on a day you’re not told to. He’s not wrong, I guess.” Lena said.

“But you wish he’d done it anyway?”

Lena sighed, “Yeeeeaaaah. That means you’re my Valentine’s for today. We should go somewhere nice for dinner. Not nice enough to need reservations, but somewhere you should dress up for. Maybe shave, comb your hair.”

“I haven’t had much of an appetite,” Thomas said.

“Do it for me. And love or whatever.” Lena said.

“I guess. Annie dropped off some clothes.”

“Nice. I guess you’re kind of a two-for-one thing. Saucy me.” Lena teased. She had softened somewhat towards Tom, in part to the strange sleep babble that made her think they really were more unified than she had thought.

“Hey, Lena,” Thomas said.

“Yup.”

“Do you think most people count it as losing your virginity if you didn’t want it, or is there some technicality?”

Lena sensed that this was about the house. Thomas had a tendency to go blank whenever the lover’s holiday came up, checking out of his mind for a few minutes.

“Opinions vary. I wouldn’t concern myself with most of them. I wouldn’t worry too much about it at all. It’s not the exact same thing, but when I was in like the fifth grade, for some reason, I thought a first kiss was a big deal. We had this weird kid who smelled like mustard all the time in our class. He wasn’t all there, you know? This girl, who didn’t like me, said she would give him fifty dollars if he went up and kissed me. He did. The taste was worse than the smell. I was too upset to be creeped out. I thought my special moment had been ruined forever. I shouldn’t have worried, you know why?”

“There’s always a next time?” Thomas guessed.

“No. Come here real quick.” She beckoned. Thomas stood beside her, and she stared up at him.

“Plant one on me if you want,” she said.

“What?” Thomas asked, dumbfounded.

“Little peck on the lips. Real quick. No, trying to slip in any tongue. One-time offer. If you want,” she said.

He leaned down slowly, afraid this was some sort of practical joke that he was falling for. He kept going until his lips met her. She put a hand on the back of his head and pressed him against her for a moment. It was hardly the most romantic of lip locks, but Thomas nearly fell over when it was done.

“When it’s good, and you want it, it’s different,” Lena whispered, topping it off with a wink that made Thomas dizzy.

“Wow,” Thomas said weakly.

“Um-hmm.”

“Why are you so...comfortable around me?” Thomas asked.

“Mmm. I’ve had to work through enough issues on my own to know it sucks. If lonely people stick together, they’re not lonely anymore.” Lena said.

“What have you been through, Lena?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re older. Right now, you should get presentable. I feel like steak.”

Thomas ate for the first time in weeks that night and realized he had been hungry, on top of everything else. He felt better with a shave and trim. He felt more like himself. His better mood lasted through Sunday, brought back down to Earth on Monday. Lena was at school when Roman came into the living room to watch the President's Day speech by President McCain on the big TV. He seemed down. The bulk of the ceremony honoring the men who’d filled the office was spent committing more deeply to more boots on the ground overseas and at home. Reduce bulk data collection, but increase specialized surveillance funding. The mess in Thomas's little town was, somehow, a sign that the Special Bureau needed more support. It was about the very last context one wanted to hear their hometown mentioned in. The New American Century was

back on. Roman turned it off before the speech ended. The next day, the president would have a hot mic moment calling a group of dignitaries from Southeast Asia a gook, which was a less-than auspicious start to the expansion of American influence. Thomas apologized to John. He simply didn't have room for more wisdom from the dead at the moment, none that wasn't already transmitted in life. Jesus grew ever more quiet and more anxious. Manuel had been distant. Thomas finally decided to ask why, a question he had avoided because he knew the answer. He had been part of the wedge between them. It was indeed why. Thomas told him not to worry; a wise man had told him to give her the benefit of the doubt recently. She wasn't all the way grown up either. That seemed to comfort the spirit. Thomas still felt adrift, but the waters had at least not grown any swifter. He tried to savour the time with Lena and her boyfriend while it lasted, before their own connection was tested by distance. Tom was getting weak, but neither of them minded much. The dreams weighed on them. They kept vigil.

The clouds broke ever so slightly on Wednesday, the 25th. Sarah called him. She still wanted distance, but had decided that he deserved to hear things from her face-to-face. She realized it was childish to call him immature and then hide behind other people. He wouldn't like all of what she had to say, but there were things she should let him know that she didn't blame him for. Either of them. They'd have an early dinner after she got out of school. Thomas couldn't decide if the dread or relief was stronger, but at least it was something rather than waiting. Lena congratulated him and revealed her own plan. She thought it might do him good to speak to people that he'd helped in the past. Saved even. She had arranged for him to meet some, hoping it might give him some direction. It was shaping up to be a big week.

He was restless all that day, leaving early to take the long way around to his destination to work out some of the anxiety. Pastor Dole waved him down outside a laundromat. Odd, he should have been at church.

"I've been looking for you, Tom," he said with that overexcited, eager-to-please golden retriever energy that made him a congenial pastor and terrible leader. He and Thomas had a long history, a history about to become irrelevant.

"Thomas." Thomas reminded him.

"No, child, I mean Tom," a calmer, more commanding, ancient voice said, a voice that looked wrong coming from that mouth. The world flattened for a moment, but the presence he saw was a blinding light that forced him to look with human eyes. Fear and hatred welled up in both of them.

Dole held up his hands, roaring, “I am the voice of the Lord. I have not come to pass judgment. It is done, and you have been found wanting. I am here, now, to test. Not faith, not obedience. I test the depths of your defiance. I test if you are worthy of struggle.”

The voice shattered the glass all around Thomas. Voices cried out in fear. The sky went dark with stormclouds. Dole grabbed Thomas and threw him through the building into the back parking lot. He walked through the destruction as six other figures descended. Men whose faces were dark, as if they wore hoods, but all they had on were robes. The six held down Thomas, Tom ripping him out of him with fury, clawing and biting like a wild animal. They were surprised to see their own vivid blood. The seventh grew out of Dole more cruelly, splitting him open as it grew out of him, sloughing him off like a jacket. It carried a rod, pinning Tom to the ground through his calf. He yelled and pulled it back out, beating back the seven with it. A flash of lightning revealed a face in the clouds, another a colossal body. It carried a scroll in one hand and a great dart in the other. It drew its arm back. Tom tried to take the sky, the seven trying to hold him down. He hesitated, wanting to go in every direction to help someone, anyone, his eyes searching for all of them. The dart was thrown. Tom was overcome with force and light, a strengthening pulse of destruction that knocked at buildings until most were stripped of roofs or collapsed completely. Anyone not under cover was thrown through the sky. Tom caught one, unsure if they survived the concussive force. It didn't matter. The pure light was replaced with an explosion of fire that melted them in his hands, the fat running through his fingers. The seven were battered, flat on the ground. The sky was red, spitting lightning at him as soon as he was grounded again, knocked from the sky at last by the explosion that burned holes through his wings. The dome of fire kept expanding out for miles and miles. The whole county. All his life. His mother, who would have found an unstrained mercy again if she had a chance, never would. His sister would never get her due for teaching him humanity now, not even from her own brother's lips. Crystal and Rip would never see his parents. Charlie Thunder would never tell Thomas his real name. Lena would never tell them all they had in common. All those stories ended. All that was left undone and unsaid would never be done, never be said. It was the end of Thomas' world before he had time to grow up. He was not the first to feel such total emptiness; he would not be the last. Not in that world, not in ours, or many others.

“That's war for you, boy. Gone in a flash,” one of the seven said.

The wall dome finally dissipated, air filled the vacuum again with a scream, unnatural like the explosion itself, going on for too long, battering him with hot debris and coating him in burning until it suddenly went cold and grew colder, a blizzard, until it broke suddenly. Perfect, silent stillness. Tom raised his head. Something gently grabbed his horns. It was Manuel and John.

“Don't look up,” Manuel said.

Thomas couldn't help it. He looked out over the leveled town. He saw tens of thousands just as real as the two before him.

"That won't do," the voices said in unison.

They were gone. All of them. Even John and Manuel.

"No distractions now. Don't worry, my son, they will be placed where they belong. Shall I tell you? Shall I tell you what will be done to your friend forever? You seemed so concerned." The voices asked with a sickening sweetness.

Thomas hooked his claws through the neck and mouth of the nearest voice. He pulled them open. The wind cried out to mark the passing of something that was not made to die. The other six retreated. The great angel shook the ground as it strode to their defence. Strange shapes raced down from the clouds bearing strange weapons. War drums, horns, and holy chants filled the air. Some wrapped themselves around him, luminous bodies burning away at him; he tore them apart as he tore them off, standing taller with each act of retribution. The wailing of nature and the music of the host made a terrifying, beautiful cacophony. A great serpent with wings slithered through the air towards him. He grabbed it by the jaws, pulling them apart until it was torn all the way down the middle, heavenly entrails making flowers bloom in the destruction. A spear pierced him. He pulled it out, and he put it through another voice. A sword lopped off a leg, tattered wings kept him up, silver blood pooling beneath him as his remaining leg dragged on. He shattered some spinning, living wheel and speared a flaming bronze statue through the neck. Every wound to him was met with death as he continued toward the voices. Men with heads like eagles finally brought him down, tackling him into the ruins of a building. Wrestling with him among charred bodies and pools of human grease. It was the familiarity of that slippery, stickiness covering him, a sensation he always hated, that finally caused him to let out a great yell. He grabbed an eagle's head in his mouth and twisted it off like a chicken's. A hand descended from heaven, the great angel, pushing him down into the sludge. Then it recoiled. Sounds like cannons joined the raging din. A sword of fire drove itself into the angel's shoulder, hacking into it over and over until the head and an arm fell off, the blood spilling down like a waterfall. The sword flashed in every direction, creatures falling from the sky with each sure stroke. Art Deco angels drove the others back and surrounded the voices. Thomas pulled himself up and grabbed a club with his last good limb, propelling himself into the midst of the five, swinging until the Lord found himself without voices. The host retreated. Thomas collapsed. The new colossus stood above him, great wings stretching across the sky, skin a bronze patina, sword lighting the ground below as the red clouds turned back to black.

“Were our meeting in victory, brother,” The Prince of America said, voice a cool, whispering breeze despite the size, “but I can at least assure you that your other family is safe under my guard. Resist the call to final rest.”

“She was right. I didn’t save anyone.” Thomas said.

“They never are, in the end, but we can free them still.”

“From what?” Thomas asked

“Eternity.”

Thomas turned his head to the ruin. Jesus walked across the desolation to put a hand on his head. He raised a hand to the sky until it was filled with ash, smearing the cross onto Thomas' forehead between the horns. The unity of despair was fading, two griefs now filling Thomas' mind as the parts separated.

“The commander comes to inspect his losses?” the Prince asked the man.

“I hoped this wouldn’t happen if I stayed away,” Jesus said, “I hoped you’d never learn the mystery of the seven thunders. You’ve all been so concerned with my father’s wrath. Behold, this is what endless love looks like. How could it be anything but inhuman?”