Volver

by Dementian

Summary

Thomas Barrow is given a second chance to reclaim his life by a Spanish sorceress on the outskirts of a Thirsk fair. Thomas knows he will have to endure great pain, danger, embarrassment, and heartbreak... but if he is successful he will gain the one thing he has always desired: Love.

Notes

I'm so glad that people enjoyed Spare the Rod. Now I want to tackle another really interesting topic, that of time travel. I found myself wondering, what would happen if S6 Thomas was able to return to S1 and use his gained emotional awareness to his advantage. What would he have done different? What would he have done the same? The results were shocking.... and slightly smutty. This story is going to arch through the entire six seasons of Downton Abbey. At first there will be heavy reliance upon the original plot, but as Thomas'
actions shape different stories it will branch out. I hope you enjoy this story! I really wanted to pour my heart and soul into it!

--Demme

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue: The Hechicera

Chapter Summary

Thomas is given a remarkable second chance by a Spanish enchantress... but it will cost every last bit of strength he's got to put the plan into action.

I notice the blinking of the distant lights that measure my return.

They are the same ones that lighted, with their pale reflections, hours of profound sadness.

And, although, I didn’t want to return one always goes back to ones first love.

The ancient street where the echo said: “His life is yours” “His love is ours”

under the mocking gaze of the stars, which look on me with indifference.

Today, they see me returning.

To return with a withered brow, the snows of time silvered my temples.

To feel that it’s a life’s puff of breath, that twenty years are nothing.

That feverish look wandering in the shadows seeks you and names you to live, with the soul bound to a sweet memory which I lament again.

I’m afraid of the meeting with the past that has returned to confront my life.

I fear the nights which peopled by memories enchain my sleep.

But the traveller who flees, sooner or later, ceases his wandering.

And although the forgetfulness that destroys everything has killed my old illusions, I keep hidden a small hope… that is the only treasure in my heart.

—Estrella Morente, “Volver”
He had done nothing, all day, save to sit on his bed and wait to see if he was needed. He hadn’t been.

It was funny, really. Thomas had never considered the awful implications of being useless when he’d been a young haughty footman. It had all seemed so natural to him, that he would always be needed. He’d had such a sense of self importance. He’d believed himself to be immortal in a sense, above and beyond all the other worthless insects he was forced to work amongst. But as time had wore on, and Thomas had grown older, he’d realized that he wasn’t immortal.

That one day, he was going to die, and what would his life be worth then?

But it had been too late, in so many ways. People wouldn’t forgive him for his younger years. They refused to give him a second chance. For as kind and gentle as Downton Abbey could be to the criminal, it refused to hold any sort of empathy for the dreamer.

Thomas had tried to tell himself at the start that it didn’t matter if he was loved. That he didn’t need to be adored by the masses like Bates or revered as a saint like Anna. All he needed was the affection of those closest to him, like Jimmy whom he’d so adored.

But then Jimmy had been taken away from him, and Thomas was alone again.

The worst, truly, were the amount of regrets he’d formed. So many things that he wanted to take back and do better. So many things he’d left unsaid to the people he loved. At the time he’d thought they were better left in the quiet, but now Thomas knew better. Time was fleeting, nothing was sure, and he would never ever be able to regain the past.

He’d ruined his life… and he knew it.

He could hear through his door the faint patterning of feet. There was laughter, and a warm light inking in from the slit where the sill met wood. Life was going on just outside his cold bedroom. People were laughing, eating, playing, enjoying their lives. It seemed impossible to him. It was like watching some surreal nickelodeon and being told that he was the one on the other side of the silver screen. That he was the one in the queer.

Thomas looked down at his hands, weathered and marred from war and a life of servitude. He could remember when his hands had been as smooth and white as fresh milk. His hair was beginning to silver, the undersides of his eyes were bruised with lack of sleep. He was like a Russian doll, slowly crumpling in on itself. All the steel, all the energy was gone.

Utterly gone.

A soft knock upon his door jolted Thomas out of his reverie. His first thought, as comical and delusional as it might be, was that someone might finally have a job for him. Hopeful, Thomas rose up from bed, but realized halfway across the room that if anything it was probably Carson finally telling him to get out. That officially had no where else to turn to, and was being thrown out on his arse tonight.

Thomas opened the door, wary, but only found Andy on the other side. He could not help but feel spitefully jealous of the boy, with his youth and promise. Andy was going to marry Daisy one day,
Thomas was certain of it. He had a whole future ahead of him, and a group of people who loved him. Thomas wondered, did he even know how lucky he was? Did he know that not everyone was as indulged as he?

Did he even care?

“Mr. Barrow,” Andy was out of uniform and in a day suit. Why? “There’s a fair tonight in Thirsk. We’re going as a group, and I was wondering if you might come?”

A fair? Thomas hadn’t thought about it, but it was almost July so it made sense that the fair was back in town. It would be here for long… but even with regrets piling up Thomas still didn’t want to go out. He didn’t have money to spend on festivities, and he was afraid if he left the abbey he might not be able to get back inside. What if Carson locked him out?

“No,” Thomas whispered. He made to close the door on Andy, but Andy held out a hand so that Thomas couldn’t latch without catching the boy’s fingers.

“You ought to come.” Andy urged, “You’ve been in a way for a while now. It’ll cheer you up.”

“No, it won’t.” Thomas said. A fair wouldn’t help him reclaim his life or find peace. A fair was nothing more than a feeble, cheap distraction from the painful reality in which he lived. It would only make it worse, if Thomas were to go.

Andy made a distressed noise, finally coming clean. Thomas had had a feeling Andy didn’t really care if he went to the fair or not. Something else was at stake to make Andy want him to go.

“Mr. Barrow, I shouldn’t bother you about this, but Carson says we can’t go unless another adult goes. I was hoping it might be you. I dunno about you, but if he were to go instead I wouldn’t really enjoy myself.”

But this was just stupid. Carson would sooner chew broken glass than go to a fair. Andy had nothing to worry about. If anyone was going to go, it would be somebody like Mrs. Patmore, who was already wary of Andy spending too much time with Daisy.

But if Mrs. Patmore were to go, Andy wouldn’t be able to enjoy his time with Daisy either. In fact, she might even be worse than Mr. Carson, given how protective she was over Daisy.

Thomas sighed, looking over his shoulder at his jacket, which had so far stayed untouched on the back of his desk chair. He’d not put on a livery today either, but there was no point anymore. He didn’t have a job, and he didn’t have a reason to look smart.

But if he was to go to the fair, or even just for a walk, he’d need to put his jacket on.

Thomas let out an exhausted sigh, which made no sense technically since he’d done nothing today but sit in his room and wait for the end. He hadn’t even eaten. Thomas fetched his jacket and shrugged it on, not even caring to do up the buttons or re-smooth his hair. There was no point anymore. There was no point to anything.

“Will you go?” Andy asked, hopeful.

“Yes.” Thomas cut him off, his tone dull and flat.

“Thank you! Thank you so much, Mr. Barrow.” Andy was gleeful. Thomas didn’t care.
He shut his bedroom door behind him, and followed Andy downstairs. It turned out that the party going to the fair was painfully small. No wonder Carson had wanted an adult to go along. It was just Andy, Daisy, and Peter the lone hall boy. Daisy was looking smart in a purple frock, and was fixing a cloche upon her head in the hallway to the kitchen. She did not look at Thomas, nor acknowledge him in any way as she took Andy’s arm and headed for the main servant’s passageway. Mrs. Patmore was too busy cooking; she didn’t care about him anyways. In the servant’s hall, the Bates were tucked into a corner by the fire, delighted with Anna’s pregnancy. Baxter was sewing something for her ladyship, and Moseley was working on his times tables for his upcoming school lessons. Carson was at the table as well, reading the paper with a cup of tea. He was smug, relaxed, a king on his unchallenged throne.

Anna glanced up, noticing his daywear. The only reason why she paid attention to him anymore was out of a source of pity. Thomas hated it; it made his skin crawl.

“Are you going to the fair, Mr. Barrow?” She asked, curious.

“Yes.” Thomas did up the buttons on the front of his jacket.

“You’d think you could find a better use for your time.” Carson sneered. Thomas’ blood went cold at his words, “If you think my patience will last forever, you are wrong.”

“Maybe you could look for a job while you’re out.” Bates joked. His tone was dark, and ugly.

“Just shove myself in a coconut shie, shall I?” All things considered, it might be a better prospective than what he had going right now.

“I doubt you’ve even got the brass.” Bates rolled his eyes, turning back to Anna.

Baxter didn’t look up to acknowledge him in the door. She was too focused on her work.

He left the abbey at the back of the group, with Daisy and Andrew leading the fray. They took the wagonette to Thirsk, with Daisy and Andrew talking the whole time about Mr. Mason’s farm repairs while Thomas and the hall boy said nothing. Peter was far from a social pariah though; where Thomas was ignored Peter was merely shy. Daisy offered him a peppermint from her purse, and he accepted it with warm thanks before falling back into silence again. Thomas, on the other hand, was offered nothing save for a cold shoulder.

The fair was strung up with colored lights and bits of painted paper in long lines. As the wagonette was parked by the side amid twenty other carriages, Andy and Daisy made a bee line for the ticket booth with Peter in tow. It resulted in Thomas being left alone, but that was just as well. Thomas was lost in a sea of fair goers, most of them in pairs or groups. He was like a bland dot in the wave of color. People were dressed up smart with flowers in their pockets and purses ready to be spent. Thomas had brought nothing, was intending to do nothing, and therefore slunk around the outer edge of the fair so as to avoid paying for an overpriced entry ticket.

There were freak shows, acrobats, and jugglers. There was a zebra on display, attracting quite a lot of attention. There were slides with long lines, and even a steam powered carousel that seemed to have been put together on pegs and slats. Thomas heard a familiar voice, and looked up high overhead to see Andy and Daisy already in a bucket seat. They were nuzzling noses, and seemed to be on the verge of kissing. Peter was no where in sight. He was probably drinking ale at a booth, despite his young age.
Burned at the lack of love and warmth in his life, Thomas found himself growing bleak and numb again, as had happened so often in the past week. He momentarily found himself contemplating simply not returning to the abbey. Maybe he should lay down in a field somewhere nearby and not wake up.

Make up he should line his pockets with stones. There was a river nearby, even if it was shallow.

Thomas sat down on the edge of the fair, utterly exhausted. The grass was damp beneath his backside; maybe it had rained last night. Thomas hadn’t slept, so he’d been awake to watch dark turn into the dawn. It hadn’t rained at Downton… but maybe it would tonight.

The sounds of the fairgoers, the rides, the clowns, it was all started mumble and mute in his head. Instead Thomas found himself looking at the trees that surrounding the grassy knoll. He wondered at how old all these trees were. How they’d lived for so many years and not been affected by time, or drought, or disease. How could he be like those trees?

He wondered if, when he died, he might be able to come back as a plant. Maybe something simple like a dandelion. He could blow in the wind, scatter and find new places to grow. Trees had a way of hiding things… of swallowing up tiny wooden cabins and homeless vagrants.

And one odd orange tent.

Thomas blinked, snapped out of his misery by the sight of a threadbare ridge tent that was tucked away on the side of the fair beyond the rim where paying customers would visit. There was a light, shining from within. It allowed the patchwork of the canvas to gleam in a swirl of crimson, umber, and orange. But why was a tent so far away from the main fair ground? Surely, whoever was in charge of it must realize that they weren’t going to get a lot of attention if they were hidden by the trees. Thomas might have been prone to think that this was merely just a tent for someone to live in instead of sell by… but there was sign hanging from the front flap. It read only one word in black painted text: “Hechicera”.

Thomas had no idea what that word meant, but he had a feeling that he was about to find out.

He no longer had the strength to be curious about things anymore, but what bare vestiges of his personality remained urged him to get closer and find out what this tent was about. He carefully threaded his way down the backside of the knoll into the thicket of oak trees which surrounded the fair, and gently lifted the front flap of the orange ridge tent aside.

He was at once greeted by the image of a Spanish woman seated at a lone wooden table. Her tent was decorated with nothing, save for a threadbare rug underfoot, a wooden chest, and an oil burner which cast light over everything. There were only two chairs: one on either side of the lone table.

The woman looked tired and poor. Her skirts were threadbare and browning at the hem with dirt. Her long black hair was curled but hiding beneath a wrap that kept it out of her face. She was perhaps Thomas’ age, maybe a bit older, but looked like she’d suffered a lifetime of grief.

There were tarot cards spread out before her. She was mulling them over like one would a book or paper. Chin in hand, she turned one card over, then the next, only to scoop her deck up and reshuffle.

She paused when Thomas’ shadow graced her floor, looking up to see him standing before her.

“There you are.” She said.
“Pardon?” She sounded as if she’d been expecting him-

“I’ve been waiting for you.” She said.

She must have him confused with someone else. “How?” Thomas asked, “I only just decided to walk over here, and I barely came to this fair at all.”

“I saw you coming.” She explained, gesturing to the cards on her table.

But Thomas knew a trick when he saw one. After a lifetime of them, he wasn’t willing to play along anymore.

“I won’t be taken for a mug.” He said, turning to leave.

“Sit down before you fall down, Thomas.”

He stopped, one foot out the tent and one foot still inside. Perhaps he’d misheard.

Thomas looked back around, stepping fully back inside the tent so that the flap ruffled down again. The woman did not so much as bat an eyelash, merely smiling and gesturing to her tarot spread.

“Fancy a game?” She asked.

“How do you know my name?” Thomas asked, wary of the stranger before him.

“I know quite a lot about you, Thomas.” She said, re-shuffling her tarot deck. “You could say we’ve met before.”

“If we have I don’t remember it.” Thomas sneered. He doubted that he’d forget meeting a Spanish vagrant in the middle of England.

“Of course you don’t.” She said as flippantly as you please, “You were asleep. Sit down.” He stared at the only unoccupied chair.

“You met me in my sleep?” Thomas repeated. It had been a long time since he’d heard something so damn ludicrous. Boy, was he getting his steps in tonight!

“A bit of you, yes. Sit down.” She said again.

Annoyed, but undeniably tired, Thomas finally decided to do as she said and sit down. He found the chair to be rickety, with one of the legs uneven so that as he sat, he rocked a bit.

“How did you meet me in my sleep, then?” Thomas asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

The woman did not give him a straight answer, instead spreading the tarot deck before her in a wide carved arch. Every card was on its front, leaving nothing but a smooth slate of painted black to the naked eye.

“I’m a woman of many capabilities.” She said. She pulled out a card from the far left of the stack, flipping it over to reveal a youth in a green tunic and yellow thigh high boots. He had a stick over his shoulder, a flower in his hand, and was laughing soundlessly to the sun above him while a white puppy yipped at his feet. Of course, the card was turned oddly upside down so that the fool was on his head. He was on the very edge of a cliff, looking ready to leap off (or rather fall into the sky).
Even upside down, though, Thomas could read the thin line of white and black text at the top: “The Fool”.

“Is that supposed to be me?” Thomas grumbled.

“The hanging fool.” The woman said. “In the past, you’ve taken a great deal many risks, and none of them brought you success. Everything that you tried failed. Everything new you put forth crumpled into ruin. It’s brought you to a moment of hellish truth…”

She paused, pulling out the next card. It was right side up this time, bearing the text “The Tower”. It bore a mighty tower being struck by a thick bolt of lightning. As a result, two men were falling to their deaths from the side, with the tower windows being licked in flames and the entire top half crumbling off. Thomas’ heart was starting to beat faster as a response.

“The Lightning Struck Tower. Danger, crisis, sudden change and utter destruction. There is no where left to run. There are no more friends to call upon. You have reached the ultimate end… and you must now face the future head onward if you are to survive it.”

But how was he to do that, when the house hated him and he’d ruined his life? How on earth was any of this possible for him? The way forward was just as foggy as the way the woman knew any of these things at all.

“How do I do that?”

Thomas hated how small he sounded. How frail and weak.

He felt like he was speaking to the embodiment of his sorrows in that moment. As if, by looking at this strange and haggard woman he was looking at himself and all the pains he’d ever caused. Like his shame could be worn as a brand, draped over his face till it hung in thick obvious lines.

She flipped over one last card, pushing it slowly across the grained wood till it sat before Thomas in the forefront position for his approval.

It was of a maiden in white, crowned with a glowing ring of holly, and holding dominance over the open mouth of an angry lion. With her creamy hands, fingers tight on the fangs, she kept the beast at bay. She was unafraid, as was befitting to her title at the base of the card: “Strength”.

“You must have strength. Not just strength to weather the storm, but strength to sooth the savage beast inside of you. You must go back to the beginning, and right the upended fool. You must have patience with yourself, compassion with others, and understanding that the world cannot be ideal.”

But Thomas couldn’t fathom such a thing possible.

“I have no strength.” He whispered. He felt raw and wounded, filleted wide open, to know what the solution was and yet to be aware that it was beyond his reach.

“I know.” The woman said, which surprised Thomas. Here he was thinking the beggar might tell him to ‘buck up’. “It’s why I knew you were coming. Your heart reached out, and I heard it. You need a bit of help, and why not? It’s not a shameful thing… to need. To want.”

Wasn’t it? Thomas’ experience had proven somewhat different. He’d never been given help when asked, save by those who acted out of the hierarchy of pity. Mr. Carson liked to think that Thomas had flat out shut help down, but that wasn’t the truth. The fact of the matter was that Thomas had never been able to ask for help from Mr. Carson because he’d already known what the answer would be: a sneer, and a ‘no’. As for wants and need? Thomas had never been able to hold either in the open. His wants were sin incarnate. His needs were just the same. In his life, he’d only had a few
escapades. His longest had been Philip Prevet, the Duke of Crowborrow. Every time they’d lain together, Thomas had known intimately that they were but one wall away from hell. Hell was claimed to be a hot and violent place, but Thomas knew better. Hell was England: cold and unfeeling. Hell was the damming request to want nothing, to need only air… and to still be denied for both.

The woman rose from her chair, walking around the stubby table to open her one wooden chest. She rifled around inside, pulled out a small wooden slot box, then returned to the chair so that she could sit down again. The cover was a simple wooden hinge, to be pushed open instead of on a hinge. When the slat was removed, Thomas saw there were only two items inside: a golden shaving razor, and a vial filled with black liquid. The woman removed them both, and sat them before Thomas so that he could see them.

The razor was a peculiar thing. Thomas couldn’t tell if it was real gold or not, but it was likewise carved with what were surely arabic symbols. Thomas opened the razor, only to see that the blade was likewise covered in symbols and (bizarrely) black. Was it made of stone? Perhaps obsidian? And what was in the bottle? It look like ink.

“Tomorrow,” The woman began, and Thomas glanced back up to catch her eyes. They were as black as the liquid in the bottle, “You’re going to slit your wrists in the men’s attic bathroom.”

Thomas paled, all the blood fleeing from his skin so that he suddenly was horrifically clammy. How could she know such a thing? How could she know any of these things? Her wisdom seemed almost irreversible, and now with the a razor before him Thomas suddenly realized that he was, indeed, standing on the precipice of the lightning struck tower. And that he, like the men painted on the card, was going to topple out a fiery window only to crack his head on the rocks below.

Thomas observed the razor with fear in his heart.

“This is the future.” The woman said.” And you cannot change it, Thomas Barrow. You can, however, reverse the past.”

“…How?” Thomas’ voice cracked. “How do I reverse any of this?”

“Tomorrow, when you slit your wrists, pour this into the water first.” The woman said, reaching out to tap a long almond shaped fingernail upon the stopper of the black vial, “It’s an infusion of sacred oils from the middle east, with mud taken from the broken tomb of Christ and salts from the dead seas. It will open a channel for you, but it will not be complete without the last ingredient…” She then took up the black razor, showing him how it folded upon its hinge.

“This razor was owned by a long dead Muslim lord. It is cursed.” She offered it to him, but Thomas shrunk back.

He did not like being in the company of cursed things. His life was already shit enough.

“Courage, Thomas.” The woman advised him. She offered him the razor again, and this time (though hesitantly) he took it.

“Tomorrow, instead of using your own razor… you’re going to use this one.”

“Why?” Thomas asked, “What will it do?”

“The last ingredient needed to reverse your wrongs is your own blood, spilt in self sacrifice.” The woman explained. Thomas pursed his lips, his thumbs running over the grooves of the sigils.
“Take the tincture, mix it with your blood, and you will be given the chance of a lifetime. The chance to redeem yourself, to turn back the clock, and fix your life.” She said. “You must be willing to face great pain.”

Thomas had certainly done the same before. He’d lifted his hand up during the war to escape pure hell, and had experienced a literal beat down to aid Jimmy in his escape from local thugs. He wondered if he could do it one last time, all for the prayer of having a better life.

But how on earth would this help him? Wouldn’t this just kill him instead? Then again… maybe that was the point.

“What if… what if you’re just taking me for a mug.” Thomas mumbled. “What if this is just gonna kill me instead.”

She seemed to have been expecting him to say such a thing. The woman reached out across her arch of black cards, and gently took his hand in her own. Her weather beaten fingers were careful as they slid across his knuckles.

Thomas had not been touched with such compassion for years. It utterly shocked him, to the point where he simply did not know what to say or do but to watch as the woman gave him a small smile.

“You have the opportunity to fix everything, Thomas Barrow.” She murmured. She spoke with such authority that it was hard to dismiss her for a cheap trick. “And now, you have the courage to do it too.” With her free hand, she pushed forward the final tarot card, that of strength and the woman tackling the lion. He picked it up, observing the paling paint and the way the card was lightly faded around the edges.

“Don’t be afraid to die.” She murmured, “Because that’s the only way you’re going to live. A calamity for a calamity.”

Thomas returned home to the abbey feeling terribly unsure about what to do next. He felt like a man walking away from a religious experience, too dumb to truly grasp the meaning of it all. He rode on the back end of the wagonette with the wooden box in his jacket pocket and the tarot card for strength in his hand. He kept looking down at it as they drove through the night, wondering at what he should do next.

The woman had known his name, and a great deal more. She’d known about his past, and his present, and had offered him a ticket into the future. But the way forward seemed so terrifying that Thomas could not imagine himself going through with it. Part of him, feeble and small, desperately wanted to believe that the woman was telling him the truth. That the black liquid was magical, that the razor was cursed. But what if it was just ink and the razor was nothing more than cheep steel painted with fake gold paint?

As they returned back to the Abbey, Thomas found it mostly dark and quiet. Only Mrs. Patmore was still up, and she didn’t speak to Thomas when he passed to the stairwell.

“Did you enjoy your time at the fair-?” He heard her ask Daisy.

“Oh yes, Andy took me on the Ferris wheel!”

“A what wheel?”
Thomas continued upstairs, feeling oddly like his feet were on a racetrack and he’d couldn’t stop. As he passed the doors on the men’s hall, he could not help but stop where Jimmy’s room had once been. Now, it was quiet and dark, with a layer of dust coating all the furniture. Thomas felt like he was an embodiment of that room. Like the dust had been layered over his lungs and heart.

Like he were already dead.

Andy reached the top just as Thomas made it to his door. He was smiling, blushing furiously, and looked as if he’d gotten a peck on the cheek from Daisy before hitting the stairs. He didn’t even look twice at Thomas as he headed into his room. Thomas was left alone, in the hallway, without even so much as a ‘goodnight’.

He didn’t know if he’d have accepted one either way.

That night he didn’t sleep. He didn’t even take off his clothes.

Thomas sat upon his rickety bed, staring at the tarot card for Strength. Next to him, leaning against his thigh, was the wooden plate box the woman had given him. He tried to scratch off the gold on the razor handle, only to find that it wouldn’t budge. Despite how unhygienic it might be, Thomas even touched the handle with the tip of his tongue but felt no tang. What was more, the metal felt heavy in his hands.

It was undeniably real gold. But what was a Spanish peddler, with barley two pennies to her name, doing with a real gold razor? Why hadn’t she sold it to get some decent shoes or a warm coat for the winter?

And what if it was really cursed?

She’d urged him not to be afraid to die. She’d told him it was the only way to live.
But what if she was wrong? What if it was just a razor (gold or not) and a vial full of ink?

*It doesn’t matter*, a tiny voice whispered in the back of his head, *Because you still want to die.*
And he did. That was the sick part of it.

As the sun slowly rose in the East, Thomas found himself deciding with awful clarity what he must do next. It wasn’t so much that he wanted to die, more than he simply did not want to live. There was no point to living, no true objective or goal anymore. He had absolutely nothing, and he knew in that moment that he would not be gaining anything in the future. It was an ugly, awful feeling. Like he’d gotten to the end of a long book only to realize that the ending was absolutely awful.

It left a terrible taste in his mouth, and there was nothing to be done but… end it.

Or something like it.

As morning rose, and Thomas did not go downstairs for breakfast, no one made to come check on him. It was just as well, because he really didn’t have anything to say.

And what was more, Thomas was too numb to speak.

He rose up, and took the wooden box with him.
As Thomas walked down the hallway to the men’s lavatory, he considered what exactly he was about to do.

He kept going through the plans in his head, wondering if it was even lucid to pour an inky black substance into a tub and expect a ‘portal’ to open up. It would be just Thomas’ luck that the bottle would only contain a type of ink that might stain the tub, and where would he be then?

*You’ll be dead*, a voice urged him, *So it won’t matter will it.*

He looked down at the box as he walked, pushing open its wooden hinge again to reveal the blade and tonic within. He wondered, as he walked, if it would hurt to cut his wrists. If it would take a while for him to die, or for the portal to work—

*Listen to yourself.* The voice whispered, *What are you even saying?*

Magic and fairytales didn’t exist, and even if they did they certainly wouldn’t work for Thomas. Fairytales were for Anna and Bates, who’d overcome so much only to be together and happy in the end. Magic was for Moseley, Daisy, and Andrew, all of whom had gone through trials of their own only to find gold at the end of a proverbial rainbow. Thomas had done nothing in the form of deserving a fairytale. He’d exiled himself from the house in which he lived, had squandered away his money and his opportunities, and had never truly tried (honestly) for something better in his life. Maybe, at one point in time, he’d thought about going into business… but it had all fallen through. Black markets and fake flour. What in the hell had he been thinking?

But he hadn’t been thinking at all, had he. He’d just been going with his gut. His deeply misguided, idiotic gut.

“Are you alright, Mr. Barrow-?”

But Anna didn’t care what he said. So Thomas just spouted some garbled to make her go away: “Yes, why wouldn’t I be”.

And off she went again, with no one the wiser that Thomas was effectively carrying a box from a Spanish enchantress intent on opening up a portal to save his life.

Baxter went with her, and Thomas found his eyes lingering upon her, remembering how she’d been in youth. His memories were powerful, despite being old and fading around the edges. She’d had olive tinted skin and sweet dark eyes. Now she seemed just as faded as the tarot card in his cards.

The closer that Thomas got to the bathroom, the more numb he seemed to feel. It was like he was detached from reality as he knew it when he opened the bathroom door. Andy walked by, clearly about to head down to serve tea, but did not say anything to Thomas as he passed. If he noticed that Thomas was still wearing the same clothes as the night before, he said nothing.

Thomas shut the door to the bathroom, and found himself entombed in a wall of red marble tile. It was difficult to care about things, like locking the door or taking off his shoes, but Thomas was prone to do both simply for the sake that he didn’t feel like explaining why he was taking a bath in black water fully clothed.

He didn’t know what to do next. On the precipice of great change, he felt confused like a child. Did he simply run a bath like normal? Did he turn off the lights, or shed all his clothes?

Thomas sat on the rim of the tub, not even bothering to roll up his shirtsleeves before plugging the
drain and starting the bath. He ran it with hot water, feebly enjoying the slight waft of steam which began to issue up. Taking a moment to simply prepare himself mentally for what must come next.

He opened the wooden box once more, taking it out from his trouser pocket to observe the golden razor and the black vial.

“The last ingredient needed to reverse your wrong doings is your own blood... spilt in self sacrifice. Take this tincture, mix it with your blood... and you will be given the chance of a lifetime. The chance to redeem yourself... and fix your fate. You have the opportunity to fix everything Thomas Barrow. And now... you have the courage to do it. Don’t be afraid to die. Because it’s the only way you’re going to live. A calamity for a calamity.”

Courage. She’d told him to have courage and had even given him a card for reference. Beholding the tattered image, Thomas ran the tips of his fingers over the lion’s teeth, held back by the maiden’s creamy hands. Was it really that easy? Just... plunge himself into murky water and slit his wrists? Grab the teeth of the lion and not let go?

Thomas put the card back into his pocket again, pulling out the black vial from its wooden shelter so that he might at last hold it up to the light. The vial was oddly smaller when he held it in his hand, and Thomas uncapped it to sniff at it.

It smell strange, like nothing he’d ever known before. A mixture of spices, all of which sparked internal images of the Middle East. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas tipped the bottle over and watched fascinated as the liquid hit the water.

Despite being a relatively small vial, the liquid immediately expanded and dyed the entire tub black. But it did not stop there, with a sudden powerful scent of spice and musk filling the air. Thomas shut off the tap, amazed as the liquid began to coagulate. It thickened, turning the water into a substance thicker than jelly.

Thomas gaped, reaching a hand out to touch the water. His hand sank through, only to pull back covered in black mud. He ran his fingertips together, but there was no grit to be felt. He’d never felt a substance like it before.

His heart began to pound faster in his chest again. Could it be that this was real? That this was even possible?

Suddenly sparked with a sense of urgency, Thomas rapidly began to shed his clothes. He got all the way down to his pants and undershirt before stopping, still swearing his socks and garters as he timidly slipped into tub.

He gasped, shocked at the sudden sensation of slipping beneath the thickened surface. His body slowly sank to the bottom, with the black sludge creeping over his limbs till everything was hidden beneath the water.

“Jesus.” Thomas whispered, suddenly terribly frightened and excited all at once.

He reached over the edge of the tub, his blackened hands staining the rim of the porcelain as he fetched his trousers so that he could pull the razor and card out of his pockets. For a moment he simply sat with both, letting the mud play over the gold and the fibers of the worn card. The sludge was like ink, staining the card so that suddenly the picture began to vanish beneath a wave of black. It was like night swallowing the sun whole.
And quite suddenly, the whole vision of a maiden holding a lion down was gone, disappeared beneath the dye.

The card crumbled, the sludge like water destroying the texture of the fibers so that it began to thread and vanish into the mud.

Thomas’ heart pounded in his throat. He did not know why, but the card being destroyed frightened him.

He suddenly realized the very real implications of messing with magic he did not understand… for there wasn’t a doubt in his mind now that it was magic. That the woman in the tent had given him a truly dangerous razor and ink to change his fate.

She’d called for courage. Did Thomas have what it took to finish off the job?

Now it was all down to the golden razor in his hands, with its long black blade.

Thomas opened the razor on its hinge, observing how the sigils were tainted by the mud so that they began to stand out even more.

It was all down to this razor. To the last element that had to be added. His own blood, willingly given in self sacrifice.

In that moment, Thomas thought of all the faces and souls he’d seen over his lifetime. Of all the things he’d done improperly or simply not done at all. All the friendships he could have formed, and all the things he could have done better.

The pride he’d never been able to put aside. The anger and the fear that had dominated every move he’d ever made.

It was with that same anger that Thomas took up the blade, willing to recognize that he’d officially reached the very last wire. That there was no more ego to be had, no more prize to be won. The only consolation he could be given now, the only hope he could feasibly aim for, was to take his future back.

The woman, the Spanish enchantress, had told him this was the only way to do it…. the only way to survive the Lightning Struck Tower.

That was what it boiled down to in the end. Survive the fall to the rocks.

Thomas laid the razor against the bared flesh of his blackened wrists, dripping in sludge, and pulled hard.

He gasped at the sudden seizing pain of his hand being sliced, the burning sensation causing him to nearly weep aloud for the awful sensation. He’d not felt such pain since he’d taken a bullet in France. As it stood, his wounded palm was now utterly covered in mud, so that the bullet wound was hidden beneath sludge.

He took the razor in his wounded hand, and laid it against his other untainted wrist.

He took a shuddering breath: “Courage” He mumbled, a quiver of fear in his voice. Blood, seeping from his one wound, was pooling atop the jellied surface of the water.
“Courage.” He told himself again.

The blood was beginning to sink beneath the mud, slowly mixing till red turned fully into black.

Thomas took one, deep breath, and pulled the cursed razor savagely across his remaining wrist.

He cried out, unable to hold it in as the awful pain gripped him. Blood was now pouring from both his wrists, mixing heavily with the black sludge.

Thomas heart pounded wildly. He watched as the razor, dropped atop the surface of the mud, slipped beneath and was pulled down by its weight.

He gasped, shuddering in a sudden, awful cold sensation. He felt the razor lay near his groin, and rested his head against the rim of the porcelain tub.

He tried to focus on the sensation of his heart beating, trying to count the rhythm as his wrists continued to burn horribly.

“A calamity for a calamity.” she’d urged him.

And suddenly Thomas was sinking under, the black sludge creeping up his collar bone and onto his neck as he slid deeper and deeper into the tub.

But hadn’t he been resting against the bottom?

Thomas tried to feel with his wounded hands and feet for the bottom of the tub, but suddenly could not touch it. Confused, thinking himself floating in the mud, Thomas tried to sit up only to find that he was too weak to do so.

He’d lost too much blood. His heart was losing strength, his pulse quieting in his breast.

And it only got worse.

Thomas was only sinking deeper and deeper into the tub, with no sign of the bottom beneath him. The black was up to his chin now, and growing higher. When it reached his lips, Thomas gasped for breath—!

He was sucked under, his whole body now in the black.

He could feel his heart stopping, his whole body turning icy cold despite the warm mud in which he’d been laying only seconds before.

There was no up or down, no sense of direction or texture. There was only the suffocating blackness. The feeling of weighted cold keeping him still.

Thomas could do nothing but pray in that moment, for there were no atheists in fox holes. He thought of his life, of his youth, of his mother and the bed in which he’d grown up. Of Jimmy’s beautiful smile, and the way that Philip had held him so close when no one else had been looking.

He prayed to God. To the Spanish woman who’d given him this cursed spell. It was not an elegant prayer or even a finished one. Instead, he only managed one word over and over again in his mind:

“Please”
Calamity for a Calamity

Chapter Summary

Thomas returns to April 15th, 1912, finding Downton Abbey much changed.

Chapter Notes

So, I have exciting news.

I have been accepted into a masters program with SCAD in Atlanta. I'm going to be joining the writing program in the fall, and greatly look forward to expanding my writing career.

I hope that everyone continues to enjoy this series. I am excited, because I really feel that we will be able to see new character formations take shape. Rest assured, Thomas Barrow is in for one hell of a ride.

No particular warnings in this chapter, save for some light smut at the end.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Six o’clock!”

Thomas sucked in an enormous breath, his heart pounding wildly in his ears as if he’d nearly been suffocated.

He blinked, dazed and confused, up at the ceiling; where he’d expected to find smoothed plaster from the bathroom he instead found a very familiar looking crack.

He was laying in his bed, in his room.

He was covered in caked and drying black mud.

His heart was still pounding in his ears, raging a wild beat against the inside of his skull as he dizzily looked left and right, his head upon his pillow. His sheets, shams, and mattress were utterly covered in the black mud; it looked like he’d been thrown into bed from a swampy lake. He felt muggy and confused, which was only amplified by the fact that he ought to have been in a tub down the hallway. How had he gotten into his bed? Had he been carried or found? If he had, then why was someone knocking on his door alerting him to the six o’clock wake up call? That hadn’t happened in ages, mainly because Thomas had an…

His eyes drifted to his side table, only to find it bare of his alarm clock and lamp. Instead, there was nothing but a thick candlestick upon its holder, a pocket watch, and a half-empty box of cigarettes.

But no… that couldn’t be-!
It wasn’t the lack of a lamp or cigarettes that shocked Thomas so much as it was the pocket watch, for he was certain it was his grandfather’s. Thomas had had to sell it during his stint on the black market, just to make ends meet… but that had been years ago! And god only knows where the watch was now!

Thomas gingerly sat up in bed, the fabric of his pajama top clinging pathetically to his mattress. It made a wet sound as the pair peeled away.

Dazed, Thomas reached out with trembling fingers to touch the pocket watch, only to stop alarmed as he noticed something bulging on the underside of his wrist.

Thomas flipped his hand over, and gasped.

Where he’d cut himself with the cursed razor, there was now a row of neat patchwork lacing, both gold and black. He’d never seen a thread like this before; he reached out to touch it with his opposite hand and felt the threads to be more like steel than fibre.

But where had these lacings come from? Who had done them? Who had put him in his bed, and how had his grandfather’s pocket watch been returned to him? The lack of answers terrified Thomas, left him shaking and confused upon his bed-

There came a knock upon his bedroom door. Frightened, Thomas drew back upon his mattress, hands up and out to defend himself from whatever attacker might be on the other side.

But instead of there being an attacker there was only a hall boy, who stopped dead at the sight of Thomas.

Thomas was likewise shell shocked. The hall boy was George, a youth who hadn’t been in the house since before the war. Mainly because he’d died in the war.

“W-what…” Thomas bleated out, like a child. “H-how? This- this isn’t possible- you’re… you’re supposed to be…”

George backed away at once, shutting the door. He was pale and ashen, clearly just as frightened of Thomas as Thomas was of him.

“Mr. Carson!!” Thomas heard George yelling as he ran down the hall.

And now Thomas was really scared.

He panicked, stumbling up from bed to reach for the lock on his door. But the lock wasn’t there anymore, which was insane! The lock had been in place for five years, installed after 1920 when Thomas had been fearing retribution from Alfred and Jimmy! Now there was nothing but a tarnished little handle. In an attempt to garner himself some time, Thomas dragged the chair from his desk over to his door and used it to create a poor man’s lock.

But so many other things were askew, and Thomas was only getting more and more panicked from the lack of the familiar.

His chair and floor lamp were gone, which was impossible because they’d been in place for nearly ten years! Tonics for his hair were gone from his nightstand, and there were more candles on his mantle- where had all his lamps gone?!

“Wake up-!” Thomas blubbered, covering his eyes with his muddied hands, “Wake up, wake up,
just wake up-“

He sunk down onto his knees, hiding beside his bed.

“It’s just a dream.” He whispered to himself. His voice was small and frightened. “It’s just a dream-“

But then there was another harried knock at his door, followed by the rattling of the doorknob.

“Thomas- are you in there?” Mr. Carson demanded from the other side. “Will you open this door!” He sounded furious.

In a panic, Thomas did the only thing he could think of by laying flat on his stomach and wriggling underneath his bed. There was very little cover here, save for the mattress divider which hung down and partly obscured his face. He cowered by the base of the headboard, curled up into a tight ball as the door continued to rattle.

“Thomas, if you don’t answer me, I will have no choice but to force my way in!” Mr. Carson warned. “You’re perilously close to the window young man!”

“This is a dream!” Thomas shouted desperate to drown out Carson’s voice and angry knocks. “This is just a dream! You can’t hurt me. Go away!!”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?!” Mr. Carson sounded on the verge of another heart attack. “Your actions are causing the house to fall apart in shambles. George says that you’re in a state and have ruined your beddings. That you’re covered in mud! If you think I’ll let this slide then you’ve got another thing coming young man-“

It was a nightmare, and Thomas didn’t know how to wake up. Curled inward on himself like a pill bug, Thomas didn’t know what to do besides cry. He’d never been so frightened in all his life, and thought for a good moment that he must be going insane.

“Please wake up.” He whimpered to himself, hands still over his eyes, “Please… Please wake up-“

Forced by the jiggling of the door handle, the flimsy desk chair finally slipped and landed against the floor on its spine. At once, Mr. Carson stepped inside.

“My god-!” He cried out, affronted. "What in heaven’s name did you do?!"

“I don’t know!” Thomas wailed from beneath his bed, “I don’t know what happened! I can’t wake up!”

“What-?” Mr. Carson was flabbergasted at the sight of Thomas beneath his bed. In an attempt to lay eyes on him, the man dropped to one knee so that he could peer beneath Thomas' flimsy bedskirt. "What are you doing underneath there?"

Thomas just continued to cry, curled inward of himself with his hands over his eyes.

"What have you done to yourself?” Mr. Carson seemed to be the one losing his grasp on his sanity now. “Look at the state you’re in! How did you get so filthy?"

“I can’t remember!” Thomas begged from behind his hands, “Please believe me, I can’t remember! I don’t know what's going on! Please don’t throw me out-!”

“Throw you out, why would I throw you out?” Mr. Carson was just more and more confused by the second, “You’re a footman for god’s sake.”
… A what?

Thomas stopped crying for a moment, taken aback by Mr. Carson’s words. Why on earth would Mr. Carson call him a footman? He’d not been a footman since 1918! Nearly ten years! He peeked out between his fingers to find Mr. Carson with a hand outstretched so as to hold up the bedskirt with another was cradled against the floor to hold his weight. He seemed very worried indeed.

But there was color in his hair; or at least it wasn’t all gray… and he had less lines on his face.

“…I… I haven’t been a footman since 1918.” Thomas corrected the man.

Mr. Carson was clearly alarmed. “It’s in 1912! Where is your head at?!”

But it couldn’t be 1912. That was impossible.

“No, I… that can’t be right!” Thomas begged. “You know that can’t be right! It’s 1925!”

Mr. Carson extended a hand, and gingerly began to pull Thomas out for underneath his bed. Frightened but feeble, Thomas reluctantly went with the man till he was back out in the open and slumped on the side of his bed.

“…What day is it?” Mr. Carson asked, quite wary.

“I… J-July…” but Mr. Carson was already shaking his head.

“It’s April 15th, Thomas.” Mr. Carson warned softly, “April 15th, 1912.”

Thomas stared, in bleak shock.

A calamity for a calamity… that’s what the sorceress had said. She’d told him that the portal would give him a chance to go back to the beginning… to right the upended fool.

“Turn back the clock,” she’d said. “And fix your life.”

Jesus H. Christ. Had it quite literally turned back the clock to 1912? Thomas had known since the water had coagulated into mud that the tonic was magical, and now that his wrists were done up in black and gold metal he had to wonder if the razor was truly the same-

Could it really be, truly and deeply, that he’d gone back in time?

“… I don’t feel good, Mr. Carson.” Thomas mumbled. “… I think… I think I have a fever.”

At once, Mr. Carson stuck a hand out despite Thomas’ muddy state, and felt at his temples.

“You’re warm.” Mr. Carson was clearly worried. “I’ll have Mrs. Hughes ring for the doctor and change your bed linens. I want you to bathe, and promptly. Clean this mud off of yourself.”

It was god damn bizarre, to have Mr. Carson treat him like a human being. Thomas had never known Carson to be so… well… not sentimental, but understanding. Normally, if Carson saw something about him that abnormal, he was ready to bring down the guillotine. Christ, Thomas was certain that Mr. Carson thought him akin to the devil most of the time.

But here Carson was, actually giving a tenth of a damn about him.
“I’m sorry Mr. Carson.” Thomas apologized profusely, unsure of what else to do or say. He was desperate to use Carson’s sympathy while he had it. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what happened—”

Mr. Carson waved that off, and helped him to his feet. Thomas went, still quite feeble, and wrapped his arms about his muddy chest to try and keep warm.

“We’ll have the doctor take a look at you, and then decide what to do.” Mr. Carson said. He seemed to already be concocting another plan himself. “But for now, you’re to bathe and re-dress promptly.”

Mr. Carson walked over to his wardrobe, and opened the doors wide. Thomas was amazed to see his footman’s livery hanging inside, just like it had for so many years. The green and black stripes were crisp and neat, freshly ironed from the night before. Mr. Carson was satisfied to find his livery in good condition and shut the wardrobe at once to move onto his dresser.

“All present and correct,” the butler mumbled before pulling out a fresh pair of pajamas for Thomas which he sat upon the top of Thomas’ uncluttered desk.

“Go wash.” Mr. Carson ordered, I’ll have George bring you a change of clothes. Tell no one else about what has occurred. I’ll have William tend to your morning duties—”

William… William Mason? Thomas’ eyes widened at the implication. All the pain that he’d inflicted on William in his traumatic fall out from Philip and awful jealousy of Bates…

What if he could correct that? What if he could do better this time?

“No I’ll—” Thomas mumbled, unsure of how to best start trying to change things, “Let me um… bathe and I’ll help with breakfast. I’m just.. I’m just a little unwell.”

“No, that will not do.” Mr. Carson shot down at once. “You’re clearly ill and if you’re contagious I shan’t have you spreading it to the other staff or the family.”

Admittedly that was a very good point.

“Bathe, now.” Mr. Carson ordered, pointing a firm finger to the door.

Feeble, Thomas stumbled into the hallway and started making his way to the very same bathroom that he’d used to complete the potion. Thomas could hear Mr. Carson complaining all the way down the hall, even as he stripped the muddied sheets from Thomas’ ruined bed.

Thomas met no one as he traveled down the hall, mainly because everyone was surely downstairs right now going about their morning duties. As he finally reached the bathroom door, Thomas was unsure about what he’d see when he stepped inside. Would the tub be covered in mud as well? Would the room stink of spices from the middle east?

But Thomas found the room quite untouched, the same as it had been only hours ago when he’d stepped inside to commit the ‘final deed’. But had it really been hours? What if it had actually been years? What if he’d truly traveled all the way back to 1912?

Thomas fumbled to close and lock the door, facing his reflection in the square grimy mirror above the sink so that he could see his reflection. He looked an atrocious wreck, and it was no wonder that Carson had thought him quite mad. The mud was caked and dried all over his face, which was no wonder when Thomas could distinctly remember being completely submerged in the coagulated dirty water. He would have to bath, and thoroughly, to be decent and up to Mr. Carson’s standards.

But before Thomas could turn on the faucets, he wanted to search the tub for any signs of a tunnel or
warp point. He checked top to bottom, even trying to peer down the drain, but only succeeded in smacking himself hard on the back of the head when George knocked on the bathroom door to deliver Thomas’ new pajamas.

He struggled to his feet, rubbed the back of his head where a stinging pain burned his skin. George was sheepish on the other side, seemingly nervous as he handed Thomas over a neat parcel of pants, trousers, and shirtsleeves.

“Mr. Carson says Dr. Clarkson is on his way.” George mumbled.

“Thank you.” Thomas said. George looked at him like he was a stranger, and promptly ran away.

As Thomas shut the bathroom door on George’s rapidly retreating back, he found himself struggling to come to terms with his new situation.

He ran the tub, allowing it to fill with blisteringly hot water as he wrung out a flannel and desperately began to scrub at the mud on his skin. There were so many details now slamming him in the face that Thomas could scarcely keep up. A small scar on his foot from where he’d cut himself on the stairs was gone, as was a small knot on the side of his head that he’d gotten during the fight of 1920. But the true terror, the true and honest item of interest which warned him time had change was the fact that Thomas’ left palm was completely and utterly healed.

There was no bullet wound, no bruise, no deformation of any kind. Instead, there was nothing but smooth, cool skin which Thomas stroked constantly. What was more, Thomas’ pinky finger could bend and straighten fully. It was a feat he’d not been capable of since he’d been shot.

But how was any of this even possible? If it well and truly was 1912, then that meant that Thomas had only been working at Downton Abbey for two years. That William Mason was second footman, Daisy a scullery maid, Anna a head housemaid… and Bates-

But Bates arrived the afternoon of the 15th, the same day the Titanic had been reported as sunk.

Which meant that Bates wasn’t here yet. That there was time to fix everything, change everything, and refashion his life for the better.

Thomas bathed with haste, washing himself several times till the water was cold and dark. He drained the tub only to splash running water openly over the side of the porcelain in an attempt to wash away the dregs that remained. Errand accomplished, he dried and redressed, finally able to view his true reflection in the mirror free of mud.

His hair was completely inky black. His skin was youthful, smooth, and sweet. He was just as handsome and pure as he’d been in his youth-

*But this is your youth.* A voice whispered in his head. *That's why you look so good.*

Thomas was mystified, running fingers amazedly over his plump cheekbones and cherry red lips.

It was like another religious experience… to see his young face only hours after seeing his older one.

He suddenly felt more energetic and free than he’d been in years, despite his disorientation and fear. His muscles were youthful and strong. His lungs were clear and in their prime. He swore in that moment he could actually see better, could walk faster and withstand more. He left the bathroom, returning to his old room with muddied pajamas in hand. It was impossible not to explore, as soon as he’d put his dirty clothes in the hamper beside his wardrobe. His bed had been re-made, no doubt by the hall boys or the maids.
Thomas first went to his dresser, opening the top drawer, only to find that several things he’d collected over the years were gone. His war medals were missing, as were a pair of Lady Sybil’s earrings and a shot of the downstairs staff that included Jimmy Kent. Instead… there was a very familiar bundle of letters tied with a soft blue ribbon.

“Oh my god-” Thomas whispered, emotion burning deep in his chest as he reached into his dresser to pull out his letters from Philip Prevet. Philip had had no way of knowing it at the time, but these letters had meant so much to Thomas. They were the one link to love that he possessed, for he’d loved Philip the longest and had been the most intimate with him. It had been Philip to show him what it meant to make love, not to fuck… it had been Philip to first find him special. His letters had originally been the only highlight of Thomas’ existence, slaving away underneath Carson’s blazing eye.

Thomas brought the letters to his nose, smelling deeply. He could sense Philip’s cologne, a deep French musk that no doubt cost a fortune—

A gentle rap came at his bedroom door. Terrified of the letters being found and taken from him, Thomas hastily shoved them into his dresser and slammed the drawer shut. He jerked around, pressing his spine against the drawer, only to find Dr. Clarkson and Mr. Carson in the door. When they found Thomas out of bed, Mr. Carson gave him a wary look.

“Are you back to yourself?” Mr. Carson asked. Thomas was far too unsure to give a solid answer, which it seemed was an answer in and of itself for Dr. Clarkson’s sake.

Good god, even Dr. Clarkson looked younger! There was sandy blonde at the fringes of his hair, and his mustache seemed fuller.

“Thomas, why don’t you sit down?” Dr. Clarkson asked, gesturing to his bed. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas did as commanded and sat near the headboard. Dr. Clarkson perched his traveling bag atop Thomas’ desk, and Mr. Carson shut the door so as to garner the three of them a bit of privacy.

“Mr. Carson tells me that you’re feeling unwell. That you were found this morning covered in mud and confused about the date. Can you tell me what happened last night?”

Christ… that was a tall order, “I cannot, sir.” Thomas mumbled. “I… I don’t know how I got to be in my bed. In the state I was-“

Well, that was a half-lie.

Dr. Clarkson took out a thermometer, and offered it for Thomas to stick underneath his tongue. Thomas did so, unsure of what good this would do. He’d only been silent for a moment before he hastily mumbled an apology around the sterile rod.

“M’ sorry.” Thomas managed to get out, “You mus’ be busy and I’m takin’ up your time-“

“Shush.” Dr. Clarkson ordered. Thomas fell silent once again. He removed the thermometer after a moment, checking its reading with wary eyes.

“Hmm.” Dr. Clarkson set the thermometer aside, instead pulling out his stethoscope to lace the buds in his ears, “Open your shirt?”

Thomas did so, jumping slightly at the cool sensation of the stethoscope pressing against his sensitive skin. Dr. Clarkson listened to both sides of his lungs, eyes still narrowing.

“You’ve an accelerated heart rate, and a fever.” Dr. Clarkson said, taking off his stethoscope to put it
back in his bag, “Nothing too dangerous, but it could account for your confusion. I’m going to ask you a few questions if you don’t mind. What’s your full name?”

“Thomas Nathaniel Barrow.” Thomas said.

“Where are you?” Dr. Clarkson asked.

“Downton Abbey.” Thomas said, for he was certain that much had not changed.

“What day is it?” Dr. Clarkson asked.

Thomas swallowed, thinking hard. It ought to be April 15th? “April… 15th?”

“What day of the week?”

Oh bugger it.

Thomas pursed his lips, shaking his head.

“I… I can’t remember.” He admitted softly. Dr. Clarkson looked slightly worried, as did Mr. Carson.

“It’s Monday.” Dr. Clarkson said. Good to know, at least, “Do you know how old you are?”

“…Twenty-two, I think.” Thomas whispered, looking away. At least, that was how old he’d been in-

“You’re twenty-one.” Carson warned.

Thomas shook his head, only to realize that Carson was right. His birthday was October 30th. Technically, he was still twenty-one.

Fucking hell. Twenty-one! The thought blew his mind!

“Why did you think you were twenty-two?” Dr. Clarkson asked, not unkindly. Thomas pursed his lips, knowing full well he was about to sound completely insane.

“I just… I just had this feeling it was 1925.” He mumbled, “And that I was thirty-five years old. That it was July. And…” He broke off, catching Dr. Clarkson’s eye. He was watching, but not with alarm or fear. “I’m sorry, I sound like a lunatic, don’t I?”

“Let me feel your head.” Dr. Clarkson said, and Thomas bent his head down so that Dr. Clarkson could carefully run his head along Thomas’ skull. “Did you have a violent dream last night.”

“God, I couldn’t double it if I tried.” Thomas mumbled weakly.

“There aren’t any bumps on your head.” Dr. Clarkson murmured, “I don’t think you have a concussion. Have you ever sleep walked before?”

Thomas shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

Dr. Clarkson scratched his head, deep in thought.

“This dream that you had last night. Would you say it was particularly vivid or frightening?”

Thomas remembered how the black coagulated water had covered his face, sucking him under till even his heart had gone numb.
“I…” Thomas swallowed, “It was the worst dream I’d ever had in my life.”

“Mr. Carson, was anything wrong with the back door?” Dr. Clarkson asked, “Do you think Thomas could have accidentally gotten outside if he sleepwalked?”

“Not through the area door, but if there are other ways.” Mr. Carson murmured. “He was the last to go to bed.”

“Was I?” Thomas wondered.

“Can you remember anything about yesterday?” Dr. Clarkson asked. “Anything at all?”

Thomas shook his head. Dr. Clarkson sighed, slightly off put.

“Here’s what I think.” He said, speaking both to Thomas and Mr. Carson at the same time. “I think Thomas sleep-walked, and somehow managed to get outside. It was frigidly cold last night, which would account for his fever and the fact that he was covered in mud. The fever could likewise lead to lucid or vivid dreams, as well as the confusion.”

But Mr. Carson’s eyes were narrowing suspiciously. Thomas could tell that he didn’t believe Dr. Clarkson. That, if anything, he probably Thomas walked out of the abbey on his own free will and got into some bother.

“Please, Mr. Carson, believe me.” Thomas begged, prostrating himself before the man, “I wouldn’t make trouble—“ But he’d surely made trouble before so why should Carson believe him, “Not like that!”

Mr. Carson let out a long insufferable sigh.

“I’m going to choose to believe you.” the man muttered, “Though why, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Because…” Thomas was desperate to get on Carson’s good side. “Because you’re a good man?”

Carson rolled his eyes, irritated. Thomas looked away, somber.

“I’m going to recommend that you rest for today. Gather your bearings. I’m going to give you a tincture of willow bark for your fever. It’ll help you to gain your clarity. You need to relax and sleep. Keep warm. You’ve just had a difficult turn, Thomas.” Dr. Clarkson patted him gently upon the shoulder. “Nothing more. You’ll be alright.”

“…. Thank you.” Thomas said. Despite the incredulity of his circumstances, it helped Thomas even a little bit to hear someone say that he would be okay. To know that he was safe, even if only for a moment.

He found himself admitting it aloud, despite the fact that Carson was not a fan of emotional jargon, “I was scared.” Thomas said.

Carson raised a dominating eyebrow, quite puzzled as to why Thomas of all people would be admitting such a thing.

Dr. Clarkson, however, took a gentler approach. He re-packed his bag methodically, to give Thomas a kind smile: “You have every right to be scared. Lucid dreams and fevers aren’t fun. But onward and upward as they say.” He turned to the door, shown out by Carson, “If you have any more difficulty, muscle stiffness, confusions… let me know.”
“Thank you, Dr. Clarkson.” Thomas said. As Mr. Carson made to leave, Thomas called out after him. “Mr. Carson-?”

He paused in the doorway, a dull look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry about this.” Thomas whispered. Mr. Carson did nothing more than give him a petulant sigh, closing the door again so that Thomas was left alone with his thoughts.

True to Dr. Clarkson’s advice Thomas was brought up a cup of tea laced with willow bark, this time by another hall boy named Matthew. He’d eventually left service to pursue work as a craftsman… something to do with roads. Thomas couldn’t remember one way or another, mainly because the first time around he’d hardly paid two pence worth of attention to the boy. This time, Thomas thanked him for the cup of tea and drank deeply as he thought.

The more he dwelled upon it, the more he realized what an outstanding blessing this was. He found himself remembering all the details that had slipped by him over the years, all the friendships he’d lost and all the lovers that had walked away from him. Given the chance to do it over again, Thomas now had the opportunity to carve a life for himself. An actual, honest to god life. And did it matter that he was displaced from his true reality? His true reality had been turning more and more into a living hell everyday. If this was a fantasy, let him remain in it. If this was a dream, let him never wake up. Likewise, Thomas couldn’t give half a damn about the fact that he now, technically had to work as a footman and go through the war again. There were so many things he could do right now, so many people he could love!

This time, he was determined to be better. This time he was determined to be open, and raw. Even if it killed him, he would at least die with honor. Thomas had seen what the other road led to. He’d seen how apathy slowly curdled and turned inward on itself until he could hardly breath for all the spite and malice directed at him.

He was left with so many ‘what if’s, and now had the opportunity to gain a valid solid answer to all his questions.

But he could do nothing while sitting in bed, and was determined to be the one to greet Bates when he came through the door. Thomas couldn’t remember much about the day, originally; it had happened so long ago after all. But he was certain that Bates had come during the afternoon tea, which ought to be— judging from his grandfather’s pocket watch— in five hours.

Thomas decided to lay back and sleep. To simply drink his tea and gather his bearings. He still felt like he was swimming, and wondered in passing if he was now ill or cursed from his venture through the portal… or whatever the hell had brought him here.

Honestly, what had brought him here?

Thomas was a thinker at heart, and this was the puzzle of the century. How on earth had he managed to travel back in time? The mud had gone with him, proof that the present past had existed, but now he was stuck in the past future. Was time on a reel, much like a spool of film? Or was time more like a gramophone record, spinning continuously to be touched by a needle so that events could play out? Was his time limited, or was he effectively dropped into the cesspool of the past with no hope of making it back to his original universe.
But this was his original universe. It was simply thirteen years in the past.

It was impossible to say whether his stay would be long or short, dictated by his own events or by the events of others. All that could be done, he reasoned, was to try and do right as best he could… and see what panned out.

But there would be obstacles.

First, Thomas knew for a fact that even before Bates’ arrival he’d been cheeky downstairs. He’d been chummy with O’Brien (he shuddered at the thought of her being present in the house) but everyone else had eventually learned to avoid him lest trouble be caused. Thomas would have to put a stop to that, and flat, lest he fall prey to O’Brien’s traps. One thing was for certain, he was certainly not going to start stealing wine, snuffboxes, dogs, or tenners out of Mr. Carson’s wallet again.

And he was definitely not going to get on Bates’ bad side.

He wanted to try and befriend Bates. To see if the pair of them got on. The true character of the man had astounded Thomas when he’d defended him in his hour of need against O’Brien.

…and for that matter… Thomas had to stop allowing O’Brien to manipulate him, flat. Today, if possible.

He rose from bed, determined to make a change, and dressed. He was thinner, more youthful and lean; he felt somehow more powerful and sexual than he had before in his original time as a footman. He suddenly realized, as he looked into the mirror and parted his hair, just how damn handsome he was. Before, it had gotten to his head and swollen his ego…now? Now, Thomas was just flat out surprised.

Thomas left his bedroom, his mind racing as he descended the servant’s stairwell. God, so many things had changed! The lamps were gone, which made sense because they’d been installed in 1915. As Thomas made it to the bottom, he found himself once again submerged in the world from his youth. There were several maids, all under Mrs. Hughes’ supervision. The floors were bustling, and Thomas could hear a far off call for fresh linens.

Right on cue, Daisy came running around the corner… but wasn’t the Daisy that Thomas easily remembered. Long gone was the cook’s assistant, freshly scrubbed and well read. Here was a Daisy that was exhausted, worn thin, and easily trodden upon. Her frayed pink skirts were littered with soot, and in her hands she carried wrapped linen packages fresh from the Monday carrier. She nearly tripped coming around the corner, so desperate to complete her many errands that she wasn’t watching where she was going. As her foot hit the outer corner of the bottom step, she gasped and nearly went flying. Thomas grabbed her without thinking, taking her by the arm so that she did not stumble nor lose hold of her packages. She righted herself easily, young and spry, and looked upon him with bizarre misty-eyed wonderment.

“Thanks ever so.” She said in a breathless voice. She was blushing furiously, a dreamy smile upon her face.

Oh bugger it. He’d forgotten.

“Oh no, I forgot-“ Thomas groaned, for Daisy had been utterly smitten with him in the beginning, hadn’t she?

“Forgot what?” she asked, politely confused.

“Nothing.” He decided on the spot that he couldn’t blow his cover with her just yet. He needed to let
her down gently, have a talk with her in private. One thing was for certain, he wasn’t dragging her
on again. He’d lost her friendship over it, and it had meant more to him than he’d realized in the end.

“Best crack on.” He said; he could remember that he’d met Bates in the kitchen, so he was
determined to see if Bates was already there.

Daisy left, unable to leave off her errand any longer. Thomas took a deep breath, trying to relax his
muscles and his mind. He could not be tense, he told himself. Above all, he had to be calm. To
remember that Bates didn’t hate him yet… and if he was lucky, Bates wouldn’t hate him at all.

They’d never be chummy, but at least they could be moderately sociable.

Thomas entered the kitchen, in the sudden shadow of Mr. Carson. Mrs. Hughes was at his side, with
Mrs. Patmore behind her counter while O’Brien and Anna took their afternoon cup of tea. Bates was
there, in his day suit and bowler hat. He had a valise at his side, and was looking rather wary of them
all. They must seem a very formidable group, when ganged up together.

Thomas did not meet O’Brien’s eyes. The very sight of her made him nauseas, and reminded him of
his horrendous experience in 1919. It had been because of her that he’d nearly lost Jimmy… and he
would never forgive her for that.

She was not his ally. She was not his friend. She was merely complacent in allowing him to live. He
would not allow her to masquerade as a chum any longer. She could not know any more of his
secrets. His most dire one was bad enough.

“I am the butler at Downton, my name is Carson.” Mr. Carson grumbled.

“How do yu do Mr. Carson.” Bates said.

But then Mrs. Hughes spotted Thomas walking into the room, and tutted loudly so that Carson
looked around as well.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Mrs. Hughes asked. Carson looked wary as well.

“I’m feeling more myself, Mrs. Hughes, and I wanted to help.” Thomas explained. “I apologize for
any inconvenience of my turn-“

“As I say.” Mr. Carson huffed, cutting off Mrs. Hughes who was quite taken aback by his change in
demeanor. “If you’re back to yourself then you should pick up the slack. This is Mr. Bates, his
Lordship’s new valet. This is Thomas, the first footman-“ Carson turned back to Bates, a hand
gesturing between the two of them, “He’s been looking after His Lordship since Mr. Watson left. It
will be a relief to get back to normal, won’t it Thomas?”

“Yes, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. He was under no illusions about being able to have valet
experience now. Any attempt to fight for a position would result in all out war with Bates.

“I assume that everything is ready for Mr. Bates’ arrival?” Mr. Carson asked Mrs. Hughes.

“I’ve put him in Mr. Watson’s old room, though he left it in quite a state, I can tell you.” Mrs.
Hughes tutted. This made sense; Mr. Watson had all but fled the building after going to war with
O’Brien. It had been hellish to endure, but O’Brien had endured simply because she’d worked
longer and was tighter with Lady Grantham.
“But what about all them stairs?” Mrs. Patmore wondered, oggling Bates and his cane as if he had two heads instead of a bum knee.

“I keep telling you.” Bates grumbled, “I can manage.”

“Of course you can.” Anna offered. Even now, Thomas could see the kindling sparks of romance in their eyes. It was rather funny, to sit back and watch as they grew fond of each other. Thomas’ stomach began to twist, though, as he realized all the awful fates that individually awaited them.

Could he avoid it? Could he use his knowledge of the future to keep Bates and Anna out of prison in turn?

“Thomas, take Mr. Bates to his room and show him where he’ll be working.” Mr. Carson ordered.

But of course, Thomas had probably botched the first interaction by being wary. This time, Thomas decided he would try to be open and see where it took him.

“Mr. Bates-“ He even tried for a smile, no matter how hesitant, “If you’ll come with me?”

Bates picked up his valise, and followed Thomas out of the room.

Thomas headed for the stairwell, this time not rushing ahead of Bates. He’d been cocky originally, and wanted to show Bates immediately his superiority on foot. This time, Thomas offered his hand to Bates to take his valise.

“Here, let me.” Thomas said.

“It’s fine.” Bates said, tersely.

Grumpy bugger, Thomas thought irritably. But how to sooth him?

“I’m not offering because of your cane.” Thomas said. “I’m offering because I… want to be friendly.”

And he meant it.

Bates sighed, but handed his valise over. It was quite heavy, probably because everything the man owned was shoved inside. No matter; Thomas had the energy and the youthful vitality to keep up.

Thomas kept his pace slow, so that they could walk side by side. As they ascended the stairs, Thomas paused at the landings so that Bates could gain more speed. It was obvious he was beginning to sweat, exhausted from the struggle. It would take many years of walking up and down the servant’s stairs for Bates to gain back his strength, but by 1925 Thomas knew that Bates would hardly need his cane anymore.

“Did… your train get off well?” Thomas asked. He had a hard time making small talk, but didn’t know what else to ask.

“Well enough.” Bates grunted, a thin sheen of sweat upon his temples and neck, “thank you.”

“I’ll show you some of the secret passages.” Thomas said with a sudden stab of pity for the man, “We don’t have many but it’ll help you get to his Lordship quicker.”

“Thank you.“ Bates was relieved at that. Thomas could understand why.

They made it up to the attics with less time than Thomas would have liked. When they made it to Mr.
Watson’s old room, Thomas carefully pushed out the paper name tag so that he could hand it off to Mr. Carson to write Bates’ name. Bates stepped into his room, looking about at the meagre rationing of furniture and the flimsy mattress upon the bed.

“Oh yes…” Bates nodded as Thomas put his valise beside the bed, “I shall be comfortable here.”

The first time, Thomas had thought he was an idiot… and to be fair Thomas still did. But he tried for kindness anyways.

“Good.” He gave Bates another hesitant smile, “There are extra blankets in the cupboards if you get a bit cold at night. The family discards old furniture too at times, and you can use it decorate your room if you like. I’ll help you. William will surely help you too. He’s the second footman.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Bates grumbled. “I won’t take what isn’t mine.”

Thomas pursed his lips, wishing that he could get on with Bates easier. He supposed the best thing was to try with honesty instead of fake kindness.

“I’m glad to hear that.” He shrugged, “There’s a chair in the attic I’ve had my eye on for some time.” He scoffed at how silly he sounded, fretting over a chair. “I know it seems a bit silly but I really do like that chair.”

Bates gave him a small smile, oddly enough enjoying Thomas’ company. “Then I shouldn’t think to take it from you.”

That was more like it; Bates was relaxing and Thomas was relaxing in turn. If all went well, they might actually be able to converse without killing one another.

“If you’d like to come with me, I’ll take you to his Lordship’s dressing room. There’s a passageway that’s quicker than the normal stairwell.”

It was a queer thing, to take Bates through a small sub passage that he’d only ever shown to O’Brien. It had probably once been used by servants in centuries past to dispose of old linens and chamber pots. Now, it was mostly unoccupied save for dust and broken tiles underfoot. Bates was wary as he threaded he way through the dangerous passage. When they reached the other side, however, he found the dressing room only a few doors down instead of a whole entire floor. They entered to find the dressing room cleared and quiet. Lord Grantham was probably still out doing damage control from the sudden realization of Patrick Crawley’s death.

Bates poked around, curious at the wardrobe and the handsome oak furniture. He observed all the ties, vests, and pressed trousers in the cupboards, noting their french linings which infused the textiles with the scent of lavender.

“There’s some cedar-line cupboards in the attic.” Thomas said, “For things that aren’t often worn. Traveling clothes and such. Mr. Watson used to rotate the summer and winter wardrobes. I’ll show you after this if you like?”

“What about the studs and links? Do I choose them or does he?” Bates asked, peering down at the collection. It was rather immense, but as Thomas had learned over the years, Lord Grantham really only favored three or four.
“You can lay them out unless he asks for something in particular.” Thomas said, pointing to a rather fanciful ball that involved pearls, “These are only for a ball—” another pair that were simple silver, “Then for an ordinary dinner.” He then pointed to a gold pair, engraved with the Grantham crest, “These are only for London.”

In a moment of compassion, Thomas took the dinner set and laid them at the top. “He’ll use these the most, so I’ll put them up top for you.”

“I’ll get the hang of it, but I appreciate it.” Bates said.

Thomas could still sense some wariness in his eyes. Was he daunted by the task of becoming a valet, or by Thomas’ presence?

“You’ll be fine.” Thomas urged. “His Lordship obviously thinks highly of you, and it’s not all that complicated. Some of these studs he hasn’t worn in quite a while. I suppose they were gifts… that sort of thing.” He shrugged.

Bates paused by the snuffboxes, noting how immense the collection was. God, Thomas could remember how wary he’d been of Bates the first time, watching how Bates opened the glass lid of the case and gently fingered the blue snuffbox Thomas had later tried to accuse him of stealing.

“Beautiful…” He murmured, “Funny our job, isn’t it?”

“Flitting about the treasure hoard?” Thomas offered with a small smile, “I suppose it’s best to appreciate what you’ve got or get what you can appreciate. But his Lordship certainly appreciates these snuffboxes. He collects them.”

“None of it’s ours, and it’s always just within reach.” Bates mused, gently closing the glass case.

“To be fair, would you want it?” Thomas asked. “It’s… a lot to handle.”

“No.” Bates smiled at him. Thomas considered it a personal victory to gain Bates’ warmth, even if only just for a minute.

“Neither would I.” Thomas said. He’d never wanted to be rich… only to be loved. Both had seemed unattainable in the end. “Though I wouldn’t mind a softer bed. And that chair.”

“I think it best to be grateful for the bed you have. And the chair.” Bates offered in return.

“You’re right.” Thomas said, though he knew he’d never truly agree. “Waste not, want not. Would you like to see the attics anyways?”

Bates paused, growing slightly pensive. It was obvious that the man was exhausted, and why shouldn’t he be? He’d traveled by train, accepted a new job, had set up a new room, and was now being shown around a new house. He needed a moment to rest and breath, particularly with his leg.

“It’s a lot for one day.” Thomas said. “We can go over it later.”

“I’m fine.” Bates gritted out. He, like Thomas, hated being pitied, “I can manage.”

“Who says that I can?” Thomas offered. Bates snorted softly, “Maybe I’m the one that’s tired.”

“You’re far younger than me.” Bates teased.

Thomas just shrugged with a smile.
He left Bates in the dressing room, allowing the man to make his way back to the attics as he pleased. As he headed down the gallery hall, Thomas found himself unable to stop smiling. It had been so damn wonderful, to simply talk with Bates and not fight. To know that Bates didn’t think him a thief or a cad. To know that none of them did, at least by this point. In unwinding the clock, Thomas would successfully be able to stop himself from making the biggest mistakes of his life.

Oddly, the future looked bright to him.

But as he rounded the walkway, he found himself suddenly confronted by O’Brien in the shadows. She looked eager to see him, dark eyes sparkling and a queer smile crooking at her thin lips.

“Heard a tale about you.” She muttered darkly as the pair of them stopped before one another. Thomas’ stomach twisted into knots, for even though at this point O’Brien did not consider him an enemy, Thomas knew flat out she still didn’t actually consider him a friend. She’d never thought of him as anything, probably.

“What sort of tale?” Thomas asked, trying to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

“The sort of tale that involves muddy sheets. What on earth were you on about, banging on in the middle of the night? Mr. Carson thought you’d taken a right turn.” O’Brien grumbled.

“I’m fine.” Thomas said. “It was just an accident… but I’d best get on with my work.”

“Don’t be sharp with me.” O’Brien warned. Her insinuation made Thomas grow pale. “You should have spoken up about the valet position while you had the chance-”

“No, it’s fine.” Thomas said. O’Brien was quite taken aback, having surely never heard him utter such a statement before now, “I’ve thought about it and I’m glad that he has the job.”

Mrs. Hughes suddenly appeared at the top of the landing, looking intent on scouring the hall for errant maids. Nervous about being caught dallying, Thomas broke away from O’Brien to confront Mrs. Hughes head on. She’d never liked Thomas much until after Thomas had broken down and confessed to her his ‘dirtiest secret’. She’d always liked William more; he was determined to at least get on her soft side if he could.

“Mrs. Hughes, is there anything else I can do to be of help?” Thomas asked. Mrs. Hughes stopped dead, taken aback at his sincerity, “Mr. Bates is all settled in now.”

“No, Thomas-“ she was struggling internally, clearly confused at the absurdity of his change of character, “Dr. Clarkson told me he gave you a tonic. Do you feel well enough to serve supper?”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said, “I’ll go tell Mr. Carson now.” He was probably downstairs, prowling and screeching about table clothes not being ironed correctly.

“Then away with you,” She said, banishing him with a flick of her hand. Where before Thomas would have taken offense, now he tried to imagine it as a sort of begrudging acceptance. With his back turned, he did not have the ability to see the look of incredulity upon O’Brien’s face… in a way though, he didn’t even have to turn to see. He knew it was there.

He knew O’Brien was already growing wary of him.
As the rest of the day carried on, and the servant’s luncheon rolled around, Thomas was becoming increasingly aware of why he’d detested being a footman. The workload was horrendous, and everyone used him for their own personal errands. It was hard to keep a mental check on his mouth, and remember that he was supposed to be nicer. Instead, Thomas just ended up being quieter, hassling from one end of the house to the next as he tried to keep up with the work load.

When Thomas finally got a chance to sit down, he was practically winded. It seemed Bates was much the same way, and the pair of them wound up sitting side by side as Mr. Carson prattled on at the head of the table about the Crawley family.

Fuck it, Thomas just wanted to eat. Couldn’t he shut up?

“Downton is a great house, Mr. Bates, and the Crawley’s are a great family. We live by certain standards, and those standards can at first seem daunting.” Mr. Carson said.

Thomas wondered if it would be feasible to eat the empty plate in front of him.

“of course-” it was obvious that Bates was annoyed too. Mr. Carson wouldn’t allow him to finish, instead rambling on like an elephant moping through grass.

“If you find yourself tongue-tied in the presence of His Lordship, I can only assure you that his manners and grace will soon help you to perform your duties to the best of your ability.” Mr. Carson said, finally getting around to passing out sandwiches for everyone.

“I know-“ Bates growled, his knuckles tightening upon the table.

“God help me.” Thomas muttered underneath his breath. He was going to inhale the sandwich in one bite as soon as he got his plate.

“BATES!”

Everyone jerked out of their seats, knees banging against the edge of the servant’s table as Lord Grantham entered the servant’s hall. He was elated, and quickly skirted around the table so as to shake Bates’ hand.

“My dear fellow— I do apologize-“ He addressed the others as an afterthought,” I should have realized that you’d all be at luncheon.”

*Christ, Robert, forget that people eat much?* Thomas tried not to feel annoyed with the man, though it was hard.

“Not at all M’lord!” Carson said at once. But of course, Carson wouldn’t care if he starved to death for the sake of the family.

“Please, sit, sit, everyone.” Lord Grantham urged. Awkwardly, the rest of the staff clambered back into their chairs as Bates alone remained standing. He shook Lord Grantham’s hand warmly, for once clearly at ease.

“I just wanted to say a quick hello to my old comrade-in-arms.” Lord Grantham praised. “Bates, my dear man… Welcome to Downton.”

“Thank you sir.”

It was obvious that everyone was tense. Mrs. Hughes was clearly shocked, as was Mr. Carson. O’Brien was suddenly glaring at Bates, and Thomas could already tell that her powerful brain was
connecting him to the concept of being a spy. Anna, on the other hand, was smiling as was Gwen. William just seemed outright stupefied.

Thomas said nothing, did nothing, and kept his head low.

“I’m so sorry to have disturbed you all.” Lord Grantham said, stepping away from Bates and heading out of the hall. “Please forgive me.”

He left much the way he’d come… without a single care in the world. Bates retook his seat beside Thomas, a dry smile on his face at the sight of everyone’s shock and confusion. His only response was one of pure wit: “You never asked.”

The rest of the day passed quickly enough, mostly involving Thomas running more errands and polishing silver for supper. When it was time to start bringing up the first courses for supper, William and Thomas were racing against Mr. Carson’s ever ticking clock. As first footman, it was Thomas’ charge to take up the meat platters while William followed about with the sauces and simple veg. Mrs. Patmore was haggard, clearly struggling to see where things were on her cramped island table as maids skirted about with boiling pots and Daisy desperately sprinkled salt over everything.

“Thomas, take that up-“ Mrs. Patmore barked, gesturing to a large game pie. Thomas headed forward, quickly taking up the plate, only to have Daisy attempt to lift the damn thing for him.

“Leave it, Daisy!” Mrs. Patmore was clearly agitated and no wonder too, “He’s a grown man; I suppose he can lift a meat pie by himself!”

Thomas noticed Daisy’s nervous expression, and gave her what he hoped to be a sincere but short smile: “Thank you.” He said, “But Mrs. Patmore’s right. It’s fine.”

Thomas headed upstairs only to find William, Gwen, and Anna setting the dining room to rights while Mr. Carson held court in the sitting room. William was laying out the vegetable course on the side board, and clearly sweating exhaustedly. Behind him, Gwen and Anna ferried about with glasses and dishes, careful not to let them clink as they were loaded off of wooden trays.

Thomas set the meat pie down at the far end of the table, aware of how William bristled as he neared. William had never truly caught onto him… and Thomas knew why. William was a plain, salt of the earth, country boy. Thomas had never been one for the lack of elegance or the ignorant.

But William was also honest and kind, and Thomas knew that by comparison he would soon be made out to the devil if he did not set the record straight.

“Take a break.” Thomas urged William, even as William paused by the side board and wiped his brow with a dirty handkerchief. William was taken aback, “It’s fine. I’ll handle the heavier trays. You’ve done more than enough today.”

“You’re in a peculiar mood.” William grumbled, refolding his pocket square to stow it inside his breast.

“…Maybe I’m waking up.” Thomas shrugged. William’s brow furrowed suspiciously.
In an attempt to divert the subject, Thomas decided to straighten the centerpiece which was off by a few inches. Had Mr. Carson seen it, he would have shot a gasket.

“How did you see that?” William demanded.

“I guess I just like to view it from a distance.” Thomas said, for in truth he was always measuring distances when he was standing in doorways. “I’m afraid it’s a bit of a curse. Carson knows I do it and I can never claim ignorance when he yells at me.”

“But that’s what you always do.” Gwen snorted.

Oh, Gwen.

She wasn’t bound for the soil like the rest of them. Soon she’d get a job as a secretary and be well on her way. One day, she’d return to Downton Abbey with her proper little husband in a fancy little skirt, and be all the merrier for it. Thomas pursed his lips, knowing full well that even now it would be difficult for him to enjoy Gwen’s company. Instead, he focused on being polite and not seeking an argument.

He didn’t want Gwen’s friendship. He just didn’t want her thinking he was lucifer either.

“Consider it terror of the guillotine.” Thomas offered, but when Gwen gave him a dirty look he continued on, “But I won’t do it anymore. Not to save myself if it puts others in the line of fire.”

“What are you on about?” Anna asked, quite confused, “You’ve been in a funny mood all day.”

But there was no time to talk about it now. There were three other trays waiting downstairs and if Thomas didn’t fetch them soon Mrs. Patmore was going to have an aneurism.

“...I’d best get the other trays.” Thomas said. When William made to follow, he shrugged it off.

“Stay here. I’ll do it.”

William blinked, utterly confused, but did not make to object.

Supper that night was a quiet affair, with the family now in mourning for the loss of the two Crawley heirs. It was deeply upsetting to him, to see Lady Sybil sitting in her chair and drinking white wine as she waited for the second course to be passed around. To know, even now, what a kind and genuine spirit she was made Thomas feel ready to weep. He did not want her to die, and was desperate that she should in some way survive. The only way it would be possible, however, were if he was able to use his medical training to somehow sway Dr. Clarkson and that other idiot doctor to take Sybil to a hospital during the final stages of her pregnancy. But no one would listen to him, surely?

Thomas sweated in his livery, eyes locked on Sybil’s head as she politely ate her peas and said nothing.

Lady Mary was in a prickly mood; Lady Edith was rubbing her the wrong way over the death of Patrick. He should have been Mary’s fiancé, but now he was dead and Mary didn’t care. Edith, ever the romantic, thought this an immortal sin. Mary, much more pragmatic and realistic, didn’t see the point in mourning for a man she’d hardly enjoyed.

Christ, but it was painful to watch. To know that, eventually, the fighting between the two of them would grow so severe that Mary would ruin Edith’s one shot at happiness with Bertie Pelham.

During half-course, when Thomas was to collect the second set of vegetables, Thomas found the downstairs chatter likewise locked on the effects of grief. Mrs. Patmore was rapidly chopping an
onion to simmer for a simple sauce on the last course, talking to her attendants and to Daisy in turn.

“When my sister died, God rest her soul, I ate my way through—“ But Thomas didn’t say long enough to hear the end of the sentence. He grabbed the vegetable tray and rushed out, noticing that Daisy was practically soppy over him every time she saw him.

The clean up after dinner was a relatively simple affair. Anna gutted the candles while William and Gwen boated the dirty plates onto trays to be washed up by Daisy. Thomas sorted the enormous serving dishes, knowing that each would have to be polished and washed in turn before they turned in for the night. William watched him the whole time, noting how Thomas was extra careful in laying velvet supports between each stacked plate.

“You’ve been odd today.” William spoke up. Thomas looked over his shoulder to note that Gwen was still staring at him suspiciously.

“It may look that way, but it’s not what you think.” Thomas turned back around, scooting the entire pile of trays down the side board so that he could continue collecting the rest.

“Then why are you actin’ so weird?” Gwen spoke up. Thomas looked back around to find her stacking glasses on the wrong tray. “You’ve never been this nice before—“

“I apologize for that.” Thomas didn’t know what else to say. He came around the table, stopping Gwen, “These actually go back down with us, but the desert service and all the glasses stay in the upstairs pantry.”

Gwen made a silent ‘o’, and began to re-stack the glasses. Anna helped her, the two of them working quicker with double time.

From across the table, William was still looking at Thomas quite warily.

As William headed downstairs with Gwen, taking with him the dirtied plates, Thomas and Anna remained upstairs to put the final touches on the dining room. Anna stripped the table, pealing away the old clothes, in a large bundle, and Thomas stacked up the glasses in the upstairs pantry. As he worked, he was interceded upon by O’Brien. It was unusual for her to come upstairs so close to the servant’s dinner, and she had a gleaming look in her eyes that Thomas did not like to see. Wary, he gave her a timid smile for the sake of pleasantries and continued to stack glasses.

“I’ve been doin’ you a favor.” O’Brien murmured, stepping in close so that she and Thomas could talk without Anna overhearing. “I told her ladyship that Bates ought to be let go and she agrees. She said to me ‘if only his Lordship had been content with Thomas’.”

“Ms. O’Brien, Bates is a good man and a hard worker.” Thomas urged, “I have no desire to make trouble.”

O’Brien was reproachful, obviously hurt that Thomas did not flat outright accept her gift. Desperate not to come under fire, Thomas tried to do damage control.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate you thinking about me.” Thomas urged, even though this was untrue, “It’s just that I don’t think it’s a good idea to start trouble, and I wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt over it—“

“What in the hell is wrong with you?” O’Brien demanded. She, above all others, was clearly upset by his change in character. And why not? Originally, the pair of them had been thick as thieves.
But Thomas did not want to be a thief anymore.

But before Thomas could explain this, Anna walked around the corner dragging behind her a large bundle of table linens. She was taken aback at O’Brien’s appearance upstairs.

“What are you doing up here, Ms. O’Brien?” She wondered aloud.

“It’s a free country.” O’Brien snapped. Anna huffed and carried on, used to O’Brien’s churlish attitude by now.

Thomas tried to follow after Anna but O’Brien snagged him by the elbow as he passed. Her grip was tight, but not painful. She was clearly concerned, dark eyes wide.

“We need to talk.” O’Brien urged, even as Anna headed down with her sack of linens. “You’ve been acting off all day. Why were you covered in mud this mornin’ and why have you been actin’ strange since?”

Thomas didn’t know what to say. He implored her silently, carefully unlacing her iron fingers from his arm.

“Please, Ms. O’Brien.” He murmured softly. “Please just give me some time.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, not that Thomas blamed her.

Downstairs, the servant’s dinner was all ready by the time Thomas re appeared. His meagre sandwich lunch had left much to be desired, and he knew for a fact that the left over meat pie from the upstairs supper would now be served for the downstairs staff. He was eager to get a slice; two if he could! As Thomas sat down, he was amazed to find that Bates automatically sought out his side. It was odd that the pair of them were starting to become dinner chums, and O’Brien was clearly jealous. She gave Bates a dirty look, irritable as Mr. Carson began to serve dinner. When the plates were fully passed out and graces said, Thomas tucked into his meat pie with enthusiasm. He found Bates just as hungry as he, which was no surprise given the fact that both of them had had a larger workload than normal today. Bates would be the one to dress Lord Grantham tonight, and surely would be feeling nerves. Maybe he, like Mrs. Patmore, ate to steady himself.

“How are you getting on, Mr. Bates?” Thomas asked, curious at the man’s settling, “Are you finding everything well enough?”

“I am.” Bates said, “Thank you, Thomas.” He didn’t sound insincere.

“If you like, I can show you the attic.” Thomas offered. ‘I still haven’t introduced you to the storage.”

“I appreciate it,” Bates said between bites, “But I don’t want to press on your time.”

“Oh it’s not a big deal.” Thomas shrugged. They were all heading up to the attics anyway, weren’t they? “It’s better that you know, just in case his Lordship wants something and you can’t find it. I’m happy to show you.”

“This is a new turn you’re taking, Thomas. Doing work doesn’t suit your image.” Mr. Carson drawled. Thomas bristled at his tone, wary that Mr. Carson was interpreting this poorly. He would
have to be careful not to strike Carson to anger, particularly when he had been the one to bully
Thomas so horribly in the end. Mr. Carson didn’t know it… but he was Thomas’ sorest weakness.

“…I’m sorry you think that, Mr. Carson.” Thomas murmured. Mr. Carson watched him, wary, but
allowed him to continue, “I’ll try to do better from now on.”

Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes shared a look, side by side. The pair of them seemed unsure, but not
unreceptive. Mrs. Hughes just shrugged, and carried on eating her meat pie.

“Are you alright, Thomas?” Anna asked from across the table. This was surely the tenth time she’d
asked today. “Only, Dr. Clarkson said you’d taken a turn this morning.”

“I’m fine.” Thomas said, eager to keep those details as low as possible, “It was just a fever.”

“Seems like it gave you a personality change.” William scoffed. Thomas kept his smile tight and his
tone polite, determined not to let his broiling anger show. God, he’d be the one having aneurisms
before the end of it if he didn’t find a stress relief soon.

“Maybe.” Thomas conceded. “But maybe I needed one as well.”
After all, this whole adventures was about second tries, wasn’t it?

William nearly dropped his fork, dumbfounded at Thomas’ answer.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it.” Anna said, turning to Gwen for support. Gwen was shocked into silence,
but nodded after a moment just to get Gwen off her back.

O’Brien’s eyes narrowed, darting between Thomas and Mr. Bates. It seemed that she was starting to
draw her own conclusions, whatever they were. Thomas was nervous at every thought that must be
bubbling in her cauldron. Why couldn’t she just leave him alone?

Oh. Because she thought they were still allies.

“Fancy a smoke after dinner?” O’Brien said, keeping her tone light. Her words, however, were
anything but for filler. Smoking was their time to scheme, their time to gossip and plan.

“…Actually, I’m trying to break the habit.” Thomas said, clear to catch her eyes so that he might
silently implore her again, “But thank you, Ms. O’Brien.”

She sat down her fork with a hard clink, bristling at his obvious lack of support. There would be no
scheming between the two of them from now on. No more gossiping. The sooner she learned that,
the better.

“Well, that’s put me in my place.” She said, stiffly.

“Is it such an insult?” Bates parried. O’Brien glared at him from across the table, bristling at his direct
confrontation.

Oh Jesus, Thomas thought in fear, Here we go.

“You’re new to this house.” O’Brien warned, “You don’t know how things work around here. And
I wouldn’t get too comfortable neither. You’re getting chummy with the family mighty quick-“

“This meat pie is great.” Thomas mumbled, desperate to stop the argument while he could.

“You’re one to talk. I heard that you spoke with her ladyship.” Bates warned.
“It’s my job to speak with her ladyship. I suggest you stick to yours.” O’Brien snapped.

“But don’t get comfortable?” Bates said, raising an eyebrow suspiciously.

“That’s the idea—”

“Please…” Thomas spoke up, his voice cutting across both O’Brien’s sentence and the beginning of Bates’ retort. “Please don’t.”

He stared at O’Brien, imploring her once again in silence. 

Don’t do this, he wanted to beg, You can’t win. He’s in the right, and you know it.

“Don’t what?” She tried to avoid responsibility, “I don’t see what I’m doing wrong—”

“You know what you’re doing.” Thomas kept his tone soft. O’Brien was amazed, and not in the good way. “Stop. Please. Mr. Bates is a good man—”

O’Brien had had enough for one night. She jerked away from the table, leaving her dinner half-finished as she left her seat and stormed off down the hallway. After a moment, Thomas heard the door to the back area slam, a clear sign that she was now brooding outside and smoking alone. God only knows, she was probably ready to set him on fire for this clear show of public treachery.

But it had to stop. She couldn’t be allowed to fight with Bates like this. She was going to lose, Thomas already knew that, and everyone was going to suffer for it.

In the staggering silence of O’Brien’s sudden departure, everyone was suddenly staring at Thomas agog.

“You’re in the dog house now.” Mrs. Hughes said; her wisdom was spot on.

“Better than on a leash.” Mr. Carson grumbled around a slow sip of port.

The days that followed were some of the strangest in Thomas’ life. It took several attempts at out right, over the top kindness, for William and Gwen to stop glaring at him. Anna was utterly delighted at Thomas’ change in character, as was Daisy; Bates was oblivious to the change and instead started to greet Thomas with small (if sincere) warmth. The real shocker, of course, was O’Brien. She’d turned on a pinhead from surely confiding in him daily to not talking at him at all. She glowered at him from corners, her eyes narrowed and a cigarette perched between her fingers. In an attempt to not let her anger rise any further, Thomas tried to be as polite as possible despite their clear falling out. He did not bait her, he did not tease her, indeed he tried to treat her as much like the others as he could.

But O’Brien, like him, detested pity and did not take kindly to suddenly being treated like an average acquaintance.

About a week after Thomas’ shocking transportation back in time, Thomas found himself polishing silver alone in the pantry. This was another part of the footman’s labor which Thomas had always despised and usually shrugged off on William. He knew now, however, that everyone would see him as lazy for shirking the load. To avoid the painful confrontations which would follow, Thomas decided to square up and polish. As a result, his fingers were often cramped and swollen, making him wish he could stick them in a vat of icy water if only to let his knuckles relax. He found himself
often flexing his fingers, trying to get the knots out.

It was a little past one in the afternoon, just after tea time. Thomas was starting on a dinner plate with a cigarette perched between his teeth, smoking and polishing at the same time. The smoke helped him to concentrate, and the polishing was becoming methodical. As he flipped the plate over on its back side to buff away now dried residue, he was intruded upon by William who opened the door to the hall with a letter in hand.

He coughed at the sudden inhalation of smoke, and Thomas at once put out his cigarette.

“Sorry—“ Good god he’d been saying that word a lot lately. “It helps me concentrate. I’ll open a window.”

“No need.” William managed out through another cough, skirting around the pantry table to open a window himself so that most of Thomas’ smoke began to dissipate. “Mr. Carson won’t be happy when he finds you smoking in the pantry.”

“I know.” Thomas sighed, “I wish I could just polish outside. At least that way I could get some fresh air and sunshine.”

“Chance would be a fine thing.” William said with a laugh, which was true. If Mr. Carson saw them leaving the house with the Crawley’s best silver, he’d be after them with Mrs. Patmore’s carving knives.

“A letter arrived for you.” William said, extending it over to Thomas who took it up, curious. With his sudden change in time frame, Thomas had no idea who might… be…

But Thomas recognized the handwriting on the address at once, and groaned aloud before he could stop himself. This wasn’t any spam writer, nor far off family calling over a death…

This was Philip’s handwriting. Because as of that moment, he was still, technically, involved with the man. He’d probably been waiting for Thomas’ letters and had been shocked not to receive them.

Thomas pressed the letter to his breast, suddenly feeling a burning sensation in his throat and eyes. 

Philip.

At once he was transported with the idea of Philip’s chestnut locks and warm honeydew eyes. The way he’d smiled even as he’d dragged his lips across the swell of Thomas’ bare buttocks. How he’d recited poetry to the inside of Thomas’ thigh, quoted Shakespeare as he’d fucked him raw, and sang him to sleep with thoughts on Wilde and Keats.

“Bad news?” William asked, unsure at Thomas’ sudden crumpling expression.

“… In a way.” Thomas whispered, pulling back to look at the letter again. He caressed the dried ink, marveling at how lovely even Philip’s handwriting was. He’d surely written this letter with his favorite blue fountain pen.

“Whose it from?” William asked, “It’s not family, is it—?”

“…No.” Thomas whispered, pressing the letter back to his chest as if he could absorb the paper through his livery and right into his aching heart. “No, it’s someone I’m seeing.”

“What, like a girl?” William was shocked at this, “I didn’t know you were courting!”
Thomas just kept pressing the letter to his chest. William was clearly struck by his sudden emotion, and offered aid in a bout of sympathy.

“I’ll take over.” William offered, gesturing to the nearly finished silver platter, “Why don’t you take a minute to read.”

“Thank you.” Thomas rose up and left, not even bothering to take off his green canvas smock.

He headed out into the back area, grateful to find it free of O’Brien or the hall boys who at times chopped wood under the pavilion. In a moment to find privacy, Thomas sequestered himself behind the woodshed, hiding in the shadow of its door so that even if someone were to step outside they wouldn’t be able to see him.

Then, and only then, did he unseal Philip’s letter with clumsy hands. He found the paper inside to be folded neatly into fourths, curled with dark cursive and an elegant flair that only the upper class possessed:

“*My sweetest boy—*

*I heard of the shock with PC. Why didn’t you write to me and let me know? This could mean everything if M is tossed up for the fortune. Think of it darling, we could live together, be together, and no one would be the wiser. I’ve asked to stay at Downton, perhaps get a bit of wiggle room in. We’ll see if we can’t find success one last time on England’s green and good shore. This is our last chance, sweetheart. We need to try all we can. Get an ear in. Tell me what’s being said. I will use your words to woo M’s heart. I hear it’s quite the task.*

*Why have you not written to me? I ask and ask again, for I have longed for your words for days now. I fear you’re being overworked, or have gone off me. You wouldn’t treat me in such a way, would you sweetheart? Not when you are my darling boy, and all the world besides. I have things to discuss with you when I arrive, so find me for your arms. I dream of your body at night, writhing beneath mine. I have learned more poetry to recite to you. If I could, I would create poetry all my own for your soul, but I confess it would only say the same thing, a million times over. Each line, each stanza, each page, filled up till there was nothing but a wall of text: I love you. I love only you.*

*Yours,*

*P* 

Thomas found himself sliding down the side of the wood shed, even though he knew it would stain the back of his trousers and result in him growing dirty. It had been so many years since he’d been spoken to in such a way, that to have it resonate in his ears again wounded him to the core. He blubered, feeling like a solid fool as he held Philip’s letter to his chest. He knew it was to end. That Philip would come to Downton only to find Mary refused, and would then end his relationship with Thomas. It ought to make him a fool, to already lament a relationship which he’d known from the start was doomed. But no one ever called Thomas sweetheart, and no one certainly ever said they loved him. Thomas found himself pressing his fingertips over the text, just to try and absorb the words.

Somewhere out there, someone loved him. Even if only for a short moment of time.
Despite Thomas’ woe on the subject, the rest of the house was pleased to offer shelter to a Duke. It was a rare honor, to house a member of the king’s distant family, and so Carson was in a state as he demanded William and Thomas to prepare only their finest for display. Everyone would have to work double time to create an alluring appeal in the name of Downton. There were wines to be decanted, fine china plates to be laid, silver to be polished, linens to be steamed, and flowers to be bought. As if this weren’t enough, the groomsmen were set to prepare horses for the mount, while the gardeners worked overtime to keep the abbey’s expansive lawns. To put it mildly, the eve of Philip’s arrival found the staff sweating in their socks. Only Mr. Carson was still in a good mood, bubbling with pride as he cut cold ham to pass around for the staff. Supper found most exhausted, and eager to enjoy their bubble and squeak. The family had left overs which were being shared; mainly an apple crumble which everyone wanted a piece off. When Thomas received his share, he tucked into it first despite it being the desert. It felt good to taste something sweet, to suck on his fork as he thought longingly of Philip’s arrival tomorrow. What would they say to one another? How could Thomas make their relationship last, if it even could stand to last at all? Was there another way forward? Was there any way to salvage what remained?

“Thomas?”

He looked up, surprised to find Anna staring at him once again. She seemed worried, as if she thought him growing ill again.

“Don’t say you’re about to take another turn. Mr. Carson would never forgive you with a Duke at the door.” She said with a small smile.

“What’s this?” Carson looked up, and for a moment Thomas saw a flash of horror in the butler’s aging eyes.

“I’m fine.” Thomas told them both at once. Even if he wasn’t, he knew it was tantamount to social suicide to shirk work with Philip nearly here. “I promise. I’m just…”

Oh to hell with it. “I’m just having problems with a flame.”

O’Brien slowly looked up from her plate of bubble and squeak, her dark eyes gleaming with knowing. Only she, at the table, would be aware of the implications of her words.

“Oh what a shame.” She said bitterly, using her knife to slowly cut long stripes into her cold cut ham. “Girl troubles?”

Thomas didn’t appreciate the jab. Oddly enough, neither did Bats.

“As if you care.” He grumbled from Thomas’ left. “Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.” O’Brien shrugged.

“It’s nothing.” Thomas wished he could diffuse the argument that was already forming. Bates and O’Brien had been at each other’s throats for days now. To see it from an outsider’s perspective was like waiting for a bomb to explode. “It’s silly. I’ll handle it.”

“Well I don’t approve of you lot having flames in any sense.” Mrs. Hughes warned. Thomas wondered if she knew even now that he was a homosexual. She’d told him as such in 1919, when he’d wept upon her sitting room table and admitted he was being forced out without a reference. She’d claimed that she’d known as soon as he’d walked through the door… and apparently Bates had as well. Did that mean they knew now?

“You’re much too young to think about all that.” Mrs. Hughes warned him, “So if you’re smart
you’ll cut it off straight away.”

The look she was giving him made it abundantly clear… she knew.

“I don’t know though.” Thomas murmured as he ate a piece of ham. The saltiness and smoky flavor was a godsend after a long day. “What if I care for them?”

“Them?” O’Brien just couldn’t let it go. She was hurt over the way Thomas had been ignoring her and she wasn’t afraid to show it. “Surely you mean—“

“Surely I do.” Thomas cut her off, but he gave her a gentle smile all the same. She glared at him in response, unwilling to accept any sort of olive branch without a proper explanation.

“I suppose we’ll have to put off our trip to the attic.” Thomas said, looking to Bates. “I’m sorry, I should have taken you before the Duke’s arrival. If you can wait for me, I’ll show you afterward.“

“Sounds quite racy.” O’Brien sneered softly. Unfortunately, her voice was still detected by Bates, and he clearly didn’t appreciate the implication of her comment.

“Do you ever think before you speak?” Bates snapped. Thomas jumped a bit, at first almost assuming Bates was talking to him until he realized he was once more glaring at O’Brien. Good god, couldn’t they stop just for a moment?

“I think more than others, that’s for certain.” She snapped, her eyes on Thomas.

“You’d never know it, hearing the way you go on.” Bates said. An uneasy tension had overtaken the table as everyone “Thomas has done nothing to you and still you heckle him.”

“Maybe I’ve come to my senses.” O’Brien snapped. The comment made Thomas wince audibly, particularly at the knowledge that O’Brien was insisting he was foul for his sexuality. He’d figured she’d thought as much, figured everyone thought as much, but it still hurt to hear her say it out loud.

“Or maybe you’ve found a way to be more nasty than usual.” Anna chimed in. Even Gwen seemed disturbed at the fact that O’Brien was effectively targeting her only ally in the house.

“Oh, get back in the knife box, Ms. Sharp!”

“That’s enough!” Mr. Carson cried out.

At once the table fell silent. Bates was reproachful, O’Brien moody, and Thomas caught between them was simply terrified. Anna didn’t look too happy either, displeased that O’Brien was being ungenerous with Thomas of all people. Gwen and William watched, unsure of what to think. The world was shifting around them. The loyalties of Thomas Barrow were up for grabs.

“I don’t know what’s going on here and frankly, I don’t care to.” Mr. Carson warned, eyes drifting repeatedly from O’Brien to Bates. “We’re the reflection of the family we serve, and it’s our duty to work well with one another. Kindly remember yourselves, and cease this infernal bickering or I will.”

The warning was clear, and at once Bates and O’Brien fell silent. Thomas was trapped between them, wilting at Bates’ side.
That night, Thomas found it difficult to sleep, thinking constantly of Philip and O’Brien in turn. He wished there was something more he could do on both accounts but found himself at a loss for ideas. When it came to Philip, Thomas could not change the ways of society or either of their situations. He could not adopt the body of a girl and step out with Philip as a woman. He did not have the money to live freely, nor the social influence to side step those that would treat he and Philip poorly. Their relationship was doomed, and there was surely no way that Thomas could save it. As for O’Brien, she’d always been a bit of an enigma even when she and Thomas had been friendly the first time. She’d wanted nothing more than to get her foot up, but how would any of that be possible when half the house thought her odious? The answer was simple: to force her way up the ladder any which way she could. Before, Thomas had thought her brilliant. Now, he just thought her terrifying. Why couldn’t she just let it be? Why couldn’t she just let him be? Worst of all, Bates was taking the insults personally (not that Thomas could blame him after that barb about the attic being racy). At least the snuffbox wouldn’t be stolen now, nor the wine. If Thomas was lucky, O’Brien would either leave or decide not to bother with him anymore. Playing possum was the best routine, he decided. She had no use for a person who offered her no leads.

The morning of Philip’s arrival, Thomas found it difficult to smile and be happy. He dressed promptly, headed downstairs, and carried about his routine with as best a speed as he was able until it was time for the eleven o’clock train to arrive. The Duke would be aboard it, and would arrive at the abbey by 11:30. As a result, 11:15 found Carson lining the entire staff up downstairs, checking over everyone to make sure they were presentable before the Duke arrived at the house.

“Are you all ready?” Mr. Carson paused in his pacing before Thomas, dismayed at his somber expression, “At least attempt to look happy, Thomas.”

Thomas snapped back to a neutral expression at once.

Carson carefully smoothed out a wrinkle on Williams’ lapel, and then headed for the stairs, “Very well, we shall go out to greet them.”

“Me, Mr. Carson?!” Daisy was downright delighted at the chance.

“…No, Daisy. Not you.” Daisy’s face into despair at the puncture of her ballooning dream. As everyone began to file for the stairs, Carson paused Bates with a rather wary look on his face. “Can you manage, Mr. Bates, or would you rather wait here?”

“I want to go Mr. Carson.” Bates tried to keep heading up, but Mr. Carson stopped him again. It was clear that Carson considered Bates both a liability and an embarrassment because of his cane.

“There’s no obligation for the whole staff to be present.”

“I’d like to be there.” Bates was losing his patience on the subject, and headed up before Mr. Carson could try to stop him again.

“Well-“ Mr. Carson huffed as everyone else filed past. “It’s certainly a great day for Downton, to welcome a Duke under our roof.”

As they began the ascent, Thomas heard O’Brien and Bates up ahead, already bickering with one another again.

“Careful you don’t trip, or you’ll embarrass us all.”

“I’ll make sure not to let you trip me.”
As everyone filed outside, Mr. Carson strode ahead of them all so that he was the nearest to the front door. The family was coming out, and Thomas’ eyes were automatically attracted to the back of Sybil’s head even as a gleaming motorcar came puttering up the driveway. It shocked him to see how clunky and slow the cars were. Just ten years alone had allowed the machinery to become more sleek and refined. As it stood, Philip’s car was still top of the line, and pulled to a smooth stop before the abbey with very little disturbance in the gravel.

Thomas found his heart pounding in his chest, his palms tingling with sweat as the chauffeur hopped out and walked around to open the passenger door. For a moment, there was nothing save for a flurry of movement inside the cab. And then…?

Philip Prevet rose with pristine ease from the back of the motorcar, fashionable and posh as always as he strode across the crisp gravel. Thomas felt his heart squeeze painfully in his chest at the sight of Philip’s handsome face; his sweet button nose and his fully mahogany locks. Thomas had been smitten with Philip’s unnaturally good looks, but when Philip had whispered poetry to Thomas while fucking his lights out Thomas had really been knocked over. Thomas’ heart had been dulled over the years, the edges growing numb so that Philip’s memory had soon been tainted by other tragedies. But here he was again, youthful and whole, and Thomas found his heart breaking all over again.

He knew it was showing on his face. Damn him if he couldn’t hold his heart together at the seams.

“Welcome to Downton!” Lord Grantham greeted him.

“Lady Grantham,” Philip was quick to clasp her hand. He’d always been a magnet for public charm, “This is so kind of you.”

“Not at all, Duke.” She replied with grace, “We’re delighted you could spare the time. You know my daughter Mary, of course.”

Lady Mary batted her eyes. Philip did his best to look interest.

“And Edith.‘” Well that was a quick ghost over.

“But I don’t believe you’ve met my youngest, Sybil.”

“Lady Sybil,” Philip took her hand, once again oozing that same charm, “How do you do.”

Sybil, for whatever reason, didn’t automatically ooze charm back. She was much more genuine as a person than Philip, who often put on a mask in public. Many would consider it a sign of poor taste, but Thomas knew better. Philip had to protect himself…. Thomas’ understood the struggle quite intimately.

That was why this second try was so god damn terrifying.

“Come inside, you must be worn out.” Lady Grantham led the party towards the front steps, only to be paused as Philip threw the proverbial wrench into the machine.

“Oh, Lady Grantham, I’ve a confession to make which I hope won’t cause too much bother.” Everyone stopped and turned to hear what Philip had to say, “My man was taken ill just as I was leaving, so I…”

“Oh, well-“ Lord Grantham shrugged it off like a fly, “That won’t be a problem will it Carson?”
“Certainly not!” Carson was god damn giddy at the thought of dressing a Duke, “I shall look after his Grace myself.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t dream of being such a nuisance!” Philip pleaded, “Surely a footman…”

And then, with all the care of a trained thespian, Philip finally allowed his eyes to fall upon Thomas.

Thomas met them steadily despite the lack in decorum it showed. God damn him, he could not keep the twitches of a smile off his face. He felt like he was staring face to face with a ghost reinvented in the flesh. A second chance, pure and simple.

“I remember this man.” Philip said, and though only Thomas could hear it his words were laced with love. “Didn’t you serve me when I dined with Lady Grantham in London?”

“I did your grace.” Thomas said, for he had served Philip quite well.

He’d valeted for him, helping him to dress and later undress. And when Philip had asked him to do the same, Thomas had obliged. And so, with only a few sentences between them they became as intimate as life long lovers.

“Ah, there we are.” Philip was glad to find a solution and a foot in the door, “We shall do very well together, won’t we…?”

“Thomas, your grace.” Thomas almost wanted to laugh. Philip knew his name quite loud. he’d all but groaned it to the ceiling when Thomas had gagged on his prick.

“Thomas.” Philip repeated the name with care. He pulled back, his warm eyes entreating Thomas to remember all that had passed between them. Thomas was glad to take Philip up on his offer, suddenly swarmed in the memories of their love affair. So many nights hidden away during Sybil’s season in London. So many hours when Thomas had ridden Philip like a high bred horse only to wait at his table the next morning.

He stepped away, heading back up the steps with Lady Grantham and the rest of the Crawley clan. He’d stepped back into his mask, hiding his emotion to pretend to be aloof. But Thomas was glad to let him go, knowing even if in that moment Philip loved him the most.

“Good. I hope you had a pleasant journey-?” Lady Grantham asked, offering a gentle hand to lead Philip inside.

But even as Philip began to encroach the doorway, the corner of Thomas’ eye was drawn to a sudden flurry of movement. He remembered, a split second too late, just what O’Brien had done the first time around. She’d tripped Bates in the dirt after all; how had that slipped him by!

Bates gasped, his cane flying out from underneath his wounded foot. This time, however, before he could fall into the dirt Thomas dove and caught Bates by the elbow so that he was kept from landing in the dirt. The pair of them staggered, clinging to one another as Thomas forced them both back up.

It was almost worse than falling, because now two of them were looking like fools and Carson was ready to kill them. There was fire in the butler’s aged eyes, blazing in the direction of both Bates and Thomas. Worst of all, it was incredibly clear that O’Brien had done something foul, for how could Bates have been tripped by Thomas if Thomas was the one he was now clinging to? All eyes in the line turned to the three of them, with Thomas blushing horribly and keeping his eyes to the gravel.

Lord Grantham saw it all occur but said nothing, merely pausing as he caught Bates’ eyes to ensure that all was well. Bates nodded, a silent but simple awareness to the situation. Lord Grantham slipped
inside, with Carson barring the door at the back of the party.

Oh, Thomas could tell he was in for a chewing. Carson’s hands were balled into white knuckled fists.

“…Thank you, Thomas.” Bates whispered, straightening back up to put his cane squarely upon the ground.

Thomas let go of Bates’ elbow, allowing a slow breath to exhale as he—

But as the line turned to head back down the servant’s alley, O’Brien got her vengeance on Thomas. Bates’ cane caught him by the back of the ankle and Thomas went down with a slight cry of shock! He slammed into the dirt, gravel and dust going everywhere as he hit the ground on his side. Worst of all, he’d ended up catching himself on one of his hands so that the wire stitches on his razor scars were pulled painfully tight. Thomas gasped at the throbbing wound, bringing his hands back to his chest.

“Thomas-!” Anna called out. She was there at his side as O’Brien stormed past, a black storm cloud if there ever was one.

“Damnit-!” Bates cursed, incredibly embarrassed to have tripped Thomas up on his cane.

“I’m fine-“ Thomas struggled back to his feet. Anna was brushing off the back of his livery, which Thomas hassled to finish off before Carson skinned him alive. “I’m fine.”

He held onto his wrists, wincing as they continued to throb. He dared not look just at this moment, but he was almost certain that if he were to he would find Carson waiting with a meat cleaver and hanging hook.

“Did you hurt your wrists?” Anna asked. Everyone had left them behind, now only Anna, Bates, and Thomas were left behind.

“I’m fine—“ but the more that Thomas said it the more he feared retribution. O’Brien would now be beyond the point of reasoning and Carson would surely deck him behind the ears. Thomas checked over his livery, afraid of tears. Mercifully he found none, but that still didn’t mean Carson wasn’t going to kill him when they were finally sequestered downstairs.

Heading inside after Carson’s retreating back, Thomas’ immediate determination was to take Philip’s many valises and put them upstairs in his room. Carson was avoiding Thomas, probably trying to cool off, so Thomas used the time alone to begin sequestering Philip’s clothes in need of ironing. Several pieces could easily be maintained upstairs, but Thomas took Philip’s shoes and set them aside to polish downstairs.

He could hear Philip coming up the hall, the chatter of the family a far off lullaby to the sulking servant’s wary ears. Bristling, Thomas straightened his livery one last time, checking for patches of dust in the standing mirror which hid by the corner. He found himself presentable, and thank god, for just as Thomas went back to sorting Philip’s valises he heard Philip’s soft voice from the doorway.

“I never get tired of that sight.” He murmured in appraisal of Thomas’ lowered back. The resulting lean left his posterior slightly higher than normal.

But even as Thomas straightened up to greet his old lover, their moment was duly interrupted by Lady Mary.

“Duke!” She wore a white flower in her hair; she must have snuck it out of a vase. “Settling in?”
“…Yes!” Philip swapped the sociable mask right back on, determined to be pleasant even when he didn’t particularly want to be. Suddenly Thomas was back to being nothing more than a chair in the corner, but he didn’t take it personally. Honestly, it was better that he be ignored; at least that way, no one could see him distraught.

The pair of them were heading off down the hall, chatting amicably away. Left alone in the Duke’s impromptu dressing room, Thomas let out a heavy sigh and fetched a canvas bag from beneath the wardrobe so that he might carry Philip’s four pairs of shoes at the same time. He would likewise take Philip’s dinner jacket; it needed a mend in the hem of the left sleeve. As he straightened back up, he jumped at the sight of Bates in the doorway, Lord Grantham’s dinner jacket over his own arm.

“Are you alright?” Bates asked.

“I’m fine.” Thomas mumbled, and really he was. He was just horribly embarrassed, “Don’t fuss over me.”

“I wanted to thank you for helping me,” Bates said. The pair of them ended up walking down the gallery hall together, side by side as they made a bee line for the green baize door. “If it hadn’t been for your actions, I would have disgraced his Lordship and Mr. Carson in front of a Duke.”

“I don’t know about that.” Thomas said, for while O’Brien’s original hijack had worked perfectly Bates had still been kept on at Lord Grantham’s personal request, “You’re his Lordship’s best friend. I doubt he would have seen you as a disgrace even if you lost your lunch.”

Bates quirked a grin, holding open the door for Thomas. The pair of them headed up into the attics to fetch their respective button boxes, “Carson would have done a jig anyway.”

“Carson does a jig if a spoon is misplaced.” Thomas said. Bates chuckled, but to be fair there was nothing funny about it.

“O’Brien-“ Bates started, but Thomas cut him off. Bates needed to understand that O’Brien would never change before a true war broke out.

“Mr. Bates, I beg of you, don’t bate her to anger.” They paused in the threshold of the attics, at the divide where one could either go left to the women’s or right to the men’s. Bates was starting to look sulky, but he just didn’t understand. No one, frankly, understood how dangerous O’Brien was besides Thomas.

“She is an enemy you don’t want to have.” Thomas murmured, eager to keep his voice low lest someone overhear them. Bates quirked an eyebrow, curious.

“What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t know the difference between an enemy and a person that gets in her way. She’s very dangerous. I… I’ve tried for so long to be her friend, but even now I’m terrified that I’m just a tool to her. And she’d turn on me the moment she wanted. She knows things that could ruin me forever.” It was a bitter thing, but Thomas knew that he could never take back the fact that O’Brien knew he was a homosexual.

But instead of being more wary, Bates now just seemed concerned. “What things?”

Thomas shook his head. He had a feeling Bates already knew, and even so Thomas was certainly not going to say it out loud. He hated to admit it, but he was horribly ashamed. The failed attempt at conversion therapy and Mr. Carson’s harsh words in 1919 had forever scalded him to life as a homosexual man.
“… Things that you can’t repeat in decent conversation. Things that could get you kicked out without a reference. Things that could turn a man into a wretch.” He wondered if that was enough to get the point across, but Bates just gave him a gentle look and reached up to place a hand upon his shoulder.

Thomas was shocked at the gesture. It was very friendly, and frankly he’d never dreamed of it happening between the two of them. The surprise must have shown upon his face, for Bates said, “It’s not as black as all that.”

“It is, Mr. Bates.” Even he could not change the tides of society, “It really is.”

Bates’ hand slid off his shoulder, and the pair of them continued their slow march upstairs. “Please, I beg of you, don’t give her a reason to go to war with you.”

“I don’t like the idea of living in fear.” Bates grumbled, “I hate this sort of thing, where workers turn on each other.”

“You’re very brave, Mr. Bates, and a good man. You’ll have to forgive me if life has made me a coward.” Thomas said. Instead of reacting poorly to hear Thomas’ abysmal confession, Bates just gave him another gentle look. It seemed that the way to the man’s heart was not through pleasantries but through honesties. Thomas, in particular, had a very difficult time being emotionally valid. Maybe now, with a better head start in place and a lack of animosity, Bates would be able to see that better.

“You have to remember what you can change and what you can’t.” Bates said wisely. “You have power, Thomas. Don’t let someone like O’Brien make you forget that.”

Thomas smiled in spite of himself. How queer, when his whole purpose for being at Bates’ side now was to try and change his fate. Bates had more of an eye into his situation than Thomas had originally given them credit for.

Yet as the pair of them reached the top of the landing to the servant’s attics, they were suddenly shown the shocking sight of Lady Mary hiding in the eave of Thomas’ bedroom door. She was being quite peculiar, head bent and a giggle on her painted lips. The door was open just a crack, as if someone was in Thomas’ room.

But who? And why? What in the hell was she even doing up here in the attics anyways? Did her lot have no value of personal space?

“Can we help you, M’lady?” Bates asked. Even Thomas could sense the wariness in the man’s voice.

“We were just exploring.” Lady Mary said. Right on cue, Philip appeared from Thomas’ bedroom, tucking something into the inner vest pocket of his jacket. Thomas’ heart sank, as he suddenly realized just how Philip must have gained access to his letters. The man had snuck into Thomas’ room, and stolen them right out of his bureau! Crestfallen, Thomas did not hide the look of misery upon his face. Philip, for his part, was clearly struggling with keeping his social mask in place and explaining himself flat out to Thomas. Though it was Bates who addressed them, it was Thomas to whom Philip looked to. He seemed to be silently imploring Thomas to stay silent. To say nothing.

Thomas felt incredibly cheap in that moment… like a dock whore.

“If you’re looking for Thomas, he’s here, your grace.” Bates said, gesturing to Thomas. Thomas pursed his lips, desperate for his eyes not to water in front of Lady Mary.
Lady Mary was clearly starting to realize just how awful the implications for her actions were. She’d grown gray faced, the lovely rosy hue leaving her cheeks, as she looked around to Philip.

“I think I’m well taken care of, sir.” Philip warned. It was a simple sentence, but heavily loaded. ‘Back off’, it said, ‘and remember your place, servant’.

But Bates did not back off at all. Instead, he was incredibly bold, reaching out with his free hand to open his own bedroom door so that it could be pushed to revealing the chamber beyond. He glared dully at the intruding pair.

“Would you care to explore my room, M’lady?” Bates growled.

Lady Mary had had enough, rightly put back to her senses and eager to get out of the attics. She was spooked like a horse, terrified of making a poor impression when clearly she’d just been having a laugh.

“Of course not Bates, we’re terribly sorry to have bothered you.” Lady Mary spluttered out. She turned tail and fled back down the women’s corridor, leaving Philip momentarily alone with Thomas and Bates. He said nothing to either of them, instead turning away with a tiny huff to follow after Lady Mary.

Philip wasn’t even out of the hall before Thomas ran after him, hurrying into his rifled bedchamber straight to the bureau. He wrenched the top shelf open, groaning in dismay when he found the letters taken.

“I shouldn’t think he’d take anything?” Bates asked, limping into Thomas’ room to peek over his shoulder at the now bare top dresser.

“…But he did.” Thomas whispered, sliding the drawer shut. He bowed his head, letting his forehead rest against the edge of the bureau for a moment as he regained his composure. “And I should have known. I was such a fool-!”

Why hadn’t he hidden his letters better? Now they were gone forever, the only reminder Thomas had ever had of being loved!

“Then you should tell his Lordship!” Bates urged, “And at once! He can’t be allowed to get away with this, even if he is a Duke!”

Thomas shook his head, finally straightening up to wipe the corners of his eyes. This was just the game they played, and Thomas had squarely lost. Philip had warned him the first time around not to be a sore loser. After a lifetime of losing, Thomas had learned how to accept humiliation and defeat.

“… I wish it were that simple.” Thomas whispered, “But it’s not.” Bates didn’t know what to say to that. Thomas had no answers for him.

It was difficult of him, to dress Philip for dinner after that. The first time around, Thomas had peppered the interaction with kisses, being sweet and loving as he’d made sure Philip looked his best. Now, Thomas kept the movements strictly clinical, far from uncaring but unwilling to make himself look more a fool than before. Philip watched him, nervous, and tried to strike up
“I can explain.” Philip said, as Thomas did up his dinner tie.

“Your grace?” Thomas did not allude to anything unnatural or suspicious, instead focusing on the half fold that so dominated the tying process.

“Darling, you don’t have to call me that,” Philip whispered, his tone loving. Thomas finished easily with his tie and began to carefully overlay Philip’s tailcoat jacket. This was a smoothing process, which involved Thomas carefully tucking away any loose flaps or spare threads that might poke out. Thomas said nothing to Philip’s comment of darling, desperately not trying to read more into the moment than was strictly necessary. Philip was only playing the game as best he could, waiting until he knew whether or not the entail would be broken. Of course, the entail would not be broken, and so Philip would be forced to reconcile his relationship with Thomas for lost.

Nothing could change that, he was certain.

“Let’s just not talk about it now.” Thomas whispered back, “Does your jacket feel too tight, your grace?”

Philip did not even make to test the seams, instead giving Thomas a blank look before stepping in and ever so gently kissing Thomas upon the cheek.

Thomas bristled, then melted at the touch. Philip felt him relax, his petal soft lips playing a careful dance at the corner of Thomas’ iron shut mouth.

“Won’t you at least kiss me?” Philip asked, slightly wounded. Thomas met his eyes, and found them misted over with jilted affections.

“…Do you want me to kiss you?” Thomas whispered back. Philip smiled tenderly.

“Darling. I dream of nothing else.”

And so, despite knowing how this could only end, Thomas tilted his face and allowed himself to be kissed for the first time in over ten years.

Oh… but he’d missed this. Feeling loved beneath another’s fingers. Feeling like he stood a chance at being happy. Philip’s arms drew around him, his teeth and tongue like velvet as they coaxed Thomas’ mouth wider.

“Why didn’t you write to me?” Philip asked between kisses, “I thought you’d gone off me.”

“Never.” Thomas whispered back, “But you know how this is going to end.” His voice broke as he admitted it. Philip pulled back a bit, slightly started at Thomas’ words. Thomas could not keep the misery from his face any longer.

He turned away, quickly drying his eyes before any tears dared to fall. He took a long sniff, coughing before turning back around to fold Philip’s pocket square in a fan pattern. He tucked the handkerchief in, so that Philip was finally presentable to dinner.

“There you are. Right as rain.” He had to cough again to hide the strain in his voice. “If you need anything, do not hesitate to let me know, your grace.”

He turned for the door, marked only at a pause by Philip reaching out and hooking him at the waist. Thomas did not move as Philip drew him back in, linking his arms protectively around Thomas’
“…Darling, I know it seems dark, but we have a shot here.” Philip whispered in his ear. “I’ll try and see if Grantham will break the entail and if he does… you and I will be together always.”

Thomas closed his eyes, damning himself when he felt the tiniest tear trickle down his youthful cheek.

Dinner that night was of course a lavish affair. They were to serve thirteen courses including roasted duck with a garnish of sauced berries and chopped hazelnuts, alongside a spread of roasted artichokes, french beans, white soup with sliced almonds, venison pies, and of course a selection of cheeses. Thomas served without once looking at Philip directly, forcing himself to consider the whole episode an out-of-body experience. When the courses finally came to a close with coffee and tea in the parlor, Carson gave Thomas and William a sharp look which directly translated to ‘get downstairs and expect a chewing’.

Thomas transferred the silver platters and glass goblets with shaking hands, already knowing that Carson was building up an armory of angry words to throw at him. William seemed to notice that Thomas’ nerves were shot, for instead of being buoyantly chatty (as he often was) he resorted to comfortable silence. Anna doused the lights, Gwen collected the linens, and the four of them headed downstairs with arms laden to find the servant’s hall bustling with life. Supper was to be laden with left over from the upstairs meals, and so everyone was excited for their share at the venison pies and roasted duck. Thomas, however, found it very difficult to find joy as he took his seat next to Bates and waited for Carson to come down. It would take little time for Carson to serve the coffee, and so Thomas watched the minutes tick past with trepidation.

Bates watched him, unsure.

“I still think you should say something.” He urged. Everyone around them was taking their seats. Across the way, Anna and Gwen were babbling over something or the other, laughing girlishly when Anna make a joke.

“There’s nothing to say, Mr. Bates.” Thomas said.

“I don’t like to see a man be pushed around.”

“I’m afraid to tell you that I’m used to it.” Thomas paused, aware that he was essentially becoming a doormat, “But I also have to reason that it’s not logical to expect Lord Grantham to be able to convince a Duke that he’s done wrong. He ranks over Lord Grantham, no matter their character differences.”

Bates grumbled, seeming to agree bitterly no matter how deeply his morals ran. This was the bane of every servant’s existence, particularly those that grew too close to the upper class.

O’Brien made it to the table, sitting down with a sulky scowl. Unlike the others, who were always in a cheery mood, Thomas and O’Brien both took a pessimistic approach to life. Now, alienated from Thomas’ sole company, O’Brien was more dark than ever. She seemed to have taken it quite personally that Thomas no longer wanted to scheme. Thomas wished she’d just let it be! Had the woman been a bull dog in another life?

She glared at Thomas, attempting to meet his eyes. Thomas, not interested in a fight, just kept his
eyes on the table and waited for Carson to appear.

“What’s it to you?” Bates snapped.

“I just think it’s rather clumsy of you, Thomas, to fall over Mr. Bates’ cane. Her Ladyship was saying it was an absolute disgrace.” Thomas flushed at O’Brien’s words, unsure if they were true or not. “You’d think the one with the limp would be doing the stumbling—“

“No thanks to you.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about.” O’Brien sneered. Already, the cheery chatter was beginning to die down as everyone realized a fight was afoot.

“You’re right, Ms. O’Brien.” Thomas cut the pair of them off before the argument turned into an all out dog fight. “It was foolish of me, and I apologize. It won’t be happening again.”

“It better not!” She snapped, angry, “Or you’ll be for the chop!”

“Are you hiring and firing now, Ms. O’Brien?” Anna demanded, angry to find that O’Brien was still making trouble in light of the day’s earlier disturbance. “I thought that authority lay with Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes.”

“I’m only saying what I think!” O’Brien hated to feel like she was being persecuted just for having opinions. It was one of her sorest spots, and always made her rile up quick. “and her Ladyship is upset as well. Thomas is the first footman, it’s his job to be on guard at all times—“

“But not from your feet-!”

“And that, I think, will be enough with that.”

At once, everyone jerked to attention in their seats. Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes had returned to the servant’s hall and both of them looked greatly displeased. Thomas kept his eyes down, sweat tingling on his inner palms as Carson glared him down.

“Thomas,” Carson addressed him frontally. Thomas licked his lips, already preparing an apology in his head, “Your behavior today was unacceptable and disgraces us all! You are the first footman, and ought to be the pride of this house! How do you expect to show a good name to Downton if you continue to fail to do the same for your own person? I ought to demote you for your slip up, and the only reason why I’m not doing so now is because there is a Duke in the house.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. It was not enough.

“If you slip up again, you’ll lose more than just your half day.” Mr. Carson warned. “And you’ll look at me when I speak to you!” He barked.

Thomas jumped at the raise of volume. His psych was shattered when it came to Mr. Carson. Unlike with the others, Carson’s deteriorated relationship with Thomas had dealt the final blow to his fragile ego. He barely was able to meet Carson’s eyes, and even then it was only for a few minutes.

“…I’m sorry Mr. Carson.” Thomas said again, his voice softer. “I apologize, it won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” Mr. Carson growled, and took his seat.

Everyone followed suit, with an awkward silence swallowing up the table whole. Bates was stiff in his chair, bitter as he angrily flenched his fist upon the edge of the table.
“Mr. Carson-“ He broke out as Carson began to slice the left over roasted duck, “It was my fault, not Thomas’, I should be the one that’s punished.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.” Thomas mumbled under his breath. Carson stopped slicing duck, his eyebrows raised at the audacity of Bates usurping his authority.

“I will decide how punishment is dolled out in this house, Mr. Bates.” Carson warned. “And it’s hardly like you can stop carrying a cane, now is it?”

Bates pursed his lips but said nothing. Across the table, even Anna looked cowed.

“I don’t think it’s fair to saddle Thomas with all the blame-“

“This topic is no longer up for discussion.” Mr. Carson snapped. At that, as they say, was that.

Of course, the night’s miseries were not over after that.

Thomas returned upstairs after dinner, heavy at heart to know that Philip’s conversation with Lord Grantham had not gone as planned. After an already awful day, Thomas was not emotionally ready to deal with a painful breakup. He found the stairs dark, with everyone gone up, and approached Philip’s door slowly. When he opened it, he found Philip is a dismal mood, hiding in his chair by the fire which was low in its hearth. Thomas closed the door, locking it just for good measure, and gave Philip a timid smile.

“Your grace.” He approached him, “Allow me to get you ready for bed?”

“…He won’t break the entail.” Philip whispered, eyes locked on the hearth. There was a half drunk glass of whiskey on the side table next to him.

“…I see.” Thomas did not even pretend to act surprised.

Philip rose up with a heavy sigh, and Thomas at once helped him to shed his tailcoat jacket. He hung it over the back of the clothes horse, and began to undo the four mother of pearl buttons at the base of Philip’s waistcoat. The deep ‘V’ opening pulled apart with ease, and Thomas folded it in half to lay it over the bed. He carefully unlace Philip’s white tie, unbuttoned his formal white dress shirt, and gently shucked his suspenders. Philip’s cufflinks were made of purest pearls, and Thomas undid them with care to set them inside Philip’s personal valise. He likewise withdrew a pair of creme silk pajamas, laying them upon the bed beside the folded waistcoat. Philip shed his clothes without care, throwing them asunder so that Thomas had to collect them off the floor before they wrinkled. The upper class seldom took care of their clothes, having never had to care for the articles personally. the whole bundle ended up in Thomas’ arms, and he carefully sorted them as Philip tugged on his pajamas, grumbling all the while.

“The old dog just won’t give in.” Philip was bitter, “And he had the nerve to show me up for it. Shouting at me for daring to want an eye in. He’s such a sot.”

Thomas let out a tiny, humorless laugh. It was difficult to find anything funny tonight.

“I’m leaving in the morning.” Philip said bitterly, “So don’t bother with tending to my clothes. I’ll get my man to do it at home.”
Thomas did nothing but shrug, carefully laying Philip’s clothes inside his valise to instead pull forth a day suit which he would surely wear on the train tomorrow.

As Philip pulled on his housecoat, Thomas set the room to rights and replaced his now polished shoes. Philip was somber, his eyes now scouring Thomas’ pale face to perhaps find some trace of vanity or pride. He would surely see both missing.

“…I’m still fixed, Thomas. I can’t change that.” Philip murmured.

“I know.” Thomas could not hide from the truth, even as his face mutated with sorrow. Philip was stricken at the sight of Thomas near tears.

“I wish you well, nothing but the greatest of… of love and life… and I hope you wish the same of me?” the tears in his eyes were yet to fall, but they would before the night was over.

Philip was overcome, and stepped forward with arms open to take Thomas against his body. He kissed him tenderly upon the temple and forehead, gently stroking his hair and whispering in his ear.

“More than you know, my sweetest darling.” Philip could not help but kiss him again, “And if I could, I would continue this forever. But I just can’t… I have a duty.”

“I understand.” Didn’t they all have a duty? Thomas to fulfilling his second chance… Philip to fulfilling his line.

“…I love you Thomas.” Philip said. It burned him, deeply, and Thomas clutched onto Philip all the tighter. “Truly, I do. But it just can’t go on, and I damn the world for it.”

“Just…” Thomas was a solid class fool for blubbering, but he couldn’t stop. “Just hold me a little bit longer?”

All the pain from his suicide attempt, all the sorrow from a life half lived and utterly denied, had left Thomas with zero defenses. Philip was understanding, even if he truly didn’t grasp the depth the situation, and held Thomas tightly in his arms.

But then he pulled back, and began to kiss Thomas instead. Where before, it had been a gentle display of tongue and teeth, now it was a powerful passionate embrace. They were kissing as if new in their love, wanting to cement their bond instead of break it.

“If this is to be our last night-” Philip leaned in to gently teeth at the delicate lobe of Thomas’ right ear. “Then let it be a night we’ll remember.”

“Your grace…” Thomas was terrified of the idea, “It’s too dangerous.”

“Shh-” Philip helped him to shrug off his double breasted outer coat, kissing him even as he began to tug at Thomas’ white tie. He was rather useless at all of it, bless him.

“Your grace, please. Philip-“ Finally Thomas was able to pull back, and he found Philip surprised. This wasn’t to be unexpected, after all. Thomas had always been the more seductive of the pair of them. But life had made him wary, and after 1919, Thomas would never dare to openly flirt with a man again. “Please, I’m scare of being caught.”

“…Darling…” Philip reproachfully took Thomas back in his arms again, his fingers upon Thomas’ face so as to cradle his cheekbones. “You’re safe with me. Look see-?” He pointed to the door,
which remained resolutely locked. “The door is locked. The windows are shut. No one can see in. No one is waiting for you. You’re mine… all mine. And you’re safe.”

Thomas did not know if he dared to believe it just yet.

He leaned in again, this time carefully undoing Thomas’ striped waistcoat to let it fall carelessly to the floor. When Thomas bent to chase the garment, Philip’s fingers hooked into the back of his trousers, feeling lightly at the swollen flesh beneath. Thomas jumped, shocked at the touch.

“You’re shy tonight.” Philip deduced, “Don’t be… just be with me. Only me.”

Thomas let the waistcoat fall back to the floor.

Philip shucked Thomas’ suspenders, shirking his shirtsleeves and trousers. Each garment fell like a petal from a dying flower, and found Thomas’ body sweet and supple beneath. Philip yanked the belt away from his housecoat, and took Thomas backward so that the pair of them toppled onto the bed with Thomas’ shoes and sockgarters still on. The result was that Thomas looked very silly, with all his clothes pooled around his ankles while Philip was rightly naked.

Philip laughed, unable to help himself. He dove for Thomas’ feet, his buttocks waving enchantingly in the air as he unlaced Thomas’ shoes and helped him to kick them free. All the clothes fell in a wave, and so the pair of them were rightly naked in one another’s arms save for Thomas’ flannel wraps which he’d been using to hide his wrists.

Philip laid at Thomas’ side, the pair of them cradled by satin and silk duvets, and began to pull off the wrapping of Thomas’ braces.

Thomas paused him, frightened of what Philip would think dare he see the wire now woven on Thomas’ slit wrists.

“What is it-?” Philip asked, dazed. Thomas was so wrapped up in the site of Philip’s naked body that he found it impossible to speak. It had been over a decade since he’d held a naked man in his arms, and his loins were powerfully stirred at the sight. Philip held no trace of feminine charm, with burly arms and hair upon his chest. But he was perfect to Thomas, utterly perfect, and he wanted nothing more than to-

“… Darling…” Philip was still staring at Thomas’ wrists. Thomas glanced to see that Philip had finally managed to take off one of Thomas’ wrapped flannels. He was shocked at the sight of wire, woven onto Thomas’ wrists.

Thomas could not help but be warmed at the sight of Philip horrified for his sake. It was so rare that anyone took genuine pity on him. “Oh Darling-” Philip groaned, carefully running the pads of his fingers over the wire lacing Thomas’ wrist closed.

“Darling, why didn’t you tell me?” Philip asked. His dark brown eyes were round, wide with shock. “Is this why you stopped writing?”

Thomas didn’t know what else to do but nod. “Nothing’s fair for us-“ Thomas choked out.

Philip swooped in, pulling Thomas into his arms to protect him from the world. “Darling, don’t think like that, I beg you…”

Thomas didn’t know what else to do.
“Make me okay.” He begged in Philip’s ear. “Make me okay, Philip.”

And so, Philip did.

Making love for men of their sort was never a languid process. You had to be quick and careful lest you suffer the terrible consequences. Philip sucked on his fingers before using them to prepare Thomas, gentle and constantly watching Thomas’ face for signs of pain. But Thomas was uplifted by the sensation of sodomy, enraptured entirely so that even the twinges of stretching were wonderful things. He had to stuff a fist in his mouth to keep quiet.

He did not know what moved him more. Being fucked, or being loved.

He supposed the combination is what really did him in.

Philip’s hips were smooth and sweet, unable to thrust like a brute nor power away like a man possessed. Instead, they beat a simple rhythm and Thomas responded in kind.

He accepted what he was given and praised god for it.

Of course, there were more prizes to be won. Suddenly there was orgasmic bliss, not a sharp shock but a rolling weight. With each push it went higher. With each ripple it grew tighter. Philip was lost in it too, the charm of his polished public mask cracking to reveal the boy Thomas loved. Philip was joyous, his face marked in ecstasy. Thomas clung to him, pressing their faces together so that their tongues, lips, teeth, noses, eyelashes collided.

“I love you-“ Philip whispered into his ear. For all the glory of it, it ought to be shouted on the mountains. “I love you, Thomas Barrow.”

He let his tongue lick the outer rim of Philip’s ear, “I love you Philip Prevet.”

And he wondered if anyone else would ever say the same.

Philip came, and Thomas followed him from the sheer feeling alone. The pair of them collapsed onto the soaking bed beneath them, sweat staining their outline in the satin sheets. For a moment, the pair of them were simply silent. This was the moments that Philip and Thomas both loved the best. Moments where they were aloud to be quiet, and still.

But Philip was an actor, and Thomas a thinker. Neither of them could remain for long.

Philip was the first to sit up, and when he did so he moved first to fetch and drain his half-finished whiskey. Thomas was the one to lay silent if only for a few moments longer, watching on his side as Philip plucked his housecoat up from the floor by his toes. It was the sort of thing you’d never catch a duke doing during the day, but Thomas relished it. Philip’s bird was sunken now, deflating back to its usual size with a lack of blood rush… but a soft gleam encapsulated the skin. It was the sweat, spit, and semen of their encounter.

Philip tied the waistband of his housecoat, hiding him handsome penis from view. He turned, and gave Thomas a tiny if beloved smile.

“You ought to get back to your bed, or your butler will scold.” Philip whispered. He drew to Thomas side, and gently helped him to sit up, both peppering his hair with kisses and stroking the skin of his temples.
Thomas did not fight nor comment as he redressed. Suddenly their roles were swapped, with Thomas now being valeted by Philip who handed him each article of clothing with care. As Thomas finished buttoning his simple iron cufflinks, effectively hiding his flannel wraps from view, Philip had a moment of reproach and fetched the pearl cufflinks from his own valise. They had a baroque feel to them, on fine gold chains adorned with bars at the end. Each tip was studded with a tiny pearl, no inch of the cufflink to be hidden from wealth.

Philip reached out, and put them into Thomas’ breast pocket. Thomas looked down, surprised. Was Philip giving them to him? It was an incredibly generous gift, and one he wasn’t sure he deserved.

“…My little pearl.” Philip praised, leaning in to capture Thomas’ mouth in a kiss again. His tongue tasted of whiskey; his love got Thomas drunk. “Keep it. A remembrance of me, and our times together. Please, I beg of you, never harm yourself again and remember that I will always love you.”

In a parting act, symbolizing the end of their union, Philip went to the door and unlocked it, quietly opening it a bit so that a tiny seam of darkness spilled upon the smoldering carpeted floor. The fire did battle with the shadows, cut sharply by a knife made of polished oak and brass.

“Thank you.” Thomas whispered, but though the gift was divine and far above his station, Thomas’ thoughts were consumed with his letters. He had to have them back. “Philip. I… I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.” Philip murmured, a hand casually stroking through Thomas’ hair.

Thomas met his eyes, unafraid. Now was the moment for courage if ever.

“…Our letters.” Thomas said. Philip grew pensive with the subject, “I need those letters back. I know that’s why you went to my room earlier, and I understand what you must think… but I’m no threat to you, Philip. Those letters are far more precious to me than any pearl, any moment of physical affection. They’re more than ink and paper, they’re the embodiment of our love.”

Philip was pained. He dropped his hand and turned away, eyes back on the fireplace which was still burning though it was low in the grate.

“….. I’m afraid I can’t, Thomas.” He whispered.

“I understand your fears, Philip.” Thomas begged. He kept his voice low, afraid even now of being overheard, but he would not leave until he had those letters back. “But you need not think of me in such a poor light. I merely wish to have some memory of being cared for. It’s uncommon for me, you see, and I’m sure you must understand the feeling?”

“It’s not you I fear, sweetheart.” Philip turned, eyes full of sorrow. He finished off his whiskey at long last, setting the crystal goblet down to carefully pour another one. The sound of liquid hitting glass filled the silence for a moment. “It’s the rest of the world. I have to be smart, and think about who else might find them in the end. We can’t have our futures taken away because of someone else’s greed and cruelty. I have to protect you, Thomas. Even from yourself.”

He reached out and took Thomas’ wrists in hand. His touch, his words, were ominous.

“I will keep them safe, Philip!” Thomas begged. In a moment of desperation, he reached out and touched Philip’s face, pressing their noses together. “As safe as a babe to my breast. But please, I beg of you, have some pity on me—?”

Philip held him tenderly for a moment, their noses sliding together. As they kissed again, Thomas silently prayed with each peck of his lips that Philip would be enough to spare him the fate of losing
But only Philip’s left hand was upon him. His right was going for a small chest of personal drawers that sat atop the chest at the end of the footboard. Thomas knew what he would withdraw, and so when their kiss broke Thomas did not feel fear at the sight of the letters. He only longed to hold them. To keep them safe against his breast.

Philip held them up between the pair of them. There was no coldness in his eyes, but a hardness was forming the feared Thomas greatly.

“I’m so sorry, Thomas.” Philip whispered. “But I would rather protect you with pain, than allow you to suffer the fate of Gaol or worse.”

“No, please—“ Philip turned, Thomas went with him but was held back, “No-!”

Philip tossed the entire packet to the flames. They were instantly eaten by the heat, turning from beige to black. Along with the pages went the letters, and Thomas’ only memory of love.

“NO-!!”

He scrambled, rolling about Philip’s frame to try and run for the hearth. Philip caught him about the waist, held him tight, and the pair of them crumbled to the ground. There Thomas sat upon Philip’s lap, squirming desperately to get loose. When he failed, he only fell back in misery, Philip’s hand over his mouth to hide the whimpers that he uttered. Everything was to hide, to keep the facade. To hold back everyone from seeing that Thomas and Philip were different sort of men.

“I know… I know…” Philip was not without empathy for the pain that Thomas felt, “But try to understanding, my darling. The world is unking—“

But Thomas already knew that. The world was burning his letters and binding his wrists with wire. He collapsed against Philip, wishing to god that he could wail aloud. Philip held him close, hiding his face so that Thomas could shake against his chest and not be too loudly heard.

“Please…” Thomas felt like such a fool, “Don’t do this to me.”

Philip was unable to turn back the hands of time. Even Thomas, traveler though he was, knew full well a third chance at his letters would not come again. They were gone, well and truly gone, and there was no point in pretending otherwise.

“…I love you so.” Philip rocked him gently, but even his kindness could not spare Thomas the pain he now felt. “But this just can’t be. You know this just can’t be.”

Of course he’d known.
He’d always known.
But that didn’t make this hurt any less.

Outside the bedroom, enshrouded in darkness from the gallery floor, another man likewise knew the root of Thomas’ pain, and why it could not be avoided. He watched, shocked at the display of two men wound together, one crying like a child and the other rocking him like a woman. He leant
carefully upon his cane, lest he grow unbalanced and alert the others to his presence.

John Bates’ fist clenched in empathy for Thomas Barrow’s plight.
And not without reason.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to comment.
The Grizzly Bear

Chapter Summary

Matthew Crawley's arrival at Downton Abbey sets the downstairs in a tizzy. Meanwhile, Bates reveals a secret, and O'Brien makes a mistake.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

So I've officially opened myself up for commissions. I desperately need help paying for grad school, and I am now selling my writing talents. Check out my tumblr post to see my rates, and what I'm open for. Please guys. I seriously have 0 fucking money, and I need help.

Anyways, carrying on. This chapter there aren't any warnings besides O'Brien stepping in a pile of shit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Philip’s parting left Thomas sunken in on himself, but he did not have long to mope on his own. The house was shifting, trying to keep up, and even as Thomas bitterly closed the chapter on the only love affair he would ever know, another love affair began to form.

Matthew Crawley’s arrival in the house was far from unexpected, but it still took Thomas by surprise. Matthew was young and whole, untroubled by Mary or by the estate just yet. Instead, he had a bizarre air of indifference about him, far from haughty but still irritated at all their pomp and circumstances. When Thomas and William opened the front doors so that Matthew and Mrs. Crawley could see the interior of the entrance hall, Matthew stopped dead. The line of servants unnerved him, and the family lined up on the left made him clearly nervous.

All through the wild display, Thomas kept his servant’s blank firmly attached.

Downstairs, the arrival of a new heir was like the slam of a vibrant headline in London’s biggest newspapers. Every maid, every hall boy, wanted to gossip on the subject. As footmen, Thomas and William were subject to the biggest interrogations. It was they that viewed each proceeding, whether they were waiting tea or holding a door. It was they that therefore knew the extent of Matthew Crawley’s personality, and in particular his spat with Lady Mary.

And boy. Was it ridiculous.

Thomas could see now, with insight into the future, that Lady Mary was already slightly smitten with Matthew. He didn’t bend over to kiss her arse, nor did he pretend to be someone else just to suit her idea of a gentleman better. He wasn’t limp-wristed, but he wasn’t determined to prove himself. He simply was, flat out and simple, and even if Lady Mary didn’t know it now she would appreciate that fact later.
It was a soft July afternoon, and Thomas sat downstairs enjoying a cup of tea. He was starting to truly settle back into his life, although he still felt terribly displaced. It was with the weight of the world upon his shoulders that Thomas went through his daily motions. He began to wonder if his former life, his true life, had been nothing more than a horrid vivid dream. But Thomas knew better… he was reminded each time he took off his flannel wraps to observe his wired wrists. No matter how much time past the wounds did not heal. They still looked as raw and ugly as the day that Thomas had arrived in the past; Thomas had to wondered if they would always be this way.

Thomas had had to bend over backwards to get the others to stop glaring at him, particularly William and Gwen. Now that he was aware of others in the house, he was shocked to find initially just how much people disliked him. Mrs. Hughes in particular was still wary of him but Thomas tried to not let it hurt his feelings too much. He knew that in time, Mrs. Hughes would grow to care for him. She just needed to see that his change of character was genuine, just as she’d done in 1919. Thomas knew it was possible, because it had happened the first time, so he didn’t worry about it so much. Mr. Carson, on the other hand, still obviously disliked Thomas and preferred William more. Though Thomas had never wanted to admit it before, it genuinely hurt his feelings and made him feel pathetically small. Carson had a way of cutting him to the bone, even if he didn’t know it, and Thomas’ nerves were too raw and exposed to hide the pain anymore. Every time Carson snapped at him, or picked apart something Thomas had worked incredibly hard on, he often had to take a moment to himself to recompose. He wondered if anyone else could see the pain he was obviously in, or if they were still blind. Most of the house worshiped Carson, and it wasn’t that Thomas couldn’t see the virtues in the man… it was just that Thomas didn’t like to be treated like scum. Carson had clearly made up his mind long ago that Thomas wasn’t worth the trouble. Maybe even this time around, Carson would never like him. The idea made Thomas’ enthusiasm wilt.

The good news was that Thomas was solidly in Bates’ good books, and in Anna’s. Gwen and William were still warming to him but at least they weren’t trying to eat him alive anymore. Instead, they merely watched him, wary for any slip up in his character. They weren’t the only ones either… after several months of being without a smoking and scheming partner, O’Brien was sour with him on every subject. She glared, she huffed, and she snapped; for it all Thomas did not bait her to anger. He tried to approach her as Anna might, being calm and kind but drawing a firm line in the sand. He would never trust the woman again… and was already mentally preparing for the moment when she would finally bare her teeth.

“So what do you think they’re like?” Daisy wondered, scooting about the table with a fresh pot of tea to refill everyone’s half-empty cups. Bates sat next to Thomas, reading the paper; across the table, Anna and Gwen sat hip to hip. Where Anna worked on the lace collar of a frock for Lady Mary, Gwen sat reading a book. William was eating fresh scones, as he always did when tea time came around. He seemed to have a fetish for them, usually hogging a plate all to himself.

“I shouldn’t think much.” O’Brien grumbled. She was organizing her button box, carefully sorting different types of half finished thread spools by their consistency and count. “She hasn’t even got a lady’s maid.”

“It’s not a capital offense.” Anna shrugged.

“She’s got a maid; her name’s Ellen.” Bates offered, “She came a day early.”

“She’s not a lady’s maid.” The subject was a sore one for O’Brien, who often felt like her job was subject to ritual humiliation. “She’s just a housemaid that fastens hooks and buttons when she has to!”

But this was clearly a jab at Anna, who was in the exact same situation.
“It’s important to learn the steps of the job, though. Every skill is learned somewhere.” Thomas offered gently, taking a slow sip of tea. “Every footman was once a hall boy—“

“And a few might be hall boy’s again.” O’Brien sneered at him again. Thomas did not comment on the insult, instead keeping his eyes focused on how Anna darned the lace. She worked quick, the tips of her fingers slightly red from the abuse.

“We’ll want some very precise reporting when dinner’s over.” Anna caught Williams’ eyes with a gentle smile. William looked to Thomas.

“That’s rather your role, isn’t it?” William joked.

“I’ll do my best.” Thomas said with a small smile.

“Are we to treat him as the new heir though?” William wondered. “Has it really been settled?”

“A doctor’s son from Manchester? He’ll be lucky if he gets a civil word out of me.”

“We’re all lucky if we get a civil word out of you.” Anna said, and by god if it wasn’t the damn truth.

Bates had grown tired of the complaining. He looked to Thomas, giving him a small smile. “I was wondering if you might show me the attic today, unless you’re not in the mood?”

They had time, and Thomas surmised that it was a good idea to show Bates before the next trip up to London. He nodded, setting his teacup aside.

“Certainly.” He agreed, “I’ve been needing to do that for a while now. I apologize, I shouldn’t have put you off.”

“Can I go with you?” Thomas was surprised to find Gwen speaking up. Even now, she still did not enjoy his company and certainly never made to initiate conversation. This was a returned gesture, for Thomas still did not enjoy Gwen very much. There was something about her which horribly annoyed him, though he desperately tried to hide it now.

“Only….” Gwen looked terribly uncomfortable, “I have to fetch a pillow for Lady Sybil’s room that she wants and I hate goin’ up there alone.”


“That’s not what I meant!” Gwen was hot under the collar. Thomas briefly wondered if she was, in fact, scared of specters.

“Certainly.” Thomas said again. This time he tried for a wider smile, though he feared it was less genuine, “Anna do you need anything?”

Anna sat down her darning, pondering it all, “Not that I can think of. Lord only knows what you’ll find up there.”

“I’m eager to see your chair.” Bates said. There was a gentle smirk toying at his lips.

“Chair?” Anna asked. She was confused, not privy to the private conversation.

“Thomas has a chair he’s coveting.” Bates explained. Everyone turned to Thomas for an explanation, even O’Brien.
“It’s the floral one, the wingback.” Thomas “It used to sit in the parlor before it got burned by the fireplace. I’ve always like it… save for the print.”

“Wait-“ William cut across, “the one with a hole in the seat?”

Thomas nodded, “Well I like the way the chair looks; the frame of it if you will. I thought Mr. Carson wouldn’t mind if I took it and put it in my room seeing as it isn’t going to be used for the family ever again.”

“He’ll mind if I tell him.” O’Brien growled in warning. Thomas pursed his lips, refusing to rise for the bait.

“…You’re right, Ms. O’Brien.” Thomas smiled at her; she glared in response, “It’s wrong of me to think of taking something without asking. I’ll speak with him first.”

“You can try and pull the wool over their eyes, but you’re not fooling me.” O’Brien snapped. “I know what you are, and I’ll never trust you again.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the table. Thomas bowed his head, choosing his words very carefully lest they start a war.

“… I apologize if I’ve hurt you.” Thomas murmured, “But please allow me to do the right thing, Ms. O’Brien. I want to live my life better. It’s no offense against you—“

O’Brien wouldn’t hear another word of it. She jerked up, snatching up her button box and shoving all her delicately ordered thread inside so that her work was spoilt. She left without another word, a dark whirl of black fabric around the corner that vanished out of sight and into the gloom. As the tension slowly lifted, Thomas found himself feeling more exhausted than ever, but at least he wasn’t being glared at… that was something, right?

In the end, Thomas went upstairs with both Bates, Gwen, and Anna. The four of them scaled the stairs near the end of tea time, taking the curling attic route only to scale yet another flight of stairs which were normally kept under lock and key lest for special occasions. Mrs. Hughes had offered Anna the key (not Thomas) and was only allowing Thomas to go into the attic with Mr. Bates if Anna went with them. It was a show of her lack of faith, but Thomas tried to remember that it was all with good reason. Soon, Mrs. Hughes would see him for as he truly was. He needed to be patient, and remember that everyone healed at their own time.

The way to the attic was a steep one, and Thomas was wary of Bates tripping with his cane. These stairs were steeper, and less cared for. Mercifully, it was a straight shot upward, no matter how great the steps were; to the left of the stairs was a smooth ramp that was often used to transport some of the larger items that could not be easily carried. The ceiling above them was vaulted and high; they could easily carry an entire moving wardrobe if need be without fear of striking the top on the ceiling.

“So this is the way to the attics, Mr. Bates.” Thomas explained, “Please be careful, these stairs are slightly steeper than what we’re used to normally. I think this part of the house is un-renovated. You’ll notice the slide ramp for the heavier furniture. I used to use it for the valises. I shouldn’t have, but sometimes they can get horribly heavy.”

“I do it too.” Anna teased. “It’s quite fun to slide on as well.”
“Don’t let O’Brien hear or she’ll report you to Carson.” Bates teased back. Anna couldn’t help but laugh.

“A slide might do her well.”

“Why is she so angry all the time?” Gwen wondered. There was a nervous edge to her voice; the attics had very few windows and all of them were barred. As a result, they were surrounded in gloom and had to use a candle to see the way forward. Thomas was the first in line, followed by Bates. Anna and Gwen brought up the rear; Thomas pretended not to notice Gwen holding Anna’s hand nervously.

“Some people are just born that way.” Anna said, squeezing Gwen’s hand comfortably.

“Well, I’ll say as someone that used to have her ear that her life hasn’t been kind to her.” Thomas offered. “She’s unhappy, and I suppose she doesn’t know how to deal with it. I have no excuses to offer either. My life didn’t start out well, but I didn’t make it any better by being unkind at first… and I apologize for it.”

“So why are you turnin’ coin now and bein’ all nice like?” Gwen asked, suspicious.

“I realized that I was going about my life the wrong way. I wanted to change.” He paused, looking over his shoulder. As a result, everyone had to stop, “And I’m sorry, Gwen. Truly, for everything.”

“If you’re sorry you should apologize to William.” Gwen said. There was a stubborn gleam in her eyes. Little did she know that Thomas wouldn’t put up a fight.

“I will.” Thomas said. “and what’s more… I’ll speak to Daisy too.”

Gwen was taken aback, stunned for a moment into silence as Thomas continued up the stairs. They reached the top to find the attic completely in gloom. July was a hot month even in England, and as a result the air was stifling. Anna had to take off her cap, dabbing at her pale neck daintily where sweat was beginning to bead. Even Mr. Bates had to pull at the stiff starch of his collar. Thomas, who was always slightly chilly, felt oddly comfortable in the muggy air.

“My god, what did that fever do to you?” Gwen wondered. Thomas found several unlit candles waiting at the top of the stairs, clearly from servant’s past who had left them to light the way for the next passers up. Thomas lit the wicks with his own candle, and offered them to Anna and Gwen so that they might not be in the gloom at the back of the line. With more wicks lit, the attic came into focus. Piles of furniture, trapped beneath canvas sheets, held dominating figures casting ugly shadows against the pealing and rotting walls. There was a smell of mold in the air, and a scary sensation of being watched. It didn’t help that a few mirrors were open to the air, so that as you passed a ghostly figured glided across the surface holding a candle in the gloom.

“I think it’s a nice change.” Anna said reproachfully. “Now go find your pillow.”

“I think it’s a split personality.” Gwen said in an ugly mutter beneath her breath.

“The pirates hoard.” Bates murmured, walking up to a random pile in particular to pull its sheet away. With a flutter of canvas, an ancient billiard table was revealed. God only knows how long it had been up here. Bates picked up a lone pool cue, laying across the top of the green velvet, and admired it in the light of Thomas’ candle. “Care for a game?”

“While I would, I don’t think we have time.” Thomas said. To be fair, he loved all sorts of games. Cards, chess, billiards, darts… there wasn’t a sporting event he didn’t enjoy.
Bates began to cough; the dust from the disturbed canvas was clearly getting to him.

“Hold on, and I’ll open a window.” Thomas promised. He threaded his way over to the walls, searching in the dark for a window that he might be able to open. Carson had nailed two of them shut after a wren had gotten in and tried to nest in an old vanity drawer. When Thomas finally found a window he could unlatch, he hastily undid the wooden lock and pushed open the slats so that fine bright light streamed into the attic. It revealed whole plumes of dust swirling through the air; Thomas extinguished his candle, setting it upon the window ledge to open one more window that wasn’t nailed down. Gwen had found her pillow, a beautiful purple thing with a frilly flower center.

“Where’s your chair?” Bates asked, coughing again. He waved a hand in front of his face, trying to dispel the dust that attached to his clothes and hair. Thomas had to thread back into the thick of the furniture, searching in the center for where he was certain the chair would be. Originally, it had always hid behind a set of side tables that had come from the same room, likewise dried out from being too close to the fire. Thomas was glad to find that the chair hadn’t strayed from its original spot, and pulled the tarp off with a flourish to reveal the wingback to the others.

“That’s ghastly!” Gwen scoffed. But she just couldn’t see what Thomas could, for while the print was disgustingly antique with tiny peonies and tulips, the mahogany knobs of the wingback were still in good condition. The top of the seat cushion was charred black, from where a stray ember had gotten loose. As a result a whole spot had been eaten away, and had resulted in the chair being banished to the attic for at least thirty years.

“It’s the shape that I like.” Thomas explained, flipping the seat cushion so that the ugly black spot was hidden. He sat down, happy to get off his feet for a moment, and crossed his legs like a king on his throne, smirking at the others. “See? It’s just fine.”

But then a mouse, squeaking at the sudden pressure, popped out from beneath the upturned seat cushion, and crawled onto Thomas’ trouser leg.

Thomas let out a cry of shock, as did Gwen and Anna. He leapt up, staggering away, resulting in the mouse falling and skirting off before it could be found and caught. Though it had not been his intention originally, Thomas found himself against Bates, who for whatever reason, allowed Thomas to hide in his frame as he caught his breath. He heart was hammering in his ribs—!

But then Anna was laughing, and Gwen was just the same, the pair of them cackling like hens in a barn at Thomas’ upset.

Thomas’ cheeks flushed with spots of hot pink, horribly embarrassed at his sour turn of fortune. At least Bates didn’t laugh at him, though there was an obvious smile on his lips.

“I’m sorry-!” Gwen gasped for breath, tears in the corners of her almond eyes, “but that’s hysterical!”

“I think— I think I might cry—!” Anna was likewise winded. The pair of them clutched at each other, giggling feverishly. Thomas straightened his trouser leg, still blushing, and gave them all an ugly glare. Damnit, and here he was trying to be sociable!

“Oh all right-!” He spat, having to reel in his mouth at the last minute before he did damage to his newly budding relationships. “I suppose that’s my just deserts.”

Anna eventually calmed down, and Gwen finally settled with her. The pair of them had to wipe their eyes, and so they were not privy to how Thomas looked up at Bates, noticing their close proximity and the way that Bates had put a hand on Thomas’ opposite hip. Bates let go and Thomas stepped back, his heart suddenly racing for yet another reason.
Was that normal? Was that natural? Had he done that or had Bates?
But Bates didn’t look bothered; he just gave Thomas a small smile. Thomas returned it, coughing to
steady his still hammering heart.

“Where did that mouse go?” Anna wondered.

“The cat will get it.” Gwen said, but Thomas doubted Mr. Carson would allow the barn cat into the
attic with precious fabrics and antique furniture.

“My chair…” Thomas groaned, for now it was utterly spoiled for him. How could he have it in his
room without worrying it still had a mouse inside? He reached out, stroking the top lovingly.

“You can do better than that.” Bates teased. He walked about the attic, before pulling off another tarp
to reveal a dark purple fainting couch that was surely as old as the Dowager Countess. He sat down
upon it, the springs singing loudly at the sudden intrusion, and relaxed against the gnarled arm. He
looked terribly smug in that moment, if not a handsome. Thomas kept those thoughts to himself
though, certain that nothing good would come of them.

“This is a chair.” Bates decided.

“That is a fainting couch.” Thomas said with a light sneer, but this time he smiled warmly so that
they all ended up snickering.

“Let that mouse come back over here, you’ll put it to the test.” Bates teased.

“Oh alright! Leave me alone.” Thomas groaned, turning away to find his way over to Lord
Grantham’s cedar chests. He undid the clasps, pulling open the two top drawers to find Lord
Grantham’s silk stockings which were only to be used during the finest of balls.

He waved an irritable hand to the drawers, stepping aside as Bates drew close.

“So this is it!” Thomas huffed, folding his arms over his chest.

“Anything I should know?” Bates asked. Thomas rifled through the top drawer, showing Bates all
the silk stockings that were kept underneath the lavender papers.

“These are only for balls.” He then opened the next drawer down to be shown stiff red velvet. “And
this is his regiment uniform.”

Bates pulled it out with one hand, observing a few moth spots, “It needs mending.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Thomas said, “But honestly, I think you can relax—“

But could he? It was 1912. Come July of 1914, there would be a war on and the royal regiment
would have to look its best.

“…Then again, who knows the future. But here’s where you’ll find it if you need it.” Thomas
muttered, looking away.

Determined not to get involved with the thought of the war (and what would surely happen in the
end) Instead, he fished around the side of the wardrobe and found wrapped leather hiding Lord
Grantham’s regiment sword. He pulled it out, undid the thong, and revealed Lord Grantham’s sword
to the light. It would have to be polished, and with care lest someone cut their hand.

“And the sword!” Thomas declared with pride, showing it off in the light.
He pointed it at Bates, grinning, “Engarde!”

Bates played the game, letting Lord Grantham’s red coat lay over the top of the bureau to grab at the sword. Thomas jumped back, unable to keep from giggling as he danced around Bates.

“Hands up!” Thomas warned, “Or I’ll slice and dice you!”

Bates tentatively raised his cane, so that suddenly the pair of them were crossing ‘blades’. Thomas tried to smack the cane away with the sword, but Bates responded with great strength, whacking Thomas’ sword down to stumble forward and try to grab him about the waist. As a result, the sword waggled in the air for a moment till Thomas’ hand was pinned at his side.

“Careful!” Anna teased, grinning as she watching Bates and Thomas scuffle for the sword, “Or you’ll hurt yourselves.”

“Is it real?” Gwen wondered.

But before Thomas could respond with a ‘yes’, they were interrupted but a sudden terse cough that made them all look around.

O’Brien stood at the top of the attic stairs, glaring at them. At once, Bates let Thomas go. Thomas quickly re-wrapped the sword, setting it back beside the bureau so that it could be hidden in the shadows once more.

Thomas was quite familiar with the ugly silence swallowing them all up. For years, it had followed every room he’d entered. Now it seemed that O’Brien was to bear his shame instead. For all the tension it left them with, O’Brien didn’t seem to mind. But Thomas knew better, and wondered if she too had spent evenings crying herself to sleep. It made acid bubble in his throat, but Thomas just didn’t know how to do any better. How could he save O’Brien when she simply didn’t want to be saved in the first place?

“Cozy?” O’Brien sneered.

“Ms. O’Brien—” Thomas straightened the bottom of his waistcoat so that there wasn’t a crease in his livery. “How can I help you?”

“Mr. Carson is looking for you.” She said. “Shall I tell him you’re dallying with the maids? I’m sure he’ll be understanding after the other day with the Duke.”

“Funny thing to mention when you started it.” Bates warned, but O’Brien brushed him off like a fly.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to. Are you always this delusional? Must be tough, to climb the stairs with a cane in the heat—”

“Please—” Thomas tried to cut her off, but she refused to have even the tiniest bit of sympathy flung her way.

“Don’t you start!” Her eyes flashed with fire, “I’m not a dog that comes when you call!”

“I’m not saying you are, but this isn’t who you are and you know it!” Thomas protested, thinking of all the times that the pair of them had shared an emotional talk over a cigarette. Where was that emotional warmth now? “What about all the times that you spoke to me about your family, about your—”

“You know nothing’ about me!”
There was such charge, such fury in her voice that Thomas was stopped cold in fear. He hung back, withdrawing lest O’Brien melt his extremities. The blazing look she gave him, the vein throbbing in her temple, all of it assured Thomas his next words would be his last.

“I never shared anything with you, y’hear me? Anything!” She spat the word like it was some kind of insult. Thomas said nothing, keeping his eyes averted. “And if I ever hear you say anything to the contrary… I’ll have your head for it. Remember, I know your secrets. And I’m not afraid of sharin’ them either. Maybe I should start with the police?”

And with that, she turned on her heel to dismount the attic stairs. In her wake, Thomas was left with a terrible, cold feeling of dread.

He’d forgotten in all his candor to be valid and genuine, that the only reason why he’d been able to prevent O’Brien from ruining him was because he’d known an equally disgusting secret of hers. Child murder and sodomy ranked right up alongside one another in the laws of the public… but Lady Grantham wasn’t pregnant yet, and so far O’Brien had no made a mistake.

Thomas shuddered, feeling violently queazy, and sat down beside the bureau to steady himself.

“What sort of secret does she have on you?” Gwen wondered. “What have you done that the police would need to know about? You’re not a criminal are you?”

“Excuse me—” Thomas mumbled. He rose on shaky legs, and pushed past Bates who tried to grab at his elbow. He fled the attic like a man possessed, momentarily considering in his fear the prospect of running to O’Brien and begging her for mercy.

But O’Brien didn’t know the definition of mercy, and even if she did Thomas doubted she would bestow it upon him.

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Lady Mary was in a bitter mood about Matthew Crawley, which in turn meant that Carson was inevitably angry in her stead. He didn’t like that Matthew had won out over the entail, and was keen for everyone to know it though he never strictly said ‘damn you Matthew Crawley’. Instead, he barked orders, stomped down the halls, and generally made a nuisance of himself. Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore were the only ones who could deal with his temper. The rest of the staff just had to run and cower, but unfortunately Thomas and William were at Carson’s beck and call. Hiding spots were few and far between. The last time, Thomas had been eager to skulk off into the servant’s area for a smoke, or had left William alone point blank to shoulder all the work, hating the job of being first footman. Now, Thomas didn’t have that leisure, so he was constantly polishing, fetching, carrying, and cleaning while Carson snarled about how he was a general waste of space. William was ready to cry after the third day. Thomas, used to the abuse, just shouldered it all and carried on.

Matthew was having a difficult time over dinners, simply because Lady Mary wouldn’t let him off easy. The jab about the sea monster was just the start; it seemed that everything Matthew did, Lady Mary didn’t like. What was more, Mrs. Crawley and the Dowager were at each other’s throats. The Dowager was of a different generation, and so she could word her venom in such a way that it carried on into pleasant conversation. Thomas, being privy to snide insults wrapped in blasé statements, had a hard time keeping a straight face when the Dowager got on her soap box. He would like to say that come 1925 the Dowager had a different mindset but the fact of the matter was she was still an old bird thirteen years into the future. Nothing would change that.
But of course, Thomas could say none of this aloud without sparking the wrath of Carson. If he dared to insult the family, or even just mention they might not be perfect, Carson came down upon him with the wrath of Thor’s hammer, striking him in public and making him feel small. Before, Thomas could fume with O’Brien in private and blow off steam with scheming plots. Now, he had to take it and suffer. There was no relief, no kind backdrop, and Thomas was getting ready to pop. He desperately wished he could pull Carson aside and demand he stop… but that would lead to death, or at least unemployment.

So Thomas took it, and soldiered on.

Midway through a rather illustrious supper, Thomas and William both went back downstairs to pluck up more plates. Lady Mary and Lady Edith were arguing again, this time over a rather boring member of the gentry named Evelyn Napier. Of course, Thomas didn’t have much of an opinion about the man because he really had no personality to base an opinion on… but he couldn’t say that allowed. Instead, he just kept his eyes locked on the opposite wall while Lady Mary grumbled about Lady Edith’s snooping into her diary.

The downstairs kitchen was full of life. Mrs. Patmore was attempting to make a sea bass, broiled in a sweet vegetable stock that put a gentle aroma in the air. It came with a ladder of sauces that William had to carry with both hands; Thomas took the fish, careful not to displace even a drop of vegetable broth.

“I wonder what Mr. Moseley makes of them.” Anna was wondering, relaxing against the kitchen sink. Bates was beside her, taking a cup of tea, and was watching Thomas when he entered the room. O’Brien was likewise taking a cup of tea, but she was standing by herself on the other side of the island and was clutching her teacup unnecessarily tight. The last time that the position for butler had become available at the Crawley house, Thomas had tried to apply for it. This time, he’d let the opportunity pass, knowing Carson would only pass him over in the end. He didn’t want to risk even more humiliation.

“If he’s smart, he’ll run for cover.” O’Brien sulked, “They’re not worth the chairs they sit on.”

As Thomas and William headed back upstairs, they had to be particularly careful about how they transferred the sauces and broths. It was easy to upset a dish, even by a slight off angle, resulting in broth or sauce draining onto one side and causing a mess. They had to keep their paces methodical and slow, while likewise walking fast enough not to get yelled at by Carson. It was enough to make your head dizzy.

“Why does she always have something nasty to say?” William wondered. He wasn’t the only one getting tired of O’Brien’s complaining. Thomas wished he could sew the woman’s mouth shut sometimes. “You’re her friend, you ought to know!”

Thomas shook his head, eyes locked forward as he mounted the stairs, “I’m not her friend, William. I’m an ant under her boot, if even that.”

“Why do you say that? You two always used to skiff off alone.”

“Trust me, it’s not worth getting into.” It wasn’t like Thomas could afford to tell him the whole sorry tale. While Mrs. Hughes might be understanding about his abnormal nature, he was almost certain William would be like Alfred and despise him on base principle. “Let’s get this wrapped up before Mr. Carson loses his mind.”

They reached the main landing, and used a private side entrance into the dining hall to transfer the dishes. Thomas had to change the platters from wood to silver, likewise mopping up a tiny trace of
vegetable broth on the side of his serving dish. William had to pour each of the sauces into silver carriers, leaving Mrs. Patmore’s ceramic ones behind in the larder. As they worked, they kept quiet; the family was only a thin door away.

“But they’re alright, don’t you think?” William whispered as he poured, “The new family, I mean.”

“They are.” Thomas agreed. “Mr. Crawley’s a nice man, and his mother is kind.”

“But what about Lady Mary?” William asked, catching Thomas’ eye.

“I just don’t see the law’s changing.” Thomas shrugged, “but it might not be all that bad. Maybe they’ll hit it off. He could really help Lady Mary to come out of that shell of hers-“

“I beg your pardon, Thomas?” Mr. Carson growled in his ear. Thomas jumped, shocked to find Carson right over his shoulder and glaring down at him from on high.

“…Pardon me, Mr. Carson.” Thomas tried to side step the man to fetch two silver serving spatulas that would decorate the sides of his platter. Mr. Carson did not let him pass, swiveling his rotund belly so that Thomas was effectively pinned against the cupboards. Thomas’ heart began to hammer in his ears, un eager to be scolded again.

“Did I just hear you gossiping about a lady of this house like she were some kind of vaudeville performer?”

“No, Mr. Carson, that’s not what I’m saying at all!” It was difficult to have an argument and whisper at the same time. He was so sick and tired of being taken for the bad man. He hadn’t meant it poorly! “All I’m saying is that Mr. Crawley’s a good man, and Lady Mary might very well find him to her tastes if she just-“

“Whether she will or not is of no concern of yours.” Carson snapped, cutting him off, “And if I hear you speaking about this gain, I’ll dock you behind the ears.”

“Love is not a sin, Mr. Carson.”

Thomas didn’t know why he said it, only that he needed to say it and desperately. Behind Mr. Carson’s back, William was gaping at him in fear of retribution.

Carson ground his teeth, eyes narrowing deeply in displeasure.

“We do not have time to hear your philosophies, Thomas. In case you’ve forgotten, the family wishes to dine. I’m sure his Lordship would be eager to know why his salmon isn’t on time!”

“…Sea bass.” Thomas muttered as Carson snatched up the meat platter and took it onto the dining hall. With a bitter sigh, Thomas plucked up the silver serving spatulas and headed after him, careful to keep the servant’s blank in place.

William finished up the line, sweating all the way.

That night after dinner was served, Thomas, William, Anna, and Gwen cleaned the dining hall and reported downstairs post haste. The sea bass had all but been devoured by the family, so there were no left overs. Instead, they were to eat week old roast, which was starting to turn. Mrs. Patmore had put it into a stew, hoping to cheer up the flavor, and the smells were radiating through out the
Thomas was the last to come down, having to put up the glasses in the desert pantry and re-fetch all of Mrs. Patmore’s serving trays. When he finally made it back downstairs, he found a great deal of the servant body gathered in the hall where Daisy was laying out the plates and William was playing a jaunt on the piano.

Mr. Carson was bowling about the hallways, grumbling at errant maids and ordering the hall boy to fetch more coal for the kitchen fires; he and Thomas reached the door to the servant’s hall at the same time.

“William!” Mr. Carson barked. The piano jaunt stopped at once, with William swiveling about in his seat to clamber to his feet. Everyone stood up straight, chatter dying down at once as Mr. Carson’s bad mood became clear. “Are you aware the seam at your shoulder is coming apart?”

William was chalk white, swallowing around a surely dry tongue to try and get his thoughts together, “I felt it go a bit earlier,” He admitted, “I’ll mend it when we turn in-“

“You will mend it now, and you will never again appear in public in a similar state of undress!” Mr. Carson corrected, furious at William’s minor insubordination. William wilted, lips pursed tight.

“No, Mr. Carson.” He mumbled. It wouldn’t be enough.

“Mr. Carson-“ Thomas tried to interject, only to receive the full brunt of his glare. “William couldn’t have just taken off his jacket in front of the family; I’m sure he would have been happy to mend it earlier but we just didn’t have the time-“

“Not another word out of you Thomas!” Mr. Carson barked at him. Thomas braced himself for the blow to come, but even then it still stung, “I’ve had it up to my chin with your ridiculous behavior-“

“How have I been ridiculous?” Thomas begged, for he was genuinely confused on the matter. “I’m trying to do everything you ask, we all are!” He gestured to the servant’s table at large.

Mr. Carson took a step forward. Automatically, Thomas took a step back, his spine suddenly pressed up against the sill of the dining hall.

“…Do not test me…Thomas. You will not like the results.” Mr. Carson’s voice was deadly calm. Thomas was suddenly terribly afraid, and said nothing. He looked away, certain his face would be white.

“To progress in your chosen career, William, you must remember that a good servant at all times retains a sense of pride and dignity that reflects the pride and dignity of the family he serves… And never make me remind you of it again. Either of you.” He glanced at Thomas as well, eyes narrowed heavily in distaste.

He left the servant’s hall in a morbid quiet, with Thomas still flattened against the doorsill and William cowering by the piano.

Slowly, quietly, people began to unclench. Anna and Gwen looked at one another, eyebrows raised to their hairlines at the implication of the gossip. O’Brien watched it all from the corner, eyes narrowed and locked on Thomas. Mr. Bates seemed slightly disappointed, but said nothing more. Daisy, on the other hand, was so often smacked around that she was the first to rebound and helped William to take off his jacket.

“I’ll do it.” She gave him a sweet smile, “And cheer up! We’ve all had a smack from Mr. Carson.”
“You’ll be the butler yourself one day. Then you’ll to the smacking.” Anna said.

But Thomas knew better; William would die before 1918 was out. Somber, he headed over to an empty chair and collapsed against it. He suddenly felt very cold and weak. It was a terrible thing, to know the future. Thomas often felt like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“I could never be like him.” William lamented, watching as Daisy whipped a small spool of thread and a needle from a side drawer in the dish cupboards. Spare items were often kept around the hall, including old novels, a few combs, candles, and matches. He watched Daisy work, clearly longing for her. “I bet he comes from a line of butlers that goes back to the Conquerer.”

“He learned his business and so will you. Even Mr. Carson wasn’t born standing to attention.” Mr. Bates said.

Thomas watched William, wondering at what a golden youth he was. Why had the war taken William instead of him? Why did the good men always have to die: “You’re a good man William.” Thomas said. Everyone looked around, interested to hear what he would say. William seemed quite surprised, “You do the house proud. Mr. Carson’s just in a grumpy mood.”

“…Thank you Thomas.” William said, “For standing up for me. I’m sorry that you got smacked too.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Thomas gave William a pained smile, drumming his fingers absently upon the table. “I’m used to it… Mr. Carson hates me.”

“What?” Bates spoke up, agog.

“No he doesn’t-“ Gwen tried to say, Thomas shook his head, cutting her off.

“You don’t understand-“ He told them all, unwilling to propagate a lie any further. “Mr. Carson… he likes William because he’s a good man, a golden man, the kind that he thinks exemplifies all that’s good with England. But when he looks at me, all he sees is something that’s different and foul. He hates different, so he hates me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Anna refused to believe a word of it.

“Mr. Carson’s just a man of his generation.” Gwen added.

Thomas caught her eye, holding it carefully. Though Gwen did not know it, Thomas was already aware that she was working to become a secretary… and she would soon be the one Mr. Carson was glowering at.

“Alright,” He said, “Let’s say that you wanted to do something different with your life. Like… be a secretary.” Gwen’s eyes widened automatically. Was it his imagination, or was she growing paler, “Do you think you could tell Mr. Carson, and not get smacked? Do you think he’d treat the idea, treat you, kindly? Do you think he’d understand? Or do you think that he’d be furious, and see you as a thorn in his side?”

Gwen didn’t answer. Anna looked to her old friend, confused at Gwen’s pale expression.

“… I’m sorry-“ Thomas knew he was frightening the girl, and even if he didn’t particularly enjoy her, he shouldn’t be upsetting her, “I’m not trying to upset you. I spoke to Mr. Carson about love, and it didn’t go well-“

“And what do you know about love?” O’Brien sulked from the opposite end of the table. “It’s not
like you have a girl.”

Thomas bristled, and another wave of quiet fell over the table.

“…You’re right.” Thomas whispered into the silence. “I don’t, do I? Excuse me.” He rose up, cracking his neck to relieve some of the tension in his spine.

“I’ve got a headache.” Thomas said, “I’m going to turn in early for the night.”

“But what about dinner?” William asked, “You haven’t even eaten.”

“I’m not hungry. Goodnight, William.” Thomas said. It wasn’t particularly true… but he didn’t think he’d be able to stomach the food anyways. He left the servants hall without another word, and returned to his room.

Thomas undressed, taking his time to lay out his livery so that he could iron before bed. As he redressed for bed, his thoughts were consumed with the question of Charles Carson, often lingering over the long forgotten face of his own father whom Thomas had learned to forget. The man had been cold, callous, and cruel. The two sides of Nathaniel Barrow had often been in juxtaposition with one another. For his wife and daughters, he was a good man. A gentle man. A generous man.

For Thomas, his oldest son, he was nothing short of a menace. Nothing had ever been good enough, and so Thomas had come to the terrible realization that he, in turn, would never be good enough.

And now it seemed the prophecy was fulfilling itself all over… and this time with yet another father figure he couldn’t please.

When a gentle knock came at Thomas’ bedroom door, Thomas almost didn’t answer it. But he felt, all in all, that if it were actually Carson it would be better to simply open the door and accept the blow whatever it was. Hiding from the man would not lessen his anger.

As Thomas opened the door, however, he was shown the curious sight of John Bates with a tray in his one free arm. Upon it there was a plate, full of the rations for dinner, along with a miniature pot of tea and even a vase full of heather. Thomas was shocked at the gesture, for he’d never been treated so kindly before by a friend.

“You didn’t have to do this!” Thomas said, amazed. He wrapped his housecoat a little tighter about his body, embarrassed to be in his pajamas before the man. Bates just gave him a grin.

“I wanted to.” He said. Eager to get the burden out of Bates’ hands, Thomas took the tray from him. But even as he opened his mouth to say ‘thank you and goodnight’, Bates spoke again, “May I come in?”

Thomas looked over his shoulder at his bedroom. It was rather untidy, unfortunately, but that was just the way things were. Thomas seldom had time to straighten his belongings between running errands for everyone else in the house.

“If you like.” Thomas stepped aside, allowing Bates entry, and carefully sat his tray atop his desk. Thomas had been compiling scraps of paper, trying to write down every wrong that he’d committed in his past so that he could right it this time around. Frightened of Bates seeing the scraps and asking questions, Thomas hastily scooped them all up and put them inside his desk drawer. It would get the scraps out of order, but Thomas didn’t care. What mattered was that Bates did not see.
Bates gently closed Thomas’ bedroom door, taking Thomas’ desk chair and sitting down. Thomas made to pour tea, his footman flair coming to his own aid. He was surprised to find a dollop of honey in the bottom of his tea cup, not to mention the lemon wedge on the side of his saucer. It seemed that Bates had realized how he took his tea. But that didn’t mean he had to cater to Thomas’ needs.

“…This was kind of you.” Thomas said, gesturing to the lemon wedge and the teacup as he garnished his drink.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, actually.” Bates explained, “And I wanted to do it with privacy.”

“What about?” Thomas asked, perching on the side of his bed and taking a sip of tea. It was nectar, and he exhaled for a moment, closing his eyes to soak in the steam radiating out of his cup.

“You might want to put down your teacup first.” Bates advised. Thomas opened his eyes again, catching Bates’ gaze and finding it worrisome. It seemed some awful burden had been laid upon the man’s shoulders, but he would find Thomas a steady sailor. After traveling thirteen years back in time, there was seldom anything which shook him up anymore.

“… You flatter me.” Thomas smiled; he did not make to set down his teacup. “But I’m a steady sailor.”

Bates did not blink, nor look away. He kept Thomas’ gaze and held it as he spoke.

“…I know about Phillip.”

Ah.

Thomas had never spoken about Philip, not even to O’Brien. He’d hinted that there were affairs, men he’d loved from high places, but he’d never once said Philip’s name. Thomas had to therefore surmise that the only way Bates could have found out about Philip was through snooping. He might have heard through the door, but the question was, what had he heard?

“…I see.” Thomas reached out and set his teacup on his bedside table. He laced his fingers together, bracing his elbows on his knees, and bowed his head. What would happen now?

“Before you panic,” Bates said, “You should know you have nothing to fear from me. But I know that he’s the reason why you’ve been upset, why O’Brien said she could go to the police, and I know that you’re hurt deeply. I’m sorry. You don’t deserve any of this.”

But whether or not Thomas deserved it wasn’t up for questioning. The fact of the matter was that his life was to be a dark one, bound by a set of rules and principles that governed the land of England (and indeed the world). Thomas could not change this, Bates could not change this… no one could change this. So it didn’t matter if Thomas deserved it or if Thomas was hurting.

It was the way the world worked.

Thomas rose up from bed, turning away. With arms barred before his chests, Thomas leaned upon the wall so that Bates could not see his face.

“…How did you find out?” He asked softly. Perhaps, with his answer, Bates could inadvertently explain what he’d seen. He refused to let on more than Bates admitted to. Par example, if Bates did not admit he’d seen Thomas and Philip having sex, Thomas wasn’t going to tell him as such.

“I was dressing his Lordship.” Bates began, “He asked for a cup of tea after I’d finished, so I brought
one to him and when I left I came along the corridor and found the door to the Duke’s room slightly open. I observed you two kissing, him tossing the letters into the grate… I heard him call you darling, and say that he loved you.”

Thomas said nothing, well aware of where Bates must have been able to get a view in. Bates had not seen them have sex, and hopefully hadn’t heard it either.

“You have nothing to fear from me.”

“I know.” Thomas cut him off. That had never been up for dispute. Bates knew what he’d done in 1919… and he’d not been peculiar about it. If anything he’d seemed annoyed about Jimmy, and Thomas had always wondered why.

“A man of a different caliber would have gone to Mr. Carson instead of speaking with me.” Thomas said, thinking of Alfred who hadn’t hesitated to squeal. “You’re a good man, Mr. Bates. A man of honor, and kindness…” Thomas looked away again, leaning even more against the wall, “I don’t deserve it.”

But instead of following up with something martyr like, Bates hesitantly encroached upon Thomas’ personal space to carefully reach out and put a hand on his shoulder. Thomas bristled.

The only time that Bates had ever touched him, had been when he’d slammed Thomas into the attic wall after taunting William over Daisy. Besides that, the pair of them hadn’t so much as brushed shoulders while walking past. They’d existed in two totally different orbits, resulting in Thomas feeling like they inhabited opposite sides of the solar system. Now, with Bates so close that Thomas could smell his aftershave, he was steamrolled by the fact that they did in fact inhabit the same house and could touch if only applied in the right direction. It made his stomach twist, but with what emotion Thomas couldn’t say. He lacked the clarity, as of yet… maybe he’d gain it in time?

“To burn those letters when you begged him not to…. He doesn’t deserve you.”

Thomas sighed, unable to keep his irritation in. Bates just didn’t understand how men like them worked. “He was trying to keep me safe-“ Thomas was cut off by Bates, who refused to sway.

“He didn’t have to destroy you to do so.”

Maybe, maybe not. But they’d never know would they?

Bates’ hand was still upon his shoulder. Thomas turned, allowing Bates’ hand to fall so that the pair of them were face to face. Bates seemed to be wrestling with some personal will of words; Thomas had to wonder what was going on his mind.

He’d never had a man stand so close to him and not kiss him. It was a completely new experience.

“…When I was a younger man…” Bates began, “I knew the siren’s song of bad habits. I did things I shouldn’t have, with people I shouldn’t have.”

Oh my god, Thomas thought, his mind spinning in circles. Is he saying what I think he’s saying?

But Thomas refused to jump to conclusions, particularly when it could get men like him killed. “What are you trying to say, Mr. Bates?”

Bates pursed his lips, “I’m trying to say you’re not alone.”

Oh my god, Thomas was ready to scream. Was Bates a hidden homosexual? It didn’t seem possible!
The very same man who’d married Anna and strutted about the …

Strutted about the attics half naked, oh dear god!!

“I’m not like you,” Bates continued on, at the sudden wicked smile that was coming across Thomas’ face. “Not entirely.”


“A secret for a secret.” Bates said, and in that moment Thomas was so smug he might have done a jig. By god, he’d never imagined such a tale! Now Thomas rethinking every interaction the pair of them had endured. Suddenly Bates’ irritation at Jimmy made a whole lot more sense.

What if Bates had been annoyed because he’d been a bit like Thomas?

“You must have realized,” Thomas concluded, “what I mean tonight, about Mr. Carson?”

“He doesn’t hate you, Thomas.” Bates said. Thomas couldn’t indulge in such delusions, however. He knew that deep down, Mr. Carson did in fact hate him. Nothing would change that, not even the good will of Bates.

“But I feel it,” Thomas urged, walking around Bates and imploring to him with open hands, “I see it. When he looks at me it’s like he’s looking at garbage. And I think he knows that I’m different.”

He turned away, pilfering through his offered meal to perch upon the edge of his desk and eat. He picked up a biscuit and nibbled on it, looking a bit like a bird on a twig.

“Maybe,” Bates conceded, “But so long as it’s something he doesn’t have to deal with why should he care?”

“Because it’s abnormal!” Thomas said through a full mouth. He had to swallow painfully, and fetched his teacup from across the room to refill his mug. “And it makes me vile.”

His tone was bitter. He couldn’t hide it anymore. He drank his tea, sulky, and muttered into the rim of his cup, “Foul and unnatural. That’s what he thinks of me.”

“But you’ve never heard him say that.” Bates urged. He came up beside Thomas, once again testing the boundaries of how close the pair of them usually stood with one another. It made Thomas slightly uncomfortable, simply because he’d never known Bates to be familiar with him.

And, what was more, Thomas had heard Mr. Carson say that. It was just that he’d said it in 1919, and if Thomas were to repeat such things in 1912, Bates would probably think he was going insane.

“Please trust me on this.” Thomas sat his mug down, arms back over his chest. It was a sort of defense mechanism, as if he was expecting Bates to smack his head into a wall again. “I have, he just… didn’t know it.”

Bates was put out. “Well.” He seemed to think it over, “I don’t think you’re vile, or foul, or unnatural.”

Thomas couldn’t help himself. He simply had to know, “What am I, then?”

Bates debated for a moment, cocked his head, then said “Lovely”.

Thomas was downright impressed, a sly smirk crawling across his lips at the cheekiness of it all. If he didn’t know any better, he would say that Bates was flirting with him. It was almost worth getting
sucked back in time through a muddy violent portal.

“Careful, Mr. Bates.” He tutted, eyes gleaming sweetly. “You’ll give O’Brien a heart attack.”

Bates just snorted, reaching out to pluck one of the heather flowers from Thomas’ impromptu vase. He offered it to Thomas, and Thomas accepted.

“Don’t get my hopes up.” Bates joked. Thomas watched him go, a flush forming on his pale cheeks.

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Now that Thomas knew Bates had had moments of ‘temptation’ in the past, he was downright obsessed with the concept. He tried to imagine Bates pushing some flowery toff against the wall, kissing him soundly. Maybe even Lord Grantham when they were younger-! But it made no sense and Thomas just burst into giggles every time the thought went to far. Worst of all, Thomas couldn’t help but think of the idea of he and Bates together, even though it was nothing more than a ludicrous fantasy.

What would Bates be like as a lover? He just… he just had to know! Would he be hard and rugged, or soft and sweet? Thomas like the idea of Bates being brutal somehow, maybe slamming Thomas up against a wall before ravaging his mouth with a wild passionate kiss.

But such thoughts were best left under the covers, for the darkest hours when no one else was awake. Thomas’ body was young and spry again; he constantly found himself getting erections at the worst of times. Of course, Thomas had learned long ago how to deal with such problems; all he had to do was imagine Carson naked, having to lift up his sagging breast tissue in order to wipe away the scum underneath the skin folds.

That particular image worked like magic.

But Thomas’ days were not all sunshine and roses. In particular, Thomas found himself often going over the events of his previous life to uncover errors, and wilted at the thought that both Sybil and Matthew Crawley were to die.

The way that he looked at it, there was absolutely no way he could save Sybil. The only way he could possibly eliminate her death would be to go into the medical field, somehow gain enough experience to be taken seriously when it came to births, and then beg Lord Grantham to take Sybil to a hospital. Even then, eclampsia was deadly and there was no cure. Sybil would, most likely, not survive the cesarian section and the blood clot rushing to her brain.

Matthew on the other hand… Thomas could probably save. It would mean becoming Matthew’s valet, someway, somehow, and using that connection to be the one to drive Matthew home after George’s birth. If Thomas could somehow be the one driving the car, he could make sure that any automobile accident didn’t result in Matthew’s death. But even so… how would this be possible?

But there was one other death that Thomas wondered if he could prevent, and disturbingly feared he didn’t even want to:

The miscarried Crawley baby.

The bottom line of the Crawley miscarriage was that it had proven to be O’Brien’s biggest weakness, and her eventual undoing. Thomas had been able to use her guilt as a sort of turning point, and it had proved to save his life in the end when he’d messed up with Jimmy. Now, Thomas knew second time around not to kiss Jimmy (and so he wouldn’t) so there wouldn’t be a need for sabotage on that
particular ground. But at the same time, O’Brien still knew that he was a homosexual… so she could still destroy him at any time.

He needed that sabotage. And it would result in an infant dying.

Thomas lamented over all of it, stressing to the point of forming an ulcer.

It was a hot day in the servant’s hall, and growing close to August. Soon the fair would be in town, and the servants would have something to do on their days off. Until then, it was stifling and boring, with sweat collecting under collars and tempers fraying more often than not. Thomas tried to stay atop his normal begrudging personality, drinking cool tea, sitting in shadows, and allowing himself to relax to William playing soft piano. Before, the pair of them hadn’t gotten on so Thomas couldn’t enjoy William’s talents. Now that William could stand to be in the same room as him and not blow a gasket, Thomas had to admire that William really did know how to play piano.

He wasn’t as good as Jimmy (no one would be as good as Jimmy)… but still.

Today, however, William was not playing piano. The servant’s tea found everyone about the table, trying to stay hydrated during the smothering heat; O’Brien was in a terrible mood and wasn’t shy about showing it.

“It’s revolting!” She spoke far too loud for her own good, frustrated by the fact that she had to curtsy to Matthew Crawley and his mother, “What they’re making us do! I can’t stand it, kowtowing to someone who could just as easily be in my place!”

Thomas did not acknowledge O’Brien. His fingers were wrapped around a teaspoon, slowly letting his thumb run over the curve of its tip. His thoughts were revolving around the miscarried baby, and whether or not to let it live.

The word from the doctors was that it had been a boy. If it was a male, it would inherit. If it inherited, Matthew Crawley would be displaced. If he was displaced, Mary and Matthew would not marry, and therefore would not have a baby. George would fail to exist… and that?

That was something Thomas could not allow. So it seemed the baby would have to die.

“Are you alright, Thomas?” Anna spoke up. He was clustered at the far end of the table, sandwiched between Bates and Anna. William was trying to play a card game but it kept getting interrupted by O’Brien’s rant. Across from him, Gwen was working on writing in cursive, using a borrowed pen and a sheet of scrap paper. Anna was watching him carefully, her eyes unbelievably blue. “You seem pale.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot, lately.” Thomas admitted.

“About your flame?” Bates asked. Only Thomas would hear it, but there was just the tiniest bit of smugness in his voice. Thomas could not help but smile, glad that the pair of them had an understanding.

“No.” He was gentle in tone. Bates grinned, returning his eyes to the daily Thirsk paper. He was reading a medical ad for a limp corrector, “Just wishing O’Brien would stop. I’m about to pop a screw.”

“I think we all are.” Anna scoffed. Meanwhile, halfway up the table, O’Brien was now arguing with William who was (as always) fighting the good fight.

“But it’s not right to be so angry at them!” William urged, “What have they ever done, but try and
adjust?"

“I’m sorry but I have standards!” O’Brien warned. “and if anyone thinks I’m going to pull my forelock and curtsey to this Mr. Nobody from Nowhere—"

“O’Brien.”

Everyone jerked out of their seats, at such a record timing that it was a miracle no one spilled their teacups. Thomas had all but forgotten this little slip up, and suddenly his heart was back to pounding in his chest as Cora Crawley revealed herself in the doorway of the servant’s hall.

O’Brien was white in the face, and with good reason. Getting caught by Carson was one thing, getting caught by a member of the actual family was another.

“Were you discussing Mr. Crawley?” Lady Grantham asked.

“…Yes M’lady.” It wasn’t very well like O’Brien could lie.

“Is it your place to do so?”

“…I’ve got my opinions, M’lady. Same as anybody.” O’Brien said. Christ, the cheek she was capable of! Even Thomas had known when to draw the line the first time around. But before Lady Grantham could admonish O’Brien on her sharp tongue, Mrs. Hughes walked into the servant’s hall to get her own cup of tea. She was surprised to find Lady Grantham downstairs.

“Can I help your ladyship?” she asked, curious as to what was going on. Even she, having only just walked in, could surely sense the awful tension in the room.

Lady Grantham pursed her lips, still angry but tending to the need at present, “This is the button we’re missing from my new evening coat. I found it lying on the gravel—“ she handed the button over to Mrs. Hughes, who took it at once. “But… I was shocked at the talk I heard as I came in.”

Mrs. Hughes looked around, stunned to hear that the staff had been so outwardly insubordinate.

“Mr. Crawley is His Lordship’s cousin and heir. You will, therefore, please accord him the respect he’s entitled to.”

“But you don’t like him yourself, M’lady—“

“You’re sailing perilously close to the wind, O’Brien!” Lady Grantham snapped. O’Brien seemed nervous, perhaps sensing now that she’d gone far too close. “If we’re to be friends, you will not speak in that way about the Crawley’s or any member of Lord Grantham’s family. Now…” she huffed, trying to resettle herself, “I’m going to wake. Wake me at the dressing gong.”

She left without another word, and in her wake an awful aura settled about the servant’s hall. Mrs. Hughes was pointedly furious, her lips pursed into a thin white line.

O’Brien collapsed back into her seat. She too was angry, but for different reasons. Everyone else sat back down as well, with Mrs. Hughes glaring reproachfully from the head of the table.

“…A real lady wouldn’t do that.” O’Brien whispered, “If she was a real lady she wouldn’t have come down here. She’d have rung for me and given me the button, that’s all.”

“Don’t.” Thomas cut her off. O’Brien, already furious, seemed pointedly ready to strangle him over
his lack of sympathy to her situation. But couldn’t she see? She was only make it worse!

“How can you stand against me?!” She demanded, rounding on him like he was the villain in all this, “How can you when if it were you in my place you’d be treated just the same-“

“Yes but that’s just the point isn’t it-“ Thomas stood back up. It was finally time for O’Brien to get as good as she gave.

“I’m not going to be in your place because I don’t say horrible things about people who don’t deserve it!” Thomas cried out. He was aware that his voice was getting louder and louder. He couldn’t help himself. He was pointedly furious at the fact that he would have to willingly condemn an unborn child to be miscarried. All to spare himself from this odious woman who refused to let him be happy because he wasn’t her ally.

“Why are you always making trouble?!” Thomas demanded, gesturing about at the table and everyone clustered at its edge, “Look at these people! They’re good people! What have they done to deserve such cruelty?! What?! What have I ever done to deserve it, but simply refuse to condone your anger? Tell me!”

O’Brien was stunned into silence at his outrageous display. She gaped at him, her mouth slightly ajar.

“Tell me!!” Thomas slammed a fist onto the table. As a result, everyone’s cups rattled wildly on their saucers.

“Thomas!” Mrs. Hughes cried out, shocked at his behavior, “Control yourself this instant-“

“No, you can’t tell me, can you-?!?” Thomas rounded the table, pointing a furious, trembling finger at O’Brien. He felt like such a fool with tears sparkling in his eyes. “You can’t be wrong, and you can’t be sorry! Well, I’m sorry! I’m sorry I ever gave you a minute of my time!”

He fled the servant’s hall, his throat clenching tight.

“Thomas Barrow, you come back here!” Mrs. Hughes’ words grew faint as Thomas ran up the stairwell.

“Thomas-!!”

~*~

He knew he’d made a grave error in being a bastard out loud, but he couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

He couldn’t stand it! The way that O’Brien manipulated, fell short, and then rebelled on everyone. It was like holding up an awful mirror in his face, reminding him of how horrible he’d used to be. And to think, he’d been so god damn agreeing; he’d imagine everyone else to be the putzes! But now Thomas could see with such clarity that it was making him sick. He paced from one edge of his room to the next.

“Fuckin- fuck!” He hissed, and lashed out to kick at his metal footboard, only to double over in sudden pain. His big toe throbbed, and Thomas groaned aloud at the sudden irritating pain. What would he give, just for the ability to smack O’Brien once in the face!
A sudden knock upon his door made Thomas stiffen. With toe still throbbing, he hobbled over to his door to listen at the crack.

"I just need a moment." Thomas said, fearful it would be Carson or Mrs. Hughes on the other side.

"It’s only me." came William’s voice. Surprised, Thomas pulled back from the door to stare at the wooden barrier incredulously. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas opened the door.

It was a queer thing, to be called upon by William. The pair of them lived right across the hall from one another, but so far had existed in completely separate spheres. It was once again a dividing of the barriers, like before with John Bates.

“…Am I sacked?” Thomas asked, quite nervous.

“No, but O’Brien might be plotting your death.” William admitted. “I just wanted to make sure that you were alright. People were worried.”

Well that was a queer idea, and no mistake. “I’m fine. I’m stressed, that’s all.”

“What on earth do you have to be stressed over?” William asked. “You have a good job in a good house. You’re young, whole, and healthy. You’re handsome too. You’ve even got a flame.”

But Thomas could see the bitterness hiding in Williams’ cherub face. The way he bit at the corner of his puckered lips, his brows furrowed.

“I just think you ought to be grateful for what you have. “William added, defensively.

Thomas knew what was bothering him. “You’re upset about Daisy.”

William was taken a back, “I’m what?”

“You’re upset that she’s besotted with me, when I clearly have no interest in her.” Thomas said. “You’re in love with her, and you wish you had a chance. Is that it?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” William warned. Thomas knew instinctively that William was close to arguing with him. In an attempt to keep him calm, Thomas diverted his tensions.

“I apologize if I’m made the situation worse.” Thomas said, thinking quickly. He needed to speak with Daisy as soon as possible, and get all this mess ironed out. “I’ll speak with Daisy today, and I’ll set her straight as kindly as I can.”

William stared. He didn’t seem to know what to say.

“…You… What?” William repeated.

“I have no intentions towards Daisy, and I’ll make that plain to her.” Thomas said. “You shouldn’t have to worry about me being in the way when it’s clear that you’re meant for each other.”

“I… I don’t know what to say.” William blundered over each word. By god, were those tears sparkling in his eyes? “I’m—I thought—“

“You thought I was a merciless, heartless bastard?” Thomas offered. William was ashamed to admit to it, his head bowed. “You thought I was a prick.”

“You shouldn’t use language like that.” William muttered. “Carson will scold.”
“Well, Carson hates me already so that’s alright.” Thomas could hardly ruin his miserable reputation anymore with a few well placed words.

“That’s not true.” William urged. He looked back up, a new fire in his eyes, “And you shouldn’t say such things. Mr. Carson doesn’t hate you—“

“He does.” Thomas warned, “You may not see it, or believe it, but it is the reality that I live in so please respect it.”

William just scoffed. “Why would Mr. Carson hate you, Thomas? You’re no different than me-“

“I am.” Thomas warned. “I am very different than you. There are things you do not know about me William… things that Mr. Carson knows. And he’ll never see me as anything but trash.”

William just stared. Maybe he could see the misery in Thomas’ face. Maybe his eyes were finally opening to their very different situations.

“… Why?” There was a genuine hurt in his voice now, as if his feelings were wounded over Thomas’ own pain. “Why are you different?”

Thomas bowed his head, saying nothing. He let out a long sigh, then turned and shut his bedroom door so that the pair of them were effectively both out in the hall.

“I can’t hide up here any longer. He’s already going to kill me as it is.” Thomas muttered. He started for the servant’s stairwell, with William close behind.

“Why are you different?”

“I’ll talk to Daisy today, and set the record straight.”

“But why are you different-“

Thomas stopped, causing William to nearly run into him on the stairs. He turned, giving William a warning look. “William… stop asking me why I’m different. I cannot tell you the answer. It will put me in too much trouble.”

“But have you done something bad?” William asked.

“That depends upon who you ask.” Thomas said.

“But what have you done-“

Thomas just stared. William seemed to sense that he wasn’t going to budge, and finally backed off. They continued back down the stairs, with William picking up another topic (thank the Lord). “Will you really tell Daisy-?”

“Yes. I’ll do it right now.” Thomas said. “I promise.”

They had to pause on the landing so that they could hold open the door for Anna and another maid named Lily, carrying fresh linens. They continued down after that.

“Really? Because I do care for her, greatly and… and if you’re not interested in her-!”

“Just let me have a few moments with her so I can let her down easily.” Thomas urged, already wording in his head how he was going to make this happen. As they hit the bottom of the stairs, Thomas made a bee line for the kitchen—
Only to be stopped as Carson came up the hall with Mrs. Hughes at his side. Both looked increasingly disappointed.

“Thomas, I need to speak with you.” Mr. Carson snapped, “Promptly.”

Thomas flushed, knowing full well he was in for another ‘smack’ as Anna would call it. He looked over his shoulder at William, who was just as nervous as he.

“William, get to the front door!” Carson ordered. “Or do you expect his Lordship to answer when there’s a knock?”

“Yes Mr. Carson.” William scampered off, not even daring to look back. As William ascended the stairs, Thomas was left alone in the hallway with Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes. He doubted he would find a sympathetic ear with either.

The three of them headed towards Carson’s office, which was quiet in the far back corner of the servant’s hall. Carson opened the door, revealing O’Brien to already be inside. She was scowling, her cheeks flushed dark red, and gave Thomas a murderous look when he crossed over the threshold.

Mrs. Hughes shut the door, effectively sealing the four of them in, and then walked around Mr. Carson’s desk so that the pair of them could stand in judgement of the other two.

*Christ,* Thomas thought, *And I was trying to make a better impression this time!*

“I wanted to speak about the pair of you regarding your behavior as of late.” Mr. Carson said.

“You’ve both been acting out and causing disturbances I will not abide. Thomas, you tripped up in front of a Duke of all people… and O’Brien, you have spoken out of turn about the family in a way that was most unbecoming. Thomas, you likewise exploded today in the servant’s hall, in a way that does not befit your position as first footman.”

“… Yes Mr. Carson.” Thomas whispered. There would be no point denying his part.

“Am I to be granted an explanation of some kind?” Mr. Carson asked, folding his arms over his barrel chest and relaxing back in his swivel chair, “Or is there something in the tap water that I should be made aware of?”

“… I apologize, Mr. Carson.” Thomas began.

“I did not ask for an apology!” Mr. Carson snapped, “I asked for an explanation!”

Thomas took a long, deep breath through his nose, trying to ground himself. He could feel his throat clenching, beginning to burn. He counted to ten inside his head, repeatedly warning himself not to make a scene, not to be emotional.

“O’Brien, you are under my charge, and as such I can tell you that you’re one hair away from being given your notice.” Mrs. Hughes warned.

“I’ve done nothing to warrant this abuse, Mrs. Hughes.” O’Brien refused to back down. “I have my opinions, same as everyone else. I’m being targeted-“

“That’s not true.” Thomas cut down.

“Then explain to me how we went from being friends to you screaming at me in the servant’s hall!” O’Brien finally turned on him, and Thomas would be a fool to deny hearing heat in her voice. If
they’d been alone, she would be screaming at him.

Thomas refused to even look at her.

“I don’t want to make any more trouble, Ms. O’Brien.” Thomas said, eyes locked on Carson’s old wall calendar which hung behind Carson’s head. “All I want is to live my life and to do my best for the house and the staff—“

“Well I’m sorry if I don’t believe that with your shoddy reputation-“

“Oh, my reputation-?!” Thomas scoffed, about to laugh at the incredulity of it all, “My reputation-?! What about your reputation-?!” He finally turned on her, maniacal.

O’Brien was seething, but Thomas wouldn’t let her get a word in, “All I want to do is my job!” Thomas cried out, “To be a good footman for Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes! Why won’t you let me?! Why do you always have to pick a fight with Mr. Bates, when he’s a good man and has done nothing to you-“

Carson and Mrs. Hughes watched the pair of them go at it, amazed at all the hostile tension. It was like a free nickelodeon.

“You’re the one who wanted to get rid of him-“ She shot in. Thomas cut her down again.

“That’s not true!” He looked first to Mrs. Hughes, then to Mr. Carson, imploring them. “I like Mr. Bates! I like him very much. He’s a good man, and I’m glad that he’s here-!”

“And you expect them to believe that?” O’Brien scoffed. “When you’ve been trying to climb the ladder-“

“I don’t give a damn about the ladder anymore!” Thomas reached up, almost grabbing fistfuls of his own hair in his rage, “I just want to DO RIGHT!” He shouted the two words so that they bounced off the walls.

“That is enough!” Mrs. Hughes cried out, scandalized at how loud he’d raised his voice.

“Thomas, control yourself!” Mr. Carson barked.

Cowed, Thomas dropped his hands and turned away. He had to take a moment to recompose himself, hands covering his face lest Mrs. Hughes see the way his expression was crumpling from bitter emotion.

He took a deep breath through his nose, and counted to ten again. All the while, O’Brien just kept going.

“I’ve done nothin’ to warrant this abuse.” She thundered. “I have my opinions, same as everyone else, and the servant’s hall should be an area of free speech, away from the family. We have a right to think what we like downstairs, and I won’t be made a fool of just because I don’t pull my forelock to the first man that waltzes through the door. The entail should have belonged to Lady Mary, that’s the way I see it—“

Oh, as if she even cared.

“Bates can’t do his job. He’s lame and can’t carry.” O’Brien continued on. “He’s been given more than enough time to adjust to the work, but he still refuses to carry the full burden. William has been taking up the slack, with this one skipping off to the attics with the maids. I caught them up there the
other day, playing with his Lordship’s sword—"

“I was showing Mr. Bates the cedar lined chests!” Thomas snapped.

“That wasn’t what it looked like to me—” O’Brien scoffed. “You were getting right cozy, smacking your swords and canes about like little toy soldiers. You might be the first footman in title but William does the real work around here, not you—"

“You’re only saying that because you’re angry with me.” Thomas wouldn’t fall victim to her little ploy. This was the same routine she’d pull with anyone she disliked. “I know I work hard, and so does William. You don’t even care about him, you’re just using him as a weapon to try and hurt me in front of Mr. Carson. All I want to do is the right thing, and you won’t let me because you want me to be your little spy and scheme for you!” He turned to Mr. Carson, imploring. The man was staring at Thomas disturbed, as if he did not know him. “Please, let me do the right thing, Mr. Carson. Please! I’m a good worker, a hard worker, and I can show you. I like being a footman—"

“Liar.” O’Brien sneered over his shoulder.

“I know in the past I might have said differently but that was before I realized what a blessing it was to work for this house.” Thomas urged. “I’ve had a change of heart. People can change. I know that you hate me, and think I’m foul—"

“I never said that!” Mr. Carson warned, a finger in Thomas’ face.

“You didn’t have to.” Thomas said. Mr. Carson scoffed, brows furrowed at Thomas’ suggestions. “I know you dislike me because I’m different from other men, but please. I’m not heartless. I’m not without feeling. I can hurt, and feel pain just like any other man… and I’m so tired of having to—"

But Thomas broke off, sensing that Mr. Carson wouldn’t understand him even if he were to fully lay out his woes. He let out another tiny sigh, suddenly feeling terribly tired.

“…Please Mr. Carson. I’m sorry if I’ve been odd but… It was an accident, I tripped over Bates’ cane when I helped him from his stumble. And… I didn’t mean any offense with Lady Mary and Mr. Matthew. I have opinions, just as O’Brien does… but it’s my opinion that they’re well suited and could make each other very happy. I think he challenges her and I think she stimulates him, that’s just what I think!” Thomas cried out, hands up in defense at Carson’s thunderous expression. “They’re good people, kind people, and they deserve love. That’s all I’m saying!”

Mrs. Hughes gave a tiny tut, but otherwise Thomas was able to carry on.

“And as for today I… I just… I’m tired of O’Brien always complaining and making a mockery. I want one day without an argument.” Thomas begged, one finger up in the air as a module, “One day where we can eat a meal at the servant’s table and not have to hear O’Brien and Bates fighting each other. I’m sick of it. My nerves are shot. I’m sorry I spoke out but… I was just… I couldn’t keep quiet anymore.”

A fine way of saying ‘I was about to bust a nut’.

“I think he’s gormy.” Was O’Brien’s response. “He’s never been right in the head and you know it. He ought to be let go before he makes another scene—"

“Thank you, Ms. O’Brien,” Mrs. Hughes snapped. She did not look pleased at O’Brien’s insinuation.
“This nonsense stops today.” Mr. Carson said, rising up from behind his desk to make the final judgement. Thomas braced himself for another ‘smack’, “O’Brien: I want no more arguing in the servant’s hall, no more bickering period. You will remember your place, and your tongue, or you’ll find one of them lost. And as for you, Thomas, I expect you to gather yourself and remember that the family are always in need. You cannot be topsy turvy with your emotions if it is your intent to be an admirable first footman.”

“Yes Mr. Carson.” There was no other answer to give.

“I expect better from both of you.” Mr. Carson warned.

“You’ll have it Mr. Carson, I promise.” Thomas said, just for added effect. Fact of the matter was, Carson wanted to strangle him on a daily basis. Any padding he could make was padding he would take.

“See that you do not disappoint me." He warned, bagged eyes locked on Thomas’ own.

As Thomas was finally dismissed from Carson’s office, he felt as if he’d been forced to run a mile. Exhausted, and rather faint Thomas briefly considered returning to his original errand of telling Daisy the truth until he heard a hard rush of breath at the back of his neck.

"I know what you’re doing.” O’Brien spat in his ear. Thomas jumped, taken aback, and whipped around to find O’Brien right behind him glowering ferociously.

“You’ll regret this, you hear me?!" She hissed, keeping her voice low lest either Mrs. Hughes or Mr. Carson overhear through Carson’s office door. Thomas bristled but said nothing, turning away once more to keep walking down the hall towards the servant’s stairwell.

“You’re a fool!” O’Brien called after him.
Thomas did not answer her.

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The rest of the day was spent in a rather unnerving quiet descending upon the servant’s hall. Supper was laid out, the family were put to bed, and every servant found themselves below stairs by the time Mrs. Patmore was ringing the dinner bell. The family had been served a meal of roasted chicken, but a few had been left over. As a result, Mrs. Patmore had torn the scraps and put together a chicken pie with sides of cauliflower and cheese. Normally, cauliflower and cheese was a dish for much celebration. Everyone ended up putting the cheese sauce on everything else, so that Mrs. Patmore had to make another sauce pot of cheese just to keep the spirits high. Tonight, however, people were nervous to take more than the bare minimum. All the tension lay at the head of the table, with Bates and O’Brien glaring daggers at one another from opposite sides.

Thomas, at Bates’ side, said nothing as he ate.

“Are you alright, Thomas?” Bates finally spoke up, noting that Thomas wasn’t eating much. Thomas gave the man a tight lipped smile.

“Long day.” He muttered, eager to get the subject off of himself. “Did you ever speak to Mr. Moseley about Mr. Crawley?”

“I did.” Bates said, “He says that Mr. Crawley isn’t taking to his new life very well.”
“Why ever for?” Anna asked from across the table. She was frowning in clear dismay.

“Doesn’t like to have a valet.” Bates explained.

“He could easily be a valet himself.” O’Brien said. No one made to answer her.

“I think it’ll just take some time.” Thomas urged, for in the end he could recall that Matthew had eventually come around, “It’s a big change, and there’s so much to it. The balls, the London seasons, I’m sure it looks a little daunting from the front end—“

“And why should any of that matter when he can’t even hold a fork properly?” O’Brien asked.

Thomas, knowing full well that an argument could result in getting the chop, kept his voice controlled and his eyes low as he replied: “He can.”

“And how should you know?” O’Brien snapped. Any word could set her off like dynamite.

Tread carefully, Thomas, he thought.

But before Thomas could say anything to the contrary, William took up the charge with all the heroic courage of a knight on his white steed.

“Because!” William urged, looking to the others to back him up, “Thomas and I take care of every meal that Mr. Crawley eats under this roof. We’ve been watching him, and we’ve found his character to be excellent.”

“He knows how to hold a fork.” Thomas agreed, carefully to keep from gripping his own too tight as he took another bite of chicken pie, “He’s not a Lord by birth but he holds himself very well.”

O’Brien scoffed, clearly ready to say something ugly until Carson cut her off.

“I thought I mentioned to the pair of you earlier that I want no arguments in the servant’s hall.” Mr. Carson warned.

“No, Mr. Carson.” Thomas replied, eyes still on the table as he ate. He couldn’t see O’Brien from where he hid behind Bates’ hulking girth, but he could feel the heat from her gaze.

“Well I have standards.” O’Brien grumbled. “Thomas just likes any man he—“

“Ms. O’Brien that’s enough.” Mrs. Hughes snapped before she could finish her sentence. Thomas’ cheeks burned hot, well aware of what she’d been intending to say, and her ugly remark behind it.

He jumped at the unexpected feeling of Bates’ fingers upon his thigh beneath the table. He was holding to Thomas’ leg, perhaps trying to be an endearing show of support against O’Brien’s harsh words. Thomas glanced up, and found Bates carefully avoiding his eyes as he continued on with his pie. If the others saw him eating with only one hand, no one made a comment on it.

Thomas swallowed painfully around his own mouthful, shakily taking a long sip of tea.

“The flower show’s been really gearing up—“ Mrs. Hughes spoke up, directing her comments to the table at large so that discussion could open up once more without leading into an argument. Thomas kept silent throughout the rest of dinner, too focused on the sensation of Bates’ warm things upon his thigh muscle to make coherent sentences.

Was he touching him as a friend, wanting to offer support…? Or was there something more?
After dinner was put away, and Daisy finished washing dishes, the servant’s hall was packed with people listening to William play piano. Bates was reading the paper by the fire, with Anna at his side darning one of her frayed maid’s aprons. O’Brien, in the corner, was drinking a cup of tea and reading a book… at least she seemed to be. Thomas was almost certain that she was watching him over the top of her novel, glaring murderously. Gwen was still working on her cursive, resulting in her writing everyone’s names so that they could see what it looked like spelt out fancy. Daisy was mystified by her own name, and kept her scratch paper for a keepsake tucked into her apron pocket. At Thomas sighed, she lamented over books of new dance steps, wondering at inked images of ladies and men courting. Thomas did not even bother flipping through the book. Instead, his cunning mind was wrapped around the issue of how to explain to Daisy that he wasn’t for her without breaking her heart.

He would have to talk to her alone, maybe in the pantry-?

No… no, he couldn’t get in there without a key and everyone would know.

The boot room? Maybe… but anyone could walk in.
Maybe the wood shed? But how would he get Daisy out there without Mrs. Patmore murdering him?

“I wish I could dance like that-“ Daisy mumbled.

“Like what?” Thomas was yanked forcibly out of his thoughts, glancing down at the textbook before them. It showed the steps to the Grizzly Bear, which Philip had taught Thomas in his room during Sybil’s London season. “The Grizzly Bear?”

Daisy nodded, sighing dramatically.

Bates grinned, setting his paper aside, “Do you know how to dance that?”

“Certainly I do.” Thomas said. “An old flame taught me once.”

Bates caught the jist, now grinning from ear to ear. Thomas looked from the book, to Daisy, to William at the piano. The last time, Thomas had whipped Daisy about to make William terribly jealous. It had been fun, but he’d been certain he’d looked like an idiot. He certainly couldn’t do that again.

And quite suddenly Thomas had a brilliant idea.

“William-“ Thomas reached out to tap William upon the shoulder so that he paused in his playing. “Do you know how to dance the Grizzly Bear?”

“Oh no.” William blushed horribly at the thought, “No, I don’t dance. I’m too clumsy.”

“Would you like to learn?” Thomas asked, “I could teach you and Daisy both!”

“How could you do that?” William asked. It would be a little tight, with a pinch for room between the table and the glass dish cabinet… but they could make it work. Daisy was watching the interchange between the two men, her eyes glimmering with hope.

“I’ll show you!” Thomas got up from his chair, well aware that everyone’s eyes were upon him, even O’Brien. “Come on. Both of you, get up!”
“Should we? Mr. Carson might be angry—” Daisy was terribly nervous and who could blame her when she was just the scullery maid. William nearly tripped over the piano bench in his eagerness to get up and into Daisy’s arms.

“I’ll handle Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, “Come here-! Hands up both of you!”

He mimicked the stance so that Daisy and William could see how to hold their hands. He placed Daisy about three paces back from William, dragging the pair of them into place with the limited space between the table and the dish cabinet. Of course last time he’d had help from William playing the piano to keep a beat. This time, they’d have to have a bit of help.

Maybe it would help solidify the group experiment.

“I need a bit of help!” Thomas asked the others. Anna and Gwen were giggling girlishly, amazed at Thomas’ brazen fun. “Come Josephine in my flying machine, Going up she goes! Up she goes!” as he sang he clapped.

The other three joined in, with only O’Brien silent. The other maids were delighted, clapping their hands to the beat as Anna and Gwen held the tune. Even Bates joined in, bless him.

Thomas took William’s hands, carefully placing them upon Daisy’s waist with the other still up like a bear paw. He then put Daisy’s hands on Williams’ shoulder, momentarily pausing to take off his own jacket so that he could work better.

The others were laughing even as they sang. Thomas pushed William forward, watching his feet so that he didn’t trip over an errant chair leg. “Forward two, back two— up, up, a little bit higher-!”

He tried to turn them but nearly got flattened against the dish cabinet. He burst out laughing in spite of himself.

“Hand on her waist, don’t drop it, back, forth, back, turn in!” Thomas cried out. William and Daisy were getting the jest, though they nearly flattened Thomas again when they did another tight circle to change the direction of their dance.

“This is not a three man job-“ Thomas lamented, though there was a blissful smile upon his face. The others were laughing outright now; Thomas stepped back, clapping and singing as William and Daisy danced on their own. They were gliding— well not really— but they were having a terrible amount of fun.

“Up, up, a little bit higher
Oh! My! The moon is on fire
Come Josephine in my flying machine
Going up, all on, Goodbye!”

“Daisy… DAISY!” Quite suddenly Mrs. Patmore was in the door to the servant’s hall, calling out for Daisy and instantaneously cutting off the dance. William leapt back from Daisy, terrified of being seen as improper. As a result, Daisy was left scrambling at mid air, crestfallen.

“Stop that before you put your joints out!” Mrs. Patmore urged, though in truth there was no venom in her voice, “See to the range and go to bed.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, exhausted, and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Daisy turned back to William, her brown eyes full of tears, beaming.

“Thank you.” Her voice quavered, “That was beautiful.”
She fled through the crowd of maids, all of whom applauded. William was ready to punch a fist in the air for victory. Thomas just sat back down in his chair, blissful as he shrugged on his jacket before Carson found him ‘undressed’.

“Very well done, Thomas!” Anna praised.

“And you didn’t even trip, did you!” Thomas egged William on; the boy was already beet red in the face, there was no harm in it. “Now see? Was that so hard?”

“Easy for you!” William jabbed back, but he was grinning from ear to ear. “I bet all the girls must flock to you.”

“You’d be surprised.” O’Brien spoke up from the corner. Thomas said nothing in response, merely finishing off his cup of tea. He found it difficult to be embarrassed or angry when everyone was delighted.

Most of all, Thomas’ eyes found Bates’ shining face across the table. In that moment, he seemed mystified by Thomas, enraptured and completely forgotten to the others in the room. Thomas had seen Bates look at Anna before in the same way. It made his heart flutter and pause—

But there was nothing to that look, even if he imagined otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to let me know. Likewise, if you are interested in a commission for GOD’S SAKE LET ME KNOW.
Kemal Pamuk

Chapter Summary

Gwen's desire to become a secretary is small talk compared to the shocking events of a hunting party featuring a Turkish diplomat. In the afterglow of it all, Thomas finds a moment to get to the bottom of Bates' odd behavior.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has reached out to me for a commission. I have several that I'm working through at the moment; it will take a bit for me to get all of them done. I have to churn out chapters for Volver, post blog updates to the SubRosa Writer, and move back home. I'm traveling from Washington to Alabama, starting Sunday. The next chapter of Volver might take me slightly longer than normal, but I'll try to keep it on a somewhat steady schedule.

I'm still open for commissions though! Email me at liladostal@gmail.com if you want to purchase either a short story or a one-shot!

No warnings for this chapter save for Lady Mary's vagina killing a man and a bit of blood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The good thing about working in a big house was that inevitably you forgot your own sorrows to instead gossip about the sorrows of the family. Of course, there wasn’t really a black cloud hanging over the eves of Downton as of yet, but Mary and Edith were ready to rip each other’s head off over Evelyn Napier and the fact that Edith had supposedly read Lady Mary’s correspondence to him. Thomas couldn’t have given a tenth of a damn if he tried, but it was still funny to watch unfold. The inheritance was still up for grabs, at least in the eyes of the Dowager, but everyone else had more or less accepted Matthew Crawley as the new son and heir. And why not? He wasn’t bad on the eyes, and he tried to do the right thing. God only knows, after a life and a half of muddling through poor candidates, Thomas knew a good man when he saw one. Of course, Lady Mary didn’t have this experience as of yet. She was still brooding, still adjusting, and it would take her some time before she realized just how much she adored Matthew. It would unfold in time… Thomas would just have to be patient.

He couldn’t help himself; he missed George terribly.

Of course, all of the hullabaloo upstairs was nothing compared to the turmoil downstairs O’Brien was brooding, conniving, turning inward on herself without an ally to share her burdens. Thomas tried to ignore her most days, which was rather difficult. As summer slid away into fall, Thomas felt like he was watching a train wreck in slow motion. Now that he was an outsider looking in, Thomas could see just how stinted O’Brien was emotionally. Something must have happened to her in her life prior to Downton, god knows what, and as a result she’d never learned how to handle rejection
or poor luck. Thomas was still angry with her, but for the most part he kept his tongue under lock and key. He was still desperately trying to build up his reputation in the house, and that wasn’t always easy to do. It took ages to crawl up to the sunlight, and only one false step to slip back down into the coal hole.

It was September, and the season for hunting had descended upon England’s countrysides. Lord Grantham was eager to get out in the saddle, and often rode with long quarries though he never particularly brought the masses back to Downton. Matthew didn’t ride, Mary didn’t shoot, and Mrs. Patmore was going blind. It was easier just to go on a weekend excursion, dragging Bates with him, to return dirty and delighted on Monday morning. Bates was normally one to take it on the chin, but for some reason he seemed to be getting worse. It confused the hell out of Thomas, who couldn’t remember Bates’ leg acting so poorly before. Bates would often turn his face away and wince, hiding in dark corners of the house for periods at a time to try and regain his composure. Could it be that this had happened the first time around and Thomas just hadn’t noticed? Or maybe this was some new malady, brought on by Thomas showing Bates the attic and the secret passageways.

He’d never forgive himself if he made Bates’ limp worse. As if the man didn’t have enough problems already!

The hour was just after the families tea, with a short break until the time to dress. As a result, most servant’s were beginning to congregate downstairs, getting ready for the dinner rush and their own supper afterwards. As Thomas descended the stairs, however, he was surprised to find everyone clustered in the hall around the table, staring down at a typewriter.

Where on earth had that come from? Curious, Thomas rounded the table, his eyes and ears perked for Carson or Mrs. Hughes. Neither of them were present; perhaps they were being fetched.

“What’s this, then?” Thomas asked William, reaching out to gently caress the slicked black keys.

“Gwen bought a typewriter.” William explained. Thomas could sort of remember this scene from before; this was Gwen’s stepping stone to becoming a secretary for a telephone company. “O’Brien told Mr. Carson, and now it’s time for the Brigade.”

“How does it work?” Daisy wondered. She and the hall boys were the most ogled, though a few of the lower maids were quite curious as well. Anna and Gwen were still not down yet, preparing the dining room table with fresh linens before the rush began. Bates was off in the boot room, polishing a pair of his Lordship’s leather oxfords. As a result, Thomas took top rank in the hall. This time, however, he didn’t let it get to his head.

“Well, it’s easy.” William said, “You just press the letters and they print on the paper.”

As an effort to back William up, Thomas reached forward and tenderly touched the ‘J’ button. A ‘J’ jumped upon the paper, ink and metal whacking against the wheel. Daisy was amazed, her eyes as wide as coins.

Of course, her childish delight was all but squashed as O’Brien stormed into the hall, followed up shortly by Carson and Mrs. Hughes. Neither of them looked happy with the typewriter, as if it were a snake in a basket.

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“Get back, please.” Mr. Carson said. The rest of the staff stepped a few feet away from the typewriter, save for Thomas who gave a little sigh in irritation. Honestly, Carson never changed, did he?

“They were trying to hide it, so I knew it was wrong.” O’Brien piped up. Thomas rubbed his brow,
grumbling under his breath as he imagined poor Anna and Gwen having to hoist this enormous typewriter about every night just to try and avoid O’Brien.

“Where’s Gwen now?” Mr. Carson asked.

“Doing the dining room with Anna.” Thomas said. “They’ll be finished soon.”

“Then I’ll wait.” Mr. Carson said. An awkward silence fell upon the servant’s hall, the younger maids and hall boys too nervous to speak up now lest they get a ‘smack’.

“With all due respect, Mr. Carson, Gwen is under my jurisdiction.” Mrs. Hughes said.

“Oh, indeed she is, Mrs. Hughes, and I have no intention of usurping your authority.” Thomas could see Mr. Carson’s budding affection for her. It was quiet, but it was there, and it warmed his heart oddly enough. “I merely want to get to the bottom of it.”

“Why shouldn’t Gwen have a typewriter if she wants one?” William complained aloud.

“It’s just a typewriter.” Thomas agreed, “It’s not like she was hiding a bomb, Mr. Carson.”

But before Mr. Carson could snap at William and Thomas to hush, Gwen and Anna came downstairs from the dining room, their hands devoid of fresh linens. Gwen went white to see her typewriter so plainly broadcasted upon the servant’s table. For the slightest moment, Thomas felt pity for the girl; it didn’t last long though. She annoyed him far too much.

“What’s that doing here?!” She asked, aghast at all of them.

“Ah, Gwen, come in.” Mrs. Hughes ordered. Gwen was timid, but stepped forward all the same. She was practically sweating bullets by this point, and who could blame her?

“Why’s that down here?” She demanded, “Who’s been in my room?! They had no right!”

“See here!” Mrs. Hughes cracked down with all the weight of a sledge hammer. It was not often that she chastised someone, so when it finally happened a certain ripple of fear went through the crowd. “In the first place, none of the rooms in this house belong to you. And in the second, I am in charge of your welfare and that gives me every right.”

Bates had withdrawn from the boot room, perhaps brought to the servant’s hall by the sound of arguing. He crept around the crowd, wary of the showdown between Gwen and the upper heads.

“This is you, isn’t it?” Anna snapped, glaring at O’Brien. She had the nerve not to look ashamed, which wasn’t anything new.

“All we want to know is what Gwen wants with a typewriter and why she feels the need to keep it secret.” Mr. Carson was still eager for arguments to remain at a minimum in the servant’s hall. He’d be lucky if he got his wish.

“She wants to keep it private, not secret.” Anna said, “There’s a difference.”

“Amen.” Bates chorused from behind Anna and Gwen.

“Mr. Carson,” Thomas spoke up, unable to deny his conscience. “Regardless of why Gwen wants it, it’s her own property. She paid for it with her money, earned by her hard work, and she has every right to do with it as she pleases.”

“I’ve done nothing to be ashamed of!” Gwen agreed, though there was a tiny tremble in her voice
that warned of tears soon to come. “I’ve bought a typewriter and I’ve taken a postal course in shorthand. I’m not aware that either of these actions is illegal.”

“Will you tell us why? Preferably without any more cheek?” Mrs. Hughes added. God only knows, cheek was a-plenty among the servants.

An awkward silence fell among the servant’s hall as Gwen worked up the nerve to tell the truth. With foresight into the future, Thomas could see how terrifying this must have been for Gwen.

It still didn’t change the fact that she was annoying though.

“… Because I want to leave service.” Gwen finally said. Her voice was meager, a breath away from a whisper. She refused to meet anyone’s eyes. “I want to be a secretary.”

Mrs. Hughes looked about at Mr. Carson, pointedly shocked. Mr. Carson was ready to blow a gasket, color collecting in his flabby cheeks as he glared at Gwen. Mrs. Hughes looked back around, still fumbling with the facts.

“You want to leave service?” Mrs. Hughes repeated as if she must have heard wrong.

“What’s wrong with being in service?” O’Brien demanded; there was an angry edge to her voice.

“Nothing’s wrong with it!” Gwen cried out, frustrated that no one could see her side, “And there’s nothing wrong with mending roads neither, but it’s not what I want to do.”

“I should remind you that there are plenty of young girls who’d be glad of a position in this house.” Mr. Carson warned.

“And when I hand in my notice, I should be happy to think that one of them will be taking my place.” Gwen said. Thomas could sympathize with Gwen, for it hadn’t been too long ago the threat of unemployment had loomed like a terrible cloud over his every waking move.

“What makes you think we’ll wait until then?” O’Brien sneered under her breath. It pressed on a raw wound inside of Thomas, and cause him to speak out.

“Because firstly she’s done nothing wrong,” Thomas snapped, “And secondly even if she had it wouldn’t be up to you to hire or fire. Those authorities lay with Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes. That is why.”

O’Brien looked around, her dark eyes narrowing maliciously at Thomas. Thomas faced her head on, refusing to let her bully Gwen over this one particular subject. He hated feeling like he was being forced out the door, and he didn’t like other people being put into that position either!

Not unless he hated them, at least.

“Enough of this.” Mr. Carson did not want any more arguing. He walked back around the table, cutting a path through the gathering crowd. “I’m going to ring the dressing gong, and we’ll have no more talk of this tonight.”

“Can i have my machine back now?” Gwen asked after a moment, her eyes falling longingly upon her typewriter.

“Very well,” Mr. Carson sighed, and Gwen dove for her machine at once to carefully pick it up from the table. By god, it was heavy even to look at! It must weigh at least thirty pounds. “But I wish I was sure you know what you’re doing.”
Of course, Carson was out of the loop. Thomas knew for a fact that not only did Gwen know what she was doing, she was doing it very well. Frankly, the girl was going to pass with flying colors and leave them all in the dust before the war was on.

God… and to think in about a year and a half, Thomas would have to deal with that shit too.

Of course, Thomas didn’t have much time to think about the war. The talk on the air was a hunting party up and coming with Evelyn Napier bringing a guest. Normally this would be routine and standard. Cook the brownies, pour the punch, brush the horses, and put the gentlemen to bed with a nightcap.

Of course, one of the gentlemen coming was an asshole, and he didn’t want a nightcap unless it involved the serving cup of Mary Crawley’s vagina.

Christ, Thomas hadn’t thought of Kemal Pamuk for years, but what he could remember did not paint a delightful picture. Pamuk had been haughty, snide and egotistical. He’d known his looks were charming, and he’d used his charisma to weave his way to Lady Mary’s side. After having watched Lady Mary blossom into a strong and self-reliant woman, Thomas had grown rather fond of her (it didn’t help that George was his favorite). Now that Lady Mary was in danger of falling victim to a scandal, Thomas wasn’t happy about it.

It was two days before the hunt, and Thomas was focused on working hard to keep Carson happy. It resulted in him being exhausted, often having to turn in early lest he fall over and crack his head against the doorframe of the silver pantry.

Tomorrow would be the day before the hunt, and as a result there would be much to-do regarding riding clothes being brushed and horses being prepped. Thomas’ role as the first footman would be vital. He’d be fetching and carrying for everyone from dusk until dawn.

But par the moment he was given reprieve, allowed to go to bed slightly early by Carson who had been bizarrely sympathetic to him… it might have had something to do with the fact that Thomas had nearly fallen asleep with his head against a silver serving tray.

He’d dressed for bed, and was on his way to the bathroom for a glass of water when he came across Bates in the hall. The man seemed to be in a bit of pain, wincing against the wall with a bead of sweat lacing his forehead. It was bizarre, and caused Thomas to pause.

“…Mr. Bates?” He called out. Bates realized he was being watched and straightened up, doing his best to erase the look of pain from his face. Thomas, however, wasn’t so easily fooled.

“Mm. Ready for bed?” if Bates was trying to avoid the obvious, he’d find Thomas a difficult man to shake.

“Almost. I was going to get another glass of water-“ Thomas paused before he could get to the crux of the matter, taken aback by the sight of a hardware bolt on the floor. It looked like something that might go on a piece of machinery. It glimmered in the dull candlelight of the hall eaves, and seemed to have been dropped there by accident. Thomas bent over and scooped it up, curious at its polished texture. It seemed to have blood on it, or perhaps it was just a type of oil?

“Is this yours?” Thomas asked, quite confused. He held the bolt out for Bates to see. Bates grimaced, as if caught.

“Yes. Yes it is.”

“What’s if for?” Thomas was quite curious, running his fingers carefully over the slick surface of the
Bolt, “I can’t recall any hardware like that in his Lordship’s valise.”

“Just a bolt for the underside of my bed.” Bates said. He was backing up towards his bedroom door, as if nervous to be in Thomas’ presence. “I have to repair it.”

“I can help.” Thomas offered. God only knows, Bates shouldn’t be getting on his knees with his war wound.

“No.” Bates wouldn’t hear a word of it, ever the martyr. “That’s quite alright.”

But even as Bates made to open his bedroom door, intent on heading inside, he paused and hissed in pain. Thomas was taken aback, cautious at the tormented expression which flickered for a second over Bates’ rugged face. What on earth was wrong with him? Was his leg really acting up that much?

 “…Are you quite alright?” Thomas asked.

“Mm.” Bates nodded, though Thomas didn’t believe him for a moment. Bates tried to change the subject, leaning against his doorsill to get his weight off his bad leg, “You were brave to speak out for Gwen the other day.”

Thomas scoffed, unwilling to be called brave for Gwen’s sake. The girl was an idiot for allowing O’Brien to find her typewriter in the first place, “Hardly.”

“Hopefully some good will come of her enthusiasm.” Bates said.

“It will.” Thomas knew for a fact that she would gain her job and would promptly leave them all behind in the dust. “She’s smart, and she knows what she wants in life. I’ve no doubt she’ll leave service soon and set off on her promising career.”

Bates smiled, “You’re more optimistic than usual.”

“Not really.” Thomas had never been called optimistic in his life and she doubted that she would start now. “I just have a feeling Gwen in particular has nothing to worry about. Which is more than I can say for some.” He narrowed his eyes, still wary of how much pain Bates was actually in. Was it his leg, or something else?

“Well…” Bates stepped inside his room. “Best crack on.” He held out his hand.

“Goodnight.” Thomas gave him the bolt, but paused as Bates’ fingers lingered carefully over his own. It was one thing to hand off a small bolt that might slip. It was another thing to tenderly caress another man’s fingers when you knew him to be a homosexual.

“Goodnight, Thomas.” Bates said. He shut the door, leaving Thomas blinking owlishly in the hall.

The next morning was a hustle, with all hands on deck. It was the day before the hunt, and the main demand was for clothing. Jackets had to be washed, dried, ironed, and brushed. Riding hats had to be shined; boots had to be polished. Even the whips and spurs had to be shined up for company. As a result, Thomas spent much of his morning fetching for both Carson and Mrs. Hughes. Of course, he wasn’t given much reprieve afterward; apparently Anna was looking for him upstairs on the gallery floor. So up Thomas went, leaving William to polish the riding spurs and whips for his
Lordship and guests. It was still far too early for the family to be up, so the gallery floor was quiet with only a few of the maids pilfering about to fetch linens before the ladies woke to bathe. Anna was running up and down the hall, pausing to look into one cupboard after the next. In her arms, she carried a black riding jacket and hat which clearly belonged to Lady Mary. She called out to him, abandoning her cupboard to meet him at the stairs.

“Thomas–! I need an extra set of hands.” She begged, “Have you seen Lady Mary’s riding britches.”

Queerly enough, he had, if only when he’d been showing Bates the cedar cupboards in the attic. “I have. They should be in his Lordship’s riding valise in the cedar cupboards.” Thomas said.

Anna was taken aback, “Why ever are they there?” She had to pause to re-fix her white crest, which was starting to droop from all her floundering about. It would need to be repined to avoid a smack from Mr. Carson.

“I can’t remember but I think Lady Mary said she didn’t want to ride for a while?” Thomas was scrambling at straws, just as clueless as Anna.

“Oh honestly.” Anna rolled her blue eyes; apparently she’d heard this complaint before, “The way she takes on you’d think it was a chore. If I was asked to ride a horse, I’d jump on the chance.”

Thomas smirked at the idea of Anna trotting away. She might be good at it; who knew? “You’d have to jump on the horse first.” Thomas teased.

The pair of them headed off down the hallway. Anna needed a bit of help juggling her full load, so Thomas took the jacket and hat away so that Anna could re-pin her hat. As they paused, Mr. Bates appeared from his Lordship’s dressing room, sweating profusely and white as a sheet. He had his Lordship’s own riding jacket over his shoulder.

He was grimacing in pain again, unaware that Thomas and Anna had seen him.

“Mr. Bates!” Anna called out to him. Bates panicked, straightening up at once and re-fixing his expression into something normal. Thomas scowled; honestly how thick did he think the pair of them were? “Are you alright?”

“Fine.” Bates said, “Can I help?”

“His Lordship’s riding valise.” Anna said, “Do you have it?”

“It’s in the attic.” Bates said.

“I’ll fetch it.” Thomas decided, handing Anna back her jacket and hat.

“No, no.” Bates shut the door to his Lordship’s dressing room, his face steely with determination, “I’ll get it.”

“You look ready to fall over.” Thomas said.

“I can get it.” Bates refused to take a hint. Thomas looked to Anna, imploring her silently to do something. If anyone could talk some sense into Bates, it was her.

“Why not let Thomas help you?” Anna asked. “It’s a lot to carry, after all.”

Bates was pinned between the pair of them, unable to deny one without denying the other. Thomas gestured for Bates to follow; they’d just have to go slow and keep Bates’ ailment in mind. “Come
“You have a secret passageway?” Anna asked, curious.

“Boys only, Anna!” Thomas tapped his nose, giving her an impish grin. She could not help but laugh, amused at his chipper attitude.

“Well, that’s put me in my place.” She teased. She watched them go, with Bates and Thomas heading down the hallway back towards the green baize door.

Bates was walking slower than normal, and no matter how patient Thomas was trying to be eventually he was bound to crack. Thomas was not a prolifically patient man. He liked progress and results, and he certainly didn’t enjoy being taken for a mug.

“You’re hurt.” Thomas said as they reached the green baize door. Thomas held it open for Bates to allow him to pass through first. They started up the stairs towards the attics, with Bates pausing every few steps to wince, “I can tell.”

“Nothing,” Bates brushed it off, “Just a bit stiff today.”

“Well let me get the valise and I’ll bring it back here—” Thomas urged.

“I keep telling you, I can manage.”

Well he could keep talking all he liked. Thomas was a man of action, not words: “I tell you what. Thomas said, stopping on the stairwell so that Bates was forced to pause as well, “I’m going to walk at my normal speed, essentially running away from you, and fetch the valises. And there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” He grinned evilly, a foot already up to mount the next step.

But a hand shot out and caught him by the wrist, warm fingers tight over his cufflinks as a smooth thumb ran gently over the fleshy mound of Thomas’ palm. It made his heart stop.

Thomas looked about, shocked to find Bates holding his hand so tenderly— and in such an open area too! Anyone could pass them by in the stairwell!

“Are you sure about that?” Bates murmured. The smile, growing upon Bates’ lips, was making Thomas heart begin to pound in his throat.

Embarrassed, confused, and more than a little turned on, Thomas pulled his hand free of Bates’ grasp to flash him a coy smile: “Gotta catch the fish to eat the fish.”

He took off up the stairs, taking them two at a time to leave Bates in the dust. He called out after Thomas but it would do him no good. There was no way he’d be able to catch Thomas; slightly smug at his athletic prowess, Thomas ran to the attic door and flung it open to scale the stairs in the dark. He nearly tripped twice, toes catching at the edges of the abnormally steep stairs. When he made it to the top, Thomas paused for breath in the steamy air, fishing for a spare candle in the gloom. He found both a holder and matches on the top of nearby step stool, but no candle to light or place; damnit someone must have taken the light away.

Tisking, Thomas crossed the attic in the dark. Unlike Gwen, he wasn’t afraid of the gloom, and knew where his Lordship’s riding valise was hiding. Sure enough, the valise was by the cedar cupboards, with a leather whip resting alongside. Thomas squatted down, plucking up the whip to let it play against his hands.

He tested the tongs against the palm of his opposite hand, swatting himself carefully.
He wondered what it would be like to use this whip in a sexual setting. He closed his eyes for a moment, his mind immediately conjuring up the image of Jimmy beneath him, spread out on a bed like an angel upon a cloud… like some kind of divine sweet meant for the upstairs.

He’d let his hands smooth over the swell of Jimmy’s backside, listening to the telltale sounds of Jimmy whispering for more. He’d swat him, but lightly. Just enough to tease him, not enough to hurt him.

He’d beg to be hurt in the end.

“Mm.” Thomas sighed, slowly returning to himself. What a thought… what a thought, indeed. But Jimmy wasn’t here, and wouldn’t come waltzing over the doorstep until 1919. Even then, Thomas would have to survive the war first… that was a guarantee just because he’d done it once before.

“Boo.”

Thomas cried out, absolutely shocked to have been snuck up on by Bates of all bloody people. The whip fell from his hands as he whirled around, stumbling and falling on his backside and hands. Bates was heaving for breath, sweating profusely and clearly in pain as he groaned and sunk against a wardrobe. He was grinning, which was bizarre. People normally didn’t smile when they were in pain.

“How did you get up here?” Thomas demanded. “Did you run?”

“Not entirely-“ But Bates had to pause, perhaps swallowing down a bit of bile that had risen in his throat. But why? What on earth was wrong with him? Why was he in so much pain? Even for a man with a limp, this was getting a bit out of hand.

“Bates—John—“ Thomas reached out, grabbing the man by the shoulders when he began to stoop. “What’s wrong with you? You look awful.”

Bates opened his mouth, probably to make another excuse, but then he just let out another groan. Thomas pulled his hands back, amazed to find that they were beaded with sweat even through the man’s suit. I mean, to be fair it was blazing hot in the attics, but Thomas wasn’t sweating through his suit so why was Bates? Was it really all because he’d been running about?

Jesus Bates needed to get into shape, then.

But Thomas’ snide irritation to Bates’ swelling stomach was put aside when he noticed that Bates was actually bleeding along the lower hem of his trouser leg. Nothing horrific, but still spotting!

“Jesus Christ!” Thomas hissed, stooping forward to try and lift the hem of Bate’s trouser leg. He was stopped, firm hands atop his own; Bates refused to let him see the wound, whatever it was. He seemed ashamed, which made no sense. Thomas had known Bates for nigh on thirteen years (not that Bates was aware of it) and Thomas had never known him to feel shame. So what on earth was going on?

“What’s wrong with your leg?”

“It’s nothing-“

“For fuck’s sake John-!” Thomas didn’t even know what to say anymore; he was starting to get truly angry. There was a fine line between being a martyr and an idiot and boy did John Bates like to toe that line.
“I can handle it—“

“Can you?” Thomas cut him off. Bates’ eyes, usually warm, now were tinged with humiliation. He seemed unwilling or unable to look away from Thomas. Thomas didn’t quite know what to make of that. He could feel the hairs of Bates’ lower calve prickling against his skin. His skin was incredibly warm, flush with blood.

“…I’ve thought the same of things before.” Thomas murmured. He wondered if Bates could understand the implication behind it all. “Thought that I could handle it.”

The black market run. The problem with Jimmy. The issues with Baxter. The attempt at conversion therapy and…?

“I never could.” Thomas admitted. “Maybe I’m weaker than you?”

Bates just shook his head.

“It’s…” Bates paused.
He never finished his sentence.

The pair of them sat, looking like fools, with Thomas holding Bates’ calve and Bates attempting to finish his sentence in vain.

There was something hungry in Bates’ eyes. It looked like longing and it made Thomas’ stomach twist into knots.

Thomas suddenly realized what that look meant, and it shocked him. Bates wanted to kiss him; Thomas had seen the same look on other men’s faces before. It was that mixture of terror and hope. The fear of being caught out and the tiny prayer that maybe your feelings would be reciprocated.

“…We should…” Bates paused.

What? Kiss? Fuck? Stop this right now?

“Go downstairs.” He finally finished.

And, Thomas had to admit, Bates had a point.

Their return downstairs was a slow one. The bloods on Bates’ trouser leg wasn’t really obvious unless you were crouched down and looking, but Thomas still knew it was there. With that in mind, Thomas carried both the valise and whip, allowing Mr. Bates to go free handed back down to the gallery floor. Anna was still waiting, but she’d moved from his Lordship’s dressing room to a spare gallery room which was often used as a dressing room for the ladies. The only ladies present this early in the morning, however, were Gwen and Anna.

Course, Gwen was sitting on the bed and sniveling with Anna standing over her and patting her back.

Bates paused at the door with Thomas just over his shoulder. Once again, he felt like he was intruding in a moment that wasn’t particularly meant for him. It was so strange, to imagine that Gwen didn’t want to throttle him anymore. She still didn’t like him full outright, but she seemed to be warming to him, and it made Thomas slightly ill. Gwen, in particular, was fresh on his memory after her stupid little luncheon in 1925.
He knew it was wrong to blame her but... it still disgusted him. To know she would later deny to Lady Mary that she'd worked as a maid.

“What’s up?” Bates murmured, his voice soft and unsure.

“Oh-” Gwen sniveled, wiping at her face with her dirtied handkerchief, “I’m just being silly.” She paused, noting that Bates had Lord Grantham’s riding jacket over his arm. Behind him, Thomas stood with the rest. “You should get that brushed.”

Bates looked over his shoulder, catching Thomas’ eye. He stepped into the room, leaving Thomas out in the hall until Bates gestured from him to head in. Still feeling horribly out of place, Thomas stepped just inside the door so that Bates could shut it and sequester the four of them inside. Thomas bristled, hiding in the corner of the room so that Bates and Anna could comfort Gwen alone.

“He won’t be up for another half hour, now what is it?” Bates urged.

Gwen sniffed, her face still wet and her voice a scratchy mess, “I suppose I’ve just realized that it’s not going to happen.”

“What isn’t?”

“None of it!” She whimpered, her bottom lip quivering wildly. Anna rubbed her back, consoling her silently as Gwen poured her heart and soul out to Mr. Bates. “I’m not going to be a secretary. I’m not going to leave service. I doubt I’ll leave here before I’m sixty—”

“Hey…” Anna wouldn’t hear word of it, “What’s all this?”

“That’s not true, Gwen.” Thomas said. The idiot would be gone before the end of 1914.

“Oh, you saw their faces, and they’re right.” Gwen moaned piteously. “Oh— look at me! I’m the daughter of a farm hand. I’m lucky to be a maid. I was born with nothing and I’ll die with nothing —”

Bates didn’t want to hear another word of it: “Don’t talk like that- You can change your life if you want to. Sometimes you have to be hard on yourself, but you can change completely. I know.”

Bates’ honorable speech, however, was cut off by another audible wince. Bates turned his face away, trying to hide the pain from the others, but it was obvious that something was amiss even to Gwen who was still wrapped up in her ennui. Thomas, eager to give Bates a moment to recover himself, took center stage. He took a tentative step forward, and did not miss the wary eye that Gwen gave him.

“…Gwen…” Thomas didn’t quite know how he wanted to word this. “I never thought I’d tell you this but… theres’ something I need to say. Don’t let them make you the victim. Mm?”

It was the same words that he’d spoken to Edward Courtenay, but of course Gwen wouldn’t know the significance.

Gwen sniffed, wiping underneath her eyes, “Thought you were the one to make victims.” She mumbled.

Well of course he was. It was better to make the victim than be the victim. Course, that had been Thomas’ line of thought in his prior life, and look where that had gotten him. Maybe he’d been wrong. Maybe it was better to simply avoid being a victim at all, and to not inflict that horror on others.
“… All my life, they have pushed me around because I was different. All my life.” Thomas shook his head, mystified at the ugly insanities the world could offer. Gwen blinked, taken aback.

“After a while, you find yourself asking, do you want to be the hammer or the nail? Turns out both options are awful. Just… try not to get in those situations. But if you are, for god’s sake Gwen… be the hammer.” It was so much better than being a nail, even if others might beg to differ. Thomas knew it first hand; after all, being a nail had driven him to suicide… and consequently had sent him back in time. “Don’t make my mistake, yeah?”

Gwen didn’t know what to say. Anna was likewise was speechless. Bates took over once again, finally able to control him facial features and hide the pain that he was obviously in.

“Take her upstairs.” Bates offered, “Dry her off.”

Anna took Gwen underneath the arm, and helped her to stand. They left the guest bedroom, with Bates opening the door so that they could head off for the attics. Gwen would be fine, Thomas knew it for a fact. She just needed to catch her breath, and remember her own strengths. Sometimes it was hard; the world could feel very crushing at times.

As Bates and Thomas watched the pair of them retreat up the hall, Bates looked to Thomas with an enchantingly warm smile: “Hammer and a nail, eh?”

But then he winced, the tiniest grunt of pain passing through his lips.

“Alright-“ Thomas snapped, “I saw that.”

But just as Thomas thought he would be able to corner Bates and get some answers, Mrs. Hughes came up the hall. She seemed to have caught Bates’ pained expression as well, for she looked quite concerned.

“Mr. Bates, what’s the matter?” She asked.

“Not a thing.” Bates lied, hiding his pain once again, “I’m fine.”

“Let me help you?” She tried to take Lord Grantham’s riding jacket away, but Bates wouldn’t help her.

“I’m perfectly alright, thank you Mrs. Hughes.”

“Are you sure?” She wasn’t buying it, looking from Thomas to Bates, “You’re as white as Thomas.”

Oh ha ha ha.

“That’s my wonderful complexion.” Bates joked back, “Inherited from my Irish mother.”

With that, he walked off, leaving both Thomas and Mrs. Hughes behind. Thomas watched him go, quite somber to see how Bates limped savagely even with his cane. Something was wrong with his leg, and even with Lord Grantham backing Bates up, he would still have trouble fulfilling his duties as valet if he didn’t get better soon.

Thomas felt quite sorry for him.

“Is he alright?” Mrs. Hughes murmured. Thomas shifting the valise a little better in his grip, the handle slightly slick with sweat.

“I don’t know.” Thomas admitted, “But I’m worried. I’m very worried.”
She scoffed softly, “It’s not like you to care for others-“

“Please.” Thomas cut her off, his voice hard. She paused, reproachful. “Don’t say that. Because it’s not true.”

To hear Mrs. Hughes try and insist as such made him feel physically ill.

~*~

“Six o’clock!” George the hall boy shrieked, hammering his fist upon Thomas’ bedroom door. Beneath his covers, only visible by his nose and eyes poking out from beneath his duvet covers.

“Fuck me.” Thomas’ voice was gravely from sleep, “Here we go.”

It was the day of the hunt, and rest would come to no one. From the moment that Thomas could button up his waist coat, he was running to keep up with Mr. Carson. William, in turn, was running after Thomas. Even with newfound generosity, Thomas was unable to keep every job to himself. He needed William’s help to get the horses ready and the food out front. The family was dressed to the nines, presentable in their riding clothes, and the downstairs smelt strongly of brownies and hot wine. Mrs. Patmore was snarling orders at Daisy, who was tripping over her own shoe laces in an attempt to keep up. The maids were running for their lives, forced to hide in the shadows but still preparing guest rooms for Evelyn Napier, Kemal Pamuk, and others. The bachelors corridor was full of life, with linens being replaced and furniture being dusted. Thomas and William were in the thick of it all, serving dishes to guests and keeping the horses in check.

As first footman, it was Thomas’ duty to take turn with the brownies. William, as second footman, was given charge over the mulled wine. Mr. Carson was upstairs, prowling the gravel front to make sure all the gentlemen were getting along well as the groundsmen got the hunting dogs ready.

If Thomas paused in the stairwell to split a brownie with William, he’d never tell a soul. The pair of them had to hastily cram the sweet into their mouths, hassling up the stairs before Carson realized they were late.

The dogs were delighted, baying and jumping in large groups. They were barely being contained by their handlers, weaving through the legs of massive steeds atop which gentlemen were sat. They were dressed to the nines, hats cocked and hair smoothed in pomade. The whole lot of them needed to be served, so Thomas made an enormous circle around the group, offering brownies to everyone who looked interested. The hounds were delighted, eager to get an ear scratch from Thomas.

He’d be willing, usually, but he had to be careful lest he drop the Grantham silver. Carson would never forgive him if he did; he’d be out in the stalls sleeping with the dogs before it was all over.

“Alright, alright-“ Thomas gave one or two a scratch with his free hand, eyes locked on his own tray lest it began to wobble. “Easy now-“

More guests were trotting up, coming up from the village where a few had boarded overnight in a hunting lodge. Among them was Evelyn Napier and Kemal Pamuk. Thomas could not help but
stare, despite all that he knew about Pamuk. The man was unbelievably attractive, which irritated the hell out of Thomas; what would he give for Pamuk to be as ugly on the outside as he was within? Pamuk was already making eyes with Lady Mary, tipping his hat and shooing off her protector, a man hired by Lord Grantham to follow Lady Mary on the hunt in case she fell into trouble.

The man was annoyed, calling out after Lady Mary as she trotted away with Pamuk and Napier. It would do him no good, either way.

“That must be him.” William said, noting to Pamuk who was practically riding circles around Napier.

“Watch out for that one, William.” Thomas warned. The pair of them headed back inside as the groundsmen rounded up the hunting dogs. They followed after the hunters, baying delightedly at the chase before them. Mr Carson was now shepherding William and Thomas back inside. One stage of the hunt was down, but another was about to begin. They would have to get silver ready for tonight’s supper, as well as help with the preparations of the dinging room. As they descended the servant’s stairwell, empty platters in hand, Thomas had to pause so that William could right two silver cups that had accidentally fallen upon his platter. It was difficult to balance them when they were empty.

“Do you not like foreigners?” William asked as they continued on down.

“It’s nothing like that.” Thomas didn’t give a tit about foreigners… just arseholes. “Let’s get these back downstairs.”

The hunt lasted for several hours, which was a godsend for the downstair’s staff. In the momentary lull, they had an usual tea break (they would find no ease after their guests arrived back). Even O’Brien was too tired to complain, which meant that tea time was mercifully quiet. Thomas almost fell asleep in his chair, taking a moment to close his eyes as he rested by the fire. He was awoken by William, who shook him on the shoulder two minutes before Carson walked in and caught him in the act. Able to straighten his face and appear normal, Thomas slid underneath the radar.

After tea, it was straight back into the fray. William waited by the front door to receive any guests while Thomas hassled up the hall boys to wipe and polish all silver that would be used for supper that night. Coal scuttles were filled, lamps in use were trimmed, and hot water was prepared for baths when the riders would inevitably return home. Glasses likewise needed to be washed in a special solvent of salt and lemon. Card tables were pulled from the attics to be prepared for evening delights, which Thomas left to the hall boys so that he could sharpen knives for dinner with a Kent’s machine. It was a precarious process, and one which Carson left only to Thomas despite his initial higher trust in William. Thomas had steadier hands and a sharper eye, being the son of a clockmaker. All the knives had to be washed and wiped before going into the machine, lest they clog the machine with grease. Even the slightest smudge could result in catastrophe, so Thomas washed thoroughly nearly nicking himself once or twice. Once they were finished in the Kent’s machine, Thomas washed them again and placed them back in their velvet holders to transport the whole lot in a basket. Though Thomas did not tell Mr. Carson, he likewise sharpened the tips of the dinner forks.

It was by sheer good timing that Thomas’ duties were neatly finished before the end of the hunt. He ventured upstairs, sorting the silverware for dinner, only to be called into the main hall by Mrs. Hughes who gestured with a sharp hand so that communication could be made without saying a word. Being a servant was like working behind the black curtain of a theatre.

Thomas ventured into the main hall, watching as William opened the door for Lady Mary, Evelyn Napier, and Kemal Pamuk. The three of them were muddy but blissful, with Anna at Lady Mary’s back to gently help her out of her coat and hat. William attended to Evelyn Napier, so unfortunately
it was Thomas’ lot to take away Kemal Pamuk’s riding coat and galoshes. He accepted both without a word, keeping his head down.

“Home is the hunter, home from the hill.” Lord Grantham praised. While he’d ridden, he hadn’t gone on the hunt. Thus, he’d arrived back early with several older gentlemen and was already dressed in fresh clothes. “Goodness, you have been at the wars!”

“Papa, this is Mr. Pamuk.” Lady Mary introduced the pair, “My father, Lord Grantham.”

“How do you do, My lord.” Pamuk was smooth, but he wouldn’t be fooling Thomas. Lord have mercy, Anna was starry eyed, hiding behind a pillar and gaping at Pamuk’s good looks.

“Did you have a good day?” Lord Grantham asked.

“Couldn’t have been better-“ But Pamuk was still side eyeing Lady Mary. The sodding nerve of the man, to flirt with a woman in front of her father!

“This is Thomas, sir.” Mr. Carson said, so that Pamuk turned around and gave Thomas quick jerk of the head. “He’ll be looking after you.”

Thomas said nothing, where before he’d made an attempt to be charming. Now, Thomas knew exactly who he was dealing with, and showed Pamuk no favor.

“You remember Mr. Napier?” Lady Mary smoothly changed tactics, turning Napier to her father so that the pair of them could take up. Thomas, however, wasn’t paying attention. He was too busy keeping back, and watching as Kemal Pamuk asked for a bath. Thomas led him upstairs, Pamuk’s coat swinging over his arm. It would have to be cleaned and brushed, unless the idiot went and died a second time. Thomas was determined not to show him into Lady Mary’s room; who knew? Perhaps the fool would be able to escape with his life.

Pamuk was being kept in the red room, a bachelor’s chamber that was equipped with dark tapestries and charming wallpaper. Thomas drew him a bath, and stayed out of the way, instead rolling out a grooming kit and laying out Pamuk’s clothes for dinner. He brushed Pamuk’s jacket, ironed his waistcoat, and polished Pamuk’s cufflinks for when he was finished with his bath. It was Thomas’ job to shave Pamuk, though he didn’t have much in the way of whiskers. Pamuk was free with his body, walking around half naked as he relaxed in an arm chair so that Thomas could carefully wash the foam from his face and curve his hair into a side part with pomade.

He dressed Pamuk, never once saying a word. Pamuk seemed off put by his silence, clearly used to people fawning over him. When Thomas did speak, he kept his sentences short and to the point.

“Am I to expect after dinner entertainment?”

“Yes sir.”

“I enjoy observing art. Will the galleries be open?”

“Yes sir.”

As Thomas helped Pamuk into his ironed waistcoat, the conversation took a turn for the peculiar. This time, Thomas refused to flirt or give sway.

“I’m relying on you to see that I go downstairs properly dressed.” Pamuk teased. Thomas did not
even meet his eyes, instead heading around the back to check that the waistband of the inner jacket wasn’t too tight. It could snap if pressed against the spine of a chair while under tension.

“Yes ir.”

“I put myself in your hands.” Pamuk said as Thomas fetched his bowtie. “I trust they’re up to the task.”

“Yes sir.”

Thomas did up Pamuk’s tie, determined not to look the man in the face, even then. Pamuk, however, was looking for an edge.

“You don’t need to be nervous with me, Thomas. I assure you I’m not a heathen.”

Thomas glanced up, and found Pamuk wearing a charismatic grin. He did not return it.

“I would never insist as such, sir.” Thomas said, straightening Pamuk’s bow tie. “I’m just a quiet man.”

“In that case, how long have you worked here?” Pamuk asked.

“A few years, sir.”

“Then I suppose you know the house well?”

“Yes sir.”

“I’m going to need your help tonight.”

He looked up again, and found Pamuk’s dark eyes gleaming with mischief. Though Pamuk had no idea, Thomas already knew what he was after. Pamuk wanted him to show the way to Lady Mary’s bedroom. Last time, Thomas had been blackmailed into the affair. This time, he would be refusing flat out.

Just in case, though, Thomas offered Pamuk one last chance to prove he wasn’t a total dipshit. “Yes sir?”

“The geography of the house is foreign to me.” Pamuk said, checking his hair in the mirror, “I may want to visit someone tonight, and if so I’ll need you to show me the way to their room.”

_Cocksucker._

Thomas said nothing for a moment, keeping his face completely blank. Pamuk noticed Thomas’ hesitation, and jumped on it.

“I can offer you money.” Pamuk assured. He walked over to his valise, and pilfered through to pull out his wallet. He offered Thomas a crisp English note, no doubt aware of how poor Thomas must be.

“I’m paid for my services to Downton, sir.” Thomas said, turning away to carefully put back together his grooming kit. As far as he was concerned, Pamuk could sort out his own cufflinks.

“I suppose you are.” Pamuk said. Thomas could hear the disappointment in the man’s voice. He didn’t give a single shit, turning back around with the grooming kit tucked under his arm.
“If that’s all sir, I’ll leave you to dinner.” Thomas said. “Please alert Mr. Carson if you have any more requirements.”

As he made a beeline for the door, he was paused by Pamuk reaching out to grab his elbow. His grip was painfully tight, and made Thomas pause. The same hand that had offered him dirty money would now clearly be used to threaten.

Thomas did not turn back around, eyes narrowing.

“I assume I can have your silence on this, boy?”

Thomas’ teeth ground tight. If there was one thing he absolutely despised, it was being called ‘boy’ by someone his own age. It showed such an incredible lack of respect that Thomas was ready to scream.

Thomas jerked his arm free of Pamuk’s hold, careful to straighten the arms of his uniform before heading to the door. He closed it in Pamuk’s haughty face, having to take a long breath in through his nose and out through his mouth in order to regain control of his temper.

Even so, Thomas would feel bitter about it all night.

Still, with the assurance that Pamuk would not have his support finding Lady Mary’s bedroom, Thomas thought his troubles were essentially over. He took care of supper, hosted drinks afterwards, dressed Pamuk for bed, had his own dinner, and then went to bed absolutely gobsmacked. Everything seemed to be going according to plan, with Pamuk not asking him for help twice and Mr. Carson happy with the evenings proceedings. Thomas managed to bathe, but just barely, and instead forwent brushing his teeth to go straight to bed. He fell asleep, with his covers down around his hips, too hot to truly want to burrow beneath. He slept without a shirt that night, sweaty from the day’s work and the recent bath. He curled up on his side, snoring softly into his pillow with only his flannels on his wrists and his pants to keep him company.

He later regretted his lack of dress quite deeply when he was woken by a hand being pressed over his mouth.

His first thought as he jerked back into the world of the living was that Pamuk had found his room in the attics and was coming to kill him for not agreeing to silence. He jerked, crying out though his voice was muffled, and threw both hands out to try and strangle Pamuk back. What he found instead, was a slim lily white neck and a head full of long blonde hair.

He blinked awake, deeply confused, to find Anna above him in her housecoat. She was pale, and frightened. Why in the hell was she on the men’s side, in the middle of the night with her hand over Thomas’ mouth?

What was more, she was not alone. Next to Anna, shaking and sweating, was Lady Mary. Her normally polished hair was coming down in brown waves, tousled and loose. She seemed more frightened than Anna, her hands up around her mouth and her fingers trembling. It was one thing to have Anna wake him up in the middle of the night. It was another thing to be woken by Lady Mary.
The family never came to wake a servant in the middle of the night, not unless it was for an absolute emergency. Clearly Mary had gone and woken Anna first, but why had Anna thought it pertinent to come and get Thomas?

What in the literal shit was going on?

Thomas stopped struggling, going silent and limp so that Anna slowly pulled her hands back from Thomas’ mouth.

Well aware that he was essentially half naked in front of two unmarried young women, Thomas quickly snatched his coverlet up to hide his chest. He took a moment to calm himself, controlling his breathing; his eyes flickered back and forth between Anna and Lady Mary.

“Is this real or am I dreaming?” Thomas whispered. Given the circumstances, it seemed a valid question to ask.

“It’s real.” Mary whispered back, point blank terrified.

“…What’s happened?” Thomas asked. Surely it couldn’t be Pamuk! Thomas had refused to show him to Lady Mary’s room, so how on earth could he have gotten his rocks off and died?

Unless… maybe Pamuk had died in the hallway instead.

“Come with me.” Mary gestured; she barely made a noise as she moved and spoke.

Anna was kind enough to fetch him an undershirt from his bureau, handing it over so that Thomas could shrug it on and avoid being flat out naked. Thomas didn’t bother with a housecoat, still much too hot to be comfortable with more clothes. He’d always been hot natured, even as a child.

The three of them left the attics, with Lady Mary leading the way. While she was in her nightgown, it seemed to have been shrugged on without thought to how it hung upon her frame, as a result, her breasts were almost showing near her armpit, and her housecoat was falling off her shoulders. They descended to the gallery floor to find it absolutely bare. Everyone else was asleep, and thank god for it. Thomas still felt slightly naked in front of Mary and Anna, particularly in his undershirt. He was certain Anna had never seen so much male skin in all her life, but after seeing Thomas’ bare chest she couldn’t be anymore traumatized, could she? Lady Mary, on the other hand, was too shaken up to put much notice into what Thomas was wearing.

They approached Lady Mary’s bedroom to find the door slightly ajar. Lady Mary opened it, allowing Anna and Thomas to slip through. Inside, it was pitch black, save for a tiny sliver of light which came in through the heavy velvet curtains. Thomas carefully shut the door, jostling the handle so that the door made no sound against the sill.

Anna fumbled with a candlestick on Lady Mary’s bedside table, striking a match to show light in the room. Thomas gaped at what the thin flame showed.

Pamuk was naked, laying on his stomach in Lady Mary’s bed. Arse hanging out, mouth ajar and eyes glazed, the man was surely as dead as a doornail. Thomas didn’t have a damn clue how on earth he’d gotten into the room, but suddenly felt like he’d been horribly played. He’d done his part! He’d kept Pamuk away! Why now was he still here?

Jesus Christ it was enough to make him want to chew on a tin can and spit out a nail. he sighed, exhausted and bitter, running a hand through his unkempt hair.
Anna was shocked; she’d successfully seen a naked man and a dead body all in one night.

“This… is insane.” Thomas whispered, slowly coming around Lady Mary’s bed. “How could this have happened?”

Lady Mary was ready to cry. Thomas waved her off, desperate for her not to make a single noise. Anna patted her tenderly upon her back, consoling her in her shame.

“You don’t understand,” Thomas whispered, “Earlier tonight before dinner he wanted me to show him where your room was and I said no. I knew he was keen on you but I figured if I didn’t tell him he wouldn’t be able to find you. So why now is he here?” He gestured from Lady Mary to Pamuk. Maybe she could shed some light.

“Someone else must have told him!” Lady Mary was just as clueless as he was. Thomas carded a hand through his hair again, thinking intently. Maybe Pamuk wasn’t dead-?

He stooped down, sitting on the side of Lady Mary’s tousled bed to carefully take Pamuk’s pulse at his bared jugular vein. The room stunk of sweat and sex, an aroma well known to Thomas after his conquests with Philip. The sheets were damp to the touch, and he gingerly kept his hands away from the incriminating evidence, slightly nauseas.

There was no pulse. Thomas turned Pamuk’s head upon the pillow (not an easy task) and turned up Pamuk’s upper lip to see that the gums were blue. What was more, Thomas could not feel any breath against his finger when he stuck it near Pamuk’s widened nostrils.

The fucker was dead. He cursed softly, looking back around to Anna and Mary who were waiting with baited breath.

“Yeah.” Thomas nodded, “He’s dead alright.”

Mary was ready to have an anxiety attack. She was shaking wildly, tears spilling down her beautiful porcelain cheeks: “I’m ruined. I’m absolutely ruined—“

“No you’re not.” Thomas refused to give the idea any credit. Mary would overcome this and fall in love with Matthew Crawley. George would be born; Thomas was determined. “Not yet.”

He stood up, taking the top sheet of Lady Mary’s bed and carefully wrapped Pamuk up to conceal his nakedness, “We’ve got to get him out of here. Back to his own bed."

He grunted, pushing Pamuk over so that he was laying on his back. Anna was clearly nervous about touching a dead body; Thomas did not force her to help, instead using the wrapped top sheet to drag Pamuk over to the side of the dead.

“Thomas, don’t, he’s too heavy—“ Anna protested.

“Even for you, the bachelor’s corridor is too far.” Mary added. “You’re going to need help.”

“No, you’ve already gone through enough tonight.” Thomas had been through the war. Pamuk wasn’t nearly as heavy as some of the men he’d carried through the trenches of Flanders. “Just get the door, and I’ll handle the rest.”

“Are you sure?” Anna whispered, frantic as Thomas picked Pamuk up beneath the knees and shoulders. Thomas braced his feet, just like the army had taught him, and lifted Pamuk up.

He heard Mary hitch a breath, clearly thinking Thomas was accidentally going to drop him and wake
up the whole house. Instead, Thomas merely straightened his posture and used Pamuk’s weight as a balancing beam.

He would need to go slowly, but he would be able to make the journey without much trouble. Unlike Mary and Anna, Thomas had years of lifting and carrying on his side.

“Yeah.” Thomas grunted under the strain of the weight, “Get the door?”
Anna fetched Pamuk’s dressing gown and opened the door wide for Thomas to pass through.

In the end, Thomas lead the way down the hall with Mary and Anna behind him. They were cautious, peering around every corner before Thomas made the turn. They were frightened of being found out, and who could blame them? The sun was slowly starting to come up, surely close to the hour of five, and soon enough Daisy would be running about to fetch the fires. The first time around, Daisy had seen Lady Mary carrying Pamuk away.

This time, Thomas was god damn determined not to be caught. If only Anna and Mary would let him go faster-! But Anna was afraid and Lady Mary was riding on the hems of a terrifying scandal. If she got found out now, all three of them would go down. For christ’s sake, was a shag really worth all of this?

Then again, was Thomas really one to talk, being a flagrant homosexual?

The turn of the of the bachelor’s corridor was ahead of them. If they just made it around the bend in time, they would avoid disaster. Daisy would light the fires in Lord and Lady Grantham’s bedroom first, as was required by their status in the house. When they finally reached the corner and Mary poked her head around to check the coast was clear, Thomas saw the green baize door starting to open.

“Watch out-!” he hissed, stepping into the shadows of the bachelor corridor before Daisy could see them. It was quite plausible she’d caught the tail wind of feet disappearing, but Thomas prayed he was wrong.

Lady Mary and Anna trailed behind him as Thomas headed for Pamuk’s room. Anna got the door, and Thomas slipped inside. Once again, they were in the gloom. Anna lit another candle; the light was poor but Mary didn’t need much to turn down the covers. Thomas laid Pamuk back in bed, gesturing for both Lady Mary and Anna to get back so that he could take off the bed sheet without the others seeing his genitals.

Well, to be fair, Mary had gone and fucked him so it wasn’t like she was going to see anything new, but Anna was still innocent and Thomas wanted her to remain that way. Anna turned her back, folding up Mary’s top sheet so that it was in a manageable square.

Thomas glanced down at Pamuk, oddly pleased to note the man didn’t have a dick to write home about. And to think, he’d walked around like a fop; Thomas was bigger than him, as was Philip… not that that was all that mattered, but it gave him smug satisfaction.

Thomas situated him upon the pillow and laid the covers about Pamuk’s body. It wouldn’t do to make it look too neat, so Thomas made the act careless. At least this way it would appear like Pamuk was tossing and turning before he died.

He panted, catching his breath from the strain. Lady Mary sniffed, still wiping away tears. Thomas fished through Pamuk’s valise, pulling out a handkerchief so that she could take care of her face.
“Thank you.” She whispered. Her voice was thick like she was suffering from a head cold.

Thomas took Pamuk’s house coat from Anna, draping it over the back of his sitting chair for lack of a better place to put it. Free handed, Anna was able to comfort Mary fully; she was trying to close Pamuk’s eyes, but couldn’t keep them shut. It was making her hysterical, though she kept a lid on her sniveling. She was probably in shock by this point.

“…I can’t make his eyes stay shut-“ Lady Mary hiccuped.

“Won’t work.” Thomas murmured, for he’d been around too many dead men to fool himself into thinking Pamuk would be pliable. He’d been dead for far too long. The sun was rising, and Pamuk’s body was going rigid. Mary looked around at him, her eyes swollen with tears.

“He’s goin’ rigid.” Thomas explained softly. “Let’s come away from here. I’ll have to pretend to be surprised in-“

Thomas glanced at Pamuk’s clock, which kept merry time ticking away on the mantle over the hearth. It read 5:33.

“Well, in a few hours anyways.” Thomas mumbled. It seemed he wouldn’t be getting back to bed.

“He was so beautiful—“ Mary wept against Anna’s shoulder as Anna helped her away. Thomas drew Pamuk’s bedside curtains, hiding his body from sight. It brought them very little comfort in the end, the air still reeked of a dead body.

They gathered at the door of Pamuk’s bedroom, the only light between them Anna’s sole candle and what faint vestiges made it through the window curtains. In the soft gloom of pre-morning, Mary’s tears turned into fear once again. She looked up at Thomas again, suddenly seeming to see him for the first time since fetching him from bed.

“If anyone ever finds out…” She couldn’t seem to find words ghastly enough to voice the conclusion, “We will face a scandal of such magnitude it will live on long after all of us are dead. Every door in London will be slammed in my face-“

“No one will find out.” Thomas promised her, catching her eye and holding it as best he could. Mary didn’t seem to believe him just yet, but she’d see in time. She’d survived the scandal the first time, and she’d make it through the second round just as clean.

“Anna won’t tell, and neither will I.” Thomas said. In that moment, he could have sworn in that moment that Anna was looking at him with newfound respect.

The pair of them seemed shocked that Thomas wouldn’t go running his mouth. But didn’t they see? Thomas was in the cosmic position to understand Mary’s problem perfectly. He too had to be afraid of people finding out about his sexual history.

“For god’s sake,” He hissed, keeping his voice down lest he be overheard by anyone passing near the door. “You both know what I am.”

Mary’s eyes widened on reflex. “Believe me, I’ve had trouble with a man like that before.” Thomas jerked his head in Pamuk’s direction. “He was an awful sort.”

“Was he?” Mary wondered. “He seemed wonderful to me.”

“He was wonderful to you because he wanted to sleep with you.” Thomas whispered, “But I guarantee you he’d have turned out a menace in the end.”
Mary nodded absently, carefully wiping her eyes again with Pamuk’s handkerchief. “Did you ever kill a man by sleeping with him?” she mumbled, possibly stabbing for a joke.

“Not that I’m aware of.” Thomas said. God only knows, he’d had dangerous days in his youth. “But I doubt it was you that killed him. We don’t know who he was, we don’t know what he ate, or how he lived. It was probably a heart attack or something. And god only knows what they eat in Turkey. The English diet could have shocked him.”

“I agree with Thomas.” Anna said. She seemed grateful for his optimistic attitude. “It wasn’t you.”

But even as Anna patted Mary’s back, Mary began to cry again.

Thomas could not lie, he felt terribly sorry for Mary in that moment. In a way the pair of them were oddly similar. Above stairs, she was considered icy and emotionless by her family. But Mary had incredible resiliency and resourcefulness in her arsenal. Thomas was much the same. There were things, however, that you really couldn’t prepare for… like the guy you were fucking dying on top of you.

Thomas reached out an arm, and allowed Mary to lean against him. She lay her head against his collar bone, sniveling against his skin. Thomas could feel her tears moistening the hem of his undershirt. Thomas felt nervous about touching Lady Mary so intimately, when they really were nothing more than servant and mistress. But Lady Mary, like Lady Sybil didn’t treat servants like inferiors… particularly when she knew them well (like Anna).

He ran a hand through her hair. It was silken and soft, even when tousled by sleep. Anna leaned against Lady Mary’s back. Together the pair of them kept her warm.

Anna put Mary to bed after that, and the pair of them walked together back to the attics. They were exhausted from the early rise, and greeted only by the hall boys who were already up and dressed to fetch coal and logs for the fires. Thomas returned to his room alone, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, and dressed for the day knowing full well it would turn out weirder than normal. When Thomas finally wandered downstairs for breakfast, he drank several cups of black coffee to try and jerk himself awake. He wasn’t the only one who was exhausted; just across the table, Anna kept yawning into the back of her hand. Bates, sitting next to Thomas, was none the wiser if only because he was clearly in pain and hiding it. At the head of the table, Mrs. Hughes looked about at her staff, utterly confused as to why they were all so off sorts.

“Come now,” Mrs. Hughes tutted, “The hunt wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Thomas said nothing, well aware that the day was about to take an insane turn. Breakfast was a quick consumption of porridge, eggs, and toast. By the time Thomas was finished and the red boudoir bell hadn’t rung, Mr. Carson looked over his shoulder at the calling board irritably.

“Must not be used to rising early.” Mr. Carson muttered.

“Perhaps it’s different in Turkey.” William spoke up.

Thomas looked up, catching Anna’s eye across the table. She seemed nervous, as if wondering how he would pull off this earth-shattering performance.

“I’d better go wake him.” Thomas said, rising from his seat and pushing his chair back in. He yawned again, unable to stop himself.
“You’d do well to wake up yourself.” Mr. Carson warned.

“Yes Mr. Carson.” Thomas mumbled sleepily, walking around the table and heading into the kitchens to fetch a breakfast platter. There was no point in taking one up, but if Thomas failed to keep to a normal schedule Carson would be automatically suspicious. He found the kitchen bustling with life, save for Daisy who was standing in the corner scrubbing copper pots. At least, she was meant to be scrubbing them. Instead, she looked pale and withdrawn. When she saw Thomas in the doorway of the kitchen, she looked even more pale.

Thomas wondered for a moment if Daisy actually had seen something… but she couldn’t have? They’d been so damn careful, and Thomas had been making sure the whole way Daisy wasn’t on his tail.

Then again, the green baize door had opened just as he’d rounded the corner of the gallery. What if she had seen something, no matter how meager or small?

Thomas would have to keep an eye on her… but there wasn’t much more he could do until she revealed her hand. He was attempting to be kinder, this time around, but if Daisy was the weak link Thomas would still have to deal with her and make sure she kept silent.

“Don’t dawdle!” Mrs. Patmore barked, gesturing to the fully laid breakfast tray before her, “Take it, take it!”

So Thomas did, walking at a clipped pace up the servant’s stairs all the way to the gallery landing. He could hear Lady Edith in her room, speaking to Lily, a maid who often helped her to dress in the mornings. As he continued on down the hall, taking the curve to the bachelors corridor, Thomas likewise heard Evelyn Napier yawning from his own room. William would be getting the call to dress him soon.

Thomas reached Pamuk’s bedroom door, and knocked (just because he could) entering in to find the room muddled in gloom and reeking of death. He shut the door behind him, carefully laying the breakfast tray atop the bureau so that both hands were free.

Thomas walked around Pamuk’s bed, casually pulling back the bed curtains. Pamuk was still laying there, slack jawed and glassy eyed.

“Oh Mr. Pamuk?” Thomas teased softly, “Your breakfast is here. Do you want it, you little shit cake?”

Pamuk said nothing.

“Mmm, what a shame, guess I’ll have to eat it myself with my filthy homosexual lips.” Thomas leaned in, so that he and Pamuk were face to face, barely inches apart.

“But just so we’re clear, you’re a dirty pig fucking womanizing bastard, and your dick’s the size of a pencil.”

Pamuk offered no objection or argument.

Thomas straightened back up, coughing a bit to clear his lungs of the smell of death. He looked left, he looked right, and feigned an expression of horror as he put a hand over his forehead.

“Help!” He called out, a weak tiny voice that barely broke wind. “Someone help!”

Naturally, no one came. Thomas looked back down at Pamuk, shrugging disconcertedly.
“Oh well.” He said, “I did call for help, you know. Guess nobody wants you alive.”

Pamuk was silent, perhaps made mute by the horror of being such a disgusting bastard. But he was cutting it close. If he wanted this to look unplanned, Thomas would now have to flat out run.

So he did.

He schooled his face into something close to shock, maybe with a dash of fear, and fled Mr. Pamuk’s room, slamming the door behind him. As he ran, he passed William coming up the way with a breakfast tray of his own.

“Thomas-!” William called after him, shocked at the sight of Thomas running in terror.

But it was all part of the stage performance. Thomas didn’t stop running, even as he made it to the green baize door. He passed right by Anna and Gwen, carrying linens for the dining hall. Gwen gasped, leaping back so as not to collide into Thomas. Anna just watched him go, wide eyed and amazed at his willingness to commit to the part. As Thomas reached the bottom of the servant’s stairwell, he found most everyone gone from the servant’s table save for a few of the maids, the hall boys, Mr. Carson, and Mrs. Hughes. Mr. Carson looked up from his toast, confused to see Thomas back in the servant’s hall and shocked. Thomas came to the man’s side, bending down to whisper in his ear.

“Pamuk is dead.” Thomas said, then straightened back up.

Mr. Carson slowly chewed on a mouthful of toast, eyes narrowed. He set down his breakfast at once, wiping off his hands and rising from his chair to push it back in against the table.

“Is something wrong?” Mrs. Hughes asked, confused.

“Come with me.” Was all Mr. Carson said.

Mrs. Hughes did so at once, setting her linen napkin atop her unfinished breakfast plate. Together the three of them marched up the stairwell, making a clipped pace, and retraced Thomas’ steps back to Pamuk’s room.

The whole time, neither Mrs. Hughes nor Mr. Carson spoke. It seemed that their time as servants had hardened their senses to any type of scandal. They took each wave in a storm, and rode it out with patience and resourcefulness.

As they reached the room, Thomas opened the door for Mr. Carson so that he could enter first. He did so, coughing a bit in the gloom.

“What on earth is going on-? Why does it smell so horrid in here?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“Stay back.” Mr. Carson warned. Thomas closed the bedroom door, effectively sealing the three of them in. Mr. Carson walked around the bedside to where Pamuk was laying, and laid a finger underneath his nostrils just as Thomas had done. A minute ticked by in unnerving silence.

“Did you find him like this?” Mr. Carson asked Thomas.

“Yes Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, forcing his tone to sound a little shaky as if from nerves. “He… he seemed fine last night. He told me he had a bit of a stomach ache but wouldn’t take anything for it. Did I do this?” His voice rose a bit in horror.
But this was poppycock. Pamuk had never mentioned anything about a stomach ache. Thomas was just playing the edge, trying to keep the acting experience a solid one. Mr. Carson shook his head, pulling out his handkerchief to carefully wipe at his finger. He opened the bedroom windows to let in light and fresh air; Mrs. Hughes crept around the side of the bed, shocked.

“Oh my god!” She was horrified, clapping a hand over her mouth. “What on earth could have happened?! He was completely fine last night!”

“Mr. Carson, I swear—“ Thomas thought of very sad experience he could muster, that of his family abandoning him or the way that Jimmy had screamed at him when woken up with a kiss, “I swear I… I didn’t… I’d never…”

“You did nothing wrong, Thomas.” Mr. Carson assured him, walking across the room to clap him gently upon the shoulder. “We know nothing about Mr. Pamuk’s lifestyle or diet, it could be he’s been ill for a while, and we were none the wiser. Foreigners are strange that way.”

Mrs. Hughes glanced up at Mr. Carson, her expression souring a bit.

Thomas sniffed just for good measure, nodding as if trying to comfort himself with the knowledge that Mr. Carson didn’t blame him for the death.

“What do I do?” Thomas asked. “Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. Anything you need—“

Mr. Carson thought it over, eyes narrowed. “I want you to go to the village, and promptly. Tell Taylor to take you. You’re to go to Dr. Clarkson, and tell him that there’s been a death. Then go to Grisby’s and likewise get one of the Grisby boys to follow you back to take care of the body. It might be a Sunday but they won’t mind coming out for an emergency like this. Tell no one else what you’ve seen, and don’t be hysterical. I will inform his Lordship, and Mr. Napier.”

This was rather peculiar. Carson hadn’t done any of these things the first time around. When Thomas had run downstairs (genuinely shocked to find Pamuk dead), he’d burst in and told the whole servant’s hall so that a slight uproar had occurred. Carson had later chastised him for his inability to keep his mouth shut, and had made Taylor run all the errands by himself. Now Carson was having Thomas do the errands, and seemed to be trusting him on a higher level to avoid scandal.

Thomas was racking up brownie points and it wasn’t even eight in the morning. Cheerio!

“Yes Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, and made to leave at once, only to be stopped by Mrs. Hughes.

“Ah-Thomas—“ Mrs. Hughes gestured to the breakfast tray, “You’d best take that back downstairs as well. She was turning down the covers, only to squeak in affront and hoist them back up.

“Good lord—!” She gasped. “He’s nude!”

She looked to Charles, affronted. “Who on earth sleeps without their clothes?”

“…Maybe it killed him?” Thomas fumbled.

“No, I don’t think so.” Carson grumbled, picking up the breakfast tray and handing it over to Thomas. He took it at once. “Off you go. Go get Taylor and the rest.”

“…Can I have the orange?” Thomas asked, gesturing with a jerk of his chin down at the orange which sat upon Pamuk’s plate, neatly sliced and waiting to be consumed. “It’ll only go bad and I only have one at Christmas. Please?”

“Oh, alright, but away with you!” Mr. Carson grumbled. “As I say!”
Thomas left at once, juggling the tray with one hand to open and shut the door.

Thomas did exactly as Mr. Carson requested, leaving the house through the area yard and crossing the gravel road to the garage where Mr. Taylor was timidly polishing the Grantham car. He was a frail old man, and had already given Mr. Carson his notice to run a tea shop. Mr. Carson had found a replacement (Thomas knew already that it was Branson from the past but no one else was yet aware), so Taylor was growing slightly more lazy in his routines. One couldn’t blame him, the poor man was in his seventies and exhausted. Apparently he’d been serving the Grantham family since before Robert Crawley’s birth. If anyone had earned their rose tinted retirement, it was him.

“Mr. Taylor—” Thomas called out to him, causing him to pause mid-swipe of the polishing cloth. He looked up, gray hair gleaming in the morning sunlight. He was almost bald, his hair so thin you could see through to his scalp. “The Turkish diplomat Kemal Pamuk has died. Mr. Carson needs us to fetch Dr. Clarkson and Grisby. I’m to go with you.”

“Good lord!” Taylor was much too old for a shock like this. He threw his polishing towel upon a work bench, and immediately opened up the passenger door for Thomas to climb up. “What on earth killed him?”

Taylor got into the driver’s seat, starting the car so that the motor spluttered to life and began to cluck along. They drove from the garage, taking a left on the gravel road to travel along the side path till they reached the adjoining front drive and could continue down the Abbey’s grassy slopes towards the dirt road ahead.

“Who knows.” Thomas sighed, feigning sadness though in reality he didn’t give a half shit. “Every day is precious, Mr. Taylor.”

“Quite right, Thomas.” Taylor said. “Quite right.”

The pair of them journeyed into town with haste, and collected both Dr. Clarkson and Mr. Grisby of Grisby and Sons. Someone was always on hand at the funeral home; today it was Grisby senior’s oldest son and the heir of the mortuary. He was a quiet man with steely eyes, and Thomas had heard rumors in town he wasn’t a man to be messed with. Thomas supposed you got a sordid reputation when your clients were mainly the dead. Dr. Clarkson was more interested in pestering Thomas with questions, curious as to how and why Pamuk had died without warning. Thomas set the story up well, claiming Pamuk had suffered a stomach ache the night before. He already knew, given the past, that Clarkson would say it was a heart attack which had done Pamuk in. Thomas knew from his time in the RAMC that sudden severe stomach aches could be a warning sign of a heart attack soon to come, as well as pains in the arms and legs.

So was heavy exertion, but that was what you got when you stuck your dick where it didn’t belong.

When they returned to the house, both Grisby and Clarkson followed Thomas back up to the gallery floor through the area yard, taking the servant’s stairwell so as not to disturb the family. By now, the shock had spread all through the house, and as Thomas passed other servants along his trek they looked at him with something akin to wonder. The only one who wasn’t pleased was O’Brien. She was wary, standing outside the Grantham bedroom on the gallery floor holding her ladyship’s housecoat over her arm. She observed Clarkson and Grisby entering the room, but said nothing.
Meanwhile a gaggle of maids lead by Gwen were whispering from the door of Lady Edith’s bedroom till Mrs. Hughes showed up and told them to scatter.

As a reward for ‘doing good’, Thomas was given the charge of tending to the clocks while Mr. Carson saw to the family and William stood at the front door. Everyone knew that Thomas loved clocks, with his father being a clockmaker, and while precarious labor might not have been anyone else’s cup of tea Thomas enjoyed taking the time to clean and sort clocks.

He sat in the area yard at the workbench, a green apron over his livery and his sleeves rolled up to carefully polish the clock that had been in Pamuk’s bedroom. The way he saw it, the poor thing was traumatized. It deserved a good rub up.

Thomas had his plate of orange next to him, and observed it fondly. He was going to take his time, eat each piece slowly, and savor it as best he could. It was a rare occurrence that Thomas got a chance to eat an orange. They were too expensive to be eaten with any type of regularity, normally saved for Christmas and other holidays. Just the smell alone was enough to make Thomas salivate.

As Thomas continued to polish the distressed clock, the area door opened to reveal Anna and Gwen. They were accompanied by Mr. Bates, and William. Thomas glanced at the clock to note that it was time for servant’s tea. No doubt they were wanting to gossip without Mr. Carson overhearing.

“Thomas-!” Mr. Bates sat down next to Thomas at once, wincing audibly at the pain in his leg. “Mr. Carson said you were out here.”

“Taking tea?” Thomas asked.

“Mrs. Hughes wouldn’t let us bring our cups outside, but we wanted some fresh air.” Anna explained. She was the quietest of the group, looking pale still.

“Sit.” Thomas gestured with an arm to the work bench. It would be a little cramped but they could all join. “Share my orange.”

“Why do you have an orange?” William asked, sitting on Thomas’ other side. Anna and Gwen took the seats across from him.

“Well, it was already sliced for Mr. Pamuk’s breakfast tray; it’ll only go bad if someone doesn’t eat it so I asked Mr. Carson if I could have it.” Thomas said, slightly sheepish at the peculiar expression which crossed Williams’ face. “And don’t look at me like that. I know it’s a bit selfish but I’ve had a tough morning.”

He caught Anna’s eye. She was starting to smile again.

“We wanted to ask you what happened?” Gwen asked. Anna reached out, taking a slice of orange for herself. Bates and William happily followed suit. Unfortunately, there was only four slices, which would leave Gwen with none.

Damnit.

Thomas noticed Gwen’s longing, and looked once more to the orange. Fuck it he really wanted the orange.

But this was what it was all about, wasn’t it? Self-sacrifice, trying to do better… and though Thomas thought Gwen was an idiot she was also still on the fence about his new character.

So Thomas gently slid the ceramic dish across the table, offering the final slice to Gwen.
“Have you had one?” Gwen asked, unsure.

“No.” Thomas wouldn’t lie. “But I figure you need one. Call it good luck for your interviews.”

Gwen was genuinely shocked at Thomas’ goodwill. For a moment she simply stared at him, but finally longing gave out and she took the orange up.

“Thank you, Thomas.” she said, reproachfully. “I didn’t expect you cared about me.”

“You’d be surprised what I care about.” Thomas teased. Bates, in the spirit of charity and goodwill, offered Thomas half of his own orange slice.

“Want the rest?” Bates asked.

“Oh god yes.” Thomas said at once, snatching the piece from Bates’ fingers. The others chuckled as Thomas tore into it at once, sighing as the citrus burst on his tongue.

“Cor but that’s nectar.” Thomas sighed, closing his eyes momentarily as he licked his lips.

“So what happened?” William asked eagerly. “He looked perfectly healthy last night!”

“Well, we don’t know what he was like.” Thomas said, “Or what he ate while he was on the road. His diet in Turkey might have been a shock compared to English food. And we don’t know if he was already unhealthy when he came to the house.”

“He had a good color about him.” Gwen said, defensively.

“Last night he told me he had a bit of a stomach ache.” Thomas said. Gwen was surprised at this. “Maybe it was a heart attack.”

“That’s what Dr. Clarkson thinks.” Anna said. Thomas caught her eye again, noting the tiny smile on her lips. She was playing lightly with the husk of her orange peel, allowing her fingers to dance over the sweet orange rind. “Grisby’s gone with Mr. Taylor to fetch a hurst. They’re taking him to London on a train.”

“I can’t imagine the smell.” Gwen muttered softly.

“They’ll probably put him on ice.” Thomas said. After all, who wanted to handle a bloating corpse?

“It makes my stomach turn.” William grumbled. “To think of a body on a train carriage. Imagine all the times we get on trains! What if there was a body in the same compartment and we didn’t know it.”

“Well, death is a part of life.” Thomas said gently, “And I’ve never seen a body come off the back end of a train; it’s probably very discrete and dignified.”

“When my father died in Wales, they brought him home by train.” Bates spoke up. Thomas looked around, curious. Bates was resting against the table, leaning with one elbow. His sleeves were rolled up, and a small frond of dark chestnut hair was against his temple.

“I’m sorry to hear he passed.” Anna said kindly.

“It was twenty years ago.” Bates said. Thomas nodded, listening intently as he continued to polish. “They put him on a train and brought him home in a pine box. We buried him the same day he arrived. It wasn’t pleasant, and I can tell you that.”
“I had an uncle who died in his chair.” William said, looking about the table, “Finished his book and his cup of cocoa, laid his head back, and died right there! My father found him three days later when he didn’t show up for work.”

Thomas’ only experience with death came from his grandmother’s passing. She’d died in agony, cancer the doctor had said, but the doctors had been prepared and she’d been taken away the same day that she’d died. Of course, there was another awful tale in town, of an old spinster who’d died in her house and hadn’t been found till six months later when the smell had begun to reek through the windows and door.

“Poor clock.” Thomas murmured softly, turning the clock about so that he could gently polish its glass face. “What an awful thing to see.”

“I don’t think the clock could see it.” Gwen scoffed.

“I grew up with them.” Thomas explained to the table, slowly buffing the glass with a polishing cloth, “I understand clocks. They’re like little people. That’s why I wanted to polish this clock first. I think it needed a bit of tender care after seeing Mr. Pamuk die.”

“It seems to be in a good enough mood to me.” Bates joked. Thomas elbowed him gently in the side.

“Don’t rush the grieving process.” Thomas teased. The others laughed along.

But even as they sat, enjoying one another’s company, Thomas felt Bates’ hand creeping once more along his thigh. He said absolutely nothing, his face never flickering from a smile even as he continued to polish. The only acknowledgement to the touch was how his hands slowed in their work, thinking intently as Bates let his fingers gently drum upon Thomas’ toned thigh.

He looked at Bates, catching the man’s eye. The smile Bates had in that moment was nothing short of adoring.

And just like that, Thomas knew what Bates was trying to say.

~*~

It was the elephant in the room, and it needed to be addressed.

Thomas spent the day in a slight daze after that, helping Carson to serve dinner to the family while the Dowager Countess joined their throng. She was just as shocked as the others at Pamuk’s death, but blamed it (like Carson) on the man being foreign. Thomas wondered if she was aware that English men died too, but she seemed completely ignorant on the Thomas as Thomas bent to serve her grilled trout with lemon and rosemary sprigs.

It was easy to dissolve himself in his work, thinking intently on how Bates had touched him and looked at him. Bates was clearly either infatuated with him or eager to discuss topics Mr. Carson would rather go unsaid. Thomas had been burned too many times, and didn’t want to suffer again. At the same time, he’d be insane to ignore the signs by this point. This was 1913, and men simply did not put their hands on other men’s thighs without good reason. Thomas had never known a man to touch him on the thigh and not want a fuck or suck.…
But Jimmy had scarred him for life, even if Jimmy hadn’t come to the house yet.

That night, supper was a morbid affair. Carson wanted no discussion of Pamuk at the table, but it was impossible to keep the maids quiet. Thomas and Bates sat next to each other, eating left over fish from the upstairs. Thomas honestly preferred his fish fried and joining a side of chips, but he wasn’t going to pass up high class salmon just because it wasn’t battered. As he ate, he watched the others carry on about Pamuk, tossing out ideas that he might have been murdered. Carson shot this down point blank, warning the others not to even contemplate such ideas lest they start conspiracies.

Underneath the table, Bates’ hand was back on his thigh.

Thomas slowly slipped his left hand beneath the table as he ate, sitting down his fork and picking up his teacup to take a long sip. Doing his best to keep his face blank, Thomas slowly let his left hand lower down atop of Bates’ own.

He felt Bates stiffen for an inscrutable second, and then relax. Shockingly enough, Bates began to intertwine his fingers with Thomas’ own.

Thomas’ heart began to pound in his chest as he slowly ran his fingers over the fleshy mound of Bates’ sweaty palm. He carefully began to swipe his thumb back and forth, doing his best to be loving even while keeping his movements small. As a result, Bates held his hand all the tighter.

*What are you trying to say?* Thomas wondered. He could feel Bates’ eyes upon his skin, causing his neck and cheeks to flush with slight embarrassment. *Do you actually like me? Or is this just friendship?*

Thomas left the servant’s hall with more questions than answers that night.

As he mounted the stairs to the attic, Thomas kept his thoughts to himself. He bathed, eager to wash the stink of Pamuk’s death off his skin and the grease from his hair. He brushed his teeth and dressed for bed, all the while wondering at Bates just across the hall. It could all be some ugly coincidence, with Bates merely using Thomas’ identity as a homosexual to be more friendly than normal. It could be nothing short of platonic (if a very touchy platonic at that)…

Then again…

But even as Thomas sat at his desk, mulling over papers full of memories from the past that he hoped to change, the sound of a man grunting in pain caught his attention.

That was Bates, no doubt in pain from his leg.

It was late, and most everyone was in bed save for Mr. Carson. If ever there was a time to confront Bates, it was now. With his heart beginning to pound again from anxiety, Thomas rose from his chair to leave his room.

He found Bates leaning against the door frame of his own room, grunting softly and clutching at his kneecap.

“Allright.” Thomas grumbled, shutting the door to his bedroom so that the two of them were in the hall alone. Bates whipped around, shocked to find Thomas watching him. Thomas waved him off,
slightly stern, “No more putting me off. I know you’re in pain and I know you’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing-“ Bates urged.

“I think I’ve told you once before.” Thomas carefully crossed the hall, till he and Bates were side by side, “I’ve had things be nothing before.”

He took liberties, reaching out to open Bates’ door so that they could enter into his room. Bates let out a long sigh, for some odd reason terribly depressed in that moment. For a split second, Thomas had a stab of terror at the thought that he’d read everything wrong until Bates gestured for Thomas to enter ahead of him.

“I hope you have a strong stomach.” Bates whispered.

“You’d be amazed.” Thomas teased.

Bates entered his bedroom last, and shut the door behind them. Bates room was a combo, with two beds though one was unused. Thomas’ bedroom had been much the same when he’d arrived, but Thomas had taken one of the beds out in an attempt to give himself more space (this had irked Mrs. Hughes at the time if he remembered correctly). Bates’ side of the room was cluttered but cozy, littered with personal affects such as pictures of family and a burnt candle with a book that he was clearly reading before bed. Bates sat down upon the edge of his cot, which was covered with a deep red quilt he’d surely fetched from one of the cupboards. Thomas stood before him, arms over his chest, waiting patiently to see what Bates would do or say.

Bates was terribly embarrassed, though he had no reason to be. Thomas could see the shame in his eyes, and it irked him. Bates reached down, and began to tug up the leg of his dirtied trousers. Flecks of blood were coming through the tweed, barely visible unless you knew what to look for.

Bates pulled the leg all the way up to the kneecap, allowing Thomas to see everything. Thomas gaped, his irritation fleeing to be replaced by nothing short of sheer horror.

“Oh…” Thomas didn’t know if there was a word in the English language to compare to the mangled mess of John’s leg.

A bizarre instrument was binding John’s flesh to the point of bruising and bleeding. Bolts were digging into the purpling skin, which was now mottling over with ugly puce and green. It seemed that Bates, in an attempt to try and ‘cure’ his limp, had bought into some shanty nonsense of putting his leg in a torture instrument. As a result, he was close to garnering an infection. Antibiotics had still not been invented yet (even in 1925 they’d been rare); if Bates got an infection, he might very well lose his leg.

Thomas dropped to his knees before Bates, reaching out with trembling hands to try and see how the contraption was screwed on. It seemed to be operating on six shifting bolts, which circulated the hoop rings at interval points. If they all came off, the hoops would probably have no support and likewise fall.

“Oh-“ Thomas shuddered, hurriedly unbuttoning his pajama top so that he was clad only in his undershirt. His arms were bared to the cool night air, though it was still quite stuffy in the attics. “I have medical training-“

“From where?” Bates asked, confused. Thomas could hardly say ‘the war’ when he was too young to have been in the Boer War and the world war hadn’t come up yet.

“I picked up a few things before my time at Downton.” Thomas kept it as vague as he could. He
rose, crossing to Bates’ bureau atop which sat a porcelain wash bowl. Thomas used Bates’ pitcher to pour it full, then lay a flannel inside so that it could soak. He carried the whole lot back over to Bates’ side, careful not to let any water spill upon the wood. He crouched down back at Bates’ side, setting the bowl upon the floor, and washed his hands hurriedly to reach up for Bates’ leg once more. Bates jerked back.

“It has to stay on.” Bates implored. “It’s correcting my limp—“

“Correcting it?!” Thomas demanded, gesturing to where the bruised skin was beginning to crack with puss, “John, it’s making it worse! And even so, you don’t need to correct your limp! It’s just a mild inconvenience, it’s not like you’re walking around with half a leg-“

“I’m as good as.” Bates was glum.

“I won’t listen to this-“ Thomas had heard ramblings from mad men before in the war. “It’s coming off.”

“Thomas, don’t-“

“You better bite down on something.” Thomas warned, leaning forward to take hold of the bloodied bolts. “This is probably going to hurt like a bitch.”

Bates ground his jaw tight, eyes closing.

“Go on.” He growled, sounding rather like a bear in that moment, “I can take it.”

Thomas gave Bates a few seconds to steel himself, then began to loosen the bolts.

It was a terribly slow process, mostly because every bolt that came loose resulted in a trickle of blood that Thomas had to wipe up with the flannel. Soon, John’s washing bowl was stained red and the flannel was surely ruined. Thomas continued to wipe and clean, counting the bolts as he placed them by his side. There were twenty-four in all, and when they were finally free Bates was beginning to sweat from the exertion. Now the hoops were merely stuck with blood and scabs. Thomas carefully began to pull them off, using the wet flannel to moisten John’s skin so that it wouldn’t be so painful to un-stick. When the last bar finally came away, it revealed John’s leg as a colored, swollen mess. Thomas suddenly felt terribly sorry for the man, and pulled back so that he could pick up the washing bowl in one go.

“Stay here.” Thomas warned. “I’m going to get fresh water.”

“Why?” Bates mumbled. He looked up at Thomas, his eyes glistening and unsure. It was the first time Thomas had ever see Bates look so weak, and he wasn’t too sure what to make of it. It made him feel slightly frightened; the dynamic between the two of them had always relied on Bates being the strong one and Thomas being the one to make mistakes.

“… I think you know why.” Thomas whispered back.

He left Bates, reproachful and vulnerable, and went to the bathroom to wash out the dirtied flannel. He would have to get a new one; he couldn’t use the same to help clean Bates’ leg without risking infection. He knew that Mrs. Hughes had a medical kit in her office (nothing to write home about but at least it had salves and wraps). Of course, Thomas would have to be careful not to get caught if he were to fetch it. He didn’t know how he’d explain himself to her, or to Mr. Carson, without revealing Bates’ moment of weakness. The last thing he wanted to do was bring the man any more embarrassment.
In only his undershirt and pajama bottoms, Thomas crept downstairs. 

The stairwell was dark and deserted. The landing was just the same. Thomas could hear Mrs. Patmore, by her lonesome in the kitchen. She was humming a tune to herself, no doubt working on the menu for tomorrow while she had a moment in the quiet to think. On his bare tip toes, Thomas snuck down the hallway. He could hear Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson sharing a nightly sherry in Mr. Carson’s office. They were talking about the death of Pamuk, gossiping where no one could hear:

“Of course, anyone who’d want to poison him would have to get Mrs. Patmore.” Mr. Carson was saying.

“It must have just been his diet.” Mrs. Hughes was just as clueless as he, “But how I’ll keep the maids from gossiping about it is beyond me. I heard Lily crying about it earlier-“

Well, Lily was an emotional creature; she cried when Mrs. Patmore skinned rabbits in front of her. Thomas approached Mrs. Hughes office and slipped inside. It was like solely by an umber lamp on her side desk; there were papers scattered atop her workbench and a few papers loose upon her guest chair. She was in the middle of settling a few accounts for the house, paying grocers for the extra food orders a hunt always entailed.

Working fast, Thomas slipped around Mrs. Hughes desk to crouch down. He opened her drawers, looking in vain for her medical kit. Instead, he found boxes of files, a few spare quills and bottles of black ink. He started going through her cabinets instead, opening them to find a few more files. With his back to the door, Thomas just kept opening and rifling, muttering to himself all the while.

“It shouldn’t be so damn hard to find. Where the hell is it-?”

“Well perhaps if you were to tell me, I could help you look.” Mrs. Hughes replied coldly. Thomas jumped, his heart pounding in his throat. He looked around, shocked to find Mrs. Hughes in the doorway. She had her hands on her hips, and was scowling down at him with such fury that Thomas was momentarily terrified he was about to fired.

“Wait-“ Thomas blustered, on his arse and elbows, “I can explain-“

“I should hope you can.” Mrs. Hughes snapped, “I’m a second from getting Mr. Carson.”

“I’m just looking for the medical kit.” Thomas explained. He suddenly realized that Mrs. Hughes could see his wrists and hid his hands upon his back. Mrs. Hughes narrowed her eyes, wary of every move Thomas made. Sheepish, Thomas shut the doors of Mrs. Hughes’ cabinets. “I need some salves and wraps.”

“Why?” Mrs. Hughes asked, her voice stern but slowly beginning to soften. Thomas refused to say, bowing his head.

“If I could just get them I’ll head back to bed-“

“Are you injured?”

“No.”

“Then why do you need the salves and wraps?”

“Someone else is hurt. I’m taking care of their wounds.”
“And you couldn’t come get me because?”

Thomas swallowed, shrugging. “It was a matter of trust—“

“You sneaking into my office behind my back is also a matter of trust!” Mrs. Hughes reminded him, “And I’ll mark you, your reputation isn’t a strong one in this house.”

“Mrs. Hughes, please believe me!” Thomas begged, clasping his hands before her despite how it showed off his flannel bindings. “I wouldn’t do anything to abuse your trust; I know this looks awful but… I’m only doing it for Mr. Bates.”

“Mr. Bates?” Mrs. Hughes expression changed at that. “What’s wrong with Mr. Bates?”

“I can’t say, not without abusing his trust. He didn’t want to tell me in the first place but I made him show me.” Thomas explained. “…I know it looks poorly… but I didn’t want to come and get you. I was afraid you’d ask too many questions.”

“As is my right.” Mrs. Hughes grumbled, “Lest you forget, I am the housekeeper here. Your welfares are my main concern—“

“Please Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas pursed his lips, dropping his hands to his sides to hide them once more behind his back. “Please believe me?”

Mrs. Hughes narrowed her eyes, glancing at Thomas’ lack of dress. “Turn out your pockets?” She ordered.

Thomas did so at once, silent as he showed her there was nothing in his pockets.

Mrs. Hughes walked around Thomas, heading back over to her desk drawers. The top left one was locked, and she pulled a key from her hip ring to check it unlock it and look inside. Content with what she found, she shut it again and locked it once more.

“I wouldn’t steal from you, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas murmured, reproachful.

“I’m afraid I couldn’t take the chance, Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes said. She then opened the top right drawer of her desk, opening it to reveal her white medicine box. She opened it upon her desk, revealing neat rows of rolled gauze, tins of salve, and a few brown glass vials full of god knows what. There was also a pill bottle, with large white capsules rolling around inside.

Mrs. Hughes pulled out two roles of gauze, along with the tin of salve used to sooth cuts. “Will this do?”

“Can I have another roll?” Thomas asked, gesturing to the gauze as he picked up the first two. Mrs. Hughes silently gave him another. Thomas stuck it all in his pockets so that they were now bulging.

“Will you tell me what’s wrong with Mr. Bates before you go?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“…He’s done something to his leg.” Thomas explained, “That’s all I can say. I’m just going to help him put it right. I think he would be hurt if others found out.”

“He’s a proud man.” Mrs. Hughes agreed, closing up her medical box to put it back in her desk drawer. She shut it and locked it, threading her fingers and laying her arms atop her desk to look at Thomas plainly. There was no love in her eyes, not yet… but Thomas could see that she was at least considering his position which was a blessed relief.
“Thomas, you cannot come into my rooms without telling me.” Mrs. Hughes warned. “You likewise cannot venture downstairs so improperly dressed. If you want to have my trust, you have to earn it.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said.

“Can I have your word you won’t do it again?”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes.”

“And will you promise to come get me if Mr. Bates’ condition does not improve?”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes.” She nodded, seemingly put at ease by Thomas compliance.

Mrs. Hughes paused, noting Thomas’ wrapped wrists. She wore an odd expression, as if she was putting two and two together to come up with eight.

“…Show me your wrists?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

Thomas hid his hands behind his back at once. “… I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because you’d think I’m a loony.”

“And why would I think that?”

Thomas shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest so that his wrists could hide beneath his elbows. “I’m sorry Mrs. Hughes, but my trust is just as hard to earn. And I can’t show you until I know you won’t ring for an asylum.”

Mrs. Hughes seemed slightly hurt for a moment. “You are aware I have a sister in Saint Annes?”

“Yes I am.” Thomas said. It put an uncomfortable knot in his stomach, to think of Saint Annes, Rustington, Briarcliffe, and all the other asylums that dotted across England. He shuddered, involuntarily.

“You can trust me, Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes said. “And if there’s something wrong with you, I need to know promptly. Your welfare is my responsibility, and that makes caring for your health my right.”

“I’m afraid you can’t help me, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said, sadly. “But I’d best get back to Mr. Bates. He’s waiting upstairs.”

Mrs. Hughes said nothing as he left; she wore a worried expression, her lips pursed into a thin white line.

Thomas all but ran for the stairs, terrified of being caught out by Mr. Carson without a proper top on.

When he reached the attics, Thomas slowed down to pant for a moment, catching his breath as he went back to the washroom and filled Bates’ washbowl with clean water.

He returned to Bates’ room, opening the door cautiously to find the man somber and sulking upon his bed. He was holding the many bloodied bolts in his hands, seeming to count them. Thomas shut the door with his backside, pressing against the wood until the latch clicked.

“Got some salve and gauze.” Thomas said by way of explaining his absence. He squatted down in front of Bates again, dampening a fresh flannel and pulling out the gauze and tin from his pockets.
“How did you do that?” Bates wondered.

“I searched Mrs. Hughes’ office. She caught me. I thought she was going to skin me alive.” Thomas mumbled. “But I managed to get a few things without her asking too many questions. She knows you’re hurt thought. She may ask you about it tomorrow. I’m sorry, she wouldn’t part with her supplies until she knew why.”

“I think she was already catching on.” Bates grumbled. Thomas wrung out the flannel, and began to wipe down Bates’ leg. He grunted at the touch, having to grit down again to keep from making a noise in pain.

“Why did you do this?” Thomas asked, washing out the flannel to wring it out again so that he could wipe Bates’ leg again. “Why, when it was such a horrid idea?”

“Maybe I don’t like being the butt of other’s peoples jokes.”

Thomas knew how that felt, but it still wasn’t a good enough excuse to justify torture and infection.

“Sod other people.” Thomas said. He opened the tin, scooping out a dollop of semi-clear paste onto his fingers. It smelt of mint, and while it wasn’t nearly as good as penicillin it still helped stave off mild infections. He began to tend to each of Bates’ open cuts, going slowly lest he cause the man unnecessary pain. “And people aren’t laughing at you. Everyone here likes you.”

Thomas scraped the tip of his finger against the rim of the tin can, popping the lid back on to unwind a roll of gauze. He began to wrap Bates’ let, starting at the top of his calve and working his way down. He ran out of gauze halfway down and had to pick up the next roll. Despite what he’d originally thought, he didn’t actually need three rolls. Two were more than enough to cover Bates’ wounded leg. Thomas tucked the end bit of the gauze underneath an upper flap, making sure that each edge was carefully covered. The gauze rolls were kept wrapped by a safety pin; Thomas used it to make sure that the ends of the gauze stayed put.

His work done, Thomas reached up to John’s knee, and gently unrolled his soiled trouser leg so that the cloth could cover the gauze. Thomas used the wet flannel to clean the tip of his finger, wiping his moist skin upon the cloth of his pajama bottoms.

He looked up at John, finding the man staring down at Thomas with the same adoration as before. It was absolutely bizarre, to be looked at by Bates as if he were an angel.

“…Do you like me?” Bates asked in a whisper. Thomas stared up at him from the floor, unable to keep from smiling a bit. He reached up, his fingers playing upon Bates’ thigh, just as Bates often did when they were sitting side by side at the table.

Bates’ face was growing soft, his brown eyes misting.


For a moment, it seemed that Bates needed a moment to let the words sink in. His eyes grew wide, then warmed again.

And suddenly he reached forward to take Thomas by the upper arms so that he could hoist Thomas from the floor. Thomas went with him, sitting on the edge of Bates’ bed at the man’s unspoken command.

They were thigh to thigh, both their hearts pounding.

Frightened, Thomas began to lean in.
He didn’t know what was going to happen; he played it completely by ear.

But Bates was beginning to lean in too, the pair of them slowly meeting halfway so that their noses bumped for a moment. Thomas could feel Bates’ warm breath upon his face. He was shaking; so was Thomas. In that moment, Thomas couldn’t take his eyes off of Bates, his mind swimming with a million memories of the man that Bates didn’t know existed.

Thomas had felt so much fear in his life before being sent back into the past, and even now there were times when he’d been terrified. But somehow, deep down, he’d known from the start that Bates would protect him. That Bates was the epitome of a good man.

And Thomas wanted to be a good man, so very badly.

Bates leaned forward. Thomas met him head on.

Bates’ lips pressed against his own were warm and soft. Thomas shook against Bates’ arms, even as his hands slowly crept up to cradle Thomas’ face. There were no thoughts in Thomas’ mind, no true motive save to be warm, loved, and safe. As his mouth opened against Bates’ teeth and tongue, he felt his own hands begin to creep up Bates’ arms. Suddenly they were mirroring each other, both of them touching each other’s faces.

There was no way Bates couldn’t feel him shaking.

Their kiss only deepened for a moment; Bates was a chaste type even when kissing another man, and Thomas was too unnerved to go much further. As they pulled back, Bates and Thomas leaned their forwards together so that their noses slid alongside one another.

Thomas would not pretend there weren’t tears in his eyes. Mercifully they didn’t fall in that moment.

“… I…” Thomas was speechless, his voice a throaty whisper, “I never knew.”

Bates crooked the tiniest smile, eyes closing momentarily as he leaned forward again to place another row of kisses upon Thomas’ cheek. When his lips found the corner of Thomas’ mouth again, Thomas accepted the kiss without a second thought.

This time they went deeper. Their tongues slid past one another, tasting of toothpaste and tea; Bates’ hands slid from Thomas’ cheeks to wrap around his back instead. He held Thomas close, and in wordless thanks Thomas tilted his head slightly to the left so that he could allow Bates better vantage into his mouth.

His heart was pounding in his ears. He only faintly registered it was due to a lack of oxygen and not the incredible rush of affection he suddenly felt.

The pair of them had to break apart suddenly, with Thomas gasping against Bates neck. Bates was blushing, a lovely warm hue to his cheeks and neck. He was mystified by Thomas once again, seeming to see something in Thomas’ eyes that Thomas couldn’t register. Whatever magnetism had drawn Bates to him was a shocking thing… and Thomas could only thank god it had given him this moment.

He’d never dreamed of such incredible affection for Bates before. To know that the most respected and honorable man in Downton felt him worthy of a kiss.

Of two kisses.

Of three…
Bates pressed more kisses Thomas’ cheek, whispering in his ear.

“Every time I touch you… I feel whole again.” Bates’ breath was hot and moist against the inner channel of his ear. Thomas shuddered from the sudden sensation.

“You’re already whole, John.” Thomas whispered into Bates’ ear. “There’s nothing about you that needs to be cured.”

Bates pulled back to press his forehead against Thomas’ own. Bates’ smile seemed so cheeky and warm then… it was an incredible to Thomas. Why was Bates smiling at him? Why did he like him?

Where had this affection come from? Was this why he and Bates had butted heads before? Was it because deep down they’d actually cared for one another? Was it because Bates had actually liked him a little at first only to be spurned by Thomas’ churlish attitude?

He supposed he’d never know at this point.


And there was such love in his voice that Thomas could not help but kiss Bates again.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to comment!
Chapter Summary

Thomas is forced to become the bad guy again when Daisy lets her affections get the better of her. The results set off a string of events including a romantic night with Bates, and a terrible act by O'Brien.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I bet you thought I was dead, didn't you?

Well, I wasn't dead. I was knackered from traveling seven days across country. To make it worse, when I finally got back home, my grandmother was admitted the same day to the ER. I've been juggling matters ever since. Thank god though, I'm back to a somewhat normal schedule. So! Here for you is the chapter you've long since been waiting for. I'm officially back to work at commissions as well. I start a new job next week. Once I know my hours better, I'll really be able to churn out chunky chapters again. Thank you so much for your patience and kind reviews! There are no warnings for this chapter today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The idea of being in a relationship with John Bates was a foreign one, but oddly enjoyable when given half a chance.

Thomas had lain with a few men in his time, and most of them would inevitably fall into the category of ‘cad’. The kindest by far had been Philip, and even he had been rather snooty when in a bad mood. John Bates was far from the normal dark horse Thomas desired. He was moral, upstanding, and gentle. The stern nature which often pervaded his working relationships was merely the byproduct of his introverted and shy personality. Bates did not have a large group of friends, despite most everyone enjoying his company. Instead, Bates was nonchalant with a great deal of the house (amicable but distant) and kept his truest companionships under the number of five. Thomas knew just from experience that Bates was most attached to Anna (for obvious reasons), Joseph Moseley (for reasons best kept unknown) and Lord Grantham. Now, Thomas raised the number up to four.

Most homosexual men were quick to jump to lewd acts, but not for the reasons that the prejudiced assumed. It wasn’t that men like Thomas were sexual deviants; they simply didn’t have a lot of time to work with. Relationships between men were often short lived, given societal pressures and the risk of imprisonment. Those that could afford to love their partners for long amounts of time were usually rich enough to avoid the consequences or poor enough not to worry about what others thought. Thomas, a member of the working class, had very little that he could hold to his repertoire in regards to relationships. There’d been a few men he’d known in his youth, his first affair at the tender age of thirteen with his father’s shop assistant, and of course Philip. Philip was his longest relationship, and a great deal of it had been accounted for through writing. Now, Thomas was in the peculiar situation of being in a romantic entanglement with a man sitting next to him at the servants hall. He slept
across the hall from Bates at night, but so far had not been visited by the man under lustful intentions. Indeed, Bates had done nothing but kiss Thomas, and even then, their kisses had been chaste creatures, hidden away from prying eyes in private passageways and his Lordship’s dressing room. What Bates really wanted to do was talk, which was strange to Thomas. Talking had never been a large part of his relationships before.

The fair was coming to town, which was an exciting prospect for the downstairs staff. Normally, life working at a big house revolved around the families affairs. When the season was in swing, the servants went to London. When the family wanted to hunt, the servants went to the country houses. When the family desired to travel abroad, the lucky few required would go with them and bring back stories of distant lands. Besides that, changing scenery was limited and fun was nonexistent. I mean… you could dabble on the piano until you got yelled at or play cards on your tea break, but those options were exhausting when you used them too much.

As a result of the hubbub, a normal trip to the village to collect stamps for Mr. Carson and more epsom powders for Mrs. Hughes resulted in Thomas, Bates, Gwen, and Anna all walking together to get a better look at the tents setting up shop at the edge of the village. Anna fetched Mrs. Hughes’ powders, and Thomas stepped into the post office for stamps. Bates had to post a letter to the manufacturer of the leg contraption which had nearly done him in, and Gwen likewise needed to post letters for her secretary applications. Their errands didn’t take more than half an hour to complete, with the hour close to the servant’s tea time. It meant that they could walk with ease, unbothered as they strolled as a large group around the edge of the village to where the fair was setting up camp. Thomas’ last dally with a fair had resulted in life changing consequences, but that particular fair had been held in Thirsk. He found himself quite nervous of running into the Hechicera again; what if it had been her intention all along to only allow Thomas a small bit of time in the past to alter the events of the future. Would he be forced to return home if she confronted him? What if he snuck around, avoided her gaze, and continued on without her interaction. Would the past crumble around him? Did she hold the power or did he? The whole lot of it was such a topsy turvy nightmare that Thomas didn’t know what to think.

He did know, however, that he did not want to return to the future. He did not want to wake up, old and scarred, flabby and jaded. He wanted to continue in 1913, even if he was a footman and bound for a war.

“When does it open?” Gwen wondered, gazing across the sea of orange and blue tents now speckling the far fields of Grantham.

“Tomorrow afternoon.” Bates said. When the girls had been dithering around the apothecary, Bates had pressed Thomas up against the back wall to gently lay kisses upon his brow and temples. Bates’ pomade and cologne had stuck with Thomas aftwerpards, hiding at the nape of his collar. As a result, Thomas’ cheeks were flushed, and he walked slightly closer to Bates than he normally would. Every so often, their fingers brushed, sending a jolting sensation up Thomas’ spine.

“Well, let’s get up a party in the evening, if Mrs. Hughes lets us.” Gwen decided. “After we’ve had our dinner.”

“You’re right!” Anna agreed, “It doesn’t come often and it doesn’t stay long.”

“What about you, Mr. Bates?” Gwen asked.

Instead of keeping with the normal flow of conversation, Bates sent Thomas a small but affectionate smile. “I’ll go if Thomas goes.”

“Afraid to be outnumbered?” Anna teased with a light hearted smile.
“You’ve caught me.” Bates chuckled. But Thomas knew the truth. Bates would much rather stay home from the fair and snog Thomas senseless in his bedroom than go and miss a secluded night. The idea of being kissed again, with such passion and rigor, put a bounce in Thomas’ step.

“Well?” Anna asked Thomas, “Will you come, Thomas?”

“I dunno.” He teased. “I’ll just have to see. Maybe Mr. Carson won’t let me come.”

“Why wouldn’t he let you?” Gwen asked. Thomas shrugged.

The fact of the matter was that despite slowly rebuilding his reputation in the house, Thomas knew for a fact that Carson disliked him the most of all the members of staff. It was quite possible that he liked Thomas less than O’Brien and that was saying a lot. But it was difficult to have this conversation with others, because people often found fit to deny it. Carson was just an old timer, raised in a different generation… but so was Mrs. Hughes. What was the real difference between them, save that Mrs. Hughes was open minded and Mr. Carson was not?

Yet before Thomas could once again set out on the difficult conversation of Carson’s flaws, he and Anna were brought to a pause by the sight of Lady Mary standing on her own across the row of stalls. She was staring listlessly at what would be the ring toss gallery, observing the shop keepers donating tiny knick knacks for prizes. The top prize was a painted vase, adorned with dark purple flowers. It wasn’t hard for Thomas to envision what was on her mind. Ever since the death of Pamuk, Mary had been abnormally withdrawn from conversation and more pessimistic in her approach on life. Despite no one knowing that Mary had fallen from grace, Mary was struggling constantly with the internal realization that she was not perfect. Particularly in her battles with Edith, Mary often felt herself superior. It seemed that in the realm of chastity and victorian romance, she fell slack.

No wonder she was so quiet now a days.

Anna parted from the group, crossing the fairground to stand by Lady Mary’s side. Thomas, feeling sympathetic, likewise stepped back. The fair stalls weren’t fully erect yet; it was a maze of poles and tent canvases still laying in packs on the ground. Thomas was careful not to drip, sidling between two tents that stood side by side so as to avoid a group of workers hoisting an enormous may pole across the yard. When he emerged on the other side, he was right next to Anna and Mary.

Mary looked about, surprised to see Thomas behind her.

“Thomas.” She addressed him. “I didn’t expect to see you here. Doesn’t Carson need you for something?”

Thomas shrugged. “If he does, no one’s told him, M’lady.”

“Don’t be modest.” Anna tisked, “Carson relies upon you.” There was a cheeky smile on her face that made Thomas’ heart flutter a bit. It felt good to be considered her friend.

“Anna told me about your little performance downstairs.” Mary’s tone was somber, but she was still smiling even if only faintly. “Apparently it was very good.”

“I’m a right little thespian when I want to be.” Thomas said, well aware he was close to being impersonal with a lady.

“Mr. Carson was convinced.” Anna agreed, “And that’s what matters.”
Mary turned away, eyes closing for a moment at the idea of Carson knowing her deepest shame. “If Carson ever knew what I’d done, he’d despise me, I’m certain. If anyone ever knew what I’d done… Mama… Papa… I’d be a lost soul to them all. A broken doll.”

“M’lady-“ Anna didn’t know what to say though, and her voice trailed away in sympathy. Thomas took a different approach.

“Well what do you think, M’lady?” Thomas asked her. “Do you think you’re a lost soul?”

Mary pondered it, biting her lower lip for a moment.

“I don’t know.” She admitted, and Thomas appreciated her honestly, “Maybe in time I’ll be able to look back on it more clearly.”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks, M’lady.” Thomas advised, “You’re the captain of your own ship.”

“Granny would argue that my husband is the captain of the ship.” Mary joked.

“Well you can’t blame her for that.” Anna teased, “She’s of a different generation, M’lady.”

*There went the same old excuse, again.*

Of course, it wasn’t easy for the past to cling on when the future was bursting forward. Out went old Mr. Taylor, taking with him the Grantham’s oldest automobile as a farewell present for seventy years loyal service. It was a rickety ragged thing, but Taylor looked upon it like it was the chariot of Zeus, driving away from Downton Abbey with such joy you’d swore he’d won some type of lottery. In Taylor’s place, arriving on the same afternoon, was Tom Branson.

By god, it was strange to see the man again.

He was young, his face youthful and his hair a solid chestnut brown. The brass tacks of his chauffeur uniform gleamed in the autumn light, and he shook everyone’s hand with gusto. Right from the start, Branson had been boisterous, eager to talk about politics and to make friends. The last time, Thomas had declined to shake Branson’s hand and had instead spent the afternoon smoking in the yard with O’Brien sneering at Branson’s nerve. Now, Thomas shook Branson’s hand when offered and gave him a warm smile. O’Brien was as tactless as ever, declining Branson’s handshake and stalking off to the yard by herself. And so, with O’Brien’s merciless apathy, Branson was christened to the life of Downton Abbey.

After welcoming Branson, Thomas left the man to sort out his cottage before hiding in the silver pantry to polish some of the candelabras for tonight’s dinner. The work was dull but methodical, and offered Thomas as zen like state of mind as he waxed polish in and out of the tiniest brackets guided by an aged pencil brush. William was guarding the front door, and Carson was decanting wine for dinner. Mrs. Hughes was barking orders at the maids, and Mrs. Patmore was attempting to make a soufflé from memory in the kitchen while screaming at Daisy for ‘hiding the flour’. Everything was as it should be, until a soft tap on the pantry door bode the arrival of John Bates. He wore a sneaky smile, and shut the door behind them to offer some seclusion.

Thomas couldn’t help but blush, grinning from ear to ear as he polished.

“Did you meet the new chauffeur?” Bates asked, coming to stand behind Thomas so that he could begin to knead his shoulders with meaty hands. It felt good to be massaged, and for a moment,
Thomas closed his eyes to revel in the sensation.

“I have.” Thomas said. “Nice chap. He’ll do well.”

“I’m glad Mr. Taylor’s retiring.” Bates said, “He’s earned a bit of rest, but…” Bates leaned in, his breath tickling the shell of Thomas’ ear. “I cannot help but notice Branson is rather attractive.”

“Thinking of throwing me over?” Thomas teased. He pretended not to notice Bates, going about his work as if he were alone. Bates did not like being ignored for silver polishing. He reached out to take Thomas’ hand away from the buffering rag, pulling him in so that they were pressed front to back in a queer bent position.

“No.” Was all Bates said. He placed the gentlest kiss upon Thomas’ ear, his lips noisy but soft. He kissed a tiny trial down Thomas’ cheekbone, causing Thomas to shudder wildly at the sensation as he turned his head to the right to kiss Bates full on the lips.

For a moment there was nothing but the pair of them, secluded and sweet. Thomas kept his eyes closed, merely wanting to simmer in the physical contact. Bates pulled back just an inch, and placed a gentle kiss upon Thomas’ brow. Thomas opened his eyes, rather in a daze. Bates was crouched before him, having taken a seat next to Thomas so that they were eye level and quite close. Thomas smiled, leaning in to try and kiss Bates again. Bates was crafty, though, and cut Thomas off with a finger over his puckered cherry lips.

“You’re like honey.” Bates warned. “I could lose myself in you. And where would we be then?”

“You don’t even know what you do to me.” Thomas said. They spoke in whispers, afraid to be heard, their hands clasped together.

Bates brought Thomas’ hand to his mouth, and laid a gentle kiss upon his knuckles. It was a dangerous move to make when Thomas had been polishing silver.

“Will you go to the fair tonight?” Bates murmured.

“Only if you go.” Thomas said. Bates cocked an eyebrow.

“I was thinking I might stay behind.” Bates said, “Perhaps catch up on a book I’m reading. It’s rather captivating. It’s about a footman, wonderful and loving, slowly opening his heart again after being hurt.”

Thomas couldn’t help but laugh a bit. He looked away, his cheeks blistering with embarrassment. Wonderful and loving, was he?

“Think I read that book.” Thomas warned, “Turns out he’s a bit of a cock-up.”

Bates shook his head. Clearly he didn’t believe a word of it.

“No to me.” And he sealed his love with another gentle kiss.

~*~

Ideas of the fair, despite earlier enthusiasm, were beginning to dwindle. Anna suddenly came down with a vicious cold, and was sent back to bed by Mrs. Hughes to keep her sniffling out of the servant’s hall. She would no doubt be the first in a long line of servants who each got sick in turn.
Thomas always seemed to get slightly ill around November when the truly cold weather set in. Par
the moment, snow was still a long way off, so Thomas felt slightly safer than the others. Of course,
the good luck didn’t spread fully around, because with Anna in bed O’Brien was forced to likewise
tend and dress all three Crawley sisters as well as her own mistress. O’Brien already didn’t like doing
the work she was required to do, so asking her to do more work was like forcing peanut butter
through a keyhole… it would happen but not willingly.

Servant’s tea time found everyone clustered in the hall save for Anna, with a plate of biscuits being
passed around. William was prowling about the edge of the servant’s hall, obviously nervous, though
Thomas could hardly imagine why. It wasn’t like there were any important tasks coming up.

William came around the table, bending down to murmur in Thomas’ ear. “Is Daisy going to the fair
tonight with the others?”

“Ask her.” Bates urged, “She’s been glum for a while now hasn’t she?”

William’s chance was quick to arrive as Daisy returned to the servant’s hall with a fresh teapot. She
began to refill cups, working around the edge of the table to top up Gwen, Thomas, Bates, and Lily
on one side before hurrying around to do O’Brien’s. The whole time, William watched her, panic
stricken as he tried to figure out what to say.

“D-Daisy-” William finally spluttered, “I was hoping that you might go to the fair with me tonight.”

Daisy looked up from O’Brien’s teacup, unsure. O’Brien was watching the display with narrowed
eyes, taking every detail in. Daisy glanced at O’Brien, for whatever reason, seemingly to need
support from the older woman. It was bizarre; Daisy had never done that before!

“Um…” Daisy’s eyes flickered hopefully to Thomas, “Are you going Thomas?”

“No, I’m not.” Thomas said, for tonight would be spent in Bates’ room. Daisy frowned, unhappy at
the prospect, and used her carrying clothe to wipe a stray bead of tea from the lip of her pot.

“I don’t think I’ll go either.” Daisy shrugged.

William was crestfallen, seeming to sink into the floor as Daisy left the servant’s hall for the kitchen
were Mrs. Patmore was bellowing for her once again. Thomas felt a knot growing in his stomach
from anxiety and sympathy.

William just grew more and more deflated. He bowed his head in defeat, and left the servant’s hall
without another word.

“William-!” Thomas called after him, but William did not stop or look around. Thomas was
flabbergasted, unsure of what to do. He looked back around to Bates, who was clearly concerned.
Gwen, on his other side, seemed very disappointed.

“Oh dear.” O’Brien’s voice was soft, laced with the tiniest bit of humor. “Maybe you should take
William yourself, Thomas.”

“Oh shut up.” Thomas snapped, rising up from the table and following after William. He had to cut a
wide path around the servant’s hall. It seemed that William had headed out the area door to try and
get a moment of quiet. Thomas was horrified to find the boy sniveling, his head bent and a hand over
his eyes. Thomas shut the area door as quietly as he could, carefully walking forward on the gravel.

“Leave me alone, Thomas.” William said. His voice was thickened with sorrow. “I know you mean
well, but leave me be.”
“…William…” Thomas didn’t want to leave him alone, even if William insisted otherwise, “Don’t be glum, I’ll… I’ll talk to Daisy tonight after dinner. I promise you, I’ll let her down as easily as I can, and tell her that she ought to go to the fair with you. We haven’t lost the battle just yet! Don’t give in when the fight’s still ahead of us.”

“It’s easy for you to say.” William refused to look at Thomas, turning his face fully away to wipe at his eyes with his frayed handkerchief. “I bet you could have any girl you wanted.”

Thomas scoffed. “You’d be surprised.” Thomas said. “And stop putting me on a pedestal with women, William… I’m not nearly as attractive as you think, and I’ve got the personality of spoiled milk.”

William shrugged, “You’re better looking than me.”

“Am I?” Thomas challenged, “Or am I just getting Daisy’s attention right now?”

William didn’t know what to say to that. He still wouldn’t look at Thomas, and it irked him.

“William, I would appreciate not having to talk to the back of your head.”

It was as difficult as getting a child to obey, but eventually William turned. His eyes were puffy and swollen, red at the rims. He would need to wash his face before returning to work lest Carson make a fuss. He was grumpy, lips quivering as he lowered his umber eyes to the pavement. Even now, when Thomas tried desperately to even the playing field, William saw himself as the inferior. Why? What was it about Thomas that William imagined to be so incredible?

“I can’t take it anymore.” William admitted. “I’m in love with her, Thomas. I won’t deny it. But she doesn’t even see me.”

“She will.” Thomas urged, his mind already racing with scenarios. He knew for a fact that either way, Daisy would probably end up married to William. The first thing that absolutely needed to happen was for Daisy to fall out of love with Thomas. To realize that no matter how much she pined, he would never be for her. That would come with honesty, and Thomas was determined that he should speak to Daisy tonight before the others left for the fair.

“I’ll tell her, William.” Thomas swore. “I’ll tell her tonight. She’ll go with you to the fair if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You needn’t sound so dire.” William grumbled. “It’s hardly life or death.”

“It’s love.” Thomas corrected him, “And that’s much the same thing.”

~*~

Mrs. Hughes was the first to step out, apparently going to meet an old friend in the village for a drink at the Grantham Arms and a jaunt around the fair. As a result, Carson was flustered and forgot to put the Sauterne on ice. Thomas did everything he could to help the man, staying on top of his chores and all put tripping over his shoelaces to put dinner to rights. As was usual, it didn’t matter what he did. Carson was still in a foul mood and everything was still Thomas’ fault.

Bustling around the kitchen, Thomas waited to gather up the final serving for the night: a charlotte rouse. Mrs. Patmore had barely been able to pull the dish together, so blind that her hands kept knocking over the porcelain bowls. Daisy, as a result, had been cuffed around the ears, and was
looking terribly glum in the corner of the kitchen. William was watching her with clear longing on his face, but just as he’d warned earlier Daisy clearly didn’t seem to register him. She was too busy staring fearfully at Mrs. Patmore, who was snapping at another scullery maid for ‘hiding the salt’.

“I never put the Sauterne on ice!” Mr. Carson groaned, desperately shoving the large bottle in a bucket of ice to try and cool it. “Mrs. Hughes goes out for one night and we all fall to pieces!”

“No we haven’t.” Thomas urged, taking the salt pot from the scullery maid who was still apologizing to Mrs. Patmore. “Let’s put salt on the ice to make it colder quicker.”

He sprinkled salt upon the ice, glad to note that Mr. Carson wasn’t glaring at him anymore. Indeed, the man seemed slightly grateful.

“Mr. Carson, can we go to the fair tonight after dinner?” William asked. Across the island counter, Thomas held his arms steady so that Mrs. Patmore could load up the charlotte rouses.

“Alright, fine, but don’t stay out too late!” Mr. Carson warned.

“Daisy, will you please reconsider going?” William begged.

“Go!” Mrs. Patmore added before Daisy could automatically decline, “It will do you good! She’s been that down in the mouth after the death of poor Mr. Pamuk.”

“I’m only going it Thomas goes.” Daisy mumbled, shooting him a baleful look that made Thomas want to scream.

But Thomas knew when to take an opportunity.

“I need to speak to you about that.” Thomas said, catching Daisy’s eye. Daisy was shocked, hope clearly lighting up across her youthful face as she began to beam. “There’s something we need to discuss-“

“Not now!” Mr. Carson barked, storming out of the kitchen with the Sauterne securely on ice. “There’s work to be done!”

“Fine, but before the group sets out for the fair!” Thomas urged. Daisy nodded, beaming now as she clutched a dirty dish towel to her chest, wringing it with her blistered fingers. Thomas could afford to wait no longer, and left the kitchen after Mr. Carson, arms laden down with desert.

As he served the family, Thomas could not help but run scenarios over in his mind. Each one seemed more peculiar than the last, and it slightly disturbed him to know that he stood a chance at once again being the bad guy. He was tired of being portrayed in a foul light.... but was there any way to avoid looking like a prick when you were turning down someone’s love?

“Daisy, I appreciate your feelings-“

But it wasn’t just that he appreciated them. He recognized and understood them. He wanted to make sure she knew he wasn’t just brushing her off.

“Daisy, I've thought about this long and hard, and I recognize that you’ve been having-“

But that wouldn’t do it, would it? It didn’t sound right. It sounded scripted. It needed to be genuine. Kind and genuine.
As the upstairs dinner was finally wrapped up, and the family took coffee in the sitting room, Thomas returned downstairs with his arms piled up full of dirty dishes. Mrs. Patmore let him dump the lot in the sink before banishing him to the servant’s hall, where he sat with Mr. Bates by the fire and watched the flames dance low in the grate. Bates could not acknowledge their affair in public, but Thomas noted there was a wicked smile upon his lips. He could not help but shiver at the thought of being alone with Bates for an extended amount of time… would they become intimate tonight?

The idea of having sex with John Bates was out right insane… but it was also now a very real possibility. He had to respect that.

What would it be like, he wondered? Would it be a slow, tender affair? All the evidence pointed towards a ‘yes’, given that Bates was much more emotional than any of his previous lovers had been. Even Philip, who’d been so kind and open to Thomas, had had a certain amount of reserve in his words and thoughts. That was just the way of the upper class, though. They were bred to keep their hearts on a shelf.

“I heard you’re to talk to Daisy after dinner.” Bates murmured. All around them, servants were filing into the hall, taking their respective seats. O’Brien was talking with Anna near the head of the table; some dribble about a lace collar that needed mending.

“I have to let her down.” Thomas said. “I hate to do it but there’s no other way.”

“William adores her.” Bates agreed. “And you’ll never be available, will you.”

“I can’t tell her the truth.” Thomas said. “So what do I say?”

Bates shrugged, thinking it over for a moment before speaking, “Be kind, and as honest as possible. Make sure she knows that it’s no fault of her own. That you simply can’t return her feelings. Mention that you’re taken if that helps.”

“But won’t she wonder who I’m seeing?”

“Tell her that it’s private. Keep your voice kind. It’s not hard to appease a woman.”

Thomas scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Is it? I wouldn’t know.”

Bates chuckled, keen for their private joke. The voice of Mr. Carson could be heard coming up the hallway. Soon they would eat their own dinners and push would come to shove.

“After your little talk, come to my room.” Bates murmured. “I thought you might like to read my novel.”

“What’s it about?” Thomas teased. “It might be deadly dull.”

“…It’s about a man, showing his love to his partner.” Bates murmured, his voice as soft as a whisper to avoid being overheard by the maids who were quite close by. “In every way a man can.”

Thomas could not help but shudder with anticipation.

Dinner was a rushed affair that night. Where the family had lingered over their rabbit and mutton, the servants were gobbling down left over pie at breakneck speed. A great group wanted to go to the
fair, mostly hall boys and maids; William kept shooting Thomas glances, clearly eager for him to make good on his promise and let Daisy down. With luck, the pair of them would go to the fair tonight and the rest would be history.

But when had luck ever smiled down on Thomas Barrow?

The end of dinner started a stream of servants up the stairs to the attic. Everyone had to get out of their black and whites and into their day clothes, leaving Thomas with plenty of time to talk to Daisy. Of course, she was too busy ferreting dirty plates into the kitchen to take much notice of him lingering in the doorway to the hall.

“Daisy-“

“Just a mo-!” She protested, her arms laden with a large wooden tray bearing tea cups and saucers. When she returned from the kitchen, arms empty once more, Thomas tried again.

“Daisy, I really need to talk to you-“

“I can’t Thomas, I’m ever so busy-!”

But if they kept up this pattern, Daisy would be working long after the others had gone to the fair. Eager to get her alone while there was still time left for her to change, Thomas forcibly took her wooden platter away so that she could no longer collect plates and silverware.

“Thomas-!” Daisy’s protests were short lived, cut off as Thomas took her by the hand and pulled her down the hallway. He looked left and right, desperate to find a quiet place to speak with her, and in the end chose the boot room. During the day, it was often a hub for activity, but at night it was generally quiet. The lords and ladies of Downton abbey were heading off to bed now, and weren’t eager to have their shoes polished. Daisy was nervous to be alone with Thomas, and he could understand why. She was unmarried and young, she’d probably never even been kissed. She’d been raised to believe in chastity and piety. To be alone with man her age, who was not her husband nor her intended, was surely going against several religious rules.

“Mrs. Patmore will scold.” Daisy worried.

“I’ll take care of it.” Thomas assured her, “It’s more important that I talk to you now than you pick up after dinner.”

“But what do you want to talk to me about?” Daisy asked.

Thomas was taken aback in that moment by just how young Daisy was. She was only thirteen, fresh from the workhouses, and terrified of everything unfamiliar. Even electricity made her nervous. She was a hundred miles away from the young woman who’d commandeered the kitchen underneath Mrs. Patmore, the scholar and test taker that had amazed local teachers.

“Daisy…” Thomas’ heart thundered nervously in his ribs. He suddenly felt terribly self-conscious, aware that Daisy was probably about to be upset and maybe even cry. He didn’t want to be the bad guy again, but he doubted he had any other choice in this situation.

For a moment she looked hopeful, but as she saw Thomas’ dismay, her smile slowly vanished. Thomas’ lack of words wasn’t making matters easier.

“I know that you fancy me-“
But Daisy immediately began to shake her head, frightened at being caught out. Thomas raised a hand, cutting off her lies. “No, please don’t try to deny it. I’m not trying to embarrass you or call you out but… there’s something you need to know.”

Daisy’s eyes were sparkling with tears yet to fall. She was as white as a sheet, wringing her apron with both her hands so that the cloth was becoming frayed.

“I’m not available.” Thomas said, as gently as he could, “I’m seeing someone and… I’m sorry. I can’t return your feelings.”

Daisy’s bottom lip began to quiver.

She broke down and started to cry, burying her face in her hands as her sobs wracked the air. Thomas felt like an absolute bastard in that moment, wincing audibly as he desperately scrabbled at straws.

“Please, don’t cry-“ Thomas begged, taking out his handkerchief to offer it to Daisy. She wouldn’t take it, turning her back on him so that all he could see of her face and arms was her shaking shoulders. “It’s not anything to do with you Daisy, it’s me-!”

“Liar!” She wailed, her voice thick and hysterical, “It’s cause I’m not beautiful or smart like the maids-!”

“What?!” This was going horrendously wrong, and Thomas didn’t have a damn clue how to make it better, “Daisy, listen to me I beg of you! You are beautiful, and you’re just as smart as the maids. It’s me, Daisy! Me-!”

Why couldn’t she see that? Even now, with Thomas’ admission fresh on the air, Daisy was still crying and refusing to face him.

“Please, Daisy, I didn’t tell you this to hurt you.” Thomas begged, reaching out to try and touch her shoulders. “I only wanted to spare you, if I could. I… I’m seeing someone else, and that’s just the way it is. I won’t be disloyal to them. I couldn’t do it even if I tried. They deserve better and so do you…. but William adores you-“

“I don’t care about William-!” Daisy wailed, jerking away from Thomas’ hand. “Everyone wants me to love William but he’s not who I care for! Why won’t anyone listen to me-!”

And with that she only started to cry harder.

“Alright, alright, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do-“ Thomas was desperate to get her to stop crying and listen to him. “You’re completely in control of your fate-“

“But I’m not, am I?” Daisy wailed. She turned around, revealing her face to be puffy and wet with snot and tears. It was an awful sight to witness, and only cemented Thomas’ gut reaction of panic. “I’m nothin’ and I’ll always be nothin’!”

Even as Thomas tried to comfort her again, the door to the boot room opened to reveal O’Brien. Of all the servants who were to go to the fair, O’Brien could not go while Anna was ill. As a result, she’d been one of the few to remain downstairs while the others changed, and surely must have heard Daisy crying from the hall. Instead of looking snide or cruel, she seemed downright alarmed to find Daisy hysterical at Thomas’ hands.

“What have you done t’her, you cad?” O’Brien demanded, “Has the poor girl not suffered enough where you’re concerned?”
Daisy began to cry afresh, burying her face in her hands.

“It’s nothing like that!” Thomas protested. Of all the people to be caught out by, why had it been O’Brien, “This has nothing to do with you—“

“That girl slaves away every day just to keep your boots shined, and this is how you repay her?” O’Brien demanded, hands on her hips and a fiery look in her eyes, “By making her cry?”

“I wasn’t trying to make her cry!” But already Thomas knew that he couldn’t win. It didn’t matter what he said, O’Brien would just turn it around and make him look like a cad, “And I wouldn’t expect you to care either way. What is Daisy to you but another tool you can use to your own ends? The only reason why you’re putting your foot in is to try and get at me—“

“You’re the vainest boy I’ve ever known.” O’Brien sneered. In that moment, she seemed utterly disgusted with him; it was hardly an act anymore, “Not everything is about you, Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas swallowed around a dry knot in his throat, feeling utterly flummoxed. From behind them both, Daisy burst past. She nearly knocked O’Brien into the wall as she fled the boot room, running for the servant’s staircase to no doubt hide in the attic. As she went, she passed by William and Gwen, both coming down to go to the fair.

“Daisy—!” William called out after her, turning on his heel and nearly running back up the steps.

“Leave me alone, William!” Daisy howled, her voice drifting away as she went higher and higher up the steps. Mrs. Patmore came out of the kitchen, flour on her hands and a confused look on her face.

“Daisy— DAISY!” She barked after the girl. It was no use; Daisy was already gone. In the hallway, Thomas was suddenly the subject of many ugly stairs as everyone from Gwen to Mrs. Patmore glared at him.

“What did you do?” William demanded, storming down the steps to confront Thomas head on.

“I just—“ But Thomas didn’t know what to say, and the heat of all the glares was making him crumple.

“You just shattered her heart like fine china, is what.” O’Brien finished, angrily.

“I thought I told you to leave her alone!” Mrs. Patmore snapped, “Now who’s going to help me clean up the kitchen?”

“I think he should do it.” O’Brien said at once, folding her arms accusatorially over her chest. “He’s the one who’s put Daisy to all this trouble.”

“I trusted you!” William cried out, and it was his hurt that made Thomas feel all the worse. “Why did you have to go and make it worse? I thought you said you were going to let her down easy—!”

“As if.” O’Brien cut in before Thomas could even open his mouth, “When has he ever done anything kind for that poor girl.”

“What did you say to her?” Gwen asked. “I thought you said you were turning over a new leaf?”

Thomas could feel an awful, ugly heat rising in his cheeks and chest. His eyes were burning, his throat was clenching tight. His face started to crumple, despite how he desperately clenched his jaw.

He knew what was about to happen, and being in public only
Amid it all, Bates walked into the chaos, cane tapping carefully against the stone. He was nonplussed, afresh to the scene and unaware of the drama that had just unfolded.

“What’s going on?” He directed his question to Thomas, but he would find no answer forthcoming. Thomas was too embarrassed, and too upset to speak anymore.

“Just- just leave me alone all of you!” He protested, elbowing his way past O’Brien who tried to block him in the hall. He ran right past William and Gwen, tearing up the stairs just as Daisy had done only seconds before. Instead of running for attic, where he might have found some type of solace in his room, Thomas instead ran for his secret passageway, which was a hidden behind several feet of stone in the bachelors corridor. There, with a natural soundproof barrier and the solitude he so desperately desired, Thomas broke down like a fool. He bent at the waist, clutching desperately at the grimy stone as he slid down to sit in the corner. The handkerchief that Daisy had so quickly denied was now used to cover his own mouth.

“That girl slaves away every day just to keep your boots shined, and this is how you repay her? By making her cry?”

“I trusted you! Why did you have to go and make it worse? I thought you said you were going to let her down easy!”

“I thought you said you were turning over a new leaf?”

How had it all gone so wrong so quickly? Thomas had tried everything, but Daisy had been oblivious, so overcome with horrible embarrassment at being rejected that she’d been unable to understand that Thomas had meant no harm. Maybe in her older years, Daisy might not have cared as much. It took her time to brush off Alfred, but she managed it in the end. Now, however, Daisy was only thirteen years old and much too immature to understand what to do. Thomas should have known better than to try and talk to her alone. He should have gone through Mrs. Patmore or Mrs. Hughes—an adult she’d understand and trust. He’d been banking on Daisy being the mature 26 year old chef’s assistant he’d left behind in 1926… the results had blown up horribly in his face.

He buried his head in his knees, feeling as ugly and as small as a pill bug buried in the earth.

How on earth would he ever dig his way out of this one? Had he already spoiled his second chance forever? Was he doomed to live yet another life hated by everyone under the stairs?

“How about you?”

It didn’t surprise Thomas that Bates had known where to find him, particularly when Thomas had been the one to show passageway. It was the fact that Bates was actually willing to approach him after Thomas had been outed as a bastard which shocked him. Thomas couldn’t summon the will to respond to the man, absolutely deflated at the miserable turn of events. Instead of pestering Thomas, however, Bates carefully stooped down to slowly pull Thomas up off the floor. Thomas was still halfway bent over, dust on his backside and his face hidden in a snotty handkerchief. Bates didn’t seem to care about either, pulling Thomas in so that he could collapse against Bates’ barrel chest.

“It’s alright.” Bates murmured in his ear, but Thomas couldn’t believe it. How would anything be alright when he’d squandered his chances for a better life so early in?

“I’m such a stupid fool.” Thomas moaned into his shoulder. “Stupid, stupid-!” And with each word he thumped a curled fist against Bates’ arms.

“Hush-!” Bates held him all the tighter, setting his trusty cane aside so that he could use both hands.
“Hush now. You did everything you could. Daisy’s a young, silly girl. She was bound to be upset.”

“O’Brien will tell everyone I’ve done it on purpose, an’ everyone will hate me.”

“O’Brien lies through her teeth.” Bates wouldn’t hear a word of it, “And no one will believe her word over yours.”

How Thomas wished that were true, but the looks of disgust on William and Gwen’s faces had been his undoing.

“William is gonna hate me so much.” Thomas whimpered. Bates’ fingers were reaching up, gently tugging and sorting through his pomaded locks. It was an oddly soothing sensation.

“William is hurt. He’ll see things differently in the morning.” Bates murmured. He placed a chaste kiss upon Thomas’ brow. “And so will you.”

He pulled back, forcing Thomas to meet his gaze despite Thomas’ eyes being swollen from tears and his nose red from rubbing. He must surely look like the very devil in that moment, but Bates seemed transfixed by him and gave him a loving smile as he stroked at the corner of Thomas’ mouth.

“Everyone’s gone to the fair.” Bates whispered. “Lily and Gwen got Daisy to go; they’re sort of tag-teaming. You’ll see… they’ll take a long walk, blow off some steam, and Daisy will be able to look at things clearly in the morning. I don’t intend to have this night squandered because a young girl made you cry.”

“Whose more emotional, me or her?” Thomas mumbled, dabbing underneath his eyes with his soiled handkerchief. “I’m a right insult to all lavenders, aren’t I?”

“You are a comet, burning through the night.” Bates corrected him, “And I won’t let a rain shower block out your light.”

He pressed another soft kiss to Thomas’ forehead.

“Mr. Carson is waiting up for Mrs. Hughes to return from the fair.” Bates murmured. “The attic is deserted. Let’s go to my room and talk some more. We’ll be more comfortable there.”

“It isn’t safe.” Thomas was still afraid of being caught. Bates, on the other hand, was brave in the face of the inevitable.

“It’s as safe now as it ever will be… and I want to make you feel better.”

Despite the fact that Thomas’ stamina was greater now that he was young again, Thomas still felt exhausted by his emotional upheaval. He kept his head bowed, slowly scrubbing at his blistered eyes as Bates lead him back up to the attic. It was deserted, quiet and dark with nearly everyone out to the fair. The only ones that had remained behind were Anna and O’Brien, both of whom were surely in bed by now. Carson was downstairs, waiting for Mrs. Hughes to return from her date, and so the men’s side was completely barren of life. Thomas was incredibly grateful for the solitude, and embraced the moment fully as Bates opened the door to his own bedroom and helped Thomas inside.

Thomas was amazed to find that the two beds which had once sat in opposite corners of the room were now pushed together to share a large threadbare blanket from the cupboards. It seemed that Bates had tired of sleeping on a cot, and who could blame him? A cup of tea lay steaming upon Bates’ bedside table, garnished with lemon. Thomas wondered if Bates had fetched a cuppa before going to find him.
“You moved your beds.” Thomas mumbled. Bates closed his bedroom door, taking his desk chair and dragging it along the floor with a dull sound so that he could make a poor man’s lock.

“I was tired of my leg hanging off the side.” Bates explained. He placed a hand carefully upon Thomas’ lower back and guided him to the bed so that he could sit along the side. Thomas carefully wiped at his eyes again, watching as Bates picked up the teacup to offer it to him. Amazed, Thomas took it, and found that there was a dollop of honey sitting in the bottom of the teacup. It was unstirred, clearly having been brought straight from the kitchen… but why?

“Is this for me?” Thomas asked, slightly guilty of drinking Bates’ tea just because he was crying. Bates shouldn’t feel sabotaged into it.

“I brought it to your room at first, but I found you weren’t there, so I sat it here and went looking for you.” Bates explained, “It didn’t take long to find you. I had a feeling I knew where you were. Call it intuition.”

Amazed, Thomas looked up at Bates with wide eyes. He felt like such a solid fool in that moment, such a child compared to this man.

“Thank you.” He whispered. Bates just gave him a tender smile and carefully touched Thomas’ chin with a tucked thumb.

“Drink up.” Bates whispered. “And get comfortable.”

Bates followed his own wisdom as Thomas began to sip his tea. It was like nectar, soothing his parched and raw throat. Thomas paused, momentarily distracted from his gifted tea by the sight of Bates shucking his jacket and cufflinks. He was beginning to undress, revealing himself to be a man of girth and muscle. Bates had always been one of the more large men in the abbey, and while part of it was surely from a displaced leg, part of it was also from the brute strength of the man. He had a rotund belly, enlarged forearms, and broad shoulders. He was a domineering force to oppose, but now as Bates’ lover instead of his enemy, Thomas was growing to greatly appreciate Bates’ physique.

“…Do you mind?” Bates murmured, catching Thomas’ eye as he began to unbutton his vest.

“No.” Thomas said. The truth of the matter was he was fucking entranced.

Bates grinned, and shucked his suspenders.

When he finally pulled his shirt sleeves, it was to reveal his bare skin for the first time.

Thomas was not one to salivate at a flash of flesh, but he was certainly about to now. Bates’ flesh was ripened with sun and work, not a wrinkle or a blemish to be found. His pectorals were divided by a thick thatch of curly brown chest hair, which thinned out only to re appear in force around his navel. His belly button was swallowed in a dark sea of hair, the trail of which vanished beneath his pants and trousers.

“…Get comfortable.” Bates teased.


Thomas was flabbergasted at his accidental slip up and took a hasty sip of tea to distract himself. His eyes were slowly being drawn to the tiny line of flesh directly above the hem of Bate’s pants. He could not help but grow lustful at the idea of how Bates’ flesh would continue on. How his hair would part again, to reveal—
“Thomas.” Bates distracted him; Thomas was terribly embarrassed to find he’d been looking directly at Bates’ crotch.

“Sorry.” Thomas fumbled.

Bates set his cane aside, walking with absolute care from one end of his room to the other. Without support, he could not go fast. Instead, he had to walk on the ball of his right foot, and did not bend his knee.

When he was standing directly before Thomas, Bates reached out and took Thomas’ finished teacup away.

“… You’ve had a horrible night.” Bates murmured. “Let me make it better.”

“How?” Thomas asked. Bates sat beside Thomas on the conjoined bed, and reached up to begin massaging Thomas’ shoulders.

“… I thought I might help you relax; we have a night to ourselves, and we ought to use it as best we can.”

Thomas shuddered involuntarily. God, but how he wanted to be totally beneath Bates’ powerful hands. Thomas let out a strange noise, a sort of blurt you might find from a trodden animal as Bates’ fingers hit a knot of muscle in his neck.

“Bad?” Bates whispered, pausing.

“…Don’t stop.” Thomas closed his eyes.

Bates continued, his powerful grip breaking up every tension Thomas had built in the past months.

“What happened in the boot room?” Bates asked. “What did you say to her?”

“I tried to tell her.” Thomas groaned, his eyes still closed. “But she thought it was because she was ugly or sommat. She wouldn’t listen, she just got more and more hysterical.” Thomas scoffed, pulling back a bit to turn around and meet Bates’ eyes. “I was such a fool to try and talk to her alone. I should have done it with Mrs. Patmore or Mrs. Hughes.”

“You made an honest mistake. Daisy’s too young to understand. She’s fearful and has poor self esteem. It’s not your fault, Thomas.”

Bates was in his ear, slowly laying kiss after kiss against his neck as he resumed massaging Thomas’ shoulders.

“But…”

Bates didn’t tell him to shush; he didn’t need to. His hands did all the persuading.

When Bates’ hands came up to Thomas’ bowtie, Thomas did not make to stop him. He kept his eyes closed, head relaxed back on Bates’ shoulder as he pulled Thomas’ bowtie away and began to unbutton his striped livery. With each pop of a button, Thomas could feel his tension melting away. At the same time, a new excitement was building, making his Thomas’ heart race in his chest. His livery was peeled back one layer at a time, each fold of cloth shrugging along his body to finally lay in a pool at his waist. When Bates’ hands finally touched the cool flesh of Thomas’ frame, Thomas
opened his eyes to find Bates entranced. He was lost in the vision of Thomas’ pale, smooth chest. Where Bates was hairy and well colored, Thomas was like porcelain with only a fine speckle of black hair trailing down his navel.

Thomas met Bates eyes. The pair of them paused, each bringing back into focus what was most important in that moment.

Not the flesh.
Not the touch.
The connection.

Thomas leaned in and kissed Bates on the lips. Bates wound his hands through Thomas’ hair and the curve of his hip. He pushed Thomas back so that Thomas fell against his combined beds, and began to ravage Thomas’ mouth in a slow, powerful seduction. By god, it was utterly exhilarating to feel Bates’ naked chest against his own. Bates’ nipples slid against Thomas’, and the friction caused Thomas’ nipples to perk up. He let out a tiny noise, which was instantly muffled and swallowed in their kiss. Teeth and tongue clashed, sliding against one another as Thomas spread and hiked his legs around Bates’ large hips. The balls of his feet dug into the flesh beneath Bates’ arse, desperate to keep them bound together. But Bates was pulling back, trying to sit up on his knees and elbows so that he could observe Thomas beneath him.

Thomas panted, eyes growing heavy as Bates brushed a stray black lock from his forehead. He could feel something hot and heavy pressing against his inner thigh. It surprised him when he realized it wasn’t his own erection, but Bates’.

“… We don’t have to do anything.” Bates whispered. “I’d have you any way that you liked.”

But Thomas was selfish, desperate to soak up every bit of love he could. He’d never imagined that he might one day lay with John Bates. Now that he’d been given the chance, and had been made to work day and night to rebuild his reputation, Thomas wanted sorely to reap the rewards.

“Make love to me?” Thomas whispered.

For a moment, Bates’ eyes widened as if he was shocked. Thomas pressed forward tentatively in the silence.

“Please?” He asked, “… I want to feel good again.”

Bates ran a gentle hand along the line of Thomas’ sharp cheekbone.

“Unless you don’t want to-“

“I want to.” Bates whispered. Thomas felt something flip in his chest, a wild sensation shooting against his ribs. “But I can’t. I’m not a free man, Thomas. There are things about me that you don’t know-“

“That you’re married?” Thomas gave him a tiny smile. Bates was shocked into silence once more, no doubt wondering how in the hell Thomas had figured that out.

“Things are complicated for men like us.” Thomas consoled him, “We can’t afford to plan into the future. All we can do is enjoy what little we have in the present. And I’m so tired of feeling sad or alone. Please?”

Bates pursed his lips, something heavy and morose passing behind his brown eyes. “Don’t tell
Anna?” He finally asked.

Thomas shook his head.

He knew Bates was already starting to feel things from Anna, no matter if he might be ready to acknowledge them or not.

This moment would not stretch into a long romance. Thomas ultimately knew better. Powerful love would suck Bates away, and wrap him deep within Anna’s arms. That was how it should be. Thomas just wanted this moment in time, in the same selfish way that he’d wanted Daisy’s attention the first time he’d been young.

He wanted to be liked, to be loved… and frankly?
At the moment he wanted to be fucked like a wild animal.

“I won’t tell a soul.” Thomas said, “This is just… something I need. It’s between us-“

“Thomas…” Bates whispered his name like a prayer, diving in to suck a powerful love bruise against Thomas’ clavicle. Thomas’ top was still caught at his wrists. He had to fumble with cufflinks, casting them carelessly aside so that they clattered against the floor. Bates shrugged off Thomas’ shirtsleeves, and with it went Thomas’ jacket and vest. Suddenly he was completely bare from the waist up, save for his flannel wraps. Bates was taken aback by the sight of Thomas’ wrists hidden behind cloth, and looked at him expectantly for an answer. Thomas just shook his head.

“Please don’t make me.” Thomas whispered. To try and distract Bates, Thomas reached between them to finger the button of Bates’ trousers. It was buckling, desperate to constrain Bates’ manhood. Thomas began to push at the fabric of Bates’ trousers and pants, but was stopped as Bates took hold of his wrists and brought them back up to his chest.

There was worry and fear in his eyes.

“… What’s wrong with your wrists?” Bates asked.

Thomas shook his head. He did not want Bates to see his wounds. They were his deepest shame, for despite all the months that had passed, the skin over the black and gold wire had not healed. They looked as fresh and raw as they’d done on the day Thomas had awoken in a pile of muddy sheets.

Bates looked down at Thomas’ wrapped wrists, at the clear shame on Thomas’ face, and put two and two together.

“… Oh…” Bates sighed, his face falling in despair. He leaned down, and nuzzled Thomas’ temple, his breathing hard in Thomas’ ear. “Thomas… why…”

Thomas wrapped his arms around Bates’ neck, pulling him in tight. He crushed Bates against him, desperate that Bates shouldn’t see his expression crumble.

“I had to.” He whispered. He felt like such a fool, but what else could he say? If he hadn’t taken the plunge, he wouldn’t be here laying with Bates now.

“No.” Bates tried to pull back, but Thomas held him tighter. Suddenly, a struggle ensued between the two men. Bates ended up winning, pinning Thomas’ arms against the mattress on either side of his head so that he could stare down at Thomas’ face.

“Darling, I can’t image the pain you must have felt, but-“
“I don’t want to talk about it.” Thomas shook his head; talking distracted from what Thomas desired. He wanted to be fucked, and hard. He wanted Bates to make him atone for all the sins he’d committed in the past. “Please, just fuck me?”

“No.”

Thomas felt an ugly knot into his stomach until Bates continued. “I won’t fuck you. I’ll make love to you. But only if you show me your wrists.”

Fine.

Thomas gave an ugly sniff, and wriggled a bit underneath Bates’ grip so that Bates would let his arms go. He began to take off his flannels, only to be stopped as Bates did the work for him. He unlaced Thomas’ flannel knots, and pulled the wraps away only to gape at the raw and livid marks on Thomas’ wrists.

“…My god.” For the first time in knowing Bates, the man looked horrified. Ashamed, Thomas wished he could roll on his side and turn away. Bates was laying atop him though, and he could sooner scoot out from underneath a horse.

Bates sat up, relieving a bit of pressure on Thomas’ chest. Thomas finally was able to pull away, but did so reluctantly. All this dark talk was putting him out of the mood. He’d already had a glum enough night; why wouldn’t Bates let him be on this subject?

Bates brushed a hand through his hair, downy brown locks falling against his sweating forehead. He was flabbergasted, stunned into silence.

“…Thomas…” It seemed he was unsure of what to say next.

“Don’t.” Thomas shook his head, carefully lacing back up his flannel wraps. “I did it back in April before you got here. It hasn’t gotten better though-”

“It’s infected.” Bates said, “You need a doctor.”

“A doctor would put me in an asylum,” Thomas warned. “I can’t tell anyone about this.”

Bates was just as depressed in that moment as he.

“…I wanted you to fuck me.” Thomas reached down and plucked up his shirt from the base of the bed, shrugging it back on, “Not remind me of who messed up I am-”

“Wait-” Bates grumbled, but Thomas just kept buttoning his shirt.

“I’m going to my room.” Thomas mumbled. “Thank you for the-“ But he never got to the word ‘tea’.

Bates caught him around the chest, holding him tightly so that he could no longer button the rest of his shirt.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Bates whispered.

Thomas wondered if Bates might be able to get this night back on track. He was certainly eager to unbutton Thomas’ shirt again.

He leaned in, nuzzling Thomas’ temple again (he was fond of doing that) as he whispered: “I’m going to make love to you, not fuck you… and then I’m going to get you some nice gauze and
salves… and I’m going to take care of you. And tonight, you’ll sleep with me. And no one will be the wiser… so no more grumbling out of you.”

There was something in the way that he said it, so sweet and gentle, that sent Thomas’ heart soaring. Bates was not a man to exaggerate, and did not speak such words lightly. A warm, heavy feeling swelled in Thomas’ chest; he allowed Bates to gently lay him back down upon the covers. Bates was unwrapping him much like he would a gift, and his eyes sparked with delight as he finally began to pull Thomas’ pants and trousers free.

“You’re like a doll.” Bates whispered, “a porcelain doll.”

“Stop your flanneling.” Thomas said, but he couldn’t hide his smile.

Bates reached out, and with slow hands ran his fingers down from Thomas’ pectorals to his hips. He trailed his touch along the slim line of dark hair that cut a path to Thomas’ genitals. Thomas hitched a breath at the sensation, eyes fluttering delightedly as Bates finally touched his penis.

Fucking hell, who would have thought this day would ever come?

“Oh-“ Thomas whimpered, biting on his lip to keep quiet.

There was something utterly sinful, to know that it was Bates touching him. To know that he was about to be fucked, hopefully hard and fast, by a man that existed in a thin sphere of people that could would happily punch and kiss all the same. So far, only two other people had managed to get into that sphere: Jimmy Kent, and Philip Prevet.

Bates was clearly not a homosexual. He didn’t seem to relish touching someone’s cock; instead he had this manic gleam in his eyes that Thomas had often seen before when they were having a particularly heated row. Maybe it was one in the same… fucking, fighting.

But Thomas now found himself desperate to see what Bates’ cock looked like. He fumbled with sweating hands, pushing at the button and flap of Bates’ trousers so that he could push them down Bates’ square hips. The prize revealed was a thick and muscled monster. Bates was not endowed with a long penis, but for what he lacked in length he made up for in girth. His penis was slightly crooked to the left, and the bulbous tip was already beginning to drip with an opaque pre-cum. Thomas wanted to chase it, to suck it off, to paint his lips with the essence, but Bates wouldn’t let him. Instead, Bates rolled onto his side to shuck his trousers and pants so that the pair of them were equally naked. Now that Bates’ leg was revealed, Thomas could see the clear wound upon his right leg. There was a bullet shaped scar, puffy and dark purple, upon the side of his knee. It seemed that the bullet hadn’t exited out the other side, which must account for the pain that Bates was in… there was still shrapnel in his muscle tissue. The skin surrounding the wound was slightly inflamed, tinged pink with a rush of blood and exertion of straining muscle. Thomas wondered if it hurt. He reached out, fingers delicately trailing that odd little purple bump which surely must have been a bloody and horrific wound. Bates hissed at the sensation, letting his head drop against Thomas’ shoulder as Thomas continue to massage his knee.

“God…” Bates groaned. He seemed close to whimpering.

“Does that hurt?”

“No.” Bates kissed the skin of his neck, “Good.”

It was a colliding swirl of sensations. Bates rubbed and stroked Thomas’ penis, the insides of his
thighs, and the taut skin of his lower belly. Thomas began to jack at Bates’ penis in response, pumping the muscle as best he could with every turn of his wrist and squeeze of his fingers. It was heaven, simply from the fact that Thomas had never thought Bates would touch him in such a way, but he wanted more. This wasn’t just about touching. This was about being fucked, punished for all the sins of his past.

He knew it was unhealthy.
He didn’t care.

“John—” He moaned in Bates’ ear. “Please… More.” He let his voice become a pathetically sultry whimper. Anything to spur Bates into a fever.

Bates sat up, pushing dewy brown hair out his eyes. His cheeks were flushed dark with blood; his pupils were blown with arousal.

“… I have some…” Bates didn’t know what else to say, it seemed. Instead, he gently gestured with a hand towards his beside table. He leaned, suddenly at an obscure angle above Thomas, to reach with one hand and open the drawer. From within, he pilfered about, and finally removed a tin of lotion. It was the sort you could pop open with a side screw, and Bates had to perch the tin upon Thomas’ chest in order to use both hands while propped on his elbows. He uncapped the tin, revealing it to be heavily used. It smelled lightly of peppermint.

“I use this for my leg.” Bates murmured. “But I figure it’ll do just as well.”

Thomas nodded. He was sluggish, his mind hazy with lust. The smell of peppermint was perking him up, though.

Bates sat carefully up on his knees. He groaned as he did so, clearly in pain. Worried, Thomas sat up with him and methodically massaged his damaged knee cap. He wondered if it might help—?

“You’re lovely.” Bates smiled, scooping out a generous dollop of lotion onto his middle and pointer finger. With his thumb, he spread the mixture, till all three fingers were dripping in white. The thought that Bates would soon be inside of him sent wild sparks of pleasure up through Thomas’ spine. He felt like he’d received a gentle electric shock.

“…how would you…?” Bates gestured to the bed behind him. But here was the proverbial question of all homosexual meetings: On your back or on your front?

It was certainly easier to fuck a man while on all fours, but Thomas wanted to see Bates’ face. He wanted to see his pouchy cheeks flush with blood, wanted to watch his lips and almond eyes screw up with concentration.

Thomas laid on his back, and ever so gently drew his legs up so that he didn’t accidentally knee Bates right in the testicles. He spread his legs on either side of Bates’ hips, displaying himself in as lewd a pose as he dared.

He tried for a smile; Bates returned it.

With firm but gentle hands, Bates took each of Thomas knees and raised them so that he was straddling Bates’ shoulders with his calves. His knees were now pressed into his chest muscles, making it slightly difficult to breath, but that didn’t matter. Bates was now able to see his anus, and brought his lotioned hand down to ever so gently trace the rim. On instinct, Thomas’ muscles twitched and tightened. Thomas sighed, eyes fluttering closed momentarily at the lovely sensation.

My god. Would wonders ever cease?
“…I’ll go slow.” Bates promised in a whisper. With that, he gently breached Thomas with his middle finger.

Thomas hissed, though not from a burn. There was something about the sheer fact that it was Bates fingering him which shocked him silly.

But Thomas was not the only one in awe. Bates seemed positively engrossed with the task at hand, panting into Thomas neck as his fingers pushed deeper, deeper-

One became two, the burning grew and turned blissful at the edges. Thomas was lost in a wave of delight, shuddering ecstatically as Bates gently stroked his perineum with his thumb.

“More-?” Bates whispered in his ear. In response, Thomas played dirty and let out the tiniest, filthiest whimper he could manage. Something demure and seductive. It sent shudders of delight through Bates; a dollop of precum bubbled from the tip of Bates’ glans and slid down the length of his penis.

“Please.” Thomas begged. He gripped Bates’ naked shoulders, squeezing at the tense flesh. “Please… fuck me…”

At this, Bates only lifted Thomas hips a bit higher so that they slid neatly against his own pelvis; Thomas’ knees framed Bates’ neck, his calves draped over the man’s broad back.

“I thought I told you,” Bates warned, positioning himself carefully so that he neither crushed Thomas beneath his weight nor put too much tension on his bum knee. “I’m going to make love to you, not fuck you.”

The tip of Bates’ engorged penis touched the stretched rim of Thomas’ anus.

For a moment, the pair of them just stared at one another. There was a great deal of nonverbal communication. A silent gesture from Thomas to indicate Bates was in the clear to push, and Bates tentatively beginning the long arduous effort of sliding inside of Thomas without immediately coming from the sensation.

The burn was blissful, unbelievably hot and tight! Bates was much thicker than Philip. Much thicker than any lover Thomas had ever taken. The slight curve of his penis meant that his glans drug against the inside of Thomas’ channel, pushing against the tender walls of his rectum. But this was heaven… this was wonderful!

It was more than the fact that a thick, solid cock was now nudging its way deep into Thomas’ center. It was Bates’ cock. It was Bates making him feel this way. It doubled the sensation, and sent him into a wild overload as he threw his head back and moaned.

But suddenly a hand was clapped over his mouth to keep him quiet. In his ecstasy, Thomas had forgotten that they were in the attics. It would be imperative for them to keep their voices down lest they be discovered.

Bates pulled his hand back, only to receive a rather seductive look as Thomas licked his cherry lips and batted his eyelashes dolefully. He knew how to make a man weak without saying a single word.

“…Beautiful boy…” Bates groaned in his ear. Thomas’ heart panged wildly in his chest at the insinuation.

When Bates was certain he was fully seated within Thomas, he pulled back a bit, trying to get himself comfortable on the bed. It was difficult; Bates’ knee was no doubt giving him trouble even if cushioned by the mattress. Determined to help if he could, Thomas nudged Bates into position and
slowly rolled the man onto his back so that Thomas was now straddling his hips. Erect in the air, Thomas whimpered in tiny huffs of breath as he began to ride Bates’ fat cock.

Bates was desperately clinging onto his sanity, gripping Thomas’ hips tight and clenching his teeth so that no sound could pass through.

But that would never do.

Though this has started out as Thomas’ determination to be punished for the original year of 1914, Thomas now wanted to bring Bates pleasure. So often in the past, the pair of them had collided heads and shouted the house down in screaming matches. Thomas wanted to show what music they could make if only they worked in tandem.

He rolled his hips once, twice, and gasped at the feeling of his prostate being nudged. He paused, if only for a second to re-adjust, but it was all the confirmation Bates needed.

His fingers flexed upon Thomas’ hips, squeezing the globes of his arse.

“I do believe… you found it.” Bates whispered. Thomas nodded, a tiny grin sprouting at the corners of his swollen mouth.

Bates began to buck up into him, and suddenly the situation was flopped again. Thomas had to clap a hand over his mouth at the last second, shocked by the sensation of Bates fucking against him. But this—-! This was absolutely obscene! This was heathonism at its finest. This was raw, unadulterated sodomy… and Thomas couldn’t be more chuffed about it.

“Oh- oh-!!” Thomas wailed behind his fingers, one hand splayed against Bates’ chest to keep his balance even as he wobbled upon Bates’ hips.

Bates hissed, Thomas’ knee accidentally banging against his own.

“But-“ Bates sat up, gently pushing Thomas so that he was forced to roll off.

“Mm- here-“ Bates whispered at the loss of contact. He didn’t want to stop-!

Bates had a better plan though. It was impossible for him to lay in that particular position and not feel pain in his knee, so Thomas was at his mercy. Whatever Bates wanted to do, they’d do. Bates rose up from the bed, pushing Thomas into position so that he was kneeling up on all fours upon the bed while Bates stood at the side. Now able to put his weight into his feet, not his knees, Bates was able to move faster and deeper. Thomas delighted in the sensation of being manhandled, spreading his knees and letting his spine drop low so that Bates got a rather spectacular view of his arse. Bates pulled out more hand lotion, lubricated Thomas’ hole, then set back to work re-entering him with a careful, smooth stroke.

He started back, his rhythm picking up speed. Thomas grabbed one of Bates’ pillows and held onto it for dear life, bitting against the fabric to keep from screaming aloud.

“Oh yeah-“ Bates grunted, unable to keep his enthusiasm in. He slammed against Thomas’ hips, his cock burning against Thomas’ passage. The lotion had a slight stinging sensation, but Thomas didn’t care. In a way he liked it more, wanted to feel as much pain as possible.

“Harder-!” Thomas begged. “Faster, please-!”

A generous man, Bates threaded his fingers in Thomas’ hair and made Thomas cry out into his pillow.
There was a thin sheen of sweat breaking out against Thomas’ temple and Bates’ thighs. He fucked Thomas with a rapid tempo, keeping his promise to make love to Thomas and fuck him at the same time. With each slam of his hips against Thomas’ arse, Thomas saw stars beneath his eyelids. With each draw back, Bates’ glans left a streak of pleasure along his inner walls. Bates reached beneath Thomas’ stomach, taking Thomas’ cock in hand and beginning to pump him so that Thomas wailed into the pillow again at the savage, sudden, double pleasure. He felt tears in his eyes, grateful to God and every other aspect of the universe. He could feel the sensations in his rising. There was a ringing sound in his ears, a wild thrumming on his pulse in his veins— it was like his whole being had been wired with electricity.

Oh, let it never end…!

But it had to end; Bates was drawing close to coming, his face screwed up with concentration and his rhythm beginning to have a staccato edge.

“God- shit- Thomas-!” He grunted, “I can’- I have to-“

Thomas reached behind him with one hand, and felt from Bates’ fingers upon his hips. He squeezed, a silent issuing of consent, and with that Bates came. He could not shout aloud, lest he draw attention to their coupling, but instead let out a heavy gasp. He staggered, leaning forward slightly upon Thomas’ back, and a heavy warm sensation spread inside of Thomas’ passage that he knew to be Bates’ cum.

Knowing that he’d been painted a whore, dirty and devilish, was all the inspiration Thomas’ needed to join Bates on the other side. He came, each muscle in his body contracting and quivering. His toes curled, his eyelids fluttered, the golden blissful edge finally shrinking away to leave Thomas limp and bare upon Bates’ bed.

He fell forward, but only a little bit. Bates was still holding him at the hips, and carefully lay Thomas back down upon the bed even as he climbed in next to him.

Beforehand, Bates had spoken about bandaged Thomas’ wrists, but now those thoughts were banished to be replaced by the reality that sex was draining.

Particularly sex as vigorous as that.

The pair of them were panting, dripping with sweat and their own cum. Thomas’ heart was pounding wildly in his ribcage, his anus was fluttering and stinging in the open air. He lay as still as he dared, unsure if Bates would truly allow him to stay the night or if he would eventually have to leave.

But even as he lay there, quiet and content, Bates took a long shuddering breath and pushed himself back off of the bed to begin redressing.

It was this part that Thomas hated the most. The moment when the rose tinted glass fell away to shatter upon the hard reality that men like Thomas didn’t get happy endings. But Bates didn’t seem to be shamed, or in a desperate hurry to get away. Instead, he was merely putting himself to rights at a slow pace, reaching out every so often to trail his fingers through Thomas’ black hair.

Thomas blinked up at him, weary in the aftermath of their rigorous love making.

“…Do I have to go?” He whispered.

“I told you.” Bates replied kindly, stooping over so that he could press a kiss to Thomas’ brow. “You’re to stay here like a good boy and let me wrap your wrists, and tonight you’ll sleep with me.
I’m going down to fetch some salve from Mrs. Hughes’ office. Lock the door behind me and let no one in.”

Bates left without another word, not even bothering to put his jacket back on and only buttoning up his vest part of the way.

Slowly, Thomas crept from Bates’ bed and carefully locked the door behind Bates, sliding the chair underneath the doorknob so that no one could open the door without hitting the jam.

He was naked, and starting to grow cold in Bates’ room. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas began to put Bates’ room to rights. He sorted Bates bed, folding back the covers and attempting to sequester up driblets of cum with a wet flannel before giving up and simply laying back down in the bed. He waited there, closing his eyes momentarily, to soak up the smell of sex and Bates which clung like a fragrance to the cloth.

When he heard the gentle tap of Bates at the door again, he was loath to get up. Still, he couldn’t leave the man in the hallway.

True to his word, Bates had brought back a salve. Thomas let him in, hiding behind the door lest his nudity be viewable from the hallway. Even though no one was there, Thomas still felt self conscious. Bates shut the door again, sealing it with the chair; he was cheeky, swatting Thomas carefully across the arse so that Thomas skittered back to bed.

“Lay down.” Bates said, taking the top off the tin salve. Thomas felt oddly like a child again, on his back with Bates at his side. He held Thomas’ wrist in his lap, applying the paste to his wounds with only one fingertip lest he cause Thomas any pain.

Thomas closed to his eyes to avoid conversation. He didn’t want to talk about why there were scars on his wrists. The situation was too complicated. Instead though, Bates kept the conversation light and warm.

“The others have returned from the fair. William is in a poor mood. Apparently Daisy didn’t pay attention to him.”

“I don’t know what to do.” Thomas whispered. He wondered, vaguely, if it was because he was a homosexual. Maybe he was just doomed to have difficult relationships with women.

“You’ve done all you can.” Bates assured him. “Daisy is young. She has poor self-esteem. William is too wrapped up in the situation to think clearly. This isn’t your burden Thomas. They’ll work it out by themselves. All you can be is kind.”

“I’m not kind.”

But Bates pressed a loving kiss to his forehead. He refused to hear another word on the subject.

“Yes, you are.”

Sleeping that night in Bates’ room was a peculiar thing. Thomas heard the footfalls of everyone else returning upstairs, but did so in a darkened room with Bates arms wrapped tight around his chest. They were pressed back to front, sharing three pillows and a thin quilt to combat the fluctuating temperature of the attics at night. They were naked, the pair of them reveling in the skin on skin
contact. With newly wrapped wrists, Thomas felt oddly cleaner despite the fact that he was stained with dried cum. In a way, he seemed to have been christened. From the ashes rose a phoenix, with a hope for the future. He could not reclaim his true youth, but he’d been given an opportunity to try again.

He would be a fool to deny the eventual pleasures it offered.

The next morning, Thomas awoke to a world familiar and yet altogether different.

He’d been disliked all of his life, and the sensation of being avoided or talked about was a common one to him; at the same time, however, there was a different tinge to the rumors which haunted every corner of the downstairs. Thomas’ attempt to re-solidify his reputation had fallen into shambles, but only for William and Daisy. Gwen and Anna didn’t seem to mind too much, seemingly of the opinion that there was no ‘good’ way to let someone down romantically. The hallboys and the maids, however, got an earful from William, who was in a bitter mood and slamming doors all day. At times they were sympathetic, at other times they were not. It often depended upon who they were talking to. But William wasn’t the real problem; Daisy was the one to watch out for. Thomas’ name was akin to mud in the kitchen. Thomas could no longer step near the oven range without being in danger of receiving scalding looks and sharp retorts from the scullery maid. Mrs. Patmore was utterly confused by all of it, given that Daisy’s personality seemed to have changed overnight.

Thomas was a masochist at heart, it seemed. Either way, he found his feet pulling him toward the kitchen as tea time approached. It was William’s turn to wait on the family while Thomas kept watch at the door. William was in such an awful mood, whirling about the place, that he seemed to have forgotten that his buttons weren’t done up. As a result, his pinstripe vest was now off by a button and the whole livery was wrinkled with tense lines. It was by the grace of God alone Mr. Carson had not seen. Everyone else was too busy in their own work to comment. Daisy was across the island, carefully spooning egg and watercress sandwiches onto a silver tray for William to take up.

William pointedly avoided looking at Thomas, as did Daisy. Both of them were glowering at the island table, their gazes so heated that they were in danger of catching the wood on fire.

“…William…” Thomas was careful to keep his voice soft, even as Mrs. Patmore boomed for more coal from George the hallboy. “Can I talk to you for a moment-?”

“I’m busy.” William snapped. Thomas suddenly heard Carson’s voice outside the hallway, and feared the man might walk in. Desperate, he leaned in so that he was almost talking in William’s ear.

“William for heaven’s sake, your buttons are done up wrong. Mr. Carson is going to have your neck if he sees you out of sorts.”

William tensed, glancing down at the front of his livery only to blush scarlet at the sight of his golden buttons askew. He quickly set them to rights, having to unbutton his entire striped vest in order to do it up right. His fingers were trembling with rage, and when he finished he gripped the handles of the silver platter far too tight.

“You always have something nasty to say to William.” Daisy snapped, looking up to glare at Thomas. There was something absolutely merciless about her expression, “O’Brien’s right about you. You’re two faced.”

Thomas felt the blood drain from his face. The kitchen seemed to go quiet, if only for a millisecond as the scullery maids and Gwen took in Daisy’s words. Gwen was by the water jug, carefully filling
up a kettle to put on the range. She went slower than usual, eyes wide as she glanced over her shoulder at Daisy.

“… I didn’t want him to get into trouble-“ Thomas tried, well aware of the disastrous implications Daisy talking to O’Brien might have.

“As if you care.” William grumbled under his breath, “You just like being superior.”

There were a million sharp comebacks on the tip of Thomas’ tongue. A million ugly things that he could say which would send William and Daisy reeling. Thomas could make a barb about William’s ailing mother, or his shitty footman work, or his idiocy and narrow mindedness. He could mention Daisy’s poverty, her lack of a true family, and the fact that she essentially rode on every else’s coat tails in fear of being labeled the leader.

But Thomas couldn’t do that… not if he was trying to rebuild his reputation.

So instead of saying anything, Thomas turned on his heel and left the kitchen at a slow pace. He felt oddly dazed in that moment, stumbling out into the hall and walking at a dumb pace towards the general direction of the back area. Before, Thomas might have tried to take refuge in a cigarette or a sulk with O’Brien. Now, Thomas had no one save for Bates, and he was upstairs tending to his Lordship. Thomas’ arse still twinged after the night before. He found himself thinking to how it had felt to be fucked by the man, but shame kept welling up in the pit of his stomach.

Bates was for Anna. Thomas felt like he was cheating with someone’s husband, even though technically Bates wasn’t married to Anna yet.

*But he will be,* A dark voice in his head warned, *And you know it… so don’t get any silly ideas.*

There was no such thing as a happy ending for men like Thomas. All he would ever have would be a string of moments, and even they were stolen from someone else. It made him feel like a criminal, and he hid in the eaves of the pantry door even as the house buzzed around him. Mr. Carson was grumbling in his office with Mrs. Hughes. Mrs. Patmore was trying to make Daisy work faster on a round of savories for that night’s dinner. A rack of lamb had been brought up from the village, and it needed to be tenderized. The smells of cooking lamb were comforting, but Thomas was starting to feel nauseated at the sound of Daisy cursing his name.

It was easy to eavesdrop in Downton Abbey, particular if you knew where all the good hiding spots were.

“I don’t know why I thought he’d ever look twice at me!” Daisy was furious at herself as much as at Thomas, it seemed.

“Daisy,” Mrs. Patmore was desperate to restore some sense of order before the dinner rush, “Thomas just isn’t the boy for you. There’s nothing more to be said-“

“And isn’t it a blessed relief!” Daisy cut across Mrs. Patmore “With the way that he carries on. He’s such a bother, I wish he’d find work somewhere else. There’s something off about him, and I can’t figure it out. Ms. O’Brien says-“

“Never you mind what Ms. O’Brien says!” Mrs. Patmore had had enough. There was a loud clang as if Mrs. Patmore had slammed the lid of a pot on the island to get Daisy’s attention, “You mind what I say, instead! Thomas is a troubled soul, and he’s not your concern. Now, you better have that lamb tenderized good and well or I’ll be dragging you up by the ear for the Dowager to see. If her teeth hurt, you’ll be the reason why!”
Hurriedly, Daisy began smacking the flesh of the lamb with a tenderizer to make up for lost time.

Was he a troubled soul?
Thomas wandered away from the kitchen area to drift into the servant’s hall, completely neglecting his door duties to instead sit at the piano bench.

It had been a long time since Thomas had heard his father’s acerbic tones, but he could distinctly remember his father calling him mad to the neighbors.

“The boy’s barmy-!” His father had cursed to anyone who would listen, “I ought to have him locked up!”

But what about Thomas was particularly barmy or troubled? This, more than any other question, had been the one to plague his every footstep. He dressed the same as William, and parted his hair with the same pomade mixture. They ate from the same table, carried the same daily routines, and slept in identical rooms… but somehow Thomas had a knack of doing everything differently. Was it how he carried himself? How he looked at the world? Was the true discourse inside his own head? Had his father been right to insist his was mad…?

But there had been other men to think just the same way as him… and inevitably Thomas’ thoughts turned back towards Jimmy Kent.

Sitting at the piano, Thomas could not help but pluck out the tiniest melody upon the ivory keys. Jimmy had once sat at this very same piano and played for all the hall to hear… he’d been well received for the most part even if he had been a bit of a cad.

He’d been the same as Thomas. He’d looked at the world through the same sharp lens. So Thomas knew he couldn’t be the only one completely mad, if Jimmy understood him well enough.

And yet, even Jimmy had abandoned him in the end.

“Thomas-“

The voice of Mrs. Hughes caused him to give a start atop the piano bench. He jerked around, guilty at the sight of Mrs. Hughes in the doorway to the abandoned servant’s hall. The noises radiating from the kitchen seemed to fade away as Mrs. Hughes took a small step inside the hall. She cast a quick glance about the room, finding Thomas quite alone.

“Don’t you have anything you ought to be doing?”

The fact of the matter was, Thomas ought to be standing to attention at the door in case there were any visitors while William served the family their tea.

“Yes.” Thomas mumbled. “I have.”

“That ought you to do it?” Mrs. Hughes’ voice had the tiniest terse edge to it. She was on the verge of growing impatient, but seemed to be waiting to hear him out. Though Thomas knew it was a poor way to behave in front of his housekeeper, he shrugged and looked glumly back at the piano.

“Sometimes there’s no point, Mrs. Hughes. It doesn’t matter what we do. Everything always falls apart in the end.” But what did any of that have to do with waiting at the door?
Mrs. Hughes was oddly understanding, coming around the long table so that she and Thomas could talk without raising their voices to be heard. She gave him a gentle look, which Thomas wasn’t too sure he deserved.

“You mustn’t let Daisy hurt your feelings, Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes urged, “She’s young, and her heart is broken.”

“No.” Thomas shook his head, for this had nothing to do with a broken heart. Daisy was right, as was O’Brien, and his father’s memory. He was a troubled soul, two faced, a vile creation. This burning arse was more than enough proof on the subject. He would never be able to look at Anna without remembering how he’d essentially fucked her husband.

The shame of it made him feel ill.

“She’s right.” Thomas wished his voice wasn’t frail, “I’m foul and vile. And you know it as much as I do.”

“Why are you vile?” Mrs. Hughes asked, slightly cross.

Thomas refused to have this conversation. It would lead to nothing in the end, “You know why, Mrs. Hughes.” He rose up from the piano bench, heaving a sigh. “Don’t deny it. You know as well as I do that I’m unnatural, and you know why it makes me vile.”

He suddenly felt a stab of nausea roll through him. He momentarily wondered if he was going to be ill. The heat pouring from the kitchen was making him feel stuffy and confused. He needed to be alone, somewhere with a breeze. Perhaps he could open the front door and get some fresh air on his face without Carson seeing.

“I have to get back to work.” Thomas said. He refused to look at Mrs. Hughes, heading around the table in the opposite direction that Mrs. Hughes had taken. Yet before Thomas could get more than a few steps away, Mrs. Hughes reached out and took him by the arm so that they could continue to speak.

“Thomas, you are not vile.” There was a warm compassion in her voice that he had not expected to hear, “There is nothing wrong with you. You’re just a little different, and Daisy is too naive to understand why.”

He wished it was that simple. He turned, catching Mrs. Hughes’ eyes, and wondered at the worry he saw lurking in their brown depths. Why was she concerned for his well being? Why, when she surely knew what he was?

“You know what I am.” Thomas whispered. She winced, as if pained for his sake, “How can you not think me vile?”

“I don’t think you vile because I know who you are.” Mrs. Hughes urged, “Not that I’m encouraging you in any sense, but you ought to know that you’re… quite fine in my eyes. Quite fine indeed.”

And at this, she reached out to gently flatten the edge of his lapel. It was starting to curl in the heat.

Though Thomas still couldn’t rightly understand why it was that Mrs. Hughes was sympathetic to him, it helped to hear her kind words. If only he’d heard more of them over the years, maybe he might have stood a chance against Carson’s bullying.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hughes.” He said.
She gave him a small, watery smile.
Dinner that night was a tense affair, though not because of the family. Though Thomas and William worked side by side, they did so in absolute silence. Every trade off with the silver and the linens was done with jerky, stoic movements. William would not meet his eyes. Thomas would not speak, and so the pair of them were stuck in a mute robotic dance while Mr. Carson carried on blissfully unaware. If anything, Carson was delighted by the lack of conversation. It made William and Thomas’ expressions more blank than normal. The lack of cheek, the lack of any dialogue, was Carson’s idea of a perfect night. When dinner was done and dusted, Thomas, William, Gwen, and Anna stripped the dining room table and brought everything back downstairs to find the hall full of life. The lamb had been a hit with the family, but Mrs. Patmore had ordered more than strictly necessary so that the downstairs would be able to have lamb too. She’d likewise made a pot of kedgeree and bubble and squeak to side their dishes. Daisy sprinted around the table like she was trying to win a marathon, setting the plates with precise ease.

Thomas kept out of the way, hiding in the hall even as the others congregated around the table to wait for Mr. Carson.

“Thomas-“

Thomas jumped, taken aback by the arrival of Bates. The day had been frantically paced for the man, with three new suits arriving for Lord Grantham straight from his London tailor. Bates had had his work cut out for him, hemming and mending each suit to Lord Grantham’s desires. It was the first time the pair of them had been alone today, and it resulted in Thomas feeling oddly flushed despite the fact that it was now nighttime and the temperature had dropped to a bearable degree. Suddenly Thomas found himself wanting to beg Bates to end their agreement, no matter how lovely their time together had been. A terrible wave of remorse was welling up inside of Thomas, with every image of memories past in which Anna and Bates had been love sick stroppy fools. It was more than just a romp in the hay, there were lives on the line. He couldn’t do this to Bates. I couldn’t keep carrying on if it would deter him from Anna. What if he ruined both their futures forever, without meaning to?

“I’ve been trying to talk to you all day.” Bates murmured. He seemed stuck between the urge to smile and the urge to care for Thomas first. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh…” Thomas fumbled around words, unsure of how best to word his emotions. He doubted the phrase, ‘I want to throw myself in the river’ would go over well. “Um…”

But Bates seemed to understand. He nodded, and gave Thomas a gentle smile. “Give it time.” was his sage advice. “Daisy will get over her broken heart soon enough, and William will understand in time.”

But Thomas doubted that either of these assumptions were entirely true. He could hear the cries of his fellow workmates in the hall, babbling about something or the other. He wondered what it would be like to join them. To be normal.

“… Dinner…” Thomas mumbled, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the hall.

“Dinner.” Bates agreed. Anna poked her head out, curious as to why the two men had not yet joined the throng. She walked down the hall, still sniffling a bit into a handkerchief. Though recovered from her cold, she was still slightly stuffy.

“You ought to come to dinner.” Anna urged. “Mr. Carson’s ready to cut the lamb. It smells
It was a poor battle, to try and fight against the call of roasted lamb.

The three of them returned to the servants hall, and found the table packed. Anna took her seat next to Gwen, with Bates and Thomas sitting on the opposite side. Thomas was unfortunately made to sit in between Bates and William, who was stiff in his chair and bitter to be rubbing elbows with the man he now looked upon as an enemy. Thomas, having done nothing but try to be nice for months, felt horribly misjudged.

Carson, oblivious to it all, began to cut into the rack of lamb with a smug delight.

The table was unusually quiet was Carson passed around plates of meat. Kedgeree and bubble and squeak were open for everyone to share, offered in large ceramic bowls in the middle of the table along with rolls of bread and butter. Mr. Carson had decanted a bottle of poor wine, which wasn’t fit for consumption by the family. As a result, a few were enjoying glasses of wine. Thomas, however, did not take a glass even when Bates silently offered one for him. Wine was difficult for him to consume. Like having sex, wine likewise made Thomas feel like he was sinning. He’d stolen too many times, drank with ease in dark corners, and as a result the taste of wine was almost a trigger for him.

With plates of lamb dolled out, Carson began to eat. Yet, the fly in the ointment kept bothering Carson’s otherwise blissful evening. Despite dinner going brilliantly, and the house working smoothly, there was an unbelievable tension at the table tonight. Thomas and William were bitterly quiet, and as a result the touch of silverware to the ceramic dishes was deafening.

“Do I detect a mood in the atmosphere tonight?” Mr. Carson drawled.

But Thomas and William would not answer. Bates, a stoic and moral man, was likewise refusing to tell. Anna and Gwen were a little too out of the loop to truly explain, and so the awful task fell to the delighted shoulders of one Sarah O’Brien who was smug at her place by Carson’s side. She looked as if Christmas had come early, her dark eyes twinkling with mirth even as she kept her expression as neutral as possible. It was not easy; she clearly wanted to smile… but to do so would give her position away.

Instead, she looked down the table at Thomas with a false sense of disappointment. Thomas wished he could chuck a goblet of water in her face.

“It’s a poor business Mr. Carson.” O’Brien said. Her voice made Thomas’ skin crawl, for he knew surely what she would say next, “It seems poor William and Daisy have been lead astray by young Thomas here. The cad.”

“What?” Carson piped up, glaring down the table at Thomas. Thomas found it difficult to meet the butler’s eyes. But, for whatever reason, it was William’s turn to speak up. He looked livid!

“I’ve not been lead astray by anyone!” William said hotly, setting down his silverware angrily. “I just thought Thomas could approach a lady with a bit more tact, but apparently I was wrong.”

“William, I tried my best.” Thomas was getting rather tired of being shat on for not letting Daisy run around the mill with the notion of love.

“Well clearly your best was not enough!” O’Brien cut in. She seemed positively giddy to imagine as much.
Bates, having taken a large mouthful of wine, was the one to take up Thomas’ honor.

“Daisy is not Thomas’ responsibility, William.” Bates warned, “She’s just in a sore spot right now. She’ll heal.”

“I’m sure Daisy will be fine.” Anna added from across the table, “She’s young and bright. She’ll bounce back.”

“I think there’s no easy way to let someone down.” Gwen agreed.

“Clearly not.” William muttered, but there was a murderous tone to his voice that Thomas didn’t like.

Mrs. Hughes dabbed at her lips with her napkin, chewing cautiously on a mouthful of lamb before adding her two cents. Mr. Carson watched the entire display, seemingly confused about why it was that everyone was in a tizzy over Daisy.

“William, we won’t have any nonsense over this discussion.” Mrs. Hughes warned, “You’re much too young to be thinking about these sorts of things anyway. Put it out of your head for ten years at least.”

“Love is a consuming creature.” William said. There was an odd wistful look in his eyes. His anger was ebbing away, to be replaced by longing and loneliness.

“Indeed.” Mr. Carson grumbled, returning back to his plate of lamb and kedgeree.

But this just made Thomas see red.

Here was William, mopey in love and whimpering for affection, and Carson had nothing to say. But if Thomas so much as mentioned the word ‘love’, he was ostracized by Carson for being out of order. What was the difference between them, save that William was ‘normal’ and Thomas was not?

“Typical.” Thomas muttered under his breath, cutting his lamb into tiny pieces though it wasn’t strictly necessary.

“I beg your pardon Thomas?” Carson warned. Thomas sat down his fork and knife, the pair clattering against the ceramic of his plate. His temper was flaring inside him, after a day of being harassed by William and Daisy. One mistake and he was back to ground zero! Not like he’d even made it up but a few steps….

“Oh nothing.” Thomas stabbed at a piece of lamb moodily, tearing it apart strand by strand so that it was hardly consumable afterwards. Nothing, nothing, nothing… Nothing.

Nothing.

“But this just made Thomas see red.” Carson growled.

“Well, it’s just rather funny isn’t it.” Thomas gave Carson a pleasant smile. He wondered if it were possible to die from an overdose of sarcasm, “I say love isn’t a sin and I’m close to the window. William says love is consuming and you say ‘indeed’.” He gave a little tittering laugh, and as his voice trailed away he started inching his hand towards the remains of the decanted wine. Maybe one glass wouldn’t be remiss.

“I suppose that’s because you think I’m foul.” Thomas tittered, pouring himself a glass of wine. He took a hearty sip, sighing at the feeling of warmth sliding against the back of his throat.
“Oh that’s delightful.” Thomas murmured, refilling his glass. Bates reached out and took the bottle from him, carefully sitting it back down.

“It’s not that good.” Bates warned him.

“No really it’s fine.” Thomas like the word ‘fine’ drag on far too long past his lips, swallowing another enormous mouthful of wine. Carson’s eyebrows were in danger of vanishing into his receding hairline.

“I do not recall making such insinuations!” Mr. Carson snapped. For whatever reason, he’d taken more offense to the idea than Thomas had thought, “William is speaking about a young lady whom he cares for, and you were speaking out of turn about a lady of this house!”

“Oh I see.” Thomas said loudly, setting down his glass with a sharp ‘thunk’ to glare at Mr. Carson. The man met his gaze steadily, for if ever there were a contestant in a battle of the wills, it was Charles Earnest Carson.

“So, let’s say that I was talking about someone I love, instead of a lady of the house.” Thomas mused, “Would you be fine with it?”

“I will not dally in what-if’s with you.” Mr. Carson grumbled. Thomas’ fists tightened upon the table, and as a result, two of his knuckles popped audibly. William seemed to have heard, for his looked about curious with wide eyes.

O’Brien was having a field day, “As if your type fall in love.” She sneered.

Thomas’ temper popped: “I could say the same about you.”

Anna bristled in her seat, her lips pursed and her face curved into a wince. Everyone knew that O’Brien got hot when her personal life was mentioned.

O’Brien ground her jaw, her eyes burning with such intense fury that Thomas suddenly felt a tiny twinge of remorse simply because he knew he was about to get slammed.

He suddenly wished he had more wine to drink. He busied himself, taking an unnaturally long sip of wine from his glass till he was touching nothing but dregs. Internally, he tried to reason that O’Brien wouldn’t strangle him at the table, if only because she physically couldn’t reach him.

Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson were staring at one another. Mr. Carson was stupefied, unsure of what to do in the face of a towering argument. Indeed, the entire table was tense, most servants falling silent lest they inadvertently be drug into the dog fight.

With horrid timing, Daisy came around the hallway bearing a steaming tea kettle. She began to refill cups, going around the table clockwise so that she served Carson first, and then O’Brien. As she poured, O’Brien caught her eye and held it. There was malice in her gaze, and it made Thomas’ stomach clench with fear.

“Thank you Daisy,” O’Brien said as Daisy refilled her cup. “Oh, and I am so sorry about all this todo-“ She added, picking up her cup and taking a small sip from the steaming brew. “But you mustn’t take it personally dear. Thomas doesn’t fall in for the ladies, no matter who they are. More of an artist than a sportsman. You’re much better off looking to another man. An actual man.”

The entire table went silent. Across from O’Brien, Mrs. Hughes dropped her fork in shock.
“…What?” Daisy asked, utterly confused. “Thomas is an artist?”

But the others were catching on with ease, and Thomas’ stomach flipped in terror as he watched each servant slowly dawn with recognition for what O’Brien meant. Anna’s mouth was open. Gwen was white. William didn’t seem to want to believe it, and the maids were absolutely scandalized.

Mr. Carson was trembling with rage.

“…You evil witch.” Bates growled, his teeth clenched. In response, O’Brien just took a slow sultry sip of her tea.

But Thomas was just growing more and more horrified. He suddenly felt like he was underneath an awful spotlight, and the heat was growing in his face and chest. Maybe a few would be confused, but most everybody knew what it meant to be called ‘an artist than a sportsman’.

Thomas rose up from his seat, pushing his chair back abruptly so that the legs accidentally buckled and the chair tipped backward to clatter against the dish shelves.

“Thomas—” Mrs. Hughes called out for him.

Thomas did not wait to hear what she would say, to hear what any of them would say. He fled the servant’s hall, running for the stairs and taking them two at a time if only to get to that attics quicker. When he reached the top, Thomas’ haggard panting was taking an emotional edge.

He suddenly wanted to run away. To flee the house entirely and not look back. Even though this adventure had started as a second attempt at his life, now Thomas felt like it was utterly ruined. He’d botched his chance to have a normal relationship with Daisy, and now everyone knew that he was queer. Carson would fire him now, there was no other way around it. Christ, the police would probably be called as well-!

Panicking, Thomas slammed his bedroom door and used his desk chair as a lock. Alone and mortified, Thomas became hysterical. Why in the name of god had he opened his mouth against O’Brien? He’d known from the start that she was dangerous, but in a moment of anger he’d forgotten and now he would have to suffer for it.

But what would he do and where would he go?

He was terrified, point blank terrified, and crumpled under the strain.

Thomas sat down upon his bed and buried his face in his hands.

His torrid love affair with Bates, his declining relationship with Carson, his ruined attempts with Daisy and his broken chances with William, all of it boiled up inside of him and made him feel utterly helpless. Before—

A knock sounded upon his door.

Thomas bristled, staggered sobs still slipping past his lips. He said nothing, unsure of who would be on the other side of the door. At worst, it would be Carson. At best…?

“Thomas it’s me.” came William’s voice from the other side of the door. “I need to talk to you.”

But Thomas didn’t want to talk to William. He wanted to leave this fucking house and never return. He felt like an absolute fool, and suddenly wished he’d not traveled back in time at all. How would he survive this?
“Go away.” Thomas groaned, unwilling to even look at the door, “I can’t handle you anymore-“

“Thomas, what did O’Brien mean?”

Thomas didn’t answer him. He’d suspected that William would be confused. He was a country boy; a farmer’s son. William had probably never heard the word ‘queer’ in his life, at least not outside of a church.

When Thomas didn’t answer, William carried on.

“Thomas… did she mean to say… Is the reason you’re not good with women because-?”

But this wasn’t about being good or not good with women. This was far more dangerous and dire than William could ever understand. Furious and emotional to a point of hysteria, Thomas rose from his bed only to storm across his bedroom and yank his desk chair out from underneath his doorknob. He flung open the door, allowing the doorknob to smack against the wood on the inside of his wall, and faced William head on. His face was tinged pink with exertion, tear tracks glistening wet on his cheekbones and chin. William was startled at his expression, absolutely gobsmacked to see Thomas exhibit such emotion when normally Thomas didn’t dare so much as crack the veneer.

“You think this is about women?” Thomas demanded angrily, “You think this is a simple spat? I’m ruined William! Ruined and foul!”

“But why are you foul?” William asked in a rush, “Tell me why exactly!”

Thomas contemplated telling William the truth for the moment. Before, he’d have been hard pressed to so much as mention his favorite color in front of the boy, but what did it matter now? If William knew the full and utter truth, maybe it would just cement his doom. Alfred had run straight to Carson when he’d found Thomas and Jimmy kissing. Perhaps William would do that same now.

Maybe it’s better this way, an ugly voice whispered inside his head. Maybe you just have to get it over with.

“… You want to know?” Thomas’ voice quivered with bitter hate, sniffing heartily as more moisture burned at the corners of his eyes, “You want to know why I’ll never fit in with this ruddy house-?”

William just stared, eyes wide and mouth slack. He seemed to be waiting with baited breath, unsure of what Thomas would say next.

Thomas leaned in, clutching at the doorsill with both hands so that all his weight rested in his perked toes.

“.. I’m attracted to men, William.” Thomas whispered, “That’s why I could never love Daisy, and why I couldn’t explain the full truth to her. How could I, when even you are ready to be sick about it.”

William shook his head. He didn’t seem to want to believe it, growing angry at Thomas’ insistence. “But surely— surely you just haven’t found the right girl yet-“

“William!” Thomas barked his name, furious at the thought. This wasn’t about women, it would never be about women-! “I know what I am! I’m an Oscar Wilde sort, an no mistake!”

The silence that fell over them was cold and unfeeling. William seemed almost afraid of Thomas in that moment, and took a hasty step back in retreat.
Spurred on, Thomas just kept digging his grave, “I’m a vile disgusting lavender. Why do you think Mr. Carson hates me so much? He knows what I am, an’ now you do too. So go on ahead and hit me. Just get it over with.”

William shook his head, whether in shock or denial of wanting to hit Thomas, Thomas did not know.

“…Do it.” Thomas ground out, jaw clenched tight, “I’m used to it.”

But William did not hit him.

He stared, fretful and agog, often turning back to look down the hallway only to catch Thomas’ eye again. He’d been smacked over the head with the information of Thomas’ nature, and clearly didn’t know how to take it. Unlike Alfred, who’d showed immediately outright disgust, William just seemed confused. Concussed.

It was like he didn’t want to believe Thomas was a homosexual.

“… Go ring the police. I won’t stop you.” Thomas whispered. He felt weary, bone tired in a way he hadn’t been for months. He reached out, took the door in hand, and began to pull it to so that William would once more be alone in the hall. He closed the door in William’s stricken face, but did not make to put the desk chair back beneath the door knob.

William did not attempt to open the door after Thomas, or speak out to him from the hall. Instead, footfalls a few moments later proved that William was walking away. Whether or not to call the police, Thomas did not know.

He did not sleep that night, waiting perched at the side of his bed for the hammer to fall in silence. Come morning, he would be likewise undisturbed.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns let me know!
Chapter Summary

O’Brien finds an unlikely ally, but suffers defeat once again when Thomas does the same.
Meanwhile Thomas comes to an understanding regarding one of his oldest co-workers.

Chapter Notes

I apologize if this has taken too long. I've started a summer job, and have been single handedly running an ice cream cart. It takes long hours and hard work to keep it going by myself, and as a result I'm often too tired to write when I finally get home. This chapter is slightly shorter than my usual spread, but I wanted to get something out there to keep my readers happy. I hope everyone is having an excellent May. No warnings on this chapter!

I've completed two of my commissions, and am about to start on my multi-chapters. With the permission of the client, I may put them online eventually. They are all Thomas centric, and a few are STR universe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Morning came, and brought with it a Downton Abbey unchanged by the night before.

Thomas did not come down to breakfast, sensing imminent doom if he did, but was fetched anyways by Bates, who came upstairs to assure him there wasn’t a policeman waiting at the table. Wary, Thomas dressed in his livery and ate amongst the staff, keeping his eyes locked on the table and refusing to speak lest O’Brien give him another reason to want to jump off a cliff.

Carson was livid, though for the first time not at Thomas. It seemed that his truest anger was directed at O’Brien, who had done the unthinkable by speaking about a forbidden topic at the dinner table. No one dared gossip in front of Carson (it was practically a death sentence to do so), but whispers were following Thomas everywhere he walked. William refused to speak with him, refused to even sit on the same side of the table as him, and Daisy was still treating him as if he were a cretin. O’Brien lorded over all of it, even while having to avoid Mr. Carson (who constantly shot her nasty looks). In a show of bizarre resistance, however, Thomas found himself gaining allies where he rightfully ought to have been gaining enemies. For one, Anna was staunchly supportive of him, and though Gwen didn’t publicly speak on the matter for fear of getting the boot from Carson, she too seemed to think that O’Brien was being horribly unfair. Bates was a given, since Thomas was still sneaking off to dark corners with the man if only to snog him senseless. Mrs. Hughes, however, was not.

It seemed that, in lieu of Thomas being bullied by O’Brien, Mrs. Hughes had finally decided that Thomas was worth a damn. To be fair, she’d never outright treated him with cruelty, but she’d certainly never enjoyed his company until much later in their relationship. It had taken Thomas
nearly getting thrown out on his ass after Jimmy before Mrs. Hughes had treated him like an equal. Now, however, Mrs. Hughes was starting to view Thomas in the same light that she viewed William, and was therefore giving him better allowances which helped to make the day run smoother.

Par example: William adored scones with tea, so Mrs. Hughes always asked Mrs. Patmore to have a plate ready when it was time for break. In the same spirit, Thomas suddenly found copies of The Horological Journal laying about on spare tables in the servant’s hall, when Downton Abbey had never before taken out a subscription. Thomas’ father had been a member of the society, and had always read the monthly magazine. Indeed, when Thomas had been small, he’d used the journal as a text book to learn bigger words. Thomas spent many tea breaks with the journal on his lap, idly flicking through pages as he read about new clocks, alternate cleaning methods, upcoming events, training for apprentices, jobs in the industry, and even museum viewings. Sometimes he’d glance up from his rag in order to take a sip of tea, and find Mrs. Hughes smiling at him with a smug expression.

None of this changed the fact that Daisy wanted him dead, though.

The day started off innocently enough, though for whatever reason Daisy accidentally slept in and as a result the entire downstairs schedule was thrown off by a good fifteen minutes. This might not have seemed like an utter travesty to some, being a member of the working class meant that being on time was practically a matter of life and death. If Daisy didn’t get the fires going, Anna and Gwen couldn’t clean. If Anna and Gwen couldn’t clean, the family wouldn’t be able to be properly received by the rest of the staff. There would be no point in dressing, no point in eating, and therefore everything else would have to slow up until the family could be acquiesced.

Daisy was in a panic, but so was everyone else, and by the time that afternoon tea came around, the whole lot of them were utterly exhausted. Mr. Carson was upstairs, attending to the needs of Lord Grantham, and so the rest of the staff were clustering around the kitchen and servant’s hall to try and garner a moment of peace. Thomas was at the table, alongside Bates and Anna, who were each working on separate tasks. Bates was sorting collars, and Anna was sewing a button onto Lady Mary’s riding jacket which had come loose during a recent jaunt. Thomas, for whatever reason, had a small moment of reprieve and was using it to read the paper though there wasn’t anything truly interesting. He felt utterly bored, though he kept it to himself lest he start up trouble. Daisy was loading a tray full of cups, with deep marks beneath her eyes from exhaustion and lack of sleep. William, across from her, was hurriedly polishing a candelabra to be used that night for dinner.

The arrival of O’Brien was met with a stoic silence from much of the table. She carried her button box upon her hip, and glared at the sight of William polishing at the servant’s table.

“You shouldn’t do that in here.” O’Brien warned, sitting down at the table across from Anna and Bates. She took out a bit of lace from her snuffbox, and began to darn it intricately with a small silver knitting needle.

“I don’t like being in the pantry all alone.” William said, “Mr. Carson won’t mind; he’s gone into the village.”

William sat down a candelabra and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Thomas took a chance, his heart pounding beneath his breast for fear of drawing attention to himself.

“….I can… help with that if you like?” Thomas offered.
William bristled, not meeting Thomas’ eye. Instead, he snatched up the candelabra again with a clean cloth in order to buff away any resider from the remaining polish.

“No thank you, I’m fine.”
Thomas tried not to wilt physically at the let down. In an attempt to hide his face, he picked up the paper and hid behind it, only then allowing a frown to grace his lips.

“That’s very pretty, Ms. O’Brien.” Daisy spoke up, noting to the lace in O’Brien’s hands.

“Do you think so?” O’Brien wondered, pulling back to look at her creation. She wore a puzzled expression, no doubt befuddled at the concept of being complimented. “She wants to put it onto a new shirt but it’s a bit old fashioned for my taste.”

“No, it’s lovely.” Daisy agreed. O’Brien was smug, and continued on with her darning now at new speed.

For whatever reason, Anna did not look happy. There was a wary expression on her face as she regarded the interchange between O’Brien and Daisy. Maybe she, like Thomas, was wondering just why Daisy was being so nice to O’Brien all of a sudden and vice versa. Where had this bizarre relationship sprung up from, and what would the effects be on all of them?

“Have you recovered, Daisy?” Anna asked. Daisy flushed pink, upset at being called out in a room full of people on a sensitive subject.

“What from?” Bates asked, looking about concerned. Even Thomas set down his paper, curious as to what had happened to make Daisy so late this morning. It had nearly upset the entire day! Was she ill?

“She had a bit of a turn when we were in Lady Mary’s room, didn’t you?” Anna offered.

“I’m fine, thank you.” Daisy mumbled. The tips of her ears were scarlet beneath her starched bonnet. She began to shove everything onto her tray more rapidly, and as a result knocked over several teacups that no longer had room.

“What sort of turn?” Thomas wondered aloud, only to wince as he realized that he’d spoken out of bounds. Talking to Daisy was as good as swallowing lye now a days. The look she gave him was absolutely scathing, but it was nothing compared to the sharp turn in William’s voice. He set down his polished candelabra, glaring at Thomas with clear contempt.

“Will you leave her alone if she doesn’t want to talk about it?” William demanded.

“I meant no bloody offense!” Thomas cursed, hurt at being drug through the mud just for being curious.

“Oh, there’s a bit of language.” O’Brien sneered. Thomas’ cheeks turned bright red, furious at having to deal with the woman, “It doesn’t surprise me to hear it from your sort. Your lips are filthier than most.”

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Bates warned.

“I consider upholding moral order to be a high priority.” O’Brien warned.

“Good luck with that!” Anna scoffed, “You’ll be crushed beneath the weight in an hour.”

But in all their bickering they did not notice Daisy slipping out of the servants hall. She practically
ran in her determination to get away from the group. As she whipped around the corner, one of her teacups fell off the tray and shattered against the grimy stone underfoot. In a highly uncharacteristic move, Daisy did not make to pick up the shards. Instead, she ran for the kitchen and stayed there until teatime was over.

Thomas’ relationship with Bates was an odd one, now that Thomas’ terrible secret was all but revealed to the public. Though no one made to call the police, there was an awful stagnant air in every room that he entered, and the whole process made him want to vomit. It was easier to battle with a friend in tow. Bates was the best companion, for he had the ability to take it all on the chin and keep going. Anna and Gwen, however, were more fiery and often started arguments now a days with O’Brien, who was getting harder to rope in. The hall boys were unbearable, as were the maids. Lily in particular didn’t so much as look at Thomas in her fear of ‘detestable characters’ and was solidly on Daisy’s side. William, of course, kept silent… but he no longer looked at Thomas.

Indeed, he seemed keen for the earth just to swallow Thomas up.

After tea time, Thomas ventured upstairs to wait by the door in case any guests came to call. In doing so, he had to go up the servant’s stairwell and bumped into Anna who was likewise on her way up with fresh linens from Lady Mary’s bedroom. Her face was flushed from the strain of running up and down stairs all day; she paused, leaning against the stairwell with her linens clutched to her chest. Thomas would have continued on past her had she not called out to him.

“Thomas…”

“Yes?” He turned around, noting that there was sympathy in her eyes. He despised being sympathized, even if it was meant in kindness. It made him feel powerless. Useless.

“I just wanted to check on you and make sure that you were alright after the other day.” Anna said.

Thomas could have attempted to claim ignorance, but what would the point in that have been. Dejected, he hung his head and considered telling Anna the truth… that he was absolutely miserable and wished he were dead.

“You should know, none of us think any the worse of you.” Anna urged, though Thomas knew this was a flat out lie even if Anna didn’t mean it as one. Plenty of people thought the worse of him now. “You are what you are, and you shouldn’t be ashamed.”

Her words sparked a meager warmth in his chest, but it wasn’t enough to keep out the cold.

“That’s kind of you, Anna.” He murmured, “But you know it’s not true. Plenty of people think the worse of me now, and if anything I should be even more ashamed.”

“Well, I don’t believe that.” Anna shook her head, her tone firm. He was pleasantly surprised, “And neither does Mrs. Hughes.”

Yet before Thomas could make a comment on how Mrs. Hughes was essentially a saint, the pair of them were halted mid-conversation by the floating voices of Daisy and O’Brien at the base of the stairwell. It was technically snooping, to stand there and listen when neither woman knew that Anna and Thomas were only a flight away, but at this point it felt like fair play. O’Brien was slowly turning the house into a war zone, after all. One had to be prepared to play dirty to win.
“Daisy..?” O’Brien was clearly catching Daisy as she ran upstairs to grab shoes from the corridors that needed polishing, “You know when you were telling me earlier about the feeling of death in the house?”

“I was just bein’ silly.”

“I found myself wondering about the connection between the poor Turkish gentleman, Mr. Pamuk, and Lady Mary’s room. Only, you were saying how you felt so uncomfortable in there.”

Anna went white, all the blood fleeing her face as she cautiously looked over the banister down at Daisy. Could it be that the girl knew? But how? How when they’d been so terribly careful to make sure that nothing was seen? Thomas had known they were cutting it slim, but he’d been so certain that Daisy had been none the wiser.

What if she had seen something? Had she seen Thomas carrying a dead body? Had she seen Lady Mary sniveling in the shadows? Had she seen Anna, helping them along with Pamuk’s housecoat in her arms?

How would Thomas and Anna ever explain their ways out of this?

“…I can’t say.” Daisy mumbled. She sounded terribly ashamed, “I’m sorry, I’m just in a tizzy today.”

“I noticed.” O’Brien was quick to smooth over the subtle rejection. “Is it because of Thomas? Because if so, I have a plan to get rid of that cad.”

“You do?” It was a painful twist to Thomas’ gut to hear how hopeful Daisy sounded.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll make it happen. We’re friends after all.”

Anna looked back at Thomas, shaking her head concerned. The fact of the matter was, O’Brien was no one’s friend… certainly not Daisy’s. It seemed that in Daisy’s emotional spiral, she’d clung to anyone strong enough to support her along. O’Brien could hold her own in any storm, and so it seemed that Daisy had latched onto her in an effort to not feel so alone.

Christ if this wasn’t a walking catastrophe, Thomas didn’t know what was.

“We are?” Daisy wondered.

“Well of course. Unless…” And here her voice grew slightly sinister, “You don’t want to be my friend?”

“No, I-“ Daisy back peddled at once, terrified of being painted with a black brush, “I’ve just got to get on. I’m late enough as it is.”

And with this, Daisy started running up the stairs. When she reached the landing and found Thomas and Anna standing there, she stopped flat and panicked. Perhaps she knew that they’d overheard, perhaps not, but she looked terribly ashamed nonetheless. She just kept running, pushing past Anna with a wicker basket that would soon carry shoes to burst through the green baize door. In their solitude, Anna and Thomas stared at one another with grave understanding.

Daisy was being hoodwinked, with O’Brien listing the house as their common enemy.
The house just seemed to get more topsy turvy as the days continued. Gwen fell ill, practically out of no where, and Mrs. Patmore nearly lost her mind over Lady Grantham’s attempt to change a desert recipe at last minute. Thomas knew it was because she was going blind, but no one else had a clue what was going on and as a result Daisy was drug through the dirt by Mrs. Patmore’s bruised ego. All of this, which could have given Thomas much to mull over, was pushed aside however by the very clear fact that Bates was slowly falling for Anna.

It had happened the same way last time.

Bates would follow Anna about through the house, helping her with her errands and toying with playful conversation. Anna would sit next to Bates at the table, causing Thomas to have to sit next to William so that the sides were even. They’d giggle, heads bent, and stare wistfully at one another when they thought no one else was listening. It wasn’t right for Thomas to be jealous, not when he knew instinctively that Bates and Anna were meant to be. But Thomas was terribly lonely and had never been loved by such a kind man before. Bates was tender with him, constantly enquiring as to how his day went, or how he was feeling, or if he’d slept well the night before. He’d sneak kisses in the dead of night, slipping into Thomas’ room only to sit with him and hold him in his arms. They hadn’t made love, not after the other night, but it didn’t matter. It was hard to make love in a house full of people, and in a way Thomas wasn’t really ready to have sex again. It still felt like he was cheating on Anna, though he knew the logic didn’t fully support that.

All of this… Gwen’s erratic behavior, Mrs. Patmore’s failing vision, Daisy’s malevolent streak, Anna’s adoration of Bates, and Thomas’ unreciprocated feelings were nothing however compared to October 17th, when Thomas came walking up the gallery hall only to find O’Brien coming up the other way. Normally, Thomas would attempt to avoid her, but today Thomas had business carrying hat boxes up to Lord and Lady Grantham’s bed chambers. They were full of new items Lady Grantham had purchased at a French boutique a few weeks ago. O’Brien seemed to realize this, and slowed up in her steps with a dark smirk upon her thin lips. Thomas kept his eyes forward, determined not to pay much mind to it, until O’Brien called out to him as he passed.

“Thomas…?”

Thomas paused in his steps, stopping though he did not turn around. The light was playing through the high balcony window, a stained glass picture depicting a landscape of mountains and sea forever staining the fine velvet carpet a mixture of green and blue. Thomas’ skin was painted the color of aqua and lizard green, his pale skin like white paint to the color’s tint.

“Yes, Ms. O’Brien?” Thomas kept his tone light. “Is there I can help you with?”

“I just wanted to tell you, though I doubt you’ll care for what I have to say anymore, that I’m quite worried about you.”

Thomas nodded, still not turning around. To some, this interaction might have seemed bizarre, but Thomas knew what it really was… a warning. O’Brien was up to something. She was initiating the game, setting the chess board before him and offering him the black pieces.

“I see. Thank you.” Thomas took a step forward, but O’Brien made him stop in his tracks again.

“What with you being a peculiar sort and knowing too much… men like you have ways of fallin’ into trouble.”

Thomas turned around, eyes narrowed in distrust. O’Brien gave him a light, airy smile, and patted her pocket before continuing on up the hall.
Unsure of what else to say or do, Thomas jerkily returned on his route back up to the Grantham bed chamber.

He found himself stuttering to a stop again, however, looking back up at the way O’Brien had gone. She was no where to be seen, no doubt having slipped through the green baize door and made her way downstairs.

But there was something in the way she’d smirked at him. Something in the way that she’d warned him… and patted her pocket.

Her pocket.

Her *pocket*.

Because that’s what this really was, wasn’t it? She hadn’t just been warning him, she’d been showing her dominance. And why would her dominance be her pocket unless something was inside?

And if past predicted present (or was it future?) Thomas knew exactly what that something would be.

He panicked, setting down his hat box if only to bolt for Lord Grantham’s dressing room. It would surely be empty at this time of day, and so Thomas did not fear to throw open the double doors or act with haste upon the threshold. The vanities and bureaus looked remarkably untouched; they were spotlessly polished, and fresh liners smelling of lavender were scenting the suits hanging in the wardrobe. But it was not any of these fine things that Thomas sought. Instead, his roving cerulean eyes were fixated upon the glass cabinets lining the western wall, one of which held a dozen or so snuff boxes all in pretty little lines.

He looked for the blue snuffbox, the very same one he’d taken in 1913… and found it gone. O’Brien had taken it.
She was going to pin him for a thief.

“…Oh…” Thomas sank onto the bed, a hand at his throat which was starting to clench with fear. “Oh no.”

The rest of the day he spent in an absolute malaise. It didn’t help matters that Sybil had disappeared off the road after claiming to go visit a spinster in a nearby town, as a result the entire house was stiff with worry while Lady Grantham feared to phone the police. What if she was laying dead in a ditch somewhere? What if somehow this all tied back into Thomas’ actions? But no… no that would never do.

Thomas had to content himself as he stood at the serving table, considering the options. There was nothing he’d done (or not done) that would truly effect Sybil in such a way as to make her vanish off the map.

Surely?

But even as he prepared the third course, a cold cut of asparagus and pearl onion, good news was delivered by way of mouth from Mrs. Hughes at the door of the dining hall to Mr. Carson who bent his ear.

“Lady Sybil has returned, M’lady.” Was Carson’s smooth announcement. “Her horse went lame and
she had to walk back.”

“Oh the poor dear!” Lady Grantham sighed, looking to Lord Grantham in dismay.

“We’ll have to send for the groom.” Lord Grantham agreed. “Have a tray sent up to her, and notify Mr. Lynch.”

“Of course, M’lord.” Carson said, eyes flicking to Thomas and William who were both still at the serving board. Thomas was hesitant, stepping forward though it was terribly out of bounds.

“…Uh…” Thomas’ voice was incredibly soft. “I-?”

But Carson shut him down with a fiery look, and Thomas stepped back in line at once.

“You’re a dear, Thomas.” Lady Grantham was quick to smooth over any unnecessary tension, “But I’m sure one of the maids will do. Send Anna, Carson, seeing as how poor Gwen is ill.”

“Of course, M’lady.” Carson said. With that, Mrs. Hughes vanished from the door, no doubt off to tell Anna of her new task and to send Lady Sybil up her dinner tray.

“Well at least that’s one mystery solved.” Lady Grantham sighed.

“Poor Sybil.” Mary tutted. “I can’t imagine. The horse going lame? I don’t think I’d have gotten down from the cart.”

“No.” Was Lady Edith’s cold reply. There was something dangerously soft in her voice. She sounded almost… sinister. It was unnerving, because Lady Edith was not an ungenerous or cruel person by base nature. “No, I daresay you wouldn’t have.”

Lady Mary glowered at her from across the table, eyes narrowing as she told a long sip of white wine.

Dinner was wrapped up with ease after that, although Carson was still irritable that Thomas had dared to speak out during the family’s dinner. Even as Thomas made his way downstairs, carrying fine porcelain to be washed, Mr. Carson grumbled in his ears.

“To speak out, in such a way, like you were a member of the family-!”

“I just wanted to help!” Thomas begged.

“It is not your place to help, it is your place to serve the food and keep the family happy.”

“But isn’t that-“

“And on another note-!”

Thomas groaned without meaning to, wishing Mr. Carson would let him be. They hit the bottom of the stairs and made the turn for the kitchen, all the while with Mr. Carson in Thomas’ ear.

“Don’t you take that tone with me young man-!” Mr. Carson warned as Thomas deposited the dishes in the sink. Daisy wouldn’t so much as look at him, merely continuing to wash and scrub with her pink frock rolled up to her elbows to keep out of the soapy water.

“I’m not taking a tone-!” Thomas begged, though he knew he sounded like a child in that moment, “I
was just wanting to help, I thought I could take up a tray to Syb-“ He stiffened, realizing the slip, “To Lady Sybil.”

“Don’t rise above your station!” Mr. Caron warned, chest puffed out with pride, “I am the butler of this house, and I decide the serving, of who, when, and how. When we are attending a family meal, your place is by the buffet table, where you and William are to cater to the family needs. If there is an emergency outside of the dining room, Mrs. Hughes and the maids will attend to it. You are not a maid, Thomas! Or do you want to be?”

“You’d like the skirt.” O’Brien sneered as she walked past the kitchen door.

“Thank you, Ms. O’Brien that will be all!” Mr. Carson thundered. He was practically purple in the face.

Of course, things just got more bleak as they settled down for the servant’s dinner. Mr. Carson was stiff in his boots, grim as everyone gathered about the table and stood by their chairs waiting for him to make the call to sit. Tonight they would be having roast chicken, whose drippings and dressings would serve to make meals for at least a week afterwards. The smell was scrumptious but even the savory addition to the servant’s hall couldn’t change the fact that Mr. Carson was in a terrible mood. He scowled at them all, eyebrows crumpled so that his brow was one impenetrable line.

“I want to say something before we sit to dine.” Mr. Carson warned. “I’m afraid it’s not going to be very pleasant. His lordship is missing a very valuable snuff box. It appears to have been taken from the case in his room. If one of you knows anything about this, will he or she please come to me? Your words will be heard in the strictest confidence. Thank you.”

It was difficult to eat after that.

Everyone was swapping gazes: Anna glanced at Gwen, Gwen glanced at William, William glanced at Thomas, and Thomas glanced at O’Brien. Smug as the cat who got the cream, O’Brien just cut into her helping of roast chicken, taking care not to pause too much nor stiffen her gait lest she appear suspicious. It was obnoxious, Thomas thought, for if you looked at the table and everyone around it, it was obvious who would dare to steal one of Lord Grantham’s snuff boxes. Gwen and Anna would sooner eat toads than commit a crime, and William didn’t have the guts to go through with it. Lily and Abigail, the other maids, were likewise too young and too fearful of losing their position… they practically looked to Mrs. Hughes like a mother. George and Matthew, the hall boys, might be a better guess, but they were once again far too young. Christ, Matthew nearly wet himself every time Carson yelled at him, so why risk the death sentence? Thomas was trying to reform himself, and had been doing good deeds for over a year now. Bates was a fucking saint, end of story. That just left the kitchen staff, and none of them ever went upstairs save for Daisy. She might be a bit sharp at the mouth now a days, but she still wasn’t a thief…

Which left O’Brien.

Thomas barely ate his roast chicken and dumplings, despite his hunger, and watched the table clear out knowing full well hell would dawn on earth by morning. O’Brien had hidden the snuffbox somewhere, and would hold it over Thomas like a trump card until she played her final move when she would declare Thomas the thief and plant the snuffbox somewhere in his rooms or possessions. Thomas supposed that he could go to Carson and Mrs. Hughes to tell them what he imagined, but really how much would they take his word for? His position was not a strong one, and he was fearful of ruining all the hard work he’d put into act since 1912. The most he could do, as awful as it sounded, was sit on his hands and wait for O’Brien to make a mistake.
But she won’t, a nasty voice whispered inside his head, She wants you gone and there’s no way to stop her now. She hasn’t killed the baby yet.

“I am so sorry Thomas.” O’Brien spoke up, causing conversation at the table to fall off the map. The only people left were Gwen, Anna, and Bates, the former two playing a card game and Bates sitting staunchly at Thomas’ side in aggrieved silence.

“What an unpleasant thing to have happened.” She said, a sinister smile in place.

Anna set down her hand of cards, unwittingly showing Gwen that she held two aces. “Why are you picking on him?” she demanded. She was clearly cross, which wasn’t common. Anna usually took the pacifist role.

“He’s a different sort.” O’Brien drawled, “those types always steal.”

And with that, O’Brien slowly rose from her chair, grinning contentedly to herself as she left the room. “Goodnight.” she said to the solemn crowd. No one wished her goodnight back.

In the awful silence that followed, all eyes turned once again to Thomas and Bates. Bates was practically shaking in anger, his jaw set and his brown eyes blazing.

“I hate this kind of thing.” He whispered bitterly, “I hope to god they find it.”

“They won’t.” Thomas croaked. “Because she has it… and when she’s ready she’s going to pin it on me.”

Anna gaped at Thomas’ accusation, but did not make to challenge him on it, “Why is she doing this to you?”

“She’s an odious woman but she’s not a thief.” Gwen shook her head, “She’s whatever she needs to be, to win.” Thomas replied.

~*~

The next day, hell did not come to earth but Anthony Strallen came to dinner.

Which was just as bad.

The problem was with Lady Mary and Lady Edith that neither could be happy while the other was flourishing. Matthew clearly took a shining to Lady Mary whenever she stopped flustering about, but Edith was making headway with Strallen and Mary didn’t like that. She therefore kept Matthew on the hook, dangling helplessly as she bit and jabbed at Edith wherever she could get. Mary didn’t like it when men liked Edith more than her, but honestly if they were giving out prizes for Anthony Strallen’s affection Thomas didn’t know if he’d want to get the trophy. Strallen was alright, but he was dull as paint and at least as old as Lord Grantham. Honestly, who would let their teenage daughter marry him?

Strallen was making progressive leaps on his estate regarding the rights of his workers and tenants which Thomas had to admire even if only from afar. He was passing through Downton on a trip with several of his business colleagues, and had been invited to dine by Lady Edith who was obviously smitten with being in love with a man (any man would apparently do). He was coming to dinner along with Matthew, Mrs. Crawley, and of course the Dowager Countess who could probably be counted on to make a spit or two at the fact that Strallen was courting her granddaughter. As it stood,
the house was kicked into high gear as the dining hall was prepared and the kitchen churned out plate after plate.

Thomas and William took turns watching the door while the other polished the Regent silver. It was one of the finer sets, not the finest by far but still requiring more attention than normal. The entire lot of it had to be ready to go by five, not to mention the family had to be served tea and dressed for their guests. It didn’t matter who you were, you had work to do, and even O’Brien was nearly run off her feet. This didn’t stop her from making jabs at Thomas any way that she could, insisting to Lily and Abigail when others weren’t looking that she’d seen Thomas enter Lord Grantham’s dressing room, and telling Matthew and George that strange men were prone to fits of insanity if unable to express their nastier urges.

Thomas had been raised not to strike women, but he was getting close to wanting to punch O’Brien in the mouth.

By the time that dinner finally marched around and the guests arrived, most of the servants were sweating profusely beneath their liveries. William and Thomas dampened dishtowels and washed up in the side aisles, hiding in the pantry so that they could at least appear semi decent for dinner instead of hysterical messes. Thomas re-combed his hair, and lent William his pomade so that William could fix his side part. They re appeared in presentable fashion, and at once whisked to the kitchens in order to start taking up savories and appetizers.

Tonight they would be dining on a thirteen course feast, one of their more bountiful, and it started with a fine chicken soup which had been concocted from the bones of the downstairs rotisserie last night. It had been made to stew while everyone was asleep, and so the whole kitchen smelt scrumptious as Thomas and William carefully poured the soup into regent silver tureens.

“Take it, take it-!” Mrs. Patmore was close to hysterical, accidentally knocking into the island so that several dishes rattled in their pottery.

Upstairs the talk was quiet and focused mainly around the business of farming. William and Thomas were careful to serve the family on their best behavior. Thomas found himself balancing on the tips of his toes, chest thrust out and expression blank. Strallen was so keen to talk himself up to Lady Mary and Lady Edith that he was almost surprised by Thomas serving him soup; it seemed he’d forgotten that he was being served.

That or he was going senile. What was he… seventy?

Back downstairs Thomas and William went all throughout the meal, taking up course after course till the side pantry upstairs was stacked four rows high with dirtied dishes. The final course was to be a raspberry pudding, which Mrs. Patmore had slaved over the entire day. As Thomas and William descended the stairs for what felt like the twentieth time that evening, they had to pause to mop sweat from their brows.

“I can’t stop thinking about that snuffbox.” William admitted as they hit the bottom of the stairs and entered into the kitchen. Bates and O’Brien were now sitting in the eves, having a small cup of tea with Anna and Gwen. Despite O’Brien’s worsening reputation, the group had no luck but to stick together in the compact space so that Bates and O’Brien were almost touching at the elbows. Neither seemed particularly happy about it.

“What if they don’t find it?” William wondered. “What happens then?”

“They’ll find it.” Thomas promised. William picked up the white sauce, a mixture of melted milk and white chocolate that was to be drizzled over the pudding. Thomas steadied his hands upon the
raspberry pudding so as not to shift the many layers of mousse at the top.

“You sound very certain about it.” O’Brien butted in.

“Because I am.” Thomas said. He knew damn well that O’Brien would bring that snuffbox back out. She certainly hadn’t stollen it to keep it for herself; what would she want with a snuffbox?

“Well,” O’Brien took a sip of tea, “I’m glad you’re showing some contrition anyway.”

Thomas’ anger flashed to a boiling point, and he whipped about, pudding in hands, ready to throw it at the woman. O’Brien eyed him warily, no doubt well aware that she was toeing a very dangerous line with him.

“If you think I’m gonna take this lying down, you’re delusional!” Thomas snapped, “I won’t let you win this. I won’t let you-!”

“Stop arguing!” Mrs. Patmore bellowed, grabbing Thomas by the elbow and forcing him back around so that she could sprinkle copious amounts of sugar atop the pudding so that it could begin to set.

“Go-!” Mrs. Patmore barked, pointing a finger towards the waiting stairwell. William ran out first, desperate to get away from the commotion, “What are you waiting for, go!”

But of course, disaster wasn’t far behind.

Mrs. Patmore hadn’t sprinkled the pudding with sugar, she’d sprinkled it with salt. Thomas had been too busy reigning in his temper to see, and now Mrs. Patmore was howling in the servant’s hall, sobbing into a dirtied handkerchief as everyone clustered around her in a show of support. Lady Mary and Mr. Matthew might be snickering about it, but none of this was funny to Mrs. Patmore, who was utterly and thoroughly humiliated by her destroyed desert.

Thomas felt terribly sorry for her in that moment. After all, she’d made that pudding a hundred times before, and when he’d snuck a crumb of two of it he had to admit it was scrumptious. By all means, desert should have gone over exceedingly well. Now, it was in shambles, all for the sake of one added ingredient.

Talk about a fly in the ointment.

“Hey… come on…” Anna whispered softly in Mrs. Patmore’s ear, patting her gently upon the back, “It’s not that bad. Nobodies died.”

“It must have been that Daisy.” Mrs. Patmore blubbered. “She’s muddled everything up before-!”

“But I never…!” Daisy was just as terrified to come under the gun as Mrs. Patmore. Mr. Carson, however, would have none of it. He shook his head with a sagely expression, silently quelling Daisy’s fear.

“But don’t worry Daisy.” the butler rumbled, “You’re not in the line of fire here.”

“I know that pudding!” Mrs. Patmore howled, distraught face turned up to the ceiling as if to speak through the layers of stone and wood so that she could beg directly into Lord Grantham’s ear. “I chose it ‘cause I know it!”
“Which is why you wouldn’t let her Ladyship have the pudding she wanted, because you didn’t know it.” Mrs. Hughes filled in. Mrs. Patmore had the gumption to look slightly ashamed, her trembling shoulders forming a tiny shrug.

“Exactly.” She whispered. Her cheeks were flushed and sodden with tears.

When she began to cry again, this time weeping softer with her head bowed, Thomas felt an enormous stab of pity fill his heart. There was nothing more than watching someone be turned into a victim, particularly someone as strong and proud as Mrs. Patmore.

“… It’s not so bad, honestly.” Thomas urged her softly. She paid him no mind, merely sniveling into her handkerchief which was as soaked as her face. “I mean… even with salt, I’m sure it still tasted….” but he couldn’t finish the sentence. Mr. Carson caught his eye, and though he did not glare nor scowl, his expression was an obvious one: “Let it be.”

Thomas fell silent, thoroughly cowed.

“I don’t see how it could have happened.” Mrs. Patmore sobbed. The more she thought about it, the more distraught she was liable to get. Bates seemed to realize this, and gently began to pull Thomas and Anna away by the elbow.

“Come on, everyone.” Bates urged, “Let’s give Mrs. Patmore some room to breathe.”

“I don’t think I should leave her-” Anna said.

“She needs someone to help her-“ Thomas added.

“Yes you should, and Mr. Carson knows what he’s doing.” Bates urged. Carson was certainly eager for everyone to clear off. He was shooing away Daisy, Lily, Abigail, Matthew, and George, setting them all onto separate tasks as William went to watch the door for the family and Mrs. Hughes scaled the stairs to speak with her ladyship.

Suddenly, Thomas and Anna were hiding in the hall with Bates, watching the smoke from the wreckage of the night slowly thin out till the air was quiet and somber again. Yet even as they stood, watching the display, O’Brien walked past with a teacup in hand and smirked at Thomas.

“Her ladyship was telling me what an awful shame it was that the snuffbox is missing.” O’Brien said, eyes locked on Thomas’ own. “I’m sad that it’s vexed her.”

“Then why do you sound so pleased?” Bates demanded.

“I’m pleased I didn’t steal it.” O’Brien replied, as light hearted as ever. “Whoever did is bound for trouble.”

With that, she continued on her way up the hall.

“…I’ll never understand her.” Anna muttered. “I wonder if she actually did take it?”

Thomas, however, could understand O’Brien, and knew for a fact that she had. He couldn’t talk to Mrs. Hughes or Mr. Carson… not now when the house was under so much strain. But suddenly he found himself wondering what Bates and Anna would say if they knew what he’d seen. Maybe they would have a plan?

Thomas turned to the both, a gleam in his eyes: “We need to talk in private.”
The three of them scaled the servant’s stairwell, taking it all the way to the top, and ended up sequestered only a few feet away from the attic divide. Alone in the gloom, with barely any light save for what flickered from nearby candles, Thomas, Bates, and Anna all took comfort in one another after a truly awful day. There was no way of knowing what would happen to Mrs. Patmore now, but that wasn’t their problem anyway. The true problem was the missing snuffbox, and where it was hiding. Somehow, Thomas was certain that O’Brien was going to pin him as the thief and get him kicked out of the abbey. If only he could catch her in her game…!

He told the pair all that he had seen, from O’Brien patting her bulging pocket to his immediate discovery of the missing snuffbox afterward, and how he was certain knowing her behavior as a once-friend that she was going to pin it upon him. Bates and Anna listened intently throughout his story, their eyes growing wide with knowing as the facts were finally laid bare before the three of them.

“So you know she took it.” Bates murmured softly.

“Oh without a doubt.” Thomas said. Anna’s eyes were glimmering like sapphires in the dark. There was an ugly mischievous look creeping upon her usually cherub demeanor, “Question is, where did she put it.”

“I think I know where.” Anna whispered. The two men looked to her, curious, and she leaned in so that the pair of them could speak in the barest of breathes.


“Hidden in your room, of course.” Anna urged, “Because I bet she’d like it if they took you for a thief.”

Bates looked to Thomas, amazed.

Thomas sat back, brow furrowed as he considered the consequences. The fact of the matter was, that the last time it had been he to slip the snuffbox into Bates’ room since the pair of them were on the same hall. If O’Brien had been brazen enough to venture onto the men’s hall and into Thomas’ rooms… she was getting very crafty indeed. It seemed similar to her MO, but Thomas was still unsure.

He supposed there was only one way to find out though, right or wrong: “Come with me.”

The three of them were like naughty children, constantly looking over their shoulders in fear of being caught as they entered the attics and made their way down the men’s side. Anna in particular was scandalized. The last time she’d ventured on this side of the glass door, it had been with Lady Mary in tow to fetch Thomas in aid. Now, she was returning with Thomas leading her, and had a wide eyed curiosity about her as she gazed at all the many doors so similar to her own side. Thomas’ room was near the end of the hall, right across the way from William’s. Thomas opened the door at once, letting the three of them in so that they could spread out in his cozy abode.

“I shouldn’t be on this side.”

“Oh, who gives a damn anymore.”

His room was, of course, far from stately or grand. He possessed no true belongings besides his
toiletries and a few books. A few clock parts stood scattered on his desk from where Thomas had been in the middle of making a pocket watch by hand. Anna was curious, and walked over to his desk to see what Thomas was doing. Thomas, however, was already beginning to tear his room apart. The first place he looked was behind his bed, but he found nothing save for dust and cobwebs.

“Alright, where did she put it?” Thomas demanded, looking about at the other too.

“Let’s search everywhere.” Anna urged, striding over to Thomas’ wardrobe to open it. She rifled through his spare livery pieces before ducking down to check through his shoes boxes. “Even the small places!”

“I hope you don’t have any dirty secrets” Bates teased, walking over to Thomas’ bureau in order to start searching through the contents of each drawer. It was a stroke of good fortune that Bates had taken this adventure upon himself, because Thomas didn’t know how he felt about Anna going through his pants.

“None that you’re going to find in the drawer.” Thomas warned, for though Bates might stumble upon the dirtied tarot card for courage, he would surely not be able to guess its true significance.

Thomas lifted up his mattress, and glanced beneath on all four sides, tucking his hands deep within the grooves of the box springs to see if the snuffbox had slipped beneath. He found nothing but continued to look, determined. He searched his bedside table, both top and bottom. He ducked down, his arse in the air as he stuck his head beneath the bed.

He found nothing.

“Aha!”

Thomas looked about, as did Bates. Sure enough, there was Anna, squatting down at the base of the wardrobe with one of the bottom drawers stuck out. Normally, it would hold spare shoes, save that Thomas didn’t have a spare pair, so instead it just held a hat box that contained his newscap. Tucked into the underside, carefully stowed away, was a gleaming blue snuffbox with inlaid French pearl. A miniature image of a Mademoiselle was waltzing on its cover, in a dress made of navy and silver.

It gleamed in the light of Thomas’ bedroom, slightly dusty on the sides from where it had collected fuzz from Thomas’ hat.

“… That…” Thomas could hardly find the words. “Foul… putrid….”

He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Bates held out his hand, and Anna gave him the snuffbox. He turned it over in his hand a few times, marveling at the fine texture of the stone and jewel.

Anna did not allow them to dwell in their maudlin haze for long, though the silence in the room was palpable and ugly.

“Give it to me.” Anna said, and at once Bates handed the snuffbox back to her. Anna pocketed it, a determined look upon her face. “I’m going to put it in her room.”

Aha… so it seemed the first time round it had been Anna’s idea. Not John’s.

Well, well. The world was full of surprises, wasn’t it?

“Oh, you naughty little beggar.” Thomas declared, all the while actually referring to how Anna had outwitted him before.
“Fight fire with fire.” Anna said with a smirk, “That’s what me mum always said.”

This made Thomas think about his own mother, who’d done nothing but fear for sickness and have anxiety attacks.

“Me mum just worshipped illness and had anxiety attacks.” Thomas muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Well, she raised you.”

“Oi!” Thomas scoffed. Anna just cackled all the more, seemingly alive and passionate in that moment. What a strange thing to get excited over… maybe Thomas had picked the wrong scheming partner all along.

But Anna’s giggling died away to be replaced by a warm silence. In that moment, she viewed him so lovingly that Thomas thought for sure he’d blush. He’d never been looked at like that by Anna, as if she thought him wonderful. He wasn’t quite too sure how to take it.

“…It’s a shame that you’re a different sort of man.” Anna said. Thomas was taken aback.

“Thinking of stepping out with me?” Thomas teased.

“Don’t think I’m man enough for you.” She said. This made Bates snort, who clapped a hand over his mouth to try and keep the offending noise in.

“Well, I’m off.” she declared, turning on her heel and patted the bulge in her pocket with clear fondness. “I have an errand to run.”

And with that, Anna left them, turning right down the hall to head towards the far off women’s corridor where she would no doubt sneak into O’Brien’s room and hide the snuffbox accordingly. Left alone, Bates gently closed Thomas’ door so that he might sneak the smallest of kisses. It wasn’t passionate or energetic; just a soft peck on the lips. A quiet meeting of flesh.

“That one is trouble.” Thomas declared when they pulled away. Bates clearly agreed, but there was a somber look in his eyes that Thomas would have been a fool to miss. Once again, Thomas was painfully reminded that Bates was falling in love with Anna. That he was, in effect, destroying the foundation of their relationship by hogging Bates all to himself. He was being greedy, and felt ashamed.

The three of them returned downstairs to find the atmosphere greatly changed. Mrs. Patmore was no longer screaming in the kitchen nor crying in the servant’s hall, and was instead sniveling in Mrs. Hughes office while she was offered a cup of tea. Carson seemed utterly exhausted by the whole affair, but there was still work to be done. Worst of all, without Mrs. Patmore to serve the servants dinner, the kitchen staff had to revert their authority to Mrs. Hughes who ordered them to lay out the simplest of meals. The leftovers from the upstairs were served, alongside fresh fruit and cheese. It wasn’t much, but at least it allowed the staff to eat without forcing Mrs. Patmore to cook while distressed. Dinner was a homely affair, although Thomas felt much better knowing that Anna had hidden the snuffbox in O’Brien’s bedroom. With luck, the rotten old hag would be thrown out! The entire time, Thomas ate his salted pork and baked potatoes with contentment that he hadn’t felt in an age. Mr. Carson kept looking across the table from O’Brien to Thomas, no doubt wondering why Thomas wasn’t panicking anymore despite O’Brien still looking smug. When the old butler caught his eye, Thomas just offered him a polite smile and took a long sip of tea.
When dinner was over and the dishes were cleared, Thomas, Bates, Anna, Gwen, and William relaxed at the table in the odious company of O’Brien. She darned a small bit of lace, a devilish expression upon her lips, but this time Thomas didn’t mind. Instead, Thomas had yet another cup of tea while Anna, Gwen, and William shared a plate of ginger biscuits. They were iced, and dissolved if allowed to dip in a brew.

Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were having a private conversation in the kitchen about Mrs. Patmore. The pair of them were clearly worried about what to do next, with no clear pathway forward. There were few professions where being blind didn’t matter, but a cook was selectively not on that list. You had to see to navigate a kitchen, to order your staff, to create your bakes, to stay safe around the stove… how would Mrs. Patmore do any of that if her eyes were going bad? Of course, Thomas knew what was going to happen and frankly didn’t worry over the subject. Lord Grantham was going to pay for Mrs. Patmore’s cataract surgery, and she would be able to stay on as cook. It would be another year before she truly lost her sight completely… but she was still safe. As much as Thomas could remember, Mrs. Patmore had scooted by on Daisy’s help, and Mrs. Hughes.

The sounds of Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson coming back up the hall caught Anna’s attention more than anyone else. Thomas was too busy reading the paper; Bates was relaxing his eyes, on the verge of almost falling asleep after such a long day.

Mr. Carson walked in the hall, looking worried. Mrs. Hughes was checking a clipboard, no doubt trying to tally up kitchen allowances to try and help Mrs. Patmore.

Anna perked up, her blue eyes keen: “Mr. Carson? We were wondering about that snuff box. Has it turned up yet?”

Everyone looked around. O’Brien looked downright delighted.

“I’m afraid not.” Mr. Carson grumbled.

“Well, I think we should have a search.” Bates grumbled, not even bothering to open his eyes for a moment. When he finally did so, he did not look at Mr. Carson, nor at Anna. Instead, he looked at O’Brien.

“It doesn’t do to leave these things too long.” Bates said. O’Brien’s grin faltered.

“Mr. Carson can search the men’s rooms, Mrs. Hughes the women’s. And it should be right away, now that we’ve talked about it, so no one has a chance to hide the box. Don’t you agree, Mr. Carson?”

“Well—“ Mr. Carson heaved a sigh, looking as exhausted as Thomas felt, “Perhaps it’s for the best. Although I’m sure I wouldn’t find anything. Mrs. Hughes?”

“As you wish.” Mrs. Hughes said. The pair of them turned on their heels and started for the servant’s stairwell. Thomas watched them go, unable to keep from smiling.

Ms. O’Brien tried to play it off. She continued to darn, though Thomas noted there was a slight tremor in her fingers. She accidentally pricked the tip of her finger with one of her needles and had to rub the digit irritably.

“What a shame.” Ms. O’Brien said. It was clear she wasn’t talking about the needle.

“Oh… I’m not worried.” Thomas sat down his cup. He gave O’Brien a small if pitying smile, “but you should be.”
O’Brien looked up, eyes narrowed. Thomas grinned.

It seemed to hit her all at once what was happening. She panicked, stumbling from her chair to leave her knitting upon the table.

“I’d better make sure it’s tidy-“ Was the only excuse O’Brien could think of as she fled the servant’s hall. Thomas couldn’t keep from grinning like an idiot, about to laugh for the joy he felt. God, what a relief!

But even as O’Brien ran for the attics, Thomas knew that she’d make it in time. That she’d find the snuffbox and still get to stay on. But it meant something to him, to know that he’d gotten one over on her. To know that he’d won the battle even if he might eventually lose the war. O’Brien could be horribly exhausting, with her constant pessimism and persistent meddling. It took a certain sort of pizzazz to beat her at her own game that Thomas had never possessed. It seemed, through divine fate alone, that Anna Bates neé Smith possessed that pizzazz.

Thomas was determined to put it to good use.

O’Brien, of course, was absolutely furious that Thomas had caught her out in her own game. Though she could not reveal her wrath in public lest she face the scrutiny of Mrs. Hughes or Mr. Carson, Thomas knew that it was only a matter of time before she tried her next gambit to get him kicked out. Thomas had a feeling that she wouldn’t go so far as to stealing wine or a tenner out of Mr. Carson’s wallet, but no matter. There would always be a way to up the edge, and O’Brien would always find it. That was just her way.

Thomas tried not to let it bother him. He knew, eventually, it would all come to a head. Until that day, he would just have to stand his ground, and be kind. Kindness was the undoing of O’Brien… kindness was what got under her skin. Thomas never found out why, not before in the original past nor now in the future past… but it seemed that somewhere in O’Brien’s life someone had taught her that kindness was a lie. That helping others lead to misery, and trusting was a mistake.

Thomas could not judge her for these things. He had learned from his father’s hands to expect violence if he dared showed anything close to kindness. Kindness had made Thomas look more like a woman in his father’s eyes. Kindness had softened his rough edges, and made him sweet to other men. His father had feared this, had known Thomas was a homosexual, and every time Thomas had tried to go out of his way for another, his father had quipped him into silence or hit him until he fled. It had taken over twenty years of misery and misfortune for Thomas to realize that his father had been wrong. That Mrs. Hughes, Ms. Baxter, Anna, Bates, and the others had been right. It had taken a great deal of humility (something he did not come by naturally) to admit that he’d been wrong. To acknowledge that he needed to change. Even now, even after a full year of trying hard to rebuild in his life and his reputation, Thomas had moments of weakness. Moments of anger when he wanted to yell at someone (usually O’Brien) or quip at someone for acting stupid (usually William). He did his best to reign in his temper, and usually it worked… but it was harder to reign in his sadness.

It was harder still to reign in his fear.

His main worry now, as he looked to Anna and Bates, was that they were slowly but surely falling in love with him as a barrier between the pair of them. He feared that staying with Bates any longer would surely ruin their chances of being happy… but what of his chances?

It wasn’t that he was blissfully in love with Bates by any stretch of the imagination, but after twenty
years of being alone and miserable it was wonderful to have a lover he could turn to. Someone who would kiss his brow and assure him that all was well. That he was a gift, and treasured in each and every way. Bates was more than attentive. He showered Thomas with affection, even if they weren’t physically sleeping together or kissing. Sometimes when Thomas would be polishing alone and Bates would come to call on him, he’d help Thomas put the polished pieces away. Other times, if Thomas was shining shoes, Bates would help him ease the chore. But Thomas’ favorite moments of affection were at night when he was laying awake in bed and Bates would come to call on him. Now that Bates knew Thomas had once slit his wrists, Bates was eager to let Thomas know that he was cared for. He’d sit at the edge of Thomas’ bed and rub his feet after a long hard day. Thomas rapidly discovered having your feet massaged was heaven on earth, and arched his toes into the touch as Bates whispered news from Lord Grantham and all sorts of scandals circulating through the family.

Who’d have thought that the way to stay in the loop with upstairs gossip was to refrain from prying into it?

But it was no matter. There was nothing that Bates could tell him that Thomas wouldn’t already be able to assume after knowing how the past future had proceeded. It didn’t surprise him that Lady Mary and Mr. Matthew were quarreling. That Lady Edith was ready to go to war and possibly ready to accept a proposal from Lord Strallen. All that mattered to Thomas were the relationships he wanted to mend. The people that he had wronged in the past that he wanted to do right by.

He was glad that, at the very least, he’d done right by John Bates…. so far.

On the final weekend of autumn, before the cold crisp of winter could start blowing through the English countryside, a flower festival was to be held with the last of the years blooms. It was a lopsided competition, for usually Lady Grantham won out of tradition. This year, however, the rumor was that the Dowager Countess was starting to feel the slightest bit of contrition. Thomas doubted this readily, for to him the Dowager Countess regretted nothing. She wore the pelts of her enemies about her wrinkled hips like badges of honor, and adorned the tips of her spears with their blood.

She reminded him of his dear old mum.

The flower show was set to start on the final Saturday of the month, and so when the sun dawned bright and clear over cool dewed grass, the family dressed in their best and the servants filled out of the house in a clustered babbling group. It disturbed Thomas deeply to see Daisy and O’Brien walking side by side, particularly after all that had occurred. But instead of talking in insidious undertones, Daisy seemed to instead be lamenting her life to O’Brien who was begrudgingly listening if not slightly sympathetic. O’Brien, after all, always rooted for the underdog (unless it was a dog she’d kicked).

Thomas was near the back of the line, next to Bates who was flanked on his other side by Anna. The night before, Bates and Thomas had snuck away to Bates’ room, where Thomas had allowed Bates to vent his growing sexual frustrations by fingering him aggressively while he kept another hand clapped over Thomas’ mouth. Thomas had pretended not to hear when Bates had panted Anna’s name, a word so deeply muffled Thomas had more or less felt it along his shoulder blade rather than heard it.

His throat had clenched up in response. It had been difficult to talk since.
“I wish she hadn’t found it in time.” Anna muttered, her eyes drifting to the back of O’Brien’s head. Anna was wearing a straw hat today, far from fancy but still fashionable on her.

“I had a feeling she would.” Thomas said, for in the original past, Thomas and O’Brien had both tore up the stairs to recover the snuffbox before Carson or Mrs. Hughes could see. “She might be foul but she’s also smart. That’s how she’s lasted this long.”

“I don’t want to talk about her anymore.” Bates complained, so both Anna and Thomas stopped at once. “I want to walk with my two favorite people while I still have the chance. Too often I have to hide in the shadows of what I really want.”

Anna paused up at this. Her face was suddenly twisted with terrible contrition.

“Oh, I wish you’d just come out with it.” Anna begged.

Bates and Thomas both paused. The pair were equally taken aback, with Bates seemingly stunned for words in the first time that Thomas had known him.

“With what?” He finally managed to ask, utterly clueless.

“With whatever it is you’re keeping secret.” Anna said.

At first, Thomas thought Anna had read it wrong, for what secret had Bates ever kept from her? But then Bates looked about, staring at the retreating backs of the others who were heading to the flower show. When Bates realized that they were far enough back to avoid being overheard, he finally looked to Anna to whisper a pitiful “I can’t.”

Anna’s blue eyes were beginning to glisten. “So you don’t deny it then?”

“…No.” Bates was still ashamed though, “I don’t deny it. And I don’t deny you’ve got a right to ask. But I can’t…” And at this, it seemed the root of his terrible frustration was revealed, “I’m not a free man.”

Anna blinked, perplexed.

But Thomas could understand what Bates was trying to say, because Thomas was blessed from the foresight of the past’s future. If there was one thing that had vexed Bates more than any other, it was his first wife Vera.

“…Because you’re married?” Thomas offered up, shyly. Bates looked around, unnerved at Thomas’ ability to see through his facade.

Anna watched him, unsure. There was something sickeningly sad in her face now. Thomas dared not look lest he fall into the pools that were her eyes.

“I…” Bates stuttered, “I have been married, yes. But that’s not all of it-“

No. No that wasn’t all of it. The wife was a sack of shit hiding away with another man. And even so she was a thief from what Thomas could recall, a truly terrible woman.

She wouldn’t stop till she was dead and Bates was in prison… but was there any way that Thomas could change this as well? He wanted to think so but…

Thomas was unsure. So many things felt out of his hands now. He’d barely survived a snuffbox!
“Well… I…” Anna looked down; she looked horribly pale and withdrawn in that moment, as did Bates.

And suddenly, Thomas thought he might be sick to his stomach.

He turned away, staring back down the path to the house. It was bare of anything, save for the few brown leaves that had fallen from trees and were fluttering along the path to hide in clumps along the sides of the road. He looked towards the far off flower show, where the silhouettes of their fellow companions were so small they appeared to be the size of tin soldiers.

“…I…” What had he been thinking? To allow John Bates to bed him? To take him away from Anna, “I’ve done a horrible thing.”

“What?” Bates was taken aback, “Why? What have you done?”

Thomas looked away, out towards the path that lead over fields which were slowly dwindling away to be replaced by weed and heather in the autumn bliss. Thomas did not feel very blissful in that moment, however.

“I’ve taken you away from your path.” Thomas said. And even so, what about his own path? What path was there for him to follow? Was his entire life going to be spent remaking his wrongs? Or would he ever get a chance to explore what truly made him happy?

What even made him happy? Did he know?
… But it made him sick to his stomach to realize that he did, in fact, not know.
That perhaps he may never know.

But such thoughts were what had led him to thinking of suicide in the first place. He needed to think of John instead, who was off his path. He needed to think of Anna, who he’d done wrong by at first and needed to repay.

This wasn’t about him, and it never could be.

“John-“ Thomas looked on the man frankly in that moment. In the way, he almost spoke to the John he’d left behind. The one who had hated Thomas so much, and had fought against him so bitterly.
“What we’ve done isn’t right. You know it isn’t right. It isn’t who you are-“

“Thomas-“ Bates was aghast to hear him say such things but Thomas wouldn’t stop. Not when he knew that he was right. That he was saving John Bates from losing his way, and losing Anna.

“No, listen to me please-!” Thomas begged, and though it might be unwise to show any type of affection in public Thomas reached out to clasp Bates’ forearm in hand. Bates was staggered by the touch. Anna’s eyes all but popped out of her head. “What we’ve done, it can’t go on. It’s wrong because it’s not who you are. You… You love her, John.”

Bates seemed too afraid to consider the possibility. “Thomas, I-“

“You know you love her.” Thomas urged, forcing his way forward, “And I know… I know she loves you! And maybe I shouldn’t have said it out loud, but I can’t keep something like this in when I know it could ruin your life to try and deny it just so that you could give me happiness-“

But even as Thomas made to continue on, to say more if only to lift the awful burden off his chest, their conversation was interrupted by a man riding a wagonette loaded with hay. He paused his draft horses, looking down at the three stragglers with care. He was a farmer, with a vein of hay between his dried lips.
“If you want a lift, I can take one of you but not more.”

Thomas knew it was time to break away: “I'll go—”

“No.”

It surprised Thomas that the request did not come from Bates, who was still standing there open mouthed, but from Anna instead. That pizzaz was back in her eyes, the firmness mixing with emotion to bring up a staunch weapon Thomas could not defend himself against.

“You go, Mr. Bates.” Anna said, “You go and Thomas and I can hurry and meet you there.”

This technically made the most sense. Bates was the one using a cane to walk, and had a slower gate than most men. Anna and Thomas were young, spry, and used to walking long distances. But even as Bates clambered up onto the back of the wagonette, he looked stricken at the possibility that Anna and Thomas might talk alone. Thomas had to admit, he was a little terrified himself.

“Just to smooth some things over.” Anna urged him, “Nothing silly.”

But Thomas had seen many definitions for the word ‘silly’ and knew that this was probably one of them. To think, the pair of them were now in the horrific situation of having attractions towards the same man. And yet, was Thomas truly attracted to Bates or the happiness Bates brought him? And did Bates even bring him happiness at all? Or did he just give Thomas the comfort of not being alone?

It was difficult to say, and disturbing to think about.

“I mustn’t slow either of you down.” Bates said. “There’s already been too much of that.”

The wagonette started off again, this time with Bates in tow. Anna and Thomas watched him go, neither of them walking for a minute so that more ground was gained and lost in turn. By the time that Bates was halfway up the trail, Thomas and Anna were truly alone with nothing but birds and blowing leaves for company.

A gentle breeze tussled stray bits of blonde hair, sweeping them away from Anna’s neat bun. Thomas’ hair, kept tight by pomade, did not shift.

“What you just said…” Anna began, but could not continue on. Despite her warm heart, it was difficult to say the words aloud. Difficult to reconcile that John Bates was anything but a normal man.

“… It wasn’t anything.” Thomas assured her. “We… we did a few things but… it wasn’t him.”

It was painful to admit the facts aloud: “He didn’t care for me the way he cares for you. It was just physical. I’m sorry if that disgusts you.”

“It doesn’t.” Anna promised, although Thomas still wasn’t sure. Too many times, the idea of two men physically together had brought hell on Thomas’ doorstep. If Anna truly did not mind, she was one of the rare few and all the more precious for it.

“We had an understanding.” Thomas said, “He’s a good man, and I respect him, but he’s not like me. And I cannot ask him to be. You love him, I know you do. And he know it’s too because he feels the same. You ought to be together, and happy regardless of what that means for me.”

He knew the truth all too well, “Happiness is precious, Anna. Don’t ever let someone take it away.”
She seemed to understand what he was trying to say. Regardless of their different positions, she put herself in his shoes for that one shining moment, and reached out to intertwine their arms so that they interlocked elbows. They started to walk again, their duo of footfalls the only true noise besides the wind whistling through the tips of the trees.

“What about you though?” Anna murmured, “What will you do?”

“I’ll figure it out.” Thomas said, “I always do.”

She gave him a timid smile. He found it easy to return. Even in this universe, changed though it may be, Thomas knew he had the ability to crawl out of hell if he needed to. “I’m just glad I got what I got. It’s a lonely life for men like me.”

“You’ll find someone.” Anna said. “There’s a pot for every lid…. even if your lid apparently has another pot hiding somewhere.”

“Trust me when I say there’s no other pot for him but you.” Thomas said, knowing full well that Vera Bates was a whore straight from hell, and no mistake.

“Thank you for saying that Thomas,” Anna murmured. She seemed to hold onto his arm all the tighter, “I’ll admit there was a time when I was unsure about you, but I think I realize now what was going on and I’m sorry if I judged you wrongly.”

It was a good thing to hear. It helped heal parts of Thomas’ soul that were still sharp from neglect and abuse. Anna was right, she had judged him wrongly, but in the original past Thomas had allowed her misconceptions to cement into facts by repeatedly denying help or warmth.

“It was my fault, Anna.” Thomas said, and in that moment he spoke to the Anna he’d left behind, not the Anna before him now. “That’s why I had to correct it.”

Unknowing about the ominous warning behind Thomas’ words, Anna did not reply.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know.
The Note

Chapter Summary

O'Brien, in an attempt to have Thomas sacked, pulls another scheme.
It's consequences have shocking effects on Thomas and Carson's relationship.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Here's another chapter. I'm sorry that my updating schedule hasn't been consistent. I'm working daily and it's hard for me to find the time. I'm likewise working on a large commission right now (two of them actually) so I have to split my time between working on them and working on Volver. The next chapter marks the official end of season one, and the transition into season two. Believe me I say that it is going to be wild.

This chapter was incredible difficult for me to write. I actually had to start with the ending, and then wrote backwards. It was the only way that I could get through it. The next chapter is going to be insane, so maybe it will be more easier to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Though Thomas and Bates were no longer technically in a relationship, it was difficult for Thomas to make do on his own.

He had to admit he was physically needy after so many years of being alone, but there was a fine line between enjoying the touch of a man and letting his emotions rule his life. Despite his lack of a steady, fulfilling relationship, Thomas had to learn to let Bates go. This would be much easier if the man was on the same page…

But Bates, it seemed, didn’t want to let Thomas go. Or Anna.
So that was a pickle.

It was the end of November, and snow had officially blanketated the entire of Yorkshire. Sleighs pulled by draft horses cut deep muddy grooves in an otherwise featureless road, paperboys were frozen solid to their bicycles, and Pharaoh, Lord Grantham’s aged golden lab, spent every waking moment by the library fire in an attempt to keep warm. An unknowing visitor might assume the Crawley’s had purchased a lab skin to lay in front of their hearth, but if you looked carefully you could see Pharaoh’s barrel belly rising and falling slowly.

Mrs. Patmore, after the horrific incident of Strallen’s salty pudding, had officially lost her nerve in the kitchen. She was petrified of every move she made, lest she inadvertently cut or burn herself. As a result, her cooking was beginning to take a turn for the worse in less experienced hands and her temper was through the roof. From sun up to sun down, you could hear barking from the kitchen for maids to ‘hurry up’, ‘quit dawdling’, and ‘fetch the ruddy’ something or the other. Her once soothing past time of writing down recipes and making orders was officially handed over to the oldest kitchen made, Gloria, who as Thomas recalled was going to leave next year in order to get
married to a farm lad in town. Par the moment, however, Gloria stayed firmly in the kitchen and thank god for it.

As a result of Mrs. Patmore’s constant foul mood, Daisy had adopted a similar mindset. She no longer sat with the servants at the table after hours, and refused to dole out biscuits with tea. She snapped when approached, even by William, and hid in the pantry for hours ‘cleaning’ though it seemed the shelves remained just as dusty and decrepit as ever. Mrs. Hughes had had to reprimand her several times for her tone, but it was just as well. Daisy was officially underneath Mrs. Patmore’s charge for most of the day, and Mrs. Patmore was too blind to see the way she scowled in the corners of the kitchen.

Thomas was her main victim, though once again this was no surprise.

After the snuffbox failing to see him cast out, Daisy seemed to have temporarily lost her faith in O’Brien. She seldom was found talking to the lady’s maid, and instead seemed to flat out ignore O’Brien which was going to end up getting Daisy killed if she didn’t watch it. Daisy was too naive (too stupid, Thomas though bitterly) to realize what was going to happen if she alienated herself from O’Brien’s good graces. It was one thing to be ignored, it was another thing to be hunted. With every smoke break denied, Daisy was painting a bullseye on her back and asking O’Brien to shoot her.

_I won’t let it happen_, Thomas thought angrily, even as Daisy refused to let him come in the kitchen or take tea from the communal pot. _There has to be some way out of this._

Whatever that way was, be it divine intervention or the final hammer of Mr. Carson, Thomas remained in the dark. Instead, he spent his days hiding from Bates, polishing silverware, and keeping watch at a door that was slowly but surely getting a heavy snow embankment that had to be scraped daily by the hall boys.

One evening, after Thomas had successfully out maneuvered Bates and Anna in the servants hall, Thomas sat in the silver pantry carefully polishing the Victoria set which was to be used only for Christmas. It was, by far, the most expansive set owned by the Crawley family and it took close to a month to tackle each piece before it was to be used December 25th. Mr. Carson liked to check up on it a few times a year, just to make sure the pieces weren’t going to waste, but par the moment Thomas was on official polishing duty for the twelve candelabras that covered every sitting surface in the dining hall. three sat on each baseboard and six sat upon the table proper. They’d either ring in the new year or the fire department before the holidays were done.

A soft knock on the pantry door caught Thomas’ attention, and he looked around to see Bates and Anna slipping inside. Bates had the look of a man who was incredibly smug to finally capture his target, while Anna just seemed relieved to find Thomas on his own. He supposed the pair had been marching up and down the hall looking for him, and lamented the fact that he’d not hidden himself securely enough. He didn’t want to have the inevitable conversation with Bates that he was about to have… he did not want to alienate himself from the only man willing to touch him sexually.

“There you are.” Bates said, shutting the pantry door securely behind him. In a bold move, he took Thomas’ polishing rag away from him despite how the oil would surely stink on his fingers, and set it aside next to the uncapped tin of silver tincture. “I’ve been trying to talk to you all day.”

“I’ve been busy.” Thomas shrugged.

“You’ve been avoiding us!” Anna said. It seemed she’d caught onto what he was really trying to do, which wasn’t a surprise. She was, after all, a rather bright young woman.

“Maybe so.” Thomas said; there was no point in lying, “But I didn’t want to have this conversation.”
“Neither do I.” Bates said, “But it has to be had, Thomas. I don’t want to give you up, not when you mean so much to me.”

“Mean so much to you-“ Thomas was baffled by the idea, “What about Anna? You can’t have three people in a relationship.” Thomas warned, noting that even if Bates cast him off he’d still have his wife to contend with. So really, there were four people in this relationship weren’t there?

“I won’t pretend that this is easy.” Bates said, “But I think I’ve come up with a solution that can benefit us all, and I want to talk to you about it.”

Thomas looked from Bates, who seemed elated, to Anna who was starting to blush. Thomas was not aware of any solution that could benefit three people in an illegal relationship… but he was open to ideas.

“Such as?” Thomas said, swiveling around in his seat to give Bates his undivided attention.

“…I’m… in a difficult situation.” Bates murmured, looking down at his feet as if to gather his strength for the battle to surely come. “I’m in love with two people, but… tied legally to a third. Neither person I love is legally allowed in the eyes of the law. Until I can find a way to somehow get rid of the chains that bind me, I’m doomed to stay a man detached.”

Oh yes, Thomas thought irritably, It’s you that’s doomed in the eyes of the law, not me.

“What Mr. Bates is trying to say- what I’m trying to say-“ Anna fumbled through her words, unsure of how to best explain her thoughts, “Is that he- we- feel that the situation we’re in is unfair to us all so we might as well do as we please.”

Thomas was still unsure of what Bates or Anna meant.

“I suppose.” He grumbled, “But what does that mean?”

“It means the law is already going to damn us, so why not just be happy?” Bates urged. He sat down on the bench beside Thomas, their thighs accidentally pressing together. Yet when Bates made to take Thomas’ hand in his own, Thomas suddenly began to wonder if the touch was accidental at all.

“Thomas…” Bates’ fingers were warm and heavy upon his own. It was remarkable, how different the two of them were physically. “I care for you, I won’t deny it, and I care for Anna too… and Anna and I have spoken about the idea of… things continuing.”

Continuing?

Thomas narrowed his eyes, unsure if he liked where this was going. Anna was for Bates, and Bates was for Anna. This was the way things had to go-

“It’s alright by me if the two of you have a bit of fun now and then.” Anna murmured. At the mention of the word ‘fun’, Thomas’ eyes popped like a firecracker. He pulled his hand away from Bates, standing up so suddenly Bates was the one sitting down between the pair of them.

“Wait-“ Thomas held up a hand, eager to stop all of this before it got out of hand, “Wait, I don’t…. let me make sure I completely understand what you’re asking. Are you considering… are you insisting we have some sort of … group union?” he gestured between the three of them, thunderstruck.

“Well, I don’t think I’ll be kissing you!” Anna teased, “But it’s not fair for you to be thrown over like a sack of potatoes. As long as we keep it private, I don’t see why you should be tossed to the wind-“
“I’m fine in the wind.” Thomas said, though in truth he wasn’t.

“I don’t think you’re being honest.” Bates said. He rose up as well, now all three of them on their feet and squaring off with one another. “Because you also consider yourself vile, and that’s not true either.”

“One has nothing to do with the other.” Thomas said, though in truth the two were probably very much intertwined. Bates frowned, but did not make to argue him on the subject. He of all people knew how touchy Thomas was on the subject of his abnormal nature.

“While I … appreciate… how kind you are to even consider such a thing,” Thomas said, looking to Anna in that moment, “I can’t accept. I believe that love is something to be shared between two people alone, and frankly… I…” Thomas blushed, looking away. He thought of Edward Courtenay where ever he might be, still young and whole. He thought of Jimmy Kent, as of yet still a young man and surely not even in service. He thought of Philip… poor Philip. Where on earth was he now?

“I do admit that I care for you.” Thomas would not lie to Bates, not after all that they’d shared with Thomas’ new lease on life, “But I know in my heart that Anna would make you happier, and I have to find out who I am.”

What an utter sot he was. He sounded like a maiden in a folk tale. “I don’t even know what makes me happy, John. How can I be in a good relationship if I can’t even make myself happy?”

“Thomas…” Bates was dismayed, sagging underneath the weight of Thomas’ polite refusal. “Please just… give me a chance. Don’t make me say goodbye just yet. Not like this-”

“I don’t know what else to do.” Thomas said, and it was the god damn truth. Maybe if he didn’t know the future that would be one thing, but the past was as clear as crystal on this one subject. Bates and Anna were meant to be… end of subject.

Where ever that left Thomas was where he’d have to be content with. He had to think of the future, of the lives and the joys that were at stake.

“I can’t let you go.” Bates said, “Not until I know you’ll be okay.”

It made Thomas smile in spite of himself… to know that Bates cared for him so much.

“I’m afraid you’ll be holding on for a very long time.” Thomas said.

“… Then that’s my cross to bear.” And Bates, it seemed, would not be shifted on the subject. He reached out to Thomas, not intruding but not backing down, and after a solid second of considering the implications Thomas felt he had no better choice but to simply take Bates’ hand… to take his love, and to allow Bates to love him back.

It made his stomach feel tight, as if a knot had formed in his lower intestines.

“Until you can find someone else, who will care for you and love you the way that you deserve to be… let me do so.” Bates whispered. “Please, Thomas, it’ll make me happy.”

“And who takes care of you?” Thomas asked, his throat clenching tight with emotion as Bates squeezed his fingers encouragingly.

“I’ll do that, thank you very much.” Anna said with a cheeky grin. With her yellow hair spilling like gold from her bun and french cap to her glowing smile and sweet blue eyes, she looked very much like an archangel in that moment.
“So who takes care of—“

“Me.” Bates said, eyes growing wide as his tights tightened in a firm grin, “Still me.”

“… Could you do it as a friend?” Thomas asked, “And not a lover?”

“I could do it as anything… so long as I got to be near you.” Bates said. When he made to pull Thomas into a bear hug, Thomas went with him willingly. It was incredibly rare in their conservative society for two men to hug each other in such a way. Thomas was physically starved, craving the emotional touch of someone who thought only the best of you. With Bates’ arms wrapped around him, Thomas felt safe; like nothing could harm him if only for a moment.

Over Bates’ shoulder, Anna just folded her arms and smiled. There was such fondness in her gaze that Thomas almost felt as if she were hugging him too.

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Despite the warming revelation that both marked the closing of Thomas and Bates’ sexual relationship and the beginning of their truest friendship, the loving mood was not shared in the house.

The day it all started going downhill was marked first by Carson forgetting to ring the dressing gong. The hassles to get lords and ladies into corsets and ties would be difficult enough, but to top it all off Mrs. Patmore had to delay her first appetizer by a good half hour in order for dinner to flow smoothly. You’d think this wouldn’t be a problem, but there were four chickens in the oven, and if they stayed in much longer they’d turn into charred coal.

To avoid the hysterical squabbling, Thomas headed upstairs through the servant’s stairwell, in order to wait on the second floor. For a good few moments he was by himself, able to listen to Mrs. Patmore snarling from afar but not having to get caught directly into the line of fire, until Bates came stumping from the second floor. He was red faced, seemingly embarrassed about something with Lord Grantham’s day suit hanging over his arm.

“Stupid—!” He was cursing, teeth clenched tight.

“What’s got into you?” Thomas wondered aloud. Bates stopped on the stairwell, groaning up to the ceiling as if to shake his fists at fate.

“I made a horrible mistake.” Bates muttered.

“Surely not.” Thomas scoffed. Bates make a mistake? It was more likely that Carson would sneeze in front of his lordship.

“I told his lordship that Lady Sybil went to Ripon with Branson.” Bates muttered. “I didn’t realize he didn’t know! I thought surely she’d have got permission… I’m afraid she’s in for hell now.”

“Well you know how Sybil is.” Thomas whispered, eager to keep his voice down lest someone else hear. Bates nodded, slightly consoled. “She knew the dangers of going against her father’s wishes, you weren’t to know that he hadn’t given her permission.”

“She’ll catch it tonight at dinner, I fear.” Bates muttered.

Thomas, unfortunately, knew this to be true from past experience.

“She’ll get past this, you’ll see.” Thomas promised him. “You want to lament about anything think about the kitchen staff. They’re going to crack if Mrs. Patmore doesn’t ease off soon.”
“She’s frightened.” Bates said, and while it was true, it didn’t excuse her abysmal behavior to her personal staff. “She can’t see, and she can’t last forever in her job.”

Alas, Bates spoke the truth.

“I’ll let you know how it goes upstairs.” Thomas said; he began to head down, knowing he’d have to take up platters in order to set up the side board now that his Lordship was dressed.

Bates was still wincing, eyes raised to the ceiling as he groaned soft and low.

Just as Bates predicted, dinner was horrifically tense.

The chicken was slightly colder that night than it ought to have been, a result of the entree being forced to wait while everyone was dressed. That night, the Dowager Countess was over for dinner, stiff in black as she cut her chicken into thin strips and watched her son carefully. Mary’s lack of inheritance was still a sore spot among the family.

Lord Grantham, on the other hand looked oddly calm which Thomas knew was nothing more than an act. He was furious, and about to bust a nut. Next to Thomas at the serving buffet, William stayed straight backed and calm, completely unaware of what was about to happen. Carson, across the table from them, was keeping watch over the decanted wine.

They’d all need a drink by the time this was through.

“I gather you went to hear the Liberal candidate today?” Lord Grantham spoke up, looking to Sybil who was carefully eating her peas one at a time. Sybil paused, a mouth full of veg, unsure of how her father had discovered her plight. She chewed, thinking over her answer, and swallowed silently before continuing on.

“There were several speakers, actually.” She explained, “He was the last.”

“Did he speak well?” Lord Grantham asked, cutting a piece of chicken into cubes that he did not make to eat.

“I thought so!” Sybil tried for cheer.
It wouldn’t help.

“But there was quite a brouhaha.” Lord Grantham said.

“You know what these things can be like-“

“I do.” Lord Grantham said, then quite suddenly slammed down his fork and knife so that it made a terrible clanging noise against his china plate. William jumped, shocked at the display, but managed to keep his hands at his sides. Across the table, Carson’s eyes widened and then returned to a more calm state, clearly trying to do damage control.

“Which is why I am astonished you should not feel it necessary to ask my permission to attend!”

Everyone was taken aback. The Dowager Countess was ready to have a field day, her warbling goose neck going back and forth as she looked from Sybil to Lord Grantham.

“I assume this was Branson’s scheme!” Lord Grantham snarled.
“No-“ Sybil protested, but she was easily ridden out by her father. Lord Grantham was getting fired up, now, despite how his youngest desperately tried to reign him in.

“I confess I was amused at the idea of an Irish radical for a chauffeur but I see now that I have been naïve!”

“I told Branson to take Sybil,” Lady Grantham cut in, eager to keep Lord Grantham from shouting. Unfortunately, however, her plan backfired in the most abysmal of ways.

“What are you saying?!” Lord Grantham snarled, his eyes bugging out of his head at the idea of his dutiful wife being so insubordinate. Any second now he was going to take off his suspenders and start trying to smack her behind.

“Sybil needed to go to Ripon, I asked Branson to drive her,” Lady Grantham growled. She hated to be chastised before the staff, and her pale cheeks were starting to turn a pearly pink at the confrontation before them all, “I thought it would be sensible, in case there was trouble.”

Lord Grantham spluttered, making obscene noises as he tried to figure out what to say next. Unfortunately, Sybil took that moment to push forward her own agenda which might not have been considered wise given that Lord Grantham was slowly turning the color of port.

“I want to do some canvassing,” Sybil explained to them all. Edith seemed scandalized, agog at the idea of her little sister being so out of touch with tradition. Mary, however, kept to her own path and listened to Sybil’s argument patiently. “The bi-election isn’t far off-“

“Canvassing?!“ The Dowager Countess wouldn’t have been more horrified if Sybil had proclaimed she was pregnant out of wedlock.

“Oh it’s quite safe!” Sybil assured her grandmother, but the Dowager Countess wouldn’t listen. She was making the same kind of noises as her son, the pair of them elbow to elbow against the tide of change. “You’re in a group and you knock on doors.”

“Yes, I know what canvassing is!” the Dowager spat. Sybil rolled her eyes, completely put off her dinner now. Carson was glaring at Thomas and William across the table, urging them silently to move to take up the second course. The pair of them were too terrified to move however, lest they equally get caught in the line of fire.

“I that that Sybil is-“ Mary began, only to have the Dowager cut her off in a huff.

“What?!“ The Dowager barked, “Are you canvassing too? Or would you rather take in washing?!“

“I was only going to say that Sybil is entitled to her opinions.” Mary growled. She detested being cut off, even by the Dowager.

“No, she isn’t until she is married!” The Dowager was a woman of her generation, which wasn’t necessarily a good thing. In that moment she dumbfounded them all by saying, “Then her husband will tell her what her opinions are!”

Jesus Christ, Thomas thought, rolling his eyes and pursing his lips. Next to him, William had a look on his face like he’d just taken a bite out of a lemon.

“Oh Granny!” Mary scoffed.

“I knew you wouldn’t approve.” Sybil muttered to her plate. She took a long sip of white wine, finishing her glass. She looked so disgusted, so disappointed in that moment, that Thomas truly felt...
quite sorry for her.

The Crawley’s didn’t deserve Sybil. She was an angel and they didn’t even know it.

In a move that seemingly broke the spell of frozen terror on William and Thomas, Carson walked calmly around the table and re filled Sybil’s wine glass.

Behind schedule, William collected the plates while Thomas made to get the next round from the upper pantry.

Sequestered in the quiet, with nothing but fresh plates and unserved courses to surround him, Thomas picked up a vegetable course of baked potato wedges, pearl onions, and button mushrooms, only to be interceded on at the same time by William, Carson, and Daisy.

“Hurry up.” Carson snapped at them all, “I don’t want anything else to go wrong tonight.”

William walked in carrying dirtied plates, which Daisy collected without so much as looking at Thomas. Carson, on the other hand, gaped in dismay at Thomas’ vegetable dish like it had done him a personal wrong.

“Where’s the sauce?” Carson groaned, “Isn’t this supposed to have Hollandaise?”

“I apologize Mr. Carson-“ William said, going slightly pink in fear, “I forgot-“

Mr. Carson was ready to collapse under the insanity of it all. Unwilling to deal with the nonsense any longer, he turned away and stormed back out to the dining hall, a fresh decanter of merlot in hand.

“I can’t fetch it, sorry-!” William begged. “I have to bring out the plates!” And right he was, for there was no sense in serving the next course if the family didn’t have plates to put them on. William picked up the stack of china plates, and stumbled out of the upper pantry to set them on the buffet table.

That left Thomas alone with Daisy.

Before, Thomas would have made to ask Daisy if she might help him. Now, however, Daisy was glaring at him with such ferocity it was obvious that she was internally begging for Thomas to give her the opportunity to dress him down again.

Thomas carefully took off his white gloves, making a show of laying them down cautiously upon the counter. It wouldn’t do to carry the sauce with his gloves in case he accidentally spilled.

Thomas walked past Daisy, scooting on the side in order to not bump her shoulder.

“Caught on have you?” Daisy spat, “That I’m not your slave?”

“You’re not my anything, Daisy.” Was Thomas’ calm reply.

Her cheeks went hot pink in outrage as he slipped out of the pantry.

Thomas headed downstairs as quick as he could, nearly knocked over Lily the maid in his attempt to get the hollandaise sauce before Carson realized he’d gone downstairs. He was quick on his feet, and thank god for it. He made it upstairs just as Carson re-entered the upstairs pantry, not a drop of hollandaise sauce spilt. Daisy was still there, scowling in the corner, and what would you know
Thomas’ gloves were missing from the counter.

“Where are your gloves?” Carson demanded, gesturing to Thomas’ bare hands.

“I took them off to fetch the sauce Mr. Carson.” Thomas huffed, “Daisy was kind enough to hold them for me.”

“Well give them back to him.” Mr. Carson spat at the girl.

The fact of the matter was, Thomas had not given his gloves to Daisy and Daisy knew it. Carson, however, was none the wiser and so he found nothing suspicious in the way that Daisy bitterly pulled out Thomas’ gloves from her apron pocket to all but fling them at the side counter. They were too light to make the journey seamlessly though, and fell to the floor where they lay in a crumpled heap at Daisy’s feet.

“Sorry.” She bit out, clearly not sorry at all. She turned and left

Thomas stooped over and picked his gloves up from the floor. He dusted them off, casually putting them back on as Carson huffed and puffed over the hollandaise sauce.

“Whatever is that girl on about.” Carson muttered under his breath.

“She’s upset, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, picking back up the second course with re-gloved hands as William re-entered the pantry and snatched up the fetched hollandaise sauce. They exited the pantry, Mr. Carson last in line, but not before the aged butler muttered under his breath: “aren’ we all?”

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The next attack in the war between Thomas and O’Brien hit him completely out of no where, causing Thomas to be so thrown through a whirlwind that fluent speech and calm thought were unattainable for days to come.

It started with a dinner for Anthony Strallen, that required the house to work in tandem so as to present a hospitable view for their guest. Above stairs, William, Thomas, and Carson all worked in tandem to show Strallen hospitality while he gloated over Edith’s praises and offered weak commentary to Matthew Crawley. The man was about as dull as paint, and Thomas couldn’t fathom for the life of him why Edith saw anything attractive in his persona… but no matter. It wasn’t like Strallen was flirting with him, was it.

As dinner was wrapped up, and the servant’s meal carried on, however, a strange tension fell over the house. Something had happened between the closing of the family’s supper and the start of the servant’s dinner to put Carson on edge. He now sat, slowly slicing his turkey giblets without making to take a bite, despite the fact that Mrs. Patmore had (per tradition) given him the biggest piece with the largest side of dressing. Mr. Carson was so wrapped up his personal ennui that he missed out entirely on the cranberry dressing that was left over from the holidays. He always made a show of grabbing the last bite, a fan of the sharp fruity taste.

As dinner wrapped up and servants began to break off into their personal cues, Mr. Carson still sat at the table now pondering over an equally untouched cup of chamomile tea. Despite Mrs. Hughes
asking him what was wrong repeatedly, Mr. Carson refused to say.

That should have been Thomas’ first clue that something was terribly wrong.

Thomas read through the January issue of the horological magazine Mrs. Hughes especially ordered for him, curious about new polishing methods for brass watch nocks that involved a lemon rind and whipped olive oil, and then decided to head to bed. Yet as he rose from the table (the last to do so besides Carson), Carson seemed to be jarred from his thoughts and stood up to call him back.

“Thomas, will you please come with me?”

Thomas looked about, curious, and dutifully followed Carson to his office.

Carson shut the door and came to sit behind his desk, looking gray and sweaty in an usually paranoid way. Normally, Thomas was the one panicking and Carson was the one remaining calm. Now, however, Carson looked like he might be sick. Thomas instantly began to calculate the chances of something utterly awful about to happen, but was knocked clean on his ass when Carson finally began to speak.

“I wanted to speak to you about… an issue…” there was something in the way that Carson said the word which put Thomas’ hair on end, “that has been brought against you. A very serious issue that I need to resolve at once.”

Thomas shifted a bit, trying to soothe the ache radiating from the ball of his feet. He considered the implications of another issue being brought against him, no doubt coming from O’Brien, but could think of nothing which would warrant terror. He’d not stolen any of the wine, after all.

“What issue is this?” Thomas asked.

Mr. Carson reached into his breast pocket, and withdrew a small scrap of folded paper. It looked like the sort of thing you might jot a grocery list down on, or maybe a to-do for the day. Instead, however, it seemed to have several strung out sentences that had been smudged with misuse, save for a few in the middle. Ugly icy dread began to fill Thomas up as he recognized his own handwriting from afar.

“There has been a suggestion that you have been plotting against the family in a most insidious fashion.” Mr. Carson said, unfolding the note till it was flat upon his desk.

There, in plain daylight, was a sentence Thomas had written in the dead of night as he tried to get the upcoming events of the family in order: “Matthew dies in car accident. Will save if valet.”

His throat clenched tight, not even allowing the tiniest sound to come out in fear.

“A member of staff has brought forward to me this note, and the complaint that you were suggesting the death of Matthew Crawley unless you were his valet.”

“….H…” Thomas was having trouble “How have these charges been brought against me?”

There could be no denying the fear in his voice.

“Is it true?” Mr. Carson growled. The tension in the air was familiar to Thomas, but it scared him shitless in its unnervingly reminder of the actual past. Thomas bristled, feeling sweat begin to slide down the back of his neck. “Because if it is… I will call the police in this hour, and you will be taken
“Mr. Carson, it’s a lie!” Thomas begged, wringing his hands as he prostrated himself before his constant judge and jury. “Whatever you’ve been told, it’s all a lie!”

He sounded like a child in that moment, and damned himself for it. Why couldn’t he just have a spine in front of the man? Where had his pride gone?

“Do you deny that you wrote this note?” Mr. Carson asked, holding it up so that Thomas had no choice but to look at it.

Thomas had no idea what to say or do. Could he blatantly lie to Mr. Carson when it was the ugly truth? Could he dig himself out of a hole he’d unwittingly created?

“It… It was a dream.” Thomas blubbered. He had no idea what else to say.

Mr. Carson set the note down, refolding it and tucking it away inside his breast pocket. There was a dark, brooding expression growing upon his face that Thomas hadn’t seen in a long time. After all the work he’d put in, desperately trying to do better in the name of not being hated in the house, Thomas was once again in jeopardy of losing everything.

“It seems an odd dream to have.” Mr. Carson growled. “Right…” He sighed, looking away for a moment as if to re-gather his composure. Why on earth he’d be the one to have to gather his composure was beyond Thomas. “We’ll leave it there for now, but I’ll be keeping a very firm eye on you.”

“Mr. Carson,” Thomas couldn’t stop himself from babbling. His heart was pounding horribly in his chest; he thought he might suffer some kind of fit. “I know that you think I’m foul, but I would never, ever, ever dare—“

Mr. Carson raised a hand for silence, which Thomas regrettably had to give.

“Go.” Mr. Carson said, gesturing to the door.

Unsure of what else to do, Thomas did as he was asked.

When he came out of Carson’s office, white faced and shaking, it was to the image of O’Brien speaking to Daisy in the eves of the kitchen. Daisy was scowling, bitter, but O’Brien looked horribly smug and triumphant. The cruel leer that she gave Thomas was enough to put ice in his veins.

It was difficult to think straight after that.

The next days were filled with tension both downstairs and upstairs as Sybil tried to ask for permission to go to Ripon but was ultimately denied. Lord Grantham wouldn’t be taken for a mug, but Sybil wouldn’t change her views. Thomas knew it would only continue to come to a head with Sybil eventually getting hurt at a rally and Branson being her ride to and from. Poor Branson could be found most days hiding in the shed, smoking and lamenting over a picture of Sybil he’d stolen from the attics. If Mr. Carson knew, Thomas was certain he’d have an aneurism. As it was, no one told on Branson. Thomas even went outside and sat with him.
It was as good as place as any to have a think.

Thomas had originally though the snuffbox was a difficult scenario but it was nothing—nothing—compared to the conundrum he now faced. There was no way to tell Mr. Carson the truth, to explain that he was actually from the future and knew for a fact that Matthew Crawley was going to die in an awful car wreck on the day of his son’s birth. Unable to take the easy way out, Thomas would have to come up with a convincing lie to explain why it was that he’d deduced Matthew Crawley was going to wreck in a car and the only way he would be saved was for Thomas to be driving as his valet.

As yet another awful day drew to a close, Thomas felt disgusted with his circumstances. He couldn’t believe he was so stupid as to jot down the events of the past, but he’d felt the entire affair would get jumbled in his brain if he hadn’t… what was worse, how now would he save Matthew?

There was no way he’d ever be made Matthew Crawley’s valet… not after this.

The night had a cool crisp feel to it. A slight breeze was blowing every so often, but it did little to shift the grass or disturb the thin trill of smoke coming from the kitchen exhausts. In an attempt to find a moment of quiet, if only to still his rapidly pounding heart and fretful mind, Thomas wandered out into the area yard and sat on an unused milk cart which, come morning, would be loaded down with empty glass bottles in need of refills.

Crickets were chirping in the distance. Their weak serenade was the only disturbance of the quiet, and it suited Thomas fine.

What was he going to do? It seemed like he’d fallen into an inescapable hole…. and to think, O’Brien had surely been rifling through his room, trying to find something to blackmail him. What else would she uncover? How more brazen would she get in her attempts to throw Thomas to the dogs? Why wouldn’t she just let him be after that snuffbox incident? Didn’t she realize that it was time to give up? That nothing would come of fighting?

Had Thomas wounded her so deeply by rejecting her friendship? He’d not thought it possible… He’d not considered that she would actually care so much.

He supposed he’d been wrong, and damn him for it.

The back door opened, and at first Thomas bristled with the golden light flung in his face. But then he saw it was only Bates and Anna, coming outside to have a moment of peace as well. They seemed deeply worried, which made no sense because nothing dire had happened to them today.

When Anna saw Thomas sitting on the milk cart, she pointed to him, and Bates came out to greet him.

The two of them stood before him, only to sit on either side of him so that the milk cart groaned on ancient wooden wheels. Thigh to thigh, Bates pulled out a pack of weatherbeaten woodbines and offered Thomas a crinkled cigarette.

“Fag?” Bates murmured.

Thomas accepted it silently, and Bates took a book of matches out of his pocket to strike it against the side of the milk cart. Thomas puffed, inhaling a mouth full of numbing smoke, and blew out a long plume away from Anna’s face. She was crinkling her nose, irritable at the scent of cigarette smoke so close.

“Don’t know why you men like those.” she muttered, “They’re disgusting.”
“Helps calm m’nerves.” Thomas murmured.

Bates took out another cigarette, and lit it against the end of Thomas’ own. He puffed for a moment, creating a firm cherry tip, and blew his smoke away in the same direction Thomas had. They were starting to create a draft that could equal the kitchen exhaust valves.

“We know everything.” Bates said. “We heard Mr. Carson talking to Mrs. Hughes.”

“I know you must be upset.” Anna said.

“And you have every right to be.” Bates added.

“Do I?” Thomas muttered, looking up at the sky. It was speckled with stars, deep drafts of indigo sweeping away the light of day to show the vast underbelly of the universe. It was like you were looking up at a wounded animal, bleeding out with the final light it possessed so that others could see. The speckles of stars were the stains in the grass. As above, so below, and all that nonsense.

Thomas didn’t know why he felt so lyrical all of a sudden.

“It doesn’t matter to Mr. Carson, does it. I’ve been working here all this time, and he’ll never see me as anything but vile scum.”

“Well I think he doesn’t see you as vile scum.” Anna said, “An’ why should he?”

“Because that’s what I am Anna. I’m a different sort of man.”

His quiet reflection was brought to a pause when Bates reached out to put a gentle arm around his waste. It was the sort of thing which, once again, reminded him that he was in an utterly bizarre situation. He tried not to read anything into it, to remind himself once again that Bates was for Anna and no one else… but it was hard when he was so lonely and fearful for his future.

How would he ever get out of this mess?

“I keep telling you that you’ve a good heart.” Bates murmured. He blew out a long jet of smoke, coughing a bit on the exhale, “Maybe one day you’ll believe me.”

“Mr. Carson hasn’t told his Lordship yet.” Anna said, “Can’t you just explain that it was O’Brien who wrote the note?”

“That’s just the thing though, I did write the note.” Thomas said, and when Anna was taken aback, Thomas lied to cover his skin, “It was a dream I had. I wrote it down in the middle of the night to get it out of my head. I dreamed Matthew was drivin’ like a maniac and flew off the road. Figured if someone had been in the car it wouldn’t have happened. Course, O’Brien must have seen the scrap and snuck it out of my room when she put that snuffbox in my wardrobe. She’s got someone else sayin’ that I told them I was gonna hurt Mr. Matthew if I didn’t get the valet job.” Thomas mumbled.

“That’s ridiculous.” Bates scoffed, “No one would believe that.”

“And who would say such a thing about you?” Anna demanded. “You shouldn’t take this lying down, because you’re not guilty of anything wrong, Thomas.”

“Well that’ll be a first.” Thomas said. In a moment of affection, Anna reached out and squeezed his hand.

“Silly chump.” She whispered sweetly.
It was the first time Thomas had found an insult to his liking.

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True to Anna’s prediction, Mr. Carson did not tell Lord Grantham about Thomas’ scandalous note the next day, nor the day after that. Indeed, three whole weeks went by without another comment on the subject. If Thomas was surprised, it was nothing compared to O’Brien. She grew more pale by the hour, her dark eyes shifting left and right every time Carson entered the same room as Thomas. She seemed to be waiting on pins and needles, praying that each day would be ‘Thomas’ last. In a queer reunion of understanding, Thomas was on much the same page. The endless waiting was worse that anything else, because it left him no room to relax. He started to lose sleep, tossing and turning each night as he though of Matthew Crawley and Lord Grantham; what either man would say should they find out about the situation below stairs.

The month of December passed by the Abbey without mention of Thomas’ predicament again, though Christmas was unusually sour and punctuated only by Mrs. Patmore making everyone eggnog and Mrs. Hughes leading the downstairs in carols. Thomas found it hard to sing; O’Brien went to bed early and did not take her offered cup of cheer. Thomas had spent nearly every Christmas at the abbey with no presents save for one he’d covertly buy himself so that he’d have something to open with everyone else at the table. This time, however, Thomas received a new set of cufflinks from Mrs. Hughes, a cast off blue silk tie from Lord Grantham, a fancy London rag on clocks from Anna and a packet of raspberry crisps from Bates, who’d learned amid their old relationship that Thomas desperately loved the flavor.

Thomas, for what it was worth, did not have much money to his name but tried to be generous all the same. One of his larger regrets in life was that he’d not taken the time to enjoy every Christmas he’d spent in good company. Now, Thomas refused to let a holiday pass without making his mark. Without the ability to buy anyone gifts, Thomas instead drew everyone cards, and fixed everyone’s watches (he even went so far as to polish them with fine renegade gloss). Mr. Carson was silent at the servant’s table as Thomas fixed his own pocket watch, eyeing Thomas’ tinkering with a curious if somber eye.

As January rolled around and still Carson did nothing, Thomas thought he might vomit. More political rallies were being held, a sign of the upcoming election in May. As a result, Sybil kept leaving the house covertly with Branson in tow. It was almost like the pair of them were going on dates, save that Branson was close to tears for Sybil’s inability to follow Lord Grantham’s requests which put him in the line of fire. Sybil was a free spirit, and she had more opinions than an editorial page for the London Times. Thomas knew that in the end, the pair of them would be so wrapped up in their insane love affair they’d end up throwing the whole family into discord. For now, however, Branson remained solidly in the ‘downstairs’ category (no matter how much he pined or sighed).

As if to make matters worse, a spew of sickness fell upon the town of Downton. Cold, wet weather never boded well for the working class and this year was no better. The farm hands were held up with a string of flu, the hall boys both caught the sniffles at the same time, and worst of all William Mason’s mother started to take a turn for the worse. Thomas knew the woman was about to die, knew that she was suffering from some kind of severe heart condition, but none of this was expressed to William per his mother’s wishes. The boy lived on in utter delusion, which caused Thomas to wonder about his own mother. Had she suffered from sickness? Was she dead, even now? Would Thomas ever hear from her again?

He doubted it.
It was night time, and the downstairs was closing up. Thomas had spent the whole day helping Mr. Carson hand and foot while William offered himself as secondary aid to the fallen hall boys. Technically it was beneath his station, to pick up chamber pots and shine servant’s shoes, but William was kind enough to do the task while George and Matthew took a sick day. Mr. Carson was forever grateful, and Thomas tried not to take it to heart to have his work load doubled. If anything, it helped him to go through the motions of the day away from his usual malaise of terror.

Thomas was in the process of returning a cup of tea to the kitchen when it happened.

He was walking down the hallway, cup and saucer rattling in hand, when the voices of William and Daisy caused him to pause.

Daisy despised him openly now a days, so Thomas did his best to avoid her. He got other kitchen maids to get him cups of tea, or took from a communal pot to avoid speaking to her directly. With this in mind, Thomas halted in the hallway, and kept from returning his teacup to wait and see if Daisy would move into the pantry or follow William somewhere else.

“Is there any stale bread you’re throwing out, and some salt?”

“Well?”

“Well I thought I’d make a last hot poultice for Diamond. It’ll give him a better night.”

Ah, poor Diamond. He wasn’t the first horse to go lame in the past few months. Dragon went lame while carrying Sybil and Gwen to Gwen’s interview in Sheldon. Now Diamond was suffering from a twisted ankle after Lady Mary had ridden him too hard. William, ever the animal lover, had been offering bits of aid throughout the day which was saying something since technically he was doing hall boy work as well. Diamond, if Thomas remembered correctly, carried on until 1919 when he was put out to pasture.

“You big softie.” Daisy was smitten in that moment, no doubt thinking William silly for carrying on about a horse. “What’ll Mr. Lynch say?”

“Well, he doesn’t mind. He says I’ve got the touch. He thinks I should pack this in and be a groom.”

That wasn’t far from the truth. Lynch certainly liked William, mostly because William offered to do the grunt work that the other grooms despised. The time of horses was drawing to a close for daily use, but the upper class still liked to ride and hunt so Mr. Lynch’s position was quite secure. Thomas often saw Lynch and Carson gloating about William in private.

It still burned him, to know that Carson thought William so wonderful and Thomas so foul.

“Why don’t you?”

“My mum.” William paused, a clear note of longing in his voice, “She was so excited when I came here. They’re proud of me, and I’d hate to spoil that.”

“Do you miss them?”

When William did not answer, Thomas pursed his lips and shrunk back more into the shadows.

If there was one thing that had set Thomas and William apart more than any other, it was their relationship with their parents. The first time around it had absolutely flummoxed Thomas how someone could be in such strong cahoots with their mother and father. The fact of the matter was, William was an only child and utterly adored by his family. They doted on him, writing him fat
letters, sending him sweets from home and presents during the holidays. Every Sunday, the servants were offered a brief respite so as to go to church, and while William often went he also used the hour away to trot straight back home so that his mother could give him a kiss on the cheek. Thomas had burned with envy when William had returned from his Sunday visits, a preacher’s note of promise in one hand and his mother’s love in the other. Thomas never went to church, instead using the extra hour to sleep in a little bit. He certainly never heard form his parents, never received letters or sweets from them.

He hated to admit it, but he wished he did.

“I’ve never had that in my childhood.” Daisy wondered, “Someone you could always trust.”

This wasn’t an uncommon experience, particularly among the lower class. The richer you were the more time you had to spend with your children.

But William just offered another piece of advice, always in that cheery warm mood, “I trust them, and they trust me. There are no lies in our house.”

Suddenly, Thomas didn’t feel much up to dealing with Daisy or William in any sense. He set his drained teacup on a side table stacked high with old magazines, and headed up the stairwell to turn in.

For whatever reason, however, William’s words seemed to have a lasting impact on Daisy that Thomas was not suspecting. The next day, Sybil left for Ripon with Branson to see the results of the bi-election while the house prepared for dinner with Anthony Strallen once again. Strallen had stopped by earlier, shocking everyone (Mary most of all) when he’d unexpectedly invited Edith to a concert on her lonesome. Edith, of course, was downright delighted to have a chance to get her digs in back at her older sister. Mary just turned up her nose, proclaiming Strallen too old and boring for her interests.

Funny, though, how she still hated not receiving his full attention.

Daisy had fallen into a somber mood, serving up course after course downstairs with such a haze that she almost tripped twice over the bottom end of the a broom propped in the corner. Sybil had not come home in time for dinner, and as a result everyone was tense. Lord Grantham looked ready to chew on a tin can and spit out a nail, growling over his lamb chops and kedgeree while Thomas and William stood guard at the serving station. Course after course, the pair of them went up and down the stairs, finally landing on the desert pudding which was a lemon curl in an attempt to please Lord Grantham. The man enjoyed lemon so much you’d have thought he’d take on a yellow tint to his skin. Instead though, Lord Grantham barely took more than a few bites, and Thomas had to return half of the pudding downstairs uneaten.

As he rounded the corner to the kitchen, mangled plate in hand, Thomas ran into William and Daisy carefully putting together five crystal bowls full of raspberry ice for the final palate cleanser. Thomas did not meet Daisy’s eyes, despite the way that she grew reproachful instead of hateful. The pair of them worked in utter silence, with William acting as a go between while he shuffled bowls of ice from his own tray to Thomas’. Thomas would have to take the ices upstairs alone, while William and Daisy carefully took apart the lemon pudding so that it could be re-used for the servant’s dinner.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mrs. Patmore demanded of Daisy, who was fumbling about and
dropping pieces of lemon pudding everywhere, “You’re always dozy but tonight you make Sleeping Beauty look alert.”

“… I was just thinking.” Daisy mumbled, carefully laying thick slices of lemon pudding onto beaten clay plates that the servants used for their own dinners. The icing nearly drizzled over the side, creating a merry yellow pool in the middle of the ancient pottery.

“Oh, blimey, batten down the hatches.” Mrs. Patmore sneered,

“I think I’ve let myself down.” Daisy said, and she sounded so dismayed that Thomas was momentarily taken aback. What did it mean, that Daisy had thought she’d let herself down? Why had she let herself down? Had it been because she’d sided with O’Brien and lied about Thomas? Was she starting to regret her position after hearing William’s honest words last night?

Either way, Thomas couldn’t dwell upon it. He had to take the ices up before they started melting in their bowls.

Up Thomas went, all alone on the stairwell, trying to keep his mind as clear as possible so as to maintain a servant’s blank. As the night drew to a close and Sybil came home after dinner, however, that turned out to be fully impossible.

Lord Grantham’s voice could be heard booming from the gallery floor, even as Lady Mary bade Thomas to lay out a simple meal for Matthew Crawley. In lieu of the horrible burden that Thomas now faced all because of Matthew’s eventual fate, Thomas found it difficult to look the man in the eye. Instead, he carefully laid out a platter of sandwiches, lemonade, and pickled vegetables to Lady Mary’s liking. Matthew was a man of simple tastes and didn’t require much, but Mrs. Patmore didn’t want him to starve either way. She even cut Matthew a bowl of peaches and cream, though it wasn’t particularly necessary, so Thomas had to essentially pack a buffet around one end of the table.

“—counts for nothing-?!”

Lord Grantham’s voice made Thomas wince, even a floor below. He wondered how Sybil could stand it, being in the same room with the man when he had a temper.

It had turned out, just as Thomas had remembered, that Sybil had gotten injured at the bi-election and was now nursing a small head wound after stopping at the Crawley residence in town. Matthew had been her saving grace, making sure that she’d gotten home safely and through the rambunctious crowd. Branson was downstairs, even as Thomas laid out the crystal for Matthew solitary meal, begging for mercy from Mr. Carson who frankly wasn’t in the mood to give it. Upstairs, Sybil was in much the same situation, sitting with her mother and sisters while her father blew a gasket over her blatant disrespect for the rules.

As Thomas finished catering to Matthew and Lady Mary, he vanished downstairs to hide by the fire. The bell would ring, should the pair need anything, but par the moment Thomas was content knowing that the two were sated. Lady Mary would no doubt be occupied with entertaining Matthew until he left… and if Thomas remembered correctly tonight was the night that Lady Mary received Matthew’s first proposal. Of course, she’d end up blowing it… but that was how the cookie crumbled, wasn’t it?

She’d get another chance. It would just take some time.
Despite the fact that no one needed to be cared for, the servant’s hall was oddly empty. Bates and Anna were nowhere to be seen, nor was O’Brien or Daisy. William was likewise gone. Where was everyone? Were they in the kitchen having a cup of tea? Had they gone somewhere else to gossip about Thomas’ impending sacking?

He doubted it but… still… the whole situation was making Thomas sick to his stomach over nothing. Even an empty servant’s hall was making him paranoid.

The sound of footsteps gave Thomas slight hope, but his enthusiasm was promptly crushed when he realized it was only Mr. Carson. There was a stiffness to his gait, a furrow to his brow, and he looked most irritated.

Thomas found a lump forming in his throat, in spite of himself. He’d seen Carson wear that look before, usually a few seconds before he started shouting or making brash judgements.

“Thomas.” Mr. Carson addressed him quietly, without venom, “Come with me.”

Fearing the worst, Thomas followed without a word.

The pair of them walked, one in front of the other, down the hallway to Mr. Carson’s office. Thomas had to admit, he’d been expecting this all along despite Bates and Anna’s protests to the contrary, but he’d likewise thought it would be a private affair. This notion was blown away when Carson opened his office door to reveal the wild west roundup of Bates, Anna, Mrs. Hughes, Daisy, and O’Brien. The last two were on the right, everyone else on the left. It seemed more like a standoff than a meeting, as Carson shut the door.

The last over the threshold, Thomas didn’t know where else to stand but on Daisy’s other side. Carson stood next to Mrs. Hughes, clearly the presiding judge and jury. The moment reminded Thomas unnervingly of when Thomas and O’Brien had been confronted for lying about Bates stealing wine. This time, however, the wine remained untouched in the cellar and Bates’ character was solidly intact in the house. It was Thomas’ reputation that was once again on the line.

It was the first time Thomas had ever been accused of daring to kill another man. It was somehow more frightening than being labeled as a homosexual, mostly because Thomas couldn’t see himself killing a man even if he tried.

“Daisy has come forward to me tonight, with an interesting piece of news regarding the suggestions against you, Thomas.” Mr. Carson said. Thomas swallowed around the knot in his throat, trying to keep his face as neutral as possible. So it seemed that William’s words had made a lasting impression. The last time around, Thomas had been the one forcing Daisy to lie with much the same end scenario. Now he could see who had helped her to stay on the ‘good’ path…. Downton’s resident golden child.

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“She says that a supposed friend asked her to lie to me, since you turned her down the night of the fair. As a result, Daisy is now going back on her claim, and states that you never threatened Matthew Crawley’s life in front of her. Is that correct, Daisy?”

“Yes Mr. Carson.” Daisy whispered. She sounded utterly embarrassed, not that she didn’t deserve it. Thomas was amazed to hear this change of heart. What had caused Daisy to rescind? Had it been William, and his warm words about truth at the heart of his family? Or had it been something else?

“In light of this, I have but one question to ask Ms. O’Brien.” Mr. Carson turned to her now, his gaze
hardening, “Do you stand by your story?”

“I don’t have a story.” O’Brien replied. She had the nerve to be calm in this moment, even when Thomas’ heart was pounding in his chest.

“You spoke with Thomas regarding insidious intentions over a job.” Mr. Carson said, “That, to me, is a story.”

“I only said we spoke about it in passing.” O’Brien replied. It was clear she was backtracking, using the tiniest of loopholes to try and make her escape. “Suppose I took it the wrong way.”

“And the slip of paper denoting the plan which you found in Thomas’ room after returning a mended jacket. Was that wrong as well?”

“You wicked creature-!” Anna gasped, amazed at O’Brien’s sheer nerve. There’d been no mended jacket, no kindness to buffer as O’Brien’s reason for being in Thomas’ room.

“Anna.” Mrs. Hughes warned, “You are here to watch, not to participate.”

Anna was going to find that very hard to do, her blue eyes narrowed and her lips pursed.

“I wasn’t wrong on that.” O’Brien refused to back down, even when caught, “No.”

“And what do you say to that, Thomas?” Mr. Carson asked, turning to Thomas to hear his side of the tale.

“It’s a lie.” Thomas would not sugar coat the truth, “She never went to my room to return a mended jacket. Why the hell would I need her to mend me a jacket when I’ve got valeting experience to his Lordship? She snuck into my room to hide that snuffbox in my wardrobe, and both Anna and Mr. Bates can testify to that because we searched my room to find it.”

“Are you saying that I would steal and place an item in your room?” O’Brien placed a hand upon her breast, scoffing, “Why not keep it for myself, if you’re going to paint me that black?”

“Keep it for yourself?” The idea was ludicrous and so Thomas laughed aloud, “That was never your intention. What would you care for a snuffbox? No. You stole it to blame it on me. You wanted me gone because I wouldn’t scheme with you anymore. To sod and heck with the rest. You would have stolen anything if you thought it’d cement your case!”

“Enough-!” Mr. Carson warned, shutting down their argument before it could spill over into a true shouting match. The pair of them quelled their anger, poor Daisy stuck between them and fidgeting with terror. She looked ready to run and hide; anything to get out of the way.

When stiff silence had overtaken them all again, Mr. Carson finally proceeded.

“Let us say then, to keep this neat, that Ms. O’Brien was mistaken on her accounts as well.”

“Mistaken my eye.” Anna growled under her breathe.

“And Daisy,” Mr. Carson turned to the kitchen maid, “We all know the value of your contribution.”

“Yes, Mr. Carson,” She whispered.

“But there is one thing I must ask, Thomas.” Mr. Carson said, turning back to Thomas with a slightly softer edge to his voice. Thomas had never been spoken to in such a way by the man. It was as if he considered Thomas a human being with feelings and a heart. “Why did you write down on a piece of
paper that Mr. Matthew would die in a car crash unless you were his valet?”

At this, Mr. Carson reached into his inner vest pocket to pull out a folded square of paper. It was none other than Thomas’ note, with tight script reading for all to see “Matthew dies in car accident. Will save if valet.”

“Or do you deny that you wrote this?” Mr. Carson asked.

Thomas looked at the man, and for the briefest moment he considered lying. He considered how terribly easy it would be to say that he had not written it. That instead, O’Brien had written it, and in doing so had tried to peg Thomas for a crime he could never conceive. The fact of the matter was, Thomas had done quite a lot of lying to Mr. Carson over the years, and in the end it had ruined his relationship with the man. Carson had gotten to a point where he’d considered Thomas less than a slug.

Telling the truth would cost his image, but telling a lie would only make it worse in the end.

“… I do not deny it, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. Mr. Carson did not speak, instead merely re-folding Thomas’ note to cross his arms over his chest.

The truth, unfortunately could not be told. Instead, Thomas would have to tell a small lie and let the rest come naturally.

“I had a dream about Mr. Matthew, that he was driving a car after hearing joyous news. He was elated, and speeding. Another car came around a bend in the road, and Mr. Matthew was going too fast to stop. The other was too unstable to turn out of the way, and as a result the two cars collided. Mr. Matthew’s car rolled over the bend, down an embankment, and it resulted in his death.” Thomas paused, knowing how bizarre this was about to sound, “I was half asleep when I wrote that note. I thought ‘if he had a valet in the car, the valet would be driving and thus the crash be avoided.’… That’s all it was, Mr. Carson. It was just me, being stupid and having a peculiar dream.”

Mr. Carson seemed to be having trouble believing all this, so Thomas carried on.

“I like to write things down. I have a journal, and this page came from that journal… I tore it out because I wrote a list of things I needed from the village, and I wanted to keep it in my pocket.” And sure enough the bottom of the page read in tightly packed script “thread, mints, laces-” but the rest was too smudged from use to read.

“That’s the honest truth, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. “I had that piece of paper in my bedside cabinet alongside other lists and bits and bods… she must have opened the drawer, rummaged through, and stumbled upon it. I suppose it was her plan B after the snuffbox.”

O’Brien scoffed loudly, but said nothing else.

Mr. Carson took Thomas’ list, and tossed it lightly into the wastebasket beside his desk. It fell neatly inside the wicker and disappeared from sight.

“Then this matter is drawn to a close.” Mr. Carson finally said. It seemed he’d swallowed the tiny lie, though it stung Thomas deeply to tell it. Thomas let out a breath, feeling as if his heart rate was finally beginning to come back under control. Could it really be that he was safe? That he’d survived such an obvious attack and still come out relatively unscathed? Only hours ago, it had seemed an impossible task to overcome. Thomas had felt flattened under the terrible weight of scrutiny, with every bump in the night making him sense impending doom.

Now?
Now, Thomas didn’t know what to believe. He was afraid of being hopeful, afraid of making assumptions too quickly and then being ruined for it. Even now, Thomas was still considering his options (or lack thereof) should he be kicked out of Downton.

And yet it seemed Mr. Carson didn’t think the worst of him.

“I must say,” Carson directed his gaze at Daisy now, who was positively withered underneath the fierce glare. This was queer, because you’d think the girl could hold her own after having to contend with Mrs. Patmore on a daily basis, “I’m extremely disappointed in you, Daisy. I expected better from you at least.”

“I know Mr. Carson. I’m disappointed in myself too.” She looked pathetically small in that moment. In a queer way, Thomas felt terribly sorry for her. Daisy had been taken advantage of in a weak and somber situation. O’Brien had seen her as a stepping stone to achieve her insidious goals, not stopping to consider that Daisy was a young and damaged girl. Daisy deserved better, and Thomas was angry on her behalf.

Through all of this, O’Brien said nothing. Her expression was stony, her posture rigid. It seemed that she might explode at any moment, with the blood drained from her face and her lips pursed into a thin white line. She was, in a word, sunken. She’d lost, and she knew it… but O’Brien did not fall with grace. She clawed all the way down. Thomas was under no illusions that O’Brien would stop now.

She knew he was a homosexual. Thomas was certain that would be her next tactic to destroy him. Before this meeting could be adjourned, Thomas would have to address the topic with Carson himself in order to prepare for the absolute worst. O’Brien would stop at nothing to ruin him… he had to take the most powerful card out of her hand.

“Very well.” Mr. Carson said, gesturing to the door with a sweeping hand. “You may go. But I must warn the pair of you that should anything like this ever happen again, your time at Downton will be at a close.”

Daisy nodded, turning and fleeing. O’Brien did not nod, did not so much as even address Mr. Carson, but turned and followed out all the same. Now, with the room cleared of tension, Thomas saw his moment to seize the power and take away O’Brien’s edge. Mrs. Hughes was walking to the door, no doubt eager to get back to her own office to finish up her nightly tasks. Thomas beat her to the punch, and gently closed Carson’s office door again so that the five of them were in seclusion once more.

“…There’s something else I… I have to say to you.” Thomas turned, looking to Carson with wide eyes.

He would not deny it. He was terrified of this moment. At the same time, Thomas knew it would be ten times worse should it come from O’Brien’s mouth. He had to prevent 1919 from happening all over again. He had to address the elephant in the room, to the elephant in the room.

“If you’d like me to leave?” Mrs. Hughes asked, still looking like she’d very much enjoy a cup of tea and some quiet.

“No.” Thomas could not let her leave. She was his proverbial safety net though she did not know it. “I need you to stay for this. It’ll help me.”

Something dangerous flashed over Mrs. Hughes’ face. She seemed to realize, as if through the tremble in Thomas’ voice and the way he was avoiding Carson’s eyes, what Thomas was about to
“Thomas, you don’t have to say anything you don’t want to—“

“No. I have to.” Thomas shook, which was quite confusing. Why was he shaking in this moment? “I have to or she will. She’ll ruin me if she uses it as a weapon.”

In that moment, Mrs. Hughes looked terribly sorry for him. It made him sick to his stomach.

“Mr. Carson, you’ve let these charges drop against me because you felt they were fake, correct?”

“That is correct.” Mr. Carson said. He did not sound alarmed or wary.

“And… while it’s true that I’ve never plotted the death of Mr. Crawley for a pay raise and valeting perks, I am still…”

Jesus Christ here we go.

“I am still vile and foul.” Thomas said. “And so… in a way, O’Brien is correct.”

“But she’s not correct!” Anna urged. Yet even her warm and tender heart could not shelter Thomas from the storm he was about to invoke.

It was like setting fire to a pasture to prevent an even worse fire from burning the entire crop.

“She is.” Thomas said. Mr. Carson did not make to contradict him in that moment, instead watching him with a calm and steady gaze that unnerved him deeply. “Because… there are things about me that are foul… and you know it. I think… I think you know it too, Mr. Carson. But… if you don’t…”

Mr. Carson did not give him any indication either way that he wanted Thomas to stop or keep going.

“O’Brien… she knows…” Thomas didn’t know how to make this any more clearer, “And you need to know too. So that way when she comes to you to use it against me, as she undoubtably will….”

But Thomas couldn’t go on. He looked down at the floor, staring at his toes instead of Mr. Carson. Mr. Carson’s black shoes were shined immaculately, even after a long day treading the stairs.

His heart was pounding so hard in his chest, he thought it might break through his ribs and go skittering across the floor.

“… I’m a…”

But it just wouldn’t come. Thomas had to swallow, take another deep breath, and look over his shoulder so that he was now staring at the door to the hallway instead of anyone else in the room.

“I’m homosexual-“ Thomas slurried the words, going as fast as he could so that it would hurt less in the end. “And I just wanted to say it to your face, with everyone that knows present, so that… so that we could…”

Could do what? Fight like cats and dogs? What on earth had Thomas been trying to prove by having this conversation?

“I know that you hate me.” Thomas shook his head. He turned fully away, hugging his chest to keep out the cold of Mr. Carson’s old ugly glare. It was burned into his skin, imprinted like a brand after all the years that Thomas had been cast aside or spurned away.
Even now, he could feel those angry eyes upon his skin. They made the back of his neck feel inflamed. In response to the ghost sensation, Thomas rubbed the back of his neck where his stiff bowtie was beginning to chafe.

“You wear a mask and you say you don’t care about things but… I know you do. I’ve heard you say things about me; awful things.”

“—Don’t you get clever with me, when you should be horse whipped-!!”

Thomas shuddered, shaking his head.

“So… I feel we need to speak about that, and clear the air… before O’Brien throws me on the bonfire. And now we have. So that’s that.”

The silence that followed his ugly little speech was deafening and Thomas did not know how to endure it.

He raised his hand to take the doorknob in hand, only to be halted by Mr. Carson.

“Allow me to speak, Thomas.”

Thomas dropped his hand as if the doorknob had scalded him.

“Mr. Carson-” Mrs. Hughes whispered, though there was very little room to keep a secret in such tight quarters. Whatever she was trying to imply, it went without being finished.

She was trying to ask for mercy, but Thomas didn’t know if Mr. Carson had mercy in his heart for Thomas’ causes.

“Thomas, please turn around.” Mr. Carson said.

Thomas steeled himself as best as he was able. After nearly twenty years of being scalded by Carson, it wasn’t near as good of a facade as he could have pulled off in the original 1913. He turned, keeping his eyes down, and prayed for mercy that he felt for certain wouldn’t come anyway. This was the lesson in ritual humiliation that Carson so thrived on. For whatever reason, his stickler personality which demanded that the candelabras were polished twice and the knives were re-sharpened every three days likewise demanded that footmen subject themselves to his complete and utter authority. Thomas had hated this at the start… had raged against the inside of his cage till the iron bars were coated with blood.

After fighting this battle for nineteen years, Thomas couldn’t do it anymore. He was just too tired to put up a struggle, a bird limp in the mouth of a fat house cat.

“I am aware that you are of the opinion that I despise you.” Carson began, his voice unnervingly calm, “And I am aware that you are a different sort of man. But I will not allow you to continue living under the weight of a burden that I did not invoke. I do not hate you.”

Thomas didn’t believe him.

“Your nature, while difficult to digest, does not reflect upon your character, to me. You came to this house three years ago a little spry in your steps and hard to deal with, and I admit at first I was unsure about you, but the past two years have shown me that you are a boy of great integrity. That you are determined to do right, despite the pain it might cause you. That you are honorable, and kind, even to
those that do not entirely deserve it—"

But Thomas could not take anymore. These beautiful and gentle words, coming from the mouth of a man who had almost taken the place of his biological father over the years, were enough to wound him to the core. Pain and cruelty were incomparably easy when put in juxtaposition with kindness. Loving words, sweet understandings, these things were like flames to the ice compacted around his heart. They made his muscles weak, made his brain sweat under the strain, and caused his heart to ache. Like a frozen man coming back to life, each of his limbs hurt under the rush of blood. A heart made to be apathetic did not take kindly to being made to hurt.

Thomas had to clench his mouth tight, teeth bared and lips pulled back so that he could breath through his mouth instead of his nose. His eyes were burning, his throat was clenching tight, and Thomas didn’t know what to do to make it stop. At a loss, he bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose with this thumb and forefinger. Anything to hide from the heartache he now felt.

Anything to deny the fact that Carson’s love was what he’d desired all along.

“Ye’ll have no more of this nonsense.” Carson said, and though he’d shouted the words a hundred times in venom and irritation, he now spoke them with a soft kindness that did not befit his deep gravely voice. “I do not imagine you to be vile, I do not hate you, and while I greatly appreciate your honesty on the subject of your different nature… I have always known that you were different. I simply didn’t want anyone else to know. I was afraid you would get hurt.”

Oh, well, that fuckin’ did it.

Thomas burst into tears, savagely hating himself for the rush of emotion that swamped him in that moment. He hid his tears and ruddy face with both his hands, muffling his sobbing albeit only a little bit. He’d never once contemplated that Carson’s desire to have him hide his identity had come from a misplaced urgency not to see Thomas get hurt. His mother had felt the same way, as had Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore. It was the confirmation Thomas had always needed. The understanding between the pair of them that Thomas’ nature was not his fault, and he did not actually deserve to be horsewhipped.

“Oh-“ Mrs. Hughes didn’t like to see anyone in such visible distress. She stepped forward and put her arms around Thomas’ shaking shoulders, attempting to calm him in any way that she could. “Thomas, enough of that or you’re going to give yourself an aneurysm.”

But Thomas couldn’t stop, nor could he viably explain to the rest of them why it was that Carson’s kindness hit him so hard. They’d only seen a year of Thomas getting smacked around the ears… Thomas, on the other hand, had lived nearly two decades under the bullet.

“Come on-“ Mrs. Hughes urged, attempting to manhandle him towards the door to the hall, “Let’s go to my tea room and we can sit and talk about it for a while.”

“Mr. Carson-“ Thomas knew he was warbling like a fool, an utter idiot in front of the man, “I’m so sorry-“

“Come on now-“ Mrs. Hughes was the only reply he got. Perhaps Mr. Carson was too embarrassed to answer.

One step at a time, Mrs. Hughes took him away. He was guided by her touch alone, too embarrassed to let his hands drop lest the rest of the house see his splotchy and tear streaked face. At the same time, however, Thomas could not fully muffle his sobs. He knew that Daisy and O’Brien were surely just outside, maybe hanging in the eves and recuperating from the horror of being underneath
Mr. Carson’s hammer. Now they would see him passing crying, and what kind of impression would that make for the pair of them?

O’Brien would think him scared; broken. Daisy would just be even more terrified, no doubt thinking everything her fault.

As Mrs. Hughes lead him to her office, Thomas collapsed into her sitting chair to cry even more profusely into her side table. This was the exact chair he’d sat in after kissing Jimmy in his sleep. As a matter of fact, he’d taken much the same position, crying into the wood and howling that his life was over. Mrs. Hughes had treated him much the same then, offering him a listening ear and a calm perspective amid the awful turmoil.

Now, there was no turmoil. Instead, the pain was within Thomas and ricocheting around his chest and soul until he felt he’d be bruised for years.

“Thomas, you need to calm down.” Mrs. Hughes urged, as Thomas continued to cry. He tried to gain control of himself, wiping his sodden face as he sniveled and heaved. “Calm down, now!”

“Y-you don’t understand-“ But even to talk just made him feel more pathetic than before, “I… He’s in my head all the time! I’m so…” But he couldn’t express his feelings enough to make a valid point. He just ended up babbling, “I can’t handle him! I can’t handle the pain he brings me-! When he thinks that I’m vile-“

“But he doesn’t think you’re vile!” Mrs. Hughes snapped. The mere notion seemed to put her teeth on edge. She clasped Thomas’ hand within her own, despite that it was wet with mucus and tears, and offered him her lace handkerchief so that he could clear his burning cheeks. She looked terribly tired in that moment, with deep bags beneath her eyes and the slightest bits of gray beginning to poke through her nutmeg hair.

“None of us think that of you, Thomas.” She squeezed his hand, trying to make her words sink home. “You’re in an unfortunate situation, nothing more. We’re worried about you, and we’re sorry that you have to deal with such things… there’s nothing Mr. Carson or I would like more than to see you happily settled with a lovely young lady, but we know that that’s not what you want. We understand that the situation is complicated. We’re not out to patronize or humiliate you. We only want the best for you. Do you understand that?”

He supposed it was the only logical reason for why Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson were giving him a second chance, but Thomas still had a hard time envisioning it as so. His own parents had taken a less positive approach. His mother had been apathetic and cold towards her children unless she feared for sickness (in which case she could be smothering and over apologetic). If she’d known he was a homosexual, she’d never commented on it. At most, she’d rolled her eyes and tutted unapprovingly whenever he’d watched a farmer rake his fields too long or observe his father’s apprentice fixing a clock.

His father, on the other hand, had most certainly known and had violently disapproved. He’d realized it early, when Thomas had made the terrible mistake of confiding in his father that he felt ‘different’. His father’s response had been to beat it out of Thomas, ever the loving father on the outside but a violent monster on the inside. If Thomas had spoken about a man, he’d been smacked. If Thomas had looked at another man, he’d been smacked. If he’d dared to speak to another man, be it a customer, his father’s assistant, another boy his age, or a stranger on the street, his father had slapped him in the mouth. He’d sworn to make Thomas a ‘normal man’… and when he’d failed, he’d gotten rid of the proof by kicking Thomas out at the age of fourteen.
Neither had ever spoken about the hope of Thomas marrying, of being happy. Both had seemed to accept early on that happiness, for Thomas, was unattainable… even unnecessary.

Thomas had adopted the same mindset when no one had urged him otherwise.

“…I…” Thomas didn’t know what to say, “I want to be normal but… I just…”

But just then, before Thomas could finish his sentence, a hesitant knock came on Mrs. Hughes’ door to reveal Daisy on the other side bearing a tea tray with two cups. She was ashen and distressed, her fingers white around the wooden handles of her tray, and she kept her eyes low to avoid Mrs. Hughes’ wary gaze.

“…I brought a cup o’ tea.” Daisy mumbled, “I thought… maybe…”

But she didn’t go on.

“Thank you, Daisy.” Mrs. Hughes was stern, but not unkind. Assuaged, Daisy sat her little tray down on Mrs. Hughes’ sitting table and carefully poured both Thomas and her a cup of tea. Thomas’ cup was already garnished with lemon and honey. Mrs. Hughes’ cup was given a little splash of cream. Her errand complete, Daisy re-stacked her tray and backed away to the door. The entire transaction passed in embarrassed silence which no one made to break.

Turning to go, Daisy seemed to have a small change of heart and looked over her shoulder with a pitiful stare. She seemed more like a child than ever.

“I’m sorry, Thomas.” she mumbled. Thomas nodded.

He had no ill will towards the girl. She was as much a victim as he was.

“I understand why you did it, Daisy.” Thomas whispered. To keep himself warm, he clasped his hands around his scalding teacup. “I know you felt low.”

“…I just… she told you rejected me because you thought I stupid.” Daisy whispered. “An’… I guess I thought it was true because you’re so smart-“

“Daisy, I’m not… the sort of man who looks to a woman-“

“Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes cut him off at once, shocked at his nerve in that moment. Despite the fact that Thomas had outwardly confessed to Mr. Carson about his unnatural nature, no one outside of Bates, Anna, and Mrs. Patmore knew about his circumstances. William knew, but only because of O’Brien’s meddling. He’d never spoken to Thomas on the topic again, and frankly Thomas had a feeling that William would be taking the ‘secret’ to his grave. Daisy, on the other hand, was the sort of girl who questioned everything.

“What do you mean?” Daisy asked, only to be cut off by Mrs. Hughes.

“Daisy,” She fixed the girl with the sort of warning glare that could curl even O’Brien’s hair (not that it needed it). “You’re not to repeat to anyone in this house, do you hear me? If you do, I’ll have to hand you your notice.”

Daisy was just as frightened as ever. She understood nothing. “Is it… Is it a bad thing, though?”

“It’s a private thing.” Mrs. Hughes replied. “Like something you might tell a doctor. Now, off you go and not another word to anyone.”

Miserable, Daisy turned to the door, carefully pulling it to so that she could give Thomas and Mrs.
Hughes their privacy.

“Goodnight, Thomas, “she said before she shut the door, “I’m sorry.”

She shut it before Thomas could reply with his forgiveness.

As soon as Daisy was gone, Mrs. Hughes squeezed his hand painfully tight and fixed him with a withering stare.

“Thomas, you cannot go telling everyone just because Mr. Carson has offered you some kindness. You know the laws!”

“I know.” Thomas said. He supposed he’d just gotten carried away, wanting to be open.

“I like to believe that we house good people here, but all it will take is one word and off to prison you go. So no more telling, or dropping hints!” Mrs. Hughes warned. Thomas bristled at the warning, but Mrs. Hughes just squeezed his hand again. It was clear she was trying to comfort him; her grip was no longer painful.

“I understand that times are hard, and I fear they will never change, but just so you know you are cared for by people in this house and we only want the best for you.”

He found himself looking at Mrs. Hughes, wondering at her kindness and wishing he’d been blessed with the astounding luck to be born her son instead of another’s.

“I wish you’d been my mother.” He mumbled. She just tutted, rolling her eyes at the thought.

“Stop your flanneling.” She joked. “People will think you’ve gone soft.”

She rubbed his hand sympathetically, the tips of her fingers brushing over the flannel wraps that concealed his stitched wrists. She paused, noting the identical cloths on each hand.

“What’s this?” She murmured reproachfully, straightening up a bit in her chair, “Are your hands still hurt? They were like this last year, weren’t they?”

“Oh um…” Thomas pulled back, nervous at Mrs. Hughes seeing his wrists. “I…”

He couldn’t think of an excuse quick enough however. Mrs. Hughes reached out back across the table, and tried to pull his hand back into plain sight. Thomas resisted, albeit feebly.

“Might I see?” she asked, kindly.

But Thomas was afraid. If homosexuality was a sin, suicidal intentions were neatly slid right underneath the title as well. He didn’t know if Mrs. Hughes would be so understanding, and he couldn’t bear to face the downfall should she panic and ring for a doctor.

“Thomas, is there something I should know?” Mrs. Hughes asked, unnerved at his silence. When Thomas began to shake his head, she cut across again, “Please, do not lie to me. You can trust me. You know that.”

Did he?

Yes, he supposed he did, but…

“Do you promise not to tell Mr. Carson?” Thomas whispered. Mrs. Hughes did not glare, but her tone was reproachful.
“No,” she murmured, “But I promise I won’t tell him unless I think it’s necessary.”

Well that was the real test, wasn’t it. Would she think this was necessary?

Thomas looked down at his wrists, and began to carefully unbutton his iron cufflinks. He rolled up his sleeves, revealing the extent of his flannel wraps. Untying then, Thomas kept his head bowed to avoid looking at Mrs. Hughes’ eyes.

“I… took care of it.” Thomas mumbled. “It’s not a problem-“

But Mrs. Hughes wasn’t listening. Instead, she was taking his left wrist in hand, pulling his palm upward so that she could take away the final layer of the soiled wrap.

She sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes going wide and face growing pale.

“Oh…” She shuddered, her withered fingers growing up to her mouth “My god…”

She did not, admittedly, run away screaming or call for a doctor inconsolable. She did, however, need a good moment to sit and stare, horrified at the sight of Thomas’ wounded wrists. It had taken a long time for the skin to heal over Thomas’ wrists, and even now the line where the black and gold stitches had been was prominent. There was nothing that Mrs. Hughes could do for him now, save to sit and listen to why his wrists were in such mangled shape. The truth was once again flat out, and if lying to Mr. Carson was painful, lying to Mrs. Hughes was just god awful. At the same time, however, Thomas had to protect Mrs. Hughes from the true circumstances surrounding his return to the past. It didn’t matter if she was understanding to his ‘unnatural nature’ or his ‘unhappy thoughts’. If he started saying he’d been transported from the future with magical mud and a cursed razor, she was going to ring for the loony bin to come take him away.

“When…?” She finally croaked, one arm wrapped about her chest as if to warm herself, her other hand uselessly flapping about as she pointed first to Thomas’ wrists, and then about at the air.

“…The night I was found in muddy sheets.” Thomas said.

“You didn’t sleep walk.” Mrs. Hughes deduced.

A horrible stab of guilt slammed into Thomas with the force of a runaway train as he saw a small tear slip from the corner of Mrs. Hughes’ aged eyes. She chased it up with a hand at once, sniffing heartily to hide her distress.

He’d never wanted to make Mrs. Hughes cry.

He winced, fumbling uselessly with words.

“I…” Thomas mumbled, “I just…. please don’t cry-“

“Don’t worry about me.” Mrs. Hughes said, her voice thick as if she had a head cold. Thomas had set her handkerchief aside, neatly folded, and so she took it back up to carefully dab at the underside of her own eyes now. Now she was the one who wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“What happened?” She asked, her voice croaky like a bullfrog. “Will you tell me?”

“I’d heard some distressing news from my father.” Thomas lied. “He hates me, you see, and he jabs
at me. It hurts me horribly.”

Though Mrs. Hughes did not know it, Thomas was talking about Mr. Carson.

“He kept insisting that I was useless, that I didn’t have a place in the house or anywhere else. That I was the past… and that I deserved to be horsewhipped for being different.”

“Well that’s poppycock.” Mrs. Hughes spat the word, bitter at hearing it aloud.

Thomas gave her a pained smile, and carried on. “I got so low, I started to believe it. So, that night I left Downton and I wandered through the woods… and…”

Well, here he went—

“I found this tent. I swear it just appeared out of nowhere. An’ there was this sign on the front that said it belonged to a Hechicera, a Spanish sorceress. An’ she was inside the tent, as if she was waiting for me all along! She seemed to know why I was sufferin’—“

“A gypsy in Yorkshire?” Mrs. Hughes wondered. “Well, I suppose the world is made of stranger circumstances.”

“Well she… she told me that I had a chance to re-shape my life.” Thomas explained. “She gave me a razor, it was cursed she said. It was black and gold and it had runes in it!”

He was starting to talk fast now, growing excited to finally reveal his plight to someone else. Mrs. Hughes just gave him a pitying look.

“I swear Mrs. Hughes, I’m not lying about this!” Thomas urged. “I’ve been wanting to tell you for ages, but I thought if I did you’d think I was mad.”

“I don’t think you’re mad.” Mrs. Hughes murmured, refolding her handkerchief in front of her so as to keep her hands occupied, “But I do think that gypsy took you for a foolish young man.”

“But there was more Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said. “She even gave me this… weird mud in a bottle. She said it came from the dead sea and that it would bring me back to life!”

Mrs. Hughes’ brow crinkled, confused.

“She said that if I had the courage to take my life, I could reshape my life. That I could make it better, make it mine… She said that I had to put the mud on my wrists, and cut them with the cursed razor. So I did. And I poured the mud all over me, and I blacked out… and when I came to she’d stitched my wrists back up. So I just… wandered home.”

Through time, through forest, did it matter?

“Thomas—” Mrs. Hughes tutted, taking both his hands in her own to tenderly stroke over his puffy red scars, “Magic doesn’t exist. That woman was an awful sort to tell you to do such a thing.”

“But Mrs. Hughes, look at how my life has changed!” Thomas urged, “Think about how my life was before the Titanic sank and after!”

“Thomas, the only thing that changed was you!” Mrs. Hughes urged, squeezing his hands hard to make him see, “Don’t you see? You changed, not your life. And it wasn’t because of some Hechicera or magical mud or anything else. Why must you be different to be good?”

The thought struck him dumb, and Thomas sat there with his mouth open unsure of what to say.
… Why must he be different to be good…?

“Because I’ve always liked you just the way you are.” Mrs. Hughes said. “Warts and all.”

Dumbfounded, Thomas blinked confusedly and tried to grasp at what it meant to be good just the way he was. To not need to change, in any way shape or form.

“I…” Thomas spoke through numb lips, his heart pounding a little harder in her lips. “I don’t know what makes me happy, though. Don’t good people know that?”

“Not all of them.” Mrs. Hughes said, kindly. She reached beneath her sitting table to where a tiny drawer could be pulled out by a thin brass knob. Inside there were several items of interest, the sort you’d just throw and collect while in the hassle of your daily life, but two of them included a pad of paper and a pencil. Mrs. Hughes took them out, and gave them both to Thomas in a queer consolation gift.

“Make a list.” She urged him. “Start with clocks.”

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know.
The Low Blow

Chapter Summary

O'Brien's final act of revenge is merciless, and leaves the house in chaos.

Chapter Notes

Alright, so this is officially the end of season one, or section one rather of this fanfiction. I'm going to be taking liberties, and from here on out the plot is officially going to start turning in my own direction, Thomas wise at least. We had to set the stage to get the gears in motion; now that we've done that we can really reap the benefits. I wanted to thank everyone for their patience with this installment. I've been working on commissions and have a full time job, so this is hardly easy to keep on a regular schedule. Please forgive me for that.

This chapter contains the trigger warning for violence and mentions of a miscarriage.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was with great relief that life continued on after O'Brien’s second attempt at Thomas’ removal.

Things returned to normal downstairs, like the flip of a trusted switch putting light back into a darkened room. Mrs. Patmore was still in hysterics, slowly but surely growing more blind by the day, but Daisy was no longer actively plotting Thomas’ murder. She seemed embarrassed by her emotional slip up, but she took it in her stride like most working girls were want to do. There was no time to be slack in your shoes when you were running a massive estate. As it stood, the snows of winter were melting and Sybil Crawley’s season was to be held come February.

Moving the entire house to London for three months was not an easy task.

Firstly, the London House had to be prepared for its inhabitants, and so Mrs. Hughes wrote to Mrs. Bute that the Crawley’s were once again returning to their London home. Mrs. Bute then had to round up the regular staff, while Mrs. Hughes rallied the maids and prepared them for the intense cleaning that would take place once the family was safely out of the way. This change of hands was as revered and practiced as the skill set of a surgeon, and by the end of it half of Downton’s maid were up in London preparing the house with Mrs. Bute while the other half and the hallboys stayed with Mrs. Hughes to care for the house. The real burden, of course, fell upon the ladies maids and valets, because it was their job to dress their masters and mistresses for all the balls that would take place. In particular, Anna was run off her feet because Sybil did not have a full time maid and Lady Grantham had ordered three gowns for Sybil to wear to her first ball, her first banquet, and to be presented to their majesties in June. Everything had to be tailored to Sybil’s body, without a thread out of place, and Thomas was called upon more than once to help Anna in her sewing so that the work could go by faster. Bates was likewise getting slammed, because Lord Grantham’s full tuxes hadn’t been worn in nearly a year and Watson, the prior valet, had not left them with moth papers before boxing them up.
Mrs. Patmore was kept at home, but she was to be the exception. Daisy, Gloria, Abigail, and Doris (the four kitchen maids) were all going to London to help with the Crawley’s London Chef, a rather haughty Mr. Browlin. Browlin might have been bull headed and worse than Carson when it came to tradition, but by god he made damn good food. That was, to Thomas’ knowledge, the man’s only redeeming quality. Unfortunately, Mrs. Patmore was simply too blind to travel anymore and she already hated going up to London anyways. It wasn’t worth the trouble to tag her along just to have her smacking into unfamiliar objects and howling at the traffic.

As footmen, it was Thomas and William’s job to take Sybil to and from all her balls while likewise assisting the family at home. William was to be the home bearer, Thomas was to be the one that traveled ( queerly enough, this was how he and Philip had met during Edith’s debut season). As such, Thomas was once again underneath Carson’s constant grilling as he trained Thomas to get back out into the ‘field’ and keep wait on a Lady.

The last time Thomas had done this, it had been nigh unbearable. Carson had detested him by that point, and had made sure Thomas knew it, pointing out every single time Thomas slipped up and making sure that he was labeled a fool in the eyes of William and the rest. This time, however, Thomas and Carson were on solidly warm terms, with Carson now looking at Thomas like a human being instead of a lump of shit in a footman’s vest. So it was that as Thomas prepared his livery, packed his belongings, and rehearsed his London mannerisms, Carson was at his elbow once again pointing out every thing that he did wrong… but with a nicer tone.

“Thomas, that is not how one addresses a Viscount to a room. Only children and grandchildren of the peerage are referred to as honorable or lords when they enter a room. The proper address is Viscount etc.” instead of “Oh very well done indeed, if a Viscount has suddenly become his grandson. What a tospy turvy world we’re coming to. Tell me why I should trust you if you can’t even keep titles straight!?”

Amazing how the small things made all the difference.

When the day of the move finally came, the servants were up extra early to get all the luggage on the train for London. Mrs. Hughes practically shouted herself hoarse, directing traffic as local boys hired in to lend extra hands loaded wagonettes in the early dawn hours so that station hands could load the carriages before the traffic arrived. Thomas was up at four, despite having gone to bed at twelve, exhausted but dressed to the nines as he and William shut down Downton Abbey in order to get Grantham House full of life. They took the train ahead of the family with Carson and the kitchen maids, eating their breakfasts in their third class compartment which Mrs. Patmore had lovingly packed while choking out goodbyes.

She didn’t like to be away from her ‘family’.

The last time that Thomas had taken this train ride, it had once again been unbearable. He’d sat in the corner smoking out the window, left alone by everyone else, while William entertained all the kitchen maids and Mr. Carson worked on the cross word. This time, however, Thomas sat elbow to elbow with William while he ate his egg and cheese sandwich, watching William show Daisy a magic trick involving a beaten pence and his sleeve.

He dropped the coin twice on his shoe… which more or less spoiled the effect.

Thomas then entertained the girls by retelling the horror stories he’d heard about ‘bog men’ as a
child. It didn’t help they were traveling through a bog area, and it resulted in William having to draw the curtain over the window in order to stop the maids from getting hysterical.

“If you could keep from distressing the women, Thomas.” Mr. Carson sighed, turning a page in his copy of the Yorkshire Times, “I’d be well obliged.”

“I’m only trying to protect them from the bog men, Mr. Carson.” Thomas teased, before turning back to a white faced Abigail and adding, “After all, they can roam far from their peat at night. Haven’t you ever seen muddy shoes in the area yard?”

“I saw a pair yesterday!” Dorris said, sounding quite terrified.

“Bog men!” Thomas sing songed, only to be shut down by Mr. Carson.

“Lynch.” Carson grumbled his correction, seeming to peruse the classifieds where a roll top desk was being offered for five pounds.

“Lynch is a bog man?!” Dorris squawked, looking to Abigail in horror. The two girls were already slightly put off by the groomsmen, who wasn’t known to have a way with women.

“No, that’s not what I-“

“I saw him out on the moor at night, bringing in horses!” Dorris wailed, “I didn’t think anything of it at the time but it explains everything now! That’s why he’s always so dirty-!”

“Thomas-“ Mr. Carson cut across the wild babble, causing everyone to fall silent automatically out of respect. “When we get to Grantham House, you will clean the area yard to ensure there are no more bog men hiding in the eaves.”

William snickered. “Lynch stayed in Downton, Mr. Carson-“

“William, you will help him. That ought to take care of the trouble.”

Both footmen were crestfallen, laughter dying on their lips.

Sure enough, there were no bog men in Grantham House’s walled area yard, but there was a wild Mink that had apparently been making daily rent out of a trashcan that usually held scraps for the baggage men. William and Thomas had to corner the frightened animal, using an old milk crate and a scrap of meat to capture it and get it out of the area yard. When Dorris heard the ruckus, she panicked thinking a bog man was fighting Thomas and William in the area yard and had to go to bed early for bursting into tears.

Thomas and William did not get desert that night after dinner.

The family arrived three days later, bringing with them Anna, Bates, and O’Brien. By this time, Thomas and William had unpacked all the luggage along with the silver and had spent the better part of two days arranging tables and vases so that the family could walk into a polished home. If they were sweating in their liveries, no one made a comment of it, but that night Daisy made berry tarts underneath the eye of Mr. Browlin for the family’s desert and let Thomas and William split the scraps. William was a fan of the sugared crust, and so had crumbs in the corners of his livery when he was finished. Thomas, however, loved the boiled raspberries and so his lips were dyed purple by the end of it. When Mr. Carson realized this over the servant’s supper, Thomas and William were once again banished to the area yard to “check for more minks”.

The months passed, with Sybil becoming an instant hit at her balls and banquets. She floated from room to room in a haze of cream and icy blue, enchanting every man she passed. Branson, who had come with the family to London in order to ferry them about, spent most of his time hiding behind potted ferns to try and get a glimpse of Sybil with diamonds twirled in her chestnut hair. The first time around, Thomas had been rather spiteful towards Branson who had been a hit with the staff, and had automatically told on him to Mr. Carson who had chewed Branson out for being ‘above his station’. This time, however, Thomas said nothing, watching over Sybil as she skirted around the edges of her lavish party to instead talk to Branson about upcoming politics in the coat room.

Christ, they were utterly spent on one another, weren’t they?

The only true turbulence in London came with a party in April, close to Sybil’s introduction to their majesties, when many of the older families were hosting an enormous party at a Teck Mansion, where the Duke of Teck held court as the great grandson of King George the third and younger brother of the Queen. It was one of the most elite parties that the Crawley’s had so far attended, and it required both William and Thomas to be present as footmen for their family while they dined and chatted with the nobility.

It was a rather cool night, despite the slow progression into an English spring, and many of the nobility were hiding upon an enormous marble veranda were greek goddesses kept watch over a sparkling fountain. William and Thomas were rotating in and out in an attempt to halve the work load, and as a result Thomas was in a moment of pause as he hid in the coat room. He was in the act of pondering whether it would be worth striking up a cigarette when it happened.

“Oh!” A familiar voice catted about, “I can’t stand these English parties. Remind me again why we left France?”

“Because, my dear,” A tired voice replied, “We are a member of English nobility. Not that of France.”

“More’s the pity.”

Thomas stuck his head out of the coat room, unsure of why the voice struck out at him as familiar, only to be shocked by the sight of a voluptuous red headed woman in a beaded gold dress shrugging her mink stole to a young footman with dark brown hair and cunning eyes. He likewise took the coat of his lord, shrugging them both over his practiced arm to make a bee line for the coat room where Thomas was watching with wide eyes.

The Anstruthers.

There could be no denying these were the Anstruthers. Thomas would recognize the face of Lady Anstruther anywhere, for it had been her appearance which had sparked the beginning of his downfall. It had been her seduction, her vanity and fear of growing older, which had in time ruined Thomas by taking Jimmy away from him. At the time, he’d known her to be widowed, which meant the man at her side was the still alive Lord Anstruther. He was silver haired, clearly much older than his wife, and was walking upon an ebony cane threaded with gold.

“Budge up—” the footman mumbled as he passed Thomas with his arms laden. Thomas allowed the man to pass, his heart pounding wildly in his throat as he considered the implications.

If the Anstruthers were here, was Jimmy here? It would only make sense, Jimmy was Lady Anstruther’s favorite.

“Is Jimmy here?” Thomas asked the footman as he put away his master’s coats. The footman
bristled, looking over his shoulder quizzically.

“How d’you know Jimmy?” the footman demanded.

But Thomas wasn’t in the mood to be questioned. The blood was rushing in his veins, making proper speech a thing of the past.

“Tell me!” Thomas urged the man in a rush, “Is he here or not?!”

“He-“ the footman faltered, off put by Thomas’ bizarre anger. After all, the man had done nothing to deserve it. “He’s havin’ a smoke by the motorcar-“

Thomas did not even wait for the footman to finish his sentence.

He ran from the coat room, despite the lack of decorum it showed, and followed the train of lords and ladies who were heading in the opposite direction towards the Chandelier Ballroom which was where the main waltz was being held. Their respective footman watched Thomas pass, confused at his hurry and lack of grace. The lords and ladies in question scoffed at the show of a footman who had forgotten himself in the middle of such an important ball-

But Thomas did not care. None of it mattered to him in that moment, not even his determination to make a better life for himself. The only thing that mattered, the only thing that held any worth in his mind, was the fact that Jimmy Kent was here tonight at this party.

The fact that for the first time in years, Thomas would see the love of his life again.

He exited the house onto a massive row of marble steps that stretched past two separate landings were lords and ladies were still coming up the stairs, beyond which an enormous line of motorcars was wrapped around an ornate ‘o’ shaped driveway full of gigantic ferns and a fountain of Apollo shooting the sun that could surely river the size of a house.

“Thomas-?” the voice of Branson was but a buzz in the back of his brain, and no wonder when the man was perched upon the hood of the Grantham’s motorcar, polishing it before his masters were to return.

But there were so many cars- surely more than fifty-! Which one was the correct one?

“Thomas where are you going-? Lady Grantham needs you-!”

For whatever reason William had followed him out of the house. Maybe it was their turn to take a shift change. Thomas paid him no mind either, instead beginning to search the cars one by one.

He would take every car down in this damn driveway if it meant seeing Jimmy again. Livery and form be damned-!

“Thomas, wait-!” William was begging, running after Thomas as he chased through the maze of parked cars. There was no way of telling which one belonged to the Anstruther’s, so Thomas felt he had no choice but to call out Jimmy’s name.

“Jimmy!” Thomas called out to the crisp night air, “Jimmy where are you?!“

No one answered him.

“Jimmy-!”

But even as Thomas made to pass yet another parked motorcar, checking it’s windows for Jimmy’s
angelic face, he was caught by a rather rough hand which jerked him to a pause. Thomas looked around to find that both Branson and William were panting, sweating at the exertion of tracking him down.

“What are you doing?” Branson demanded, eyes wild from the chase, “You can’t be runnin’ around out here, Lord Grantham’s ready to leave! We need you to help the family to the car-“

“But-“ Thomas looked back about, eyes darting from car to car. The idea of leaving now, when Jimmy was finally close enough to call out to, was tantamount to torture. He felt like he was being tempted by some sort of heathen demon. Like the sins of his past were now causing terrible problems for him in the present.

Yet as Thomas looked back to the stairwell, where Lord and Lady Grantham were now descending with their three daughters in tow, Thomas was stopped dead by the sight of a familiar curly blonde head from the back.

Jimmy was walking up the stairs from the opposite side. Even from the back, with a good five hundred yards between them, Thomas could easily still recognize Jimmy.

He didn’t even think. He ran back towards the stairs.

“Yes, that’s the— NO!” Branson howled, aggravated that Thomas was running back towards the direction of the Crawley’s but without any sense of decorum whatsoever.

Thomas dodged to the left, running through the grass instead of the gravel. Jimmy was halfway up the steps but he was walking at a sauntering pace (the little nit). If Thomas could just get around the-

“Thomas-!” Lord Grantham called out, “What are you-“

Thomas ran right past Lord Grantham, mounting the steps three at a time.

Jimmy was twenty stairs ahead of him. fifteen— ten!!

But just as Thomas threw out a hand to grab Jimmy’s wrist, he was suddenly grabbed at his own by a harsh and commanding grip. The resulting stop of force had Thomas tripping, and Jimmy slipped out of tangible reach to continue on up the stairs-

“Wait-!” Thomas cried out after him, mindless to the noblemen who stared at him as if he was insane. “Jim-“

His wrist was pinned against his lower back. Gasping in pain, Thomas looked around outraged to find himself face to face with a stuffy butler that looked distinctly like an irate bull. He was an enormous man, broad shouldered and squashed nose with thin brown hair that was parted fiercely to the left. It was the Duke of Teck’s butler, whose name Thomas couldn’t rightly remember at the moment.

“Have you lost your mind?” The butler hissed through clenched teeth. “Get back in line and serve your Lord or God so help me-“

“Thomas!”

Lord Grantham had come back up the stairs, with his cape billowing in the cool April wind. His top hat was perched at a jaunt upon his glistening curls. His cane gleamed in the lights echoing from the great mansion behind them. The butler immediately dropped his vicious act, resuming a facade of subtle servitude. He dipped his head to Lord Grantham, subservient.
“M’lord, I have fetched your footman.” The butler said, “He forgot himself, I’m afraid.”

“I think I can handle it from here.” Lord Grantham said, and though there was no heat in the man’s voice, Thomas knew instinctively that Lord Grantham didn’t much care for the butler before him. “Thomas, I require you at the motorcar. Lady Grantham is tired. We’re returning home.”

Disgraced and embarrassed, Thomas still couldn’t help looking back over his shoulder. Jimmy was gone, no doubt inside the mansion and attending to his darling Lady Anstruther.

Humiliated, Thomas had no choice but to return down the stairs, and home with the Crawleys.

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“Did you drink?” Carson snapped, glowering at Thomas in his borrowed office.

Thomas stood before Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes, both of whom were staring at him incredibly concerned. Worst of all, Lord Grantham was there as well, after having returned home to promptly tell Carson there was a ‘slight incident’ at Teck Mansion. Carson, of course, didn’t like it when a spoon was out of place… so finding out that Thomas had lost his senses in front of a fleet of lords and ladies to the disagreement of Lord Grantham had resulted in absolute outrage.

“No Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, dully.

“Because I can think of no other reason why you should act so bizarrely than to be drunk. Are you ill?” Carson continued on, blustering with reddened cheeks, “Are you fevered?”

“I… thought I saw someone and I-“ Thomas waffled for a reason to explain his peculiar behavior, but came up short.

“Who did you think you saw?” Lord Grantham asked. Thomas flushed, unable to look the man in the eye.

“Well…” Thomas briefly considered lying and saying that it was someone like his brother, but Daniel Barrow had been seven years younger than Thomas, and was no doubt running the family clock shop or being trained for the position by now. Lying was probably not the best idea, given his precarious reputation for getting into trouble via O’Brien. She would only take a lie and make it worse.

“I saw someone that I care for, M’lord. A truest friend, if you will.” Thomas paused, “I’d not seen him in many years and I confess I forgot myself. I just so desperately wanted it to be him. And when I saw that it was… well…” Thomas didn’t know what else to say.

“You ran after him.” Lord Grantham supplied.

“I did, M’lord.” Thomas said, “And I feel very foolish, I admit it.”

“Which is no less than you deserve since you acted very foolish.” Carson grumbled.
“Thomas, you are the first footman of this house.” Lord Grantham tutted, “You must always be on guard for distractions that could take you from your work. I sympathize with your situation, but the Teck family is one of the most important families in England… they are related to the Queen herself. We can’t embarrass ourselves in front of such a family.”

“Maybe… it’ll just be me that gets embarrassed, M’lord.” Thomas offered. “I don’t think they’d associate you with me when it comes to honor.”

Lord Grantham gave him a stern smile, but Thomas noted that he seemed more amused than annoyed.

“It’s a matter of principle, Thomas.” Lord Grantham said. “Some noble families care nothing for their servants… but I do. I don’t want you to end up underneath the thumb of the Teck’s butler. He’s hardly like Carson.”

Thomas made a face, thinking of how the man had gripped his wrist painfully tight.

“We’ll say no more of it.” Lord Grantham decided, “But I expect better from you in future. I’m sure Carson will have more to say on the subject than I.”

“Indeed.” Carson muttered under his breath. Thomas could already sense the impending punishment over his head.

That night Thomas was back out in the area yard, sweeping and cleaning, mink be damned.

After that one slip up, Thomas found his thoughts routinely compromised by Jimmy Kent. The last time that Thomas had seen Jimmy had been a quiet September morning. A cool mist had settled in over the lawns of Downton, painting everything in muted shades of gray and green. Jimmy had been dressed in his tweed suit, his newscap pulled low over his eyes. He’d shaken Thomas’ hand and walked away.

He’d taken with him every reason Thomas had for living.

Thomas had gotten used to the pain of losing Jimmy, and had dulled it with drugs until he’d been on the verge of suicide. Now, with his youth and his future back firmly in his hands, Thomas was left with the ugly question of what he wanted to do with his life. Did he want to throw everything away and try to find Jimmy? Would it be better to gain Jimmy back, or to make a life that was truly and uniquely his? Jimmy wasn’t like him. Jimmy looked to women, and clearly didn’t have much problem getting a leg up in life. Thomas was the absolute opposite, and could hardly stand to flirt without making a fool of himself.

Maybe… it just wasn’t meant to be.
And oh, how that burned.

After the Teck’s party, things quieted down at Grantham House. Sybil needed a rest after so many
balls, and she was given the chance to instead focus on tea parties instead with her sisters. The three trotted off to garden parties and luncheons, dressed in lacy white frocks with ribbons of purple and blue. It seemed like every afternoon was either spent washing, drying, or ironing lace and by the time April was drawing to a close Thomas was sick to death of it.

In all his ennui and work, Thomas had forgotten what was coming. When it hit him, he was completely blindsided.

It was a quiet night, after a day of endless tea parties. The three Crawley sisters had taken trays to bed, far too tired to dine with their parents. Lord and Lady Grantham had decided to therefore dine out, and so the staff had been garnered a few hours off. Given that they were in London, many of the servants had decided to go out for a few hours. Some went to get dinner from local fish and chip pubs. Some were sending post cards to family members or fetching rare items from the market. For Thomas, however, he’d spent the night relaxing in the corner near the hearth, nursing a cup of chamomile tea with almond biscuits. William had played several rounds of solitaire, but had eventually given up to sit across from Thomas so that he could get warm as well. Even in May, England could be slightly chilly.

William was watching him. Thomas pretended not to notice, and instead kept his eyes low on the dwindling flames.

“What’s your mum like?” William asked him.
The question took him by surprise. Thomas found himself blinking owlishly, unsure of what to say as William waited patiently for his answer. Why this question, and why now?

“Are you thinking about your mother?” Thomas asked him, a diversion to keep from speaking about his own.

“I dreamed about her last night.” William said. “She was young and whole. I missed her a lot today. I was wondering if you missed your mother.”

“No.” Thomas said, and it was the truth. He didn’t think about his family a lot, “I lost my family a long time ago. I’ve made peace with that.”

“What happened?” William asked. “Will you tell me?”

Thomas sighed, taking a long sip from his teacup to keep from having to answer. As Thomas drank, Carson walked in the room and noted that the two of them were still up.

“Thomas, William, it’s time to turn in.” Carson grumbled. It was, admittedly, quite late.

“Just five more minutes?” William asked, craning his neck as he looked about in his wicker chair.

“You have five minutes and nothing more,” Carson warned, tapping the face of his wrist watch, “then upstairs to wash with the pair of you.”

Yet as the pair of them returned their gazes to the fireplace, Mrs. Bute came hassling up the hallway to the area yard with a crisp yellow note in her hand.

“Mr. Carson, a telegram just arrived for you.” Mrs. Bute said, holding out the offending letter. Mr. Carson took it and opened it, reading silently as Thomas and William continued their talk.

“You did well today.” Thomas said, to get William off the topic of his sordid family past. “We’re
almost finished with the season. We’ll be home soon.”

“ It hurts, doesn’t it.” William said, and Thomas was confused until he added, “To talk about your family?”

Oh for god’s sake. Thomas tutted and rolled his eyes, taking another sip of tea to realize that he’d actually drunk all his brew. No more putting off the conversation, it seemed.

“No.” Thomas said, which was only partly true, “It doesn’t. But I don’t want to talk about it, either.”

“William…”

William and Thomas both looked around, to find Mr. Carson wearing a somber expression that did not fit his usual persona. He seemed oddly deflated, despite being a man of incredible stamina.

“Come with me.” Mr. Carson said, folding up the telegram and pocketing it in his vest. “Thomas, head up to bed. Now.”

There was something in the way Carson spoke… Like he had bad news.

As Thomas headed upstairs, his thoughts inadvertently turned to his own mother. He’d not thought about her in a while, honestly, simply because she’d never made much of an impression on him. She’d had a brood of seven, with Thomas the second oldest, and had never had much time for individual conversation. She’d been a fretful woman, always worried… always afraid. Money, family, sickness, business, church group, charity donations… if it wasn’t one thing it was another. Thomas probably got all of his anxiety from her, not to mention his depression. He’d also inherited her piercingly blue eyes, pale skin, and dark hair. To be quite honest, he looked a great deal like his mother… Margret had always looked more like his father, with a more square nose and curlier hair.

He didn’t like thinking about such things.

Thomas’ oncoming ennui was mercifully interrupted by the sight of Bates heading from the washroom to his borrowed quarters. There was a damp towel slung over his shoulder, with thin lines of water running down his barrel chest. It was a delightful distraction, and Thomas found himself remembering fondly how he and Bates had once made love… how firm and warm Bates’ flesh had been against his back.

“Turning in?” Bates asked. They were before one another; their rooms were opposite each other, with Thomas and William sharing a room in the cramped quarters. Grantham House was undeniably smaller than Downton Abbey and did not have the room to house all the male servants in separate quarters.

“Carson put his foot down.” Thomas explain. Bates grinned, taking his towel off of his shoulder and carefully folding it upon his arm. It was obvious that there were things Bates wanted to say, but Thomas was glad that their relationship was past. It wasn’t healthy for either of them.

“Where’s William?” Bates asked, but even as Thomas made to reply, the sound of William coming up the stairs was answer enough.

And yet, as William came around the stairwell, there was no jovial smile or relaxed gate to greet
them. William was instead deathly pale, and seemed to drift through space without truly existing in it. Thomas had never seen William so out of sorts, and it stopped him dead.


William did not answer him. It seemed he hadn’t even heard Bates. William entered his shared room with Thomas, and sat upon his bed. He did not make to undress. He did even take off his jacket.

It worried Thomas.

Thomas followed after William, silent and wary of approaching without care. He paused in the threshold for a moment before rationing that it was silly to be afraid to enter his own bedroom. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas stood before William and watched him sit.

William was…
Well, there was no other word for it. He was lost.

“…William?” Thomas murmured. William did not seem to hear him at first, just like before with Bates, “Are you alright?”

William nodded his head, slow but firm. Then, he began to shake at the shoulders, and shook his head back and forth. With a lurching sensation of horror, Thomas watched as William began to blubber and cry, wailing hysterically so that hot thick tears began to drip down his plump homely cheeks.

“My mum.” William’s voice was so strained it sounded foreign. Thomas had never seen William so upset! “My mum is dead!”

And with that, William burst into wild tears. Thomas was unprepared for William to lurch out and grab hold to him, but that was exactly what William did. Despite the fact that William was twenty years old, and Thomas was twenty four, William grabbed onto Thomas’ waist and buried his face in Thomas’ waistcoat. He howled in grief, chubby fingers twisted in the striped fabric of Thomas’ livery.

In the doorway to the hall, Bates watched with a shared expression of horror. He too was shocked to see William in such a state.

“M-u-m!” William’s voice was a guttural sob, devoid of strength or hope. He sobbing just seemed to get louder, and less controlled.

Thomas looked to Bates, pleading with him silently to get someone, to do something. Thomas didn’t want to handle this. As much as William might have thought him a chum, Thomas didn’t have the mental or emotional strength to handle a break down like this.

Bates recognized Thomas’ expression: “I’ll go get Mrs. Hughes.” He said. He left immediately for the women’s side.

After that, things got progressively easier for Thomas. He stayed silent, allowing William to cry into his waistcoat, and waited for Mrs. Hughes to arrive. When she did so, she was in a tartan house coat, with her hair unbound in a long chestnut braid. She’d taken William by the arms, and pulled him up from the bed, to walk him back downstairs to her borrowed office where they could have a cup of tea and talk things over. Allowed some solitude at last, Thomas had shakily disrobed, brushed his
teeth, and gotten into bed. He’d felt oddly exposed, laying there and waiting for William to return. Part of him wondered why it was that William had decided to cry on his ‘shoulder’ so to speak. Was it because he truly felt Thomas was that much of a chum? Or was it because William was more emotional as a creature than Thomas?

Thomas didn’t like feeling emotionally responsible for someone like William. It was one thing if Thomas was involved and in love. When it had come to Edward or Jimmy in the past, Thomas had never had a problem being responsible. In a way, he’d liked the fact that others had looked to him as a caretaker for those that he loved… but Thomas didn’t love William. In a way, it made him feel uncomfortable for William to cry against him like that.

He hoped it didn’t happen again.

Thomas nearly fell asleep, listening to the muted chitter of cicadas through his window into the area garden. Just as Thomas was lulled, his breathes becoming even and his body tingling with numb warmth, Mrs. Hughes returned with William.

William was not crying anymore, but he was sniveling softly every so often. He disrobed with Mrs. Hughes’ aid, and at first there was a bit of kerfuffle as Mrs. Hughes pulled out William’s valise and helped him to pack. Then, William had gotten into bed and Mrs. Hughes blew out William and Thomas’ shared bedside candle. The room was plunged into darkness once more, and at first Thomas thought Mrs. Hughes would merely leave.

But then Thomas felt a warm soft hand upon his face, and blearily opened his eyes to find Mrs. Hughes above him.

“William is leaving tomorrow morning.” Mrs. Hughes whispered, her words barely a breath upon the air. In the dark, her outline was formed by the glow of lamps from the hallway. It made her look like she had a halo, and for a moment Thomas was enraptured by her beauty. “Can you handle the work load until we arrive him next month?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas whispered.

“Good lad.” She said, and she petted his hair to tuck a stray black frond behind his ear. She positioned his duvet a little better upon his shoulders, and left the pair of them to sleep. She shut the door to the hallway, plunging the pair of them into darkness.

William’s muted tears were Thomas’ lullaby into sleep. When he woke up the next morning… William wasn’t in his bed anymore.

The final leg of Sybil’s season was merely the introduction to the King and Queen, something which was highly revered and bizarrely secret from the staff. Thomas was the only member of staff besides Branson to journey with the Crawley’s to Buckingham palace. A long promenade of women were being flaunted by their family, and the whole time Thomas hung off the back of a gilded coach with Branson driving a pair of white horses. When they arrived, swinging around the grand front, Thomas felt a little flat and unfit compared to the fancy footmen in red and gold that waited on the royal family. There were surely more than forty of them lining the stairs, each of them waiting hand and foot to take the new debutants and their mothers to meet their majesties. Thomas opened the door for Lady Sybil and Lady Grantham, helped them to exit their carriage, then waited with Branson in the back lot for a good three hours while the ceremony took place. The pair of them shared a lunch packed carefully by Mrs. Patmore and played a card game. Mrs. Patmore had been kind enough to pack them roast beef sandwiches, freshly made crisps and even a cut apple.
The return to Grantham House had been a quiet one. Both Sybil and Lady Grantham had been exhausted, and when they’d arrived back home the pair had retired for a nap. Thomas had changed out his livery, Branson had put up the car, and life had returned to normal.

Five days later, they were on their way home… finally.

It was a wonderful thing, to return to Yorkshire after four months in London. Thomas was a man of the modern era, living on the outskirts of Edwardian society, and so Yorkshire often presented him with more problems than it did solutions. At the same time, however, Thomas was a country boy at heart. He’d been raised in a tiny fishing village, and had spent the majority of his adult life hidden in the rolling hills of England’s fertile soil. This wasn’t to say that he didn’t enjoy traveling, but there was nothing quite so rewarding and enriching as coming home.

The majority of the staff traveled home a day early, save for Thomas, Bates, Anna, and O’Brien. The four of them were to return the next day with the family, so that they might walk into a house already prepared for their arrival. The train ride home was unnervingly quiet, with O’Brien glowering in the corner and refusing to speak. She seemed to be pondering some great calamity, which might have been in part due to the Arch Duke of Austria getting shot. Thomas knew that this was the beginning of the great war, and found himself often thinking of the near future when he would no doubt be called to enlist. He had decided already it would be best to return to his practice as a healer, given that he knew the ropes and could at least cope with the workload. At the same time, however, Thomas despaired at the thought of returning underneath the vengeful eye of General Burton in Richmond. Burton had been a devilish man, who’d despised anything out of the ordinary. Thomas was certain Burton had been able to tell Thomas’ character was unlike a ‘normal man’s, and Burton had made sure that every day of life at the barracks had been a living hell. Perhaps this time Thomas would be able to conceal his nature more, but he doubted it.

As they pulled back into Downton’s familiar station, Thomas took deep breathes of the clean country air. There was an ugly smog that rolled about London most days; it’d make you develop an awful cough if you didn’t watch out. The flowers were all in bloom, with June fully upon them, and a hot wind blew through the tree tops sending summer birds into a cloudless blue sky.

The Crawley’s were delighted to return home. The front seat of the motorcar was crammed, with Branson, Bates, and O’Brien taking up what remained of the room. Thomas and Anna had no choice but to ride on the back, giggling like children as they bounced along the dirt road and clung to the strapped luggage.

“Oh, I’m so glad to be home!” Anna called to the blistering summer air; it rushed past her ears, sending little golden strands of hair loose from her bun.

Thomas grinned in full agreement. He let his arms spread wide, soaring like a bird, but had to grab onto the motorcar quick when Branson passed over a small pothole and nearly sent Thomas flying off the back. Anna laughed, and helped Thomas to hold on.

Downton Abbey hailed upon a green and crystal blue horizon, its house flag snapping in the sharp wind. Out front, the entire staff lay in an immaculate row of black and white, with the day maids in their best frocks and Mr. Carson at the front of the line. Branson pulled the car around to a smooth stop, and Thomas hopped off the back of the car to help Anna down. Thomas opened the car door
for the Crawleys while William stepped out of the line, unlacing the luggage from the back of the cart in a silent and somber mood.

Lady Grantham let out a sigh of relief as her feet touched the gravel. She wore a blissful smile, and greeted William kindly though they were hardly good acquaintances.

“Hello, William.” She said; there was a touch of sympathy in her voice Thomas did not miss, “It’s so good to have you back.”

And with that she and Lord Grantham made their way up the steps to be welcomed home. Carson showed them inside, Bates took Lord Grantham’s coat, and everything was officially back to normal. Anna and O’Brien were left taking coats and hats from all the daughters, with the rest of the staff heading back down the area stairs in order to attend to their masters if called upon. This left Thomas and William to unload the trunks alone, while Branson cleaned out the back of the motorcar and whistled a merry Irish tune underneath his breath.

“How are you feeling?” Thomas asked William.
William just shrugged in response.

Sensing that this conversation was effectively going to go no where, Thomas began to unload the luggage quicker: “I’ll get the luggage, don’t bother-“

“No, I need to help.” William mumbled. He sounded absolutely miserable.

As the pair of them took the last bit of luggage off the back of the motorcar, Branson revved the engine and pulled the car around the side of the house to the garage where he would no doubt spend the day cleaning and repairing the beast. This left Thomas and William alone outside the house, puttering in and out in repetitive strikes so that they could carry all the luggage inside. There was, in effect, a small elevator inside Downton that worked on a pulley system. It eliminated the need to carry massive trunks up the stairs, but required two separate hands to work and was hardly for entertainment. Thomas and William had to load each trunk in separately lest they be unable to work the levers, and then pull each load up before tying off the ropes, heading up the servant’s stairs, and unloading the trunks from the top. To say that it was back breaking work was putting it mildly, but at least Anna helped by collecting the ladies hat boxes. Bit by bit, the enormous pile was reduced to manageable bites.

“How did London go?” William asked. There was such an aura of gloom about the boy that Thomas momentarily felt a stab of pity go through his heart. This was an unfamiliar situation when it came to William, for the boy was so fortunate compared to Thomas it wasn’t even funny.

“Well, it all ended fine.” Thomas promised, “Lady Sybil met with the King and Queen and we came home. You didn’t miss much.”

“No more drama with O’Brien?”

“None for me, thank god.” Thomas muttered nastily under his breath. He wouldn’t have been able to cope with another incident in London; the workload had been too much of a strain. “Course, I can’t say the same for the Austrian Arch Duke.”

“Isn’t it terrible?” William wondered, “To think there are such awful people out there?”

As the pair of them began to trek down the hall with enormous trunks, it put a pause in their conversation. You couldn’t talk decently while you were likewise huffing and puffing for adequate breathe. When they reached Lord Grantham’s dressing room and sat down his trunk, they took a
slight breather.

“I’m afraid there’ll be more horror than you can imagine before it’s all over.” Thomas thought of all the agony to come. Of William, in particular, who had before been so damned determined to fight bravely in the war. What had that gotten him in the end but a punctured lung and a premature death?

“Well, when the times comes it comes.” William was just as staunch as before. His mother’s death had broken his heart. It seemed the only way for him to cope through the pain was to be brave against an unknown enemy…. such a golden boy. “We’ll do our part for King and Country!”

“Yes.” Thomas said, watching as William carried on up the hall back towards the lift to fetch the next trunk, “Yes I’m afraid we will.”

The only true problem about returning to Downton was, of course, Mrs. Patmore. Normally Thomas would have been glad to see the cook again; she made the best salted cod cakes around, after all. But now a days Mrs. Patmore was on the verge of having an anxiety attack every two minutes, unable to see anything and screaming at her assistants for her own failures. It made for a miserable atmosphere downstairs, and of course the brunt of it all fell on poor Daisy’s shoulders. The time was coming soon when Lord Grantham would make the decision to send Mrs. Patmore to London with Anna for cataract surgery, but until that day poor Mrs. Patmore was forced to wallow about knocking into every corner she came across. Besides that, very little was out of order and Thomas continued on, watching as the days crept ever closer to August 4th. That would be the day that England declared war on Germany.

At the same time, Thomas could sense something… odd in the air.

O’Brien was acting peculiarly.

For a while, she’d simply been quiet, speaking to no one and heading to bed early each night. Now, however, O’Brien was constantly receiving post and seemed to be growing more animated again. Thomas wondered if she’d garnered a new position and would bugger off soon. But Thomas’ thoughts about O’Brien grew sour still when the joyous news rang out across the house that Lady Grantham was expecting. It was a shock, to be sure, but not as much of a shock to O’Brien that Lady Grantham had put an advert out looking for another maid. Dr. Clarkson swore that Lady Grantham was about four months along, which made Thomas sick to his stomach given that this meant she got pregnant around February while they were all in London. There was something about the idea of Lord and Lady Grantham going at it that just made him want to barf. It was like imagining his parents getting the jig on, for god’s sake!

As June slid neatly into July, William was still obviously in mourning. Anna had been kind enough to stitch him an arm band, and he still wore it every day. Before, Thomas had been extremely annoyed by this, given that his relationship with his own mother had been so poor. To Thomas, it had felt like William was flaunting his wonderful family under the guise of grief. Now, however, life had made Thomas wiser. It was obvious that flaunting anything was the last thing from William’s mind. He was miserable, dejected, and spent most of his days staring listlessly into the fire waiting for Carson to call for light’s out.

Daisy tried to cheer him up, but it was a difficult practice.

But this quiet and blasé life that Thomas lived, passing through summer months with no cares
besides following Carson’s daily tasks, was about to draw to an ugly close. While Thomas had been relaxing, thinking himself safe, O’Brien had been plotting, and had been preparing for her final attempt to take Thomas down.

It happened on a Friday night, when Lady Mary had finally returned from a London trip to sort out her feelings towards Matthew Crawley. The house was in full swing, offering a traditional English dinner with nine courses, and Thomas and William were being run off their feet. During the fifth course, as Thomas and William swapped out plates of roasted lamb and grilled potatoes in the kitchen corridors, Thomas noted O’Brien watching him from the corner. There was a lazy if ugly smile upon her face that Thomas did not like to see.

He tried to ignore it and carried on with his work.

And yet, as dinner was eventually concluded and Thomas began to go through the laborious process of shutting down the dining room, Mr. Carson approached him with a grim expression. He looked oddly pained, and it made Thomas’ stomach immediately turn into knots. He had a feeling O’Brien had made another move; he had yet to know just how disgusting and low it would be.

“Thomas…” Mr. Carson greeted him. His voice was quiet, grave.

“Mr. Carson?” Thomas tried for a smile, tried for anything to keep alive the tiny hope that O’Brien hadn’t once again done something abysmal.

“I need to speak with you in private.” Mr. Carson said.

William, who had been stacking a carrying tray full of porcelain plates, paused at Mr. Carson’s words. He looked over his shoulder, caught Thomas’ eye, and quirked an eyebrow as if to say ‘What’s going on?’

If only Thomas knew.

The pair of them journeyed downstairs, leaving William to sort out the rest of the dishes with Gwen and Anna’s help. As they hit the bottom of the stairwell, the passed a packed servant’s hall where everyone was slowly but surely cloistering to have their own dinner. O’Brien was there, quiet as always, but this time she wore a devious smirk upon her face.

Thomas did not like to see it.

As they entered Mr. Carson’s office, Mr. Carson shut the door and gestured for Thomas to take the visitor’s chair. Already, Thomas was mentally tallying what O’Brien would dare to say he’d stollen. He couldn’t envision anything that had been taken, and so was left rather clueless as Carson took his seat behind his desk and bowed his head in aged exhaustion.

There was a letter upon Mr. Carson’s desk, open to reveal long jagged lines of dark scribbling ink.

“There has been another incident.” Mr. Carson murmured, “And I’m afraid this time it’s… very severe.”

Thomas’ stomach sank. He felt like he might be sick at any moment.

“Mr. Carson, I’ve done nothing.” he began, determined to state his innocence, but Carson shook his head.

“No, you don’t understand Thomas.” Mr. Carson cut him off, “Because you see this time… you
actually have done something wrong. And it can’t be denied.”

Thomas’ mind began to race at a shocking speed, jumping from one grievance to the next. But what could he possibly have been accused of?! His behavior in the past months had been exemplary-! Surely this had nothing to do with the scene at the Teck Mansion?!

“While the business of the note has passed, you will no doubt be unsurprised to learn that Ms. O’Brien is unwilling to let things drop.” Mr. Carson said, “She’s… decided to do something rather… vulgar.”

“Vulgar?” Thomas said, his voice a raspy whisper with a throat clasped in fear.

“She’s contacted your family. In particular, your father… and has told him of your employment here, and that she feels that you are… unacceptable to have on staff given… well…” Mr. Carson gave Thomas a sympathetic expression, though his voice was muted and soft without inflection of emotion. “Given what you are.”

“… Oh my g-“ Thomas blurted, only to fall quiet again as words failed to drip out of his numb mouth.

She’d… she’d done what?

Surely…

It was as if Thomas’ mind had gone into shock. He was so numb from the betrayal, so cold from the implications of O’Brien’s meddling, that he’d seemed to have forgotten how to speak. Instead, Thomas remained gravely quiet as Mr. Carson picked up the letter upon his desk and began to read.

“This is from your father, to O’Brien.” Carson explained, “A part of it reads: I agree with you that he should not be working in a big house, not around children and delicate ladies. He shouldn’t be working anywhere at all, save a whore house if you ask me. I’ve written to Lord Grantham as you’ve noted, and I’ll likewise be writing to the police if I hear no fall back on your part.”

“I’ve got to run.” Thomas broke off, immediately thinking of his valise upstairs and all the things he could cram inside it. “I- I- if you give me a reference tonight, I’ll leave and-“

“Wait.” Carson said sternly, holding up a hand to cut Thomas mid-petrified rant. “Hear me out.”

Thomas couldn’t imagine what rabbit Carson was about to pull out of his hat, but doubted the trick would save him from his father.

The only man he’d truly ever feared.

The man who had taught him how to fear.

“Lord Grantham has spoken to me.” Carson explained, “He received word in the post this morning. Your father is demanding that you be turned over to the police, but Lord Grantham has requested that he come here to speak in a private meeting. He thinks he can change your father’s mind… if nothing else, he’s going to offer him money to keep quiet.”

So this was how it was going to be.

Thomas felt a wave of nausea pass over him, settling cold and thick in his stomach till all the
goodness and hope he’d been building up after years of trying to act ‘kind’ had fled from his body. Suddenly, he felt nothing but rage. Sheer, unadulterated, pure rage. He wanted to find O’Brien, to beat her with his bare hands, to crack open her face till she’d never again think to frighten him in such a way. He’d never before thought of violence against a woman, but this had nothing to do with the difference in the sexes, nothing to do with the fact that Thomas was young and O’Brien old.

It had everything to do with the fact that O’Brien had dared to turn to Thomas’ father for vengeance…. and that was unforgivable.

“… I need some fresh air.” Thomas said, rising up from his chair. “Can I please take a moment?”

“Of course.” Mr. Carson said, rising up from his own chair so that the pair of them were eye to eye once more. Thomas wondered if Mr. Carson could see the cold fury behind his eyes…. the rage threatening to boil over at any moment. “I’ll alert you if Lord Grantham hears any more news but I believe we have a shot to correct this problem before it sinks you. Either wall, I will be writing you a reference just in case. There’s a house in London, home to a good friend of mine who is in need of a first footman—”

But Thomas wasn’t listening anymore. For some reason, he’d gone deaf to Mr. Carson’s voice and was hyper focusing on the letter in Mr. Carson’s hands. The aged paper, the jagged ink… That paper had been at his family house. In his father and mother’s writing desk no doubt. Had his mother read the letter? Did she even know any of this was going on? What of Margret, his older sister…? Had she been the one to take it to the village post office?

Had the neighbor’s dog chased her down the fence line just as it had done to Thomas so many years ago?

“Thomas?”

Thomas was brought back to the present by Mr. Carson calling his name. The butler seemed concerned, as if starting to realize just how truly angry Thomas was.

“Thank you Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, though he wasn’t too sure what he was thanking Mr. Carson for. “I’m going to… take a walk in the yard. I need some air.”

“Of course.” Mr. Carson murmured. “I’ll tell Mrs. Patmore you’re taking a tray tonight.”

The last thought on Thomas’ mind was food.

Thomas left Mr. Carson’s office, his blood singing in his ears. There was an odd ringing noise, taking out any other noise surrounding him so that though he passed by the kitchen he didn’t hear Mrs. Patmore calling for dishes. He didn’t hear Daisy repeating orders, or the sound of Mrs. Hughes calling for the servants to gather at the table for evening prayers.

He was detached from the scene, floating above it and lost in a memory of his mother washing dishes. She’d been using a sponge so ragged that there were holes the size of fingers in its fibers. Her black hair had begun to fall out of her bun, a few strands swinging to and fro as she’d gently washed their dinner plates.

She’d been beautiful to him, then.
Thomas reached the back area door, and opened it to reveal a quite night beyond the threshold. There, at the area table, was O’Brien having a cigarette. Her back was to the door. She seemed to be lost in thought.

Despite the fact that it would surely draw attention from inside the house as well as outside, Thomas slammed the area door shut.

O’Brien bristled, looking about to see Thomas in the threshold. She sneered, turning away once more.

“Oh dear.” She tutted, tapping her cigarette so that a bit of ash fell from her cherry tip, “Not having a good night? And the day started off so well-“

Thomas would have no more of it.

He stormed over to the area table, and before O’Brien could move he knocked her cigarette out of her hand. It fell to the cobblestone, skittering away so that it was only distinguishable in the dark by its glowing tip. O’Brien looked up at him, but before she could let out a retort, Thomas reached out and grabbed her by her collar so that his fist was unbelievably tight in the starched fabric. She stared up at him, and for a moment Thomas saw fear in her dark eyes… fear as she realized that he was a fully grown man, capable of rendering her great harm if he dared.

But he didn’t dare. Even with his blood pounding in his ears and images of his mother washing dishes in his head… there still was a line yet to be crossed.

They were near the line, horrible near, but there was still room yet.

“I swear to you.” Thomas spoke in a shaky whisper, rage causing his voice to tremble, “On every bit of trouble you have brought to my doorstep… if you dare to bring my father into this… if you dare…. to take my family and use them against me as bait… you will regret it until the day you die.”

O’Brien didn’t know what to say. She sat there, speechless with her mouth open. Thomas wondered if a man had ever grabbed her in such a way before. Even now, he knew that he’d gone a hair too far… had allowed his temper to get the better of him just like his father had so often done.

But he couldn’t care. He couldn’t think straight. He was so furious that she’d sink to such a measure to wound him.

Thomas let go of her collar, and she immediately shrank back. She was observing him now clearly for the threat that he was, perhaps well aware that she’d passed the point of no return with him.

Thomas had no more patience for her, no more words to share. He left her in the yard, slamming the door behind him again as he went.

A week passed without much incident, and then another. O’Brien seemed to have lost her nerve where Thomas was concerned, at least for a little while. She did not speak to him, nor taunt him in any way. Instead, she kept her head buried in her paper, reading often about the comings and goings of Germany, Austria, and France. She, like the rest of the world, was captivated by the political fall out that would soon lead to war.
Lady Grantham’s pregnancy took precedence in the house, however, over Austria’s woes. Family babies were always a spectacle, simply because they called for pomp and circumstance of all sorts. The younger maids in particular were captivated by the idea of Lady Grantham having a baby. They were too young to have children themselves, but many of them often openly yearned for marriage and all that would come afterward. Daisy, in particular, had much to say on the topic.

It was a calm afternoon, around tea time with many of the servants clustered at the table. Thomas sat reading the paper, with William at his side enjoying a plate of warm biscuits. Bates and Anna were both enjoying cups of tea, as was Gwen. Mrs. Hughes was speaking to Mrs. Patmore in the kitchen, and Mr. Carson was prowling the halls looking for George the hall boy who had apparently misplaced the area yard axe and was in trouble for it rusting.

Daisy was puttering about, tea kettle in hand, once more yearning about Lady Grantham’s baby. She wondered about it often, musing on what it would be named, what it would look like, and if she might ever be able to hold it.

“Maybe we should knit something!” Daisy said, pouring Anna her second cup of tea, “I could make it a hat-“

“Oh yes,” O’Brien sneered, rolling her dark eyes, “I’m sure they’d love a pair of booties knitted by you.”

“Or what about a christening mug?” William offered. Thomas shrugged, turning the page in the paper to see what the classifieds had to offer… nothing of interest popped out, so Thomas decided to start work on the crossword.

“I dunno.” Thomas mused aloud, eyes downcast as he plucked up a pencil and began to fill in words. “Silver isn’t something they’d have to worry about, and something knitted is more personal. I say let’s knit them something… maybe a blanket.” He caught Daisy’s eyes.

“I could do it in the Grantham arms!” Daisy beamed. “Blue and red aren’t so hard!”

“That would be lovely.” Anna agreed, “I’ll help if you like.”

Gwen, however, didn’t seem to care too much about booties or christening mugs. Her eyes were on Thomas’ paper, all of which sported bad news.

“Anything in the paper, Thomas?” Gwen asked.

“Well they’ve arrested that Princip fellow and his gang.” Thomas admitted, “All Serbian, and all members of the Black Hand. But that’s hardly a surprise, it wasn’t like they were bound to get away with what they did.”

“War is on the way.” Bates agreed. Little did he know that the war would be far greater than any of them could imagine.

“We’ll have to face it, as bravely as we can.” William agreed. Once again, he’d taken on that stalwartly edge, which worried Thomas so.

The last time, the war had taken William’s life. He wondered if he could change that this time around, or if the circumstances were too much out of Thomas’ control.

“William…” Thomas set his paper aside, folding his arms upon the table to catch Williams’ eyes. There was an anger in them, foreign to the sunny warmth William usually possessed. “I don’t know if that’s the right way to look at things.”
“What, don’t you agree?” William asked, unhappy that Thomas didn’t immediately back him up.

“Typical, you being a coward.” O’Brien muttered under her breath. Her voice was like a spark to gas fumes, and prompted Thomas to spit out in rage.

“Shut up.” He barked. Everyone at the table turned to look at him, shocked at his volume and tone. O’Brien didn’t make to reproach; her face had grown pale once again as if she’d suddenly remembered how Thomas had grabbed her by the collar the other night.

Thomas let out a slow breath, allowing his anger to dissipate. He rolled his neck, cracking two of his vertebra, and looked to William again who was still staring at him unsure.

“I only meant to say that war is a very dangerous business, as Mr. Bates knows.” Thomas said; Bates nodded in silent agreement, “It’s important to be loyal and brave, of course, but it’s also very important to be smart, particularly when you’re on the battlefield. It only takes one misstep. One bullet.”

“Well…” William was disheartened by this. He looked down at the table, chewing a bit at his bottom lip, “We’re not there yet, are we.”

“But we will be eventually, and when we are I’d rather see you come home to us.” Thomas said. “I’d rather everyone come home.”

Before William could reply to this, Mr. Carson entered the hall. He had a puzzled expression upon his face, and seemed slightly disgruntled as if on an errand which he did not particularly enjoy.

“Daisy!” Mr. Carson instructed, “Run and fetch Mrs. Patmore. His Lordship wants to see her in the library.”

Daisy was dumbfounded by this suggestion, for Mrs. Patmore rarely traveled above ground to see the family, and certainly never interacted with Lord Grantham.

“His Lordship wants Mrs. Patmore to go up to the library?” Daisy wondered aloud, as if thinking Carson had gone mad.

“That is what I said.” Mr. Carson growled; clearly the idea of him being mad was off the table. Daisy scuttled from the servant’s hall, setting down her teapot so as to move faster. She vanished into the hallway, already calling Mrs. Patmore’s name.

“Anna, you’re to come too.” Mr. Carson said. Anna was taken aback, looking from Bates to Carson before rising up and heading out of the hall. Everyone watched Anna go, wondering just what was going on.

But Thomas already knew. Just as Thomas remembered, Lord Grantham had decided to send Mrs. Patmore to London for cataract surgery. He grinned, glad to know that Mrs. Patmore’s troubles were at an end. He looked back down to his paper as Mr. Carson left the hall, deciding to get started on his crossword puzzle again.

“Are you ready to go to war, Thomas?” William asked him, “If the time comes?”

“I’m already in a war.” Thomas grumbled, to avoid thinking about the inevitable future. It didn’t matter if he was ready to go to war or not… he was bloody well going.

“What a shame that you’re losing.” O’Brien muttered.
Maybe she thought Thomas wouldn’t hear her; maybe she didn’t care. Either way, Thomas slammed his paper down on the table again, whipping his head around to glare at her ferociously. She was taken aback by the fervor in his gaze.

“Shut your flappin’ gums.” Thomas bit out, “Or I’ll make you.”

The table fell stone silent, shocked at Thomas’ ugly tone and biting words. Thomas knew that he’d lost his temper again, and cursed internally as he bowed his head and chewed on his tongue. Across the table, Bates watched him reproachfully.

“Thomas?” Bates murmured, unsure of what was going on. Gwen and William looked almost frightened, as if wary that Thomas would return to his ugly demeanor from years before.

“I apologize.” Thomas said, looking to the others and not O’Brien, “I’m a little tense. You see, O’Brien’s decided to write to my father telling him that I work in this house. He hates me and wants to ring the police, because I’m… different. She knows this, that’s why she did it. She’s blackmailing me with my family since all her other little schemes have failed her so far.”

“Hey now, what’s this?” O’Brien scoffed loudly, upset that Thomas would dare speak the situation aloud where all could hear. “I never did anythin’ of the sort-“

But the others weren’t buying it, not by a long shot. Gwen gave O’Brien a filthy look, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you did!” She said scathingly.

“Why would you write to Thomas’ father?” William demanded. “His family is none of your business-!” The subject of family was a tough one for William after what he’d suffered in the previous weeks.

O’Brien’s cheeks flushed, angry at being dogged from all sides. “I’m merely doing my civic duty.” She sneered, “People like him shouldn’t work in decent houses. It’s not right in the eyes of God-”

“You never disappoint.” Bates growled, arms crossed over his chest. In that moment, he looked as if he wished he could dunk Daisy’s abandoned pot of tea over O’Brien’s curly head. “That’s low, even for you.”

“It’s fine.” Thomas cut loudly across the others. Silence fell as all eyes turned to him to see what he would say. Though internally Thomas was furious, he kept his tone civil and his words clipped. “Even if something does come of it, I’ll be ready.” Thomas looked to O’Brien at this, and did not shy away from giving her the full force of his glare. He knew from experience that it was a weathered thing, enough to make even Carson think twice. O’Brien paled, but her lips were set and her eyes were narrowed. She would not change her position. “I’ll handle my father, if and when he comes… and then I’ll handle you.” Thomas said.

His ominous tone left little to the imagination.

It was with great relief that the downstairs staff learned Mrs. Patmore was traveling to Moorefield to have her cataracts removed. Anna was a little less enthused to travel back to London again after only just arriving home, but she took it on the chin and repacked her valise with care to leave with Mrs. Patmore on a foggy yet cool July morning. The whole time Mrs. Patmore bawled her eyes out, insisting that Lord Grantham would surely not want her anymore once the operation ‘failed’. Amazing how she assumed the worst of anything to do with the future.
In order to keep up with the demands of the family, Mrs. Bird came up from Crawley House to cook for the extended family. She was a shriveled and menacing woman, with a hawk like stare and a beak for a nose. Thomas had never liked her, and she had never liked him. Even now, when Thomas was trying his hardest to be nicer, Mrs. Bird glared at him every time he entered the room and refused to give him any slack. She was a staunchly religious woman, and despised anything out of the ordinary. The idea that she might know what he was put knots in Thomas’ stomach. Not for the first time in his life, Thomas found himself wishing that he was normal… anything to try and stave off the cruelty of the world.

A week after the reveal that O’Brien was using his family against him, Thomas sat in the servant’s hall having a cup of tea on his own. William was taking over the watch, garnering Thomas about half an hour to get small errands done. Thomas needed to sew a button back onto one of his striped vests, but had accomplished the task at a clipped pace and now was able to relax for a moment. Mrs. Bird refused to give him biscuits, she said it would ruin his appetite and “make him gain even more weight”. Thomas found himself looking down at his slim stomach, prodding tentatively at the tiny bulge that appeared around his belly button whenever he slouched in his chair. Was he really getting fat?

Thomas raised up the bottom of his stripped vest, prodding a bit further at his stomach. It wasn’t so much as a bulge as it was a bump. Surely nothing to worry over. God only knows in 1925 he’d gained at least thirty pounds and he certainly hadn’t been happy about it—

“Thomas.”

The reproachful, slightly irritated voice of Mr. Carson nearly made Thomas choke on his tea. He immediately tugged down the bottom of his vest, humiliated to have been caught prodding at his stomach so intimately. The look on Carson’s face made it clear that he thought Thomas was acting like an idiot.

“His Lordship would like to see you in the library.” Carson said. Sensing that the conversation would inevitably lead to his father, Thomas regretfully left his cup of tea and chair behind to ascend the stairs.

Up the pair of them went, Carson trailing after Thomas, finding the house quiet in the afternoon hour with most of the maids refreshing the beds and the hall boys chopping wood out back.

“Did my eyes deceive me, or were you prodding at your stomach?” Mr. Carson grumbled. Ahead of him, Thomas flushed and pondered how best to explain that he was wondering if he was fat.

“I was just checking a button Mr. Carson.”

“I see.” It was clear Mr. Carson didn’t believe him. Thomas winced, hating to lie to Mr. Carson after all the progress he’d made with the man. Sighing, Thomas stopped on the threshold of the second landing and turned to face Mr. Carson.

“Mrs. Bird won’t give me biscuits because she thinks I’m fat, so…” Thomas gestured aimlessly with his hands. “I was just… checking.”

“What were you checking pray tell?” Carson grumbled, and Thomas was suddenly struck with the concept that Carson was truly an enormous man. Towering over six feet tall, with a rotund stomach and broad shoulders, Carson surely weighed a hundred pounds more than Thomas.
Thomas gestured silently to his stomach. Carson rolled his eyes and opened the green baize door so that they could cross the main hall.

The library was scarce during this hour. It was slightly stuffy inside, with a small fire going in the marble grate, but Pharaoh was in his waning years and often liked to lay near the fire in order to relieve his arthritis. Lord Grantham himself was sitting upon his leather winged armchair, feet up on a matching ottoman and reading the weekly London newspaper where large center pieces spoke about the ongoing turbulence in Eastern Europe. Lord Grantham paused, setting his paper aside when Carson walked in with Thomas in tow.

“Thomas, M’lord.” Carson said, closing the library door so that the three of them could be garnered a bit of privacy.

In the past, while Lord Grantham had been reasonable to Thomas he’d never been… warm. Thomas had supposed the man was well aware that Thomas had a sour reputation downstairs, and he’d been jammed so far up Bates’ arse that anyone Bates despised Lord Grantham despised as well on main principle.

Now, with Thomas having a few years of solid good deeds underneath his belt, Lord Grantham seemed to look upon Thomas in a more generous light. There was a warmth in his gaze, and an earnest admiration in his eyes that Thomas wasn’t used to seeing.

“Ah, Thomas.” Lord Grantham rose from his armchair, coming about the room so that they were before one another. The man was younger, healthier than Thomas remembered. There wasn’t as much gray in his hair.

“M’lord.”

“I need to discuss some rather difficult business with you.” Lord Grantham admitted, his tone soft and understanding, “I’m afraid it will be hard to listen to.”

“I know, M’lord.” Thomas replied. Lord Grantham watched him with an appraising eye, “I’m aware that my father has written to you.”

“He has.” Lord Grantham said. He reached into his vest pocket, and withdrew a crisp letter that had been folded several times so as not to be a hassle. Lord Grantham unfolded the paper, gazing down upon the dark jagged script with pursed lips. “I’ve read what he has to say and I’m afraid that it’s not good news. He wishes for me to cast you out without a reference or he will go to the police and frame you for… certain crimes.”

*Sodomy,* Thomas thought irritably, *Just say the damn word. Sodomy.*

“Certain crimes that start with the letter ’s’?” Thomas added, a bitterness in his voice. Lord Grantham raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed.” He said no more on that subject, “I understand that the situation between you is incredibly tense, but I believe that I have come up with a solution.”

“M’lord?” Thomas wasn’t aware of anything under the sun which might make his father change his mind. The made had despised Thomas from infancy. That wasn’t about to change just because an Earl asked nicely.
“I’m going to invite your father to come here, and to speak with me in person.” Lord Grantham said. The idea put knots in Thomas’ stomach, and a sour taste in the back of his throat. “We’ll sit down, discuss the facts, and hopefully mitigate him away from talking to the police.”

“No-“ Thomas knew it was crass to speak across Lord Grantham without any honorary indications, but he was adamant that Lord Grantham understand this hair brained scheme could never come to light. His father? In Downton? Thomas would rather be shot!

“No?” Lord Grantham had such a look of surprise upon his face that it was obvious to Thomas he’d never been told the word ‘no’ in his life.

“You cannot do that-“ Thomas said, only to be cut off by Carson from behind.

“Thomas…” the butler crumbled; it was a clear warning to stop acting out of turn. Thomas did not like Carson chastising him after so many years of being dogged by the man, but it was difficult to constrain himself when he was emotionally in a tizzy.

“M’lord, I don’t think it possible to convey thoroughly enough just how dangerous of a man my father is.” Thomas urged, hands clasped as if in prayer, “He is not someone that I can willingly let stand in your presence, never the less cross the threshold of this house.”

“Oh I don’t think it will come to that,” Lord Grantham waffled, but once again Thomas was the wiser party of the pair of them.

“Forgive me, M’lord, but he’s my father not yours,” Thomas wondered if it was wise to take such a firm tone with your employer and social better, “And I know him better than you do. If he comes here, I guarantee you that he will be the most inhospitable guest you’ve ever witnessed and he will probably bring the police with him. He’s a drunk, not a gentleman. He won’t understand how to speak to an Earl-“

“Thomas, let’s give him a chance.” Lord Grantham negated. So flabbergasted was he that Thomas inadvertently fell silent. Lord Grantham pressed forward before Thomas could tell him ‘no’ again.

“I’ll write to him, carefully, and arrange a little visit.” Lord Grantham explained, “I have an idea that he won’t object when he hears my terms. We won’t publicize this meeting, and the two of you can speak-“

Thomas scoffed without meaning to. Lord Grantham was taken aback.

“I’m sorry M’lord.” Thomas apologized at once. “…But he’s not spoken to me in over-“

Thomas nearly said the word ‘twenty’ and had to pause. His father had thrown him out when he was fourteen which meant he’d only been cast out ten, “In over ten years, M’lord.”

Thomas shook his head, wondering at the audacity of it all, “He disowned me when he… found out about what I was. He won’t want to speak to me. He won’t even want to look at me, I gather.”

It was hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

This isn’t my fault! he wanted to say, I never wanted to be different.

Lord Grantham was not without sympathy. “Either way, I will speak to him and so will Mr. Carson.”

Thomas tried not to feel angry at the man, but it was difficult. Thomas did not want to see his father again… did not want to imagine that his father would soon intercept on the small sanctuary that he’d
built himself within Downton’s hallowed halls. And all of this because of O’Brien! It was enough to make him scream.

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to just let me go, M’lord?” Thomas muttered. Lord Grantham just smiled.

“I’m afraid we rather rely upon you.” He said, and there was a touch of humor in his voice, “And I will not see you given over to the police. You do not choose to be the way you are.”

No, Thomas thought bitterly, I do not.

The next few weeks passed rather quietly with minimal fuss, save that Daisy got caught putting soap in the soup and was rightly smacked on the bottom for it. Without Mrs. Patmore in the house, the downstairs seemed oddly quieter, but maybe that had something to do with the fact that O’Brien had resolutely stopped talking. She was growing colder, nastier, and rarely spoke two words to anyone save for Mr. Carson. The bitterness and resentfulness rolled off her in waves. Every day, Thomas had to wonder if the woman would snap and who would suffer from the fall out.

But you already know, said a dark voice inside his head, The baby dies. The baby is the one to suffer the fall out.

It made Thomas sick to his stomach.

As Lady Grantham’s pregnancy continued steadily onward towards the end of July, Thomas found himself watching Clarkson come and go with a wary eye. He knew that war was coming, and he knew the best thing to do was to try and join the RAMC once more. He reasoned that if he was lucky enough, he could survive the war twice and then be able to help Edward again. It would be through sheer determination alone that Thomas would be able to save Edward from suicide but if he managed it, Thomas would consider it the pinnacle of his success. There were many things that he regretted from his past: Edward’s suicide was surely in the top three.

It was a stuffy July night when Thomas finally made his move, watching the door for visitors as Dr. Clarkson came down the main stairs. He had his traveling bag in hand, having come over at Lady Grantham’s request to check on an infrequent stomach ache that had resulted in her taking a tray for the night. Clearly it wasn’t a dire matter, for Clarkson walked at a calm pace and seemed to be in a content mood.

Thomas had had the door propped over with his foot, trying to tempt a breeze in from the outside. The soft lullaby of cicadas were oddly lulling, and he had to snap himself awake twice as he grew drowsy from the intense work load. A telegram had come from London earlier that day, stating Mrs. Patmore’s surgery was a success and she could now see again. As a result, she would be returning home in four days time and would be able to work the harvest festival on August fourth (Mr. Carson had been terribly worried they’d have to rely on Mrs. Bird alone).

Thomas, however, found himself looking to the fourth with great trepidation. That would be the day war would be announced on Germany. Within a month’s time, Thomas would on the front lines, and in the midst of a sluggish, gruesome hell.

It will be worth it. Thomas reasoned, watching Dr. Clarkson walk up the main hall towards the entrance where Thomas waited, It will be worth it if I can save Edward.
Thomas fetched Dr. Clarkson’s hat and coat, helping the man to shrugged both on. Branson was bringing the motorcar around the front, happy to take Clarkson back to the hospital so that he didn’t have to go on foot. Garnered a small bit of time, Thomas decided to finally speak his mind as he handed Dr. Clarkson back his weathered bowler hat.

“Dr. Clarkson, can I speak with you before you go?” Thomas asked.

“Yes.” Dr. Clarkson seemed in a good mood, which was lucky for Thomas. Unbeknownst to many, Clarkson had a fierce temper when pressed.

“I hate to bring up a dark topic but war is coming-“ Thomas said.

“Yes, I feared so.” Clarkson pursed his lips, gazing out into the starless night; rain was coming soon, and the sky was overcast so that all seemed black and muggy.

“Well, when it comes, I’d like to work in the medical field.” Thomas said, “And I was wondering if you were looking for volunteers.”

“Are you?” Clarkson was surprised, “Well that’s interesting; we are looking for the Territorial Force hospitals. But are you sure you wouldn’t be missed here? Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes are quite fond of you from what I understand.” At this, he gave Thomas a small smile. Thomas did not return it.

“I’d like to be of service.” Thomas said. He did not want to comment on the other, reasoning that the only reason why Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were fond of him was because he’d been working his arse off to do good. They wouldn’t really like him if they knew his true personality; Thomas knew that for a fact.

“As you wish.” Dr. Clarkson said, tipping his hat to Thomas as Branson pulled up in the motorcar, “I’ll make inquiries.”

Off he went into the night, leaving Thomas alone at the door once again. When it was time for Thomas and William to swap shifts, Thomas mentioned nothing about his request to Clarkson and started off towards the green baize door. He was tired, and wanted a cup of tea before dinner.

There was only about a week left before his father’s doomed visit. Lord Grantham had planned it for the first of August, and Thomas found himself slowly ticking off the days on the calendar wondering what would come next. If he was lucky, Clarkson would be able to find him a position with the RAMC and he could sneak off unscathed. If he was unlucky, his father would call the police.

I’ll kill us both. I’ll die before I go to Gaol. Thomas decided as he reached the green baize door, opening it to reveal Bates and Gwen waiting just on the other side. They were elbows deep in intimate conversation, seemingly concerned over something or another. Gwen had a bunch of folded bedsheets in her arms, pressed against her chest. She wore her black and whites, a frill cap barely containing her scarlet hair. Bates was leaning precariously on the rail of the stairwell as if to alleviate a pain in his knee. Perhaps he was tired from walking about all day.

“Thomas…” Bates greeted him, “We were hoping to catch you after William relieved you. Next week is the day. What will you do?”

“Not much I can do.” Thomas shrugged.

“But surely Lord Grantham will be able to convince your father not to make a fuss.” Gwen said. She seemed to be trying to bolster Thomas’ courage, though at the moment he was quite flat, enthusiasm wise. “It’s not right to blame someone for the way they were born, and he’s family after all.”
“Well not everyone comes from a loving home.” Thomas warned her. Gwen gave him a slightly irritated look.

“I know that—"

“All I’m trying to say is that he won’t be up for negotiation on the subject.” Thomas explained. Even know, when Thomas tried hard to do well, Gwen seemed to have a difficult time liking him. He supposed that they were just too different to enjoy each other. “I have to prepare myself for what will come.”

“What do you mean?” Bates asked.

“You don’t think he’ll be violent, do you?” Gwen feared.

Thomas scoffed aloud, shaking his head. He knew for a fact that, given half the chance, his father would smash his head against the wall till it was as soft as a boiled apple. No… Thomas was under no illusions as to a peaceful encounter. What he desired was to find a plan B, and he’d hopefully just found one in Clarkson.

“I’ve spoken to Dr. Clarkson just now.” Thomas said, “When war breaks out, I’ve asked to join the RAMC.”

Both Gwen and Bates were obviously shocked. Gwen’s eyes were as round as coins. Bates seemed stricken at the idea.

“What?” Gwen said, aghast.

“I have medical experience and I want to truly help people.” Thomas urged, though in fact his actual medical experience came from having survived the war the last time. “I want to bring them back to health, back to life… and what’s more if my father demands I either leave without a reference or be arrested, I know which one I’ll be taking. Men like me don’t leave prison.”

“It won’t come to that.” Bates seemed bound and determined on the subject.

“And we don’t know that war will happen.” Gwen added. “It could all end up peacefully. It just looks bad now.”

“I’m afraid war is coming, Gwen.” Thomas said, for as much as Gwen tried to change her fate, it would be impossible for her to change the fate of Europe as a whole, “And when it does we all need to be prepared to play our part.”

Thomas tried to ignore how miserable Bates looked.
Their time was past.

The final week before August first without much indication of chaos save for the fact that Mrs. Patmore returned on Monday the twenty-ninth with crystal clear vision and a personality that could crack louder than thunder. She was both in a defiantly good mood, firmly cemented in a world she
could once again tackle, and irritated that Mrs. Bird did not automatically pack out and leave upon her arrival. Frankly, Mrs. Bird seemed wary to trust that Mrs. Patmore’s vision wouldn’t fail on the first bit of smoke from the stove or a harsh glare from the kitchen window. Mrs. Patmore, on the other hand, seemed to have decided that she’d been blessed with divine powers to see everything no matter how tiny or insignificant, and spent the remainder of the week barking at Mrs. Bird for forgetting about a mushroom stem that had fallen from the trashcan or a speck of gray hair clinging to the shoulder of her dark blue dress.

Daisy was stuck between the pair of them, unsure of who to take orders from or who to plot against. Thomas did not envy her at all.

The first day of August was on a Thursday, and the morning dawned calm and clear. Thomas woke that morning with such unnerving clarity that it was like he hadn’t slept the night before. It was with bizarre calm that he packed his valise to prepare for immediate departure, hiding his forbidden reference letter along with his muddied tarot card for courage in the dip of his newscap hat. He found himself looking at the card often that morning as he dressed for the day, stroking the brittle texture and thinking back to the Heichecera. Could it be that she knew this was to occur from the start? Maybe there was divine providence in Thomas having to show down with his father again.

Breakfast that morning was quiet, punctuated only by a squabble in the kitchen as Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Patmore argued over how to properly cook beans.

You’d think it would be a simple process but apparently Mrs. Patmore was doing it wrong and Mrs. Bird simply had to tell her.

Sitting next to Bates at the table, Thomas mulled his upcoming meeting over a cup of black coffee, refraining from conversation as he instead reasoned that his father would surely not come downstairs to speak to him. Thomas would simply hide down here, and do something menial. Maybe he’d polish silver or chop wood out back.

He could remember being small, surely no bigger than five, and his father cursing at him from the back stoop as Thomas had tried to chop wood.

“Yer doin’ it wrong!” the man had slurred, whiskey bottle loosely clutched in his left hand. He’d been too drunk to chop the wood himself “Lemme show you how a real man does it.”

He taken the axe from Thomas, and demanded Thomas hold the block of wood steady so that he could chop properly. Thomas had stared up at his father terrified, little arms trembling as he’d held that block of wood and prayed to God that his father wouldn’t miss and cut off his hand.

“Hold still you bloomin’ idiot!” his father had snarled, weaving slightly as he’d raised the axe above his head. “If you make me miss I’ll give you m’boot!”

He’d missed, but hadn’t hit Thomas’ arm. With divine intervention alone, the axe had instead slipped down the side of the block of wood only inches from Thomas’ left hand. Thomas had jerked his fingers back, watching as the blade of the axe had shaved off the bark like a hot knife carving through fresh butter—

“Thomas?”

Thomas was jerked out of his reverie to find that the breakfast table was deserted. He looked about, perturbed, and realized that in his malaise everyone else had been called to their morning duties
leaving only him sitting there holding onto a half drunk cup of cold coffee like an idiot. Mrs. Hughes was before him, a worried expression upon her face.

“Thomas?” She repeated, “Are you quite alright? You look as white as a sheet, which is a lot coming from you.”

“… S’my English complexion.” Thomas muttered. He drained the rest of his cold coffee in one swig, and rose up to push his chair back up to the table. He’d have to hassle to hurry up now, determined to help William put a dent in the silver polishing duties.

“Mr. Carson wants you to stay out of sight for the day.” Mrs. Hughes decided. “You’re to assist me with some heavy lifting. I’ve ordered food and supplies for the harvest festival this Sunday but I can’t lift it off the back of the truck.

“Course.” Thomas said, and followed Mrs. Hughes down the hall.

The morning slid by without much comment. Thomas lifted crate after crate, stacking them in neat little rows underneath the overhang of the area shed so that Mrs. Hughes could sign off on the delivery man’s paperwork and give him a small tip for his troubles. Thomas said nothing through all of it, instead, focusing as best he could on the task at hand. Once all the crates were stacked, they needed to be opened and sorted inside the shed. Mostly they contained tarps for the tents which would hide lords and ladies beneath them from neighboring counties. Other boxes contained extensive amounts of plain linen napkins, and one even offered a set of simple croquet mallets (apparently last year’s had been ruined by a heavy rain). Thomas sorted them all, checking his watch as Mrs. Hughes let him break for tea and biscuits.

It was one in the afternoon… surely his father was in the house by now.

Thomas took tea outside, not even wanting to risk running into his father through fetching a cup, and sat eating a packet of biscuits with Mrs. Hughes while they waited for the next delivery truck to bring another round of ingredients for Mrs. Patmore and Mrs. Bird. They’d be making enormous amounts of puffs and cakes, and as such would require extensive stocks of baking goods.

“My father was always a stern man, you know.” Mrs. Hughes spoke up, when Thomas did not make to start conversation. “He and I butted heads a lot.”

“My father once nearly chopped my arm off with an axe.” Thomas said. Mrs. Hughes fell silent, staring at him with a disturbed expression. “He was drunk and trying to chop wood. Got mad at me when I didn’t do it right.”

“He’s upstairs with Lord Grantham right now.” Mrs. Hughes murmured, “Mr. Carson said he seemed to be sober.”

“Wait.” Thomas said, his tone ominous. He had a feeling his father wouldn’t be sober for long.

“They’re discussing business right now. I should imagine he’ll be—“

But before Mrs. Hughes could finish her sentence, the back door was thrown open to reveal O’Brien. She was white faced, shaking, and seemed to have suffered some kind of heart attack.

“Come quick.” Was all she could say. “Come quick!!”
It was like she might burst into tears at any moment.

With a sickening sense of dread, Thomas followed after Mrs. Hughes and O’Brien.

Of course, it all transpired just as before. Thomas was the one to make the phone call, while O’Brien and Mrs. Hughes tried to keep Lady Grantham calm. Branson drove to the hospital, pushing reasonable speeds in order to get Dr. Clarkson to the abbey in time. Dr. Clarkson arrived in a tizzy, but his pronouncement was a somber one after only a few minutes of investigation.

The baby had been miscarried.

The horror of the event shocked the abbey staff, and brought normal daily activities to a halt.

The deliveries were canceled, family tea was left cold, and Thomas’ father was asked by Mr. Carson to wait upstairs in a sitting room while everyone sorted themselves out. Downstairs in the servant’s hall, the staff clustered around one another, waiting to hear about Lady Grantham’s condition.

Thomas sat between William and Bates, waiting. Mrs. Hughes was at the head of the table in Mr. Carson’s usual seat. She seemed cold cocked, just… lost… in a fog of horror. Thomas couldn’t blame her.

The one at the table who was the most frightened, however, was O’Brien. She was trembling in her seat, pale and sweaty. Her fingers were interlaced upon the table, but even so they shook with the tiniest tremor. She seemed stuck between the desperate desire to cry and the inability to do so.

Thomas knew what she’d done, and felt no pity for her. He had done many horrid things in his life… many things that he regretted. But he’d never ever committed an atrocity against a child.

“That poor wee babe.” Mrs. Hughes choked out. There were tears in her aged eyes, but she did not make to wipe them away.

Anna sat on Bates’ other side. She was just as somber as the rest of them, “How’s her ladyship holding up?” She whispered.

“I’ll take her up a tray later on but… I dare say she won’t touch a bite.” Mrs. Hughes whispered.

For a moment, Thomas watched O’Brien shake; he contemplated what it might be worth, to proclaim the truth to the table in that moment.

But no… no, Thomas had to be wise. Had to hold that card as closely to his chest as possible. He had to protect his future, for if the day ever came when Jimmy would be in danger, that would be the day to use O’Brien’s fatal flaw. Not now. Not over something as stupid as his drunken father.

At that moment, Branson came in. He was usually a cheery and talkative man. Today, however, he was quiet and kept his head low.

“I think you’d better dine with us tonight, Mr. Branson.” Mrs. Hughes murmured. Branson nodded, “We can’t know if you might be needed later or not.”

“I’m going to go back for the doctor at ten.” Branson said, “Mr. Carson told me to stay on as well.”
“Very good.” Mrs. Hughes said, sniffing and wiping at her eyes.

“He’s just coming down now.” Branson said, looking about to stare back up the stairs. “Mr. Barrow’s with him.”

Branson looked back about, finding Thomas’ gaze. Thomas’ heart was beginning to pound rapidly, his ears pricked for any noise of the someone coming down the stone steps.

“I think he wants to speak to you.” Branson said.

Thomas took a long steadying breath, feeling as if he were summing himself up for a battle. He stood up, pushing his chair back to stand freely from the table.

“I see.” Thomas said, pushing his chair back in.

Then, quite suddenly something rather odd happened.

William stood up, as did Daisy, Anna, and Gwen. Bates was the only one to remain seating on their side of the table, with Thomas suddenly flanked on either side by people. Thomas had not been expecting this, and felt an odd flush of emotion at the realization that he was being backed by allies in such an awful moment. It was the first time in his life that he could claim such a feat.

it made him feel oddly… loved.

“What’s all this?” Branson asked softly, gesturing from Bates to Gwen, the lone line of Thomas’ supporters.

Bates said nothing but jerked his head to the right, signaling that Branson should join the line. Branson did so, if only for the simple reason that he didn’t seem to know what else to do. As a solid barrier, they braced for the wave.

Footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs… a set of two.

A shadow was gliding smoothly upon the stone walls.

And there he was.

It was, to Thomas’ mind, the most disturbing sight he’d seen in nearly forty years of life. He’d prayed when he’d left at the age of fourteen that he’d never see the horrid sight of his father again… but there he was, all the same.

Thomas did not shift his gaze, though he felt a cold sick sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Nathaniel Barrow was a tall domineering man with a hard jaw and an iron stare. Black hair, black eyes, skin muddled from work and callouses… The sort of man that could give you an ugly bloodless look and set you running if you disagreed. Unfortunately for Thomas, he’d spent most of his childhood disagreeing, and it had formed him into a cruel and backstabbing man. He’d had to take his fate into his own hands to try and change that… and now he felt like he was facing the final confrontation.

The final hurdle to leap.

The room was deadly silent, and it resulted in an ugly standoff that Mrs. Hughes did not enjoy. She rose up, the scrape of her chair legs obnoxiously loud, and was the first to greet Thomas’ father. Carson reached the bottom of the stairs, and stood at his father’s back; he was effectively
“Mr. Barrow, how do you do.” Mrs. Hughes said.

“Ma’am.” Though Thomas’ father did not have a hat on, he still tipped his head in slight respect. This was the queer thing, the thing that made Thomas’ blood boil. His father could be calm and polite when called for… he just couldn’t seem to stretch that decency over to his oldest son.

“I’m told you’re the housekeeper here.” His father said. His grave voice set a chill in Thomas’ blood.

“I am. I apologize for the confusion today.” Mrs. Hughes said, stepping around the table, “A terrible tragedy has just fallen upon this house.”

“I’ve heard, the family has my condolences ma’am.” His father said. “I was mercifully able to speak with his Lordship before the incident, so my errand is complete upstairs. However, Mr. Carson wishes for me to speak with you as well. He says you have words for me.”

He wouldn’t even look at Thomas.

It was like Thomas wasn’t even in the room.

You curmudgeonly bastard, Thomas thought, narrowing his eyes in disgust, You’re still just as shitty as ever.

“Please-“ Mrs. Hughes gestured with a hand, pointing down the hallway which would take a traveler past both her and Mr. Carson’s offices. Yet as Mrs. Hughes made to lead the way, Thomas’ father held up a hand to offer pause. He looked to the others in the room, the first time he’d even turned his head in Thomas’ direction, and found O’Brien sitting alone on one side of the table.

“Are you Ms. O’Brien?” His father asked. O’Brien looked about, pale and shaken. She seemed startled that his father would even speak to her. She nodded her head, unable to speak for lack of nerve.

“I want to thank you for the consideration and kindness you’ve shown my family.” His father said. Thomas clenched his fists, wishing to god he could launch himself across the table and crack his father in the mouth. “I genuinely appreciate your concern ma’am.”

And with that, his father followed Mrs. Hughes up the hall, leaving the servant’s hall in an awkward state. Many were perturbed, and O’Brien in particular looked like she might be sick at any moment. Disgruntled, Carson took his seat at the head of the table, shooting everyone ugly looks.

“Sit down.” He grumbled.

Down the hall, Mrs. Hughes shut her sitting room door. Bitter, Thomas retook his seat next to Bates. William slowly sat down on his other side.

“That was your father?” Daisy wondered in a soft whisper. She seemed both awed and afraid of their guest.

“Yes.” Thomas knew his tone was cold. He did not seek to change it.

“Cor.” William drew a hand over his face, seemingly exhausted by the whole debacle, “He looked like the devil.”

“He is the devil.” Thomas said.
“What’s he even doing here?” Branson wondered, sitting down next to O’Brien. He was the only
one who dared to sit on her side of the table. “I overheard him talkin’ to Lord Grantham before
everything happened. It wasn’t a pleasant conversation, I can tell you that.”

“That is for his Lordship to worry about.” Mr. Carson grumbled, “And after the horrors of today, Mr.
Barrow’s visit is not our first priority.”

It was an awful reminder of the pain that had been inflicted upon the Crawley family that day. This
was not an hour for tea or for talk. It was an hour to wait, and to see what would be needed of them
next. So it was that none of them spoke, nor made to take a biscuit or even so much as a cup of
water. Eyes flicked constantly towards the bell board, waiting to see which room would go off.

“What happens now?” Daisy mumbled after several moments of quiet. “Do we… Do we do
anything in particular?”

“We wait, Daisy.” Was Mr. Carson’s wise reply. “The family will tell us what they need.”

And yet, once again the needs of the family and the horrors of that day were swept aside by their
unwanted visitor. A sudden, sharp angry noise resounded from Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room, like a
man had just yelled. Thomas’ ears perked up, a thousand nerves in his body singing from repetitive
abuse and warning him that something bad was about to occur.

He got out of his chair again, coming around the table so that he stood beside Mr. Carson’s chair.

“Thomas, what are you doing?” Mr. Carson grumbled.

Another angry shout came from Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room.
He could hear Mrs. Hughes trying to diffuse his father’s anger.
It wasn’t working.

The door to Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room suddenly flew open, the knob smacking into the dry wall to
make an impressionable hole. Thomas’ father stormed out, eyes blazing and vein throbbing in his
neck as he made a bee line for the servant’s hall.

For Thomas.

“I won’t stand for this anymore!” He roared, an accusatory finger pointed straight at Thomas’ paling
face. “It’s one thing to be a chit, it’s another thing to be mentally unbalanced! I knew he was
unhinged from the start, I should have something him in his sleep-!”

Mrs. Hughes came running out of her sitting room, desperate to stop him. “Mr. Barrow, please! I
speak with you in the confidence of a parent! Surely you can’t think to make the situation any worse-
!”

But at that very moment, Thomas’ father reached him, and shot a hand out to grab at the back of
Thomas’ head. Thomas let out a yelp of pain, a hot stinging sensation putting tears in his eyes! He
reached around with both hands, desperately trying to pry his father’s grip off.

But his father was now dragging him bodily down the opposite hall towards the staircase, as if he
was now going to try and drag Thomas physically out of the house!

“If you think for one more bloomin’ minute that I’m gonna let you spread your filth in innocent
people’s houses, then you’ve got another thing—“
But just as they reached the base of the stairs, a sudden iron grip seized Thomas by his upper arm and drug him forcibly away from his father. In the ensuing scramble, several of Thomas’ black hairs came loose from his head, still stuck in his father’s fingers with slight traces of pomade. Thomas yelped in pain, but was finally free and able to see that his savior was none other than Charles Carson. He was furious, a menacing tower to behold as he faced off with Thomas’ father.

“Let him go sir!” Mr. Carson barked. “This house has suffered quite enough for one day without your family squabbles being drug into it!”

“He’s unhinged!” His father barked. “Look at his wrists, I tell you! The woman told me he cut them, look at them! He needs to be in an asylum-!”

At this, his father reached out to grab Thomas once again by the wrists. This time, however, Thomas was much too fast to be caught and grabbed one of the servant’s chairs to use it as a barrier. He held the chair by its back, using the legs like spears to keep his father at bay.

“You keep your hands off of me!” Thomas snarled.

Furious, Thomas’ father brushed past Mr. Carson, grabbed the chair by one of its legs, and yanked it right out of Thomas’ hands. It fell with a clatter to the floor; his father leaped forward, trying to grab him again. Thomas dived to the left, scrambling to right himself as Carson once again became his willing barrier.

The room was breaking out into chaos. People were on their feet, watching horrified as the day just got worse and worse. Mrs. Hughes was in the doorway, O’Brien was behind the table, Anna and Gwen were clinging to each other—

“His Lordship has paid you for your silence.” Mr. Carson’s tone was one Thomas was familiar with: that of absolute loathing, “You either take the money and keep your tongue or leave empty handed and be branded for slander!”

“Don’t give him money, he’ll only use it to drink; the fiend!” Thomas couldn’t stop, couldn’t seem to control his mouth. Years of masochistic reactions fueled by an abusive childhood only seemed to jump out even worse when his father was around.

“You-!” His father couldn’t seem to get the words out he was so furious. He leapt forward, as if to seize Thomas by the hair again, but was cut off by Mr. Carson who used himself like a shield in Thomas’ defense.

“Back, sir!” Mr. Carson commanded. For the way he said it, he might have been a ringleader directing a lion for a circus.

“Mr. Barrow, please calm down!” Mrs. Hughes begged, her hands outstretched as if to physically push his father’s temper into a malleable position, “We won’t have fighting in this house!”

“You little wretch-” It was as if his father hadn’t heard her; indeed where before he hadn’t so much as looked at Thomas, now he seemed incapable of registering anyone else in the room, “I should have drowned you in the village well when I had the chance!”

Thomas pushed the pain away, lashing with his tongue like a sword: “Well drowning can only ruin one day of my life; why let me off so easy, eh?!”

“Thomas, hold your tongue!” Mr. Carson barked; it was the first time he’d shouted at Thomas in nearly three years.

“Oh don’t even give him the curtesy!” His father couldn’t seem to fathom why it was that anybody
on earth would go to Thomas’ defense. He’d behaved much the same way when his mother had attempted to at first. “He’d the dumbest creature I’ve ever had the misfortune to deal with-“

“I’m smart enough to know not to beat my wife!” Thomas lashed out. “I’m smart enough not to be afraid of my own emotions-“

“Oh as if you’ll ever even have a wife!” At this, his father laughed aloud, throwing his head back. “What kind of a woman would settle herself with a freak like you! You’re practically a woman all your own-“

“I’d rather be a woman than be like you!” And now there was true emotion wrecking Thomas’ voice, turning his words into less articulate beings that scraped over the gravel of tears soon to come, “I’d rather be the strangest, most disgusting man in all of creation than a man that beats his wife and ruins his family! That’s all you are! You go to church on Sunday and you beat your wife on Monday! You’re a pathetic, spineless man!” Thomas could feel tears coming, he didn’t know if he was going to be able to hold them back, “You’re a vacant, boorish, brainless bastard! You’re weak-!!”

And how comical it was that this word, above all others, was the one to spur Nathaniel Barrow to his greatest heights of anger.

He shot forward, knocking Carson aside with a hard elbow to the ribs, and grabbed Thomas by the back of the hair again to throw him hard to the floor. Thomas fell, ass over elbows, and landed with a crash; his father leapt atop him, bearing down on him with fists and teeth if only to start beating the living hell out of him.

He punched Thomas several times in the face, an explosion of pain rocketing through Thomas’ skull, eye socket, mouth, ear, and neck. He could no sooner recover from one punch than he felt another, arms pinned behind his head by his father’s left hand to leave him absolutely defenseless. He kicked, he screamed, but the cacophony was nothing compared to the cries of dismay and terror that now filled the servant’s hall.

“Oh my god!” Shrieked Anna.
“Are you mad?!” Gwen cried out.

“Get off of him-!” William was somehow now in the fray, pulling at the back of his father’s vest and jacket to try and spare Thomas the beating, “Fight a man with his hands free, if you have any courage in you!”

“Jesus feckin Christ!” Branson cursed, “Stay back Daisy-!” There was a shuffling of feet, something that sounded like a sob.

“Dear god-!” It was as if the true weight of the events were finally crashing down upon O’Brien. She’d fallen back from her chair, and was now pressed against the table. “Stop it!! What are you doing; this is madness-!”

But just then, John Bates set down his cane, rounded the table, and pulled Nathaniel Barrow up by the tie to punch him full on in the mouth. The collision was so brutal, so deep, that some of his father’s blood fell onto Thomas’ wounded face. The splatters were hot and warm, mingling with his own blood that now covered the left side of his face.

“Thomas-!!” Mrs. Hughes was in a panic, squashed against the side board though she tried in vain to grab Thomas up to the floor. She couldn’t get past his father, who was now fighting desperately to fend off both Bates and William. Bates was unstable, crippled on one leg without his cane. Though
his initial punch had been strong or true, it couldn’t be backed up by a second. Indeed, the weight of
the blow had put Bates right off his feet, so that he now crashed against the side board and nearly fell
atop Thomas’ face. He caught himself on his left elbow just in time, a bizarre stepping stone for
William who was back up and into the fray, fists raised like a boxer.

William jabbed at Thomas’ father, wanting to get his own in. Furious at being assaulted by someone
three times younger than him, Thomas’ father grabbed Williams’ fist, pulled William right over
Bate’s back and Thomas’ legs to bring him to the ground so that he could crack William hard across
the face.

William cried out, the pain obvious in his eyes; a bloody bruise suddenly blossomed near his left
ear.

But William was brave, true, and strong; he fought back, kicking Thomas’ father off with both his
feet to clamber up and go for the kill. He didn’t make it two steps, however, before Branson grabbed
him about the waist and drug him backward so that the fighting could stop. Bates was getting up,
holding desperately to the side board and the back of Carson’s chair. Thomas was still on the floor,
but not for long as Carson grabbed Thomas’ father hard by the arm and the back of the neck to shove
him unceremoniously from the room.

“George, get the area door!” Carson barked; the poor hall boy must be somewhere off to the side,
now having to see out their ungrateful guest. “Out! Get out! I won’t have you besmirch his
Lordship’s home with this brouhaha!”

Carson shoved Thomas’ father towards the hall, but his father held out a hand to catch himself
against the corner; he was furious, glaring with a bloody eye and a battered nose down at Thomas.

Mrs. Hughes was at his back, helping him to sit up.

“God sees everything, you little wretch.” His father spat out. He had to take a moment to wipe blood
from pooling in his mouth.

“There’s not a sin you commit with your little cake-eaters that he doesn’t know. You’ll burn in hell
for what you are.”

And with that, he turned to leave in a furious brooding cloud.

But it couldn’t end like that, not when there was so much pain and anger radiating inside of Thomas.
He scrambled up to his feet, slightly off balance and woozy from the beating.

“I’ll see you there-” He called out after his father, though the man did not make to show he’d heard
anything.

Thomas wanted to get the last word in; he needed to-!!

“Hey, did you hear me-?!” Thomas shrieked, taking several steps forward.

“Enough, Thomas-” Mrs. Hughes was at his back, holding him from following after his father with a
hand on his stomach and a hand on his shoulders. “Enough, let him go.”

“I said I’LL SEE YOU THERE!” Thomas shrieked the final three words.
His voice broke from the emotion and strain.

A second later, the back door slammed… and his father was finally gone.
A terrible ringing silence fell down upon the servant’s hall, but not one that was followed by lack of movement. Indeed, several people were pulling themselves back together. Mrs. Hughes was still at Thomas’ side, patting him tenderly between the shoulders and holding him steady.

“Well done.” She whispered, and it was not said in malice.

Mr. Carson was appraising William, grasping him by the shoulder to give him an endearing squeeze. William’s tawny hair was in his face, his cheeks were flushed and there was a bit of blood by his ear.

Anna and Gwen were shell shocked, clumsy as they began to slowly pull chairs back up on their legs.

“Well that showed him,” Branson scoffed softly, disgusted at the behavior of their departed guest. William made an ugly noise of agreement under his breath, while Daisy handed Bates back his cane; there were tears on her cheeks.

But in that moment, Thomas could not help looking at O’Brien; could not help glaring at her even as tears brimmed in his eyes and blood dripped down his cheek.

“Are you happy now?” He croaked. “Was that enough for you? Do you need to see me suffer anythin’ else, or am I free to go now?!”

“Thomas-“ Mrs. Hughes whispered, pressing her hand upon his chest to keep him still. “That’s enough.”

He wondered if she could feel his pounding heart beneath her fingers.

The rest of the staff turned to stare at O’Brien, who was still clutching to the table staring numbly at the space where Thomas’ father had been until just a few moments ago.

It was like she couldn’t accept what had just happened; like the whole process of it had been too vivid, too intense to truly register.

“… I’m so sorry.” She whispered, before drifting away from the servant’s table to walk feebly to the stairs. She began to climb one step at a time, a ghost sliding away from a scene of carnage.

No one made to follow her.

~*~

It was with quiet reserve that Thomas conceded to sitting in Mrs. Hughes’ office with William so that the pair of them could receive a patching up.

Thomas’ face was swollen on the left side, several deep cuts now marking his cheekbone, lip, and chin. Dr. Clarkson was still upstairs tending to Lady Grantham, and couldn’t spare the time to come downstairs, but it was no matter. Mrs. Hughes had some medical knowledge, though it was mostly the stuff of midwives, and she used it to her credit as she carefully cleaned and taped up both William and Thomas’ wounds.

“You’re going to be a fine color for the garden party, I can tell you that.” Mrs. Hughes muttered,
gently sliding a wet flannel around a cut on Thomas’ cheek. The entire area felt swollen to the touch, as if the bone beneath had shattered from the force of the punch.

“We ought to call the police on him.” William said. He was still in a foul mood, despite it being near eight o’clock at night. The family had all taken trays, which were now being prepared by Mrs. Patmore and Mrs. Bird in a joint affair.

“I’m afraid we can’t, William.” Mrs. Hughes sighed, dipping her flannel back into the water which was slowly turning pinker from blood, “But we most certainly won’t be inviting him back.”

She dried off Thomas’ cut, and carefully placed a tape over the gash. Thomas winced from the press, but said nothing as he stared off into space.

He wondered if that would be the last time he’d see his father… laying on the floor broken like a smashed china doll.

Why had the world— no, not the world— O’Brien…! Why had O’Brien been so unkind to him, he wondered. Why had she been so determined to make him miserable, and was it really all worth the rubbish? Had she just not realized until she was in up to her eyeballs how terrible it was all becoming?

Had she just not cared?
He wondered, after watching the carnage today, whether she’d care now.

“Thomas-?”

He jerked, shocked back to the present moment by the sensation of Mrs. Hughes touching his kneecap. He looked up to find her concerned, a dry flannel between her fingers and a tiny frown upon her wrinkled lips.

“Are you feeling alright?” She asked, softly. William watched Thomas from the next seat over, clearly waiting to hear what he would say, “You look awfully pale.”

Pale…. he’d always been pale. It was his mother’s curse, he reasoned.

“S’my natural complexion, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas whispered. His throat was still horribly tight. “I get it from my mother.”

At this, Mrs. Hughes just patted his knee again, and gave him a tiny tired smile.

“I want you to take a tray and go to bed.” She ordered.” The family won’t eat tonight, not after all the horrible things that have happened. Mrs. Patmore’s taking care of their trays right now; I’ll get Gwen and Anna to pass them out. You two are to rest up. Dr. Clarkson told me that if either of you feel dizzy or nauseas you’re to report it to me straight away.”

“Concussion.” Thomas mused. That must be what Dr. Clarkson was looking for.

“Yes.”

Thomas nodded and stood up, mentally checking himself to see if he felt woozy or ill. Indeed, he did feel slightly light headed, but he reasoned this was because he hadn’t eaten since morning and he’d hardly touched a crumb then.

He left Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room, and headed for the stairs. William was slower, stopping by the kitchens to speak with Daisy who stirring a heavy copper pot full of chicken stock mixed in with
vegetables. Thomas did not make to converse with anyone as he took to the stairs, noting that several of the maids watched him go with sad eyes and even Mrs. Bird looked reproachful.

It didn’t matter; none of it would change his father’s mind.

It felt oddly easy, to sit at the foot of his bed with his back pressed against the cool metal of his base board, and simply stare off into space. The room was dark, unlit by brass light or oil lamp, and it allowed Thomas to gather his thoughts without distraction.

He could remember how cold and callous he’d once been, determined to be seen as better than William… stronger, and braver. Instead, he’d ended up looking like a right cock, and it had been impossible to re-cement second opinions in the eyes of his co-workers. Somehow, in being weak, Thomas had managed to be stronger in their eyes… to be more acceptable and loving. It was hard for him to make connections, hard for him to truly understand what was going on. All he could say was that, for better or for worse, he’d rather be weak and with other people than strong and alone.

He couldn’t handle being alone. Maybe that was a trait he’d gotten from his mother. God only knows his father enjoyed his privacy.

Thomas could barely remember being a small lad and his father working in his back shop. Thomas had probably been no larger than four, just a tot, with a knitted blanket from his gran wrapped about his shoulders to keep him warm on a cold October night.

His father had been deep in work when Thomas had entered the room, barely even acknowledging his son. To garner some attention, some affection, Thomas had then sat at his father’s feet and wrapped himself around his father’s ankles.

He gone to sleep there, clutching at his father’s leg.

A soft knock at his bedroom door snapped him back to the present for the second time that night. Thomas looked up, the gloom of night cut like a knife by warm lamplight from the hallway beyond. There was Mr. Carson, bearing a tray of simple rations… Thomas’ dinner.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Carson demanded, sitting Thomas’ tray upon his desk and wandering into Thomas’ room to start turning on lights. “Sitting in the dark by yourself-”

“Got lost in thought.” Thomas said, clambering to his feet, “You didn’t have to bring me a tray.”

“Well we’re stretched thin enough as it is.” Mr. Carson grumbled, “So it’s all hands to the pump, isn’t it.”

“I suppose so.”

The two men stood staring at each other for a moment. Mr. Carson seemed very tired in that moment, not that Thomas could blame him. Today, by any standard, had been a horrid affair.

“I should be downstairs-“ Thomas said, thinking of all the nightly chores he usually did. Who would tend to them now with both he and William in bed?

“No, I won’t have you serving when you look a fright.” Mr. Carson wouldn’t be budged on the subject, “It’ll upset the ladies.” He paused, his tone turning gentle, “I likewise wanted to speak with
you regarding something your father said… Mrs. Hughes helped to illuminate me a bit but I confess I’m very concerned.”

In hopes to avoid talking about what Thomas was certain Mr. Carson was getting at, Thomas sat at his desk and began to delicately tear off small chunks of a loaf of bread. It was still piping hot from the oven, and delicious smells tempted Thomas to salivate.

His dinner that night was a chicken soup, with bread and sliced tomatoes, and a bowl of white beans.

“You didn’t sleep walk.” Mr. Carson said. “All those years ago.”

“…No.” Thomas confirmed, “And I’m sorry that I lied about it.”

Mr. Carson digested this bit of information, and after a moment carried on: “… Has this sort of thing happened before or since?”

“No, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. He kept his eyes low, focusing on tearing the bits of his bread into smaller and smaller pieces. He’d end up with crumbs at this rate, “I don’t think it’ll ever happen again either.”

Mr. Carson nodded, then reached out and placed a warm hand upon Thomas’ shoulder. At first, Thomas bristled. He was unused to the touch…

But then, he began to draw strength from the warm weight. From the fact that Carson was embracing him, even if only partly, and telling him that everything (for better or for worse) would be okay. Whatever okay meant.

“Stick to your guns, Thomas.” Was his wise advice, “You know who you are, and your worth.”

But Thomas could easily remember Mr. Carson saying the exact opposite. Could remember Mr. Carson aligning him to any criminal nature he could think up, from pedophilia to thievery.

It was hard to forget that.

“… It was hard not to listen to him.” Thomas swallowed around a knot in his throat, “He was my father.”

Mr. Carson just squeezed his shoulder: “I’m sure you can find a better role model than that.”

But Carson would be surprised.

Mr. Carson let go of his shoulder after a moment, tapping his finger upon Thomas’ desk next to his tray.

“Eat up,” He commanded. “You can’t work if you’re hungry. Tomorrow, William will take your place as first footman until your bruises heal.”

“Oh, so I get a day in is that it?” Thomas joked, thinking of how nice it would be to sleep naturally and not be woken at five by an alarm clock.

“Certainly not!” Mr Carson grumbled. The idea of having work off was scandalous to him. “You will spend the day running errands. This is not a hotel, we work for our bread and butter… which we do not tear into crumbs.” He added.

Thomas could not help but laugh at this, if only a little bit. At once, he set down the pieces of bread
he’d been abusing, and wiped off his hands on his trouser pants.

“Nor do we wipe our hands on our pants. What are you, five?” Carson grumbled. But there was no heat in Mr. Carson’s voice, and Thomas didn’t take insult.

“Wise men are fools if they forget what it is to be young Mr. Carson.”

“I forget nothing. I’m a butler.”

~*~

After that awful day, life became bearable again.

As if by a light switch, O’Brien’s hostility stopped. She was by no means kind or chummy with her co workers, but she did not snip nor seek to bait Thomas to anger. Instead, she kept her head low and worked in a methodical quiet. She was contemplative in her solitude, and incredibly tender with Lady Grantham whom she now doted on day and night.

Thomas knew it was guilt making her act so suspiciously, but everyone else was starting to wonder whether she’d suffered some kind of brain aneurism.

The garden party was the largest event on the horizon, and so it was easy to focus on after the confusion and grief. The family were slowly but surely beginning to get over the loss of their miscarried baby. Lady Grantham slept in a lot and didn’t eat near as much as she used to, but otherwise she was untroubled. Lord Grantham was somber for many days; Thomas heard through the grape vine that the baby had been discovered to be a male… to imagine the next Earl of Grantham was gone because of O’Brien’s hysteria.

Still, nothing could be done. The infant was now lost, and the only way was forward.

August third was a sunny and hot day, without a cloud in the sky. It was spent full tilt, with William, Thomas, George, Matthew, and several of the stable hands all working together to pull up each and every tent on the expansive front lawn of the abbey. The gardeners were given no slack, forced to tend to every shrub no matter how big and small for the pleasure of their guests. They had to set up a croquet pitch, and pull up tables for guests to dine upon. Thomas and William stacked foldable chairs till they were out of breath, sweating horridly in their liveries.

Mercifully, however, they got a break around tea time. It was too much energy to get off the pitch and go have a cup of tea, so Daisy was kind enough to bring out a tray full of iced lemon waters which everyone indulged in. Thomas and William in particular were pathetically sloppy, gobbling down water till it dribbled of their chins in order to get re-hydrated.

Several of the foldable lawn chairs were out and open in the shade. Thomas fell into one, and William took the other, so that the two of them were side by side, panting and sipping lemon water on the outskirts of the fray.

“Oh… I feel richer already.” William mumbled, sucking contemplatively on his lemon wedge.

“It’s nice how the other half lives.” Thomas agreed. If only they could relax and lay out every day. How nice that would be-!
“Oh bugger it.” William mumbled, pulling at his white tie till it came undone, “I can’t handle this heat. It’ll be the death of me.”

Thomas quite agreed, and silently pulled off his own tie. It felt good, when the wind began to blow and his sweat began to cool his skin.

Thomas sighed, sitting his lemon water on a foldable side table and leaning his head back to close his eyes.

“…Wake me up with Carson comes.” He mumbled.

“Not to worry, Thomas, I can happily wake you up myself!” Carson barked from right behind their chairs. The man was leering down at them, furious to find them indecent and undressed.

The pair of them panicked, falling out of their seats, so that William’s chair toppled onto its side and Thomas upended his glass of water.

They grabbed their shrugged ties and their glasses, and began to hobble away as fast they could with Carson barked after them: “And don’t let me catch you slacking again!!”

The day of the garden party arrived with such a rush, it was like August third had forgotten to give them a night to recover. Even in the early hours, the maids were laying linens out on the lawn and the hall boys were unfolding every chair that Thomas and William had stacked the day before. Thomas and William themselves were worked overtime, ferreting tray after tray of baked goods and cold sandwiches to hungry guests who had come from neighboring counties in all directions. The Crawley family were dressed in white; Lady Edith seemed to be waiting on pins and needles for something and Lady Mary was in an ugly temper.

Lady Grantham lay on a lawn chair, a white umbrella helping her to block out any unwanted sunlight. She was quiet, and did not cooperate in the party. Instead, O’Brien hovered over her like a spinster aunt and kept petting her hair.

Branson and Bates helped out, though Bates had a hard time managing with his cane and Branson had absolutely no experience waiting a table. Instead of doing any true serving, they instead followed after Thomas and William and helped to fetch them anything that they might need (a rag, a refilled glass, or a plate with a sandwich perhaps).

Thomas was, admittedly, only half focused on the party as he waded through guests. Part of him was also focused on the fact that it was August fourth, which meant that by the time the day was over England would be at war with Germany. Indeed, Thomas couldn’t help but notice Dr. Clarkson every time he passed by the man. He was certainly Dr. Clarkson would soon flag him down and notify him that he’d been in touch with General Burton so that Thomas could be shipped out to Richmond.

Thomas was already growing weary at the thought of the place, but everything had to be looked at in a certain light. Richmond, Burton, and the war were all for one goal… to save Edward Courtenay’s life.

To keep him from committing suicide, at all costs.
It was around noon, when Thomas was serving a group of visiting farmers a tray full of cucumber sandwiches that Clarkson finally noticed him. He seemed to have been knee deep in discussion with the Dowager Countess, no doubt about Lady Grantham’s recent miscarriage. The weathered old bird was now grumbling to Mrs. Crawley, and the pair of them looked close to having an argument. Clarkson was eager to get away, and found Thomas an easy target to take up conversation with lest he be demanded to take a side between the two old women.

“Ah, Thomas-!” Dr. Clarkson called out to him. Thomas paused, empty tray in his left hand. Dr. Clarkson winced, summing up Thomas’ freshly healed scars. The left side of his face was still mottled green in several places.

“Ah… I see you’re recovering. No concussion I trust?” Dr. Clarkson asked.

“None that I can tell.” Thomas said. He let his tray fall, holding it against his side with a loose grip. His bicep was sore from the strain of carrying trays all morning.

“Well, I wanted to let you know that I’ve done as promised.” Dr. Clarkson said. “General Allenby is commanding the division at Plymouth, and I’ve asked him to look in on you.”

Wait.

What?

Thomas was taken back, both at the name and the location. He’d been expecting to hear about Burton and Richmond… now there was Allenby and Plymouth? What in the hell had happened to change that around, fate wise?

“…Allenby?” Thomas asked, “I thought it would be General Burton-“

“Burton?” The name made Clarkson laugh aloud, “Oh god no! You’re a good man, Thomas. I want to make sure you’re well taken care of. Burton’s a harsh man. I’d only send you to him if I wanted you miserable.”

He laughed again. Thomas found the humor hard to come by.

So it seemed that the only thing he’d done different was not be a bastard, thus influencing Clarkson’s opinion of him and what sort of fate he’d wish on Thomas. Burton had been an awful man, the sort to set Thomas’ teeth on edge, and it had resulted in him living in a solid hell for several years as he’d worked tirelessly to get out from Burton’s grip.

It seemed he had Clarkson to thank for that.

Bitter, Thomas said nothing and accepted the papers that Clarkson handed over. He pocketed them, determined not to let his anger show in his voice or face.

“You’ll be underneath Colonel Wavell.” Clarkson said. “Those are your papers. When you’re ready, report to the local recruiting office and they’ll take it from there. As a matter of fact, I’m being drafted back in as a captain so I’ll be certain to keep an eye out for you. Don’t worry Thomas… I’m eager to see your career in the medical field progress. If you’re talented enough, I might hire you on back at the hospital here.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Was all Thomas could think to say.

“General Allenby is a good man, and Colonel Wavell is his right hand.” Dr. Clarkson said, “You’ll be in good spirits with them, and able to help those who need it most. Mrs. Hughes told me that you had some medical training which came to the aid of Mr. Bates. I have to ask, where did you learn to
dress an infected wound?"

Well, he could hardly say the RAMC. “My mother was something of a midwife. Nothing too grand, but she helped other women in the village.”

This of course was a flat out lie. As far as Thomas was aware, his mother had had absolutely no talents.

“Well, I advise you not to dress a wound again until you’ve learned properly.” Clarkson warned, his gaze slightly stern, “But I appreciate your enthusiasm. You know, if you’re any good you really ought to think about changing careers. The army can provide you with the proper education to facilitate a degree, and it’ll place you farther in life than being a servant.”

For whatever reason, Thomas felt oddly stiff at this. He didn’t like being reminded that he was at the proverbial bottom of the food chain.

“…Thank you Dr. Clarkson.” Thomas said. He wondered if his irritation showed in his voice, because Clarkson looked slightly reproachful, “Excuse me, I need to be getting back to work.”

“Oh of course.” Clarkson said. He let Thomas go without further fuss.

Back Thomas went into the fray, serving sandwiches and tea. He couldn’t help but notice things, his eyes roving around the fields so lush and green. Soon they would be replaced by the barren mud and useless wreckage of Flanders… or would it be Flanders? Where in the hell would Thomas end up going? Would Allenby be kinder than Burton? Would Plymouth be easier to adjust to than Richmond?

But there was Lady Mary, begging Matthew on the fringe of the field. Matthew was walking away, and Lady Mary looked distraught.

Thomas sighed, looking back over at the tents where Daisy and William were swapping trays babbling to one another. It was obvious, even now, how terribly in love with her William was.

And even then, there was Anna and Bates, heads bent together and speaking in soft tones about something. Anna looked resentful. Bates looked somber. He supposed that their relationship was now about to hit the first of its many rocks.

And yet, not even paces away there was Sybil and Branson, arm in arm with Gwen and leaping for joy. They were screaming, wild in their glee.

It seemed like Gwen had finally landed that damn secretarial job.

All of it was falling together just like before. All of it was happening and Thomas couldn’t stop it.

And so, when he saw Lord Grantham jogging on the pitch and looking frantic, Thomas did not blink or worry. He accepted his fate with bleak outlook, reasoning that even if the war killed him at least he’d be able to say that it wasn’t in vain.
That he’d done the right thing even if only a little bit.

“My lords and ladies-!” Lord Grantham cried out, “Can I ask for silence-!”

And so silence fell, with every man, woman, and child turning to look to Lord Grantham at center stage. The violin quartet stopped playing, the servants stopped working…. Thomas wondered if in that second even time stood till, waiting for Lord Grantham to say the next words.

“Because I very much regret to announce, that we are at war with Germany.”

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to comment.
Chapter Summary

Thomas leaves Downton Abbey and begins his training in Plymouth. A shocking turn of fate offers the chance of a lifetime.

Chapter Notes

So I feel it goes without saying that from here on out there will be warnings for bodily gore, medical gore, and all around war gore. I honestly cannot write these next few chapters without things getting grisly. If that’s something that triggers you, please be aware that there will be several inclusions of violent graphic medical scenes. Comment if you are triggered, and I will try to make a warning in the text so that way you know when a scene is about to come.

Note: I apologize for the confusion with the double chapter and the lack of italics. My internet went haywire and I promptly went to bed after posting this chapter so I didn’t realize the error till the next morning. I have edited everything so we’re up to snuff, and have deleted the last chapter. I lost two of the comments when I deleted the false chapter ten though, which breaks my heart. ☹

You’d think after O’Brien’s insanities that war with Germany would be less of a shock, but even still the downstairs staff spent the first few days in a queer malaise after receiving the awful news.

It was difficult to know what to do, particularly for the younger staff who’d never experienced a war before. The maids were unsure if routines were to be changed; the kitchen staff didn’t know if they ought to start conserving canned goods now or wait till an ordered rationing strike began. Were there to be bombs? The cavalry? Were the Germans going to be arriving on Wednesday or were they safe for a few more weeks?

Thomas of course, knew fully well that the German’s weren’t going to be banging on the doors anytime soon, and so he continued on with his life as best he could, preparing for the final push when he would head to Richm—

But Thomas had to remind himself forcibly once again that he wasn’t returning to Richmond or to Burton. He was heading to Plymouth, and Allenby… and god knows what else.

Two days after the garden party, when all the tents and chairs were finally cleared away and life was beginning to return to its normal routine, Thomas decided it was finally time to alert Mr. Carson that he was leaving for the RAMC in two weeks time. The last time, Thomas had served out an entire month before leaving for the RAMC, but he’d reasoned at the time that he wanted to have a good reference letter and hadn’t wanted to anger Carson any further. Now, Thomas knew that he’d been
fooling himself. By the time that Thomas had originally joined the RAMC, Carson had wanted him dead. A good reference was a thing of flighty imagination.

Now? Who was to say. Thomas might actually end up walking away with something worth holding onto.

But this time, there was more to do than to simply hand over a paper and call it done. Thomas likewise wanted to write a separate letter, that in the event of his death could be opened by Carson to be read and explain everything. Thomas had decided that, for better or for worse, he would tell the entire truth about his return to the past; it would help ease his conscience even though he’d be dead if Carson ever read it. It had taken a good four or five tries to write the letter, and every time Thomas failed a rough draft he burned the paper in the fireplace lest O’Brien catch onto a fragment of it and spin another wild tale about Thomas being mentally unsound.

It was with this letter in mind that Thomas had listed Carson as his next of kin, though they were unrelated biologically. It was his best chance of having Downton Abbey alerted to his passing… and therefore his best chance of Carson reading the letter under the right circumstances. He only prayed the man would not open it before hand.

It was tea time, and the servants were all clustered downstairs enjoying a cuppa before the next swing of work was to go into effect. Bates was reading the paper by the fire in Thomas’ favorite rocking chair, speaking aloud to both Gwen and Anna who were looking at the text over his shoulders. Daisy and William were in the kitchen, enjoying freshly made apple scones now that Mrs. Patmore firmly had her eyesight back. William was trying to show Daisy that he was in ‘fit fighting shape’, whatever that meant, all the while getting scolded by Mrs. Patmore for daring to let Daisy feel his arm muscles. William had always been a terribly weedy thing, so Thomas didn’t quite know what Daisy was feeling beneath his shirt, but Mrs. Patmore wouldn’t have it either way.

O’Brien sat at the far corner of the servant’s table, darning a lace collar for Lady Grantham by herself. No one spoke to her, nor did she attempt to make conversation with others. It was as if she existed in a separate sphere from others. Thomas could remember the sensation full well… it sent shivers down his spine.

Let me be anything but alone, he thought fearfully. I can handle anything, so long as I’m not alone.

Thomas headed down the hall to Mr. Carson’s office, where he knocked upon the door and waited to hear the grumbling “Enter” from the other side.

Thomas did so, and found Carson decanting a bottle of port with a carefully trained eye. This was Carson’s zen state, a sort of hobby that Carson adored more than any other. Thomas, of course, could not talk; he had the same reaction when cleaning clocks. Carson looked up, spotted Thomas in the doorway, and gave him a tiny if sincere smile.

“Ah.” Carson set his decanter aside on a clean folded white cloth, “Come in.”

“Mr. Carson.” Thomas shut the door behind him to garner the pair of them a bit of privacy, “I have to talk to you about something that’s rather important. Do you have a minute?”

“I do.” Carson said. It was still bizarre to Thomas, to know that Carson would take time out of his day to speak to him. Before, Carson would scramble for an excuse to get out of the room; anything to avoid Thomas. “How are your cuts feeling?” he asked.
Thomas was taken aback, feeling instinctively for his face where his cuts were still slightly swollen and green.

“Oh-“ Thomas had not been expecting such a question, “I’m sure they’re fine. That’s not why I’m here though.” He admitted, and with this he reached into his vest to pull out both his draft papers and his letter for after his possible death.

“I wanted to tell you that I’ve been called to the RAMC.” Thomas said. “Dr. Clarkson delivered me my papers during the garden party. I’ve been asked to journey to Plymouth in two weeks time to serve underneath General Allenby in Yves.”

Thomas offered Carson the paper. Carson took it with a somber expression.

“…I see.” Carson murmured. Was it Thomas’ imagination or did Carson seem terribly sad in that moment?

Carson looked over Thomas’ papers, before finally handing them back so that Thomas could put them safely inside his vest pocket once more.

“It’s rather early to get drafted.” Carson murmured, “I have to wonder if you didn’t plan to leave before now?”

“…I did.” Thomas would not lie to the man now or ever again, “I was using it as a back up plan in case my father called the police. Men like me… well… we don’t survive jail.”

Carson made a tiny noise of agreement underneath his breath. “I suppose none of us could have known we’d go to war with Germany so soon… still, here we are.”

_You’d be surprised_, Thomas thought gloomily.

“I’ve listed you as my next of kin.” Thomas explained, which made Carson look up startled. “Only that in case anything happens, my actual family won’t care. Downton is the only home I have.”

Carson gave him a tender smile, folding his arms over his chest as he relaxed back in his chair, “Then you better make sure nothing happens to you. I won’t stand for Downton without footmen.”

_Imagine Carson without footmen_, Thomas could remember saying so long ago, _Like a ringmaster without ponies._

Thomas handed Carson the next letter with care; it was sealed carefully with the words ‘Just in Case’ written on the envelope. Carson took it, noting its weight and its title, giving Thomas a wary eye.

“And this?”

“…This is for you too.” Thomas said, “It’s a letter, in case something happens to me. I case I die, I want you to read that. You may think me completely insane when you do but everything I detail is absolutely true. It’s only if the worst happens, but… it’ll help my conscience.”

“I doubt you’ve ever done anything to warrant a guilty conscience.” Carson said, which was about as disturbing a sentence as Thomas could garner from Charles Carson in lieu of their entire relationship. “I should imagine this letter scandalous?”

“Horribly so.” Thomas said.

“Then I’ll put it out of my mind.” Carson said, and with that he unlocked his desk drawer to put the
letter comfortably inside. “Though I must ask… why write me a letter instead of telling me now?”

The truth was an awful thing, “Because you’d think me insane.” Thomas said. “And I couldn’t bear to lose favor in your eyes. I know what it is for you to hate me… I can’t go through that again.”

You nearly killed me, Thomas wanted to say, I didn’t know how much I needed your approval until I knew I’d never get it.

Carson just shook his head. “I have never hated you.”

Thomas wished he could say that Carson was right.

The next two weeks were spent in a bizarre state of function and fear. Half the time, Thomas found himself going through the daily routine without once touching on the subject of the up and coming future. The other half (mostly at night), Thomas found himself plague with memories of war.

He’d hidden his feelings the first time round, but war had been absolute hell to endure. The lice, the rats, the roaches, the constant hunger, the fear of death, the pain from trench foot, and every other damn wound you could encumber when you were in the throws of a war. Often times, Thomas would wake from horrific dreams of being stuck in the trenches of Flanders, unable to stick his hand out- unable to breath or move. There was nothing but mud, endless mud sucking him right down to the bottom.

Soon Thomas would be back in that mud… and nothing would be able to save him. There would be no bullet this time. No turning away.

Thomas couldn’t say why but this time through, he was determined not to take the ‘simple’ way out. There was no such thing as a coward in the trenches. No glory moment where heroes rose and the fearful sank. There was only the stark reality that someday, somehow… some bullet was going to rip you in two, and you were never going to see home again.

If certain men shot themselves or shot each other or let someone shoot them in order to get out, to get home… well…

That was their own affair.
No one blamed the other.

The final day before Thomas’ departure, Thomas packed his bags and returned his livery to Mr. Carson. Every soldier was issued a standard uniform and equipment set by their local registrar office. Thomas was to wear his 1902 Pattern Service Dress tunic and trousers on the train to Plymouth, and ironed them carefully to let them set upon his clothes horse. The thick woolen fabric, dyed in a dark khaki, were dull and lifeless… a perfect reminder of what Thomas was walking into. Thomas likewise was given his puttees, 1908 Pattern Webbing Belt, and ammunition boots, all of which was heavy and hot in the still August air. Thomas’ pack and haversack were packed with a mess tin, knife, greatcoat, blanket, trench tools, and water bottle carrier. Thomas was likewise given a Brodie helmet, which was such a laugh that Thomas wanted to scream. It didn’t protect shit: it was too shallow, too reflective, and frankly slippery in a wet and soggy trench.

Thomas knew from experience that even as a healer he would be given a MK V revolver when he
finished training... but it wouldn’t be enough to save him from the German’s. The tanks, the grenades, the machine guns... all of it would destroy men before they could so much as fire their MK V’s.

Thomas headed downstairs, dressed in nothing but his tweed trousers, shirt sleeves, and suspenders. It felt incredibly bizarre to walk about Downton without his livery on, like he was going in the nude, and Thomas couldn’t help but blush when he entered the downstairs to find everyone in uniform clustered about the table. They were joking, laughing, planning for the upcoming week.

None of them were going to war. None of them would have to fear it. Even William wouldn’t go for several more years yet. For now it was only Thomas... and somehow he felt like the sacrificial lamb out for slaughter though he’d already gone through this process before.

Carson was in the hall, speaking with Mrs. Hughes who seemed to have a tally for upcoming deliveries. Thomas slunk along the wall, watching as Mrs. Hughes went through page after page of vendors to be paid.

“—and we’ll have to tip the butchers as well for the grouse they gave us. His Lordship complimented it especially—” Mrs. Hughes paused, noticing Thomas against the wall, “Well look who it is, in his regulars. Do we know you, young man?”

“I’m just passing through.” Thomas shrugged, though he couldn’t help but smile when Mrs. Hughes beamed at him.

“Are you prepared for tomorrow?” Mr. Carson asked.

“Yes sir.” Thomas said, “A special train is leaving tomorrow morning at four o’clock for soldiers leaving out. I’ll take it to London and from London to Plymouth. I’ll be stationed there under General Allenby and Colonel Wavell. We’ll train and then leave out for France.”

Mrs. Hughes’ smile faltered. It was like she didn’t want to think of Thomas going overseas.

“And are you... ready for war?” Mr. Carson murmured.

Thomas gave him a tiny smile: “Believe it or not, I have experience with the pain of battle.” Little did they know that Thomas was actually referring to the same war he was about to enter.

“Then I suppose there’s nothing more to be said.” Mr. Carson said, “But our thoughts and prayers will be with you Thomas, I won’t deny it.”

That meant more than Mr. Carson knew. Thomas wondered if Carson had ever served in his younger years, particularly during the Boer war, but doubted it. Thomas had a hard time seeing Carson in khakis underneath a South African sun, riding some dappled steed into battle.

“Thank you Mr. Carson. In war, that’s honestly all that matters.” Thomas said.

“You can do as you like for today—“ Mr. Carson paused, gesturing aimlessly about. It was a quiet afternoon; nothing was really pressing anymore, “There isn’t anything going on today. The family are quite content with their own matters. His Lordship has asked me to convey his warmest regards to you, and he wishes you safe journeys.”

That meant just about as much as a wet hanky.

If Thomas had this final day to himself, he was going to spend it out and about in the village, enjoying the fresh air and the quiet country living. He’d already decided to go to the post office
earlier, determined to pen both a letter to Jimmy Kent and to send a telegram to Phyllis Baxter. It might seem absolutely bizarre given that neither had truly been in contact yet, but Thomas had a sinking feeling that something awful might happen to him in the war. If he was to die, he wanted to make sure that Jimmy knew he was loved, and that Phyllis knew not to trust Peter Coyle. Call a back up plan, if you will.

Thomas was getting good at making them.

“If you need me for anything, you have me.” Thomas said, “I’m going to go to the post office, can I post anything for you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Mrs. Hughes said, and she flipped through her clipboard to unpin a letter from the very back. She handed it over, and Thomas pocketed it inside his vest. “Mrs. Patmore has something she wishes to post too. She’s just in the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” Thomas said, taking a step back to poke his head into the doorway of the kitchen where William and Daisy were pouring over a new recipe book from London. Mrs. Patmore had purchased it after successfully having her cataract surgery, and was now enthusiastically trying out everything she deemed worthy of the cause. Today, the family was going to be having banoffee pie for dessert, and Mrs. Patmore was hard at work whipping up a toffee so delectable you could smell it from the stairwell. Thomas savored it internally, for sweets on the front line were incredibly hard to come by; practically non existent. Even the smell of toffee would soon be nothing more than a fond memory to him.

“Oh, look who it is!” Mrs. Patmore teased at the sight of Thomas in her doorway, “the tin soldier.”

“One leg and all.” Thomas quipped, “I’m heading into town for my last day and Mrs. Hughes said you had something to post?”

“Just a letter to my sister.” Mrs. Patmore said, setting aside her wooden spoon that was absolutely dripping in toffee to dust off her hands and pull out a letter from her apron pocket, “I was going to post it this afternoon myself when I had the hall boys run a delivery, but if you’re going I’ll give it to you. I don’t trust that George; he’s got a brain full of wooden nickels.”

“Maybe.” Thomas said, for between the two hall boys George was definitely more stupid than Matthew. He accepted Mrs. Patmore’s letter, tucking it safely next to Mrs. Hughes’.

“Are you nervous?” Daisy asked, ogling Thomas’ bizarre normal wear.

“I’ll admit, I’m not.” Thomas said, for he already knew plenty well what to expect. The last time, he’d been internally terrified though none had thought to ask him or care.

“You’re a brave man, Thomas.” William said, and the warmth in his voice took Thomas aback.

“Don’t be silly, William,” Thomas wished he’d stop painting war with such a golden brush. The boy had no idea what he was about to be thrown into.

“I’m serious!” William said, chest puffed out with pride, “I want to join but m’dad won’t let me.”

“You’re father loves you, and you’re all he has left.” Mrs. Patmore snapped, picking up her wooden spoon again to gesture it like one might a sword, “You leave that poor man be.”

“But it’s not right.” William couldn’t stand to be denied such an opportunity. “I want to serve my country!”
“It takes all kinds to fill up a train car, William.” Thomas said, suddenly wondering if perhaps he could change William’s mind and sway him away from the infantry fate that originally awaited him. “There’s plenty you can do here. You can volunteer at the hospital or take up donations.”

“That’s not enough, Thomas, and you know it.” William grumbled. “You’re going to be fighting the Germans, and I’m going to be fighting the women with white feathers.”

“Those women are idiots.” Thomas snapped; how he detested people who looked to fallen soldiers as cowards. What did they know of battle or hardship under enemy fire? “I’m sorry that I can’t offer you more of a solution but if I think of one while I’m away I’ll write.”

“Will you write to me?” Daisy asked, hopefully. “I’d like to know how you are.”

“We all would.” Mrs. Patmore added. It was touching, to know she cared about him now.

“I’ll write to Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas decided. “I bet she could pass the letter around to all of you. It’ll save on the paper. I won’t have any where I’m going.”

“Never mind that.” Mrs. Patmore waved him off, “You head to the village and be sure to stop at the bakers. He’s my great grandmother’s daughters, first cousin once removed second cousin, and I’ve asked him to look in on you before you go.”

Thomas had to take a moment to properly digest that family tree.

“…Your…” He repeated, politely puzzled.

“My great grandmother’s daughters, first cousin’s once removed second cousin!” Mrs. Patmore barked. “Didn’t you hear me?”

He had, but that hadn’t made it any easier.

“…I’ll keep that in mind.” Thomas said, “Thank you.”

With that, Thomas headed out to the village.

It was a gloriously windy day, and the fresh air put a bounce in Thomas’ step. It felt incredibly relaxing, to have a moment free of work. To simply walk amongst the fields and be at one with the English countryside. This was one of the things Thomas had most sorely missed while being in the trenches. Space, green and lovely…. no gunfire, no fear, just… wind.

The village was full of life today, mostly with soldiers that were about to ship out. They were the first row of calvary men, the sorts that had been involved in the Boer war and were happy to serve their country again. Most of them were older, in their fifties and such, and were taking their wives and children out for a final picnic or walk about the park before they returned to training. Thomas had no one to walk about, but that didn’t stop him from enjoying the view. A Schnauzer was tearing up a rugby ball, barking delightedly at the game with his master who was already walking about in khakis. Another soldier was swinging his daughter in his arms, a tiny girl no bigger than five, throwing her about like a carrousel much to her delight and her mother’s terror. Another soldier was emerging from the tobacco shop, arms full of cigarette cartons. He above all was the smartest in Thomas’ eyes, for tobacco would be scarce upon the front lines. Clearly this man was an experienced soldier, and knew how to pack. Thomas decided that before he left, he’d fetch a few cartons and to hell with the expense.
He entered the post office to find it mercifully bare, with a hassled post master reading a catalogue behind his slotted desk. He perked up at the sight of Thomas, and set his rag away to tip his hat.

“Shipping out?” The man asked. He was in his sixties perhaps, with a walrus mustache and a prime blue uniform.

“Yes.” Thomas said, pulling out the letters from his breast pocket and sliding them over, “I need to have these two mailed out, and I want to purchase one letter and one telegram.”

“That’ll be a pence, lad.”
Thomas fished for the change, accepted his goods, and took both the telegram, letter, and envelope over to a side desk where he could write with a borrowed pen.

The telegram would be for Phyllis Baxter, though Thomas doubted it would do much good. If he had the math right, it would be right about now that Phyllis really started to get in deep with Coyle. If Thomas could just get her attention, maybe warn her from afar, she might panic and back off before the damage was done and Coyle asked her to steal her mistresses jewels.

He put pen to paper and began to write:

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**POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.**

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**TO**

Phyllis Baxter
Wilson House, 3 Gladbury Road, Beaconsfield, London F-26

Do not trust Coyle, Liar and thief. Is planning to desert you and land you in prison. Will take jewels for himself. Be careful! Heading to war. You have all my love—Thomas B.

---

One completed, Thomas set the telegram aside and began to write the letter. This one was much
more intimate, and something that he did not feel comfortable with putting openly without the security of an envelope. Even so, Thomas would not be using his name.

This would be the queerest letter he ever wrote, but he had to do it to go about life without a guilty conscience. To know that, even if he died, Jimmy would be aware of how much someone loved him:

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Jimmy,

You do not know me, but I love you. We have to your knowledge never met as of yet, but you are known to me and are more dear to me than all the world besides. In this war, I may not return, and so if I end up dying, I wanted you to be aware that someone on earth adored you, that you were more special to me than anything else, anyone else. You always will be. We may never meet again face to face, but I dream of you and wish you nothing but the best. Please live your life full of champagne, beautiful women, and parties. Be happy above all else. You are my sunshine, and will be until the very end.
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With this letter completed, Thomas immediately folded the letter up and shoved it inside the crisp envelope. He sealed it, the wax sticky and disgusting upon the tip of his tongue, and returned to the post master who was waiting patiently.

First, Thomas handed over the telegram.

“This one goes to Wilcox House in London.” Thomas said, watching as the post master took the telegram and stamped it for authenticity, “For a Phyllis Baxter.”

“Very good.” The postmaster said, though Thomas noted that he paused at Thomas’ text and caught his eye.

“M’sister’s got a cad for a lover.” Thomas explained. “Want to warn her off before I head out.”

“Ahh.” The postmaster said, setting the telegram aside, “And the letter, lad?”
“This one goes to Anstruther house in London.” Thomas said, “For a Jimmy Kent.”

“Address?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know it.”

The man wasn’t perturbed, pulling open an aged text so thick it could have been used as a weapon in a home invasion. He began to flip through the pages of the London directory, pouring over all the ‘A’s.

“Anstruther… Anstruther…” The man mutter under his breath, “Andrews… Anderson… Anson… Anstruther!” He’d found it, and tapped the name with the tip of a weathered finger. “39 Park Avenue, Kensington, London.”

He wrote down the address with care, then showed it to Thomas for approval. “That about right lad?”

Thomas touched Jimmy’s name, fondly caressing the ‘J’. He smiled tenderly, though he knew it would be a warning sign to wiser men.

“That’s about the size of it.” Thomas said.

He stepped away, heading for the door.

“Heading to war tomorrow?” The postmaster asked. Thomas nodded. “Then good luck lad.”

Thomas smiled, but did not engage in conversation further. After writing the letter to Jimmy, his soul felt terribly tired.

And what better way to commiserate the fact that he was a denied homosexual than cigarettes and sweets?

Thomas first stopped at the tobacco outlet, a local haunt that had always appealed to him. It smelt like his father’s overcoats, and reminded him oddly of home with its mariner goods dotting the back wall. The shop owner knew Thomas by first name, and was tenderly fond of Thomas since Thomas had surely funded half of his retirement by now. For that reason, when he found that Thomas was going to war, the man gladly gave him two carton’s of cigarettes for free. Thomas remembered this moment of kindness from before, for it had been impromptu and unchanged by his behavior. For all his trouble’s at the abby, Thomas had never brought ill on the tobacco owner’s head. Last time, Thomas had used his spare money to buy a silver lighter. It was a pound and would last him the rest of his life. Thomas took comfort in that now, amazed to see his old lighter again after two years of not having it by his side. The leather grip, the sharp click of metal on metal, and the dull heat of the flame so close to his fingers was like the caress of an old friend. He pocketed it, and headed down the street for the Downton Bakery which doubled as an confectionary. He wanted to look in on Mrs. Patmore’s….. relative.

Whatever he was.

The bakery was by far Thomas’ worst shop to enter, simply because Thomas had a hankering sweet tooth that could not be denied. There were entire crates full of licorice allsorts, colorful wine gums, Blackpool rocks, barley sugars, pear drops, peppermint humbugs, packages of fruit pastilles, and
Pontefract cakes. As if to make a mark in capitalistic style, there were now little tins that you could send to the troops put up on front display. Gleaming in brass, with colored covers of English countrysides and handsome men putting on brave face as they fought off the enemy. They were to be filled with rolled tobacco and candy of your choice, though Thomas had never received one on the front lines. They were usually for the golden boys like William, who had a mass of adoring fans at home.

There was a beefy man behind the glass counter, fiddling about with royal icing over a victorian sponge cake. He glanced up at Thomas every so often, but for the most part kept his eyes down as he continued layering the checkerboard decoration. Thomas wondered if everyone in Mrs. Patmore’s family was prone to be a cook.

“Pardon me,” Thomas stepped up to the counter, carefully jostling his cigarette pack underneath one arm, “Do you know of a Mrs. Patmore at Downton Abbey?”

“Aye, I do.” The man said, sniffing heartily and continuing on with his icing, “I’m her great grandmother’s daughters, first cousin’s once removed second cousin.” Without batting an eye, he added, “An’ you must be her little tin soldier, Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas blinked. As far as he was aware, he wasn’t Mrs. Patmore’s little anything.

“I suppose I am.” He shrugged. “She told me to come down here-“

“One for me to give you a sweetie.” The man agreed, finally setting down his tube of heavy royal icing to fetch a paper sack that you might use to hold small trinkets in. He handed it over, and Thomas accepted it cautiously. “There you are, lad.”

He was not aware one could ingest a paper sack. “I… thank you?” He said, glancing from the man to his sack. The man rolled his eyes, irritated that Thomas couldn’t catch on faster. Clearly hot tempers were part of the Patmore district as well.

“You don’t come in here much, do you?” the man grumbled, “The sack’s free lad, you take it an’ you fill it up with anything you want from those barrels.” He gestured to the large barrels of sweets that lined the far wall of the shop. Thomas eyed the pear drops and wine gums longingly.

“Really?” Thomas didn’t know whether or not to believe his luck, “And the whole thing is free?”

“Free as a bird.” The man grumbled, taking up his tube of icing again. He was once more absorbed in his cakes, and allowed Thomas to do as he pleased.

Thomas promptly sat down his cigarette cartons and trotted over to the barrels to begin fishing through them.

Normally the sweets were measured on a scale, and for every half pound you got you had to pay a throppin. This time, however, Thomas got the luxury of getting anything he pleased without so much as a how do you do from his own pocket book. He loaded up his bag with wine gums, barley sugars, pear drops, long packages of fruit pastilles and even two Blackpool rocks that stuck out of the top of the bag like a pair of antennas. Thomas detested licorice, so he stayed away from the allsorts and the Pontefract cakes, but he certainly was delighted to get his fill of all the rest.

“Thank you!” Thomas cried out as he left, giddy as he held onto his enormous bag of sweets with pride. He was properly laden down now, and couldn’t help but begin sucking on one of his Blackpool rocks as he walked. Boy, if it wasn’t divine, pure unadulterated sugar, colored in the blue and red colors of Downton Abbey. Different towns had a habits of stamping their rocks with their
particular colors, so Thomas ended up with his tongue blue and red as he licked the rock like a lolly and wandered back off through the English countryside.

He finds his mind traveling, as always, to Jimmy Kent and wondering where he was. Jimmy wouldn’t be going to war, he was probably just under the cut for the draft. But would Jimmy balk at his letter, and demand to know who sent it? If Jimmy was smart (and by god, the boy was smart) he’d notice that Thomas’ letter was stamped with Downton’s crest in the corner for mailing postage. He’d at least know that, whoever sent his letter, would have come from the Downton area, and would have been a man going to war.

Would he be disgusted and throw the letter away? But it in the fireplace perhaps, just as Philip had done with his own love letters to Thomas?

Or would Jimmy hide it away, confused at the mystery but proudful to know he was adored by utter strangers? That sounded more in character for the Jimmy that Thomas loved, not the front that Jimmy put on with everyone else.

Jimmy was shy, even if he didn’t want to admit it. He hid his true face till he was all alone. It was one of the many things that Thomas and Jimmy shared in common.

As Thomas crossed the final borderline between the countryside of Downton and the property of Downton Abbey, Thomas decided to venture right into a large but empty field so that he might sit down in the high weeds and enjoy the rest of his rock. He was only going to eat a piece of it, he decided, so as to conserve the rest, and promptly broke it off from the stick to suck on it longingly.

By god, he’d be a diabetic before he was forty and he would be chuffed about it.

The sky was exceptionally beautiful today, even if it was incredibly windy. The blue was piercing, the clouds were thick, and they all seemed to be painted together like they were from a professional’s pallet. The outlines of the trees were stark and crisp, deep pine green clashing shockingly with the—

Thomas bolted upright, legs trembling and eyes wide.

There, on the outskirts of the forest which bordered Downton Abbey, was the Heichecera.

She stood at the base of a massive evergreen, her colorful skirts blowing in a wide looping hoop about her ankles and knees. Her black hair was bound back by her scarf, her dark skin almost camouflaged her into the earth of the forest… but Thomas knew within an inch of his life that she was there, that she was real and solid.

What did this mean?

Was this a signal from here that the end was near? That she was coming to take him away despite the work that he had left to do? Was she about to unravel all of Thomas’ hard work, like one great tug at an ornate tapestry of woven thread? Was she simply watching him, and if so how had she found him? Was this universe even real? Was she its master and Thomas was completely unaware-?

“Thomas!”

He could hear the voice of John Bates growing closer, but he could not take his eyes off the Heichecera. He was afraid to do so, as if to glance away would be to break the spell and everything would come undone.

Had she come to claim him?
Bates was by his side. He put a hand on Thomas’ shoulder, jerking him out of his reverie. Thomas looked about, unnerved, and found John was not alone. Anna was with him, the pair of them dressed in day ware and clearly on their way to the village. Anna’s hair was partly undone, a long blonde braid that blew in the wind.

“I’m glad I found you.” Bates said, “I wanted to be with you before you left tomorrow morning. Anna and I got a bit of time off. No one’s really doing anything up at the house—”

“Do you—” Thomas pointed to the forest, ready to mark out the Heichecera for them, but was unnerved when he found the spot where she’d stood empty.

It was as if she’d never been there. As if she’d been nothing more than a mirage to his sugar soaked mind.

“Did you see…. did you see a woman over there?” Thomas asked, still pointing to the tree line. Both Bates and Anna looked, eyes scanning the horizon for evidence of another person.

They found nothing.

“A woman?” Bates wondered.

“I don’t see anything.” Anna admitted.

“A gypsy.” Thomas clarified, for surely the gypsy population in Downton village was hardly above one person.

“I don’t see anything either.” Bates said, and at this he let his hand slide carefully down Thomas’ back till it rested at the base of his spine, “Are you alright? You look frightened.”

“… Just… nervous.” Thomas spoke without thinking, merely mumbling words as he continued to search the outskirts the forest for the Heichecera. Good god… could the woman vanish? Was she all around him every day and he didn’t even know it?

That was enough to put a chill in anyone’s bones.

“I knew you would be.” Anna said. Thomas looked about to find that she was in a pondering mood. “Even if you told William and Daisy you weren’t.”

“We wanted to speak with you.” Bates explained, “ Alone, before you left.”

“Please don’t say goodbye.” Thomas said, for all of a sudden Bates’ wounded expression seemed to make Thomas’ awful fate more real, more solid. If they didn’t say goodbye, then it wouldn’t be like Thomas was going off to war again. Like he was just… on an errand or something.

An awful, awful errand.

“Not goodbye, no.” Bates agreed, but suddenly his hand was trailing up and down Thomas’ arm, tenderly stroking his open skin where Thomas had rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows. Bates’ fingers lingered at the leather wraps upon his wrist.

Thomas looked down at his touch, suddenly realizing why Bates was here. But why had Bates allowed Anna to tag along? Surely he wouldn’t…

“Mr. Bates,” Thomas murmured, “Please don’t do this. You know we can’t—”
It was tantamount to torture, to yearn for something, be offered it, but to know deep down it couldn’t be yours.

“Let me have this, Thomas.” Bates begged, his eyes suddenly full with such a vigorous expression of longing that it shocked Thomas. Could it be that Bates still pined for him, even now after all this time? “If I’m going to lose you, let me have something to remember you by.”

But of course. It wasn’t longing… it was fear. The awful fear of the inevitable. Every soldier experienced it. For an ex soldier, watching a young man go to war… well…

You felt like you were watching someone walk to their execution.

And then, quite suddenly, Bates leaned forward and kissed Thomas on the mouth in front of Anna.

Thomas sucked in a breath, despite Bates’ lips being on his own. It shocked him, for never in his life had he kissed a man in front of another person. It felt horribly dangerous, even though Thomas knew deep down that Anna could be trusted. Much like Bates’ put-off goodbye, it seemed to make Thomas’ situation all the more real and serious. It was why he despaired when the subject of his inverted nature inevitably came up in conversation or events. It made him feel that much more a freak. That much more denied by society.

Thomas pulled back, his lips swollen from Bates’ ravaging kiss. “Don’t-!” Thomas begged, looking out across the fields onto the country road. No one was there, but that didn’t mean that no one had seen. “It’s too dangerous, anyone could see-.”

“Sit down!” Anna urged, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to watch your fancy man kiss another bloke and want them to have a roll in the hay.

Grass. Whatever.

Thomas immediately ducked down, crouching by his cartons of cigarettes and bag of sweets. Bates sat next to him, but instead of stopping or rethinking his rash decision, Bates just leaned in on one arm and kissed Thomas again.

Thomas put his hands on Bates’ shoulders and pushed back, his cheeks bright red with embarrassment. “I- we- I- This- we can’t do this-“ Thomas babbled, so ashamed he couldn’t even meet Anna’s eyes. She was sitting next to them, with Thomas’ bag of sweets on her lap to keep the goodies from being attacked by stray bugs.

“Not in front of…” Thomas couldn’t even say her name. “It’s not normal. It’s not right. It’s a bad thing-.”

Bates shook his head, “Love is not a bad thing.” And with that he leaned in again to kiss Thomas a third time.

This time, Thomas accidentally fell back on his elbows, slightly toppled by Bates’ weight. Bates pressed him against the grass, blades tickling at his high cheeks bones as Bates ravaged his mouth with all the affection a man could pour into a single kiss.

Jesus Christ, Thomas wondered, a little punch drunk over all the affection, You know how to kiss a man.

“I need this-“ Bates broke away, placing tender kisses upon Thomas’ neck. He plucked at Thomas’
buttons with his left hand, carefully exposing his collar bone so that he could lavish it with attention. “If you go and I love you… I need this…”

“If you go and I love you… I need this…”

“Anna-“ Thomas croaked her name. “It’s not right. None of this is right, an’ you know it-“

“I’m not looking.” Was Anna’s reply, and sure enough, Thomas bravely glanced up to find that Anna was indeed staring off out across the field with her back to Thomas and Bates.

“You have to let me go.” Thomas whispered.

“No.”

“John-“

“No.” And at this, Bates pulled back to press his forehead against Thomas’ own. Their breathes were intermingled, sweeten by Thomas’ rock candy. Thomas wondered if his mouth had tasted like sugar to Bates. It would explain why he’d kissed Thomas so damn hard.

“I will not lose you,” It was as if Bates thought by saying it over and over again it would become so. “I will not.”

He kissed Thomas again, and this time his buried both his hands in Thomas’ inky black hair. The angle of the kiss changed, and it deepened—

There were fingers touching his left hand.

Thomas jumped a bit, unable to do much but utter a muffled squeak with Bates’ tongue in his mouth. His eyes flicked to the left, and he found Anna watching.

What in the name of god is going on here? Thomas could not help but wonder. Anna’s eyes were locked on their illicit kiss, and it was clear that she knew full well just how raw and strange it was for her to be watching.

Frankly she seemed just a little excited by it.

Anna watching just put an entirely different spin on the kiss, making it somehow more dirty and raw. Thomas groaned, shuddering as Bates broke their kiss to continue kissing his collar bone. He was sucking at the skin, his tongue and lips leaving a powerful, dark bruise. Thomas’ eyes practically rolled into the back of his head at the sensation.

“War is a monster.” Bates said, which was an odd thing to whisper into the skin of a man you were trying to give a hickie to, “It eats up everything in its path.”

“It is.” Thomas mumbled, for he could not help but agree. Anna’s fingers curled slowly around his ring finger, holding his hand even as Bates returned to gently kissing Thomas’ neck and jaw line.

“I cannot lose you, Thomas.” Bates said, “Not without loving you one last time. So you have to promise me you’ll come back.”

My god… were those tears?

Thomas looked up, taken aback, to find that Bates’ eyes were glimmering. No tears had fallen as of yet, and even still his voice remained strong, but… but…

“John…” Thomas was stunned by the expression of emotion. All this for him?
“Please.” Bates croaked, now flat out begging, “Please don’t die. I beg of you. If you have to, run away. Do anything to survive. To come home to us. To me.”

Thomas couldn’t stand it anymore. He sat up, albeit slowly, and took Bates with them so that the pair of them were off the grass with legs entangled. Bates seemed to realize that he was getting too emotional, and looked away with a grim expression as if he was internally chastising himself.

An odd stiff silence fell over the pair of them. As much as Thomas agreed with Bates’ advice, this time around the war would be a personal battle for Thomas. He was determined to do as much good, to save as many people as he could… Edward in particular. He couldn’t just run away if the result meant that Edward was blinded again.

“There are people that I have to protect.” Thomas said. Both Anna and Bates were silent, listening to what he had to say in lieu of their weirdly erotic encounter. “People that matter to me. I can’t do that by running away.”

“War won’t give you an option.” Bates said, and frankly this was also true, but it still didn’t change things.

“I agree.” Thomas said, nodding absently as he tucked a stray lock of black hair behind his ear, “I know it will be hell, and I know that the chances are that I will die. But I am determined to change my fate, to make my life a better one. If I die, I want to do so knowing that I did the best I could. There’s no room for cowardice in a sentiment like that.”

Bates sighed, looking further away. Thomas leaned in and laid his chin upon Bates’ shoulder.

Anna’s fingers were upon his hands again. Her touch was smooth and cool, much like the English wind that blew about the countryside.

“Don’t die, Thomas.” Anna whispered. She sounded just as distressed as Bates looked.

There was really only one thing he could say, “I’ll try not to.”

Returning to the house that afternoon felt oddly somber though no one else was in a sad mood. Bates was quiet, and spent most of the evening in Thomas’ chair by the fire watching the embers glow. Anna was at his side, working on one of Lady Mary’s hats that needed to have its band replaced. Nothing on her face seemed to insist that she’d spent the better part of her afternoon watching two men lock lips. She kept her gaze averted and her expression calm.

Thomas took his cigarettes and his candy upstairs, but not before allowing Daisy, William, and Gwen to each have a piece or two from his bag. Daisy and Gwen were fond of the pear drops, where as William seemed eager to have one of Thomas’ barley sugars. Thomas didn’t eat any more, far too sated by the rock candy he’d nibbled on while walking through the country. After everyone got their say, Thomas hid the rest of his goodies in his burlap bag, stuffing the candies and the cigarettes deep inside along with his spare clothes, shoes, and toiletries. After packing, Thomas traveled back downstairs adn spent the rest of the night sitting in the servant’s hall.

He just wanted to soak in up while he had the chance.
Slowly, piece by piece, servant’s turned in for bed. William went first, exhausted after a full days work as the only footman. The maids turned in after that, with Anna the last one to go up. Then Bates went up, then the kitchen staff, and finally it was only down to Thomas and O’Brien who were the final two in the servants hall with only an oil lamp to keep them company.

O’Brien had been reading a book, whose title was so faded that Thomas could not read it on the cover. When she finished, she closed her volume and sat it carefully upon the table. O’Brien was pondering; it seemed like she hadn’t realized Thomas was still downstairs with her, until she spoke up.

“Got your booties packed?” She asked, dryly. She struck up a cigarette, puffing on it idly. If Carson knew she was smoking in the servant’s hall, he would surely be irritated.

“I’m wearing them on the train tomorrow.” Thomas said.

“I suppose you’ll be lonely.” O’Brien said, tapping her cigarette into an overflowing ash tray to knock off a bit of deadened bud, “So far away from home.”

But instead of rising to the bait, Thomas found himself wondering about O’Brien… about all that they were. All that they had been and frankly could have been.

“Do you wish you could to war?” Thomas asked her. Of all people, she seemed the most capable of waging hell on an entire army.

“I have no intention of dying for a cause I don’t believe in.” O’Brien muttered.

“That’s just it though.” Thomas said, for he quite agreed with the sentiment, “If you had a cause you believed in, you’d move mountains for it. You’d be a the perfect soldier. You could rise through the ranks, I bet.”

O’Brien snorted, an ugly look upon her face, “Well it’s a pity we’ll never see me as a career Captain.”

“…It is.” Thomas said. He wondered what life would have been like for O’Brien if she’d been born a man. He had a feeling that she would have had an easier time. “Goodnight.”

With that, he walked towards the stairwell, exhausted and ready to get what little sleep he could. He would have to get up in about five hours in order to make it onto his rain for Plymouth.

“Your mother misses you.”

Thomas paused, one foot upon the bottom stairwell. He looked about and found O’Brien with her back still to him. All that he could truly see of her was her left hand, idly clasping her smoking cigarette.

“…I’m sorry?” Thomas repeated. He wondered if O’Brien could hear the warning in his voice.

“Your mother misses you.” O’Brien said, tapping her cigarette again in her ash tray, “He let it slip in the letters. Said she cried for you-“

“I don’t want to hear this.” Thomas felt an ugly cold sensation crawling up through his veins. The fact of the matter was, between the two of his parents he had admittedly been closer to his mother… but she’d always been paranoid over the smallest of details, and had never been openly affectionate with any of her children. The idea of her crying for him… it made him sick to his stomach.
“…All I’m sayin’ is you don’t want her to cry even more.” O’Brien said. Thomas could tell she wasn’t speaking in malice; she was defensive but not intrusive. “So don’t die.”

“… I’ll take that into consideration.” Thomas said, “Thank you.”

And with that he went upstairs.

It took Thomas a bit to fall asleep. Nerves kept him from settling down, and when he did it was close to midnight. He slept deeply after that, however, utterly exhausted and only able to garner about three hours of decent sleep if left undisturbed. Mercifully, no one came to bother him, and he woke up right on time the next morning to the sensation of someone squeezing his shoulder.

Thomas groaned, opening his eyes in the gloom; a lit candle was sitting upon his bedside table, illuminating Carson who was wearing a day suit, of all things. For a moment, Thomas didn’t know if he was dreaming or not, for never in his life had he seen Carson wearing a tweed suit with a dark brown tie and bowler hat.

“Time to get up.” Carson whispered. “I’m taking you to the station.”

Thomas rose up, aching from so little sleep, and began to get dressed. Carson let him be, and so by solo candlelight alone, Thomas washed his face and combed his hair to put his khaki’s on for the first time… again.

The fabric was thick and stiff, just like he remembered. He buckled his pants, lined up his tunic, laced his webbing belt, strapped on his puttees, and tied up his ammunition boots.

Thomas looked himself up and down in the mirror, noting with unnerving clarity that nothing seemed to have changed in his appearance despite how he’d done so much to reshape his youth. He still looked like a child in men’s clothing… too young to go to war.

But we’ve done this before, Thomas reasoned with himself, So we’ll just have to do it again.

Thomas shouldered his pack and picked up his valise, inside of which contained everything he’d ever owned. He found himself looking over his shoulder at his bedroom… at his red curtains, lone wooden ironing board, mantel, bureau, and single space bed. He supposed that this time, he’d done his reputation justice. He’d done this space justice.

Nothing more could be said or done. It was time to leave. Thomas blew out his candle, and closed his bedroom door for what might truly be the last time.

He headed downstairs through the gloom, pausing as he passed by Bates’ door. Without truly thinking about it, Thomas raised his hand up and touched the paper slit that named Bates’ room thus. He found himself thinking about how Bates had practically had tears in his eyes. How the man had been so truly horrified at the thought of Thomas dying in battle.
That made one hell of a change from last time.

As Thomas descended the stairs, he had to do so with one hand on the rail. It was pitch black, with only the tiniest trickle of light greeting Thomas at the bottom. The source came from the kitchen, where an oil lamp cast a glow upon Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore in tartan house coats, waiting with Mr. Carson who was holding his bowler hat in both his hands.

Thomas was amazed at such a reception. Last time, he’d left the house in the dark by himself. He doubted anyone had even cared he was going.

“Oh, there he is, the little sleepy head.” Mrs. Patmore murmured with a small smile. She’d put a kettle on the stove, which was emitting the delicious aroma of coffee. She poured Thomas a cup and handed it over, which he gratefully accepted given that he’d barely gotten enough sleep to do the day justice.

“M-m-morning.” Thomas yawned heavily through the word, taking a long sip of coffee. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes, carefully setting his bags upon the floor so that he could finish his cuppa in peace.

“Have a cuppa and wake up.” Mrs. Patmore advised. There was such tenderness in her voice that Thomas was taken aback, “You’ll need to be at your best today.”

With that she turned away to begin pulling together a large tartan handkerchief, which Thomas could see was loaded down with what looked like an enormous cornish pasty, a boiled egg still in its shell, and an apple. All of this was wrapped up tight, knotted inside its little tartan holder, which Mrs. Patmore handed over for Thomas to take up.

So a send off party and a meal for the train? Boy, Thomas was being spoiled.

“I’ve packed you this for the train.” Mrs. Patmore said, “I know you’re fond of my salted cod cakes but you need something more substantial for today so I’ve made you a pasty with meats and fruit. You’ll thank me when you’re not hungry this afternoon. I don’t know what they’ll be feeding you at Plymouth but I doubt it’s as good as my cooking.”

“You must write to us,” Mrs. Hughes cut in. Though she wasn’t as old as she eventually would be in Thomas’ memory, she seemed terribly worried in that moment. All the stress showed in lines upon her face. “As soon as you’re settled so that we’ll know you’re well. We’re all eager to see what you make of yourself, but you must promise us to stay safe.”

At this, Mr. Carson added, “I’ve received post from the local recruitment office notifying me that your paperwork has gone through. I’ve officially been declared your next of kin…. so I would like it if I wasn’t troubled on your behalf. I have enough on my plate without getting random postage, thank you very much.”

Carson’s voice was grumbled and clipped, but his meaning was clear: Don’t die.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said… though in truth, what control did he have over these things?

Mrs. Hughes took a step forward, fretting over Thomas’ collar and webbing belt.

“You’ll be safe, won’t you?” She croaked.
“I’ll try.” Thomas said. It was as best as he could offer her in that moment. “I want to help people, though. I won’t lie Mrs. Hughes… going to war isn’t about staying alive. It’s about protecting what matters.”

“Well you matter.” she croaked again, patting his shoulders to fiddle with his leather and brass straps, “His Lordship wanted me to tell you to wish you well, and that the pride of the family goes with you.”

With that, she reached into the pocket of her tartan dressing gown to pull out a patch shaped rather like a miniature shield. It was divided straight down the center, one half crimson the other have stark blue.

It was the Crawley crest… the symbol of Downton Abbey which flew constantly over the house.

Thomas had seen these little patches before. They were mostly worn by lieutenants or majors, men who came from noble families and wanted to represent their houses with pride. At the same time, infantry men could easily wear them too. They were more often than not servants; footmen, valets, hall boys, groomsmen, gardeners…. the golden lot that loved their houses and wanted to show their pride.

William had worn a patch like this, as had Matthew.

Thomas slowly took it from Mrs. Hughes’ hands, unable to explain to her in that moment what this little patch meant to him… for all the medallions a soldier might eventually wear, a patch like this represented the warmth of home. The knowledge that they had something wonderful to return to if they could make it through the war alive.

Call it an end goal, if you well.

“You wear this.” Mrs. Hughes whispered. “And know that the family and all of us are thinking of you day and night, and keeping you in our prayers.”

Thomas rubbed his thumb over the fine stitching, feeling at all the tight individual threads.

It was more precious a gift to him than he would ever be able to convey.

“… Thank you.” Thomas whispered.

He looked up at them all.

Mrs. Patmore, with her frizzy orange hair slowly turning gray and her eyes now back to their original piercing brown. Her frumpy expression but her warmth audible in every word she spoke. Her delicious food and her soulful wit. Her ability to put a laugh into any conversation, even the somber ones.

Mr. Carson, tall and proud with his gray hair slicked back and soft purple bags beneath his eyes from a lifetime lacking good sleep. His strong shoulders and his large hands, which easily carried the weight and the responsibility of butler. His grumbling tones, like thunder on a warm dark night. His loyalty and honesty, leaving no room for those that dared to slack in their boots.

Mrs. Hughes… who had always treated him with such kindness even in his original universe where everything had gone wrong. With her wrinkled hands and her small smiles. Her compassion and humility… her understanding that Thomas did not choose to be a homosexual, and her willingness not to judge. Her wanting to try all she could just to make the world a little bit nicer for everyone else.
Thomas looked from one person to the next, summing up that they were the soul and breadth of Downton Abbey. It wasn’t just a place he was returning to. It was its people.

“Are you scared?” Mrs. Hughes asked him.

“No.” Thomas said, and he meant it. “I’m going to be rolling around in filthy trenches covered in rats, roaches, and half naked men screaming for mercy while gunfire falls like raindrops on my head. I’m not going to have time to be scared, Mrs. Hughes. I’m going to be too preoccupied trying to stay alive.”

“Do you think you can manage it?” Mrs. Patmore murmured. “It’s not your usual style, to be so… unclean and shaken up.”

But Thomas just smiled and shook his head.

“That won’t matter to me.” Thomas said. “I’m going to war to save people. I don’t care about the how or where. If the time comes when I have to put my life aside to save another’s, I will.”

In that moment he thought of Edward. It would be impossible to find Edward on the battlefield unless he was just incredibly lucky, but if he did Thomas would not leave his side. He would save Edward from the terrible fate of being blinded. Even if it killed him… he would not stop until he knew that Edward was safe.

“I know what happens when selfishness dominates your actions.” Thomas said, thinking back on his original time at Downton. It had turned his life into a living hell, “No one benefits.”

But this just made Mrs. Patmore teary eyed. She grimaced, looking away to begin scrubbing irritably at her stovetop where a persistent stain stood out near an unlit eye. “Oh, just take your bloomin’ sandwich and get on the train.” she finally choked out.

“I’ll be driving you to the station.” Mr. Carson said, “Branson has been taken ill.”

“Can you drive, Mr. Carson?” Thomas wondered, for he’d never seen the man behind the wheel of a car and frankly was afraid to.

“I’m hardly a chauffeur.” Carson grumbled, “Well be taking the wagonette. Lynch is waiting outside.”

“Then we ought to go.” Thomas said, glancing at his watch. They had little more than forty five minutes to make it to the station, and it would surely taken them thirty just to get to town.

And so it was finally time to say goodbye. Thomas first turned to Mrs. Patmore, who was still scrubbing at the stove.

“I suppose this is goodbye-“ Thomas said, offering her his hand.

“Don’t you ruddy say goodbye to me.” She snapped, her voice full of suppressed tears. “I won’t have it d’you hear me? Just go on and get moving, so you can get back to us as soon as you can.”

Thomas let his hand drop, turning away from the surly cook. He found Mrs. Hughes’ eyes likewise glimmering with tears.

“Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas offered her his hand to shake.
“Stop that with your hand.” She batted the offending limb away, “I’m not his Lordship… now give me a kiss!”

Thomas was baffled by this, having never kissed a woman before. His face flushed beat red, and a nervous titter in his voice. He leaned in, and brushed a chaste kiss onto Mrs. Hughes’ cheek.

Who’d have thought, the first time kissing a woman would be Mrs. Hughes of all people.

But at this, Mrs. Patmore lost it. She turned about, with tears streaming down her pudgy cheeks, and before Thomas could bat her away she flung her arms about him. Thomas gaped, awkward in her embrace as she sniveled into his neck.

“Come back to us in one piece, you stupid boy.” She bleated out.

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t try!” She was furious to hear these words, pulling back to give him a sullen is soaking glare. “Do!”

He gave her a small smile, “For what it’s worth, I thought your pudding was good even with salt.”

“Oh get out of my kitchen!” She spat, shoving him away to return to her stove.

Thomas picked up both his valise and his rucksack, slinging the latter over his shoulder so that he could hold his tartan wrap-up in his free hand.

Mrs. Hughes blinked back tears, fixing his pack a little better upon his shoulder.

With that, Thomas turned away from the kitchen, heading out into her servant’s hall-

There was a letter sitting upon the table, in plain sight of the stairwell landing.

“What’s that?” Thomas wondered, gesturing to the letter on the table. Why would someone leave post down here in the middle of the night?

“Oh.” Carson grumbled, heading out of the kitchen to don his bowler hat once again, “I’m afraid that’s from O’Brien. She insisted on leaving it for you. You don’t have to take it if you don’t want to. I certainly wouldn’t blame you.”

But curiosity pushed Thomas forward, and so he took up the letter from the table to quietly slip it into his tunic pocket. He’d have to read it on the train, there wasn’t time now.

Mr. Carson and Thomas left Downton Abbey through the servant’s area door, heading out into the cool night air to find Mr. Lynch waiting just outside the alley gate with Diamond in her holster. This was Lady Mary’s horse, and the fastest of their brood. She was hooked up to a simple wagonette that normally would carry hay about the property. As of now, the back carriage was empty, save for a few quilts that were used like seat cushions in lieu of anything fancier.

Mr. Lynch held Diamond still so that Carson and Thomas could both climb up. Thomas put his rucksack and his valise into the back of the wagonette, and Carson took up Diamond’s polished leather reigns.

“Off to war then?” Mr. Lynch asked as he handed Carson over a thin leather whip.
“Afraid so.” Thomas said, leaning heavily over the side of the wagonette so as to shake Lynch’s hand goodbye. He wondered if the man knew that Thomas had spent a good five hours terrorizing maids and calling him a ‘bog man’.

“God speed, lad.” Lynch said, clapping their clasped hands with his free one. “We’ll be keepin’ you in our prayers.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Lynch.” Thomas said. He straightened up in the seat so that Carson could swat Diamond upon her thigh. Their cart took off into the night.

“Goodbye Thomas!” Lynch called out after their retreating wagonette.

“Off we go.” Mr. Carson murmured softly, though none replied to him. He clicked Diamond’s reigns twice, and she sped up to start at a gay little trot through the night mist. They strolled down the abbey’s gravel front road, with Thomas looking behind him at an angle in his seat so that he could the abbey slip out of sight. Its blue and red flag was still at its mast, without a wind to stir it to dance. Carson took a left on the main road, and they started off at a proper speed towards town. Their only light came from a simple brass lantern that sat on the seat next to Mr. Carson. Its golden ray bounced and jiggled upon Diamond’s shifting back, casting a soft glow upon the trees and road as they strode down Downton’s rural outer lanes.

They said nothing for a moment, both men deep in thought. It seemed that Mr. Carson was content to simply sit in silence, but Thomas found that he wasn’t. There were so many things he wanted to say to Carson but couldn’t… so he’d have to simply make small talk instead.

“Mr. Carson?”

“Hmm?” Carson glanced over to Thomas, a small smile on his face.

“If I come back and there’s no room for me anymore at Downton, what should I do?” Thomas asked. Would he return home to find that no one wanted him again? That times were moving too fast and that there wasn’t any money anymore?

“There will always be a place for you at Downton, Thomas.” Mr. Carson said. That was good to know in any event.

“One day, can I be a valet?” Thomas asked. “I’d like to work with clothes, if I could.”

“One day.” Mr. Carson agreed, “Perhaps when one of our ladies marries.”

At this, Thomas smiled. Perhaps the day would come when he would be able to be Matthew Crawley’s valet after all.

“Of course, I want to train you a little more first.” Carson warned him. “You have great potential but you have the habit of getting side tracked on the little details.”

“I thought the details made the man.”

“They can, but they can also break him.” Carson tutted, “And you have to return home from war first.”

They were encroaching Downton village proper, and Carson started to slow up Diamond’s pace. The cobblestone road was difficult on the wheels of their wagonette. Thomas took up the lantern so
that it wouldn’t bounce off the seat and end up falling into the road. Able to hold the lantern aloft, Thomas lit the way for Mr. Carson as he traveled around the outer edge of Downton village to where the train station was waiting on the far right side. It was positively glowing with light and bustling activity. There would be no civilians on this train, which was bound only for soldiers heading to different destinations. It would take them until nine to arrive in London, and from there another three hours for Thomas to get into Plymouth proper so that he could make it to noon orientation.

As Carson pulled up to a stop beside the train station, Thomas sat the lantern down on the floor board of the wagonette and pulled out his valise and rucksack from the back. Carson helped him, and even got off the wagonette to walk Thomas personally to the station.

It was so queer, to be side by side with Mr. Carson in this way.

Carson took Thomas’ valise from him, allowing Thomas to shoulder his rucksack as they got in line with a throng of soldiers making their way to the front. Thomas had to fish for his travel papers, which were specifically stamped by his local recruiting office to mark him with paid passage for Plymouth. When he reached the front of the line, the ticket office stamped his papers as received and allowed Carson to escort Thomas to the platform where a dozen or so soldiers were already waiting to board a train that had just pulled up and was still gushing steam. Nearly all of them were accompanied by women, who were kissing them goodbye and holding them tight. Several were crying, not wanting to leave their families. A few seemed to have forgotten there were other people watching, with one man going so far as to lift his bonny girl up in his arms so that he could promptly suck her soul out through her mouth.

Thomas eyed the couples, and glanced up at Mr. Carson.

“This is the part where we kiss, right?” Thomas joked. Carson gave him a dirty look.

“I’d rather we part not in an argumentative mood, Thomas.” Carson grumbled, offering his hand for Thomas to shake. Thomas sat down his rucksack and shook Carson’s hand. His grip was warm and tight.

Once again, Thomas was stuck in the awful position of not being able to tell Mr. Carson the truth. Of having to hide his emotions from the one man who had for years declared that Thomas was incapable of feeling anything.

“…Goodbye, Mr. Carson.” Thomas murmured, “And thank you for giving me a second chance. You sent me to war a happy man.”

Carson squeezed Thomas’ hand, then finally let it drop.

“….Goodbye, Thomas.” Carson murmured. “Don’t give me reason to read your letter.”

Thomas just smiled and picked his rucksack back up. He took his valise from Mr. Carson.

“And to think, there was a time when you wanted me dead.” Thomas joked, stepping towards the train as it began to board. The conductor had thrown open the doors and was now accepting soldiers one at a time. Most were now having to pry their wives off, with one hysterical and unwilling to let go.

“Here’s your chance Mr. Carson!” Thomas called out, in bizarrely joyful spirits as he stepped up to board the train. “Wish it now or the opportunity will pass!”

“Then let it pass!” Carson called out. “And bring you home to us with God’s grace!”
He even waved goodbye; Thomas could not help but return the gesture.

How queer that he was smiling as he made his way down the row of compartments until he found an empty one. He found himself sitting on the side nearest the platform, and opened up the window to once again by able to see Carson who was still watching him.

Carson even moved down the platform, skirting between women who were being hoisted up to kiss their lovers goodbye through the open windows. A woman near Thomas was crying, whimpering into her husband’s next as two men helped him to lean out the window so that he might embrace her lovingly one last time.

“George don’t go-“ She sobbed, “God I beg of you, don’t go-“

“Let me go, Mary.” He was murmuring into her auburn hair. “Let me go.”

Thomas wondered if he would return alive.

Carson was now directly beneath Thomas’ window. Thomas leaned out, still smiling.

“Mr. Carson, do me one last favor.” Thomas begged, even as the train whistle blew.

“Last call!” Shouted the conductor, ushering two or three more soldiers on board. They were the final stragglers of the group, with the train soon to depart for London station.

“Anything.” Carson said. He had this desperate look on his face, as if he wished that he could pull Thomas off the train and back to the wagonette where it was safe.

“If something happens to me…” But Thomas didn’t know what else to say besides, “Tell Sarah I forgive her.”

Why of all times use O’Brien’s first name now?

Carson’s expression crumpled. It was as if Thomas’ words were a damning blow.

“Tell her that I understand.” Thomas said, “And that I never wished her ill. That…”

But the train was beginning to take off. Carson had to now start walking in order to keep up.

“For god’s sake, return to us!” Carson called out over the gush of steam and the blast of the train’s engine roaring back to life.

“I’ll try!” Thomas screamed out, and with this he flung out a hand so that if only for the briefest moment Carson could nearly touch him again.

But the train was picking up speed, and Thomas’ compartment had passed the end of the platform. Thomas was still half stuck out of the window, watching as Carson got smaller and smaller upon the horizon till he was nothing more than a fading golden speck.

And soon, even that too was gone.

Slowly, Thomas retracted himself back into the window, shutting it to keep out the wind. There were two other soldiers in his compartment now, both of whom seemed around Bates’ age. Perhaps they
were Boer war soldiers.

“Say your goodbyes?” One man asked with a small smile. There were medals pinned to his chest; clearly he’d already served his country before.

“Yeah.” Thomas looked back to the window; it was pitch black with no true definition of a landscape beyond the glass. “Yeah I did.”

He just wished he could have said more.

Thomas spent a good deal of the train ride sleeping against his rucksack, tucked into the corner with his overcoat cast over his shoulders like an impromptu blanket. He held onto his Downton patch and O’Brien’s letter, though he had yet to read it, and dreamed of nothing but flashing color and light. Some images persisted, mostly of that where Thomas saw the fading Downton platform again but this time instead of Carson chasing after him it was Jimmy with his arm out to try and catch Thomas’ retreating hand.

Thomas awoke with a jerk to find that they were just about to pull into King’s Cross station, and he was being shaken by one of his fellow passengers.

Thomas gave the man his thanks, and when the train finally stopped, he disembarked the Virgin Trains, which he’d so far taken to get out of Yorkshire, and hustled over to the Great Western Railway station where he located platform eight which would take him straight to Plymouth without hassle.

Thomas got back on the new train, found himself a cozy spot near the back where he would not be bothered, and finally opened up Mrs. Patmore’s delicious lunch to indulge in a bit of food.

The train embarked, taking Thomas through Reading and then south towards Taunton. A trolley lady came around offering cups of tea, and Thomas took one to wash down his pasty as he started on his egg and apple. By the time that he finished, his hands were sticky with bits of boiled cinnamon apple and beef; he had to use his tartan handkerchief to wipe his hands clean so that he could finally open O’Brien’s letter.

To be fair, he didn’t know what to expect:
Thomas sighed, refolding his letter to stick it back inside his tunic pocket. He wondered if he would ever be able to truly make Sarah understand that it wasn’t her fault. He doubted it but… he could try at the very least. Of all the people that he’d wronged in his life with a new outlook to try and do better, was it truly right to harm O’Brien so? Was it truly in his best interest to name her solidly as the enemy?

Why was it that someone at Downton always had to be the ‘bad’ servant? Thomas didn’t know if he could truly understand the logic behind it all.

The train traveled through Exetor and finally arrived in Plymouth to show Thomas a massive coastal community thriving on the bays of England. In the center of it all there was the citadel, gleaming in the noon day heat with fine baroque walls and high levees to keep flood waters out. Thomas exited the train station with a flock of soldiers, sweating in his khakis as he took a local bus down past Sutton Pool where the majority of Plymouth lived in a harbor like community.

The Citadel faced the open ocean, and was incredibly staunch with seventy foot walls and one hundred and thirteen guns pointed out towards the oceans. Once these black waters had been churning with Dutch warships. Now they held English battleships, each of them pointed towards the East where Germany surely waited past the English channel.

The 47th Coast Regiment demanded nothing but excellence. Thomas wondered if he was capable of giving it.

Thomas’ arrival in The Citadel was much like his arrival in Richmond the first time around, save that a hysterical catholic general was not waiting for him. Instead, Thomas was greeted by enormous throngs of infantry soldiers, who were divided about learning various aspects of their trade before
being shipped out on military boats across the English channel. Thomas, as a healer, was not enlisted in infantry regiments save for the bare necessities (such as firing a gun and fighting hand to hand with rogue soldiers that might try to come over the trenches.

In the beginning, Thomas had never liked this part of training. His father had been an excellent shot, but Thomas had never been able to shoot like his father. This time around, Thomas had more training but still wasn’t the best shot among the healers. Instead, he excelled at hand to hand combat where he was able to use his military knife to fend off practice attacks. Internally, Thomas thought this all piddle posh, because actual attacks over trench walls were nothing like these little bouts with padding and claps on the back. Thomas therefore was incredibly aggressive with his counter attacks, even in training, and soon earned the nickname of ‘the little terror’ among the older regiments who thought his vicious fighting to be ‘right on cue’ for that of a good soldier.

Terror he might be, little he was not.

There was also physical training to endure. Thomas had to go through a daily pattern of lifting weights, going through obstacle courses, and pushing the limits of his endurance. Before, Thomas hadn’t done very well in this area either despite being an excellent sportsman. This had been one of Thomas’ failings in the war, given that soldiers had to push themselves to the ends and even more after that.

So Thomas just kept fucking pushing, even after his muscles screamed for release and his back ached late into the night.

The entire time, Thomas kept his sights on the possible run in with Edward. On the test that was coming for him, and all that waited for him at home if he could just make it through this damn war.

He had to save Sybil.
He had to save Matthew.
He had to save Edward.

He could do none of these things if he was dead.

At nights, when most of his fellow healers were fast asleep in their bunks, Thomas wrote cramped letters on stationary he managed to buy from local pharmacy shops. Soldier’s got a discount, but Thomas was writing so many letters that it still put a strain on his budget. Thomas kept putting money aside, hiding it deep in his rucksack for the eventual future when he would not have a job. Despite Carson’s assurance, Thomas was under no illusions as to the future. One day, Downton wouldn’t be there to catch him. One day, Thomas would have to have enough money to save himself as he made his way through the storm.

He wrote to Mrs. Hughes, just as he’d promised, and told her that he was doing well. That he was being pushed physically but was determined to overcome the obstacles. Soon his initial training would be complete and Thomas would begin to focus solely as a healer. He wrote to her of his excitement and his fears, asking her to pass on his affection to everyone in the house. She wrote back to him and told him how the family was shaping up. That Matthew had been called to war, though Lord Grantham had not. How Lord Grantham was miserable because of this, and wanted to be sent into battle.

Thomas didn’t even comment on such a ridiculous notion. He found himself partly thinking Lord Grantham to be an incredibly stupid man.
Sarah,

I don't know how to explain to you why I did what I did without you belittled. I tried to tell you in the beginning, but you didn't seem to understand what I was trying to say. Nothing to do with you. Before our back and forth began, you never knew I was there. I try not to take your actions personally. I know it was you who found the scrap of paper in my bedroom to lie for your cause. I know you wrote to my family. I suppose I return, but in truth I know why. You did it because you were hurting that I'd abandoned you. The fact of the matter is, I hadn't. Sarah, I was heading down. I'd seen how much pain I was causing to others to stop. I began to believe in the good of our co-workers and stopped thinking of them as a category of enemy. I wanted to be included. I wanted to be loved. I understand those aspirations, because I'm certain that you have them, too. I don't want to admit it. That was why I stopped scheming; that was isolating myself.

I'm unsure if you believe me, even now, but that is the only reason...
After completing his initial training as a soldier, Thomas began to focus entirely on his work as a healer. Before, Thomas had not applied himself, had often taken long smoke breaks and had flirted failing with other officers that he thought might be like him. In the end he’d been demoted to stretcher bearer because no one would rely upon him for more. This time, Thomas refused to be put in that demeaning and terrifying situation again.

He applied himself just as he’d done during his time at Downton Abbey, and soon found that he was damn good at surgery.

There was something oddly soothing about fixing a wound with immediate rewards. Thomas studied how to provide first triage to soldiers coming off the field, passing rudimentary tests with flying colors where before he’d merely slunk by on a mediocre grade. Head Healer Morris then promoted Thomas to second triage, and so Thomas began to “learn” how to dress wounds… but Thomas already knew how to dress wounds from his time in the war, so once again he passed with flying colors.

So Thomas was passed upward to the third order of triage, where he was asked to take courses in rudimentary French so as to work with ambulances that came out of Paris. Admittedly, Thomas had to push himself even harder to learn how to speak French, because it did not come naturally to him and he did not have the prior training to rely on. He ended up butchering the language but he got his point across and he could heal a man no matter his nationality. For that reason alone, Head Healer Morris once again promoted Thomas to the fourth order of triage so that Thomas could learn how to stop acute hemorrhaging, and equally critical wounds to the thorax and abdomen.
Thomas,

You must try to keep your hopes up. Mrs. Patmore has told me that learning how to cook she often dealt with the French and apparently, with their language. It’s not your fault that you can’t pronounce some words. You’re an Englishman; you’re not meant to speak the language. I know you would find that very hard to believe.

William is still begging his father at every opportunity to enlist though nowhere. The man refuses to give the notion a second thought, much to Daisy keeps his spirits up though; I do believe they are about to start believe it!

Mr. Carson is suffering from the strain of not having you around, your head. He’ll learn how to manage, sure enough, and you’ll be up the reigns of first footman. William has been doing his best in you, he doesn’t have your particular flair. It might have something to do with you were always very efficient with detail. Mr. Carson wants me to that details can both make and break a man. He says that you’ll know We’ve lost a few of the maids and have taken more on. There’s a new of you in your sillier years. Her name is Ethel Parks, and I swear death of Anna before the end of it. I wish you’d hurry home, so you into the girl. She’s just as wild as you were... but she and O’Brother’s threats. Can you imagine your Anna stuck in the middle of
Fourth order of triage was a significantly smaller group than third order, consisting of only a handful of healers that Head Healer Morris thought worthy of the task of taking on the battle of surgery. Thomas practiced again and again on corpses, sewing into dead flesh late into the night, and stepping into live surgeries as back up help for actual surgeons so that he could work his worth against an actual hemorrhaging patient. Other healers had problems at this stage; the blood was too much for them and the screaming often frightened them.

But Thomas just shouted right back for the soldiers to ‘grin and bear it’, often getting cursed at by the men undergoing operations even as Thomas kept them from bleeding out. Thomas’ nickname of “the little terror” turned into that of “the little fighter” as he’d battled with men left and right to behave while being on the table. Head Healer Morris kept all of this in mind as he offered Thomas the chance to operate solo on a soldier returning with shrapnel wounds in his abdomen.

Suddenly, Thomas was the main man scrubbing up, with the more experienced doctors at his shoulders as he began to work to save a stranger’s life.

The man sobbed for his mother, for his wife, for his sister; Thomas shot back at him to be quiet, careful not to get distracted or worked up as he slowly removed the fragments of an artillery shell from the man’s abdomen and stitched the wound closed with eighteen sutures. The operation lasted over ten hours, with the man fainting two hours in to leave Thomas to struggle through the remaining eight. He constantly had nurses checking the man’s pulse, hectic to finish before shock overcame the man and he died on the table anyways.

The man lived, and Thomas was promoted with honors to the fifth order of triage… intensive surgery and amputations. The men on death’s door, and then some.
Thomas,

I thought it might do you good to hear someone talk, wasn’t screaming in pain. Everything is quiet over there. That’s my opinion alone. There’s some nonsense about wanting to join the army. I think he ought to read more damn letters. That’d show some sense into him. Will, he’s always been a pain to look good to others. You should hear how he goes on about you to Effie.

I think he’s forgotten that you haven’t left England yet. He keeps insisting that you’re fighting off the Germans like a hero. Shall I tell him differently or do you want him singing your praises for a little bit longer?

It all sounds ungodly and gruesome. I can’t imagine standing it. Waded through the blood and the dead limbs. About it like it’s normal, but it isn’t. Remember how it was like over here, before you got sucked into all the glory for yourself. Remember Downton and how you used to polish silver all day and whimper for Carson’s att...
But Sarah could never understand because she was too involved in her own world. There was no time to be afraid. No time to think of life back in Downton. Tiny lead balls flattened into the bodies of men wrecked the foundations for limbs, and destroyed any chance of a limb being saved. There was no way to fight infection but to saw off the limb before it took the entire man down.

So Thomas began to saw into man after man, even though they screamed out for him to stop, begged him to let them die instead. He cut off feet, legs above and below the knee, hands, arms sometimes all the way up to the shoulder. Anything to stop the infection and trim the shattered bone. As Head Healer Morris watched Thomas flourish in surgery after surgery, Thomas was gifted with his own personal surgical saw and amputation tool set. He was told by other doctors that the tools were expensive, and a sign of affluence among other doctors.

Frankly Thomas didn’t give a shit.

This was when Thomas’ training really took a dirty and macabre end. There was no way to cleanse a wound save to either pour salt on it or boiling water. Neither were particularly pleasant on a raw infection. Thomas had to work with a team of six healers, two for each limb that wasn’t to be amputated. The final limb was all Thomas’ to wrangle with. He had to rip off soiled gauze, muddied with puss, dirt, and dried blood, then wash out the wound with boiling water and salt before beginning to saw.

But the wounds that Thomas truly pushed himself to cover, the wounds that he found himself getting true hankering for, were gas amputations.

These were the men that had been on the true front lines, the men that had suffered both blasts, and the chloroform gasses that swept the ground afterwards. Not only did they need a limb amputated, the flesh around the wound was covering with horrific festering sores. It was these sores that had ruined Edward’s sight. It was these boils, these rashes, that Thomas therefor wanted to learn how to save the most.

The men screamed with such agony that Thomas was certain he would hear the noise long after he was dead. Like the shriek of a banshee, the howling echoed down every hall, out of every window of the citadel.
It sent a damn chill through your bones. It kept Thomas up at night, clutching to a dwindling bag of candy with trembling pale hands.

*I don’t want to do this,* he could hear the mantra in his mind. The hysterical begging of a boy out of his depth, *I don’t want to do this. God I don’t want to do this.*

But he had to do this. There was no other way.

August passed with Thomas clearing all five orders of Triage, and by the time that September rolled around, he was officially being recognized by Morris for his prowess in healing. It was with great honor that Thomas accepted the title of Head Healer, an order which was given to healers who proved themselves capable of being surgeons on the battlefield. A head healer was assigned to every platoon, and was given control of the entire medical team from the ambulances to the body runners (it was this position that Thomas had once filled). Out of the original medics that had come to the citadel for training (a number that could probably match around three hundred), only nine made it through the five orders of triage to accept the position of head healer. Thomas was one of this number, and wrote back home to Downton with great pride, and even included a note from Dr. Clarkson (who was now a major in the war).
Placements was much like a graduation ceremony, save that Thomas had never completed finishing school and so had therefore never actually been to a graduation ceremony before. It occurred on a warm September day, the skies a crystal blue filled with bright puffy white clouds and the occasional sea bird that drifted overhead. The funny thing about having the citadel right on the shoreline was that seabirds often perched on the guns mounting the walls, making for bizarre coastal decoration with their squawks and fecal sprays. Today was no different, and despite the presence of both General Allenby and Colonel Wavell in the citadel the seagulls continued to be a nuisance and perch on anything that stayed still for longer than five minutes.

General Allenby was a tall broad shouldered man, with thinning blonde hair and a fierce glare. He looked like the sort who could chew on a tin can and spit out an iron nail, and Thomas had made up his mind early on not to cross him if he could. Allenby didn’t say much, preferred to stay in the back of the group, and for the most part grumbled with Colonel Wavell and no one else. Today, however, General Allenby was to give placements to the nine head healers who had gone through their training of the five orders of triage, and so Thomas found himself standing in the center courtyard of the citadel shortly in order to be of service to several surgical wards. It could be that our paths cross there. I look forward to hearing of where you eventually end up.

Dr. Richard Clarkson, M.D. R.A.M.C

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Allenby wasn’t alone today. Not only did he have Colonel Wavell at his side but several other
Majors and Lieutenants as well. They were all waiting along the back wall to receive their new head healer. They were clustered in a tight group, receiving cups of coffee from a nurse with a tray, and didn’t seem too bothered to look in on the nine healers who stood shoulder to shoulder.

While the upper ranks were allowed to relax, the healers weren’t allowed to move. They had to stand with their arms behind their backs, their feet flat on the stone, and their eyes straight ahead.

Even as he waited, Thomas felt a bead of sweat begin to trickle down his left temple.

About half an hour into the gruesome wait, Thomas finally saw Allenby moving to the front of the line. There was a raised platform at the front of the courtyard, a sort of walking plank divided by two side steps. Allenby mounted them, stiff at the knees, and the resulting hush over the higher ranks left the courtyard completely quiet.

The only sound came from the squawk of a seagull overhead, being shooed off a mounted gun by an irritated soldier.

“Attention!” General Allenby shrieked, brass stars and medals gleaming in the hot September sun.

At once, everyone stood a little straighter in their posts.

General Allenby looked left and right down the line of the nine men. He spoke at a calm pace, neither rushed nor stagnant. This was a man who controlled every situation he walked into.

“Medics, you have proven yourselves well underneath Plymouth’s training. You’ve been groomed at the head of experts, and have distinguished yourself as head healers underneath Head Healer Morris. Due to this, you have been called forth by his majesty to start your careers in battle!”

Allenby cast another wary eye to see if any of the medics were slackening in their form. When he found everything to his order, he continued on: “Tomorrow morning at 0100 hours, you will leave the Citadel to embark for France to join our brothers in arms in the glorious fight against the hessian bastards that dare to overtake freedom! You go to aid nine separate troops in need of a head healer, and today receive your placements among the respective colonels, majors, and lieutenants who have expressed interest in your careers. Step forward when you hear your name, and receive your orders!”

At this, everyone let out the shared cry: “Sir yes sir!”

Colonel Wavell walked up the platform, a clipboard in hand. He gave it over to General Allenby who at once began to read from it in a clipped and calm tone.

“Healer Aldridge!” General Allenby said. James Aldridge was a golden youth, with a cleft chin and a handsome visage. He stepped forward at once, a hand to his temple to salute.

“Sir yes sir!” James cried out.

“You will be underneath Colonel Johnson.”

“Sir yes sir!”

And so it continued on.

“Healer Baltimore!”
“Sir yes sir-!”

“You’ll be underneath Colonel Wavell himself. Make sure you’re up to the mark.”

“Sir yes sir!!” Thomas Baltimore was by far the best of the best, and had clearly won the top brass. He looked delighted with himself, a mousy haired young man with round spectacles that gleamed in the sunlight.

But Thomas could not think much about Thomas Baltimore, because he knew from the roll call that his own name was next. His heart was beginning to pound a little harder in his chest in the anticipation of what would come next.

This was the next step to getting through the war. His placement would be his personal conquest. Until the end, Thomas would care for the men underneath his charge.

“Healer Barrow!”

Thomas stepped forward, shouting at the top of his lungs, “Sir yes sir!”

“You will be underneath Lieutenant Courtenay.”

Time seemed to stop.

Thomas gagged on his tongue, momentarily thrown completely through a loop so that he could not automatically respond with a ‘sir yes sir’. Instead, Thomas jerked his head to the left, heart pounding wildly in his throat as he scanned the crowd for Edward Courtenay’s face.

And sure enough, even as Thomas stared, he saw Edward appear from the back of the line of majors and colonels.

He was young, whole… and unscarred.

In that moment, Thomas felt transcended, like his entire frame of mind had been suspended on-

“Barrow-!” General Allenby barked, “Answer me!”

“S-sir yes sir! Sorry sir!” Thomas shouted. He then stepped back in line lest he get even more flack. Allenby was glaring at Thomas, no doubt wondering just why it was that Thomas hadn’t immediately given him back the traditional response.

Frankly, General Allenby could go fuck himself. Thomas only had eyes for Edward.

He was an adonis, utterly beautiful to Thomas with his curly tawny hair and a sweet sultry smile. He was watching Thomas, glorious blue eyes roving all over Thomas’ face. And oh-! How utterly blue
those eyes were. How incredibly pure and true.

Thomas felt like he’d been flung into an ocean, staring into those eyes. Like he could look into them forever, and that would be enough.

He did not hear the rest of the medics receive their placements. He did not care. It did not matter to him where the other medics went, for in that moment Thomas was soaring on a cloud of elation as he realized that he was now to follow Edward. That, no matter what for the rest of the war, Thomas would be able to stay by Edward’s side and keep him safe.

*This is fate,* Thomas thought dreamily. *This is my reward for working so hard. I’ll stay with Edward and keep him safe. This is God’s intervention.*

For a solid moment, he wondered if guardian angels were watching over him.

But even as Thomas’ thoughts turned into an ode for all bright and beautiful things on earth, General Allenby started speaking again in a deep booming voice. Thomas couldn’t help but stare at Edward anyways, not even bothering to watch General Allenby make his ending speech.

“I expect the best of you, as head healers!” General Allenby warned, “You are to care for your uppers with pride! The fate of his majesty’s army rests upon your shoulders! May they prove worthy of the charge!”

“Sir yes sir!” Everyone shouted. Thomas was too busy staring at Edward to follow the line.

“Dismissed!” General Allenby shouted, and with that he dismounted the platform to head back towards the pretty brunette nurse who’d refilled her tray of coffees and was now even offering up a plate of scones. General Allenby might be made of steel, but clearly he had a sweet tooth as well.

In the relaxed atmosphere, every head healer broke off to find their new upper. Thomas was suddenly the only one left in the original line, his limbs tingling with shock as he watched Edward walk forward.

It was… like a type of baptism. Like everything was bathed in a beautiful light.

The sun shone on Edwards’ curly hair and brass buttons, illuminating his lips so that they looked like soft petals instead of human flesh. Edward stopped a foot or two ahead of Thomas, offering him a gentle smile and a handshake.

Thomas accepted it. When their hands touched, he could have sworn a jolt of electricity went through their fingers.

“Barrow.” Edward greeted him. His voice was like honey to Thomas’ ears.

“…Sir…” Thomas replied. He wondered if he sounded as stupid as he felt, “I’ve waited a long time to see you.”

“You know of me?” Edward asked, curious. Those blue eyes had hooked Thomas in and were pulling him under.

“I’ve heard of your bravery sir.” Thomas said, though this was actually a lie.
“Well someone lied to you then.” Edward joked. Even now, Thomas could not help but laugh a little. Edward’s voice was so sweet to his ears, he momentarily wondered if he was dreaming.

“You’re to be my head healer in Ypres.” Edward said, “I’m eager for your particular expertise. This war we’re in is hellish, I won’t lie. Our particular area has been heavily bombarded by gas. That’s why I chose you. I’ve been told that you’ve a special touch for gas amputations.”

“…Yes.” Thomas said, weak at the knees as he remembered how horribly scarred Edward’s face had been.

*It will not happen this time!* Thomas thought defiantly. *I will save you. I will protect you to the end.*

“Yes, it’s rather a soap box of mine.” Thomas finally finished.

“Well I think it’ll do us good. Follow me,” Edward said, and he turned to walk away back towards the eaves of the courtyard which lead into long stone corridors that wrapped in a giant loop around the entire citadel. Thomas dutifully trotted afterward, almost stumbling at first for how numb he was with both joy and shock.

“So where do you hale from Barrow?” Edward asked.

“Downton sir.” Thomas replied, “It’s in Yorkshire.”

“I’m from Oxford myself.” Edward said, “I saw your file. You used to be a footman, I believe?”

“Yes sir.” Thomas said, “I suppose you were a lord, given your rank?”

“The son of the Earl of Bicester, actually.” Edward replied. “I have three footmen at home. So I’ll be sure to be horribly bossy and imposing.”

Thomas just beamed.

“So long as you don’t ask me to clip your toenails, sir.”

“Oh dear.” Edward joked, “I’m afraid that’s my favorite part of the grooming.”

Following Edward’s lead, Thomas took a left and began to head towards the general direction of the officer’s canteen. This was an area previously unknown to Thomas, for it hosted only members of the higher staff. As head healer, Thomas technically could now cross its threshold, but didn’t have the same rank as that of a lieutenant, major, or colonel.

“This relationship will not last, sir.” Thomas teased.

“You’ve struck me blue, Barrow.”

But Thomas couldn’t stand for Edward to call him ‘Barrow’ one more time. He wanted to hear Edward call him Thomas, just as he’d always done.

“Thomas, sir.” Thomas murmured. Edward paused at the entrance to the officer’s canteen, sequestering them in a coat room where the pair of them could take off their hats and overcoats. “Call me Thomas.”

“…Thomas.” Edward said, and there was warmth in his voice as he shook Thomas’ hand again. Edward then clapped Thomas on the shoulder, steering him back in the direction of the canteen.

“Let’s get ourselves some grub. We have a lot to discuss.”
“Yes.” Thomas agreed, “We do.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you have any questions or comments. Please feel free to tell me if you have any triggers that you want to make sure are included in my forwarding comments for warnings.

Note: I apologize for the confusion with the double chapter and the lack of italics. My internet went haywire and I promptly went to bed after posting this chapter so I didn't realize the error till the next morning. I have edited everything so we're up to snuff, and have deleted the last chapter. I lost two of the comments when I deleted the false chapter ten though, which breaks my heart. :c
A Horse Named Khamsa

Chapter Summary

The reunion with Edward Courtenay is put into sharp perspective when Thomas is sent overseas to war.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for this chapter being slightly later than usual. I'm likewise working on commissions and hold a full time job and am helping my mother produce a play that literally has it's opening night on Friday oh and did I mention I'm trying to move to Atlanta in a few weeks and I've just adopted a four week old kitten that has bronchitis?

Did I mention all of that?
Might have accidentally slipped my mind.

Trigger warnings for this chapter include: blood, gore, war violence, amputation, and all around nasty squicks
If this triggers you as a veteran, I apologize deeply.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thomas kept pinching himself to see if he was dreaming, but he wasn’t.

He tried to reason that this might just be some kind of sub-reality; that in the horrors of returning to the awful constant state of war, Thomas had somehow managed to convince himself that he’d stumbled upon the blessing of Edward Courtenay as a queer type of coping mechanism.

But day in and day out, as Thomas woke, trained, read his mail and continued to work towards his career as a healer, Edward Courtenay was there at his side. He reminded Thomas on a constant basis that this was real, and Thomas couldn’t be more giddy about it if he tried.

Edward was nothing like he remembered, a broken doll upon a cold unforgiving floor, frightened of every bump in the night and desperate for companionship to keep the monsters away. Instead, Edward was cheery, humorous, and just a little bit cheeky. He had a stern sense of authority about him, but that was typical of the posh crowd. He knew how to rub elbows with the lower classes though, and delighted in doing so with Thomas whom he’d quickly come to look upon as a bosom friend. Edward was physical, constantly sparring with the lower ranks and helping young soldiers to gain their ground in this awful war. He was also well read, and delighted in debating both politics, religion, sex, and money with anyone who was up for a good jaunt.

Thomas was definitely up for a good jaunt.
Of course, time stood still for no man, even if that man had gone through the laborious process of traveling back in time by methods best left to gypsies. It wasn’t a week after gaining the constant company of Edward that Thomas received news he was to be shipped over to norther western corner of Belgium where fighting was at its worst along the North Sea. Last time, Thomas had gone through France instead, eventually ending up in Flanders where he discovered there was no hope in sight unless he take matters into his own hands. This time around, there would be no slow progression of terror. From the get go, Thomas would be thrown into the fray. Whether he survived or not, gypsy’s potion be damned, was in his own hands.

Mr. Carson, Downton Abbey

I’m writing to inform you that my time has finally come to travel overseas and wonderful man named Lieutenant Edward Courtenay; we’re going to Dorford to Dunkirk, Belgium where I’m told the fighting is quite aggressive. I’ve just received word from Lieutenant Courtenay that I’m to be placed in a platoon and will be in charge of the healing station with around ten healers. It sound rather illustrious but I’m under no illusions as to the reality of my situation. I’ve been on war for war and feel that by the end of it my men will have drastically reduced victors nor losers in war; only survivors.

Please give my affection to everyone at the abbey, especially Mrs. Hughes. I want to thank everyone for the candy tins that they’ve sent me. I would write letters, but I fear that I can’t afford to spare the stationary. Where I am strictly rationed. It’s better to get into the habit now while I still can.

If I do not make it back to Downton, if this is the last letter that I write, I hope that the hope that I write it be good for it.
A sudden knock on Thomas’ door gave him slight pause.

He looked up, unsure if he’d imagined the noise or not, for so deep was he in his letter writing that he’d been thoroughly stuck inside his own head. The now finished letter to Mr. Carson sat upon his desk, next to the remnants of an apple, and a cold cup of half-finished tea.

Thomas’ belongings were packed up, now all stuffed inside his duffle bag, leaving his meagre quarters quite bare of his existence. Thomas rose up, his way lit by a lone candle, and opened his bedroom door to find with a pleasant surprise that it was only Edward on the other side. He was beaming, carrying a tray with two metal canteens full of rationed food from the mess hall. Thomas had been so intent to write his final letters that he’d not been able to make it to dinner. It seemed that Edward did not enjoy the idea of Thomas missing a meal.

“Budge over, little lump.” Edward teased fondly, causing Thomas to step inside so that he could lay his tray upon Thomas’ writing desk. He glanced over Thomas’ letter, grinning from ear to ear.

“Brave and wonderful man, am I?” Edward asked, even as Thomas snatched up the letter and folded it hurriedly into a stale envelope.
“Don’t be nosy.” Thomas warned, but he couldn’t stop smiling either way.

“Oh that’s sweet of you, that is.” Edward praised, setting aside Thomas’ stale cup of tea and eaten apple so that he could lay out their canteens, “What will the men say, eh? There’ll be talk.”

“In your dreams.”

“Ha!”

The pair of them took their canteens and sat down with their backs against Thomas’ bunk, tucking into pot pie and stewed beans. The eatings in the mess hall were nothing compared to Mrs. Patmore’s cooking, but Thomas knew from experience that even this was truly a treat. It would be nothing but tin eating over seas, and most of the food would be gruel, bland, and cold.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” Edward asked. Everyone was to leave around six in the morning for Dorford, only to get on a shutter boat and head across the North Sea for Dunkirk. The whole journey would take them about a full day and night.

“Just about.” Thomas said, “I’m glad you brought up this meal. It won’t be such good eating where we’re going. I’ve packed a few extra can openers to help with opening the tins.”

“You’re clever!” Edward praised, slurping a sip of tea. Thomas wondered if his lack of manners was a result of not having to eat at a posh table with his father watching.

“I don’t know about that.” Thomas said, “I also brought extra rubbers for the bottoms of boots. They’ll pull off within a few days, but you probably already know that.”

At this, Edward paused mid-bite to stare at Thomas agog, “Golly moses, it’s like you’ve been to war before.”

“Maybe I have.”

Edward scoffed, returning to his meal, “Rubbish. You’re too young to have been in the Bauer war.”

At this, Thomas offered him a sly smile and a coy question, “How old do you think I am?”

Edward mulled it over, tilting his head from side to side as he considered his options, “…Eighteen?”

Thomas laughed aloud. Eighteen! As if.

“I’m twenty-four, you putz.” He laughed. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.” Edward said without missing a beat. “This is my second time shipping out overseas. I hate it.”

Thomas did not miss the bitterness in Edward’s voice, nor did he blame the man for disliking war so. It was common knowledge that those who glorified war had either never been to it, or had a terribly skewed perception of reality. Of what was normal or not.

“I don’t blame you.” Thomas said. For a moment, the pair of them sat in silence.

“Are you scared?” Edward finally asked, finishing up his pie and starting on his beans. “I won’t look down on you if you say yes, you know.”
“I know.” Thomas said, for Edward was not that sort of man. “I’ll be honest, I’m not that scared—” It was difficult to be when you already knew what to expect. The not knowing was always the worst part, “I’m just determined I guess.”

“What will you miss the most about home?” Edward asked.

Now that was a fair question. The real trick was narrowing down the list to a manageable amount. Thomas thought of everything that he already missed even now, from his work as a footman to his livery to the smell of Mrs. Patmore’s cooking. Of course, over in Belgium and France even those things would be small bacon compared to the simple wonders of being at home. If there was one thing that the British took for granted, it was their ability to have a cup of tea.

“Tea.” Thomas said, “Fresh with lemon and honey. You?”

“Oh, I miss fishing.” Edward sighed, as if longingly thinking of the days when he could stand waist deep in frigid murky water fighting a trout. “I love to fish, you know. I’d have my cook pack me a lunch and I’d take one of the footmen with me. We’d sneak an ale and fish until dusk. It was as good as a day off for one of them. They used to fight over who got to go.”

If only Lord and Lady Grantham had had boys! Wouldn’t that be something, fighting with William over the chance to romp around the countryside with a little lord. Instead it was only shopping and balls… all the petticoats and hats a man could ask for.

If he asked for that sort of thing, of course.

“Sounds like fun.” Thomas said. He sat his empty canteen aside, sucking against his teeth to get the shell of a bean away from the gap of his two back molars. “My family only had ladies, so I’d go with them for shopping.”

“Aha…” Edward knew the struggle. “My mother used to take our first footman shopping. He hated it. I knew he did because he always got migraines whenever she would say ‘Jacob come with me to town!’.”

Edward spoke in such a shrill voice that Thomas had to wonder if it was possible to be around such a woman and not get a migraine.

“Christ.” Thomas groaned, rubbing the ear that had been closest to Edward, “I’d get a migraine from that too.”

“Did your master ever annoy you?”

Oh, now that was a hard one to answer.

Lord Grantham wasn’t a man without his pitfalls, by any means. He could be spoilt, with a horrible temper when pressed and a knack for forgetting that the servants worked to a different time schedule than his own. He also was terribly fond of his dogs, particularly Pharaoh, which resulted in dog hair getting on every piece of furniture in the house.

“Yes—” Thomas said, only to pause as he thought of how fair and well rounded Lord Grantham could be at the same time. Not every servant was so lucky, “No— well… I dunno really. He loves dogs but they shed everywhere and I hate having to try and clean up after it all. At the same time, he’s a good man and I know that now. I used to think he was spoilt.”
“Maybe he’s both.” Edward offered.

“Maybe.” It was as good a guess as any.

“Maybe I’m spoilt.” Edward said, after a moment of self-reflection. But Thomas just shook his head with a sweet smile.

“No…” He assured Edward, for he could tell by base instinct that Edward was no such thing, “No, you’re wonderful.”

“Oh stop your flanneling.” Edward joked, “I’m a right prick.”

Thomas laughed in spite of himself.

“So, was that you saying goodbye to your sweetheart?” Edward asked, gesturing to Thomas’ unsealed letter. He’d yet to write the address on the front.

But though Edward’s words were surely meant in light jest, the brought about a tense reality for Thomas. Once again, Thomas had to think of how different Edward was from him. That Edward, despite being lovely, warm, and funny, was still a man that preferred women. This would never change, even if Thomas’ perceptions had.

“I don’t have a sweetheart.” Thomas murmured. “Have you?”

Edward just shook his head. He looked oddly changed in that moment, more somber and reflective than he ought to be, “No. I don’t.”

Thomas glanced at him, noticing how his expression was becoming sorrowful. That would never do: “Maybe it’s because you’re such a prick.”

Edward burst out laughing, howling at the insinuation. After a moment, he had to wipe a tear from his eye, blissful with a grin firmly back in place.

“I’m glad you’re going with me to war, Thomas.” Edward praised, “You’re going to make this trip a whole lot easier, I can tell.”

And Thomas couldn’t help but agree.

That night, Thomas slept relatively well, given that he was going to war in the morning. He was woken around five by the call of a sergeant ringing the morning alarm, and showered in the communal locker rooms before dressing in his uniform. If there was one thing Thomas hated, it was having to shower with other men. For whatever reason, Thomas often wondered if other men could tell that he was different, and it came in full force whenever Thomas undressed in front of a crowd. He had to keep his eyes averted, afraid of glancing in the direction of other men lest he see something pleasing and grow aroused. The fear of sporting an erection in a public shower point blank terrified him, for how would he explain himself then? Instead, Thomas just washed in bitterly cold water, going as fast as he could, and hurried back to his dorm with a towel wrapped snugly around his petite waist.

The breakfast that morning in the mess hall was a hurried one. People were posting letters to the staff sergeant, and Thomas made sure that his own got out before the morning post was delivered home. Thomas received another sweets tin, this time from Anna, and tucked it into his breast pocket lest it be forgotten in the hubbub. It would do him well to have fresh tobacco to smoke, along with pear
drops to nibble on. After that, Thomas took his duffle bag and headed down to the docks of Plymouth, waiting for the train that would take them through Exeter and all the way down to Dorford. This would be their final stop before boarding a shutter boat for the coast of Belgium and Dunkirk. The entire ride down was filled with anecdotes from Edward, who spent his time cheering up the younger soldiers and trying to keep others from thinking about the war. He sang bawdy songs with the troops, and whistled and pictures of half naked women that soldier’s had smuggled in their duffle bags.

One was presented to Thomas as it was passed around: it featured a buxom woman with dark hair, surely no older than eighteen, posing for a camera man with her breasts showing and her head thrown back on a satin pillow.

“Look at the tits on her!” A man had crowed to Thomas.

Thomas looked at the tits, remarked that they seemed to have regular nipples and a normal shape, and said, “That’s just swell.”

It wasn’t very well like he could summon naked pictures of hung men and proclaim, “Look at the cock on this one! He’d win a horse show if he didn’t trip over it!”

The arrival in Dorford had a much more somber mood. The men were growing tense, despite their silly talk earlier, and Edward kept a firm grip on Thomas’ elbow as they parted their way through the thickening crowds around the docks. The horizon in the direction of Belgium was dark, churning with far off storms. The ripple of thunder made Thomas wonder if he was actually hearing gunfire instead. Captains and Lieutenants were dividing up the men into groups, each of which was lead by a soldier of higher rank. The soldiers were to report to their prospective leader, board their shutter boat, and make their way across the sea to different stations.

Thomas’ boat was lead by Edward (with no surprise there). Edward barked at men from atop a small scaffold, urging them onto the shutter boat as fast as they could manage in order to keep a time schedule. Some of the men looked downright terrified, with two or three actually praying as they hid along the walls of the shutter boat near the back. An enormous metal hatch made up the bow of the boat, locked by two iron cloves on both sides that had to be unlocked unanimously for the gate to drop. It would be this gate that would serve as a down ramp for soldiers, whether they be boarding horses or running on their own two feet. It was to Thomas’ great surprise that Edward actually road a horse; indeed several beasts were boarding their shutter boat only to be tethered to the side walls where soldiers kept them calm and still. It was positively packed on board, with no room to move on either side.

“Group 3B!” A captain was shouting from the stern of the shutter boat, where an enormous helm stood on a high deck overlooking the bow below. There were supplies being loaded in, one crate at a time, till an enormous wall of wood blocked the sight of Dorford’s port. It seemed that Thomas’ group was to be 3B for with one last scuttling of a man on board, the starboard ramp was pulled away and the door was shut tight. It was sealed from the inside by a lieutenant who cranked a shaft until the seal was watertight, waving his hands to signal up to the captain as a signal of ‘all clear’.

“Everyone settle down! Settle down!” Shouted a Lieutenant on the far side. He was urging men to sit down upon the floor, to stay as still as possible while the Captain up ahead pulled at levers and churned the shutter boat’s engine to life. The beast of a machine roared beneath their feet, making the metal floor vibrate slightly.

“Disembarking!” Roared a sailor from helm deck, “Everyone keep yer heads down!”
And sure enough, as the shutter boat began to pull away from the dock to pick up speed, an enormous splash of off shore waves hit the bow sending a spray of water over the top of the boat. Salt and foam kissed the air, with horses snorting at the mess. It was a show of how calm the horses were that none of them jostled in their reigns. These were not ordinary steeds, made for hunting or riding. These were war horses, built for the purpose of delivering soldier’s safely across to the other side of a battle zone. They did not start, they did not fear, and what was more they did not regret. They plowed through with their mission to the end, and for that they were invaluable on the battle field.

Thomas found himself remarking at the beauty of the beasts. One of these horses was Edward’s, Thomas just didn’t know which one that would be.

Thomas was near the bow of the boat, with his duffle bag sat at his feet. Several of the lieutenants and upper ranking soldiers were likewise crowding the front of the boat. Several boxes of supplies were near the bow, having been laid there in order to make extra room on the upper decks. Now, Lieutenants were using them like platforms, with Edward climbing atop two crates of explosives in order to be taller than everyone else in the crowd.

“What are you doing?” Thomas demanded, fearing the man might fall and break his neck, “Get down from there-“

“I’m making a speech!” Edward declared, which was just what General Burton’s right hand Colonel had done during Thomas’ first shutter boat ride over. He’d spent a good half hour comparing the German’s to heathens, leading them all in somber prayer, before retiring to have a port on the upper deck with the Captain of the ship.

Thomas rolled his eyes, hoping he’d not have another awful repeat of that experience.

“Attention!” Shouted Edward, putting two fingers to his lips in order to bite and whistle loudly. Soldiers looked about, both upper and lower alike, till Edward was suddenly at the full attention of one hundred men and twenty-two horses. Even they seemed to be listening, their ears turned sharply to the front and their dark eyes lit with knowing.

Overhead, a peel of thunder rumbled across a blackening sky. The shutter boat was open aired, with every soldier viable to get soaking wet should rain fall down.

“Allright men!” Edward spoke in a voice both loud and clear, eyes keen as he stared each man down, “I won’t paint this any prettier than it is. We’re heading to Belgium and when we arrive it’ll be a shock for most of you. Remember your orders, that’s your best bet. We’re leading a fight to push German’s back from the town of Dunkirque. The locals are destitute. We’re going to be aiding the Belgian and the French troops, as well as backing up our own English brothers.”

Men listened with rapt attention, soaking up every word as if hoping that might keep them safe.

“There will be gunfire.” Edward warned. “There will be bombs. There will be chlorine gasses. Do not act like a hero, do not do anything stupid, and keep to your orders!” Edward shouted, holding up a finger for each command till three were in the air. “Is that clear?”

“Sir yes sir!” the men shrieked. Thomas said nothing to any of this, merely smiling as he scratched at his chin.

Edward wasn’t telling him anything new, but he appreciated the man’s take on the subject. There was nothing worse than being preached to. Edward was actually giving the men advice, directions even. It would surely end up saving their lives. The last time Thomas had entered a war zone, men
had scattered like cockroaches, hiding from bullet fire only to be drowned by rogue waves.

“When we dock on the beaches of Dunkirk, this front panel will come down!” Edward yelled, gesturing to the bow behind him. Salt water was continuously dribbling down from the cloves, where gears hung tight to keep out battering waves. “You’re to run down the ramp, across the beach, and into a dug out that will lead you into our trench system. You’ll move to the center of command, where you’ll give your name to Colonel Wavell. He’ll be there waiting for you, and he’s in charge of our platoon. You’ll them be divided up amongst the upper ranks, and given your orders. You’re to follow any instructions given and to do them without sass.”

He eyed the men warily at this, “This is war, gentlemen. There’s no such thing as the individual. When you make it to command center, you’re going to be given a partner for safety and accountability. You will eat, sleep, breath, shit, and fight with that partner until the day you leave… or die.”

At this, a soft murmur rippled through the men. A sense of mortality was hanging in the air, making them all nervous.

“Among your groups, there will be medics!” Edward seemed eager to get away from the subject of death if he could. Thomas doubted they’d be able to avoid the subject for long. Edward’s voice turned high and leering, hands on his hips as he chastised the men before him, “They are not your mummy and they do not bandage every booboo you get! They work under the commands of the lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels, and generals. Stay out of the way of the body shifters, unless you want to be the next one on a stretcher. Likewise do not enter the surgery tents unless you want to see something better left to the imagination.”

Thomas shrugged, musing Edward had a valuable point at that.

“Among the medics, there is a head healer. We are privileged to have Thomas Barrow as our head healer.” At this, Edward gestured to Thomas, so that suddenly another Lieutenant was urging Thomas to clamber up onto a box packed with dynamite. Nervous, Thomas toed the edge of the wood, fretful to put his entire weight on such a shaky structure. The men were all staring at him now, enraptured by the sight of him next to Edward.

_They’re scared_, Thomas remarked, looking from one pale youthful face to the next, _A month ago these boys were whining to their mothers for extra tea. They’re not meant for this war._

And it made Thomas sick to his stomach, to know with all likelihood that over half of these men would surely not make it back. There’d be an empty seat at someone’s table. An empty bed left cold and stale.

“There he is!” Edward cried out, gesturing to Thomas beside him so that everyone made sure to look at him well and hard, “Everyone get a good look at his face! Remember it!”

Thomas nodded to the men, forcing a pained smile as best he could. He probably ended up looking slightly constipated.

“He’s as smart as they come,” Edward praised, causing Thomas to flush, “And he’s going to keep you safe. That being said, Barrow will be working directly with me and Colonel Wavell. He’ll be running our surgical tent in Dunkirk. Try to avoid running into him, yeah? Because if you do… well…” Edward shrugged. “He’s probably gonna saw a limb off.”

That shut everyone up.

One boy in the back looked close to tears. Irritated, Thomas gave Edward the stink eye. Did he really
have to remind them that Thomas’ main contention was to amputate destroyed limbs?

Edward looked slightly sheepish, but continued on never the less.

“I’m not a religious man, so I won’t lead you all in a prayer.” Edward said. He spoke in a gentler voice now, seemingly aware that most of the men were actually just boys and probably scared shitless, “Instead, I’ll ask you all to think of this. Each of you has a family, a town, probably even a lover at home… Children, wives, mothers— they all need you.” Edward said, turning to glance at Thomas for a moment. It was as if Edward was wondering if Thomas thought longingly of any of these things.

Indeed, Thomas could not help but picture Downton Abbey in that moment, beautiful and bold against a summer breeze.

“They love you.” Edward reminded them, “They cannot live without you. You are their bread winner. Your wives need your income to survive gentlemen. I’ve seen what happens to the wives of soldiers who die. They become destitute. Penniless. Do you want that to happen to your families? To your wives and children?”

“No sir!” Many of the men shouted. At this raucous call, others began to speak up so that suddenly the whole bow was crammed with voices of anger screaming “No! No we won’t!”

“They stay alive!” Edward shouted over all of them, a fist in the air in retaliation, “And get back home!”

The men applauded him, or rather themselves.
Thomas feared it would be the last time they’d feel joy for a while.

After Edward’s speech, there was nothing to do but sit and wait. Edward got off his makeshift platform only to engage in small talk with other Lieutenants so that Thomas had no choice but to amble through the crowd towards the far wall where one could catch a breeze coming in through ribbon holes that threaded enormous coils of rope. Thomas didn’t have to wait long for Edward to appear, threading his way through the crowd so that he could reach the horses on the port side. A few were grazing in sacks of hay and grain, with most merely holding still in their tight channels. One in particular near the front was Edward’s destination, a handsome and clean legged horse that had one hell of a finely chiseled bone structure for a face. Its neck was arched, its tail was carried high, but for whatever reason its croup was oddly level. Thomas had never seen such a horse before, and remarked at how the horse from tail to ear tip was completely black. The mare responded well to Edward’s approach, and appeared to have a calm personality not easily ruffled.

Thomas joined Edward’s side, noting the horse was now heavily nuzzling Edward’s offered hand.

“Invigorating speech, Lieutenant.” Thomas teased, “Are you going to try and rouse the horses now?”

“Oh, not Khamsa.” Edward murmured, praising the beast before him with a sweet tone and loving gaze, “No I’d never try and nag her to death.”

“Is this your horse?” Thomas asked in wonder, looking up at Khamsa to admire how tall the beast was. She was surely about nine or ten hands, not a horse to be trifled with.

“Mm.” Edward nodded. “Yes, she’s been mine for a while now. A gift from my father after a trip to
Arabia. She returned with him, just a little foal. I was only a boy, but it had been my dream to own a horse. She’s an Arabian, you know… one of the fastest breeds in the world.”

Khamsa certainly did not look like any quarter horse Thomas had seen before.

“Well, I’m glad you’ll be in good company.” Thomas murmured.

“Oh you’ll be in her company too.” Edward warned, giving Thomas a crafty smile; he was prone to mischievous moods even during dark times. “I’ve requested for you to be my accountability partner.”

Thomas could not help but split a grin at this, joyful to know that he would once again be in such close proximity to Edward as to protect him from the dangers of chlorine gasses. It seemed like fate was lining him up with one stroke of good luck after another, which was a queer thought to have when he also considered that he was about to head into an active war zone.

“Lieutenant, think of the men.” Thomas teased, reaching up to carefully pet Khamsa upon her flank. He remarked at how smooth she was, how muscled and strong. “They’ll talk.”

“Let them.” Edward didn’t seem to care much one way or another. “There’s worse things in life than to be chased by a rumor. You’ll find that out soon enough.”

Little did Edward know that Thomas was more than well aware of the horrors he was about to face. Unwilling to spoil such a nice moment by the thought of the near future, Thomas instead pressed Edward for details about his position in Dunkirk.

“So I’m the head of the clinic in Dunkirk?” Thomas asked. Edward nodded, fiddling absentminded with Khamsa’s holster.

“You are.” For whatever reason, Edward sounded slightly apprehensive. He put on a brave face though, determined not to let Thomas see the fear in his eyes. “It’s mostly gas victims and bomb amputations from Ypres. Bullets are usually fatal. You’ll probably get shot and killed relatively soon. That’s what happened to our last head healer.”

Thomas pursed his lips, scowling at Edward’s forced tone. There was no need to be quite so gloomy this early into the game, surely? “Well that’s cheered me right up.” Thomas muttered.

“Don’t worry.” Edward said, as if hoping his words would somehow banish the image of a dead healer from both their minds. “He was paired up with an idiot. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Oh, and he’s sweet too.” Thomas found himself grinning again. Damn Edward for being so irresistibly charming!

“I try to be.” Edward teased.

But now, with the watery road to Dunkirk ahead of them and nothing to do for a good six hours, it was time to rest and wait. With this in mind, Edward kicked his duffle bag next to Khamsa’s feet. He squatted down, back resting against the wall, and closed his eyes as if to go to sleep.

Thomas followed suit; he didn’t know what else to do.

They sat side by side, slowly but surely gathering company as soldiers left and right tried to fight off their nerves through restless bits of sleep. It was the sort of jittery rest you’d probably find the night before a wedding or in the hours before a birth. Your mind was pacing, unwilling to let you rest in
case something happened you weren’t prepared for. Thomas found himself wishing that he’d bought more stationary before leaving England. Why hadn’t he thought to get a tin of tea? It was one thing to go to war the first time and have these regrets, but this was Thomas’ second time around. He should have known. He should have been more careful! But dinner with Edward and getting one last letter out to Mr. Carson had forced thoughts of stationary and tea out of his mind.

Disgusted with himself, Thomas tried to sleep.

In the end, he probably didn’t end up sleeping more than four hours in combined micro bursts. He laid his head upon Edward’s shoulder after a while, and allowing the rocking of the shutter boat to be a soothing rhythm against his sore muscles. From time to time he’d fade out, but the arrival of a sudden rain shower and the rippling of thunder across the sky made it difficult to sink into deep restful sleep. Thomas was certain that Edward slept, but for how long he couldn’t say. His deep rumbling breathes were a lullaby in Thomas’ ears. He found himself dreaming of Edward, basking on a cool beach that glimmered with flecks of silver. Edward was naked, his cock erect though he did not make to take himself in hand. Instead, he reached his arms out into the air, as if coaxing Thomas to come down from the heavens.

The waters were surging up, covering Edward only to rush back again. For some reason, though Edward was the one being splashed, Thomas was the one to feel wet and cold. The rumble of water, splashing about Edward’s carved calves and swollen bird, grew louder and more erratic.

And so it was that Thomas opened his eyes to dusky plumes with smoke drifting through a nigh time sky.

They’d arrived.

The sound of cannon fire was immediate and obvious to recognize. Thomas found his muscles stiffening in automatic response. Like the sort of thing you’d forgotten about after a long pause in an otherwise ugly game, Thomas was slowly snapping back into player mode.

Cannon fire meant Germans.
Germans meant fighting.
Fighting meant death.

“Edward.” Thomas looked to his right to find Edward fast asleep against his shoulder. Somewhere in their little nap, Thomas had gone from being the one who leaned on Edward to the one who supported him. They weren’t alone in their idea. Nearly every man was either asleep or at least sitting down. The few standing up were smoking near portholes, looking out at the dark and turbulent sea.

“Edward-!” Thomas shook him by the arm.

Edward woke up with a start, snorting softly as he blinked awake. He looked about, rubbing the corner of his mouth where a bit of drool had dried into white spittle.

“We’re here.” Thomas said; with unnerving coincidence, a sudden crack of a canon rippled out across the sky.

Thomas and Edward rose up, sore from sleeping against slick metal and their rucksacks in tight
quarters. They stretched as best they could (hardly easy to do when they were in a crowd) and began to thread their way towards the front. Other Lieutenants were gathering there, staring out at any free port hole they could gather. A few were clustered near the boxes of supplies, using their height as an advantage to see over the top of the bow ramp. Thomas and Edward joined them, crawling through a practical sea of bodies just to glimpse what they could of Belgium. There was nothing you could see at the moment, save for a queer little shoreline that was only distinct because of the flashes of light where gunfire illuminated the sky. The whole place looked horribly dismal, even from a distance, and Thomas found himself already beginning to regret this whole awful business.

God, and to think it had only just begun.

“I could swear it looks like the bastards have gained ground on us.” One lieutenant muttered, eyes squinting through the porthole as cannon fire lit up the coast line.

“Surely camp hasn’t fallen.” Another lieutenant feared.

“We’d know if it had.” The first replied.

Just then, the sound of a motor pealing through water caught everyone’s attention. Men stood up, left and right, curious to see what was making such a commotion as to drown out the cannons. It turned out to be even more shuttle boats, though these were smaller than their own and were equipped with guns. Without warning, they began to fire at the shoreline, sparking up in a glow of white, yellow, and orange against the darkening night. Soldiers fired round after round, trying to clear the beaches for incoming soldiers lest they be taken out early by enemy forces. In that moment, Thomas suddenly felt like time was moving too fast. He could hear Edward shouting at the men, rousing them from their sleep into terrified awakening. He could see Sergeants pulling the horses loose, moving them through the soldiers till they were forming a line of beasts at the front like a wall of muscled imposing flesh. Men were panicking, some pulling out guns, others holding their packs to their breasts. Some more experienced soldiers were moving boxes of supplies out of the way; two men were climbing up on either side of the bow ramp, getting ready to pull the cloves so that the gate would come crashing down.

“Thomas!”

He looked about, only to find Edward already mounting Khamsa. Edward held out a hand, as if to get Thomas to climb atop the horse as well.

“I can’t ride!” Thomas shouted.

“Oh yes you can!” Edward refused to hear excuses. He took Thomas’ hand, and before Thomas could say one word of protest he was suddenly being hoisted up onto the back end of Khamsa’s loaded saddle. Thomas waffled, making noises of disbelief as he desperately scrambled to set his legs astride Edward’s own. His britches were splayed wide, his cock was right up against Edward’s ass and this was surely going to be a very bad idea.

He held onto Edward as tight as he could, grateful to receive his own duffle bag as a fellow soldier passed it up to him. He was the only man to ride alongside a soldier; the other higher ups were riding solo, pulling out pistols and tightening down their packs.

“Brace for impact!” Howled the Captain from up atop helm deck. Soldiers were openly panicking now, ducking their heads down as if hoping that would help for when the boat eventually crashed up against the rocky beach. Thomas clenched his thighs tight about Khamsa’s sides, one hand on the
back of Khamsa’s saddle and the other notched tight in Edward’s waistband.

“Don’t run into the gas, Edward!” Thomas begged, speaking as loudly as he could into Edward’s ear. The tips of Edward’s curly hair was tickling his nose, even as men around them clung tight to the walls of the ship. “We work as a unit-!”

“Don’t worry about me, Thomas!” Edward quipped, but before he could say anymore there was a sudden heaving motion that nearly sent them all skittering. Khamsa was steady on her feet, as were most of the horses. The men however, tumbled about one another as the ship crashed against the shore of the beach. The soldiers atop the cloves were signaling to one another. Any minute now, the ramp would be dropped.

In that moment, with the sound of rapid gunfire echoing in his ears and the smell of smoke filling his nose, Thomas could not help but think of the hearth at Downton Abbey.

Of Mrs. Hughes sitting by the fire in his favorite rocking chair, turning a page idly in a book of ancient poetry—

The gate dropped.

There was a split second for Thomas to take on the sight of the beach, strewn with blood and dead bodies, but then Edward was roaring for Khamsa to take flight, speaking to her in a language Thomas did not understand.

“Arkab!” Edward roared, kicking Khamsa hard in the ribs. “Rukub ealaa!!”

She bolted.

Thomas had never flown so fast before in all his life; not on a train, not even in a motorcar. This sort of speed was meant for birds alone, for beasts of the wild! He’d never ridden on a horse once in this life or his last, and held on for dear life even as he began to bounce wildly up and down in his saddle. In a desperate attempt to stay on, Thomas threw his arms about Edward’s waist, despite how it might look, and held the fuck on as Khamsa stormed the beach.

She was leaping over the corpses of fallen soldiers; she was mounting the sand dunes-

And then suddenly they were atop the beach, riding hard along tracks in the reeds that had been mowed flat by men, beasts, and even tanks. Ahead of them, not even by two miles off, were massive trenches that had been dug deep into the earth by soldiers and beasts alike. Miles and miles of no mans land spread out across what once might have been a beautiful and flattering beach. Now there was nothing but carnage and muck, riddled with the broken remains of tanks, wagonettes, and abandoned medic tents. Thomas could hardly keep a solid view; he was simply bouncing about too much. Khamsa was going too fast and he didn’t even know how to sit properly in the saddle!

But just when Thomas feared he might fall off and be lost to the dirt, Edward let go of Khamsa’s reigns with one hand to reach behind him with another so that he might hold Thomas tight to his back.

Pressed against the powerful blades of Edward’s shoulders, Thomas buried his nose deep into the
starched fabric and shut his eyes tight.

*Get me out of here*, he prayed. *Get us to safety.*

Khamsa was not afraid of the gunfire, nor of the men screaming out in agony. Indeed, it seemed that nothing reached her ears save for Edward’s foreign cries to go faster, to take the hill! She charged past the prelimenary trenches, even as Germans far off attempted to shoot her down. The sound of bullets zipping through the air past them made the bottom of Thomas’ stomach drop out. Any one of those bullets would be their death—a fraction of difference and all would be lost!

But even as Thomas feared that they would be gunned down without making it to base, Edward steered Khamsa towards a deep opening in the trench where crates had been broken and stacked to make a sordid ramp through the mud. It was through here that men brought in supplies and horses, ten feet deep into the earth where the temperature dropped and the bullets could not get them. It was here that men hid and lived in fear, waiting for the moment when the war would turn and they could all go home.

Khamsa did not whinny nor stir in her holster as Edward jerked her reigns and forced her to a stop at the base of the ramp; it was common to have horses underground. They pushed supplies on makeshift sleds and carried the wounded faster to medics. Khamsa was greeted by welcoming men, absolutely filthy from head to toe. They called out Edward’s name, clapped him upon the thigh and calve, glad to have him ‘home’.

“Got us a head healer!” Edward boasted.
He was met with cries of praise.

~*~

Dunkirque was much like Thomas expected and remembered, though he’d never been here before.

It was the same way in Flanders; location mattered very little save for how close to enemy lines it drifted. The fears of disease and death, whether it be from Cholera, trench foot, or bullets, dominated every hour of the day. Every action of every man. The Chinese Labour Corps had dug out a massive network of trenches through the northwest corner of Belgium where it touched on the border of France. It was a city wrapped in a maze, covered in filth from rubble blown in by battle and slipping walls. At times, enormous ramps passed overhead, cutting soldiers into gloom and shadow beneath; at other times, tiny little dug outs had been carved into the walls of the trenches, allowing soldiers a place to kip or eat if they dared pause in their defense.

Just like before, the rains of Belgium coated the war zones, causing every soldier to appear slicked to their skin in mud and water. Horses were bathed in a river of filth; supplies were sodden before they were even taken out of their crate. No Man's Land was an area of carnage, where nothing stirred save for when cannons or bullets blew mile high waves of mud and filth into the air. The mud would get flung into the trench inevitably; the worst was in it washed in the body of a soldier who’d vanished beneath the muck never to be seen again. Who would have imagined that soldier’s could drown without stepping foot in a body of water?

Of course, the real hell (and the part that Thomas liked least) was the amount of rats that covered the
trenches.

Rats, upon rats, upon rats!!

They were everywhere you looked, scuttling along the floors of the trenches, squeaking in No Man’s Land when a bomb went off, hiding in the crates of foot, walking over sleeping soldiers, invading medical tents and essentially making life a living hell.

And yet, Thomas was quite surprised to learn that he was not to be living in the trenches. Indeed, he was to stay out of them entirely.

Thomas’ realm, from dusk until dawn, was a little medical tent on the backside of the trenches that was safe from gunfire for the most part. As a registered head healer, Thomas was now one of the official Medical Officers of the British Expeditionary Force. To say that this was an honor was an understatement, but Thomas tried to take it in his stride. It wouldn’t matter how many colors he put on his uniform if one of them was blood from dead soldiers.

The prior Medical Officer whose position Thomas had filled had died from gunfire after being abandoned by his accountability partner. It was a sore topic in the tents, for many of the healers and nurses that remained had known the man and thought him excellent in his craft. But Thomas had spent the past two years working dusk till dawn to make people understand that he was a changed soul. It wasn’t long until he found himself in the respect and good company of the nurses and medics.

Thomas’ first order of business was to re-establish regimental aid posts so that the wounded could be evacuated and cared for by ambulances in advanced dressing stations. This was level two triage, and was chock full of medics who hadn’t made the cut past level three. They couldn’t speak French but they could wrap a wound with damn ease, so Thomas put them to work. Horses and soldiers on duty carved out better routes for ambulances to take. More than once, Thomas saw Edward riding atop Khamsa, urging her to go faster while soldiers desperately tried to keep up on foot.

Indeed, Edward seemed to find plenty of reasons to hang out around Thomas’ tent. He was always stopping by to deliver news, supplies, or simply see how Thomas was.

Of course, this was hardly a one way affair.

Thomas doted on Edward constantly. Despite bunking with other healers behind the tents, Thomas still found himself wandering into the back edges of the trenches to find Edward and look after him. He brought Edward fresh rations, made him tea in a canteen, looked after his health during bouts of influenza which overtook men like a tidal wave. Above all, Thomas demanded that Edward be careful at all times. That he watch out for gas, and never be without his chlorine mask. It gained him the reputation of the ‘nagging wife’ inside the troop lines, though Thomas was mostly unaware of this given that he was needed constantly in the medic tent. The rumors went even farther, insisting that Thomas was too feminine for a man at war… but to these unkind words Edward held a staunch defense. He refused to hear a man dismiss Thomas’ abilities, and was known to get into a hot temper if he heard a muttering he didn’t like.

But there was no time to deliberate on the emotions of either man. War was relentless.

“Alright, I want to see eyes up and hands out!!”

A gas attack had ravaged a unit that had been led into battle during the direction of Ypres. It was a sweltering hot day, with no cloud coverage to hide a soldier in shadows. As a result it was absolute
carnage in the trenches. The sunlight and clear skies was giving both sides a chance to shoot with better accuracy. The far off screams of wounded and dying men echoed through the medical tent, but Thomas was deaf to all of them. He strode through his little crowd of healers, dictating beds to wounded men as they were brought in on stretchers. Their skins were being boiled alive, their clothes falling off and their hair curling with the effect of the chlorine. Their wails and gurgles all but blotted out the chaos outside; once again Thomas could not hear them. Now, as always when battle was upon him, Thomas found himself falling into a strange auto pilot where he could work and not be emotionally strained.

Healers were scrambling about him, even as Thomas dunked his hands in a bucket of what one could pray was clean water so that he could scrub at the filth on his hands with diluted lye.

It would help very little but it would give him some amount of cleanliness.

“Every man to a bed!” Thomas ordered, “Put boxes in a line if you have to! Roger, get me a pack of morphine and dilute it with saline— everyone gets a bit—! Remember boys and girls, the day will come when we have nothing!” At this Thomas paused, watching one of his best workers, Roger, begin to dilute a bottle of morphine in a deep dish filled with saline. It essentially turned a eighteen fluid ounces of saline into three gallons.

Men were being laid anywhere they could fit a body, from open beds to rows of medical crates to even padding on the floor. Thomas walked among them, now tasked with the gruesome job of picking out who would be more likely to live or die. Those he could not save immediately were taken by horse ambulance to the coast where they were shipped back to England. If they survived the voyage, they were treated in an army hospital on God’s green and blessed soil.

Roger packed bag after bag with saline, handing them off to Helen, a nurse in her teens that showed a great deal of promise. The pair of them were quick and efficient, hopping from one bedside to the next in order to give every man a chance at some relief.

“Lieutenant Nordstrum led out a unit that got bombed with chlorine gas!” Healer Norris said. He was another one of Thomas’ better helpers, a man about ten years Thomas’ senior but unable to excel in his craft. He was strong, though, and that was what mattered in the end when you were in a war.

“You know what that means-“ Thomas warned.

“Please don’t say it-“ Helen moaned, throwing back her head with her eyes pinched at the thought of what must surely come next.

“I don’t make the rules.” Thomas said, for with every evil of war there was an ugly if immediate solution.

Someone shoots you? Shoot them back.

Someone’s leg gets blown off? Amputate the stump.

Someone gets hit with chlorine gas? Douse them in horse piss.

It was the ammonia in the urine which deflected the chlorine that could so easily burn skin, clothing, and hair. Between the two options of letting a horse wiz on you and watching your skin bubble and slide off your bones… well….

Most men took the former.
“Bring out the horse urine!” Thomas commanded, and though audible groans went up in the tent, his commands were obeyed. Norris was helped by other men, a group of four dragging an enormous washtub full of collected horse urine through the healing tent so that torn rags could be dunked in the noxious liquid.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes-“ Thomas went by each man, nodding to all of them. They could be saved. They were burned and howling in pain but they could survive. “Yes, yes—“ But just then Thomas came upon a man who had been burned so horrifically his face was practically dissolved. Thomas winced, knowing full well the man would surely die come morning, “No.”

“Everyone else is a yes!” Thomas shouted to his helpers. Even the most dire could be salvaged; at least, Thomas was optimistic for the moment. Come morning a few more men might become ‘no’s.

“Ford-!” Thomas shouted out the back of the healing tent, ushering forward another strong man who was less of a healer and more of a grunge body. He was one of Thomas’ lesser helpers, a man capable of physical tasks but nothing else.

Ford shuffled to the front, ready to be directed. He had rather gorilla like arms, and plaintive brown eyes.

“I want that man separated from the others!” Thomas commanded, gesturing to the soldier who was now for all intents and purposes without a recognizable face. “Strip everything off of him, all his clothes, shave his hair, everything comes off! You wipe his entire body down with horse urine and immobilize the chlorine eating at his flesh. Work fast and you might save his life-!” Highly unlikely.

Thomas wheeled about, pointing to the men now groaning and sobbing upon thin mattresses or lines of boxes. “Every man in this tent is stripped!” Thomas shouted to his crew. “All the clothing has to go-!”

Granger, a nurse with curly blonde hair, was running back and forth handing out rags. Thomas spotted her and called out to her: “Granger, get the field pajamas! Just bottoms, no tops!”

His team worked like a well oiled clock, and Thomas was proud of them in that moment. The smell of horse urine was noxious in the air, making every man gag (even those choking on their own blood).

“Oh god, it stinks!” One man wailed as Helen began to bathe him in urine. Drenched in piss, the man squirmed and writhed upon his bed.

“It’ll smell better than your burning flesh.” Thomas scolded, passing by Helen’s patient to instead focus on Roger’s patient whose fingers seemed to have been burned solidly together. The man was shaking, holding his hands to his chest; Thomas carefully began to inspect the man’s hands, wondering if perhaps this man too was to be a ‘no’. Could these fingers be saved?

Roger began to bathe the man’s flesh in horse urine. The soldier gagged, rolled his head to the left, and vomited all over the bed.
“I agree with that sentiment.” Thomas said, deciding that the fingers could in fact be saved so long as there wasn’t nerve damage. “Prep him for surgery, Roger.”

Thomas moved on to the next man, a soldier whose flesh was horribly burned but whose eyes seemed to have miraculously survived. The answer lay in the man’s forearm, which was so horribly burned Thomas knew that the arm would probably have to be amputated. It seemed the man had flung his arm over his eyes to block the gas… it had saved his sight in the end. The man’s clothing was so burned it was beginning to blend into his flesh. It had to come off—all of it!

“All of this man’s clothing has to come off!” Thomas barked. Roger had just finished inserting a drip into the arm of the man with gnarled fingers. He hopped over to Thomas’ side, and began to tear at the soldier’s clothing, trying to isolate the more serious burns on his body at the same time.

Their hands tingled when they touched the clothing. It was a mark of how strong the chlorine was.

“N-no!” The man groaned, tossing and turning upon his cot. He was delirious, riddled with fever and pain. He struggled against Thomas’ and Roger’s hands, which would do him little good in the end.

“So… Sophie…” The man began to cry. Thomas could not afford to pause as he stripped the man’s clothing; at times he felt rather like a bastard when he pulled off clothing and flesh came away.

“Please… Sophie… Sophie…” The man shuddered, tears slipping from his eyes.

Roger began to wipe the man down with urine. Thomas followed up, isolating the man’s ruined arm upon a crate next to his cot, carefully wrapping the wound in boiled linens.

“If you die, Sophie’s going to be mighty lonely, so I suggest you suck it up you big baby!” Was all Thomas could say.

And so it carried on.
Life at home is pressing on the same as always. William still isn’t and he’s quite distraught about it. I’ve shown him your letters, but I to be admired instead of pitied. I on the other hand am under no ill of war. Maybe one day he’ll understand but he’s just a child for me. Speaking of children, Daisy is getting more of a voice. She’s learning. Mrs. Patmore, now that she can see again. The true problem is that have his helpers anymore and he just can’t stand it. Money is tight, the family still expects us to carry on. What would I give to have you that things could return to normal!

I’ve sent you a tin of candy and chocolate. If only I could send you Patmore’s salted cod cakes. She promises when you come home she’ll be large as you like.

There’s one thing I want to mention to you in closing, but you must take seriously. You’ve mentioned many things about your Lieutenant friend wonderful and amazing he is. I’m so glad to hear that you’ve made is in fact a friend. Please for heaven’s sake, don’t fall into bad habits and protect you. I’m frightened to death to think of you following after some lead to your death.

Come home to us first, then you can have silly thoughts all you like.

Elsie H.
Thomas blew out a long column of smoke, hiding behind the back eves of the medical trenches. All was quiet par the moment in the tent, save for the occasional man who cried out in his sleep.

It was night, and the stars of Dunkirque were dull to glint behind overcast skies. Tiny trickles of smoke drifted up in between No Man's Land and the trenches… signs of soldiers smoking a tin of beans or summoning the courage for a cigarette. Hiding behind the tents, Thomas was safe from any gunfire, but he was the rare exception.

He let Mrs. Hughes’ letter fall to his side, savoring the taste of pear drops in his mouth even as he enjoyed one of his newly acquired cigarettes. The copper tin was bulging in his pocket, sporting the painted cover of a country scene.

It wasn’t as pretty as Downton.

“Rough day?”

Thomas looked about, smiling to see Edward skulking around the back corners of the medic tent. This was another common occurrence… Edward coming to find him after his shift had ended. Thomas took the day shift, simply because most of the true gunfire happened when there was good enough light to make a shot. At night, the soldiers were starved for sleep. Battle rarely persisted so long unless it was dictated by a merciless upper.

Edward was no such a man.

“Gas attack.” Thomas explained, thinking of the man who essentially had no face. It had turned out he was none other than Lieutenant Nordstrum, though no one had realized it at the time. The reveal had come in searching the man’s personal belongings, one being a letter in his pocket addressed from his wife. “Nodstrum’s dead.”

“Is he?” Edward wondered, looking back over his shoulder at the medical tent. One could just see Nordstrum, laying upon his cot with his face in wraps. He’d been meant for a horse ambulance, but damages to the trenches had held off medical aid.

It was too late now.

“Could swear he’s still alive.” Edward wondered, and it was true that Nordstrum wasn’t technically dead yet… but he wouldn’t last long.

“He won’t make it.” Thomas said, coughing to clear his throat and flicking a bit of ash away from the cherry tip of his cigarette. He took another drag before talking, “Gas got him in the face. It’s in his lungs, and it’s stripped the lining. He’ll drown in his fluids by morning.”

Thomas paused, shadows of another life flitting through his mind.

Of Edward, eyes glazed with a mask of webbed scars.

“…Can’t help but think it could have been you.” Thomas said, for really Nordstrum’s name had been drawn at random to lead a troop. “Scare the shit out of me.”

The idea of losing Edward twice, particularly now after all they’d become to one another…? It was hell. Pure, utter, maggot infested hell.

“Don’t worry about me.” Edward said, the age old line. He leaned into Thomas, the pair of them arm to arm. Thomas fished for his copper tin of cigarettes and pear drops, offering Edward one of each. He declined the sweet but took up a fag, lighting it with the tip of Thomas’ own.
“I have a way of dodging gas.” Edward said around a mouthful of smoke.

“Everyone does until they trip.” Honestly, the foolishness of some men. They though they were invincible right up until they died. “I can’t lose you, Edward. Not like that. Not again~”

But the slip up was a poor one. Thomas internally cursed his foolishness, looking away so that Edward could not see the embarrassment that was surely written upon his face.

Edward was gentle, not pressing with eagerness, “You lose someone to the gas?” Edward wondered.

“… I don’t want to talk about it.” Mentioning Edward’s fate felt too much like tempting God.

Edward seemed to realize that Thomas was drawing towards a melancholy mood, and really who could blame him? It was hard to be optimistic during war. Instead of telling him to suck it up, or grin and bear it, Edward instead leaned for humor and charm. This was his way of dealing with the difficult moments, and Thomas had to wonder for the millionth time that it made such stark contrast to the Edward Thomas had known before.

Looking back now, it was incredibly obvious that Edward had been depressed. Compared to the Edward before him now, the Edward from the past had been a ghost… already dead.

“Why don’t we go out to dinner, eh?” Edward teased, raising up an elbow to lean against the side of the medical tent. Thomas grinned, crossing his arms over his chest as he stubbed his finished cigarette out in the mud beneath his boots. Dinner indeed.

“Oh how lovely,” Thomas grumbled, “Our favorite hole in the wall, or maybe somewhere fancy? I bet Paris had a bistro or two. I’m sure General Allenby won’t mind our absence.”

Edward scoffed at the name, unafraid of being caught out by the flustered general: “General Allenby is off fondling his own balls.”

Had Thomas still been inhaling his cigarette, he might have choked on it. As it was, he still spluttered, desperate to keep his snickering down lest he wake up some of his patients.

Edward just leaned more till they were practically temple to temple, gossiping about their uppers in soft voices lest anyone hear.

“That’s how he hides the tension, I swear it to you.” Edward hissed in Thomas’ ear. “He masturbates constantly.”

“I should try that some time.” Thomas laughed.

“When was the last time that you masturbated?”

“Oh god…” That was a good question, and one that technically would go against the natural flow of time.

If Thomas truly thought about it, the last time Thomas had masturbated had been while Jimmy had still been in the house. It had been right before Jimmy had been forced to leave; he’d done something silly like flirted over a card game or jaunted a piano tune. Either way, Thomas had conjured up a lurid fantasy that night of Jimmy whimpering and whining for his attention, naked and at Thomas’ feet by his favorite rocking chair.

Thomas would pretend to read a book, just seeing how long he could push Jimmy before he finally gave in and climbed atop Thomas’ lap.
And in Thomas’ fantasy, Jimmy would. He’d snatch the book away from Thomas’ hands, climb right up on his lap, prepare himself with his own fingers, and take Thomas’ cock like a champion. They’d rock in that armchair, fucking like heathens not even feet away from where Carson usually kept court at the head of the table.

“It’s been ages.” Thomas admitted, sheepish as he remembered his lurid fantasies. “Literally ages.”

“Well that won’t do.” Edward said, promptly taking Thomas’ hand and pulling him away from the medical tent towards the back rows of the trenches where soldiers often slept and ate away from gunfire. “C’mon. Let’s go eat beans from a can and jack off into a sock.”

Thomas howled with laughter, unable to keep his voice down from the stitch in his side.

The pair of them traveled through the deep ditches of England’s first defense system, finding a little hole in the wall where Edward had clearly sent up camp for himself. He’d stuffed his pack into the back, a sort of sleeping dug out, and Thomas promptly started them up a tiny fire with the help of rolled lint and a flint rock. The pair of them sorted through their rations, sharing helpings of calves foot jelly, beef tea, onion porridge, and the feared maconochie stew (a disgusting blend of vegetables well past their prime). As they ate, they relaxed, which was a hard thing for a soldier to do even at night during a war. Bombs were always going off in the distance, creating a tense atmosphere that made it hard to sleep.

“So how was your day?” Thomas asked around a mouthful of onion porridge. It was foul, but at least it offered him sustenance.

“Oh it was fine.” Edward shrugged. “Khamsa pissed into a bucket for rations. I helped fortify a trench wall, accidentally ate a roach, and shot two Germans.”

“Accidentally?” Thomas asked, wary of Edward developing any sort of foul disease from swallowing such a detestable bug.

“Oh don’t you start.” Edward said, but he was already too late. Thomas set down his bowl of porridge to begin feeling at Edward’s stomach and lower belly. He could feel no knots, no sense of tension in the organs, but still kept prodding as Edward groaned and laid back against the wall of his dugout.

“Thomas-!” Edward moaned, irritably. “You’re going to have to stop fussing over me one day. You know that right?”

“Hush up,” Thomas muttered, for the day when he stopped caring about the safety of Edward Courtenay wouldn’t come for many years. He began to press methodically at the tract of Edward’s stomach for signs of soreness. “Does that hurt?”

“No mum.” Edward scowled.

“That?”

“No.”

And so with a sense of righteous display, Thomas reached back to punch Edward firmly in the stomach. Edward yipped, folding in on himself from the sudden attack.
“That?” Thomas sneered, well glad to have gotten a bit of his own back for Edward’s jabs.

“Bit.” Edward wheezed, still curled into a ball.

“Good.” Thomas said. He sat back, resuming his meal of porridge. Edward rolled up onto his side, finishing his cup of beef broth to start another. He was now solidly eating from Thomas’ rations but Thomas didn’t mind. He hated beef broth; it was much too salty for him.

“…Thomas-“ Edward had grown oddly pensive as he sipped on Thomas’ tea, looking up at him with a queer sense of adoration. “Why do you care about me so much?”

Thomas did not answer, for the truth was flat out. He could not tell Edward that he cared for him, indeed that he loved him. Edward wouldn’t understand why, he might even be angry, and Thomas wouldn’t risk losing Edward’s friendship.

“Why do I matter, really?” Edward asked, when Thomas wouldn’t answer him.

Thomas felt a pained smile come to his lips, wishing he could just speak the truth, “When I’m with you, I know I can be a better person than the world has made me out to be. You make me want to be good, Edward.” He paused, using his spoon to carefully scrape what remained of his porridge from the inside of his tin bowl, “You make me realize I can be good.”

Edward didn’t seem to believe it, “I do all that?”

Thomas nodded, setting his bowl aside. He looked out across the trenches, wondering if anyone else was getting sleep tonight. The rumble of distant battle was a lullaby haunting the air.

“You know what’s funny.” Edward said, scooting a little bit closer so that he was hip to hip with Thomas. “You do the same thing for me.”

Thomas started, turning about. “I do?” He blinked, confusedly at Edward.

Edward just grinned like a child, “You do! I’m a brave man but sometimes I get sad… I think… things I shouldn’t think.”

Thomas understood completely.

“You help me to be brave. To remember that I can’t let the dark thoughts surround me.”

Thomas could not help but flush at Edward’s words. Was he really all that important? The idea of giving Edward such courage but a warm feeling in the pit of his stomach. It made him think, even for the tenderest of seconds, that Edward might just one day look to him in the same way that he looked to Edward.

But that was just silliness. Edward wasn’t like him… Thomas was almost certain.

But as Thomas made to speak, a particularly loud peel of canon fire made Edward jump. For a moment, both of them bristled and waited for impact, but impact never came. It seemed the canon had been from their side, firing back an attack on the aggressive German front.

“If you want to sleep easier at night, pretend it’s thunder.” Thomas offered up in the stiff silence that followed. “That always helps me.”

“You have a solution for everything.” Edward said, and there was such tenderness in his voice that
Thomas almost wanted to blush.

He tried to tell himself that Edward’s comments were nothing but platonic. That the pair of them would never be anything but very close friends... brothers in arms, even.

But oh, as Thomas lay in bed that night staring up at the tent flaps of the medical quarters, he found himself hoping for more.

Hoping that one day, he might be loved again by someone as wonderful as Lieutenant Edward Courtenay.

Mrs. Elsie Hughes, Downton Abbey
1542 Moss Lane
Downton Village, North Yorkshire
YO23 1BR

Mrs. Hughes,

Why does it feel like I’ve been here a lifetime? Why can’t I remember how it was to wake up and hear birds instead of bullets? Why can’t I be stronger, more courageous? I told myself I’d be braver. I told myself this time around I’d do better. I want is to go home. I keep thinking of ways I could leave. Just run out of land and get shot. I wasn’t supposed to have these thoughts again. I wasn’t supposed to be braver. Stronger.

I’m such a fool. I’m such a stupid, stupid fool.

I tried to save all the morphine, and we still ran out. They’re dying, and I’m dying, and we still ran out. They keep crying, “mothers, their lovers.” Every time I waken up, they scream out ‘please kill me’. They have maggots growing on their flesh. Some of them can’t feel anything anymore. Human beings weren’t meant to suffer like this. How could...
It just got worse and worse.

They ran out of morphine.
They ran out of saline.
They ran out of bandages.
They ran out of practically everything.

There were only three things which they had in abundance: mud, rats, and horse piss. More than once Thomas caught men deliriously cooking rats over tiny flames, desperate to eat something with actual meat in it.

Those that had the ability to hold out and be strong were still taking the brunt of fighting a war with dwindling supplies. It was hard to find courage when you were starving and sleep deprived. The assaults just came, one after another, and it was either man up or die in a ditch.

The real sick test of Thomas’ will to hold on came when a young man entered his tent with a bullet wound to the foot. He claimed he’d been shot while working on an open faced trench, having survived a frontal assault only to be gotten in an appendage that stuck out. There were powder burns on his left forefinger, but Thomas did not mention that to the horse ambulance when they came to take the man away. Indeed, the idea that the man had done himself in was promptly blown out of Thomas’ head when he was told by the ambulance team in rough French that the warships to and from England were temporarily blocked off by a rouge German advance. The French forces were fighting to push them back but it might be a few days more before fresh supplies and letters could get
It was a death sentence to two men. The one who’d given himself a Blighty developed trench foot from the infection that spread without medicine to clean his wound properly. Unable to escape to England, despite his desperation, the soldier had now fallen in on himself, and refused to do much more than hide in his bunk where he wept day and night, clutching his ruined foot. When he learned that Thomas would be forced to amputate, the man had tried to run away.

He hadn’t gotten very far. Rogers had drug him back.

It was probably poor timing for General Allenby to call an officers meeting when Thomas was elbows deep in an amputation without pain medication. The screams of the soldier were so horrific, so loud, that they could surely be heard by the Germans across the rapidly expanding No Man’s Land. Every healer and nurse on hand was being forced to hold the man down, with Roger and Helen at Thomas’ elbows to hand him what little supplies they had left.

“C’mon, hold out Jerry!” A healer near the man’s head was urging. “We’re so damn close! Barrow’s almost finished!”

“Mother-!” Jerry wailed, hysterical as he thrashed against the pain, “Mother help me!!”

Blood spurted like a fountain as the ruined foot fell to the floor. The ruined artery jetted blood out across the dirt, but was clamped down promptly by Helen’s ready hands so that Roger could wrap a tourniquet around the soldier’s new stump. Thomas pulled back, taking deep gulping breathes of air as he shoved his bloodied hands into a pale of water. He scrubbed at his skin, though it was futile, and took deep shuddering breathes.

The soldier wouldn’t stop screaming. Thomas almost wanted to put his hands over his ears, anything to drown the man’s wild cries out.

He closed his eyes, gripping the edge of the water barrel tight. It smelt oddly like ammonia and—

Ah. He’d just dunked his hands in horse urine. That was why the blood wasn’t coming off.

Groaning Thomas stumbled across the tent to the actual water barrel, fetching a pail so that he could wash his hands in something other than horse urine. He felt horribly sticky, like he’d never be clean again, and for some odd reason he wanted to cry—

“Are you ready?”

Thomas started, turning about to find Edward over his shoulder. When the hell had he come into the tent?

“Outside-“ Thomas ordered, thinking of all the germs that might be on Edward’s uniform. “The amputation patient— it’s not safe—“

But the amputation patient was flat lining. Helen cried out, waving for Thomas with wide yes.

“Thomas, he’s fading!” She begged.

Exhausted, stressed, and strained he might be, but unable he was not. Thomas flew to the soldier’s side, placing both hands upon the soldier’s mouth to push breath into his lungs.
Roger began to pump upon the man’s chest. Helen was at his wrist, trying to gain a pulse.

“What the hell did this?!” Thomas demanded, angrily. “I turned my back for one second—“

“He put something in his mouth!” Granger begged. “I thought it was a pill-“

Thomas forced the soldier’s mouth open, fingers digging around inside the hot wet cavity to try and find what the man had swallowed. The esophagus seemed to be tightening, as if in response to some kind of chemical. Thomas dug even harder into the man’s mouth, only to pull out blood and a strange bubbling foam.

His fingers began to burn-!

“Ah-!” Thomas hissed, wiping his hands hurriedly on his pants. “Shit, shit, shit-!”

In his fury, he lashed out and kicked at a stack of supply crates.

“What did he do?” Helen begged. “What did he swallow?”

“Lye.” Roger cursed, checking the man’s mouth for himself. “Thomas, your fingers.”

But Edward was already there, a cup of water in his hand and his own handkerchief. He dipped Thomas’ burning fingers into the water, wrapping it up tight with his handkerchief. The pain began to diminish though the tips of Thomas’ fingers still tingled.

The nurses and healers were watching, well aware of Edward’s private relationship with Thomas. When Edward pulled back, both of them looked around at the soldier to find his face had turned blue.

He was dead.

There was a sense of dejection and exhaustion among the healers now. All their work, all their efforts and talents put to waste by a man who’d committed suicide the moment someone had turned their back. It felt like they’d been done a wrong by the man…. but was that even fair?

Thomas staggered to a crate of gauze that was now empty and sitting on its top to provide work space. Thomas squatted upon the ledge, his head in his hands.

For a moment, Thomas wanted to cry again. He barely contained himself, trying to hold back his emotions even as Helen began to whimper into her bruised fingers.

“I’m so tired.” Thomas heard her whisper. And to think, she’d had more sleep than him.

“Thomas-“ Edward reached out, and gently began to rub at his back, “There’s nothing you could have done. General Allenby’s called a meeting in an hour and he wants you there. Do you have a clean shirt-“

“Clean shirt-“ Thomas stuttered with an ugly laugh, “Edward, I don’t even have bandages.”

“Then borrow one of my shirts and get an hours sleep.” Edward urged. “You can use my bunk. It’s quiet right now.”

“No.”
“Why not?”

“It’ll smell like you.”

“Are you saying that I stink?” Edward asked, sounding rightly hurt at the ugly insinuation.

But that wasn’t the point of it, not at all. Thomas wasn’t desperate to avoid Edward’s scent because it stunk (although to be fair everyone in camp was filthy). It was that Edward’s scent made him get a raging erection at times… Edward used the same dark cologne that Philip had used, and while no one in camp had cologne to wear, Edward’s clothing had the tiniest traces of scent still lingering to the threads.

“Did I mention the word ‘stink’?” Thomas snapped.

He didn’t mean to lose his temper with Edward but god he was so terribly tired. He wanted to sleep. To close his eyes even for the smallest moment… but he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. Too many men were relying on him to stay awake. Too many men would die if he left.

“Well, did you have to?” Edward grumbled.

“Look-“ Thomas rounded on Edward, eyes burning from the strain of staying open for over forty-eight hours. “I don’t have time to change my shirt, or take a nap. I’m running a bare bones hospital here,” Thomas pointed to Lieutenant Nordstrum, who was still holding on but just barely, “This one’s two breathes away from cocking it up, that one over there has more burned flesh than alive. The boat to take them both back is delayed, and I’ve run out of nearly every single supply on hand so at this point I’m ready to dilute whiskey and beer if it takes the edge off but I’m going to have to share it with two hundred men who all want me dead because they can’t SMOKE IN MY TENT-!!”

Thomas clapped a hand over his mouth, well aware that he’d basically just screamed at Edward. Edward, to his credit, didn’t look all that upset.

“I haven’t slept in two days.” Thomas croaked. “My back is killing me, my eyes are sore, I really want a cup of tea with honey and lemon, but God help me…” Thomas closed his eyes, and immediately turned away at the moisture which burned on his lashes. He couldn’t let the others see him cry. He had to be strong. If he wasn’t then who would be?

But Edward took Thomas by the shoulders, massaging carefully at the tense muscles that he found there. It was rather forward, to touch a man like this in public, but frankly no one gave a damn about homosexual advances during the war. It was a crime in England but so was walking about in the nude and plenty of men did that here as well.

“Sleep, Thomas.” Edward murmured in his ear. “Just take my bunk and sleep for a bit.”

“I can’t.” Thomas croaked, his throat clenching as tightly as if he’d been the one to swallow lye. “I can’t sleep. I can’t do anything but work… or that jackass over there is going to die-“ Thomas gestured to Nordstrum.

“Hush.” Edward wouldn’t hear a word of it. “Look, there are other healers in this tent. Let one of them cover-“

Cover?! Oh there was a laugh.

“Cover-? Cover?!“ Thomas babbled, unable to keep the tiny hysterical laugh that crawled up his throat. He rubbed feverishly at his eyes, hoping to hide the redness Edward might see. “For god’s sake, half of them are idiots-“
“Hey!” Roger snapped, clearly affronted to be labeled as such when he was by all terms Thomas’ right hand man.

“Not you, Roger.” Thomas sighed, aggressively. “You’re invaluable.”

Placated, Roger returned to covering up the now dead soldier. He would have to be tagged and removed by horse ambulance when they finally arrived later on tonight.

“Sergeant-” Edward ordered, gesturing to Roger who popped his head back up at once in a proper salut, “You’re to cover for Barrow while he gathers himself.”

“Yes, Lieutenant.” Roger said.

“No!” Thomas refuted.

“Yes!” Edward started to push him towards the door.

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No.”

“Walk or I’ll shoot you.”

“I wish you would!”

But in the end, there was no use fighting Edward. He was bull headed and stubborn, willing to do whatever it took to get his way when he thought he was right. He lead Thomas by the arm through the backs of the trenches, past the little dug out where before they’d had their supper. Now Edward was bunking deep underground in a fortified bomb shelter with the other upper ranks, having been awarded better accommodations for his heroism in battle. They entered and stepped down several stairs to be surrounded by cool gloomy earth. There were several tiny rooms off the main chamber; Edward let Thomas into the one on the far right, showing him a cramped bunk and a wooden table atop which several letters sat along with personal hygiene items and a few copper tins of goodies sent from loved ones.

Edward all but fled after that, being called back up to the surface by the command of General Allenby himself. Thomas was forced to disrobe in the dark, falling onto Edward’s bunk to pass out immediately where he lay in nothing but his pants and undershirt.

It was risky, to take off so many layers of clothing when technically he could be called back to a medical tent at any minute, but Thomas was so sore and so exhausted that he briefly considered simply hiding from his duties and letting someone else take the fall.

It wasn’t right. It wasn’t honorable… but Thomas was too tired to fight anymore.
He slept soundly, every muscle in his body aching as he buried his face into Edward’s pillow. Every so often, a deep rumble rocked the bomb shelter from a protected explosion, but besides that nothing else disturbed him. No one came running. No one died or got shot.

He seemed to slip from existence temporarily, simply riding on the tail wind of a scene without need or care. He briefly wondered if he turned invisible… if he was transported home or back into the future away from the war.

Best of all, when Thomas did awaken again, it was to the lovely sensation of someone tenderly stroking his cheek with a curled finger.

Thomas did not make to stir, afraid to cut the moment short. He found himself holding his breath, startled to discover it was Edward Courtenay stroking him so. Thomas almost had himself under the impression that this was surely a dream until he heard Edward whisper.

“… You’re so beautiful…”

Thomas opened his eyes.

There was Edward above him, blushing fiercely to know he’d been caught in such an intimate position. His finger was still curled upon Thomas’ cheek, but he withdrew cautiously until he was as stiff as a board before Thomas. The pair of them waited with baited breath for the other to speak, Thomas still laying upon the bed, Edward waiting at the side.

“…Eat any more roaches?” Thomas finally whispered.

“I’d figure I’d wait till after General Allenby leaves.” Edward murmured. Though he did not act reproachful, there was still an obvious tension that Thomas would be a fool to ignore. “He’s waiting to see you.”

Thomas sighed, sitting up and cracking his neck. Was it his imagination or did it seem darker in the room?

In the silence that now persisted, Thomas finally found the nerve to address what he so wanted to say: “Am I beautiful?”

Edward flushed, turning his face away to recompose himself.

“I don’t feel very beautiful.” Thomas admitted. He ran his hands over his cheeks, to where a thin layer of black stubble was forming over a layer of mud and grime. There was no such thing as clean living in Dunkirk. What would he give for a shower and a bar of actual soap… he could strike a match off of his chin!

“You heard me.” Edward seemed very defeated in that moment, as if he was terribly ashamed.

Thomas looked up at him, heart skipping a beat at the red tint in Edward’s cheeks. Was he embarrassed?

“Are you ashamed?” Thomas asked.

“Are you angry?” Was Edward’s reply.
Thomas smiled, heart fluttering nervously at the idea that Edward was worried he might be angry:
“Anger is not what I am feeling right now.”

Edward was greatly relieved to hear this. He seemed to relax from the top of his head all the way down to his toes, slowly slackening in his stance until he seemed much more like the man that Thomas knew and loved.

“What are you feeling?” Edward asked. Dare Thomas think that Edward was being coy on purpose?

No. It was still too much to hope for.

“Well rested.” Thomas replied, not alluding to his feelings either way. He rose up, cracking his back and running fingers through his hair. God he needed a comb and a wash. He noticed Edward looking nervous again, and added, “And flattered.”

Edward flushed, the tiniest smile gracing his lips.

“But I’m not beautiful.” Thomas warned, for no one could be rightly called beautiful when they were essentially covered in filth, least of all him.

Thomas began to put himself together, pulling on his trousers, suspenders, and shirtsleeves. His clothes were decidedly rumpled after having laid on the floor for an hour. As he situated his waistband, Thomas began to button up his brass until realizing half way up he’d accidentally missed a hole and had to start again. How annoying-!

But suddenly Edward had walked up behind him. Thomas paused, a sudden warmth exploding in his breast when he felt Edward tug carefully at his waistband.

“There’s a bit of a knot in your belt.” He murmured, smoothing the bump out.

Suddenly, Thomas quite forgot about doing up his brasses. Edward was coming around his side, carefully situating his waistband so that it was perfectly squared upon his uniform. When he finally made it to Thomas’ front, he did not meet Thomas’ eyes but began to do up the buttons on his uniform with speed.

That was rather usual. Normally a toff didn’t know how to dress himself.

“You probably think I’m crazy.” Edward murmured.

Why? Because Edward wanted to touch him? Because Edward apparently thought he was beautiful? What was so crazy about that?

“No.” Thomas assured him, “I don’t.”

Edward paused, his fingers upon Thomas’ last button so that his hands were inches away from Thomas’ face.
“Really?” Edward seemed to be praying for an answer, as if he daren’t hope for a better outcome. Thomas was so familiar with the stance that he almost wanted to laugh with the absurdity of it all.

Could it be? Could it really truly be that Edward felt the same way about him?

“…Really.” Thomas said.

Edward met his gaze and held it.
Thomas did not break it,

Edward’s hands slipped a bit from Thomas’ button, resting upon Thomas’ chest to feel the rise and fall of his breathes.

Thomas wondered if Edward could feel how his heart was pounding.

Edward seemed to be forgetting himself, his eyes glistening and his mouth slowly beginning to open.

It was like he was trying to say something but it wouldn’t come out.

But even as Edward tried to speak, Thomas nodded, leaning in. Anything to be closer. Anything to give him support.

Until quite suddenly their noses were nearly touching and—

A sudden pounding on Edward’s door made the pair of them spring apart.

Thomas wanted to curse, furious at being denied when he didn’t even know what he might have received. Would it never happen again, whatever it was?

But now his imagination was running riot!

The door sprung open to reveal Lieutenant Cartwright, a rather shrewd soldier who didn’t like to see things out of order. Even now when there was mud on his cheek and a rip in his trousers, his hair was still parted to the left.

He eyed the pair of them with a narrow gaze, like he suspected something foul but couldn’t gather what.

“General Allenby wants to see all of us. There’s a meeting about the next battle. He wants everyone there, including Barrow.” Cartwright said.

Oh, enough about General Allenby!

“Fine, fine, we’re coming.” Edward snapped. He sounded just as frustrated as Thomas felt.

“Well-“ Cartwright didn’t understand what there was to wait on and it showed in his voice. “He’s already waiting now.”

There was such sass in his voice that Thomas’ temper popped: “We’re coming, damnit!” he barked.
Cartwright glared but left, shutting the door as he went.

Thomas wanted to say something, anything to break the tension, but it ended up coming to a close as Edward picked up his hat and donned it upon his head.

Thomas didn’t know what else to do but follow him out the door.

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General Allenby was not the kind to be received without audience, and so Thomas found it little surprise that men were packed to the rafters, when Edward opened an underground bunker. A fold out table had been placed in the center, with men elbow to elbow around the perimeter scanning maps and letters from generals in other territories. Allenby was at the head of the table, next to General John French who was technically Thomas’ boss as commander of the BEF. Both were deep in conversation with one another, pointing to specks on a map crammed with black and red lines and x’s. Thomas and Edward sidled into the back of the room, catching Colonel Wavell’s eye near Allenby’s side. Allenby was promptly alerted, and when he saw that Thomas and Edward had finally arrived, he looked pleased.

“Ah, good.” Allenby gestured for Thomas and Edward to come closer, so that they could sit down at what was an already packed table. They ended up sharing half a chair together, unable to sit anywhere else. “Now we can begin.”

General Allenby rose up, exuding such an air of authority in the dingy little bunker that it was difficult to ignore him. Talking died down, eyes perked up; the air was becoming increasingly damp, enclosed several feet underground. The smell of rotting earth was heavy in every breath they took. Everything felt oddly cold without natural sunlight, almost like the wine cellar of Downton Abbey.

“Gentlemen, I bring you good news.” Allenby declared, and at once several men sat up a little straighter. “We have found victory in the Battle of the Marne.”

At once, everyone began to thump against the table in a show of support. Thomas noted that a few lower officers did not applaud, and wondered if they like he were thinking of all the men who had died for Allenby. Of all the men whose lives surely had not been worth this.

“Now, we must push northwards, and get back to the sea as fast as possible.” Allenby said. “We have to construct trench fortifications. I have the pleasure of turning this meeting over to General John French, the commander of the BEF.“ Allenby sat back down, gesturing to French at his side, “He’ll speak of our next move.”

French did not rise to his feet; no one asked him to. It seemed when you were in charge you could do whatever you want.

“Gentlemen, the next weeks are crucial.” French began. Unlike Allenby, French seemed to have more of an authority complex. Thomas supposed it was only natural when you were practically in charge of everything. French spoke in a sharp, commanding tone, that just begged for someone to dare and talk over him.

“The German’s are close to capturing Antwerp. I’ve spoken with the commander of Antwerp’s forces and have decided that, when they end up capturing the city, the forces of Antwerp will join us and withdraw to the city of Ypres. We’ll reinforce our defenses there, and hold them fast.”
“Predicted response?” A major asked from across the table.

“Well, that’s why I’m here today.” French explained, a dark look crossing over his face. “If the German’s think they can take Ypres, even for a second, they will.” French clenched his fist, as if to symbolize the German’s crushing their barriers. “They’ll slaughter us for the chance. Winter’s coming fast, and we can’t fight once it hits.”

“Didn’t work for Napoleon.” Wavell muttered, causing a few men to chuckle under their breath. French grinned and carried on.

“We need as much help as possible in Ypres.” French explained, “So I’ve decided to move forward and take the best of the best with me. In particular, I’m taking a few healers from Dunkirk who’ve gained wide recognition, and your top soldiers. Agreed?” He looked to Allenby at this. Allenby shrugged, untroubled.

“Now that the coasts are clear, you can have them.” Allenby decided. “We have young men on the way. Fresh faces. We can train them and hold them accountable.”

“Very good.” French was pleased that everyone was giving him what he wanted, eyes scanning the table for hopeful recruits. “I’ve heard of the prowess of a few of your men, and I’ve gathered a list of their names-“

“Let’s hear them.” Allenby sighed. It seemed he’d been expecting this.

“Soldier wise…. I want Lieutenant’s Courtenay, Cunningham, Daniels, Doyle, Robertson, and Sharp?”

Thomas bristled at the mention of Edward’s name. How would he be able to protect Edward in Ypres? One of the most dangerous territories-!

“Major’s Avery, Barnes, Hardin, Hughes, Johnson…. Colonel Butler, Malone, Walker and of course Wavell… are you amenable to losing all these men?”

Allenby grumbled, weighing his options. “You can have Courtenay, Daniels, Doyle, and Sharp, but I need Cunningham and Robertson. Same for Barnes, Hardin, and Malone. You cannot have all my best men.”

French didn’t look pleased with the idea.

“What about Wavell?”

“You cannot have Wavell.” Allenby wouldn’t even hear of it.

“I need him-!”

“Then you can jolly well deal, my good fellow!” Allenby snapped, “I need Wavell here to train the new recruits. I can’t keep sending you fresh meat if you take away my butcher!”

Oh goody, Thomas thought bitterly, They’re finally admitting we’re nothing more than livestock.

French grumbled under his breath, folding his arms over his chest. It seemed his dreams of getting Wavell were dashed, even if he was the head of the BEF.

“What healers do you want?” Allenby asked, trying to get French off the tense subject.

“well, I’ve got a platoon of healers that will be able to treat and prevent when the battle for Ypres
arrises as I predict… we’ve got enough body runners but I need experienced healers, men equipped to handle the perils of surgery and gas attacks. I’ve called in Medical Officer Miller and Walker from two neighboring troops, but I want Barrow and I won’t accept no for an answer.”

Thomas’ heart leapt at the thought of being taken to Ypres. He had an ugly feeling that should he go, he would probably never return. But Edward was going to Ypres too, so it seemed that he was destined to protect him even there. But instead of letting Thomas go without a fight, Allenby looked downright stricken.

“No, no, him you can’t have.” Allenby wouldn’t even hear of it.

“General, the chance of a gas attack is too high to ignore!” French barked. “You cannot keep both Wavell and Barrow here. You must pick one or the other. Either I must have the ability to lead men through the gas, or a healer that can save them in light of a failure! I’ve already spoken to Douglas Haig about this, and I’ll have you know that he’s agreed Barrow must come with me.”

Christ, did everyone know his name? Thomas was shocked to hear so many were speaking about him.

Allenby bristled, looking away with an ugly expression. Every man in the room watched with rapt attention, like children observing arguing parents at the dinner table. How would mummy handle daddy’s harsh words?

“Well, if you’re going over my head, then why bothering asking me-“

“Sir, now is not time to find offense.”

“Offense?” Allenby flustered, bitter, “Where would I gather offense-“

But Thomas did not care about offense. He wanted to know what was expected of him, and if he could even possibly keep up with the work load. If this was going to kill him, he wanted a damn good reason for why.

Thomas coughed, so that several officers looked in his direction. He ended up having to talk over both Allenby and French, who were still arguing.

“What is being asked of me in Ypres?” Thomas asked. French bristled, unhappy at Thomas’ insubordination, but answered his question none the less.

“To run our medical operations on the ground in lieu of intensive battle.” French explained.

“Let us assume that there is no battle-“ Thomas offered, but French cut across him before he could finish his sentence.

“There will be one.”

“General, I’m not speaking in concretes and neither are you.” Thomas warned. French seemed thunderstruck at the insinuation. “We don’t know if Antwerp will be captured, we don’t know anything. That’s the very nature of war, to be left in the lurch…. as many of your men on the ground will tell you.”

A few men stiffened in their chairs at this. Thomas could sense a division being drawn in lieu of his statement. It was the hard line between Generals who loved to bask in the glories of battles won and soldiers who died in the filth trying to win the battles for them.
“If Antwerp is not taken, then what is our plan?” Thomas asked.

“To head back towards the sea.” French ground out. He had a look on his face like he wished Thomas might vanish on the spot and never return.

“Am I needed at the sea?” Thomas asked.

“No.”

“So then, let us wait until we know whether or not we have Antwerp at our disposal again. We lose it, I go. We win it, I stay.”

“I’ll remind you, Medic, that your actions are dictated by me! Not by your own logic.” French thundered. Oh, how he hated to be put in the spotlight this way. It reminded him of Carson all those years ago.

But this time Thomas had men on his side, Edward in particular, and he didn’t take kindly to having Thomas be shouted at.

“His logic is the same logic that you’re following, General French!” Edward snapped. “Barrows one of the best medics this unit has ever had. He’s the reason half these soldiers are still alive. At least show him a little respect.”

French positively fumed, stuck in a crowd of men who were slowly starting to turn on him. Bitter at being shown anything less than absolute loyalty, French drummed his fingers irritably upon the cramped table to finally relent: “Fine. I’ll make arrangements if we keep Antwerp.”

“Very good.” Allenby seemed grateful to have this sordid meeting come to a close, though he still wasn’t happy about losing so many men, “Then I suppose the men should prepare to mount up, just in case. We’ll be going on horseback, naturally-"

But Thomas once again felt the need to interrupt, simply because there was no way he was riding on a horse all the way to Antwerp unless Edward would be with him.

“I’m sorry… are we all to be riding on horses?” Thomas murmured, “I don’t know how to ride.”

“Well then, I suggest you learn, Barrow.” French leered.

So it seemed that Thomas was going to have very little choice either way.

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It calmed down a bit on the battlefield that next week, which was a great relief since the traffic to the sea was finally open again and supplies could be brought into camp. Everything was restocked, from saline to morphine, and Thomas had several soldiers sent back to England including Nordstrum who was somehow remarkably alive. Though Nordstrum’s visage was utterly destroyed, he ate, spoke, and looked out on the world through heavy bandages about his face. His life would never be normal again, but for the most part he tried to keep in good spirits. As a token of his gratitude to Thomas, Nordstrum offered Thomas one of his horses, an English quarter horse named Bonnie who was fresh
off the boat from England and essentially useless in battle. She was a speckled mare, saddled and blinking confusedly down at Thomas as if wondering what on earth she was doing being partnered with someone who couldn’t ride.

For her pains, she was rewarded with apple cores and carrots from Thomas’ meagre rations.

Thomas sat astride Bonnie, carefully pacing her back and forth. He had a great deal of trouble directing her, for she seemed content to go wherever she pleased. At the moment, Thomas and Bonnie were in the back of the medical ward, on a slightly grassy knoll where horse ambulances brought supplies and took patients away back to the North Sea. Edward was on break, offering to teach Thomas to ride. He sat on an upturned crate that had held fresh gauze until just recently. Now it was being used for scrap, and offered the perfect seat to the tired soldier.

Neither of them commented on the moment they’d shared before the meeting, but there was an undeniable tension between them now. Neither good nor bad, it simply existed as a barrier where wonderful conversation had once existed.

They needed to talk about it, they wanted to talk about it… but they couldn’t. Finding the words, finding the time, finding the courage… it just seemed impossible.

So now here Edward was, watching Thomas turn his new horse to and fro, a soft smile curling at the edges of his lips but nothing more.

“I have men I could be operating on.” Thomas tisked, irritated that he was having to endure this humiliation. Bonnie seemed to have much the same mindset.

“It’s dead in there.” Edward quipped.

“Quite literally.”

“C’mere, it’s not that hard.” Edward rose up, stubbing out his cigarette in the mud underfoot to carefully take Bonnie’s reigns in hand. She jerked a bit, nervous at being approached.

“Ey…” Edward tutted, rubbing her nose tenderly, “You be a good girl now.”

“I’m getting down.” Thomas sighed, “I’m tired of being up here. My legs hurt.”

“You’ll have to be up there for much longer, soon.”

“Well, I’m getting down all the same.”

Thomas swung his leg over the side, only to be offered a helping hand by Edward who took him carefully by the waist and got him safely back down to the ground.

Thomas found himself soaking up the touch, tense as Edward’s fingers slipped away.

“You’re tense.” Edward murmured.

“Am I?” Thomas could not help the bitterness in his voice, as he thought of all the waisted opportunities they’d been forced to endure. What would have happened if that door hadn’t been opened? If the meeting hadn’t occurred?

“You’d think I’d be used to disappointment by now.” Thomas mumbled.

Bonnie started to nibble on what little grass the knoll offered. Thomas let her, turning away to stride several paces until he felt he could gain some air. He stared out into the network of trenches
stretching beyond the borders of Dunkirk. Far away, the border of the sea existed. Thomas could not see it, but he knew it was there. Sometimes he found himself looking this way and thinking of England. What would he give to go home?

Edward came to his side.
He didn’t like to be away from Thomas. It was a mutual feeling.

“How have you been disappointed, Thomas?” Edward asked, looking out across the trenches.

“…Have you?”

“You’d be amazed, with the life I’ve led, but I have.” Edward mumbled. He scuffed his toe in the mud, as if ashamed.

Thomas damned himself for his masochistic streak which compelled him to ask: “How so?”

“…One time…” Edward still would not look up, “I was in love with someone who couldn’t love me back.”

Ah, well Thomas would know nothing about how that felt.

“Why not?” He asked.

“Society wouldn’t let us be.” Edward said. Thomas’ heart throbbed painfully in his chest at this, “There was always a wall between us, and I never wanted it there. Because you see, I was in love with them to the point where I didn’t know myself without them. To where I couldn’t live without them.”

Chest squeezing, throat clenching, Thomas asked the inevitable question: “…Was she beautiful?”

Because it would be a ‘she’, he was sure.

But Edward said nothing, and the painful silence was more than Thomas could bear. Finally, when Thomas thought he might explode from the tension, Edward leaned in, his mouth right over Thomas’ ear.

“He is very beautiful.”

Oh but such sinful words had never sounded so sweet.

Thomas wanted to scream for all the frustration and want he felt.

“If you know what I mean.” Edward mumbled, pulling away.

“Edward, don’t tease me so.” Thomas groaned, shaking his head. He couldn’t help himself. He felt sick to his stomach with longing.

“Tease you how?” Edward sounded just as desperate as me.

“Don’t tempt me with everything I’ve ever wanted.” and he damned himself for sounding so needy, “I’m not strong enough to resist.”

Edward said nothing to that, but Thomas could tell that he was deep in thought. That Thomas’ words had stirred something powerful in him, be it for better or worse.

But Thomas was so terribly stressed, so horribly muddled, that he just couldn’t take it anymore.
shook his head, turning away to head back towards the medical tent.

“Where are you going?” Edward asked.

Thomas kicked at the mud as he walked. Bonnie nickered, nervous at the display.

“Work.” Was the only answer Thomas could offer.

In truth, Thomas would merely head inside to sit in the corner and think for the rest of the afternoon.

Night fell on Dunkirque, pulling the whole area into an ugly muddy gloom. It was difficult to tell at night where the No Man’s Land ended and where the sky began, save for the far off illumination of canons bursting in the night. Their peels of thunder cut the silence, making everything feel muddy and thick… even the air.

With no one to operate on, and only Roger and Helen in the tent, Thomas had decided to try and mount Bonnie again… this time without Edward. He felt embarrassed and yet elated, his emotions such an awful muddled mess that he couldn’t make straight sense of them anymore. Edward had said ‘he’, and that meant Edward looked to men. ‘He is very beautiful’ was present tense, so maybe Edward either had a fancy man or he was in love with someone and couldn’t say it. Thomas wanted it to be himself; was hoping and praying that his assumptions were correct. But just because he was close friends with someone didn’t mean they’d love him.

Jimmy Kent had taught him that.

“Alright, now stay still now you little shit.” Thomas muttered under his breath, Bonnie’s saddle in both hands. All he had to do was use the foot holster to get himself up, and that shouldn’t be too hard, should it?

“You hear me?” Thomas mumbled in Bonnie’s ear. They were pricked, keen and alert in the dark of the night, “I have an amputation saw, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

With a deep breath, Thomas kicked off of the ground, and swung his leg over Bonnie’s back. He ended up nearly falling over on the other side, clinging tight to Bonnie around her strong neck and upper leg muscles.

She snorted, but didn’t move much.

“Shh… sh.” Thomas tittered, nervous as he finally got himself straight up in the saddle.

Well, this was quite nice!

“Alright… easy we do it…” Thomas gently kicked Bonnie in the tummy. As a result she began to trot. Thomas started to steer her, turning her away from the medical tent so that she could walk a few paces around the grassy knoll that was the rest of the ‘safe’ quarters. It was dangerous to stray too far outside during the night.

“Oh, this is easy.” Thomas said, though in truth he was still quite nervous. “Yes. I’m… riding a horse now.”
Bonnie didn’t make to comment, but seemed to be fine with Thomas’ assumptions.

“Well. Life must be grand being a horse.” Thomas spoke aloud, knowing full well he was essentially talking to no one. Bonnie did not mind, pausing in her trot to begin eating grass again. She liked to do that a lot. Apart from shitting, eating seemed to be her favorite activity.

“My life is shit, you know that?” This was rather like therapy, except Thomas didn’t have to pay for the sessions. “I’m stuck in this awful war, and I’m in love with someone. But I don’t think it’ll end well, you know?”

Bonnie snorted, pawing gently at the earth to try and tug up more roots to eat.

Thomas looked out over the dark horizon of No Man’s Land. Carnage and chaos, life ripped at the seams till all that was left were the broken outlines of destroyed wagonettes and the felled bodies of horses and men.

“I’m so scared of losing him, like I lost him before.” and how easy would it be, for just one bullet to take Edward away?

At that moment, a canon fired from the other side, its blast like the echo of far off thunder. Bonnie tittered, raising her head sharply to stare out over the sidelines. Thomas soothed her, patting her neck lovingly.

“Shh.” He consoled, “It’s just an enemy canon. They’re too far away to hurt us.”

Bonnie seemed none too sure.

But even as Thomas opened his mouth to continue with his little therapy session, England’s finest retaliated the canon attack with an incredibly loud and extremely close fire blast that exploded like a bomb in the ears of nearby men. Thomas had not realized just how far he’d strayed in the dark, just how close he was to firing lines!

Bonnie reared, shrieking in fear at the noise and light. Thomas screamed, nearly getting thrown off but holding on tight by the girdle as Bonnie suddenly bolted in terror, galloping wildly down the firing lines!

“Stop! Stop!” Thomas shrieked, pleading in Bonnie’s ears. He tried to pull back on her reigns but couldn’t grab them in his hands. His foot was stuck in the holster, he couldn’t jump off-! Thomas grabbed her reign with the pinky of his left hand, jerking with all his might to try and get her to stop. But he ended up pulling her head to the side, surely causing her great pain in her mouth-

Bonnie panicked, and jumped clear into No Man's Land.

All at once, enemy fire went wild. The sight of a soldier, riding halfway off his saddle and in a zig zag pattern, was like a macabre game of grouse shooting to the German’s who’d been antsy for far too long. Bullet fire zipped through the air, followed by the explosions of cannons on either side. English men were screaming now, shouting for Thomas to get back-!

But Thomas couldn’t stop Bonnie, couldn’t straighten her course- when she reared again, frightened at the canons, the sound of rifles ended her life.

And suddenly, Bonnie was falling backwards.
Thomas screamed, throwing himself as hard as he could out of the saddle before the horse could trap him in the muck, flattening him and surely killing him.

He managed to get out of the way just in time, but his foot was still caught in Bonnie’s holster. The horse now lay dead, bleeding pitifully from the mouth. Suddenly thrown against the mud, Thomas’ ears were temporarily muted. There was dirt in his mouth, dirt in his eyes- he could not see!

Shaking from the adrenaline rush, Thomas slowly reached his hands up to try and wipe his eyes clear. When he did so, it was to few a black and starless sky above him.

He was in the middle of No Man’s Land… and his horse was dead.

I have to crawl out of here. Thomas thought, frightened witless as he rolled on his stomach and began to squirm. But he couldn’t get his foot free!

Cursing, Thomas had to double back, curling up on himself to hook his thumbs against the twisted foot holster so that he could finally get his right foot free.

Able to crawl without stopping now, Thomas rolled back onto his stomach and began to inch towards the English lines. If he could just make it closer to the trenches, maybe he could live-

But the enemy snipers were desperate for a shot. They began to fire rapidly, one bullet nearly striking Thomas in the leg. Thomas froze, panicking, as he realized that his movement was the only thing giving his position away. If he stayed still, no one knew where he was in the dark.

He didn’t know what to do.

If he moved, he’d be shot. If he didn’t, he’d still be shot.

Tears caught in Thomas’ throat, as panic and misery welled up inside of him.

How could he have been so stupid as to ride a horse without skill or training? Alone and at night of all times! Why hadn’t he waited for company, or until it was safer? Why had he strayed so far? Had he thought himself so invincible as a Medical Officer? Had he forgotten what happened to men who dared to forget their roles and place?

“Edward.” Thomas croaked his name, thinking of how bravely Edward rode Khamsa into battle. Khamsa was a brave horse; she wouldn’t be scared of canon fire. “Edward!”

Another bullet flew out at him, but was far off the mark. It seemed that noise wasn’t as easy to aim at as movement.

So Thomas sucked in a deep breath and screamed at the top of his lungs: “EDWARD! EDWARD HELP!”

Another bullet tried to find him in the dark. It got significantly closer, but still missed.

The English forces were shouting, rousing one another from sleep or pause. Men were screaming out Thomas’ name, trying to find him in the dark. He could hear soldiers demanded backup, rousing their partners to arms as they began to fire back at enemy lines. Suddenly the bullet fire was above Thomas’ head, as both lines tried to do one another in. Thomas took the distraction to his aid, and began to crawl through the mud as fast as he could.
“EDWARD!” He wondered if anyone could even hear him over the gunfire. “EDWARD HELP ME!!”

He had to spit mud out of his mouth again, and felt a worm fall free from his lips. Disgusted, Thomas spat rapidly, trying to get the grit out from his teeth. He felt a roach crawl over his fingers as he continued to struggle.

But the whinny of a familiar horse broke the repetitive noise of gunfire. The sound of a horse galloping through mud and the screams of dismay from Englishmen-!

“Get back!” One mad was shouting, “Get back here, you can’t save him!”

Thomas jerked his head up, eyes dazzled by the sudden light of fires from the English camp. There, flying through the mud with half his clothes off and a pistol in his hand, was Edward Courtenay. His face was full of a fiery expression, his blue eyes blazing in the dark! He rode high and strong atop Khamsa, who did not fear neither bullets nor canons. She bore straight and true on her course, where Bonnie had flailed and ultimately died. Germans were trying to get a shot in at Edward, but they couldn’t! The English lines were still firing, cutting off any attempt at an advancement.

And then, Edward was upon him, stooping over Khamsa’s side to fling out a hand for him. Thomas reached up from the mud and the muck; Edward grabbed him tight and with an enormous show of strength pulled Thomas right out of the mud.

Thomas scrambled, muddy legs sticking out to use Edward’s foot like a stepping stone. With Edward’s help, Thomas managed to get onto Khamsa’s back.

“Hold tight!” Edward barked, kicking Khamsa sharply in the ribs and turning her away. “Shajaea!”

Khamsa took the order as the word of God, and fled back towards English lines

Thomas held tight to Edward’s waist, his face pressed against Edward’s back.

Don’t let us die, Thomas prayed, wondering if God would be able to hear him over the canon fire… but where it was by God’s intervention or sheer dumb luck, Edward and Thomas did not suffer a bullet in their retreat. Edward took Khamsa down through the trench network, rode her hard through the muddy veins, and brought her back up on the other side behind the medical tent where Thomas had sat only half an hour earlier on the grassy knoll.

The pair of them collapsed off of Khamsa’s back, with Thomas shaking like a leaf as he clung to Edward and the side of Khamsa’s saddled.

“I thought…” Thomas couldn’t even get the horrible words out. I thought I was going to die.

Edward was fiercely protective, crushing Thomas in a tight embrace. His fingers sought Thomas’ neck, his nose deep in Thomas’ filthy black hair.
“You’re safe now.” Edward sounded just as ragged as Thomas felt. “I’m right here.”

Thomas looked up at Edward, in awe of his courage and loyalty. Edward’s beautiful blue eyes were shining down on Thomas, and there was something fierce inside of them that moved Thomas to his core.

Thomas could tell what Edward was about to do. He knew it instinctively, because he’d done it before himself, and for much the same reason. The devotion, the adoration… it blinded you and made you foolish.

“… It’s too danger—“

But Edward didn’t care. In a way, neither did Thomas.

Edward swooped down, and kissed Thomas firmly on the mouth. Mud, sweat, and tears be damned, Edward loved him so fiercely in that moment it seemed he was blind to any other distractions.

Thomas swooned. He’d never been kissed in such a way before… not even by Philip.

He was being kissed like Edward wanted to suck the very soul out of him, wanted to somehow burry Thomas deep inside himself. To swallow him up and never let him go.

The hunger in Edward’s kiss was mirrored in Thomas’ reply. He kissed not only the strong and brave Edward before him, but the Edward from the past who’d died such a pitiful death. He kissed the Edward who’d needed him. The Edward who’d died from the loneliness without him, and the Edward who had shown him just what it meant to be open. To be unafraid to connect with another.

_I love you_, Thomas thought in that moment. _I love you so very much._

When Edward finally pulled back, there was a stuttering in his breath. His lips were swollen, his eyes hooded. Hidden by Khamsa’s enormous frame, the pair of them basked in the glow of their revealed affection, unafraid. No one could hurt them here…. not even the enemy nor more than half a mile away.

“…I love you.” Edward whispered. “I love you so very much.”

Oh thank god, Thomas swooned, a blissful smile creeping across his face as he leaned in to kiss Edward again.

And again.

And _again_.

Chapter End Notes
If you have any questions or concerns please let me know!
Please note that while I have tried to remain as accurate as possible, it is very difficult to do so 110% when I'm writing a historical fanfiction. A few of the people in this fic are real, a few are not.
The Difficult Patient

Chapter Summary

Thomas and Edward grow fonder of one another, but the war won’t let them be.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains strong triggers of graphic medical gore and horror, blood, war trauma, kidnap, assault, and gun violence. For the convenience of my readers, I have installed a symbol: (xxx) before particularly traumatic sequences. If you see that symbol and feel you might be triggered, just scroll past.

We have only one more chapter of wartime, then we're back on England's green and fucked-up soil. Just hang on folks!

So, all things considered, Thomas wasn’t allowed to ride a horse solo ever again. Ever.

Antwerp fell like a jenga tower with one brick too few, and so everyone was called to push for Ypres as fast as they could. Thomas currently sat atop Khamsa, clinging lovingly to Edward’s waist as they marched ever southward towards Ypres. It was two days after Thomas’ disastrous attempt to ride a horse alone, and he was now the butt of every joke in the platoon. “Oh, there goes Thomas!” they’d say, “The Horse Killer!” Of course, Thomas felt quite terrible about killing a horse that had frankly done nothing wrong and was but a novice in battle. Still, others clapped him on the back and told him it was just rotten luck; some horses weren’t meant to withstand the horrors of the war and you usually didn’t find out which ones they were till they were already on foreign soil and facing gunfire. It was for this reason alone that no one looked twice at Thomas holding tight to Edward; most just assumed that Thomas was trying to not get thrown off. But they were wrong, for Thomas didn’t care about Edward’s horse. He knew Khamsa wouldn’t be spooked by gunfire.

He was clinging to Edward because he adored him… because he was completely and utterly in love.

Kissing Edward had been like sucking on pure oxygen, an absolute blood rush that had left him light headed and weak kneed. In the days that had followed, Edward had snuck him more kisses, often taking moments out of his work on the front lines to sneak into the back of the medical tent where crates of newly shipped gauze and morphine offered a barrier for Thomas and Edward to hide behind. Edward did not kiss him chastely as Bates had; he kissed him full front and possessed, clinging so tight to Thomas’ buttocks and shoulders that he surely left marks. But for everything that he gave, Thomas returned tenfold. He’d never been so in love before, at least… he’d never been so in love and had his feelings returned. Thomas told himself now, more than ever, that Jimmy Kent would never care for him. That he was a lady’s man and would always be that way. There was no point mourning over a love that would never be when Edward was right in front of him with both arms open. Thomas had sent Jimmy a letter, and that was more than enough. It was the closing
chapter to their odd love story, and one that Thomas was content with.

He didn’t have time to mourn over Jimmy anymore. He had to move on.

“Hold on tight to that horse, Barrow!” A soldier teased as he marched past in the platoon, muddy from shaggy head to ripped toe.

“I’m telling you, I didn’t do anything wrong.” Thomas murmured, his cheek pressed warmly against Edward’s back. It was growing terribly cold now that they were on the threshold of November. Edward had one hand upon Khamsa’s reigns, and used the other to cup Thomas’ hands were they were laced over his belly. “The horse spooked.”

“You picked a poor horse.” Edward said. Thomas shrugged, sighing so that a great lungful of Edward’s natural musk entered his nose.

“Clearly I’m not a natural for it. Picking horses that is.” Thomas added for clarity, “I’m probably just not meant to ride horses.”

“I disagree.” Edward said, “You’re athletic and limber. You ride well, you were just riding an animal not used to war. It was rotten luck that the German’s fired a round that night…. but you won’t have to worry about that anymore.” Edward tutted. He briefly let go of Thomas’ fingers to pat at Khamsa’s neck. She was trotting along, keeping up a good pace even with the wagonette tied to her saddle. Behind them, Khamsa pulled a good measure of medical supplies, including ten brand new morphine tanks that were worth their weight in diamonds to the troops. For this reason, heavy numbers of men surrounded Khamsa’s wagonette, rifles out and pointed on the horizon just in case the German’s tried to take the tanks and scupper the remaining troops.

“Khamsa may not be a war horse, but she’s my horse. She’d ride with me anywhere. She’ll do the same for you.” Edward praised, returning his hand to cup Thomas’ own. He squeezed tightly at Thomas’ fingers, so that Thomas snuggled all the better against Edward’s back. It was wonderful, he thought, to be in love.

“And why’s that?” Thomas teased in Edward’s ear.

“Because.” Edward said, “She knows how much you mean to me. She’s firmly second in my heart—“

At that moment, Roger came past on his own English quarter horse, Helen the head nurse riding behind him with her arms locked about his waist.

“You two keep it up any longer, and Thomas’ll be in the family way.” Roger teased.

Thomas shot his right had man a menacing glare. “Shuttup, Roger!”

FORWARDED BY REQUEST
UNIT 11, YPRES, WEST FLANDERS, BELGIUM

M.O. Thomas Barrow, Unit 11, Dukirque, Belgium
November 1st, 1914

Thomas,

I’m so glad to see that you’ve picked up a bit since your last letter. I was worried about you so! I’ve sent you a little something to make you feel better, but I was told by the local recruiting office that it’s difficult to get packaged supplies overseas. Hopefully it’ll come to you soon. The weather has faiired up quite a bit, and we’re all grateful; there was a spew of awful storms that left the area yard a muddy mess. Poor Daisy had to clean day and night to keep the downstairs up to par. Of course, the weather isn’t really on my mind, but unfortunately putting into writing what I actually want to say will be most difficult. Please try to read between the lines if you will.

While I’m delighted to hear that your work with Lieutenant Courtenay has payed off handsomely I must stress to remind you that not everyone in your platoon will be excited to hear about your experiment. War is a trying time on everyone, and even on good days your brand of science and medicine has been the subject of much intolerance and scrutiny. Lieutenant Courtenay sounds to be a most agreeable and kind gentleman, and I’m glad that he’s brought you the comfort and security that you were looking for, but he can’t protect you from everything. Should word get out about your experiments to the wrong person, even the tiniest bit, I fear that everything you’ve worked for will be slaughtered. Please, understand me Thomas. I am on your side, and I don’t believe there’s anything particularly wrong with your brand of science. I merely feel that you are rushing too fast, too happily into this union of minds. Remember, you are at war! It doesn’t matter how many successful experiments you have, you’re still having to experiment on a battlefield. I’ve urged you before but I suppose it doesn’t matter now. You’re bound and determined to have it your own way.

Please, for god’s sake… just come back to us safe.
You’re worth more than those silly experiments.

Elsie Hughes

postscript: If you do something stupid I’ll never forgive you, and Mr. Carson feels mite the same!

—B. Patmore

Despite not having an overwhelming round of enthusiasm from his friends and ‘family’ at home, Thomas still felt glad to have told them all about Edward. With Edward’s kisses stinging his lips through the day, and his touches burning Thomas up at night, Thomas simply couldn’t keep it a secret anymore. He felt free, like he could fly away into the wind like a feather at the lightest touch! Still, his feet remained firmly fixed on the ground as he set up stations in Ypres.

Ypres was a town in West Flanders that had been ravaged by the war already. Where there had once been streets bustling with activity there were now barren walkways of bloodied cobblestone. The shops were empty; the houses were bare. There were no animals, save the ones that had unfortunately been left behind by their fleeing owners. Farmer’s fields were now trodden and ruined, despite the late month and the sure ripening of harvest from years past. Church bells were empty, save for when they blew lightly in the wind. Their sepulchral tones echoed over ancient courtyards and crumbling graves. Above it all, a painted banner hung from the roof of the church, a firm splash of red color in an otherwise beige and bland wasteland: ‘we zullen terugkoman’.

“We shall return” warned the residents of Ypres, and so the platoons of soldiers treated their abandoned houses like little homes away from home.
They were not the only ones to occupy Flanders. There were already English troops waiting, along with the French, the Dutch, and even a smattering of Canadians were just as confused as everyone else as to how they’d ended up so far away from home. Supplies were pooled, resources dispersed, and so upon arriving in Flanders Thomas was immediately put to work setting up triage stations with two other medical officers: John Miller from Unit 4 and Stuart Walker from Unit 1.

Ypres was to be without a doubt the center of great controversy. Where before, Thomas had been in charge of nearly all the medical operations in Dunkirk, he was now divided work wise so that he strictly dealt with gas wounds and amputations. Walker was to deal with bullet wounds and minor surgeries. Miller was given precedence over initial triage and dividing patients into their appropriate stages of care. All those that could be put back in battle would simply recycle through Miller and head off to the front lines again. Those that needed minor tending to went to Walker and eventually Miller again before returning out.

Those that came to Thomas stood no chance. They were considered the ‘perishables’; the soldiers who would probably die before returning home. Anyone who entered Thomas’ tent stayed there, or was sent back to their original platoon on the coast. His medical unit was given the nickname of “the red tent” for all the bloody sheets that were hung out to dry by nurses trying to conserve supplies. You could see them flapping in the breeze even from a distance. They were the only smattering of color in a dull and gray landscape, and a firm warning to the remaining soldiers.

One evening close to the tides of battle, Thomas was just returning from the end of his shift to walk down the cobblestones streets of Ypres alone. Unlike most of the men who slept in trenches, Thomas was privileged to actually sleep in a rundown house. It had no doubt belonged to a farmer at some point, but now it’s main residents were medical officers and their best helpers, men and women who couldn’t be sacrificed to things like the flue for their necessity to keep others going. Thomas’ bedroom was, as of this moment, the pantry offside a tiny kitchen that contained nothing but a wood burning stove with one lonely eye and a butler’ sink so deep you could easily take a bath in it.

Despite having more supplies and being buddied up with a number of platoons, the sharing of rations was still a meager and nasty experience. Thomas found himself wondering just how much longer he could ply French rations from the foreign medics that shared his little farm house. They found English food to be downright revolting, but for cigarettes they were happy to share a bit of their own. Plonk was the main thing on Thomas’ mind, a mixture of ‘pinard’ and ‘vin blonc’ that ignorant Tommy’s had smashed together to form a concept that meant ‘cheap French wine’… Plonk. The fact that French soldiers got wine in their rations was a subject of hot debate, and one that Thomas was terribly envious of. Singe was another hopeful, which was an awful slang for ‘monkey meat’. French troops got boiled beef in tin cans that wore the brand of ‘Madagascar’. With a name like that, sneering soldiers deduced that it was probably monkey meat, and not actual beef. Tommy’s called it Bully Beef, but the French just called it ‘Singe’. Thomas didn’t give a shit what it was called. He hadn’t eaten good meat in so long he was surely becoming anaemic. Any type of meat was meat he’d accept.

With Plonk on his mind, Thomas didn’t notice Edward sneaking up on him…

“Off shift?”

Thomas stopped and looked about, grinning from ear to ear as he saw Edward bounding up the path after him. There was dirt on his cheek, and his hair was oily from lack of a wash. Still, he was more beautiful to Thomas in these days than any other sight on Earth.

“Mhmm.” Thomas said. So blissful was he, he couldn’t stop smiling even as Edward came to a halt
by his side. Now the pair of them were walking in tandem up the path, with their fingers so close they were almost touching.

“Good,” Edward said, but not before tugging Thomas by the elbow off the beaten path towards the medic farmhouse and into a stray field that was now full of tents populating a good mass of the lieutenants. “Come with me.”

“My mother warned me not to go wandering off with strange men.” Thomas teased.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not a strange man, now is it?”

The walk through the field was a relatively quiet one. A few lieutenants were swapping shifts. The ones leaving out were buttoning up their uniforms as they passed, running fingers through oily hair in lieu of a comb. The returning lieutenants were falling into their cots exhausted, with a few making a bee line for a muddy creek behind the fields to wash and shave. They sat crouched on the banks with shards of disused mirrors, shaving with dull razors and poor man’s soap. Edward’s destination was none of these places, instead taking Thomas now through the border of the woods to a little gardening shack where it seemed he’d staked out camp. Edward had a way of pushing through the crowd; he’d clearly used intimidation as a tactic to get the best pick of the field.

Edward halted Thomas on the stoop, grinning as he held up a waiting hand for patience. Thomas sat politely upon the steps to the shed as Edward entered ahead of him, and pretended to feign ignorance while simultaneously listening with a strained ear for the sounds of a tussle on the other side.

Edward reappeared, poking his head through a gap in the door to beckon Thomas inside with a crooked grin.

Thomas staggered up, and into the shack.
He found it laid out a bit like a picnic.

There was a blanket upon the ground, that was nothing more than a rotten duvet stripped from some unfortunate soldier’s bunk. There were broken candle bits, lit to flicker dully in the deep umber hue, and a tin mess plate laid out with shriveled grapes, bits of cheese, and even an apple that had been sliced into eight pieces. What was more, there was a bottle of what appeared to be actual wine, opened with two tin mess cups sitting at its side.

Plonk be damned, this was more than Thomas could ask for!

“…Is this for me?” Thomas asked, beaming so widly now he thought his face might split in two. He’d never had such splendors before!

“What?” Edward teased, shutting the door behind Thomas so that the pair of them could have some privacy, “Never been taken on a date before?”

“Not like this.” Thomas said, and it was the damn truth. Once, when he’d visited America with Lord Grantham in 1923, he’d gone to a speakeasy with another gay valet that had been determined to ‘loosen him up’. His words had become quite literal, with Thomas in the backroom, a cock in his mouth and arse as two valets took him at the same time.

A shot of soured whiskey as a fuck without lube was nothing compared to this.

“Well, I’m determined to change that.” Edward’s door even had a lock, though it was small and rusted. It gave them the privacy they so desired, and Thomas was greatly relieved to be away from
prying eyes for the first time in months.

Edward led him over to the blanket. Thomas went willingly and sat down with his legs tucked up underneath him.

“Wine?” Thomas teased, “At a time like this?”

Edward sat across from him and poured them both a glass, hardly expert handed but generous none the less. The liquid was deep red, perhaps a merlot, “There is no such thing as ‘a time like this’. We’re guaranteed nothing in this life. We ought to use every second to our advantage.” At this, he offered up his glass in form of a toast. Thomas accepted, and the tin rims clinked together so that they could drink-

Thomas gagged as the wine hit his tongue. It was dirtied with sediment, so think it was almost like hot cocoa— what?!

Edward was coughing too, nearly spitting the wine out. Thomas smacked his lips and tongue several times, blinking watering eyes as he looked into his wine cup and then at the bottle of wine.

“Where did you get this?” Thomas asked.

“Found it.”

“Where?”

“There’s an old wine cellar in an abandoned farm house. Some of the Tommy’s found it and I managed to swipe one of the best ones. I can remember my father wanting a bottle like this-“

Thomas carefully poured a tiny bit of wine onto his fingers, seeing the sediment clearly now.

“…Edward…” Thomas said, recognition dawning upon him.

“I thought it was good; it looked good-!”

“Edward!” Thomas could not hold in his laughter now. He turned the bottle about, tapping merrily on its peeling label. It bore the word ‘Port’ with pride. “This is port.”

“…Well…” Edward didn’t seem to understand what to do. His puzzled expression was utterly adorable, “My father drinks it all the time and he likes it-“

“Port has to be decanted.” Thomas explained kindly.

Edward blinked, “…What’s that.”

But Thomas just couldn’t stop laughing. To think, something he’d taken for granted! He’d forgotten that not everyone knew how to decant heavily sedimented wines! He was about to fall over, with happy tears glistening in his eyes. He wiped them away, instead setting the bottle of port at his side to start scrounging about the room.

“Do you have a flannel?” He asked, still half-laughing.

“Yeah-“ Edward rummaged for one in his duffle bag.

“A clean one.” Thomas added, because that wasn’t something you could take for granted out here. Edward had one, and offered it over for Thomas to take.
“I need something like a funnel.” Thomas said. Edward did not have one of those in his duffel bag, but after a big more scrounging about he managed to find a piece of tapered tin that had probably at one point been used for gardening. It would simply have to do.

Edward bent the tin with a bit of strain, curving the structure into something akin to a funnel. He handed it over and Thomas lined it at once with Edward’s offered flannel. He then had Edward toss out both their cups of ruined port, for there was no use in trying to save them now. With clean tin cups, Thomas began to carefully decant the wine, pouring only a little bit in at a time.

Edward watched the whole affair fascinated, eyes as round as coins as if Thomas were performing some kind of magic trick: “I’ve never seen this done before.”

“Your butler probably does this every day; I’m sure at least one of the footmen does.” Thomas added, for in a large house duties were often passed around like hot potatoes. Thomas stopped pouring Edward’s cup, passing it over.

“Now, let that breath.” Thomas warned, for there was no point in chugging port if you were going to treat it like Plonk.

“I had these incredible aspirations of treating you to dinner.” Edward sighed. “Maybe making love to you by the fire afterward.”

Thomas’ stomach leapt at the thought of Edward and he making love…oh! Wouldn’t that just be a treat? But there wasn’t time for such things during a war, and it was much too unsafe. It was one thing to be caught getting a hand job. It was another thing to be caught getting buggered.

But Thomas just kept on smiling, refusing to feel down in such a wonderful moment like this, “I like doing this for you… Makes me feel a bit like home.”

“Does your butler have you decant?” Edward asked. Thomas just chuckled; Mr. Carson would die before they pried the decanter from his hands.

“Oh no. He does it himself every day.” Thomas explained, “It’s his zen state.”

Edward just shrugged, “My butler was like that about ironing.”

It put a funny picture in Thomas’ head, of Carson with an ironing frock on trying to get all the creases just right in a silk pillowcase.

“Mrs. Pierce, my housekeeper, used to catch him at it all the time. She’d tell him to stop but he just couldn’t.”

Thomas chuckled, his head full of images of Mrs. Hughes doing just the same.

“Mr. Carson, whatever are you doing?”

“I’m relaxing, Mrs. Hughes!”

With a fresh wine cup full of properly decanted port, Thomas raised his tin cup again. Edward followed suit, and once more the pair of them toasted their glasses.

“To us.” Edward praised.

“…To us.” Thomas could not help but blush at the thought. When he took a sip, he was instantly rewarded with a warm and oaky taste of proper port.
“Much better.” Thomas agreed, licking his lips.

“Oh,” Edward sighed, nearly downing his entire cup, “That’s the stuff.”

“Amazing what decanting will do.” Thomas teased, “Get’s rid of all that nasty sediment.”

But Edward had moved on, topic wise. He cast a hand about, knocking the poor subject from the air. In the candlelight, he looked a bit like a wizard casting a beautiful spell.

“Enough of that.” Edward murmured, “Tell me about yourself. Tell me everything. I’m enraptured by the thought of you.”

“Enraptured by the thought of me?” Thomas repeated. Now, those were words to woo any toff. “You’re a charmer, Edward.”

“And I won’t be put off.” Edward added, finishing the rest of his port to pour himself another glass. They had to be careful not to get too drunk.

“I wouldn’t dream of putting you off,” But really what was there to say? In all honesty, Thomas felt like he didn’t have much to offer Edward that he could actually tell. It wasn’t like he could just blurt out ‘I traveled in time with a Gypsy’s potion’. Take that way and what did you have? A clockmaker’s bastard that had worked their whole life in one house.

“I’m a footman at Downton Abbey in Yorkshire.” Thomas explained, “My master is Lord Grantham. His real name is Robert Crawley though.”

Edward thought it over, relaxing back on the heel of his palm. His beautiful blue eyes narrowed as he considered all the lords and ladies he probably knew.

“… I know him.” Edward finally said, “Been to parties where he attended. He’s a curly haired fellow, right? Likes dogs?”

“That’s right.” Thomas said. Edward was quite smug with himself, popping a piece of aging cheese in his mouth. God only knows where he’d gotten it from… probably one of the French soldiers. When Edward offered Thomas a grape, however, he ended up having a go at Thomas by pulling the grape back before Thomas could pinch it with his own fingers.

“Put your head in my lap,” Edward commanded.

“Oh, are you going to feed me now?” Thomas asked. Funnily enough, the idea wasn’t a bad one.

“That’s right.” Edward said, patting his thigh like it was an offered throw pillow. “Now, put your head in my lap like a good little footman.”

Rolling his eyes, Thomas scooted over atop that dingy little blanket and laid his head carefully upon Edward’s thigh. He was suddenly looking up at the underside of Edward’s sharp chin, along with dingy wooden rafters that were full of cobwebs. It was a miracle the roof could still keep rain out.

This time, when Edward offered him a grape, he did not pull his hands away. Thomas opened his mouth wide, pink tongue offered like a velvet carpet, and lapped up at the grape Edward placed between his teeth. It was a true blessing in this awful war, to enjoy the taste of fruit.

“Mmm,” Thomas felt rightly spoiled, even if he was sitting on a blanket covered in weeks of filth, “Delicious.”
“So, you’re a footman.” Edward continued on, refusing to let the topic drop despite how boring Thomas must sound, “What else? Where are you from originally? Did you grow up in Yorkshire?”

“No, I’m from Stockport near Liverpool.” Thomas said, “On the coast. I’m from a family of clockmakers. I grew up above a clock shop with five other siblings. I was the oldest boy.”

But at this, Edward grew puzzled. “So then, why did you become a…” But he broke off, ugly comprehension dawning upon him. “Ah…. They found out?”

“They found out.” Thomas said, though in truth his mother had probably known the whole damn time.

But Thomas was tired of talking about himself. He wanted to know about Edward, every tiny detail no matter how small. He wanted to be able to paint such a firm picture in his mind that he would never be able to dispel Edward from his subconscious. One hundred years from now, if someone dug Thomas up and cracked his head open with a shovel, they’d surely still find Edward hidden inside… buried deep and kept safe.

“Tell me about you.” Thomas begged. “Everything?”

“Everything?” Edward was just as baffled by the word as he was by the process of decanting shitty port wine. “Well… I suppose I can say that I’m from Oxford, educated in Eton. I’m the oldest son of the Earl of Bicestor… Lord Bicestor, also known as Niles Courtenay. I’ve a younger brother Jack who’s a piece of shit-“

At this, a dark expression flickered across Edward’s handsome visage.

“My mother Agnes is…” But Edward didn’t seem to know the proper word to describe his mother.

“Not a piece of shit?” Thomas offered, but Edward just shook his head.

“She’s worse.” He muttered. “A real menace. She doesn’t even look at me like a son, most of the time.”

Thomas reached up a hand, cupping Edward’s thigh where it met his hip bone to give him a gentle squeeze. Edward smiled, and carried on, popping another piece of cheese into his mouth.

“I like to hunt, fish, shoot, ride-“ He grinned playfully at the thought, “I’m a man of the outdoors.”

Thomas could see him now, riding Khamsa through rich English woodland in his red and whites. He’d hunt after a fox then come home filthy to get a nice hot bath. Thomas would draw his water, pour in some Epsom salts, and rub Edward’s back till he was nice and relaxed.

“I love to take picnics, and stay in cabins with nothing but a log fire and a roll out mattress.” Edward carried on, growing wistful, “Oh, there’s nothing like it… living off the land in the fall, when the harvests are ripe and the shooting is good. I collect the antlers from pronghorn I’ve been lucky enough to nab. Eight pointers, too! I have a whole hall in my home, decorated with stuffed kills.”

Thomas knew Edward was trying to brag. He smiled up at him, and when Edward lay an arm over Thomas’ chest, Thomas took it up to squeeze lovingly. Edward’s flesh was a warm, soft weight against him. He felt whole when Edward touched him, like he was still part of the universe.

“I love Spring.” Thomas whispered. Had he ever told someone such a thing before? “I love all the fresh blooms, and the newly born animals, and the cold finally leaving.”
“Spring is beautiful.” Edward agreed, but then he said, “Just like you.”

Thomas flushed, rolling his eyes and looking away: “Oh go on, you.”

But Edward did go on.

He sat Thomas up, pulling and pushing with firm hands until they were hip to hip. Thomas was pliant in Edward’s hands, without complaint as Edward pulled him back onto his lap so that Thomas was now sitting instead of laying.

Edward wanted to kiss him, and passionately; Thomas was without complaints.

They began to snog, as randy as two teenagers hiding behind a soda shop. Edward was devious, hands itching all over Thomas’ medical uniform to pluck at buttons and push underneath shirt tails. He seemed eager to touch every part of Thomas available, and then some. Thomas responded in kind, fingers locked deep into Edward’s auburn curls. His hands slid down Edward’s neck, and onto his shoulders, but then came back to the center to tug at Edward’s shirt collar. It came away easily, the fabric weak from constant misuse and battle. When Thomas found Edward’s bare chest beneath, he arched his thumbs to scrape teasingly at Edward’s nipples. They pebbled in response, and Edward gasped loudly into Thomas’ mouth.

“Naugh’y lil’ foo’man.” Edward mumbled, his lips still suctioned tightly to Thomas’ own.

His hands went from Thomas’ hips to Thomas’ back, and suddenly he was lowering Thomas onto that dirty little duvet with all the glory of satin sheets and silk slips.

“God you’re beautiful.” Edward crooned, pupils blown as he took in every inch of Thomas’ frame. “I love you, I swear I do. With every fiber of my being, I adore you.”

Lord, he talked like such a toff sometimes.

Thomas gazed up at him, amazed, his eyes glossing over. It was like the whole world had been bathed in a rosy light. Like the war going on just outside their door wasn’t happening anymore. How could anything be wrong in the world when Edward loved him so?

“Oh Edward…” Thomas sighed, reaching up with one hand to tuck a stray hanging curl behind Edward’s pert ear. “…You’re so wonderful.”

Edward gave Thomas a crooked grin, then dipped down slowly to begin sucking tenderly at the flesh on the side of Thomas’ neck. The wet, hot, suctioning feeling was so erotic Thomas felt himself begin to grow aroused.

Edward’s knee was between Thomas’ legs. He could surely feel Thomas’ stiffening penis.

Thomas whimpered, turning his face into Edward’s curls to take a deep, long sniff. Edward smelt like mud, sweat, grease, and other foul thing on earth. Delighted, Thomas buried his nose deeper and took another long sniff.

Good god, it was a wonderful thing to be in love.

Ms. Sarah O’Brien, Downton Abbey
November 3rd, 1914

Sarah,

I’m poised on the threshold of disaster but can feel nothing but joy. I spend every day working to save men on the brink of death, but all I can think is just how wonderful life is. Have you ever been in love, Sarah? You can tell me, even after all that hubbub earlier this year. I’ve always wondered if there was someone special in your life. There’s certainly someone special in mine. They’re so wonderful, you wouldn’t even believe it, and can you imagine they’re also a member of the upper class? We haven’t done anything too wild, not yet at least. There’s just no time, but the other night? Oh, it was so wonderful! They put out a blanket and had candles and wine for us to enjoy. We even got to eat cheese and grapes. Imagine me, having a fancy date while in the middle of a war! They kissed me so deeply and held me so tightly… well…I won’t tell you the rest, but boy do I feel great. I feel like I could fly, straight to the moon! They say that men have invented flying machines that can take them right up into the clouds and back down again safely. After the other night, I believe it.

Thomas
post script: Please tell Mrs. Hughes that while I always appreciate and like to hear her advice, I’m going to have to firmly ignore her wise words this time.

It was the eve of battle, and there was a tense air surrounding Ypres. Generals and Colonels had marched in and out, conversing deep into the night about what to do in case this flank or that flank went under. Meanwhile the flanks in question were smoking their last cigarettes and getting drunk on plonk, nervous about what the future would hold. Thomas watched it all occur, and said nothing. He sharpened his amputation saws, stockpiled his supplies, and kept his hopes high. Edward’s love mark was warm and sensitive upon his neck. The other night, they’d gone so far as to tentatively touch one another’s cocks. It had been a clothed, hurried affair, but the tiny moans bubbling from Edward’s throat had been akin to an aria for Thomas. Edward’s fingers had grasped Thomas’ cock with such loving care. He’d stroked, he’d rubbed, and above all he’d cupped. The heat had become unbearable till Thomas had had to break it off or come in his trousers.

He’d done a lot of ugly things since starting this second-chance spree. Coming in his trousers would not be one of them.

Thomas reached up and gently touched his love mark, smiling to himself at the sensation of the raised bump.

There was a matching one just left of Edward’s belly button.

“Healer Barrow?”

He looked about to find a young medic on the outskirts of his tent, hands twined as if nervous of approaching Thomas. Thomas had never seen the boy before, and he had an American accent. He was surely no older than eighteen, with black hair and wild willowy eyes.

“Yes?” Thomas noted that the boy was favoring one foot more than the other. Had he turned his ankle? To make a joke, Thomas pointed and said, “Don’t tell me… trench foot?”

“No sir.” The boy gave a nervous laugh, “I’ve come to fetch you for a meeting.”
“There’s a meeting?” Thomas wondered, for he’d not been informed by Roger or any of the other head healers walking about. As a matter of fact, a good deal of them were already gone to bed, trying to get some rest in lieu of the oncoming battle tomorrow.

“It’s a secret meeting.” The boy illuminated. Eyebrow arched, Thomas considered the implications of a secret meeting. Maybe it would be something devious and dark… maybe it was Edward trying to get his attention and using the boy as an impromptu messenger.

“A secret meeting.” Thomas rolled the words in his mouth, stretching the vowels comically.

“Between whom?”

“The lower recruits sir.” The boy said. Thomas was suddenly crestfallen. No secret meeting with Edward?

Well, now he wasn’t excited.

“No generals, no majors, no corporals.” The boy explained. “It’s for us lower ranks. No one knows about it.”

“And I’m being invited?” Thomas asked, gesturing to himself, “Even though I’m a head healer?”

“Well, there are a few higher ups there, sir.” The boy said. “But they’re all like you. They’re…”

But the boy couldn’t seem to find the right word. Thomas had a feeling it wasn’t ‘homosexual’.

“Relaxed?” He offered.

“I was going to say nice.” The boy said.

“Well, no one can accuse me of that.” Thomas muttered under his breath. He set aside his sharpened saw, wiping off his hands with a damp towel and shrugging his white coat. It seemed that he’d have to put up with a bit more nonsense before bed.

“Shall we?” Thomas said, gesturing to the front flaps which lead out into a dark and frigid night. The boy turned on his heel, marching out into the mud. Thomas followed him without another word.

Normally when the hour was late, men would relax even if they were on shift and dare to make a cup of tea with tin saucers and tiny flames. Tonight, however, the atmosphere was tense and the men were all on guard. Shifts were shorter, but more in depth. Instead of constant patrolling and smoking, men were firm in their posts with rifles pointed out towards the borders of Ypres where the German’s lines were rapidly approaching. Thomas had to walk single file behind the lower medic in order to keep up. The trenches were full of men, even sleeping ones that were crouched over hiding beneath dirtied coats.

Snaking through the trench network, the medic showed Thomas down a ramp made of upturned crates and into an underground bunker that was a stock for ammunition and level one triage gauze. Thomas thought at first that the meeting would be in here, but it wasn’t. Instead, he was behind a rack of stretchers that had been propped up length wise to hide a door into a smaller room. Here, out of sight and out of mind, were surely about fifty or sixty younger men. They were cramped, one atop the other, and were whispering in nervous voices.

There were a few Lieutenants, but Thomas was the only Medical Officer. Thomas was pleasantly shocked to find that Edward was among the upper men, relaxing against a crate of rifle shells and
smoking a shared cigarette with another upper.

He saw Thomas and beamed, waving merrily to him amongst the younglings.

“Who let you into this party?” Thomas demanded, pretending to take offense as the young medic sat the stretchers back up to hide the doorway. All the boys looked about, curious to see who had arrived.

“Ey-!” Edward grumbled. "I let you into this party, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh, I see!” Thomas wound his way through the many heads, almost tripping over a few outstretched limbs. At Edward’s side, Thomas felt at ease. “I wasn’t originally called up.”

“No one knows you sir!” Another healer piped up. He was another American, youthful and a companion of the first. “You’re all clammed up.”

And there was Roger near the front of the crowd, sharing a cigarette between two French boys who looked more like teenagers than men. “Cept to Courtenay.” Roger drawled, a knowing smile upon his lips. Roger might have meant well but he was starting to stray into dangerous territory. Thomas gave him a wary look, eyes narrowed in irritation.

“Talk, talk, talk.” Edward batted the insinuation aside like it were nothing more than an irksome fly. “You boys don’t know the joys of a bosom friend.”

*Particularly one that isn’t afraid to put his hand on your cock,* Thomas thought dully.

Roger lit another cigarette, now essentially working on two at the same time. “Whatever you say, Courtenay.”

They all laughed, in cheerful banter. It put the crowd at ease, which was a shock of a difference compared to all the General’s meetings. Here were the casualties that became nothing more than numbers on a sheet. Here were the boys, the smiles, the souls, the faces, that made up the fight for freedom.

Yes, Thomas was much happier to be called to this sort of meeting.

“So…” Edward said, shushing the crowd with a voice that boomed over the heads. The younger boys hushed, eyes as wide as coins. The older lads leaned against their friends or nearby walls, striking up cigarettes and sharing bits of plonk mixed with rationed water.

“Tomorrow morning, four hundred hours probably-“ Edward mused, tilting his hand back and forth to give or take on the time. “They’ll be here.”

There was no questioning who the ‘they’ were.

“And from what I understand, you lot-“ He gestured about, “Have question? You’re new to battle, but I’m not. We’re here to help you feel more prepared.” Edward pointed out some of the more experienced heads in the crowd, particularly Thomas, who stood at his side with warm smiles.

“So let’s hear it.” Edward gestured to the men again, “Raise your hands if you have a—“

But before Edward could say anything, at least thirty hands shot into the air. Edward was taken aback, gaping at the enthusiasm.

“Good god.” He muttered, causing a ripple of laughter to go through the crowd. “Let’s just…uh…”
Edward didn’t know where to start, “Start with the back!”

He pointed to a youth with dark hair and wild eyes… they were a peculiar green color.

“Are the Huns going to have tanks?” The boy asked.

Edward shrugged, then shook his head, “Probably not at first.” Edward said, “Tanks are expensive and the German’s lost several of them in their recent siege. They won’t want to use a tank if they can spare it at first. If things go in their favor though, they will probably bring takes through Ypres and level it to the ground.”

“But, we have tanks right?” Another boy piped up. He was Canadian, from the sounds of it.

“Eh…” Oh sure, they had tanks. Maybe… four, all said? “Yes and no. Not in Ypres. Not yet.”

Christ, England didn’t even have tin for mess plates.

But Thomas found his eyes drawn to a youth near the front, who was shaking. Whether it was from cold or nerves, Thomas couldn’t tell. He was pallid and thin, with baggy eyes and a fretful expression. He looked like he hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in months. He had his hand high in the air but, for whatever reason, wouldn’t meet anyone’s eyes.

Thomas pointed to him, quieting down the babble about tanks and why they weren’t in Ypres.

“What about you?” Thomas asked.

The boy dropped his hand, but seemed to stumble over his words. He opened his mouth, trying for courage, but it failed him twice before he could get his thoughts out.

“I’m… uh… I’m really scared about…” the boy didn’t seem to know how to finish his sentence while still having his nerve, “Having a limb uh…”

But at the mention of the word ‘limb’ the boy lost his courage. He ducked his head, his bottom lip quivering wildly.

Thomas didn’t need a complete sentence. He knew what the boy was afraid of.

“Amputation?” Thomas murmured kindly. The boy nodded.

Hell, several people were nodding along. It seemed the topic of amputation was a tense one. Thomas couldn’t blame them. When he’d been a stretcher bearer, he’d been terrified of losing a limb. As a Medical Officer, he had the ability to stay off the front lines and away from most of the canon fire. Was that particularly fair to the others? Thomas was unsure.

“Out of curiosity, how many here have questions about amputation?” Thomas asked the crowd. “Drop your hands if you do.”

Half the hands dropped.

Christ!” Edward was taken aback, “That’s half the crowd!”

Thomas, however, wasn’t surprised.

“Well, let’s go through the stages.” Thomas said, taking precedence over Edward as all eyes turned on him. “Say that you have to have an arm, leg, hand or foot amputated. You’re going to be taken by a stretcher bearer through the front lines all the way to me.” Thomas pointed to himself as he spoke. “You won’t stop at any of the prior levels of triage. Amputations are top priorities. During the
immediate moments following your loss of a limb, you’re going to be in shock. Shock can both save and end your life. In most cases, you will probably not feel as much pain as your body is actually enduring. Call it what you will, but shock is as dangerous as it is helpful.”

This seemed to bring a bit of ease through the crowd, but Thomas wasn’t finished yet.

“I’m going to isolate your injury, pick a practical level to amputate from, and saw down.” Thomas said. “My saws are sharp, I’ve spent the whole day today getting them up to snuff for tomorrow… it’s going to take me about ten to fifteen minutes to saw depending upon if a bone is completely shattered or only partly.”

But Thomas paused at this.

The boy who’d asked the original question was crying.

When there was no one speaking, you could hear his tiny snuffles. He hiccuped, hiding his face. Thomas suddenly felt awful; did the boys really need to know how long it took? Christ, Thomas had probably succeeded in giving them all nightmares.

“…I…” Thomas shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have been so brazen about that. What’s important for you to know is that I’m not going to cut off your whole limb. I’m only going to take what I absolutely have to. And as soon as I’m done, you’re going to be put on an ambulance, taken to Dunkirk, and put on the path back to England… if you’re English, American, or Canadian that is.” Thomas added. “It’ll be good ol’ Paris for you French boys.”

A few of the men raised their cups of plonk in mocking toast.

“Will we be asleep when you amputate?” A boy from the back asked.

“No.” Thomas said, “Not unless you’re knocked out or something.”

“Well for god’s sake-!” A french soldier spoke up with a thick accent, “Kick us in the ‘ead!”

“Very well.” Thomas said, as a smattering of laughter and applause filtered through the crowd.

But the boy was still crying in the front. His mate, who was sitting next to him, had an arm comfortingly about his shaking shoulders.

“I’m so scared.” The boy wept. His tearful tone was an ugly agent, and shut everyone up even after the French lad’s joke. “I can’t sleep at night.” And at this he began to cry in earnest.

“It’s true.” His friend piped up, miserably. “I’m his accountability partner, and he barely sleeps.”

This required a more personal touch. Squatting down so that the pair of them were eye to eye, Thomas address the boy without a scant thought for anyone else in the room.

“What’s your name?” Thomas asked.

The boy wiped his nose with the back of his hand, rubbing his eyes to clear them of tears. He was so downtrodden Thomas felt genuinely sorry for him; “Nicholas.”

“How old are you, Nicholas?” Thomas asked.

“Seventeen.” Nicholas mumbled. So he was underaged to boot. He must have lied to the war office in order to get in. The lad was poor, and probably didn’t have a birth certificate.
“Well, have you ever had a nasty wound before?” Thomas asked him, “Maybe you cut yourself while shelling a potato, or you broke a bone?”

Nicholas sniffed again, wiping his eyes. They were honey brown, rather lovely to look at: “I cut m’self with a knife one time, helping me mum with a pie.”

“When it happened did you feel it?”

He shook his head: “Not really. Felt it afterwards, though. Ached for a long while.”

“It’s the same thing with a really big bad injury.” Thomas said. Nicholas listened, but still for whatever reason could not meet Thomas’ eyes.

“When it happens— if it happens— Thomas added hastily, just so that way there wasn’t an aura of death over the conversation, “You’re going to go into shock from the blood loss. I promise you, you will not know what hit you. We have morphine… not a lot but some, and I dilute it strictly for amputations so that way when you need it you’ll be able to receive it…. if we still have it.”

They wouldn’t have it. Thomas just couldn’t bear to tell Nicholas when he looked so frightened. This seemed to give Nicholas a bit of strength, though Thomas could tell the lad was still terribly shaken. Thomas felt an awful wave of pity for the boy; by rights, he should have never come to this war. He was too young… but recruiters were paid for every head they put in the army. No doubt Nicholas’ service had given some jolly codger another brass to put in his pocket.

Money would be the death of this world, Thomas was certain.

“I’m just so scared.” Nicholas admitted, and he seemed absolutely mortified by the words. He bowed his head even further with shame, hiding his reddened cheeks behind shaking hands. “I want to go home. Yesterday, I… I got a letter from my mum. I miss her so much.”

He wiped his swollen eyes again, feverish. “I’m such a putz.”

“How many in here are scared shitless?” Edward demanded, just a touch irritable. Both Thomas and Edward put their hands in the air as a show of good faith.

A heavy portion of the crowd raised their hands, but there were still some who refused to put their hands up. Edward didn’t like that one bit.

“Oh, we’ve got some liars in this room!” Edward crowed. A shock of laughter rippled through the crowd, as at least fifteen more boys and men put their hands up.
Nervous, Nicholas looked over his shoulder. He was bowled over to see so many men with their hands in the air.

“Look about Nicholas.” Edward praised, throwing a hand wide to gesture to the entire room at large, “You are in a room full of chicken-shit lily livered cowards.”

More laughter, more ribbing. Even Thomas couldn’t help but laugh a bit.

“It’s going to be okay.” Edward assured them all, but speaking most of all to Nicholas who still looked slightly embarrassed at having to announce he was a coward to his whole platoon and then some. “I know that right now it doesn’t look good, Nicholas, but one day it will. One day, if we’re lucky, we’ll look back on this and laugh.”

Edward glanced at Thomas, giving him a cheery smile, “With all our limbs.”

“He’s going to be okay.” Edward assured them all, but speaking most of all to Nicholas who still looked slightly embarrassed at having to announce he was a coward to his whole platoon and then some. “I know that right now it doesn’t look good, Nicholas, but one day it will. One day, if we’re lucky, we’ll look back on this and laugh.”

Edward glanced at Thomas, giving him a cheery smile, “With all our limbs.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.” Thomas echoed.

~*~

Thomas did not sleep for long that night, merely tossing and turning in his frigid bunk as he listened to the sound of German guns getting closer and closer. Around three in the morning, Roger awoke him with a tremulous yawn, and the pair of them got dressed as fast as they could to head out from their tiny farmhouse. They took their duffel bags with them, for there was no guarantee what would happen today. If Ypres fell, they would lose everything, perhaps even their lives. In Thomas’ bag, he had letters from home, tins of half-finished candy, and every other supply to his name. He could not afford to lose them to the German’s, should Ypres be lost.

The fields were dark, with no moon in the sky. Any light was generated from the battlefield, where torches near the trenches marked out enemy lines. Near the houses, however, it was absolutely black lest snipers far off see Englishmen moving back and forth and try to take a lucky shot. Mercifully, there was little disturbance as Thomas and Roger made their way to the level five triage tent. Here, long lines of starched linens were having over twine, marking up room after makeshift room stacked with supplies and nurses drinking coffee out of a tin saucepan.

Edward was waiting outside the front flap of the medical tent; it seemed that he hadn’t slept either. He was atop Khamsa, whose blinds were keeping her vision straight ahead lest she be shocked by a sudden canon burst or the sight of men running after her rider. Though she was black, the men had painted her with wet chalk in a spirit of camaraderie. On her back flag was the image of the union flag. Blue, red, and white chalk so normally used for repairs in the trenches and makeshift maps on rock walls were now used to remind the men of what they fought for.

Not for Britain, nor the freedom her lands boasted… but for their chance to go home in one piece… hopefully with all their limbs.

Thomas exited the tent, scratching an itch idly upon his brow as he came to stand at Edward’s side. He sat so high up upon Khamsa that Thomas had to kick over an empty crate in order to vault atop it so that the pair of them could talk naturally. Edward did not do much besides quirk a little smile at the corner of his lips. There was no one about at the moment, but it was still dangerous to openly show affection in the trenches.

Thomas patted Khamsa lovingly upon her neck. She snorted a bit, leaning into his touch. Thomas
carefully glided his hand upon Khamsa’s flank till he was touching her saddle, and from there ghosted over leather and frayed linen till he was touching Edward’s gloved hands. He squeezed Edward’s hand silently.

“What,” Edward teased in a whisper, eyes still dead ahead, “No words of keep safe?”

Thomas just shrugged, just staring out over the battlefield. Shrapnel, blast holes, broken trench lines, and dead bodies littering mud surely four feet deep in parts. Would this land ever look normal again? Would grass ever grow here again after all was said and done?

“If you die, god so help me, I’ll saw off your limbs.” Thomas murmured, his tone unusually pleasant for such sharp words.

“Just not my penis, please.”

“Oh I’m starting with the penis.”

Edward snickered in spite of himself. He cupped Thomas’ hand between both of his own.

“So long as you keep it for yourself. It belongs to you, you know.” Edward paused, a slight blush blooming upon his cheeks. “You and no other. You’re the love of my life, Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas looked Edward dead in the face, amazed at such words. No one had ever called him the love of their life, and to be labeled as such was so heartwarming and gutting at the same time that Thomas didn’t know how to feel.

Was he the love of Edward’s life?
Was Edward the same for him?

For so long, Thomas had imagined that Jimmy was the love of his life, even when he knew flat out that Jimmy was not like him and therefore an illogical choice. Thomas couldn’t help his irrational thinking, though… his feelings for Jimmy had been so undeniably strong at the time. In the end, they’d fueled his depressed spiral…. for how could a life ever be worth living if Jimmy wasn’t in it? If Jimmy didn’t care about him?

But Thomas was decidedly over Jimmy, or so he told himself in order to sleep better at night. Jimmy could never love him back. Jimmy was not an option… and Thomas needed to move on before he ruined his life a second time.

Edward was by far the kindest, closest, and greatest of his lovers in this life or the last. He sparked something deep and humane inside of Thomas that had nothing to do with his desire to right his past wrongs. It was a genuine and powerful effort. Edward had no way of knowing that his mere presence had Thomas looking for right things to do. Had Thomas pushing for a better life even away from Downton Abbey.

He’d become a Medical Officer, a Head Healer… and what for? For himself?
He’d never seen himself as a doctor. Why had he pushed so hard?

But the answer was simple, and it resounded in volumes as Thomas and Edward clasped hands and bowed heads before battle. He’d done it to be with Edward. To be ready to protect Edward. All the pain, all the set backs, all the irritations were far worth it if Edward was better off in the end.

If that wasn’t love, Thomas didn’t know what was.
“I did not know what it meant to do better, to be better… until you came into my life.” Thomas murmured. “And now that I know you, I can never walk away to the life I lived before. All I’ve done to make my life right… it’s nothing, Edward. It’s nothing without you. You are my life. My entire sodding life.”

Edward bent down, and in front of God and anyone who dared to look kissed Thomas upon the lips.

Thomas froze, shocked at the sudden display of open public affection. His heart beat wildly in his chest, and for a moment all he could think was a running mantra of “Someone will see! Someone will know!”

But Edward was brave, and so was Thomas. Both of them knew now that you didn’t get second chances in life… unless you were willing to put in the work for them.

Someone was sniggering behind them.

Thomas froze, a gasp sucking his lips away from Edward’s. He looked about, heart pounding in a sudden state of fear, until he saw that it was only Roger at the open flap of the front medical tent. There was such an obvious look of ‘I told you so’ upon his smug face that Thomas momentarily wanted to smack him. Anything to get him to stop being so damn… so damn… oh! There wasn’t even a word for it.

“Go away!” Thomas hissed, brandishing an irritable hand to swat Roger off like the irksome gnat that he was. Edward flipped Roger an ugly hand gesture, scowling.

“Anything you say.” Roger shrugged, turning to head back into the medical tent, “You boys just won me a tin of tobacco.”

And so they were alone again, though this time Thomas was scowling instead of swooning. Edward tilted his chin up, kissing Thomas again on the temple closest to him.

“Someone will see.” Thomas fretted.

“Let them.” Edward said, kissing him again, “It won’t make me love you any less… and half the men already know. No one cares… ‘cept for Cartwright and he’s an insufferable bastard anyways.”

True, true.

But even as Thomas opened his mouth to say something as equally scathing about Cartwright, the sudden sound of battalion trumpets issued from their side. Men were calling for arms, pulling out their rifles and their swords. Horses were snorting and shrieking, Generals were screaming for men to get into position.

Across the No Man’s Land, you could hear the similar screeches in German. The demands to win. The warnings not to let another inch be given to the enemy lest all be lost.

And suddenly, Thomas was filled with the fear that he would lose Edward in this fight today. That Edward would get trapped by the gas or shot-

Thomas reached up, grabbing Edward tight by the lapels of his tweeds so that they were suddenly nose to nose.
“Edward, stay safe, I beg of you!” Thomas cried out, having to talk louder than normal in order to be heard over the bugles. “Watch out for the gas. Don’t go into enemy territory without your mask! Do you have it-?”

Edward patted Khamsa’s side pack.

“No, you keep it around your neck.” Thomas snarled, suddenly angry. He reached over Edward’s lap, having to strain in order to unlatch the leather satchel. He pulled out the gas mask, shoving it into Edward’s hands. “Put it around your neck, now!”

Edward did not even blink. He followed Thomas’ orders to the T, staring down at him fondly.

“What is it with you and gas?” Edward wondered.

“I can’t lose you.“ Thomas spoke over him, shushing him, “I lose you, I lose everything. You are my whole life, Edward… You are the reason I came back— look at me!”

Thomas grabbed Edward by the face, forcing him to stare eye to eye even though men were now calling for the mountebanks to get into position alongside the trench walls.

“… You are the reason I came back. You are the reason I endured it all.” Thomas said. His voice broke. He felt an awful stinging sensation in the corners of his eyes. And to think…Edward wouldn’t even know what he meant.

“…I will come back.” Edward swore, leaning in to kiss Thomas firmly upon the mouth. “I promise you, I will come back.”

But he was being pulled away from Thomas’ hands as Khamsa was ushered forwards. She could not deny the call to arms, nor could Edward. Thomas watched the pair of them go, with Edward looking about in his saddle even as Khamsa trotted faithfully towards the mountebank line.

Twice more, Edward looked over his shoulder. Each time, Thomas was still standing on that broken little crate, watching him go.

Thomas supposed he would never forget the sight of Edward in that moment, body facing the enemy but head turned to stare only at Thomas. Germany waiting for him, England calling him.

His uniform pressed and tidy. His horse brushed. A gas mask around his neck.

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M.O. Thomas Barrow, Unit 11, Ypres, West Flanders, Belgium

November 12th, 1914

Thomas,

Honestly, what is the matter with you? Dithering about at a time like this! You realize this is why men like you get a bad reputation? For god’s sake, there’s a war going on. Is there really time to be getting love marks and swapping notes when you’re being shot at? What if the worst happens? What if you lose him, them? What if they die? Where will you be then, cryin’ over some fallen soldier nurse when you’ve still got work to do? I’m trying to look out for you, here! And so is Mrs. Hughes. I told...
her what you said in your postscript. I overheard her saying that you were acting like a right little
nitwit, fluttering about and on the verge of getting into trouble. You’re like a butterfly, swallowed up
by the rapids all for a drink of water you could fetch at any old creek... and yes, I meant butterfly in
a sour way.

I don’t know why I’m writing this next bit. I suppose it’s because I’ve lost a few men to war. In a
way, I think I’ll end up losing you too. Yes there was someone, back when I was a girl. Before I was
a lady’s maid, I was a seamstress. I made nothing, and I hated my work. It was a thankless life.
When he left, I became a lady’s maid. I decided I was worth more than what my mother had given to
me.

Keep your head down, watch your back, and stop being such an absolute idiot.

Sarah O’Brien

The battle did not last a day.
It did not last a week.
It lasted an entire month, and then some.

Days upon days, stretching like the intestines of a bloated corpse being flung out into the sun to
tempt buzzards to a feast. Man after man falling, boy after boy dying. English, Canadian, French…
all of them powerless to resist the German onslaught.

Supplies ran out.
Moral followed next.

And still, Thomas kept fighting, kept working to save each patient he came upon praying that the
next bloodied face to greet him wouldn’t be Edward.

But it never was Edward, though Thomas saw plenty more men that he knew. Instead it was soldier
after soldier, canon fodder and stretcher bearers alike. They lost hands, feet, legs, arms, buttocks…
two men were unfortunate enough to lose their penises though they died soon afterwards so no love
lost there.

It wasn’t too long into the battle for Ypres that the lower ranks came to the same conclusion as the
uppers.

God had abandoned them. Now they would have to pay court to the Devil for daring to invoke war
on their brothers.

It was known as the slaughter of the lambs, the Kindermord, for the losses of student volunteers on
both sides. By the true turn of October, there was absolute chaos in the ally ranks as everyone fought
back to keep the Germans from gaining any more ground into the cities. Houses had been lost, roads
cut off, with the enemy squarely gaining nearly all the high ground in Ypres. There was true fear in
those days that everything would be lost.

And for Thomas, the horrors of war were about to become very real, very fast.
Like most awful occurrences, it would not be a solo affair. As the rain would fall, so too would the bricks, till Thomas felt utterly weighted down by the forces opposing him. He’d not seen Edward in days, and only knew that he lived from word of mouth as wounded soldiers came and exited his tent in rapid succession. He worked, he ate scraps, and he slept in short bursts. The first two weeks of such living had caused Thomas to suffer a minor mental breakdown. He’d had no time to properly lose his mind however, because there was simply too much to do. Now, three weeks into battle, Thomas was numb from the bloody unending routine. He worked, he ate, and he slept. There was no stopping. There was no breathing. He’d not changed clothes in weeks. He’d not bathed for longer. He stank, and was covered in filth.

There was no time.
There was no time.

When Thomas heard Edward’s voice for the first time in three weeks, he momentarily thought it a flitting hallucination. Above a cacophony of howling men and sobbing boys, his name rang out in a panic: “Thomas-! Thomas!!”

And indeed, Thomas didn’t look around until Roger smacked him hard upon the shoulder, jolting him out of his revery from where he’d been stitching up several bullet wounds on a lieutenant bound for Dunkirk and home. When he finally did turn around, however, it was to the sight of Edward barreling through the tent with a bloodied body in his arms. Whoever it was, their right leg was completely blown to hell. It started just below the kneecap, with the skin about the femur yanked back like one might a curtain. A bloody raw bone stuck out, almost all the way down to where the ankle might have been if any foot still remained. The foot was long gone though. Nothing was left but stringy tatters of muscle ripped like streamers, and flaps of skin with meat and fat hanging off in folds. A makeshift tourniquet had been wrapped around the soldier’s upper thigh, but it would not do for long.

It was not until Edward brought the man to Thomas’ side that Thomas was able to finally get an identification on the soldier. It was not a man at all but a boy, with dark hair and hollow eyes. A tearful, miserable face, marred with mud and blood, gray from lack of luster… Nicholas-!

“Oh god, no.” Thomas moaned in grief for the boy’s fate. To think, how he’d been so terrified of this very happening. “Not him.”

But it was him none the less, and there was nothing Thomas could do but (bitterly) amputate his right leg. Nicholas would not live if Thomas did not operate. He had to pray the boy was still enough in shock to mute most of his pain. Judging from the shrieks and hysterical wheezing, however, Thomas’ time was running slim to the ground.

“Fucking canons.” Edward spat out, as he and Roger helped to lay Nicholas down on one of the few spare cots in the ward. “Killed his accountability partner. He pushed Nick out of the way-“

So it seemed that the young boy Thomas had known earlier in the secret meeting had sacrificed his own life so that Nicholas would live. If there were a more honorable death, Thomas wasn’t aware of it.

“I can’t say-“ Edward pleaded with Thomas. His hands were red from Nicholas’ blood. He looked to
Thomas, begging for forgiveness. Though they’d not seen each other in weeks, there was no time nor privacy for a kiss or reconciliation. War pressed on, and so should they. “I’m so sorry, I have to go back.”

Thomas did not bother to hide the tears forming in his eyes. He could blame it on stress of the job if nothing else.

“Go.” He choked out, waving Edward back towards the front flaps. “Be safe.”

Edward all but ran out of the tent, having to throw himself back into battle.

“My leg-! I can’t feel my leg!” Nicholas was wailing through deep gutteral moans. Helen, Thomas’ most trusted nurse, was already wrapping a tongue depressor in gauze which was to be dipped in a potent cocktail of morphine and wine. It was the only thing they had to numb the pain anymore, and the morphine was fleeting.

“That’s a good thing, trust me!” Thomas snarled, using a pair of dirtied sheers to cut Nicholas’ ruined right trouser leg all the way off to the hip.

“I need three holders!” Thomas barked, waving a hand about till he felt thin metal touch his fingertips. Nicholas was held down by nurses and healers alike, while Thomas began to clamp the femoral artery as best he could. The wad of dipped gauze was stuffed in Nicholas’ mouth, and while it did muffle his screams, it probably did not numb his pain.

“Saw!” A nurse shouted, even as he passed Thomas over his trusted Gigli amputation saw. Nicholas saw it and began to scream, though he could get very little sound out through the gauze wad.

Nicholas thrashed, but everyone on hand was holding him down.

“Can we save the knee?” Roger wondered; god the wound would be a tough call!

“Yes.” Thomas snapped, determined to save as much of Nicholas’ leg as humanly possible.

“Are you sure-“

“DON’T QUESTION ME!” Thomas shouted, the stress making his temper fly off the handle. Roger threw his hands up in mock surrender, by now well acquainted with Thomas’ terrible people skills.

“Roger, cut that tissue!” Thomas pointed to the now pointless flaps of skin hanging beneath the revealed femur. At once, Roger began to isolate and cut, so that flaps of skin were torn away in waves.

“Rubber wrap-!” Thomas helped three nurses to wrap a rubber band tightly around Nicholas’ leg, a true and honest tourniquet that replaced the ribbons of another soldier’s ruined uniform.

“Get those salt wraps ready-“

“They’re here, Mr. Barrow-“ Helen had them in a neat little pyramid pile, taking away all the scraps of flesh Roger cut off. When Roger’s hands were finally out of the ‘danger zone’, Thomas took a deep breath and placed the saw upon Nicholas’ ruined leg… it was as low as Thomas could dare to cut while still making a clean amputation.

Nicholas was all but screaming at this point, desperate to get words out from around the mouth wad.
His words didn’t make sense, technically, but everyone knew what he was saying: “No please, don’t do this. Just let me die. Anything but this-!”

Thomas pursed his lips, flared his nostrils, and began to saw as rapidly as humanly possible.

The wild screams Nicholas gave out were like the shriek of a banshee. Every soldier, be he resting upon his cot or enduring an operation of his own, knew what was going on. They didn’t have to look, they didn’t have to even be in the tent. Screams like this only came from an amputation.

“Jesus, don’t cut off your own thumb!” Roger begged, for Thomas was going so fast he was in real danger of accidentally harming himself.

“Have everything ready-!” Thomas snarled in lieu of an adequate response. Helen was ready with linens and salt packs. Roger had a dirty tin bowl out to catch the detached leg when it should fall.

Nicholas screamed, and screamed-

And then, with an ugly dull thud, the destroyed femur and torn sinews came cleanly away. Roger scooped up the evidence, taking it out the back of the medic tent to a burn pile where all human remains were incinerated. With the rubber wrap on and his femoral artery clamped, Nicholas’ new wound did not adequately bleed. That did not make looking at the open limb any more pleasant to look at, however, and Thomas was grateful when Helen covered up the garish sight with gauze and salt packs.

“Get him to an ambulance now!” Thomas said, and without further ado Nicholas was lifted up in the arms of a medic strongman. The dirtied wad of gauze was taken from his mouth, so that once again everyone could hear Nicholas crying at the top of his lungs. The strongman was unfazed; he’d heard it all before.

“Have them take him to Paris!” Thomas shouted, for it would be the faster route. Ambulances to Dunkirque, while technically best for English and Canadian soldiers, came with a fated boat ride. Nicholas would receive treatment faster on the ground.

(***)

Roger returned from disposing of Nicholas’ remains, washing his hands as best he could though their bowls of water were already too filthy to clean properly.

“Christ, he’s got a set of lungs on him.” Roger said, but his tone was not without sympathy.

Thomas wiped his own hands before haggardly dragging damp fingertips over his face. Why Nicholas? Why, of all the boys, had it been the one most terrified—

Pap-! Pop, pop, pop, snap, pap, BOOM!

Nurses screamed and ran for the back of the tent. Doctors and healers pulled out their guns-!

The fire was so close now it was making holes in the front flaps of the medic tent. Soldiers on cots near the door were so desperate to get away they actually rolled out of their beds, hobbling on crutches or even dragging themselves through the mud just to get away from the fighting.

At once, Thomas pulled out his own pistol, which he kept at all times in his belt. Roger did the same, both of them opening fire at the Germans who’d dared to get so close. They were not the only ones firing; every medic in the tent with a gun was letting a jolly time fly!
“HOLD YOUR GROUND!” Roger roared to the nurses, who were now clustered in the back of the tent.

“HOLD YOUR GROUND!” Thomas agreed. They would not give an inch, they would not! “NOBODY MOVES!”

The nurses did not dare retreat out the back of the tent, but they did not come forward either. How could Thomas blame them? They’d never seen battle before, not truly, and they were unarmed.

When their rounds were silent, Thomas raised a wary hand in an act of authority so that every healer turned to wait and see what he would do. Thomas narrowed his eyes, listening intently for the sounds of German’s returning fire.

They did not do so. They were dead.

“Good.” Thomas growled, immediately reloading his pistol just for the sake of sakes. “Everyone reload and get back to work. They’re gone.”

But they weren’t… not truly… and Thomas was about to find that out for himself.

~*~

Even after Nicholas had been gone for two days, Thomas still hear the boy’s screams in his dreams. What sleep he could come by was now marred by Nicholas’ worst hours.

“Don’t do this to me!” He’d beg Thomas upon his knees, sobbing with his hands twisted in Thomas’ shirttails. “Anything but this-!”

Then Nicholas would turn into Bates, who’d turn into Carson, who’d turn into Robert Crawley, who’d turn into Edward, and Thomas would then wake up with a start sweating as if fevered.

In a way, he was.

It was the early morning of November 21st that shit finally hit the fan for Thomas, and it began with a sudden start from sleep that had nothing to do with a nightmare.

“Thomas-! Thomas!!”

Thomas gasped awake, a hand flying to his pillow where he kept his pistol stashed underneath. His first thought, irrational though it may be, was that a German was trying to wake him up in order to fight with him. If only all combatants were so polite, but it was only Roger in nothing but trousers and socks, shaking Thomas rapidly awake with terrified eyes.

“Whu- what?!” Thomas demanded, mentally preparing himself from everything be it the fall of
“Ypres or the death of the King.”

“The German’s snuck into camp!” Roger spoke rapidly, his words tripping over his tongue, “They stole the last morphine tank!”

He’d heard of this sort of thing before, but the Germans had never been close enough to Thomas’ own platoon in order for him to experience it first hand. All was fair in love and war, and so if you left shit out chances were it was going to be stolen eventually be it by the enemy or your own accountability partner. That was why Thomas slept with his duffle bag as a pillow, why he did not trust anyone save Edward when it came to what possessions he had. It was too fucking dangerous, and here was the reason why!

That morphine tank was indispensable. They lost that tank, they lost Ypres!

“Oh no they bloody well didn’t!” Thomas snarled. He leapt out of bed, tripping over an empty carton of cigarettes and shoving his shoes onto his feet without properly doing back up the laces. He had on nothing save for his trousers and an undershirt, with his suspenders banging about his waist. Grabbing his pistol, Thomas took off the safety and bolted for the flaps which divided the medic tent from what meager housing the nurses and healers now took for their own. There was no more living in houses, and it was too dangerous to stray far from camp.

But stray they did, with Thomas charging out into the night to see a man retreating over the dangerous fields of Ypres that were now littered with dead horses, destroyed canons, blasted trenches, and other rubbish. Thomas could see nothing of the man, but the moonlight above glimmered upon the steel canister of the morphine.

Thomas did not even stop to think. So desperate was he to get back his rightful property that he dove into No Man’s Land, following after the German soldier.

Roger followed him, his own pistol out. His shoes were loose upon his feet, flapping around unseemly with every leap and bound. There was no time to stop and tie up the laces. They had to keep running! If they could overtake the man, they would be able to overpower him and get back the-

A bullet whizzed past Thomas’ temple as the retreating soldier turned and fired an errant shot at his pursuers. Furious, Thomas returned fire, as did Roger. The pair of them shot off three rounds a piece, but none of them managed to hit the soldier. Their fears were the same: if they accidentally hit the morphine tank, all would be for naught. Morphine was good to no one when it was soiled on the ground.

The soldier turned again, and fired three more times. Once again, the bullets missed Thomas.

But one did not miss Roger.

Thomas heard the shocked gasp, and turned about in horror to watch his companion fall into the mud. He did not think to continue after the German, dropping to his knees at once to scoop Roger out of the mud. The bullet had hit Roger’s right shoulder, which was (given his status) a horrific injury. Roger had been invaluable in surgery. With a wound like this, how now would Thomas be able to use him as a team member?

God, what if Roger died from it?

“Shoulder.” Roger spat, already clamping down upon the wound with his remaining good hand. “Just m’shoulder. Get that tank.”
“But, Roger-” Thomas protested, trying to press down upon the wound; they’d have to call for the stretcher bearers. Thomas wouldn’t be able to drag Roger all the way back to camp-

“Go!” Roger snarled, so aggressive that it temporarily shocked Thomas still. “Get that fuckin’ tank, Thomas. Get it! We lose it, we lose Ypres. You know that. I’m not important, the tank is!”

Thomas didn’t agree, but it didn’t change the circumstances.

The German still had the tank, and what was more he’d gained considerable ground even through the hail of bullet fire while Thomas had been trying to attend to Roger. Thomas looked over his shoulder, watching the German slip and fall in the mud as an English canon nearly ripped him apart.

Now was his chance!

Scrambling in the mud, Thomas took up his pistol again and let out a cry of rage. He dashed through the mud, running so fast that flecks of dirt traveled up his pants and dirtied his belly. The soldier was still down-

“SOLDIER DOWN!” Thomas heard Roger shout out, calling for the aid of any stretcher bearer nearby. “SOLDIER DOWN, ASSIST!!”

Thomas dove over a canon ditch, too small to make much impact, and then dodged left around a broken German war cart. He kept running, even as the soldier scrambled up muddy from head to toe only to fall into a massive ditch with a cry.

Thomas dove right after him, and to sod and heck with what lay at the bottom.

It turned out to be an abandoned trench wing, wrecked by English artillery. The German was now within arms reach, a thin blonde boy with a sharp nose and petrified eyes. Thomas howled in rage and dove upon him.

They collided, the morphine tank between them, and began to fight like heathens with all dignity forgotten.

Thomas pulled at the man’s hair and punched him in the neck. The man scratched and tore at Thomas’ face and eyes, finally navigating the faded collar of Thomas’ undershirt to pull Thomas in close and bite him hard upon the shoulder.

“Bite me, will you?!” Thomas roared in outrage, well aware the man wouldn’t be able to understand him. He head-butted the soldier, nearly knocking the man out, and scrambled to take the morphine tank away.

Thomas clambered back up to his feet, navigating out his pistol out of the mud with shaking hands. He’d dropped it in the fray, and prayed it would still be of use.

Yet even as Thomas brought the gun up to fire upon the now dazed soldier, a sudden telling click at his temple made him go cold and freeze.

Someone had pressed a gun to his temple.

He could not turn, could not dare to move… but someone was most certainly standing next to him. A
German, no doubt, coming to aid his fallen comrade.

This is it. Thomas thought helplessly, even as the soldier in the mud finally gained enough strength to clamber back to his feet. He was still bleeding heavily from his nose, however. This is how I die. For a fucking morphine tank of all things-

“You are doctor?” The German pointing the gun asked. His accent was thick, and a dead give away to his nationality.

“…Yes.” Thomas said. If the man could speak English, he could probably understand it too.

“You come with me… or you die.” The German said. But before Thomas could even contemplate such awful circumstances, the man standing next to Thomas reared back his gun and smacked Thomas hard on the back of the head with the pistol.

Stars of blue and white burst before his eyes, and Thomas felt something wet and heavy upon his cheek, chin, neck, and chest as he fell face first into the mud.

The other German, whom Thomas had so nearly defeated, was the one to deal the next blow.

“Schießen das!” The boy spat, furious, and kicked Thomas hard in the temple. Combined with the blow from the gun, it knocked Thomas out cold.

~*~

There was a crick in his neck.

At first, Thomas momentarily thought he was still asleep in his cot next to the medic tent, and he first wondered why no one had thought to wake him up and get him back on shift.

But then, Thomas felt an awful, throbbing ache in his temple, and he heard foreign voices talking.

He remembered, and he cursed internally.
He’d been fucking kidnapped by Germans… and probably wasn’t going to make it out alive.

They’ll torture me, Thomas thought, bizarrely calm in that moment, They’ll torture me for information but I won’t give it. Then they’ll kill me.

When he opened his eyes, however, he did not find himself in a torture chamber lined with racks or whips. Instead, he was in an underground bunker that was all but ransacked, tied to a rickety wooden chair with a small group of German soldiers who looked absolutely beaten. They were filthy, wounded, and thin, barely clothed and carrying weapons that seemed to be on their last limbs. Though the Germans did not know it, they looked just about the same as the English troops.

There were five of them in the bunker. They were talking to one another, gesturing to Thomas as they smoked soiled cigarettes and favored legs uninjured by battle.

“Sieh mal, wer uffjewacht is,” one muttered nastily in Thomas’ direction, “Is wohl Zeit für’n Tee.”
A dirty snigger went through the group. Thomas had a feeling they were mocking him.

“Yeah well you don’t look too peachy yourself.” Thomas growled. The men stiffened, glancing from one to another as if hoping someone would step forward and proclaim ‘I know what he said!’.

But it seemed that no one could speak English.

Thomas struggled against his bindings, irritable to find that despite the Germans looking worse for wear they were still rather tight.

“How fucking pigs.” Thomas spat, trying to pull at his bindings as hard as he could. How long had he been knocked out, and where was he? Was he still in Ypres, or had he been taken farther still behind enemy lines? He could still hear the faint echo of canons from above, so surely he wasn’t too far from the battle. No more than three miles, at most.

The Germans were skittish to approach him, even if he was tied up. Thomas could not blame them; he was just as fearful as they.

How queer after so much time fighting them, to see them face to face. To watch them whisper amongst one another and known that for each of these men there was a mother, a father, a home, a town… all missing them.

English Generals likened them to mercenaries, but they were children just like Nicholas.

A noise from behind Thomas gave him pause; it was the sound of boots crunching upon broken floorboards. He couldn’t turn his head to see who it was, but Thomas could tell from the weight behind the boots that the man was tall and heavy set.

“Howl begrüße unseren Gast,” a dark voice over Thomas’ shoulder said.

One of the boys stepped up, Karl perhaps; he had dark hair and raging eyes. Thomas knew he was about to be attack and bristled as he readied for the blows.

Karl threw back a hammish punch, smacking Thomas squarely in the jaw so that he suddenly had stars bursting in front of his eyes. Karl hit him again, and again-! Each time he punched Thomas on the opposite cheek, till Thomas’ neck ached from the brutal knock back and his jaw was swollen near shut.

“Halt.”

Karl stopped, leaving Thomas sagging against his twine bonds with blood dribbling from a fat bottom lip. He took in one breath, then another, and tasted blood in the back of his throat.

He swished his mouth, and spat right at Karl’s feet so that the tip of his boot was stained dark red with Thomas’ blood. Karl seized, furious, and reared back his arm again for another punch-!

“Warte.”

Karl halted mid punch, seething as he was forced to back off.

“Dit wirste noch bereuen.” Karl snarled, arms crossed over a hammish chest. But it seemed his nasty agenda would have to wait, as a tall older man walked around Thomas’ field of vision to stand face to face.

He was lithe but broad shouldered, in the uniform of a General save that his clothes were tattered and
a few of his brasses had been knocked off. His steel blonde hair was smoothed back, with grease or pomade it was hard to tell.

The man had a jaw like iron, and a long hardened face. He reminded Thomas slightly of his father, had his father been German and blonde.

“You are in a German bunker, Englishman.” the man spoke in fluent English though there was a slight accent with his vowels. “It would behoove you to have some manners.”

“Mm.” Thomas thought the concept over, then hocked a loogie and spat it straight at the General’s face.

The General bristled, blood and mucus dribbling from his temple.

“Bastard!!” Shrieked Karl, diving forward to surely end Thomas’ life. But the General flung out a hand, stopping Karl from getting at Thomas.

Karl seethed, watching as his superior daintily pulled out a linen handkerchief and wiped his face.

Thomas’ breath was growing shallow, certain he was in for hell now. Would they torture him? Would they shoot him outright?

“I will let you live after that, for only one reason.” The general growled. “I require your assistance as a surgeon.”

“You look healthy enough to me.” Thomas sneered. “What’s a matter, have a scraped knee?”

The General sneered but did not reply to Thomas’ taunt directly: “A man of mine is in need of your skills.”

“How do you know I have the skills you need. You don’t even know my name-“

“You are Thomas Barrow are you not?”

…What the fuck.

Thomas was taken aback, gaping at the German general who was now grinning smugly with clear indication that he’d won. How on earth had these men learned his name? It was one thing to have upper English Generals know about him, but German’s too?

“Oh yes.” The General murmured. “We know of your skills. We have intercepted many communications about you. Your uppers praise your talents with amputations and gas attacks.”

“Well, what can I say.” Thomas growled. “I’m handy with a knife.”

“You may call me Commander Albrecht.” Albrecht said. Thomas cursed, well aware of the name and the bloody reputation that followed. His troops had a knack for pillaging villages, raping women and slaughtering children. He was the terror of France.

“I have heard of your skill in surgery, and I have a man who is dying. Your prowess can save him.”

“Alright, Albert give me a good reason why I should help you?” Thomas snapped.

“We have English prisoners.” Albrecht said, which didn’t surprise Thomas. They were missing four men from camp. “Save my man, and I will let one of them go in recompense.”
“No.” Thomas snapped. “I will do nothing unless you let go of every prisoner you have.”

“You are not in a position to bargain.”

“Actually I am.” Oh how wonderful, to be openly snide and cold again! Thomas had missed the feeling of a well oiled barb sliding off his tongue. He was certain a snake felt the same when it spat venom. “I’m the one with the skills, and every minute that we sit here is another minute your man has to lose. Why should I care if he lives or dies? What is he to me?”

“If he dies, I will kill you.” Albrecht tried.

“I’m going to die, anyways.” Thomas was under no assumptions as to the other.

“I will kill all the prisoners too.” Albrecht added.

“They’re going to die anyways as well; you know we aren’t immortal.” Thomas sneered.

“Really?” Albrecht could give as well as he took, “You should tell that to a few of your lieutenants, riding about on their horses like pompous peacocks.”

“Tick tock, tick tock…” Thomas’ tone turned soft and dangerous, eyes gleaming maliciously. “How long are you willing to wait, baiting me, Albrecht?”

Albrecht cracked his neck, rubbing his jaw as he realized that Thomas wasn’t going to bite.

“Lass sie laufen,” one of the Germans offered. Albrecht looked over his shoulder in mild address. “Die sind eh nichts wert.”

“Unsere Ärzte sind tot,” another added. “Soll er stattdessen bleiben.”

At this, the others seemed to reach agreement. They were nodding to one another, commending the second man for a supposed stroke of genius.

Albrecht turned back around, speaking once more in English.

“You save him, and I will release our prisoners.” Albrecht said. “But you will stay and heal my men.”

“… Oh I can live with that.” Thomas said, for he had no intention of leaving without that morphine tank. “I’m not leaving here without my morphine tank, anyways.”

He wouldn’t heal them. He would poison them all, slowly. They would burn to death from the inside out, their veins rotting in their muscles.

Albrecht raised a thin blonde eyebrow.

“You know. The one you stole?” Thomas offered nastily. “Makes me wonder where all your morphine went. Didn’t dilute it enough, did you boys?” Thomas tutted with the roof of his mouth and tongue. “Silly silly…”

“We’re saving it for our patient.” Albrecht explained.

“I see.” Suddenly Thomas wondered just who this patient was. After all, this war wasn’t called the Kindermorde for nothing: “Tell me, is he terribly rich and charming? Or just your best shooter? You think I don’t know about the Kindermorde? I wonder how many of their friends have your shitty policies killed.”
Albrecht bristled. Clearly that comment had gotten under his skin. For a moment it was quiet in the bunker as Albrecht considered what to say next. None of the lessers spoke up; each of them watched with baited breath. Thomas wondered if they could even understand a single word he was saying.

“Both his legs must be amputated, above the knee.” Albrecht said.

“Double amputation.” Thomas whistled in appreciation, “How long have the wounds been open?”

“Two days.” Albrecht said. Thomas rolled his eyes.

“He won’t make it.” Thomas shook his head, “He certainly won’t make it through today. What time is it?”

Albrecht checked his wristwatch, whose glass was cracked as if he’d accidentally smacked his hand against a boulder: “2:32 p.m.”

Thomas nodded, considering all that the man had to lose. If the open wounds didn’t kill him, sepsis would. But that was if the man could make it through the night, hypothermia notwithstanding.

“He won’t make it through the night.” Thomas said. “Too cold… Come nightfall he’s a dead man. The shock, blood loss, or even sepsis will kill him if the hypothermia doesn’t.”

“This man is very important.” Albrecht growled; it seemed that the facts would not deter him from his goal, “If he lives, it will secure the freedom of your fellow soldiers. If he dies, I shall drag you out of this bunker and shoot all of you in front of your pompous little friends.”

If the man lived, Thomas doubted they’d make it out anyways. It was either die for sure or risk the slightest chance that maybe they could escape and live. Maybe.

“I can work with those terms.” Thomas decided. “But I do require being untied to operate.”

Albrecht gestured to the soldiers, giving them a curt command. Kurt did not move, bitter at Thomas having spat on his boot and his general. Instead, two other men stepped up and pulled out broken pocket knives to cut Thomas’ bindings free.

It was the small things like that which made army’s triumph. You couldn’t win a war if you didn’t conserve your twine, or keep your knives in good condition. These particular men were young and stupid.

but even as Thomas’ hands were unbound, he was grabbed tight at the shoulders and wrenched from the chair. He tried to test the strength of the men, but found it unwavering.

And even then, they did not stop. One reached up and with sweaty fingers clapped his hands over Thomas’ eyes so that he could not see.

“Really going to need to see in order to work.” Thomas growled.

“Keep quiet, or you will never see your lovely homeland again.” Albrecht warned.

“Oh, like Munich is anything to write home about.”

He was drug along through corridors, the air stale and freezing. As he walked, Thomas listened for anything whether it be the scream of a fellow trapped Englishmen or the blast of an errant cannon. Instead, he heard nothing, and it frightened him more.
All the while, he kept thinking of Edward. Of where Edward might be in this moment... dead or alive? Would Edward know he was missing? Would anyone? Had Roger seen him be kidnapped or was Thomas now another nameless MIA?

He suddenly wished he’d told Edward he’d loved him more often.

They took a sharp turn left, walked down another hall, then took a turn right. It was here that Thomas’ eyes were uncovered, and he was shown a sparse operating room that had surely once been packed with supplies. Now cabinets and trunks lay bare, with every bed in the wing upturned and left for baggage save for a final cot that held a colonel who was being tended to by four nurses. What remained of his stumped legs were wrapped in inches of dressing, all of which was bleeding through crimson.

The german soldiers let Thomas’ aching arms go, only to slam shut the door that led out into the hallway. Kurt stood in front of it, barring the exit with a loaded pistol. Thomas rolled his eyes when he realized the gun was actually his own. So it seemed they didn’t steal just morphine…

Albrecht led Thomas through the deserted medical wing, his gate stiff and reverent. Thomas did not pretend to show any type of manners, plodding along as he rubbed his arms and cracked his stiff neck. His jaw was still swollen, and he was certain he’d at least cracked his lower mandible.

As Thomas approached, he noticed the German women were stiff and frightened of them. Two actually hid behind the third, a large hulking woman with chestnut hair held tight in a bun. She looked strong enough to knock a mule out, and Thomas held his hands up in a show of mock surrender.

The fourth nurse was barely clinging on. She was gray, pale and sweaty. She looked like she was suffering from low blood sugar. Clearly it wasn’t just the soldiers who were suffering.

“She needs sugar,” Thomas noted to Albrecht, who cast Thomas a wary glance, “Do you have any candy?”

“I was not aware that you need candy for amputations.”

“You nurse.” Thomas snapped, a little louder than was necessary. “Look at her, you idiot. She’s going down and fast. She needs sugar. And I want all your English prisoners brought here or I will not operate. I want to see them alive, in front of me.”

“You are making many demands for a simple healer!” Albrecht was starting to lose patience, but frankly Thomas had lost it half an hour ago when he’d woken in a German bunker with his hands tied behind his back for the sake of a fucking morphine tank.

“I’m not some simple healer!” Thomas shouted, furious at Albrecht’s inability to take a hint. “I’m the only healer you’ve got, and this soldier is going to die without my immediate aid! I’m not stupid, I won’t operate until I see the English prisoners! How do I know they’re actually English? How do I know they’re even still alive? Whose to say you won’t just shoot us all after I finish healing this man? I don’t trust any of you to keep your word!”

Albrecht shifted, his jaw clenched so tight one could almost hear his back molars grinding. Thomas refused to back down, burning and furious with his dire situation. Either Albrecht would bend, or he’d lose his little colonel. Thomas wasn’t going to make his life any easier.

Albrecht turned to the three German soldiers who remained away from the door, “Bring mir die
Engländer und irgendetwas Süßes für Brigitte.”

The soldiers looked reproachful but did not talk back. They left without another word, so now it was only Kurt and Albrecht in the room save for Thomas and the nurses (to say nothing of the patient). Kurt still barred the door, furious with his pistol at the ready.

Thomas ignored Kurt and Albrecht as best he could, instead focusing himself with the patient at hand. The man’s skin was cool and clammy, pale even for a German and moist to the touch. His breathing was shallow. His eyes listless… he was awake but Thomas wondered if he was still functioning and aware.

“What’s his name?” Thomas asked.

“Fredrick.” Albrecht replied.

“Fredrick!” Thomas shouted the man’s name, trying to get him to look Thomas in the eye.

Fredrick didn’t stir, staring somewhere over Thomas’ shoulder.

“When’s the last time he urinated?” Thomas asked, taking Fredrick’s pulse at his neck. Christ, but it was feeble!

“He hasn’t been able to function since yesterday.”

“God this’ll be tight.” Thomas moaned into his hands. “What supplies do you have?”

“Our healers were shot yesterday.” Albrecht explained, gesturing to the wrecked medical ward. “All that we have left is at your disposal.”

Thomas rummaged through upturned steel carts, finding a beaten leather valise underneath one of the ruined beds. He sat it atop the mattress and opened it up to find it was nothing but scalpels. Thomas fished through them, pulling out a few that looked to be the sharpest, and lay them on the bed beside Fredrick’s destroyed legs.

“This is my team, I’m assuming?” Thomas asked, gesturing to the four remaining nurses. The large woman was still the bravest of the lot, hammish arms over her enormous bosom and a firm frown upon thin lips. She looked like the sort of woman who could rip a chicken’s head off and cook it into the most delicious meal you’d ever eaten.

“They will assist you in surgery.” Albrecht said, “They are smart.”

“I’m sure.” Thomas said, and he did not speak in a sarcastic tone. These women were healers, just like their English counterparts.

“Do they speak any English?”

Albrecht addressed the large one in front, “Sprichst du englisch?”

The woman shook her head. “Brauch ich nicht,” She said, her voice dainty and soft.

“She says that she doesn’t speak English… but that won’t stop her from being able to help you.” Albrecht said.

“She said all that in three words?” Thomas scowled, for he had a feeling the woman was more or less dog cussing him.
“I can’t do this unless someone translates specific demands.” Thomas said, “You want this man to live so much you’re going to have to stand here and tell them when I need them to do certain things. If you’re not up to the challenge your man will suffer for it.”

Albrecht feigned slight annoyance, rolling his steely eyes. “I have suffered worse for my cause.”

Just as Thomas opened his mouth to retort, however, the door to the hallway opened and three naked men were marched through.

(XXX)

They were skin and bones, beaten bloody, without a stitch of clothing between them save for blindfolds which each of them wore. Their hands were bound behind their backs, their faces hunched over. They were walked about like dogs on leashes by the Germans who forced them along the wall as if to line them up and shoot them down.

And yet, these same men acted in bouts of kindness as well as cruelty. One of the German soldiers shoved his man to his brother, so that he could march over to the wayward nurse and offer her a copper tin full of lemon drops. She opened them and put four in her mouth, sucking on them greedily. Thomas had to wonder when they’d last eaten. Had it even been that much of a meal?

“Behalt se,,” the soldier told the nurse kindly. She gave him a weak smile, clearly grateful to be cared for. “Ich kann se eh nich leidn.”

The nurse blinked. “Bist du sicher?” she asked.

“Ja.” The man laughed. Without further ado, the nurse tipped all the lemon candies into her hands, and offered them to her sisters-in-arms. They each took one, and when the lemon candies had been split, the nurse took the rest into her palm and threw them all back like one might pills. The sugar rush might be enough to get her to her next meal…but whatever she ate, it would have to be filling. Candy would be nothing more than a temporary fix.

“Take their blindfolds off!” Thomas demanded, gesturing to the naked men. Albrecht jerked his head, and the German soldiers took off the blindfolds at once so that the naked men could stare up, dazzled and frighteend.

“Officer Barrow!” Cried out one man, with dusky brown hair and a livid bruise underneath his right eye. “They got you too?!”

Angry at having his prisoner speak, the German guard punched the man in the stomach. He wheezed, winded, and fell silent.

“Ah!” Thomas shouted aloud, speaking with such volume that a few of the German’s jumped. “I’d be very careful not to hurt them. Not a single hair on their heads. They all sit on the floor, now.”

When the German’s didn’t move, Thomas took a murderous step forward. Albrecht did not move in defense, but there was something stiffening about him. He was waiting for Thomas to fly off the handle. For Thomas to do something dangerous-

“Tell them to sit them on the floor, and not touch them again.” Thomas growled. “Or god so help me… I’ll kill your man and spare us both the trouble.”

Albrecht wasted no time. He gestured to his soldiers, pointing to the floor. “Setzt sie hin und lasst sie
in Ruhe!”

Bitter, the men complied. Now huddled upon the floor, the naked men cowered against one another, hoping to defend their brothers with their own naked bodies.

“I won’t operate on this man until I know they’re all English.” Thomas warned Albrecht. He looked to the soldiers, who were staring up at him amazed. They were no doubt wondering what on earth could happen next.

“Tell me your name and your rank!” Thomas urged. “Where you were born, give me details! I won’t operate on this German soldier until I know you’re actually English prisoners.”

“We are!” Cried out the youngest, a frail waifly thing with curly blonde hair.

“I’m Henry Rawlinson.” The oldest man said. He seemed to be the most beat up, no doubt having suffered to defend his younger friends. “I’m a Major.”

“Thompson Capper, Lieutenant.” The brunette said. He was the one who’d been punched in the stomach.

“J-James Williamson. Infantry.” The blonde youth whimpered. He was clearly the youngest, and no doubt the most afraid.

“I’m from Westminster, London.” Rawlinson continued on, “I was born on the twentieth of February 1864. I’ve served since 1884 in His Majesties service. I’ve just been given command of the fourth corps division. I take my orders directly from General Douglas Haig… I’m the first Baron of Rawlison.”

“I see.” So new to the peerage to boot? Thomas looked to Capper, who seemed damn eager to talk. “You?”

“Born in Lucknow, but I’ve been in England since I was a small boy.” Capper said, “Lived in Sandhurst. Born October 20th, 1863.” So it seemed that Capper was actually the oldest. Maybe Rawlinson just wore his stress more visibly. “My mother’s name was Sarah. My father’s name was Thompson. I have an elder brother named John. I know for a fact that your accountability partner is Edward Courtenay. We’re friends.”

Thomas was quite content. But Williamson was beginning to whimper, no doubt struck nostalgic by talk of England.

“Where are you from, James?” Thomas asked, as kindly as he could manage in that stressful moment.


“And what did you do before this?”

“God…” James was so distraught by the thought of it that he began to weep openly. “I was a footman. An’ to think, I wanted nothing more than to go to war. I want to go home.” He begged. “God, I wish I could go home!!”

There was no point in getting more questions out of James. He was much too distraught. Thomas waved a hand, hoping the boy would settle down. It wouldn’t matter if he showed fear in front of the
enemy anyways. Either way, they’d probably all end up dead.

“Alright… I believe who you say you are. It’s going to be okay, James.” Thomas added, though frankly how was he to know any of that. “I know what I’m d-“

A sudden loud bang issued from overhead, knocking dirt loose from the ceiling and sending the nurses screaming into a corner. Thomas’ immediate thought was that an English canon had struck the top of the bunker and it was about to collapse. Instead, nothing fell, and silence slowly overtook their room again.

“Was that ours or yours?” Thomas wondered, looking up at the ceiling.

“Ours.” Albrecht snapped. And yet, as Thomas caught his eyes, he noticed how frightened Albrecht looked. He was tense, his jaw ground tight, and his breathing was unusually shallow.

“…Then why do you look so nervous?” Thomas drawled.

Albrecht had had just about enough. He pulled out his pistol and pointed it straight at Thomas’ face. Thomas felt a bead of cold sweat trickle down the back of his neck, traveling between his shoulder blades.

“Save this man,” Albrecht ordered, cocking his gun as he spoke, “Or I will shoot them all in front of you, and then you.” He gestured from the soldiers to Thomas with his loaded pistol.

Thomas glanced at the three men against the wall, all of them naked and beaten. It was no longer just his life at stake.

“…I’m going to need the morphine from the tank you stole.” Thomas said.

It was given without question.

Scrubbing up for surgery was difficult when half the supplies were gone. As Thomas washed and re-washed his hands, the nurses set up all the supplies Thomas would need. Gigle saw, scalpels, rubber tourniquets, mounds of gauze… all of it was heaped into a neat little pile on an upturned steel cart that the largest nurse righted and cleaned. They didn’t speak a lick of English but they knew what to do and for that Thomas was grateful. Thomas scrubbed his hands with lye soap, for there would be no point in doing an amputation if Thomas’ hands weren’t clean.

As he worked, he spoke to James the footman.

“So tell me James, who did you serve… I’m thinking, the Earl of Derby, yes?”


“I think I remember him.” Thomas said, for Lord Grantham had always been frolicking with one peer or another. Derby was rather close to Yorkshire. No doubt Lord Preston had visited Downton for a garden party, maybe even dinner. “I served the Earl of Grantham… Robert Crawley. Name ring a bell?”

“Yes.” James said. “He came to the manor a few years ago for the birth of Lord Preston’s daughter.”

And so he did. Thomas could just barely remember the event, if only because with Lord Grantham
away he’d been able to heckle William all the more. That of course had been back in the original 1910.

“Are you ready?” Albrecht asked, cutting Thomas’ conversation off.

Thomas wiped his hands on a clean towel, folding it neatly atop his sterile tray. “I’m ready.”

Thomas scooted through the nurses, who stepped back at once as if afraid he might try and attack them. Instead, Thomas reached for the drip that gave Fredrick morphine. They would have to dilute it in order for the medicine to last an entire surgery. A double amputation would take time-

“What are you doing?” Albrecht asked, sharply.

“I’m diluting the morphine.” Thomas said, fiddling with knobs on the side of the-

Albrecht cocked his gun again, pressing it hard against Thomas’ temple. “You will dilute nothing!” He barked.

“This surgery will last hours!” Thomas shouted back, not daring to move lest Albrecht lose control of his temper and fire. “Maybe even a whole day. You give all the morphine to him now, you’ll run out! That’s why you lot had to steal our morphine, you weren’t using it right. Now get that gun out of my face!”

Furious, Albrecht reluctantly dropped his gun.

At once, Thomas walked around Fredrick’s cot, side by side with the large nurse who watched him warily.

“Tell them to prepare forceps, bowls of salted water, and a rubber tourniquet for each leg.” Thomas ordered.

Albrecht translated the command and at once the team of German nurses stepped forward to get the job done. The largest woman was clearly the leader. She acted with a sense of independence that Thomas liked to see. Helen was the same way, back in camp.

“Ask them which leg is worse.” Thomas ordered. Albrecht translated the question, and the large nurse pointed to the right leg which had a tricky shard of bone sticking out of the meat of broken muscle. Horrifically enough, there were marks in the man’s mutated flesh which showed that someone had been attempting to saw down… so clearly this wasn’t his first amputation surgery. No wonder they’d needed morphine; talk about insult to injury!

“Alright, we’ll start here.” Thomas commanded, gesturing to the ruined leg. He pointed to the frail nurse whose blood sugar had plummeted. She was hovering by Fredrick’s saline and morphine drip, carefully checking the numbers.

“Tell her to watch his pulse, and to keep him safely under.” Thomas ordered. As Albrecht spoke, the nurse nodded rapidly and took a stethoscope off from around her slim neck to begin listening at Fredrick’s breast.

“Tell her if at anytime Fredrick starts to go under, she should give me the signal of a thumbs down.” Thomas showed off the hand gesture, flipping it rapidly so that each woman could see the difference. “Thumbs up is good, thumbs down is bad, yeah?”

The women nodded, clearly glad to have some form of communication underneath their belt
“Alright then, thumbs up?” Thomas gestured to each woman. They returned the mark, nodding vigorously. “Then let’s get started.”

The first thing one hand to do was clean the wounds. Thomas and the largest woman began to unwrap and wash each amputation, a rubber tourniquet cleanly in place over Fredrick’s upper thighs.

The woman’s large hands were oddly delicate. She worked with precision, wiping and washing as Thomas pulled off each soiled bandage. Soon they had a neat little pile next to Fredrick’s bed, and they could finally assess the true damage of the wounds. Twice, the woman caught Thomas’ eyes. She seemed to be waiting for him to do or say something, and in lieu of action was starting to garner a new opinion about him.

Thomas wondered what she’d been told about English men.

“Thomas.” Thomas said, gesturing a bit to himself though he could not point when his hands were covered with Frederick’s blood.

The nurse smiled, nodding. “Greta.”

“Greta.” Thomas repeated, glad to have her name. But Greta then looked to her team members, gesturing to each of them.

“Frieda, Bridgette, Anna.” Greta said. Bridgette was the one who’d had problems with blood sugar. Frieda and Anna hovered at Greta’s large elbows, taking away her piles of gauze.

Thomas nodded, dictating he’d understood. It was…nice. They were on opposite sides, but they were both still human beings.

“Greta, forceps.” Thomas gestured to the many clamps at Freida’s elbow. Frieda gave several to Greta, who passed them off one at a time to Thomas so that he could clamp every open artery in Frederick’s leg. It was now time to cut, and Thomas picked up the Gilge saw with care as Greta lay her large arms about Fredrick’s leg like a vice.

The man wasn’t going to thrash, in Thomas’ opinion. For god’s sake, he was nearly dead already. Still, it was nice to have Greta keep Fredrick pinned to the bed. Nathaniel had all but flipped about like a fish.

“Tell them I’m about to saw.” Thomas ordered. Albrecht gave the word, and each nurse tensed visibly at her station.

This was always the worst part.

“Aw, Christ, I don’t want to see this.” Williamson whimpered, pinching his eyes and looking away.

“You shouldn’t have to help their lot.” Clapper snapped, “This is an outrage.”

“This isn’t about him.” Thomas reminded Clapper, methodically working the saw back and forth through destroyed tissue. “It’s about you lot, and our morphine tank… an’ England. Gettin’ home to it, that is.”

“Old chap, I hate to burden you but I think we’re to die here.” Rawlinson muttered.

“Perhaps.” Sweat was already starting to form at Thomas’ brow. “Wouldn’t be much of a stretch…
but I’m determined to try and get us home safe if we can.”

“God bless you, Thomas.” Rawlinson praised him. “You’re a good man.”

“I dunno about that.” Thomas mumbled, too busy focusing on his patient to engage fully in polite conversation.

The first shreds of the leg came away cleanly, dead meat from a destroyed bone. But even as Greta held the rubber tourniquet tight and Frieda pressed salt packs upon the open wound, Bridgette made a frightened noise and gestured wildly for Thomas’ attention.

Fredrick’s vitals were beginning to fall.

“Oxygen!” Thomas barked. “Now!”

Albrecht was shouting at Bridgette, frightening her. Her hands trembled as she put a chipped oxygen mask over Frederick’s gray and sweaty face. After a tense moment of everyone watching for Bridgette’s thumbs up or down, Bridgette took Frederick’s pulse again and breathed an obvious sign of relief.

Crisis averted.
Back to work.

Thomas re-wrapped Frederick’s new stump as best he could, using old salt packs as lifting agents so that more blood could flow to Frederick’s tested heart. Up above, Thomas could hear the steady encroach of noise. He had to wonder what slaughter fest was going on above. Were the German’s attacking again? Or were the noises Thomas heard the English fighting back?

Maybe someone knows I’m trapped, Thomas thought fleetingly. Maybe they’re coming for me.

But he couldn’t afford to live in such delusion. Even if someone knew he was taken (probably Roger), that didn’t mean they’d be able to rescue him. He was probably underneath a miles worth of trench networking.

Thomas washed his hands, silently beckoning Greta to do the same so that they could swap legs with Frieda and begin their work on the more deadly wound.

But there was a problem.

The wound, which Thomas had only just bandaged up, was beginning to bleed. It seemed that, in Frederick’s broken state, his blood was too thin to clot. As a result, Frederick was now bleeding out — they needed ice!!

“Ice!” Thomas barked, looking to Albrecht, “We need ice, anything to stop the bleeding! Do you have something that will work?”

“I- yes!” Albrecht was suddenly taken with a stroke of genius, snapping his fingers for Frieda and babbling in broken German while pointing to the door.

But even as he spoke, another wild explosion ricochet over their heads. It knocked a light fixture from its hook, sending them all into semi-darkness. Frieda screamed; Bridgette ducked her head like she thought the whole ceiling might cave.

“Christ!” Williamson howled. “This is the end!”
Greta was staring at Thomas. Her eyes were boring into his own, as if saying, ‘Do something’.

“Frieda!” Thomas called the girls name, reaching out to grasp her gently by the elbow. She jumped, frightened. “Frieda! Go!”

“Dummes Mädl!” Albrecht cursed, as if this was somehow all Frieda’s fault. Frightened, Frieda ran from the room. Kurt let her pass, but even as she vanished into the hallway, Kurt followed after her.

“Frieda-!” They could hear his voice calling out in terror. “Frieda, halt!!! Stop!!!”

Another explosion went off over their heads, followed by terrified screams from the hall and a sudden rippling of black dust. All the light was shut off in the bunkers, casting everyone into total gloom. It was like they were in a cave-!

“Fuck!” Rawlinson cursed. “What was that??”

“That’s our canons!” Clapper spat, “That’s got to be ours! I think we broke through the walls!”

“We’re gonna die!” Williamson cried, “We’re gonna get shut in!”

“QUIET!” Albrecht roared, so furious that everyone did as he bade lest they died.

A clicking noise filled the air, and suddenly light sprang up as Albrecht lit a match. He searched in the dark, found an overturned oil lamp that had just recently held fire, and righted it to re-set the wick.

At once, the room was filled with a dull orange glow.

But the girls weren’t even concerned with the lack of light. Instead, each of them was looking to the hallway, frightened and wondering where their companion had gone.

“Kurt?!?” One of the soldier’s called out.

“Frieda!” Anna cried out, cupping her hands over her mouth, “Frieda, antworte doch!”

But no one replied. The hallways were now full of terrible noises, clanging and explosions.

Thomas had a feeling both Frieda and Kurt were dead, no doubt caved in by a collapsed bunker wall.

“Damnit.” Thomas cursed, turning back to Frederick. His leg was still continuing to slowly seep blood. “Alright, the ice won’t be coming, so let’s use what we have on hand. Greta-!” He beckoned her to press with wide hands upon Frederick’s wound. “Keep that pressed and elevated!”

“Zu Befehl!” Greta said, and though Thomas doubted she could understand him fully, she at least followed his orders without complaint.

But suddenly, even as they began to get back to work, a wild commotion went on outside the barracks. Thomas could hear men running and screaming, and suddenly several German soldiers fled past their open door in the opposite direction that Kurt and Frieda had gone. They were bloodied, battered, and screaming at one another with their guns abandoned.

One skidded to a halt by the door, shrieking at his fellows: “Die Engländer sind im Bunker!”

And with that he carried on, running after his fellow men.
The two remaining soldiers panicked and fled out the door, not even bothering to listen to Albrecht who was screaming after them, cursing them like cowards. Without warning, Anna bolted as well, crying out for the men not to abandon her. Thomas looked to the girls, bewildered. What on Earth was going on?

“Was machen wir nur?” Bridgette begged Greta.
For whatever reason, the pair of them looked to Thomas.

Albrecht suddenly pointed his gun again, just as menacingly as before. Now, however, Albrecht was growing gray and sweaty like Frederick, and Thomas could tell his patience was at an end.

“What are you waiting for?” Albrecht spat, “Keep moving!”

Thomas pointed to Frederick’s next ruined leg, beckoning for Bridgette. He would have to make do with her now, what with Frieda probably dead and Anna gone.

Bridgette shook wildly as she worked, her fingers trembling so hard that it was difficult to take tools from her. When she took up a pair of forceps to try and remove debris from Frederick’s wound, Thomas had to lay his hand atop her own so that he could steady her tremor.

She bristled for a moment, unnerved at being touched by an English man.

But, as she continued to work, she slowly relaxed. Greta was speaking to her in a soothing voice, offering a dirty basin to collect fragments of Frederick’s once whole femur. Piece by piece, the wound started to clean-

**BOOM!**

Greta and Bridgette shrieked again, eyes pinched shut as more dust and dirt dislodged itself from the ceiling. You could hear the screams of men bouncing off the rubble in the hallway. The calls for help, and the sobs for loved ones.

Albrecht cursed wildly his gun shaking as he pointed first to Thomas, then to Greta and Bridgette, next to the three naked English soldiers, and finally to the hall.

“Ignore him.” Thomas said, though he knew the girls wouldn’t be able to understand him. Something in Greta’s eyes, however, seemed to spark with realization. She began to work faster, pushing Bridgette to keep moving. Thomas checked on Frederick’s vitals, noting they were still stable but just barely so. He knew in that moment, looking to Frederick’s leg still to be cleaned and the lack of supplies about the room, that Frederick was going to die.

Thomas couldn’t save this man. He was too far gone.

As an explosion echoed in the hallway, a shower of dirt shot past their door along with a rumbling black cloud which billowed only to settle and sift.

“Something’s going on out there.” Rawlinson said, craning his neck and trying to see, “I can see shadows.”

“No talking please.” Thomas snapped, picking up his saw again as Greta and Bridgette tearfully strapped the rubber tourniquet around Frederick’s second leg. This would be the moment of truth. If he pulled through the amputation, he would live. If he didn’t, he would die within minutes.

*I have to get that gun out of his hand.* Thomas thought, eyes flickering to Albrecht every so often. *If I can just get the gun…?*
He began to saw.

“I think that’s our men!” Clapper cried out. “I can hear English voices!”

So could Thomas, but he couldn’t let that distract him from the danger at hand. He had to either pull Frederick through this surgery or get that damn gun out of Albrecht’s shaking hands.

*I’ll have to use the saw.* Thomas thought, reflecting on the dangerous weapon in his own hands. *It’s not a gun, but it’ll do. I can distract him with it and try to get him to drop the gun. But I’ll have to do it when an explosion occurs.*

“Can you save him?” Albrecht snapped, eyes darting from Thomas to the door where smoke and flickering lights were now rolling through.

Thomas checked Frederick’s pulse again, allowing Greta and Bridgette to keep still lest they suffer more blood loss on the now fresh wound.

Frederick had no pulse.

He did not let his panic show, returning to his work. “Maybe.” Was all he said.

“Maybe?!” Albrecht shouted, eyes popping madly.

“Stop FUCKING INTERRUPTING ME AND I’LL DO IT!” Thomas roared, spit flying from his mouth. Albrecht seemed oddly cowed at this, and even took a step back as Thomas started to saw again.

Frederick was dead and the girls did not know it. So long as Thomas kept them from checking his now flat pulse, Thomas could continue to work and Albrecht would never know the truth. The girls were frightened; he had to keep them near Frederick’s feet—

Well… he didn’t have feet, did he?

“This way men!” Thomas heard someone shout in the hallway, “Check every room!”

“HELP US!” Screamed Williamson, shouting at the top of his voice, “HURRY THEY’RE GOING TO KILL US! HELP US!! HELP US!!”

Albrecht’s patience and nerve finally snapped. He pointed his gun straight at Williamson’s petrified face and—

Thomas whipped around, and with the saw in hand aimed for Albrecht’s long neck.

Albrecht shrieked in agony as five hundred razor sharp spines slashed through the fragile flesh of his face, chin, and neck. Greta and Bridgette abandoned Frederick altogether, now hiding behind the surgical table and holding onto one another as Albrecht and Thomas fought for dominance.

Albrecht still had the gun- if he fired-!? 

*Pop!* Went the gun, though it hit nothing but floor and wall, *Pop! Pop!*

“HELP US!” All three men were now screaming in tandem, desperate to be heard. There were voices, the sounds of rushing feet, more explosions and more smoke!

But Albrecht was stronger than Thomas, and he knocked him fiercely to the ground. He pointed his gun straight at Thomas’ face-!
Thomas closed his eyes, bracing himself for the bullet about to penetrate his skull and kill him.

“Nicht schießen!” Greta screamed. “Lass uns einfach abhauen!”

Albrecht did not shoot. Thomas opened his eyes only to see Greta above him. Her arms were outstretched, she was blocking Albrecht’s line of fire!

Christ, Thomas thought, desperately pulling himself out of the way even as Albrecht argued with the girl.

“Geh mir aus dem Weg!” Albrecht snarled, bodily shoving Greta down. “Du blöde Kuh!”

Greta looked close to tears, now sprawled on her back upon the grimy dirt floor. Thomas had no way of knowing what ‘blöde kuh’ meant, but he had a feeling it wasn’t a compliment.

Albrecht was losing his nerve now, pointing his gun first to Greta, then to Thomas. He did not seem to know who to shoot first.

“Du bist ein verdammter Verräter.” Albrecht said it with such loathing, such contempt, that Thomas knew from experience that he was about to shoot Greta. Bridgette was crying behind the operating table, begging Albrecht not to do it-

Thomas could either roll on his front and run for safety, or get to his feet and take out Albrecht before he shot Greta.

Albrecht raised his gun.

Thomas didn’t think twice.

With a heaving roar of defiance, Thomas all but jumped to his knees, landing painfully on his left ankle and throwing himself at Albrecht. His bullet fired, but instead of shooting Greta in the head it shot her in the arm. She screamed in pain, clutching her wounded limb to her bosom as Albrecht and Thomas fell to the floor.

Now they were fighting one another, and the gun was out of Albrecht’s hands. With nothing but his fists, Albrecht began to punch Thomas every square inch he could reach. Williamson, Clapper, and Rawlinson were screaming for help, Greta and Bridgette were sobbing at the top of their lungs. Even if there was a war going on outside, there was no way an encroaching soldier couldn’t hear the cacophony!

And indeed…. help arrived.

The door was suddenly jammed chock full of people, all busting to try and get in at the same time. They were English soldiers, their uniforms gave them away, and every one of them was carrying some type of weapon be it a rifle, pistol, shotgun, or in one case a two by four. At the front of their pack was Edward, a rifle in hand and a blazing look in his beautiful blue eyes.

He’d come for Thomas… Thomas knew it instinctively.

Edward raised his rifle, even as Albrecht scrambled backward away from Thomas to try and grab his gun.

“Mein Leben dem Deutschen Reich-“ But before Albrecht could finish his final call to salute his homeland, Edward shot him square in the face.
He fell over backward dead, his visage utterly destroyed.

Thomas got to his feet as best he could, his temple throbbing from Albrecht’s assault. Now it was just Greta and Bridgette, hiding behind Frederick’s surgery table with Greta holding a bloody arm. The English prisoners were liberated, their hands cut free by their fallen brothers who shed their shirts and jackets so that they could cover their loins. They were embracing one another, crying out to God in their thanks.

Edward was upon Thomas in an instant, scooping him up in his arms and holding him tight. Crushed against Edward’s chest, Thomas almost dissolved into tears.

“Rodger-“ Thomas choked out, thinking of his fallen comrade. Had he survived?

“Back in camp, he’s just fine.” Edward was close to blubbering. He pulled back, if only to take Thomas’ face in hand, “God what did he do to you?”

“He wanted me to save him-“ Thomas looked back over his shoulder at Frederick. Edward gave the double amputation a slight sneer of disgust. To be fair, the sight wasn’t pretty.

But other soldiers were not content with the victory. They wanted blood, and their guns were now pointed at Greta and Bridgette. One of them was Cartwright, who despite being an English soldier had never shown Thomas an inch of respect and clearly thought of him as a weakling.

Thomas leapt in front of the girls, spreading his arms wide just as Greta had done for him. Furious, Cartwright spat, “Get out of the way you stupid dandy!”

“Hey!” Edward snarled, furious at the insult.

“They’re nurses.” Thomas spat, refusing to back down, “They’re completely innocent. All they do is heal. Let them go-“

“So they can heal more German bastards? I don’t think so!” Cartwright wouldn’t be budged to sympathy.

“This isn’t about what you want!” Thomas warned. “This is about human rights- they’re innocent women, let them be!”

“I wouldn’t expect a lavender like you to understand.” Cartwright sneered.

“Shut your fucking mouth!” Edward shoved Cartwright hard, nearly knocking the pistol from his hands. Now the pair of them snarling and fighting with one another, while other soldiers urged them to knock it off and get their act together. Rawlinson was among them.

“Boys what are you doing?!” Rawlinson cried out, furious at the display. “This is no time for spats!”

“You all know what they are!” Cartwright pointed first to Thomas and then to Edward. “You’d shoot them on British soil, why not do it here-?!”

“You harm a hair on his head and I’ll unplug your tiny balls!” Edward snarled.

“You’d know a lot about balls, wouldn’t you?”

And now they were fighting outright, with Edward trying to punch Cartwright in the mouth. Thomas rolled his eyes and turned away, stooping down to try and assist Greta who was obviously in pain and frightened to death.
“It’s alright.” Thomas soothed, hands up in a show of mercy to both women, “Let me see?” He delicately tugged at Greta’s swollen arm, trying to get a view of Albrecht’s bullet. But it had exited cleanly on the other side… it would hurt but it would heal neatly.

Thomas snatched clean gauze from Frederick’s table, and began to carefully wrap Greta’s wound.

In a show of peace, Bridgette rolled up Greta’s stained sleeve so that it was all the way to the shoulder.

“Hilfe.” Greta begged, her brown eyes flickering from Thomas to Cartwright who’d now been detached from Edward but was still cursing a storm and waving his pistol about. “Hilfe uns.”

It was hard to say why, but Thomas had a feeling she was saying ‘help us’.

“I will.” Thomas said, giving her a smile as he continued to bandage her arm. “I’ll help you. I prom-“

POP!

Greta stared at him, her brown eyes blank. For a second, Thomas did not register rightly what had happened.

Then, a large dollup of blood rolled down Greta’s right temple.

She slumped over backward, falling so hard and so heavy that Thomas could not keep her up. The gauze, which he’d been using to wrap her bullet wound, spooled out in a long string of tainted white. Her head fell right into Bridgette’s lap. She was staring up at the ceiling now, eyes blank and unseeing.

Numb, Thomas looked about and found Cartwright holding a smoking pistol with a triumphant expression upon his smug face.

Bridgette sucked in a breath, and let out a shrill scream-!

Cartwright shot her too, a bullet lodged neatly between her eyes. She fell backward, sagging against the leg of Frederick’s operating table to roll onto her side dead.

Thomas stared at the women, unable to fully understand what had just occurred.

Were they…. were they still alive? Surely they weren’t dead-

“Oh stop being such a ninny.” Cartwright sneered. “They were German’s. It doesn’t matter if they’re women or nurses-“

He was being pulled from the room. Edward had him by both arms, his jacket over Thomas’ shoulders to try and give him some warmth.
“Come on.” Edward begged. “Come on let’s get out of here.”

“Greta-“ Thomas called out her name, half expecting the girl to pop back up, crying and holding her temple, “Greta!”

But Greta did not stir.

~*~

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know. Thanks so much!

**I want to give a shout of thanks to Temul Burbu for their fantastic German translations (and English nitpicks). The fact of the matter was, I was relying upon Google for translations and... may I say... it was a subpar experience. Rest assured, the
German you read has been approved by a bonafide, sausage eating, beer drinking, lederhosen wearing German native. Danke!**
The Bullet Band

Chapter Summary

Three years later, Thomas is at the end of his rope. A trip home to England with Edward in tow is just the cure he needs.

But the war refuses to let them be.

Chapter Notes

Alright, before anyone starts yowling and snapping at me, I want to explain why this chapter took so long:

1. I moved into a new apartment in Atlanta on August 14th.
2. On August 15th, I went on a week long vacation to the beach.

All through this time, I've been trying to get everything compiled; this chapter is massive, nearly ninety pages. So I know that you guys have been wondering if I'm dead, but you can consider this a rebirth if you like.

No, I'm not quitting this story. I'm just needing a bit of time. Hopefully things should be much more settled now. Talk about a crazy month!

The trigger warnings for this chapter include: PTSD, period appropriate homophobia, war violence, and surgical violence. If you think any of these things will trigger you, please be aware of their inclusion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The tea in his hands was stale and cold, but still a treat meant as a reward for… well…

Thomas wasn't quite sure what for anymore.

The minute he’d been returned to camp, Thomas had been given a thorough look over by both M.O. Walker and Miller. He’d been treated for a skull fracture and broken jaw, then given temporary leave to Dunkirque where he recovered in a less hostile area. It was here that Thomas learned that Frederick, Commander Albrecht’s soldier, had actually been one of the best shooters in the German Army. Thomas was emblazoned as a hero, and offered handshakes from everyone be they General French (who still didn’t like Thomas), General Allenby, Colonel Wavell, General Douglas Haig, and even the French Marshal Joseph Joffre, who had the decency to offer Thomas an actual bottle of Château Margaux, which Thomas was certain probably cost more than any amount of money he’d ever earned in his life.
But Thomas had not been in the mood to drink, and so the bottle had remained untouched in his duffle bag.

He was to be awarded several medals, or so he was told. He’d received letters by post through special members of the army whose sole job was to transport letters (Thomas had yet to forget Albrecht’s barb about finding English correspondence). He was to receive the Victoria Cross, the highest award in the British military, for “gallantry in the face of the enemy”. Thomas was unsure if he was supposed to feel honored or not. To this day, he simply felt aware. He did not even opt to look at the medal, instead asking that it be sent directly home to Mr. Cason so that he would not be bothered with the rest. There was an initial pinning ceremony. A small get-together in France…

Thomas did not go. He did not have the energy, nor the patience. He seemed to be lacking many things nowadays.

“You’ve done well soldier, but you’re close to being invalided out.”

One year had passed, and then another. Suddenly it was 1917, and Thomas couldn’t rightly remember what it had once meant to live without war. Downton Abbey had grown from being a constant and comforting image in Thomas’ mind to a detached photo like a faded picture. What color was the flag that few atop the spires? What were the hall boy’s names? Was Thomas really twenty-seven years old? He felt like he was actually one hundred.

Thomas sighed, slowly reaching over with aching limbs to set down his cold tea cup upon a cramped bedside table.

Beside him, Edward put his hand comfortingly upon Thomas’ thigh. They’d now been together longer than any other previous relationship Thomas had had, and for that Thomas felt a sense of kinship and common love that he thought might be felt by husbands and wives. It was no longer that he was in a relationship with Edward. They were simply bound together.

Before the pair of them, both General Allenby and Colonel Wavell were negotiating with Thomas to take some time off. They wanted him to get some rest, in any way that he could, and were even offering for him to take a paid trip to Paris if it helped him to get back into his right frame of mind. Thomas’ slowing attention span and exhausted was becoming a liability in the surgery center, and he’d already pushed his luck by returning to Ypres. The horrific outcomes of war had turned Ypres from a once flourish little town to a pile of rubble where nothing but flies and rats stirred. Now on the outskirts, what remained of the British and Canadian forces were holding German’s at bay. It was officially a contest of who would hit the dirt first. Who would be the one to fall.

Thomas was like a tin soldier in the wind. One wrong gust…?

“The battle is withdrawing for right now. The Huns can’t fight in this winter. Your rescue two years ago slaughtered some of their finest men. They’re losing strength. They’ll need time to regroup and figure out a new plan of attack. There’s nothing more for you to do here.” Wavell said. He had his arms folded over his chest, politely puzzled as to why Thomas wasn’t running screaming for the hills at the first chance.

“I won’t leave Edward.” And how could he make them understand, that to leave Edward was akin to death. They could not part. Not even for a moment. At this, Edward squeezed his thigh in a comforting gesture. A silent show of ‘I am still here’.

“If I go back, he goes too.” Thomas said. “We’re accountable to one another.”
“Courtenay cannot easily be re assigned.” Wavell shot Allenby a look, as if doing a mental tally up of who they could put in Edward’s place and for how long, should they have to. “We need him here.”

“Then I will not go.”

Allenby let out a long drawn out sigh. Thomas had grown to enjoy the man’s company over the years, if you could really grow to enjoy anything during war. Allenby was the sort of man who took things personally, who looked at soldiers and saw people not pawns. That was rare, nowadays. You had a way of growing numb in war, and it was the sort of thing that crept up slow. One day, every fight was a fight to the death. The next day, you simply sat there and watched waiting for the right bullet to strike you and take you out. You lost your pizzazz to win. You lost your hope for the future.

For whatever reason, Allenby was yet to lose that. Maybe he was just one of those men who was enchanted by the act of war. Who wanted to die riding his horse, or rolled up in the mud underneath it.

“Barrow, you’re not doing well.” Allenby said, as if this wasn’t perfectly obvious to anyone with working eyes. But it seemed that Thomas needed reminding, so here they were. “You need some time off. Some time to relax. You’re a medic, and you’re not needed as poorly as a defense soldier in these times. We haven’t won Ypres yet, not truly. We still have to hold her steady, and we have to rebuild before Spring comes. The moment the thaw hits, the Huns will strike us with everything they have. We need you well, when the time comes. We need Courtenay here.”

And still, Thomas could think of nothing to say but, “I will not go without him.”

He wondered, in that moment as Allenby and Wavell watched him, if they knew.

There were rumors in the camp, of course. When Roger was recovering from his bullet wound to the shoulder, he’d reportedly gossiped with Helen. The pair of them were right little love birds, much to the disgust of every other medic in the tent. They snogged behind crates, they promised to wed if they lived through the war, and Helen wore Roger’s uniform jacket on her smoke breaks just to show off to her nurse palls. It was in those little chit chats that snippets about Thomas and Edward came out.

How there were two couples in camp, not one.

Allenby made a tiny noise in his throat, balancing out the weight of soldiers in his hands like one might pebbles to throw into a river. He sighed through the corner of his mouth, held up two fingers to Wavell, who nodded. This must be some kind of silent communication between the pair of them, a way to talk without other soldier’s knowing.

“Let’s see what we can do.” Wavell finally said, speaking to Thomas and not to Allenby. “I’ll make contact with the war office and get permission for the pair of you to go back home for a little while. A couple of weeks or so, should do the trick, don’t you think?”

“Oh, God yes.” Allenby muttered. “Cup of hot tea in a warm bed, good shower with fresh soap. Lord I’d think I’d cry.”

“I think we’d all cry.” Wavell agreed.

At this, the pair of them looked to Thomas and Edward, slightly sulky with longer.

“Well, if that’s all?” Edward asked. Wavell paused him with a slight wave of the hand.

“Eh, not entirely.” Wavell said. He gestured over his shoulder, catching the eye of a nurse named
Laura who seemed to have been waiting for Wavell’s command. She brought over a bundle of letters, two of them in fact, and one terribly beaten up package that looked like it’d been ripped from a dying German soldier’s hands.

“What are these?” Edward wondered. A slim bundle was handed over to him. The thicker bundle was handed over to Thomas, along with the package. Thomas’ nose crinkled at the sight of the torn and soggy paper wrapping. There were stamps, but each was so muddied with water and sewage that you couldn’t tell where they’d come from originally. What was more, there was a plethora of post script written on the outside of the package with what looked like old chalk or poor man’s pens.

“SON OF PIGS” said one.

“BASTARDS” read another.

“There was a recent raid on a German camp, stragglers and the like.” Wavell explained, “We found a whole host of English correspondence. Nothing too pressing, just letters from home.”

“Yes, because why would we care about those.” Edward muttered irritably under his breath. He was turning a letter in his hands where the word ‘WHORE’ had been written in fat black pen.

“Well.” Wavell pursed his lips, “As I say, these are yours. That package is so torn up, I can’t tell what it once was.” Wavell added, gesturing to Thomas’ muddy mound. “Sorry about that, lad… but that’s war for you.”

“Thank you.” Thomas said coolly. “I wasn’t aware that war including profanity.”

Wavell blinked, but made no quip back.

“You’re a damn good healer.” Allenby even reached out and patted Thomas’ shoulder. The weight was warm and heavy, if unexpected. “I’m worried about you. We’re all worried about you. So go home and get some rest… an’ come back… so we can win the war.”

Thomas didn’t like the idea of everything resting on him, but could think of nothing else to say.

There was mud now underneath his fingernails.
The grit was slightly irritating.

Thomas looked down at the package where someone had written ‘SON OF PIGS’. He gently toyed with the muddied clothe, and carefully scraped at the chalk till he could see a tiny bit of the writing that had remained underneath.

“Hughes” was all he could make out.

After meeting with Wavell and Allenby, Thomas was given the rest of the afternoon off and made his way back through the war torn fields of Ypres to hide himself in Edward’s cabin by the woods. This little shack had seen more than its fair share of tears and sweat over the years. Thomas and Edward were yet to make love, which was queer because normally Thomas was the sort who could jump on a sexual bandwagon any day. But war had ruined their libido’s, or so it seemed. So exhausted and broken down were they that, had they ever been together and able to sleep in the cabin, they would do so entwined and fully clothed.
Today was no different, though Edward was out stalking the fields and going through his letters in private while Thomas did the same inside. They liked to have moments to reflect. Anything to get some privacy.

But Thomas’ letters were soggy and ruined, years old too. He wondered what everyone at Downton must think. Had Carson broken down and opened his damning letter, revealing everything about the past? Or were they all still hoping out to hear one last thing, one final blow that admitted Thomas was actually dead.

“—Can’t imagine what you’re going through—“ Anna had written at some point. At least, it looked like her writing. The paper was too broken to clearly tell, “We’ve prayed for you so hard.”

“The sodding nerve!” But that was surely O’Brien, because no one else at Downton had such a rancor when it came to words. “To ask someone to heal your soldier with a gun pointed to their head. If you lose your men, you die. They can’t go picking people from the other side just because they’re in a pinch. They’re worthless mercenaries, every last one of them!”

“I hold your medal with pride.” Carson had once dictated this correspondence out, no doubt at his own desk. “His Lordship has asked that it be kept in his personal safe, as a sign of the honor you have brought to this house. When you are ready to come home, your Victorian Cross will be waiting, and so will I.”

“My poor poor Thomas.” Was that Mrs. Hughes or Mrs. Patmore? “Don’t you let those terrible men get you down.”

But it was the package that caught Thomas’ eye the most, particularly for the way that it had held up over time. Not only had it been wrapped in brown paper, but in muslin and twine too. Mrs. Hughes had been the one to pack this, and she’d done so with meticulous care. She’d wrapped it like she was going to war, and indeed she’d been smart to do so. Thomas had to tear away the twine with a pocket watch, tugging gently at the soggy string until it fell in a riddle heap on the grimy floor.

Thomas pulled back two more layers of linen, and found himself staring at something… red and blue and white.

And the true pity of it was, Thomas didn’t realize he was staring at cut out from his old comforter until he’d turned the fabric over back to front three times. So dirty and stained was it that Thomas hadn’t been able to fully see the Welsh medallion covering… how someone (Mrs. Hughes probably) had lovingly stitched into the back: “To Thomas, 1914. Come Home Soon.”

But it was 1917, and Thomas hadn’t seen Downton Abbey in three years. He pressed the quilt cut out to his lips and sniffed. It stank of mildew and rot. The batting was probably destroyed for good.

This quilt had once lain on his bed, and kept him warm each and every night. This was his favorite quilt, his personal quilt, the one that he’d slept with both this lifetime and the last. To have a piece of it so close now was an awful terrible temptation that made him long for him.

He almost wanted to weep, but it seemed that he was just too tired to summon the energy to cry. Wasn’t that an awful thing?

Thomas sighed, relaxing his head against the wall behind him, and closed his eyes. There was a tiny fire going in the floor grate, which Edward had installed by using the rough siding of a broken down tank vent and old coals from abandoned farm houses. It put damn good heat into the little hut, which
was essential during these frigid times. For a moment, Thomas almost went to sleep until a sudden harried movement of latch and lock alerted him to Edward’s return. He looked about and found Edward yanking a threadbare scarf down from his neck. Shivering at the snow falling outside, Edward shoved the door shut and barred it with the back of a chair. He tossed ruined letters down on the floor, then sunk on his backside next to Thomas to pull off his boots. His socks had holes as large as coins in them, and his toes were bone white from cold. Edward put his feet near the fire, his pinky toe touching Thomas’ own. The pair of them were mimicked now in posture and in defeated stature.

“All of it was shit.” Edward mumbled. “Couldn’t get a word out. You?”

“Same.” Thomas said.

“The hell is that?” Edward wondered at the ruined quilt piece in his hands. Thomas offered it over, and Edward took it up with a lip slightly curled in disgust.

“Christ, what would they even want with this?” Edward grumbled, “Is this a quilt patch?”

“Came from my bed at home.” Thomas explained. Edward groaned in dismay, stooping over to try and put it by the edge of the fire.

“What a damn shame.” Edward sighed, “An’ it’s so lovely too, innit? If we let it dry off maybe the dirt will come free.”

“Let’s be honest with one another. The dirt will never come free either way. We’re all muddied up.”

Edward relaxed back against the wall, reaching out with one hand to grasp Thomas’ own. For a moment the pair of them sat in silence.

“I got word from Wavell while I was walking.” Edward said. “He sent a telegram to the war office yesterday… got us passage. We’re to leave tomorrow for Dunkirque. We’re to go home for three weeks. A month on God’s green and fertile land… I can hardly believe it.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Yeah, you do.” Edward’s tone was firm, and refused to be meddled with. “An’ we’re taking you straight home to Downton, you hear me? None of this muckin’ around in London gettin’ a pint and spending the night in a pub. You’re going home, and you’re going to have a good old cry with that bird Mrs. Hughes you talk about. I won’t stand for any less.”

“Edward, I’m fine-“

“No, you’re not.”

But there was no judgement in Edward’s voice. No cruel barb to the fact that Thomas had essentially been a walking useless shell for months.

The facts hung between them ugly and bare… arguments they’d had, just trying to get the words out that needed to be said.

Thomas couldn’t bear to have the argument again, so instead he slumped down against the wood and lay his head on Edward’s thigh. By rights, they needed to pack. They ought to be getting their things together, not being pathetic and hiding in a shed over a rin-tin fire pit.

Instead of acknowledging any of this, however, Edward just carded his fingers lovingly through Thomas’ hair.
“I ought to tell you, Khamsa is coming.” Edward said. “So we’ll have to make do with that.”

“Of course she is.” Thomas wouldn’t expect any less.
Where Edward went, Khamsa followed.

Thomas found his eyes locked on the image of Mrs. Hughes’ little quilt stitching, slowly drying by the fire. Come morning, the mud would be crumbling and dry, leaving faded stains behind on the Welsh cornering and florals.

It would still smell like shit, but Thomas would carry it in his pocket all the way home.

~*~
The next morning came slow and soft, with no sound of gunfire over the hills. German’s were freezing in their camp just like their English counterparts, and no one wanted to fight if they had to risk frost bite. It left an empty melancholy feeling over the land, like the ditches and the graveyards were missing the chatter of constant battle. Birds were gone, and the fields were bare. All life had fled Ypres in the past three years. Animals had learned to stay away, save for the rats that enjoyed the rubbish and the flies that were attracted to the dead.

It was in stone cold silence that Edward and Thomas redressed around a dim hearth, not bothering to light it again. Normally, Edward liked to fetch coal for the next night early in the morning before anyone else dared to get up. He’d tramp through the snow, find another broken down coal shed, and wake Thomas up with newfound warmth and a flint fire. Today, however, there would be no need.

Today, they would return to Dunkirque, and from Dunkirque to England… and still Thomas could not find it within him to smile.

He was a walking corpse as he shrugged his pack and said his goodbyes to camp. Helen kissed him on the cheek despite his stubble. Roger shook his hand and patted him kindly upon the arm.

“Get a leg up while you're home.” Roger advised. “Shag with a door and a lock, not that ruddy little hovel you two call home-“

“Remind me to kill you sometime.” Thomas grumbled, amazed that Roger could both annoy him and hearten him at the same time. Roger just gave him a loping grin and shrugged.

“Just saying. I know I would if I were you.”

“Liar!” Helen cried out, affronted at the devilish idea, “You told me you’d marry me when we went home!”

“Well, I'd do that too!”

“But which one would you try to do first, that’s the question!”

“Whichever I could get away with I suppose-“

“Oh Roger, you the absolute devil-“
“I’m leaving now.” Thomas muttered, turning away in the stale morning light. He imagined he might hear Helen and Roger bickering in his head all the way back to England for how used to it he was.

They didn’t stop snitting about sex before marriage even as Wavell came over with a cup of shitty camp coffee in hand to wave them both goodbye. Edward saddled Khamsa and swung his leg up first, helping Thomas up second as Roger helped tie their packs onto Khamsa’s back even with Helen nagging him.

“If my mother knew that you were talkin’ to me like that—"

“Life is short, sweetheart. We ought to seize it.”

“I’ll seize it with your ring on my hand, thank you very much!”

Roger grumbled something ugly underneath his breath. Thomas raised a wary eyebrow, wondering if Roger would be just so reluctant to marry if he was in Thomas’ position and unable to bind himself to the man he loved. Thomas would marry Edward in a heartbeat… but that was never to be. The laws of God and man forbade it, and for that Thomas would always be bitter on the subject.

“You two have a good trip home.” Wavell urged, “And get some damn rest, Barrow!”

With that, Wavell smacked Khamsa’s rump in an attempt to send her off. It was a show of how well trained Khamsa was that she did not move.

“Something’s wrong with your horse, Courtenay.” Wavell wondered.

“Yeah, you’re hitting her.” Edward snapped, clicking with his tongue and teeth. Khamsa snorted, pawed the ground, and trotted off in the direction of Dunkirque.

It was funny, after three years of being stuck in Eastern Europe Thomas had almost forgotten the way back home. It wasn’t too complicated when you thought it out: you rode through the hills of Ypres till you hit the trench network to the northern sea pass and kept at it for eight hours till you hit Dunkirque where you could wait on the shores for a ship to take you back to England. All things told, it took about maybe a day and a half to get back on good English soil.

A day and a half, between heaven and hell. It got you thinking about just how dangerous this war really was. The Germans weren’t so far away from Downton after all, were they?

And for that matter, neither was Thomas.

Thomas kept looking over his shoulder back at Ypres. After living there for three years, he didn’t feel right abandoning his post. Though it wasn’t his home, in any way shape or form, it was his station and he found himself thinking often of Roger whose shoulder still got a bother or two whenever the cold weather hit him hard. Of Helen, who often liked to have tea with Thomas on her breaks. What would they do with Thomas gone for a solid three weeks? How would they cope? Would Helen learn to take her tea with someone else? Would Roger have to gripe and moan to another healer?

It didn’t seem natural, and it stung to know that Thomas’ life had so been stolen from him by this war. He should never have had to be in Ypres in the first place. He ought to have been able to lead his life in England without fear.
“I shouldn’t leave them.” Thomas turned back to Edward, pressing his face into the warm planes of his lover’s back. “They’ll be in trouble in two minutes—”

“Now don’t you start that again.” Edward rubbed the knuckles of Thomas’ hands where they were wrapt about Edward’s waist. “Roger’s got it all taken care of.”

Thomas said nothing for a moment. When Edward squeezed his fingers, trying to invoke another answer, Thomas reluctantly spoke up:

“M’sorry.” Thomas admitted, “I don’t really feel like myself.”

“I know sweetheart.” Edward did not hold it against him in any way shape or form. “I’m right here, so don’t you worry.”

They rode to Dunkirque, and reached her around dusk.

They waited on the beaches with troops of wounded men, some already dead and some close to it. Clustered around beach fires with tin cups of weak coffee, men kept silent watch of the horizon while their fellows whimpered and fell gray.

By the time that midnight had passed and the ship to England had arrived, six more men had died on the beach. Those that still lived did not have the strength to speak anymore.

They boarded the boat to England without comment, and took up refuge in the back. Faintly, Thomas recalled that on the first boat trip over the men had been cramped, stacked upon boxes and supplies with horses and such. There’d been talk of survival, of high hopes, of winning the war and returning home heroes.

Now, the boat home offered wide walking space. Men lay upon the floor in tarp wrappings. The dead had their faces covered. The living were much the same. There wasn’t a man on that boat who wasn’t wounded in some way. Even Edward and Thomas, whole as they were, were quiet and mournful.

Thomas found himself looking up, often. The stars overhead were unnervingly bright. He fell asleep with his neck crooked backward, rocked backward and forward by the toss of the ship.

~*~

“I’ve got him.”

Thomas wasn’t too sure what was happening at first, save that something warm was pressed to his side.

He was being lifted, heavy as a sack of potatoes, in the arms of a strong and loving man. The noise, oh! The noise!
Such noises, like a symphony filling the air. When had it gotten so loud?

There were ships, blasting their horns to disembark. There were seagulls squalling and sailors calling out to one another. Thomas could hear waves lapping at concrete, and far off the baying of a dog.

There was piercing light in his eyes, bright and blinding. He blinked, dazzled, and found himself face to face with the image of the front draw gate dropped.

A dirty, packed world lay before him, and he did not recognize it at first.

“What?” Thomas looked up to find Edward’s arms wrapped tight around him. Khamsa was being lead off the ship by a helpful sailor, walking down a rusted plank onto an algae eaten dock. It seemed like they were the last men off the ship, with all the wounded gone on before them. The docks were packed with nurses and healers; motorcars were puttering back and forth… all of them were ambulances.

What was this place? Was this England?
Did it still exist, after all this time?

“Head on.” Edward was plucking Thomas through the crowd, swinging to and fro so that he could skirt past men who were now trying to take off bloodied tarp wrappings in large bundles. “I’ll get you down~”

“Where are we?” Thomas asked.

“Home.”

Thomas’ stomach lurched at the thought.

By god, if it wasn’t England after all. Dover was just as grimy and loud as Thomas had left it, though this time there was less color and more of a pained air. The ambulances were waiting in droves, their drivers smoking cigarettes and hanging out by the stoop. Nurses were going over clipboards, stray dogs were running too and fro begging for scraps. The whole lot of it looked like some children’s circus puzzle where you had to find twenty different objects in the crowd in order to win the game. There was too much to look at, too much to see, and suddenly Thomas was quite glad that Edward was carrying him because frankly he didn’t know if he’d be able to walk.

They touched down onto land without much pomp and circumstance, save that Khamsa was re saddled and Edward tentatively sat Thomas down in order to take up her reigns. Their bags were atop her back, strapped down tightly and covered in mud. It was only when he was surrounded by so many nurses and healers who’d bathed that Thomas suddenly could see just how damn filthy they were. I mean, it was one thing to be filthy and in Ypres but… to be filthy and in England?

Oh, it was mortifying.

Thomas suddenly felt horribly itchy, and scratched at his unshaven face and neck. He had a four day old stubble, making him look a bit like a hobo, and his hands were caked with grime. Should Mr. Carson see him like this, he’d tar and feather him out on a line. How on earth would he be able to return to Downton Abbey looking like a peasant?

“I can’t go home like this.” Thomas whimpered as Edward made to get up into Khamsa’s saddled. Edward looked back around, alarmed at the trill of sorrow in Thomas’ voice. “Look at me, I’m filthy~”
“We’ll bathe on the train.” Edward promised. “We’re taking a sleeper. I’ve got the money, not to worry.”

Thomas had never been on a sleeper car before. Would they even let him on the train when he looked so pitiful?

But Edward was strong where he was unsure, taking Thomas by the hand and pulling him up onto Khamsa’s saddle. They rode out of Dover’s docking station, Khamsa’s cloven hooves clopping brightly on wetted cobblestone, and took her at a brisk pace down the center street where people were going about their day completely unaware that Thomas was having a moment of emotional crisis.

The worst part was, there wasn’t technically anything wrong. England seemed to be doing just fine. The streets weren’t on fire, there wasn’t a river of blood washing the children away. It was just that after years of Ypres, it wasn’t normal. It wasn’t right.

But it was. Thomas was the one that wasn’t normal and right… and how awful was that?

Thomas hid his face in Edward’s back. He didn’t know what else to do. Edward was the one to steer them to Dover’s train station, and he was likewise the one to purchase their tickets. The whole time, Thomas cowered in the back, unable to do much more than watch as Edward had Khamsa put into steerage with several other horses and shouldered both their packs. Edward was so unbelievably strong to Thomas in that moment, like a pillar of steel that couldn’t be dented by a tank, and in response his own legs felt like pudding as Edward lead them up onto the sleeper cars. He found himself captivated by the small details of England: the brass doorknobs of the individual train compartments. The sound of crystal tinkling as servers passed about trays of whiskey and gin. And their liveries-!

Thomas was stopped, stone cold, at the sight of pressed red and silver. He wanted to reach out to touch the stiff pleats. He wanted to feel each of their collars, to smell pomade upon his fingers and retie all their shoelaces. He wanted to absorb himself in the sensation of being alive without war. Of existing without chaos. Creativity had had no room in Ypres. There had been necessity, but no art. There are been invention, but no true pleasure. There had been nothing but the constant need and the constant lack. And here?

Here on this sleeper train, with waiters serving gin and rich ladies taking tea?
It seemed that there was neither need nor lack. There was just…

But there wasn’t even a word for it.
You couldn’t compare a sleeper car to Ypres. You could only oggle at it, and barely that.

Their particular car was quiet and compact, and Thomas found it an unbelievable relief after the hubbub of outside. There was one thing to be said about Dunkirk and the lot; it was quiet. When you got thrown back into England, it almost made you want to vomit. It was such an undiluted stream of action and effect that you almost fell off your axis. For the past three years, Thomas had been a healer living in filth and grime with nothing but barren air and deathly quiet around him.

Now, he was in an opulent sleeper car, surrounded by rich women taking tea and servants wearing red liveries.
He wanted to cry.

“Good thing about these cars is that you can buy a shaving kit for a— oh darling-!”

Thomas could not stop crying, tears pinching from his eyes as he let out a keening wail of exhaustion and fear. Fear of what, he could not say, but as Edward grabbed him tight and pulled him in for a fierce hug Thomas felt oddly certain the whole world was about to explode. That he could not cope anymore, and would surely shatter from the force of trying.

But none of these things happened. Instead, Thomas fell apart in Edward’s arms only to find that he was quite safe. Edward held him tight, allowing Thomas to wet the lapels of his dirtied jacket with long overdue tears. Thomas did not know if he cried for his past, his present, or his future, but as he cried he felt an almost cathartic release. It felt so good, to weep in the arms of a man who loved him, and to know that he wasn’t in danger of being shot by a German soldier.

He wasn’t in danger of anything, really.

“It’s alright.” Edward whispered, stroking Thomas’ hair kindly.

Was it?

Edward kissed him lovingly, unflustered by the fact that Thomas had essentially squalled like a child into his breast for no reason. Indeed, he seemed relieved as if he’d been hoping Thomas might cry for a while. There was no time to cry in war, and there was no point to cry in peace. What was left in between?

“I’m such a damn putz.” Thomas whispered, his voice thickened as if he was suffering from a severe head cold. He pulled back, wiping his eyes, only to be taken right back into Edward’s arms so that he could be smothered in affection again.

“Perish the thought.” Edward said, “You’re tired, and you’ve endured an enormous change. Let me take care of you for a while.”

And so he did.

Edward had been initially right to think of a purchasable shaving kit, but unfortunately due to the over abundance of soldier’s returning home from war and the rationing of supplies, there were no more shaving kits left for purchase in the sleeper car. Unsure of what else to do, Edward and Thomas hid in their little room as England rushed by, first stopping through King’s Cross and then continuing on in the same train to York. The pair of them were so exhausted, so broken down, that they slept soundly through each stop. The only time they were woken was, funnily enough, by the smell of bacon being rolled through the train carriage by a maid offering hot breakfast.

Thomas was yanked from his dreams of nothingness to the salty sizzling of bacon only to find that the opportunity for breakfast had passed. He felt horribly denied, but reasoned that in the following weeks there would be ample opportunity for bacon. Thomas would simply have to seize every last one of them.

On the bright side, it gave him a thirty minute warning that they were pulling into York.
Thomas and Edward were decidedly scruffy to the point of uncomfortableness as they exited out onto York station. Given the constant demand for soldiers and the manufacturing of weapons, there weren’t many men in York save for the old and the young. Those that looked to be somewhere near Thomas and Edward’s ages had a snooty quality to them. They were all rich, and they all looked like they had somewhere pointed to go… like being out in public made them uncomfortable.

It might have had something to do with the women in rags on the roads offering out white feathers and screaming for donations. As Thomas and Edward rode Khamsa down the streets of York, heading towards the far off hills of Grantham county, the women called out to them with curled fists in the air:

“Three cheers for our men! Brava to the brave!”

The dogged looks that Thomas and Edward gave them back were hardly rounds of applause.

“Can’t stand people like that.” Edward muttered nastily, navigating Khamsa onto a side lane with less traffic. It took about an hour to travel from York to Downton by car, but Khamsa didn’t have to stay on a particular path. Without wheels and a motor, Khamsa could walk straight into the outer fields of York and start making a bee line for Downton. “The way they carry on. Always saying ‘cheers from the brave’ and sod like that, but when do they ever do anything besides complain. I tell you, Thomas, there’s nothing more universal than a mouth that won’t shut up. There’s a word for a nag in every language.”

Thomas made a non committal noise, taking a deep breath of country air and closing his eyes. It felt like heaven, to ride with Edward through the country. Could it really be that they’d been in Ypres only a few days ago?

No matter.

The woods that divided York and Grantham were deep, and littered with tiny trails that spoke of rich men riding for sport and game. Edward took Khamsa through each of them, at times calling out for her to ride faster so that Thomas was jerked from a day dream by the sudden feeling of flying through the wind. His testicles were getting slightly sore, but he tried not to take it to heart. There was something wonderfully playful about the way that Edward romped through the woods, even if it meant that Thomas’ bollocks were squashed.

“Come on now-!” Edward teased Khamsa, clicking with his teeth and tongue as they came upon a thin river. “Let’s jump!”

“Oh dear-“ Thomas was given very little warning as Edward started to repeatedly shout into the air.

“Go, go, go, GO!”

Khamsa whinnied, delighted, and jumped clear over the river to the other side.

Thomas shrieked at the exploding pain in his groin, legs clamped tight around Khamsa’s middle: “Jesus, Edward, you squished m’balls!”

But Edward just laughed and laughed, gay and delighted at the sensation of ‘hunting’ again.

It was so obvious, when you had Edward in his natural habitat, that he was a boy of the countryside.
The way that he rode out, flat and unafraid of bramble or bush… how he gripped Khamsa’s reigns and jeered her on. Nothing scared him; nothing stopped him.

Thomas couldn’t help but smile into Edward’s back.

When the pair of them finally broke through the brush, it was close to five in the afternoon. They’d been riding hard all day, trained to take strenuous exercise with very little food. For these reasons, they didn’t have to stop and lunch, and made better time as they entered Grantham county. Downton was a village that nestled through farmer’s fields, so Thomas knew that they were getting close when Edward started riding through crops instead of grass. There were no men in the fields anymore; instead there were women in heavy trousers and wide brimmed winter hats trying to keep up with the work. They looked up from their plowing and cutting, watching as Thomas and Edward rode past.

“Good morning, ladies!” Edward shouted, taking off his Lieutenant’s hat to wave at them all. So joyous was he that he did not mind the way they stared, as if he were off his rocker.

One even waved back, a young girl with black hair; she ran along a rotting field fence, her braided pig tails bouncing upon her back as Khamsa took over into the next lane and left the women behind.

It was with a swooping sensation that Thomas recognized a road.

It was the lane that lead from the Bates’ eventual cottage to the main road. These houses, as of the moment, were nothing more than uninhabited shacks. Without Matthew Crawley’s generosity, they hadn’t been restored yet. Eventually, however, the whole area would be a pleasant neighborhood sporting start up homes.

“Eh, this is disgusting.” Edward chirped. He said it so joyfully that Thomas couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ride to the main road and take a left!” Thomas cried out. “Ride hard!”

And so Edward did.

There was something incredibly freeing about flying on the back of a horse, going as fast as the beast dared. Khamsa was born to run, and she did so with such joyous strength that the road soon turned into a spool of silk beneath them. They’d taken over one lane, and then the next, going along Downton’s country roads with such ease that Thomas almost wondered if he’d slipped into a dream. Khamsa hadn’t been able to ride like this in years, and Thomas had to wonder if it was just as exciting for her as it was for her riders. Maybe this vacation would be good for her too; maybe she needed to remember what it meant to be a horse outside of a war zone.

The vision of Downton Abbey broke through on a blazing blue horizon, the sun bleaching the ancient marble walls a bone white. Thomas’ heart squeezed pitifully in his chest at the sight of Downton’s red and blue flag flapping triumphantly upon the tallest turret. In that moment, as Edward turned up the gravel road and carried Khamsa down Downton’s main stretch, nothing had changed. The manicured lawns and pruned oaks were just the same as they’d always been. The gravel was freshly raked and the windows were well washed. It was like Thomas had only been away for a moment; like he’d merely turned his head instead of going off to war for three years. He suddenly realized in that moment just how terribly out of place he’d been in Ypres. For as much as he’d had a routine, Thomas had never been meant to go through the war. He was a English country boy, a man of Downton… and that was as it should be.
“Tawaquf!” Edward barked, jerking at Khamsa’s reigns so that she came to a skittering halt in the gravel front. Khamsa didn’t want to stop, and she nattered irritably as she toed from hoof to hoof.

“Ey- Easy… Khamsa!” Edward reached a hand beneath Khamsa’s strong neck, cupping her stiff muscles to massage them delicately with long fingers. “Sh… Hudu… Sweet girl… Fatat latifa…” She calmed, expelling a long breath. Her pointed ears swiveled to and fro, taking in the sounds of far off farmers calling for hay and the echo of wood being chopped.

“There’s my girl.” Edward petted her, straightening back up in the saddle.

“Go around the side.” Thomas begged, for there was no way he could think to go up to the front door when he looked like a homeless vagrant. “To the area yard.”

“A toff in the area yard.” Edward scolded himself even as he led Khamsa around the side, “If my butler could see me now, he’d go toes up.”

Thomas just hugged Edward tighter. To have him here, to have him seeing Downton, was like something out of a dream. Even in the past, when Edward and Thomas had first met at Downton Hospital, Edward had never seen Downton.

To know that Edward could now meant more to Thomas than he could truly explain.

The area yard was just as Thomas had left it, with a pile of chopped wood hiding under the open aired shed and the workbench sitting bare by the door. A young scullery maid whom Thomas did not rightly remember was sitting outside with several pairs of work boots, cleaning with a cloth dampened in polish. At the sound of Khamsa’s hooves, the maid looked up, and all but dropped her shoes in shock.

Thomas could not bear it anymore. He dismounted Khamsa to almost fall off her side. Edward grabbed him by the armpit, keeping him steady as Thomas finally touched Downton’s ground. He almost wanted to fall to his knees and kiss the cobblestone.

The maid turned and ran for the door, abandoning her shoes upon the steps. She slammed and locked the stoop like she thought Thomas and Edward might try and ransack the house. Edward was taken aback, looking down at Thomas curious.

“What a wonderful reception.” Edward grumbled, dismounting Khamsa to tether her reigns to a patio column. Khamsa didn’t know what to make of her new surroundings, and suddenly began sniffing at the stack of chopped wood to her right.

“Ah, don’t you dare-!” Edward warned; like most horses, Khamsa was prone to nibbling on wooden slats in a form of huffing that got an animal high. It was a bizarre thing to watch, but sure enough if you checked the stalls of any horse you could find bite marks along the wooden lining. “You little heathen.”

Khamsa flicked her tail irritably, but did not make to huff again. She often got her feelings hurt when Edward yelled at her.

It occurred to Thomas in that moment that he looked decidedly like a vagabond, and he really shouldn’t have attempted to venture to Downton without first getting a shave or a haircut. But Thomas had been so desperate to get home, so excited at the prospect of seeing everyone again, that he’d forgotten it had been a solid three years since the staff had laid eyes on him.
The back door flung open with such force that the handle smacked into the opposite wall and left a scuff mark. There, upon the stoop, stood a gaggle of women each more shocked than the last.

Mrs. Hughes was at the front, her hair a little grayer and her eyes shining as if with prayer. Beside her was O’Brien, her curled forelock just as stiff as ever and her a muscle in her jaw jumping. Anna was at O’Brien’s elbow, still wearing a maid’s uniform and absolutely gobsmacked to see Thomas on the stoop. Even Mrs. Patmore had come out of the kitchen, which was a show of just how special Thomas’ re-appearance was in their eyes. Daisy brought up the rear, still in her pink scullery maid’s dress but no longer designated with the task of cleaning shoes. Clearly she’d come up in the world, even if only by the measure of pouring tea.

Absolute silence reigned over the cobblestone. Mrs. Hughes took a tentative step forward, then another, a hand upon her breast and her mouth open in shock. No one seemed able to speak, they were too flabbergasted at the sight of Thomas back from the dead.

Thomas wondered what it must be like in that moment to see him, hair shaggy and chin marked with four days worth of stubble… his uniform faded and his eyes sunken in from lack of sleep.

“…They gave me leave.” Thomas said. “They think I need… some time…”

“Oh Thomas-!!”

Mrs. Hughes darted forward, arms flung wide to scoop him up. When her arms wrapped around him, Thomas almost broke down and cried again. He was exhausted, emotionally spent, but relief crashed over him in waves as Mrs. Hughes’ scent and warmth filled him up. He was home, now more than ever he was sure. It was one thing to ride a train, one thing to see Downton Abbey… but to hold Mrs. Hughes?

It cemented the fact that he’d made it back. That he’d survived.

“Oh, I worried about you so-!” She was close to tears, pulling back to touch his face. She stroked over his stubble with weathered thumbs, taking in how long his hair had gotten.

“My god, it’s a miracle!” Mrs. Patmore was beside herself, clutching at her chest as if feeling pains, “It’s an absolute miracle!”

“Thomas, we were so worried about you!” Daisy came around the group, and though O’Brien and Anna both were eager to touch him again it was Daisy to hug him next. Thomas almost started laughing, he was so overjoyed to see her. He’d forgotten how short she was, barely coming up to his chin-

“Thank god you’re safe!” Anna clasped his hands, “Look at you! You’re a site for sore eyes-!”

“You’re a site, period!” O’Brien couldn’t seem to get over how tussled he was, “Don’t they give you razors in the army?”

“Supplies are short-“ Thomas admitted, for while they did in fact give soldier’s grooming kits they usually got lost about a month into service. Razors were a thing of luxury. Most men shaved with a piece of sharpened glass.

“But why did they let you come back?” O’Brien demanded, “Did they discharge you?”

“No.” Thomas shook his head, “They wanted me to take a month off to get well.”
“A month!” Anna gasped, “But that’s wonderful!”

“Why didn’t you write to us and tell us you were coming home?” Daisy asked. Mrs. Patmore, however, wasn’t going to let her grief go unknown on the subject of letters.

“Why didn’t you write period? We haven’t heard from you in ages! By god boy, we thought you were dead!” She snarled. But oh! How Thomas had missed her temper.

“We couldn’t get letters through!” Thomas explained, “Ice blocked the passage, and German’s stole the rest. Post is a thing of luxury!”

“Why on earth would someone want to steal letters?” Mrs. Hughes demanded.

“It lowers moral.”

“But that’s awful!”

“It’s just the way that it’s done, I’m afraid.” It was difficult to make them understand when they’d never been to war. In that moment, however, Thomas didn’t want to talk about war. He wanted to hold everyone close, to smell Mrs. Hughes’ linen dress, to taste Mrs. Patmore’s cooking and to watch Mr. Carson decant wine. He wanted to be absorbed in the essence of Downton and to never surface up to air again.

“Oh, you look half dead, an’ no mistake.” Mrs. Patmore patted him tenderly upon the arm, “You need a shave and a haircut—“

“I’ll put you right.” Anna said, “I used to cut my sister’s hair all the time.”

But Thomas was not Downton’s only visitor, and Mrs. Hughes was eyeing Edward curiously. Even as Thomas was being pulled inside, Edward was waiting patiently on the stoop with his hat in his hand.

“But… who are you? Are you dropping Thomas off?” Mrs. Hughes asked, confused as to why she’d sent only one soldier to war but had gotten two back.

“No ma’am.” Edward said, “My name is Lieutenant Edward Courtenay.” He bowed his head politely to her, “I’ve been sent to care for Thomas on his leave. We’re to stay together until our return to Ypres.”

Mrs. Hughes was thunderstruck, and at first Thomas couldn’t understand why. To his knowledge, she shouldn’t be expecting him to be formally discharged just for a bit of cold feet so why was she acting so surprised that Edward was going to take him back?

But then Thomas remembered all his letters to Mrs. Hughes, to everyone really, telling them how Edward was the love of his life… and suddenly he realized just why Mrs. Hughes was shocked.

She knew that Edward was Thomas’ fancy man.

“…I see…” Mrs. Hughes touched her breast, looking over her shoulder to Mrs. Patmore who seemed ready to smack Thomas around the ears. Indeed, all the women were looking at Thomas now in states of varying shock, save for Daisy who was puzzled as to why the welcome wagon wasn’t being wheeled out.

“Well, I should alert his Lordship that you’re both here.” Mrs. Hughes said, “Welcome to Downton Abbey, Lieutenant. Mrs. Patmore will make you some tea.”
She clasped Thomas tightly upon the arm, then stepped inside to harry off down the hall.

O’Brien scowled, hands staunchly upon her bony hips: “That’s some nerve of you, to bring your fancy man home.”

“Don’t start bein’ nasty to him.” Daisy chastised her as she followed after Mrs. Hughes, “Not just as soon as he’s back.”

O’Brien harrumphed, rolling her eyes and heading inside after Mrs. Hughes and Daisy. Now it was just Mrs. Patmore and Anna, both of whom were exasperated but warm.

“Come inside.” Mrs. Patmore urged, “Mr. Carson’s upstairs with William and Mr. Bates.”

“They’ll be so relieved to see you home, Thomas.” Anna said, walking alongside Thomas as he entered into Downton’s lower halls. By god, he’d missed the smell of this place! The reek of shoe polish and silver cream, the far off babble of plates being washed in the sinks and dust bins being cleared out… it was heaven on earth.

“I’m not home forever, Anna.” Thomas said. He had to keep reminding himself that this was only a visit. That he could not stay away from war for long. He wondered if Wavell and Allenby had been right to send him home if it was only going to end up making him feel more homesick. What if this was a terrible idea, and Thomas ended up becoming a deserter out of a desire to stay home? Thomas tried to reason with himself that Edward wouldn’t allow him to turn into a coward, but what if Edward became infected too? What if they should have gone to Paris instead, or somewhere else less cozy and warm so that way Ypres didn’t seem so bad when they returned?

Thomas tried to swallow his fears; he wanted to savor the present for as long as possible, and it wouldn’t do to become too caught up with the future.

“They can’t have you in the war if you’re ill.” Anna said. “You need to rest, you’re no good to anyone if you’re shaky on your feet.”

“Oh that’s all they do is send boys who ought to be home.” At this, Mrs. Patmore’s voice was tight and emotional. Suddenly, Thomas remembered the story of her nephew Archie, and how he’d been shot for desertion. Had that happened yet, or was Archie still missing?

“Oh-!” Mrs. Patmore gave a loud sniff as she returned to the kitchen, already rolling up her powder blue sleeves to snatch up her aged recipe book. “I’m going to make you so many salted cod cakes you’ll burst! And raspberry biscuits and all your favorite treats. We’ll have dinner tonight in your honor!”

“Anna, I can’t see his Lordship looking like this.” Thomas murmured, catching Anna by the elbow just before they entered the servant’s hall proper, “Do you think we could sneak up for a bath first?”

“His lordship won’t mind, honest.” Anna said. Her crooked little grin warmed his heart in that moment, “He’s been so worried about you, we all have.”

“I’m afraid I’ll make a very poor first impression.” Edward murmured, rubbing a hand over his own stubbled jaw. “We tried to shave on the train but they’d run out of razors.”

“Don’t you worry about that, you’re war heroes.” Anna praised, “You’re allowed a bit of cheek.”

“Speak for yourself, I’ve got about four days worth.” Thomas muttered, scratching his chin as an itch
flared up. Even as they spoke, Mrs. Hughes returned downstairs, practically glowing with pride.

“Ah, there you are.” She said, walking right up to Thomas and Edward, “I’ve told his Lordship that you’re home, and he’s absolutely thrilled. He wants you to come up to the library right now.”

“But I haven’t shaved.” Thomas begged, “Or washed my hair; I look like a homeless vagrant.”

“You look like a soldier, returned from war.” Mrs. Hughes corrected him, “And you might have been away from this house for a few years but it still works just the same, Thomas. We answer when his Lordship calls. Upstairs with the both of you, and promptly.”

“Can’t deny the call of an Earl.” Edward teased. Thomas threw him a filthy look over his shoulder; as the son of an Earl, it was usually Edward who did the calling.

“Hey now, whose this?”

A sudden, ringing voice echoed out in the hall, bringing both Edward and Thomas to a pause as they made to climb the stairs. Thomas looked about, only to find with a shock that he was staring into the face of Ethel Parks for the first time in ages. A terrible stabbing pain hit his heart as he realized this was Ethel before her fall from grace… before she’d been cast out into the streets and forced to take up prostitution. Here was someone whom Thomas could identify with on several levels, whom he’d always gotten along with for the most part. She’d shared his ideals, much like Jimmy, and had been ostracized by the downstair’s staff for it. Indeed, Thomas could sense how everyone was judging Ethel even as she merely stood in the doorway and smiled up at him. O’Brien was scowling at Ethel’s shoulder, all but leering over her like a hawk would a vole, while Mrs. Hughes just looked terribly disgruntled.

“Thomas Barrow.” Thomas said, extending his hand so that Ethel could shake it. She did so, but not before attempting to seductively run her fingers over his palm and wrist.

“A medical officer, mind you!” O’Brien warned, “So none of your cheek.”

Just to spite O’Brien, it seemed, Ethel winked at Thomas and said, “I’m Ethel… and you can be my doctor anytime, handsome.” in the most sultry voice imaginable.

Mrs. Hughes’ eyebrows were in danger of disappearing into her hairline. “Thank you, Ethel, that will do.”

“Excuse me.” Thomas said, nodding to Ethel as he continued on up the stairs. He could hear Edward chuckling in the back of his throat, trying not to laugh aloud. They were being followed up by Anna and Mrs. Hughes, both of whom were scoffing at Ethel’s nerve.

“I swear I don’t know what I’m going to do with that girl!” Mrs. Hughes wondered aloud.

“She’s not so bad.” Anna teased.

“She called me handsome.” Thomas added, “So I like her just fine.”

Mrs. Hughes gave him a withering look, “Don’t you start with that nonsense, she’s bad enough without you egging her on.”

“She likes to flirt.” Anna explained as they hit the main landing.

“Really?” Thomas teased, opening the green baize door for both women, “I couldn’t tell.”
As they walked out into the main hall, Edward made an appreciative noise in the back of his throat.

“Hmm.” Edward paused, craning his neck to look about, “Yes, now I’m certain… I’ve been here before. I can remember that hearth.” He pointed to a massive stone hearth across the hall where the Crawley family crest took centerstage over all other decoration. Anna and Mrs. Hughes looked about, amazed.

“You have?” Anna wondered, “But when?”

“I think I visited during a garden party several years ago.” Edward explained. “The oldest daughter had just gone through her first season, so my father wanted me to meet her. I forget her name but I can remember she was quite the firecracker.”

“Are you… a noble?” Anna stuttered, looking from Thomas to Edward and clearly hoping someone would fill her in. Mrs. Hughes’s mouth was slowly beginning to drop again.

“I’m the son of an Earl.” Edward explained, “Lord Bicestor of Oxford. My father knows Lord Grantham well… they went to Eton together from what I understand, and they’d always been distant friends since.

“Well, I … apologize for any forwardness you may have encountered from the staff, M’lord.” Mrs. Hughes said. Edward waved her off, unwilling to accept an unneeded apology.

“Please.” Edward said, “My time here at Downton has been nothing but sublime. I should have told you from the start about my birth, but I confess my thoughts were centered on Thomas’ welfare. I’m here for him, and so he ought to take the main stage over me.”

“You can trust him.” Thomas urged both Anna and Mrs. Hughes, “He’s not some stiff toff, he understands what it’s like to be on the other side.”

Anna grinned but Mrs. Hughes refused to budge. Now that she knew Edward was an Earl’s son, she would probably not speak openly in front of him again.

“I shouldn’t think what you mean, Thomas.” She warned. “Now come along. His Lordship is waiting in the library with Mr. Matthew. He’s home from Flanders and eager to see you. He’s heard all about what happened in Ypres with the Germans.”

Thomas stomach flipped at the thought that everyone knew he’d been kidnapped and assaulted. What would they think when they learned he had nightmares of Greta dying in front of him while Cartwright shot everything that moved? Would they imagine him a broken toy, unfit for work or war? Would they pity him and treat him like charity?

God, he hoped not.

As they continued their stroll to the library, Anna hung back slightly so that she and Thomas could talk without Mrs. Hughes overhearing. Edward was still too intrigued with the main hall to notice, pausing to look at every piece of artwork that he passed.

“Is he-?” Anna did not finish her sentence, but her eyes alluded to it all. Thomas nodded, and Anna let out a tiny breath, scandalized.

“But that’s so dangerous!” she whispered, “He’s the son of an Earl, Thomas! You can’t take up with their sort. It’s just not done.”

“I love him Anna.” Thomas said, “I don’t care whose son he is.”
“I’m sorry, were you talking about me?”

Both Anna and Thomas jumped, shocked to find that Edward had somehow snuck around the back of them while they’d had their heads bent in hushed conversation. Thomas scolded him, fanning him off: “Get away with you!”

Edward grinned and butted through Thomas and Anna, heading for the library door where Mrs. Hughes had just slipped inside. She was no doubt introducing them to the family, preparing Lord Grantham and Mr. Matthew for their visitor. Anna hung back to hide behind one of the flanking marble columns, and Edward tried to straighten the part in his hair as best he could. The fact of the matter was that they looked absolutely filthy, and no amount of nitpicking was going to change that. They needed baths, and shaves, even if they were returning war heroes.

The door to the library was flung open by Mr. Carson, and for the first time in three years Thomas suddenly found himself staring at a man who’d single handedly nearly put him in a grave and raised him up from the dead.

He’d forgotten how wonderful the sight of Mr. Carson was. How the dark purple bags beneath his eyes and salt and peppered hair blended wonderfully to create a man who was both stressed out of his mind and yet still able to take the burden. At times, Thomas had loathed this man. At times, he’d desperately desired his approval. Now, however, Thomas was just goddamn grateful to see him again. Carson and Hughes were two of the pinnacle reminders of Downton’s warmth for Thomas. Where one gave him strength, the other gave him reason. War was devoid of anything remotely close to logic, and so Carson and his personality had been tucked into the back of Thomas’ mind, hidden away lest he be tainted by the tragedies Thomas endured.

Now, Thomas could pull Carson back out again, and view him in the light. Like a comforting blanket or stuffed animal, Thomas wanted to hold Carson close to his chest.

To don a livery, and follow him around once more.

“Thomas.” Carson said his name with such longing that Thomas thought at first the man might hug him as Mrs. Hughes had. Instead, however, Carson just viewed him with misting eyes. Thomas could tell the man was growing emotional, clearly overwhelmed with Thomas’ safe return home. “Thank god you’ve returned to us—”

But before Carson could say anymore, Lord Grantham came out from the library beaming in a tweed suit and blue silk tie. He looked overjoyed, which was weird because Thomas had never been one to receive much praise from the man. Clearly Lord Grantham was one of the men who idolized soldiers.

“Thomas! My dear fellow!” Lord Grantham was suddenly shaking his hand, and Thomas stuttered to attention as he tried to step into the role of a servant again.

“M’lord.” After three years, the words felt foreign in his mouth. “Forgive me for this intrusion. I was given three weeks leave to get well. I should have called but…” Thomas didn’t even know what to say, “I had a hard time coming to grips with this situation.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about any of that!” Lord Grantham waffled. But of course he wasn’t worried, he wasn’t the one that laid out the rooms or made the meals. What did it matter to him if two sudden house guests popped up? His workload would remain the same: zero. “I’m so glad to have you home and in one piece. We’ve thought of you endlessly!”

But even as Thomas opened his mouth to say something benign and lowly in reply, the sight of
William Mason popping up behind Lord Grantham’s broad shoulders gave Thomas pause. The past three years had clearly been good to William. There was a healthy glow to his skin that Thomas hadn’t seen a young man wear in quite some time. He was whole, and eager; he seemed to forget himself as he stepped out around Lord Grantham and shook Thomas’ hand warmly.

“Thomas!” William was downright gleeful to have him home. What a queer experience! To think, when Thomas had returned home the first time, they’d been livid to see him…. they had considered him a curse by then, and the feeling had never truly gone away over the years.

Thomas had never considered he’d been offered such a warm welcome. It was making him feel like he was suffering an out of body experience. When would the world return to normal again, he wondered?

“William, it’s good to see you again.” Thomas said.

“Look at you!” William was downright chuffed; he clapped Thomas upon the shoulder just as Mrs. Hughes had done, “Look at how… manly you are!”

Lord Grantham was flabbergasted. Mr. Carson looked ready to strangle William with his shoelaces.

“I-“ But by god, before Thomas could even get out two words Matthew Crawley was sidling through the door. Was he to be introduced to every person in this house before it was all said and done? Matthew had his uniform on, emblazoned with the flashing insignia for captain. Just like Thomas, Matthew wore a patch for Downton Abbey. The blue and red was the rare splash of color upon his uniform. Matthew seemed downright mystified to find Thomas home in one piece, and no wonder. If anyone understood the life expectancy of a Ypres soldier, it was Matthew Crawley. Before, Thomas and Matthew had been much closer stationed in Flanders together. Now, Thomas felt nothing but pity for the man, well aware of how awful a state Flanders was in. It was difficult to say which situation was worse.

“Barrow!” Matthew offered his hand, and Thomas shook it at once. “I’m so glad to see you home and in one piece.”

“Thank you, Mr. Matthew.” Thomas said. “It’s just for a visit. General Allenby felt that I needed a refresher of sorts.”

“I quite agree.” Matthew said, “That’s the only way I’ve been able to keep my head, personally. After what you went through in 1914, I can only imagine the sort of discourse you’ve suffered. But..” Matthew paused, looking to Edward, “Forgive me, but I feel like I know you from somewhere.”

“I’m Lieutenant Edward Courtenay.” Edward introduced himself, offering his hand for Matthew to shake. He did so at once, and the two men regarded one another warmly.

“Edward Courtenay? But you’re not Niles Courtenay’s oldest son are you?” Lord Grantham said in wonder. “The Lord of Bicestor?”

“I am indeed sir.” Edward said. “I confess, this is the second time I’ve visited the abbey. The first time I came I met your eldest daughter. She’d only just gone through her debut season.”

“By jove!” Lord Grantham was immensely pleased, beaming from ear to ear as he rapidly shook Edward’s hand, “I know your father! Indeed, I know you! My dear, dear fellow. It’s such a relief to have you home and safe form harm! Your father must be thrilled-“

“I confess he doesn’t know yet.” There was something about the way Edward said it, like he was
internally praying Lord Grantham wouldn’t ring his father on the telephone and break the news, “I’ve come with Thomas to support him. I’m accountable to him, if you will. I’d rather not take time away from him if I can avoid it, and I fear my family will make a fuss. I would appreciate your discretion.”

“But your father would be so relieved to have you home!” Lord Grantham wondered in dismay. “Are you sure you shouldn’t at least call him and tell him you’re back? Thomas can manage on his own for a day or two.”

“I’m under General Allenby’s orders.” Edward said, though in truth Allenby hadn’t even wanted to let Edward go in the first place. “I’m afraid Thomas and I are rather stuck for life.”

It was a funny phrase, and one that didn’t fit the situation. They weren’t actually stuck for life, only for a few weeks, but the way Edward was looking at Thomas made Thomas wonder if Edward hadn’t used those words specifically for a purpose. Was it possible that Edward wanted to be stuck with Thomas for life? Could it be that even now, after all they’d shared over three years, there were still depths that Thomas did not know about Edward?

He supposed only time would tell, if they made it through the war.

“Well, you must come in for tea at the very least.” Lord Grantham urged. “Carson, have Mrs. Patmore whip up something special. She won’t mind will she?”

“Certainly not, M’lord.” Carson said, though Thomas knew for a fact Mrs. Patmore would mind given that the hour was drawing dangerously close to the start of dinner preparations. Any time taken away from her meal plan would result in the cooking being rushed. Carson headed off towards the green baize door, jerking his thumb for William to get back in line and hold down the fort. William stuttered to attention, never having possessed the same grace and flare that Thomas had, and ran for the buffet table in the library to stand straight backed like a board.

Thomas had served many a whiskey and tea in the library, but he’d never dared to be so forward as to sit down on the couch. Now, however, Lord Grantham and Mr. Matthew were sitting down on a couch and urging Edward and Thomas to take seats opposite them. Edward had no trouble sitting down, leaving only Thomas standing looking backward and forward from the nobility to William who was resolutely not looking at him lest he slip up again.

“Come now, sit down.” Lord Grantham beckoned. “We won’t bite.”

“I should fear to do so, M’lord. I’m quite dirty.” Thomas admitted, gesturing to his ruined trousers. What if he left a stain on the couch? Oh, Mrs. Hughes would have his neck!

“But Matthew had never been the one scrubbing the couch, so what did he know?

Unwilling to appear rude, even at the expense of Mrs. Hughes, Thomas regretfully took a seat next to Edward. Where Edward relaxed into the couch, Thomas sat right on the edge of the cushions with the bare minimum of his arse touching the fabric. It was almost comical, and Lord Grantham was eyeing him with a slight twitch at the corner of his lips like he was holding in a laugh.

“I confess we’ve all been thinking about you since that day.” Matthew admitted. “I heard the story through my own general. I feel like everyone this side of Belgium knows what you did… It’s rather
shocking that you were even put in that situation at all. Even for a soldier.” Matthew was taken
aback by the ugly brutality of it all. “It’s a shame that you had to endure something so awful. I’m
sorry for your misfortune.”

“There’s no such thing as misfortune in war, sir.” Thomas said. “Just the facts. I knew what I was
getting into that night… I was just stupid enough to think I could beat the odds.”

“There was nothing stupid about what you did.” Edward said, sternly. “You were brave, and that’s
flat, even if you don’t want to admit it. Very very brave.”

Thomas shook his head, looking away.

Their awkward conversation was broken by the arrival of Carson, carrying a gilded silver tray
bearing a glistening teapot and four china cups. There was sponge cake as well, dusted with
powdered sugar, and Thomas had to wonder if Mrs. Patmore cake larder had taken a serious hit. It
was amazing, how the serene calm of the surface reflected nothing of the chaos underneath. Right
now downstairs there would be shouting in the kitchen, calls for chopped vegetables and more wood
from the outside stock. Daisy would be plucking a chicken as fast as she could… Anna would be
ironing the tablecloths.

Mr. Carson carefully poured out four cups, and William ferried them to each man. Lord Grantham
was served first, then Mr. Matthew, then Edward, and finally Thomas. Thomas felt terribly guilty as
he accepted a cup of tea from William, even if William shot him a cheeky grin when Mr. Carson
wasn’t looking. It wasn’t right that he should be served tea by his own ilk. It made him feel sick to
his stomach.

“I wonder if you might tell us the whole story?” Lord Grantham asked as Mr. Carson began to cut
pieces of sponge cake and William ushered around a small tray with a bowl of honey, lemon
wedges, milk, and sugar cubes. “About what happened that day? When we heard, we were all so
shocked we almost fell out of our chairs. Poor Carson was ready to sail to Belgium to make sure you
were alright, personally.”

“There was no need, M’lord.” Thomas mumbled, though in truth he hadn’t been alright since that
awful day. If Mr. Carson had actually sailed over to Belgium, Thomas would have probably wept
and flung himself into the man’s arms. “It was over before it even began, to be honest.”

“You were kidnapped for two days.” Edward said. He didn’t like the idea of Thomas dumbing down
his role, “We almost thought you were dead.”

“Well I wasn’t.” Thomas snapped.

Edward paused, and a strange silence fell.

Thomas had never shouted at Edward before, and even to snap at him left Thomas with a terrible
sense of dread. Thomas closed his eyes, taking a deep breath through his nose before setting his
teacup down.

“I’m sorry, Edward.” Thomas whispered. He drew his hands upon his face, till his mouth was
cupped behind his fingers, and closed his eyes once more so that he would not have to see Lord
Grantham and Mr. Matthew sitting across from him on the couch. “… I didn’t mean to snap at you.
I’m not feeling m’self.”

“I know. It’s alright, you don’t have to apologize.” Edward put a hand upon Thomas’ thigh.

It was a shockingly bold move, with Lord Grantham and Mr. Matthew watching. Putting your hand
on another man’s thigh if you weren’t incredibly familiar was almost as brassy as kissing him on the cheek. But Edward did not pull away and no one made to reprimand him. Mr. Carson had admittedly gone white, but the man likewise was ready to fall out in hysteria when he forgot to set the sauterne on ice.

Thomas took a deep breath, then straightened up to face Lord Grantham and Mr. Matthew dead on. The pair were still ogling the way that Edward held onto Thomas’ thigh, but Thomas still did not make to tell Edward to stop. He reasoned that, if he was such a hero in this house, he ought to be allowed a bit of leisure. He wasn’t employed by Lord Grantham anymore, not really, and so he didn’t have to live by the abbey’s rules. It was a dangerous line to walk, but Thomas had toed worse before and come out alright in the end.

“It was after a long day.” Thomas began, “We’d battled hard and we’d suffered losses. We had nothing left, supply wise. I was cleaning men with horse urine and staving off their pain with diluted alcohol from looted village cellars. I was woken up in the middle of the night by my right hand man, who told me that a German thief had snuck into camp and had stolen our last tank of morphine. It was vital that we recapture the tank, if we wanted our platoon to survive any kind of onslaught. Morphine was only for amputations, and if we lost the tank…well… we’d lose the men.”

Thomas felt a tension rising in his chest. To stave off his anxiety, he took a small sip of tea. The pause in his story was unbroken, with each man enraptured by his tale.

“The pair of us chased after the man, and it took us into No Man’s Land. We were so intent on getting the tank back, we didn’t realize we were running into German territory. Then we started getting shot at, and my man went down. He was hit in the shoulder, but he lived… but now it was only me able to give chase. When I finally caught up with the thief, I was deep in the German trenches. I was held at gunpoint and kidnapped by soldiers. They knocked me out and when I woke up I was in an underground bunker, tied to a chair.”

You could feel the tension shifting in the room. Lord Grantham hissed, eyes narrowed as he glanced at Mr. Matthew who’d likewise gone pale. Carson and William could not speak in the presence of Lord Grantham, but Thomas could tell they were upset. William’s servant’s blank was officially dropped. He was horror struck, amber eyes wide with dismay. Carson was just clammy and stiff, eyes locked on the side of Thomas’ head.

“God in heaven.” Lord Grantham muttered. “I can’t imagine what you were feeling.”

“…Nothing really.” Thomas admitted, and it was the honest truth. He’d been furious at his own stupidity, but besides that he’d been too numb to feel fear.

“I was angry at myself for being captured, but I was too numb to feel fear. There was a man, a German general named Albrecht. He said that he needed my help with one of his soldier’s who was to undergo a double amputation. The man had been wounded for almost three days, and if he didn’t get aid immediately he would either die of sepsis or blood loss. As someone who specialized in amputations, Albrecht had apparently recognized my healing skills and wanted me to save his man. He told me that if I refused, he would kill me. But I was numb, and angry… so I just bickered with the man. They had English prisoners, and I demanded their release if I was to save Albrecht’s man. They were desperate so they did as I asked.”

“By jove, that was brave of you!” Mr. Matthew praised. “Albrecht was a man like thunder, from what I heard. I can only imagine how awful he must have been up close.”

“He was the same as our generals.” Thomas mused. “Stressed, backed into a corner, and desperate to itch out a win any way that he could.”
Thomas paused to take another sip of tea. All this chatter was making his mouth grow dry. No one spoke in the lull.

“Three English prisoners were brought to me. I had them verify they actually were English… god forbid I be duped into thinking they were allies when they were actually German’s in disguise. But they were actual Englishmen, and they were desperate to be saved. I had Albrecht sit the men upon the floor in front of me while I worked. I was wary of trusting that they wouldn’t be shot while I healed the wounded soldier. Who was to say they wouldn’t just shoot us all when I was done?” Thomas shrugged, letting out a little sigh.

“I can imagine it very easy.” Mr. Matthew mused. “They’ve done it before, after all.”

“So you see my predicament.” Thomas admitted. “Even as I began to operate… I had a feeling it would all end terribly.”

“But you acted with such bravery!” Lord Grantham praised, “And underneath immense pressure.”

“I wasn’t alone.” Thomas said. “I had help. There were… nurses.”

His chest felt tight.

Thomas took one breath, then another, coughing to try and dispel the tension in his chest. Edward reached out, and once again clasped Thomas’ thigh in his hand. He seemed to be silently urging Thomas to remember his surroundings. To note that he was no longer in Ypres. That he was safe, and surrounded by people he knew and cared for.

Still, it was hard to speak of Greta even after three years. To the day, Thomas had not mentioned her by name. He wondered if he could do so now.

“… There was a… woman.” Thomas coughed around the sizable knot in his throat. He wondered if Lord Grantham could hear the quiver in his voice. “A nurse named…”

But he couldn’t go through with it.

Thomas set down his teacup, and buried his face in his hands. He took one deep breath after another, but only ended up feeling light headed as he overloaded his blood with oxygen. He distantly registered that someone was speaking to him, that Edward was squeezing his thigh again… none of it really mattered. He was pooling all of his remaining mental strength into the act of blocking out the image of Greta’s bloody face. The sight of her round brown eyes slowly fading into listless black till they were as lifeless as a dolls.

“Gimme a moment.” Thomas mumbled, “For pities sake.”

The room fell quiet.

When Thomas dared to raise his head again, he found everyone watching him with expressions of mixed alarm and worry. He blinked his eyes rapidly, trying to regain his composure, and finally went on.

“… There was a nurse.” He refused to name her, and somehow that helped stave off the anxiety. “She was willing to help me. She couldn’t speak English but she seemed to know what was expected of her as my assistant. She was quick, smart… I relied upon her heavily during that operation. Then it all went to hell.”

Thomas took another sip of tea, suddenly wishing it was whiskey. He could recall with ease even
after three years, how the bombs had shaken a good two inches of dust off the bunker ceiling. How Greta and the other nurses had clung to one another, terrified of being caved in. Seconds later, or so it had seemed, Cartwright had burst into the room and everyone was dead.

“We’d infiltrated the enemy lines.” Edward explained, for the awkward silence after Thomas’ bitter pronouncement had just continued to grow. “I was leading a battalion to re-capture our comrades. We were pushing the Germans out of Ypres’ western flank and it was leading into a full frontal assault. We didn’t know where Thomas was, but I had a feeling he was underground. Call it intuition.”

“Walls were collapsing. Men were running. It was chaos.” Thomas said. “We lost a nurse to a collapsed wall. Another ran for her life. Albrecht didn’t know who to point his gun at first. He was panicking, losing his nerve. The prisoners were calling out for help, and Albrecht tried to shoot one of them. I knocked the gun sideways and everything went topside.”

Thomas had to pause to run his hands over his face again. It was hard to discern one moment from the next after that. Albrecht had fought for dominance and had temporarily won until Greta had flung out her meaty arms and had blocked Albrecht’s final blow. Why had she saved him? Had it been because he was a doctor, and therefore like a healer like her? It had been difficult to explain, but Thomas had felt a kinship with Greta despite not sharing a language with her. She’d seemed the sort of person who’d understood his view on the war.

“We heard the men calling out.” Edward explained, “And I navigated a troop through the channels underground till we found the room where Thomas was being held prisoner. Cartwright, another Lieutenant… well… he shot everyone.”

Thomas suddenly stood up, feeling the need to pace. He couldn’t say why, but in that moment movement was essential to him. If he walked, he would not panic. He desperately wanted to retain a sense of composure in front of Lord Grantham and Mr. Matthew.

“… Thomas begged him not to.” Edward continued on. Here, he spoke in soft tones, clearly trying to imply the brunt of the burden without upsetting Thomas’ fragile psyche.

“Thomas defended the nurses, and for a moment Cartwright wasn’t able to get a shot in… but…” Edward shook his head, “He’s a damn brute, and he wouldn’t listen to reason. The moment we let our guard down, the moment Thomas let his guard down, Cartwright shot the nurses. It…” Edward broke off, glancing at Thomas where he was now staring out a library window.

“…It rattled Thomas deeply. The nurse was begging Thomas to help her, or so I think. It was hard to tell, she was speaking German, but she seemed to be asking Thomas to have her spared. And of course, Thomas told Cartwright to back off… to leave her alone. But Cartwright’s a foul git, and he wouldn’t be moved to reason or sympathy. Not even for an unarmed woman who was just a healer—”

“Alright that’s enough.” Thomas blurted out.

Edward said no more, in silent agreement that the message had been implied and now it was time to drop the subject.

For a moment, Thomas felt that he could endure and keep his dignity. He kept his eyes looking out over the eastern lawn, trying to occupy his feverishly pacing brain by counting the trees that lined the very far edge of Downton’s massive estate.

He got to the number twelve when he heard a terribly tiny noise leave his throat.
It was the fact that people in Downton now knew of his shame, though he wasn’t too sure what his shame actually was. There was something awful pressing in his chest, making him remember all the awful things he’d endured in the past three years. Not only had he gone through this war once, he’d gone through it twice and he just wanted it to be over. He knew the war would end in 1918 if he could just hang on…

But he didn’t think he could.
In that moment, Thomas genuinely realized how god awful tired he was. How much he wanted his life to return to the way it was before.

Thomas pressed a hand tight over his mouth, trying to keep the noises inside him. And yet, even as he cowered by the wall there were hands upon his arms.

Edward was behind him, comforting him.

He held Thomas tight from behind, doing his best to hold him together even as he fell apart.

Thomas pressed his fingers tight to the corners of his eyes, holding in the moisture and heat that he found.

It was not in the sounds that he heard, but in the sounds he didn’t hear; there was no call from Lord Grantham for courage. No grumpy tisk from Mr. Carson demanding a return to order. No somber apology from Mr. Matthew… and no kind words from William. Every man stood silent in their post, watching as Thomas slowly fell apart. It seemed that war had a way of sifting through the normal pointless conversation that peace indulged in. Indeed, Thomas could remember in a different life hearing Matthew mention that war had a way of distinguishing between the things that mattered and the things that didn’t.

And Thomas supposed logic like that transcended the time space equilibrium.

“How long have you been like this?” Lord Grantham finally asked. It was clear he was deeply disturbed.

“From the moment he got back to camp.” Edward said, “He couldn’t sleep, he couldn’t eat… everyone was so proud of him but he just… he couldn’t function normally. It was a miracle he lasted three more months, nevertheless three more years.”

“And I should hardly wonder why after all that you’ve been through.” Lord Grantham said. Still Thomas could not look at the man and focused instead on the outpouring of wind beating at the thin limbs of a willow tree across the yard. Lady Mary often liked to sit there and read a book.

“Your bravery is astounding.” Mr. Matthew spoke up, “I can’t believe how courageous you were. You held off enemy forces in the face of certain death and saved three men from horrific fates. Honestly that kind of courage is one in a million.”

Thomas could say nothing, and instead gave a tiny little shrug. It was terribly rude, and Thomas wished he could curb his manners just a little bit… but he was so terribly tired that it was hard to even stand up straight never the less talk.

“When we finally got to a lull in the action, General Allenby immediately approached Thomas with the opportunity to take a few weeks off and get some rest.” Edward said, carrying on conversation in lieu of Thomas’ silence. “But Thomas wouldn’t return home without me, so here I am.”

“I can’t let anything happen to you.” Thomas croaked. “You know that.”
“We’re accountability partners.” Edward explained, and Mr. Matthew made a soft noise in knowing. “And I couldn’t have picked a more wonderful partner than Thomas.”

“Quit your flanneling.” Thomas whispered, head downcast as he scuffed at a loose thread in the Persian carpet underfoot. “His Lordship doesn’t want to hear that nonsense.”

They had to remember they were not in Ypres anymore. It was dangerous to show affection outright.

“It’s hardly nonsense after what you’ve done, Thomas.” Lord Grantham said. “I insist that you stay upstairs for your leave. We should have a guest room prepared—”

“No, M’lord.” So awful was the thought of being in an upstairs room that Thomas could not bear to face the window anymore. He turned about and found Lord Grantham on his feet, regarding Thomas with such misty-eyed adoration that Thomas felt slightly disturbed. Lord Grantham could be ridiculous when it came to putting war heroes on a pedestal. He wanted nothing more than to fight, and in being denied the chance he now overly praised anyone who was ‘lucky’ enough to fight. It was men like Lord Grantham that sent boys to war, however, and Thomas couldn’t afford to indulge in his rose-tinted view of battle. There had been no joy in Thomas’ heart when he’d been kidnapped by Albrecht… no happiness when he’d watched Greta die. All of it had been avoidable.

All of it.

“M’lord, I beseech you, let me stay in my old room while I am here.” Thomas said.

“But you can’t be made to sleep in the attics when you’re no longer a member of staff.” Lord Grantham said; his tone made it clear that he felt sleeping in the attics was poor choice over the gallery floor. “you’re no longer in service. You’re a decorated medical officer.”

But Thomas did not want to be a decorated medical officer. He wanted to be back in livery, hiding safe and sound beneath the stone floors in Mrs. Patmore’s kitchen or Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room. He wanted to enjoy the comforting quiet of a fireside cup of tea in his favorite armchair. He wanted to polish silver until his fingers turned numb.

And he didn’t like being told that this shoddy war was somehow better than his preferred existence.

“M’lord,” Thomas warned, “I am a member of this staff no matter what job I take up in His Majesty’s service. I’m only a medical officer because we are at war. When we return to peacetime, I pray I will be lucky to be employed by Downton once again. I’m a servant, and I’m proud of that.”

Carson looked fit to burst with pride. His barrel chest was puffed up, his stern profile thrown up high with a smug expression as if to proclaim “Here is my worth as a man.”

William just looked a little disappointed. He was still desperate to get out into the action, after all.

“Of course.” Lord Grantham was reproachful, clearly feeling slightly guilty that he’d aligned servitude to less than desirable. “I’m sorry I shouldn’t have been so callous. If that’s what you want then you may have it.”

“If it’s alright sir, I’d like to room with Thomas too.” Edward said.

At once, everyone looked about intrigued. Mr. Matthew and William didn’t seem too scandalized, but Lord Grantham and Carson certainly were. Thomas had a feeling their outrages were for different reasons.

“I-“ Lord Grantham almost spluttered, so tongue tied was he for words, “I’m unsure if I can allow
that, Edward. You’re a son of my dear friend from Eton, and a member of the upper class. By rights, you must room on the gallery floor; I’ll gladly call for the maid’s to fix you a bed—"

“I know it may seen slightly odd, given my natural status, but I need to make sure that Thomas sleeps soundly through the night. We’ve been having trouble with that—"

And indeed, they had. Thomas could barely get so much as three hours of sleep without waking up in a fit of terror or ennui.

“Perhaps we could make up a room for you in the attics all your own, M’lord.” Carson said, eyes beginning to narrow slightly as they flicked from Thomas to Edward’s face, “Just for the sake of propriety.”

“I…” Edward could hardly deny that, now could he. “It’s not ideal but if that’s what is best—"

“I agree with Carson.” Lord Grantham said. It seemed the two men were swapping looks, somehow sizing up and unspoken barrier that they needed to cross.

Ah. Thomas thought wearily, noting how Carson seemed irritated but not angry, It’s because I’m a homosexual. They don’t want to tempt me into sin.

Little did they know that Edward was a sinner too.

~ * ~

It was with a weary and somber feel that Thomas agreed to a quick shave so that he might be presentable for dinner.

Lord Grantham didn’t rightly know how to let Edward go downstairs, not without putting up a fight at least. Edward was determined and repeatedly told the others that he was here for Thomas, not the other way around, till they finally relented and allowed him to follow where Thomas might go. It was uncommon for a member of the upper class to wander through the halls of the servants, and it had Mr. Carson on edge so that the hall boy was suddenly put to work sweeping floors that would normally have been left alone at such a late hour. Edward did not care about the state of the floors, instead helping Thomas into a downstairs bathroom so that he might borrow a shaving kit and get rid of his scruff. The pair of them were cramped in tight quarters, bent over a shallow cracked sink and a dirty mirror as they meticulously scraped away every ounce of dirt and fuzz from their faces. It was interesting, Thomas thought, to see how his face had changed. Just like before in his prior life, Thomas' face had lost some of its youthful fullness during the war. His cheekbones were more angled, and there were deep bags beneath his startlingly blue eyes. Edward too had a haunted look about his face, like he was contemplating some deep mystery without a tangible answer. Thomas supposed all soldiers were like that in the end.

After they’d shaved and washed their faces, Thomas and Edward combed their hair into distinctive parts and offered their jackets so that Anna might brush them. She was fast and dexterous, taking a wire picked comb and laying their jackets over a wooden folding board borrowed from Mr. Carson’s personal wardrobe. Back and forth she went, teasing the green and brown felt until it was no longer clotted with clay and horse fur. When they were returned, Edward and Thomas looked a thousand meters from their original state, and just in time too. Mrs. Patmore had been preparing a sumptuous feast for Thomas’ homecoming.

He could already smell the salted cod cakes, and was close to tears in longing.
Downstairs, it was like a holiday come early. Daisy and another new scullery maid were laying out the more fancy plates which featured roses of white and red around the rim. Mrs. Patmore was cooking a three course meal instead of the typical buffet spread which servant’s dinners boasted. They were to have all of Thomas’ favorite treats, including but not limited too salted cod cakes, garlic roasted Brussel sprouts in cheese sauce, curried potato cakes, and a kale salad with grilled swiss chard, garlic cloves, and red onion. To say that Thomas was hungry was a mild understatement. He was famished to the point that he was thinking murderous thoughts about food, hoping to brutally hack into whatever meal they set before him.

Edward was to eat downstairs, which set everyone in a peculiar mood. Mr. Carson was not happy about the his longtime order being disturbed for Thomas’ fancy man, but there was nothing he could do when Edward sought permission and won it through Lord Grantham. Downstairs lacked the amenities to doll up a Lord’s plate, but Edward wasn’t fussed. For the past three years he’d been eating slop and sucking on molding cow knuckles out of a dented tin plate (when they were lucky). To eat off an actual plate was a godsend, and to receive hot food was practically an orgasmic experience. Tea was passed around in a brown clay kettle that Daisy was fond of, and atmosphere was bubbly. It was like the war was over, like all the men were coming home, like Thomas was here to stay.

But this moment was just a dream… and like all dreams Thomas would have to wake up from it eventually.

Daisy had gone so far as to make Thomas a paper crown, which he was now being forced to wear to the hilarity of the rest of the staff. It fell down around the tops of his ears, slightly too big for his head, and it looked like he was wearing a macabre paper blindfold with little cut outs for fake diamonds. Thomas sat near the head of the table, positively flanked by everyone from Anna and William all the way down to Daisy and Ethel. O’Brien was carefully winding a lace collar around a steel needle, every so often pausing to give Ethel a dark look. Clearly Ethel had not been making friends with O’Brien while being downstairs, and was now being regarded as the official trouble maker.

She certainly was giving Thomas salacious looks. Every so often, Thomas would catch her running the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip or giving him a tiny quirking grin. Even looking to men, Thomas knew when a woman was flirting with him.

*Cor, she’s trouble,* He wondered.

William was chattering constantly to Thomas and Edward, delighted to speak to soldiers returned from home. He had this keen look in his eyes that Thomas did not like. It reminded him too much of how William had all but charged into war the first time around, cannon fodder that had paid the ultimate price for his enthusiasm.

“We’re winning aren’t we?” William asked, “We’re pushing them back!”

“We are, for the most part, but it’s come at a great price.” Edward paused to take a small sip of scalding hot tea. Thomas noted that Edward seemed slightly annoyed with William, perhaps taken aback by his puppy-like demeanor. “We still have a long way to go-“
“What’s it like, facing down evil?” William asked.

Edward glanced at Thomas, his jaw stiffening. Clearly he didn’t like Germans being equated to evil. Thomas felt the same way, thinking of Greta and how kind she’d been even in her final moments. Had she been evil just because of her nationality?

“Perhaps you can talk some sense into him, Thomas.” O’Brien grumbled, not even bothering to look up from her knitting as she spoke, “He thinks war is a holiday.”

“It’s terrifying, William.” Thomas said. William clearly didn’t believe him.

Before Thomas could carry on, urging for common sense, the sound of the area door slamming open and shut caught everyone’s attention. Anna perked up at once, her whole mood shifting as she rose up from her chair and trotted down the hall.

“That’ll be Mr. Bates, I’ll go get him.” She said. Clearly Bates had been running errands for Lord Grantham that day, which explained why Thomas hadn’t run into him yet. Thomas wondered what Bates would think to see him again, when the last time they’d been together Bates had kissed him so passionately…

He found himself glancing at Edward, taking in the beautiful curve of his lips and nose. His time with Bates was over. He was for Edward now.

“Right cozy they are.” O’Brien muttered, casting Anna’s retreating back a scornful look. It seemed that the sight of people in love put her in a dark mood, which made sense after her confession to Thomas so many years ago. Thomas had never forgotten that once upon a time, O’Brien had been in love with a man. Thomas had to wonder what her relationship might have been like… had she been treated poorly, or had she been the one to ruin the union?

But Thomas had no time to deliberate this any further. Instead, he was greeted by the sight of John Bates rushing down the hall. His cane tapped along at a frantic pace, Anna at his shoulder, and his honey dew eyes were blown wide with delight.

He saw Thomas, sitting at the servant’s table like he’d never left, and made a bee line for him.

Thomas rose up, and embraced Bates fully though it was hardly common for men to touch one another in public with such affection. So glad was he to return home, and to see Bates again that Thomas could not help but be exuberant. A loud tittering noise rose through the crowd of onlookers, and Anna in particular looked quite soppy as Bates pulled back and cupped the side of Thomas’ head to finger oily black locks.

“Thank God,” Bates praised; was Thomas assuming or did Bates look oddly exhausted, “Thank God you’re safe.”

Thomas grinned, but pulled back slightly as he remembered that Edward was behind him. Edward knew all about Bates, and the fact that they’d once been intimate. Thomas didn’t want Edward wondering if Thomas still harbored feelings for the man.

“Is it true?” Bates asked as he took a seat next to Anna, “Everything they’ve said about the Germans in 1914?”

Thomas nodded, retaking his seat next to Edward. The last thing he wanted was to drag that awful conversation up again.
“Whose this?” Edward asked, though in truth Thomas suspected he already knew. There was an odd sort of look in the man’s eyes, and it was one that Thomas did not like to see. Surely Edward wasn’t jealous?

“This is Mr. John Bates,” Thomas said, “His Lordship’s valet.”

When Bates extended his hands, Edward shook it begrudgingly. Thomas noted that beneath the table, Edward took his free hand and placed it carefully on Thomas’ thigh. It was like he was being claimed. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so bizarre.

“This is Edward. Lieutenant Edward Courtenay” Thomas introduced. The shock that flitted across Bates’ face was unmistakable, and Thomas knew at once that Bates was at least aware Thomas had a fancy man. Perhaps Mrs. Hughes had mentioned it in passing to him, knowing that Bates could be trusted in all things.

“… I see.” Bates looked put out, but quickly tried to mask his lack of enthusiasm with indifference. O’Brien, however, saw everything. There was an ugly smirk at the corner of her lips, twisting her face into a crooked grin as she resumed knitting with a dainty pace. Thomas had a feeling she was storing up ammo on Bates, eager to put another bullet in her gun if she could manage it.

“Is that jealousy I detect, Mr. Bates?” O’Brien sneered.

“Can’t imagine what of.” Edward replied. So cold was his tone that it brought O’Brien to an abrupt pause. She glanced from Edward, who was glaring, to Thomas who shot her a look of warning. Edward knew everything, and O’Brien would not find an ally in him. She seemed to suspect as much and immediately bowed her head to return to her work in silence.

“To what do we owe the pleasure, Lieutenant?” Bates asked. He kept his tone polite, but it was clear that he’d rather Thomas have come home alone.

“I’m here to support Thomas on his leave.” Edward said. He shift his body to the left, framing himself so that he sat even closer to Thomas. “Thomas has told me about everyone, really. We’ve been together for three years-“

Edward bristled at the sudden slip up, hastily finishing, “We’re accountability partners in the Ypres division.”

Bates said nothing for a moment, carefully pondering over the cup of tea that Anna had poured for him.

“Well we’re glad to have you.” He finally said. The enthusiasm, however, did not quite reach his eyes.

“Alright!” Mrs. Patmore hollered from the kitchen, stepping out to wipe at her sodden brow.

“Supper’s ready, where’s Mr. Carson?”

“He’s bringing up wine from the cellar.” Mrs. Hughes came walking up the hall, keys bouncing upon her rolling hip. Everyone was coming together now, with the hall boys pulling up their chairs from the fire and Daisy taking away the tea kettle to free up more room on the table for dinner.

“I’ll help with that-“ William said, and he was off like a shot down the hall to squirrel away in the cellar. Daisy returned with linens in hand, and as she began to lay out napkins for everyone she pulled out Thomas’ old chair in an offering.

“Sit down here!” She begged, though Thomas was only three chairs down directly across from the
“fire, “It’ll be like it was before!”

“Honestly, I think we’re getting a little too silly.” Thomas muttered, fingering the paper band of his makeshift crown.

“No we’re not.” Anna said with a grin, “We’re glad to have you home!”

“But I’m not home for g-“

“That’s not what matters Thomas.” Edward said, getting up from his chair to pull Thomas from his own. Now they were shuffling about, with Edward putting Thomas in his old chair so that he could take what had once been Bates’ seat. Bates seemed put out, no doubt wondering where he would now sit with his own chair being occupied by a visitor.

“You’re home now, and you need to enjoy it.” Edward said, taking Thomas’ paper crown and placing it back upon his head. He even situated it so that the largest fake diamond was in the front. “Wear your crown with pride!”

“The whole lot of you are barmy.” Thomas muttered.

But you couldn’t fight a war when you were the only man in the trench. Thomas was solidly outnumbered ten to one on enthusiasm, and soon he was packed in a clustered huddle with everyone crowding around the servant’s table for a good seat. There was excited chatter in the air as William returned and took a seat next to O’Brien. Mrs. Hughes was the next to sit down, taking the chair on Thomas’ left so that he was now framed at the elbows. The room at the table was growing quite squished.

And then Carson walked in.

At once, everyone rose up in their seats. Edward was taken aback, the last to get out of his chair as he looked about curiously. Carson appraised Thomas with a glowing look, and took his seat without another word.

Everyone sat down, with Edward still looking about unsure. Clearly he’d been oblivious to how strict the staff hierarchy was.

Thomas leaned in, and whispered into Edward’s petite ear, “The staff stand up when the butler enters the servant’s hall. It’s a show of respect.”

Edward nodded slowly, eyes narrowed as he observed how every member of staff sat straight back in their chairs with heads turned to Carson’s command.

“This is a proud day for Downton Abbey.” Carson said, speaking to everyone though his eyes were still upon Thomas. Thomas could feel a hot flush growing upon his cheeks in embarrassment at being so openly admired. “To welcome home one of her wisest sons, in one piece.”

*Her wisest son*… what did that mean? Was Thomas really wise?

“Lord Courtenay, His Lordship has expressed to me that you wish to dine with us in order to support Thomas.” Carson said, speaking to Edward with that demure tone servant’s often took in front of the upper class. It was a queer switch, to have Carson be commanding and subservient all in one speech.

“I fear that our menu will be subpar to your tastes, but if it is your desire to dine downstairs then we will of course be humbled to receive you.”
“Perish the thought Mr. Carson.” Edward was smooth in his reply, aware that he was the proverbial elephant at the servant’s table. “I’m certain Mrs. Patmore’s cooking is just as sublime downstairs as it is upstairs. I’m glad to be here. I feel that it’s important for the upper class to understand how lucky they are. I know now that I am blessed to have staff that serve my family.”

Carson was so smug he could have melted like fat sliding off a steak. He drummed his thick fingers upon the heavily washed table, catching Mrs. Hughes’ eye as if to say, ‘What good taste Thomas has’.

At least, that’s what Thomas hoped.

Beckoned by her name, Mrs. Patmore appeared laden with massive dishes of salted cod cakes and assorted sides. Thomas immediately began to salivate, eyes widening in reflex as Mrs. Patmore sat down all the dishes in the middle of the table with the help of Daisy and the scullery maids. As soon as they were finished, Mrs. Patmore banished the younger girls back to the kitchen, where upon they returned with chairs so that Mrs. Patmore and Daisy could sit at the table with the rest of the staff. This sort of audience was only prevalent with particular meals, like Christmas and Easter. Thomas felt touched that Mrs. Patmore would sit outside of the kitchen for his homecoming.

“I have the girls eating in the kitchen, but I’m glad to be out here in the light.” She swore, dabbing at her brow where she was still sweating slightly. “And here we are-!”

She beckoned them all to admire her handiwork, waving in a long arch over the mountainous piles of food. “All your favorite dishes, sides, and deserts. What do you say to that, eh-?”

Everyone looked to Thomas.
He feared to open his mouth lest he drooled upon the table, but did so anyways if only to say: “I say I hope Mr. Carson passes the plates soon.”

Everyone laughed.

He ate, and ate, and ate, and ate… Every bite was scrumptious, every swallow divine. It was impossible to describe the weight and wonder of a home cooked meal for a starving man. To fully understand it, to fully grasp it, one would have to deprive themselves of decent food for three years in a muddy and vermin infested pit… then be shipped back to civilization and offered their favorite meal.

You’d weep, moan, and beg for three helpings.

By the end of the meal, Thomas was almost ready to unbutton his trousers in order for his bloated stomach to have more room. He was feeling sleepy and content, his head lulling upon his shoulder as he watched everyone bicker over the last raspberry meringues and key lime tarts. Edward was carrying on conversation with just about everyone, Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were sending one another surreptitious looks, and Thomas found himself contemplating that should he die in this moment he would do so a happy man.

“You ought to know,” O’Brien spoke up, thumbing the handle of her dulled knife as she spoke, “Major Clarkson has been here speaking after you. He’s talked to his Lordship on many occasions about you coming to work for him after the war is over.”

Thomas bristled, thinking that work underneath Clarkson would no doubt drive his anxiety through the roof.
“If you make it out alive, you might consider it.” O’Brien added when Thomas said nothing.

Mrs. Hughes let out an exasperated huff, setting down her wine glass. “Really, Ms. O’Brien. I think we can go one night without you mentioning that.”

“She’s spent most nights these past years reminding us you could be dead by morning.” Bates grumbled. Clearly the animosity between the pair of them hadn’t slackened in Thomas’ absence. “She’s quite correct.” Thomas said, for though he hated to admit it O’Brien’s callous viewpoints were nearly always correct when it came to war. War was no place for the heartfelt or the morally pious. War was for those that fought to the bone and teeth… those that knew what it was to want and to hate until you needed neither food nor sleep to keep going. If there was anyone under Downton’s roof that matched the bill… it was O’Brien.

“Well, we could all be dead by morning.” Edward tutted. It was no secret to Thomas that Edward disliked O’Brien. Over the years, as Thomas had revealed more and more about his life before the war, Edward had come to learn every wrong that O’Brien had ever done him. In return, he’d grown passionate about his irritations with the woman, and had sworn up and down several times over the years that if he ever met O’Brien he’d give her a piece of his mind.

Thomas wondered if Edward was up for such a row, or if he’d let the sleeping dog lay for the sake of Thomas’ ‘welcome home’ meal.

“The whole point of living is to live life to the fullest.” Edward continued on, “We ought to seize each day like it were our last.”

“How very true, M’lord.” Carson agreed.

“Thomas has taught me the true meaning of bravery.” Edward said, and once again Thomas felt a solid heat rising into his cheeks. He’d get a tan before it was all said and done, “It’s because of him that I’ve lived so long in this war. I’m proud to call him my partner….” Edward glanced at Thomas, and when Thomas smiled at him Edward seemed to grow even more passionate.

Suddenly Edward was rising out of his seat, taking his wine glass with him; what on earth-?

“As a matter of fact, I think we ought to toast him.” Edward said, glass held high.

“As a matter of fact, I think we ought to toast him.” Edward said, glass held high.

“Here, here!” Mrs. Hughes agreed, standing up as well.

There was a massive tangle of noise as every chair was pushed back so that its owner might stand. Thomas waffled at the sight of the servants rising as one, begging with each of them to stop being so silly and sit down- for god’s sake!

“No- honestly- everyone please-!” Thomas begged. He was blushing so fiercely now he could feel the burn in his lips and ears. He clapped his hands over his face, horribly embarrassed, and attempted to block out the sight of everyone toasting him. His heart was pounding so fast in his chest he thought he might have an anxiety attack.

“To Thomas Barrow!” Edward called out in a voice loud and clear, “The bravest of us all!”

“To Thomas!” The others echoed in agreement, and suddenly there was a rousing clink of glasses as everyone touched their drinks.

~*~

That night, as Thomas lay in his bedroom for the first time in three years, he could not help but feel a
bit like a child.

Edward had ordered him to bathe, and when Thomas had stripped off all his uniform, Edward had passed the articles of clothing over to the maids so that they could be beaten, washed, and dried. He was then put into a pair of striped pajamas, tucked into bed, and now lay back upon his pillow watching as Edward carefully sorted out some clothes for Thomas to wear the following day.

Honestly, was he so incapable of helping himself?

“I can do that, you know.” Thomas mumbled, so sleepy and warm that it was hard to be disgruntled.

“I know.” Edward kept his back to Thomas, sorting out a pair of socks and garters, “I just like dressing you. My man always dressed me for the following day. I thought I’d try the foot out on the other shoe, if you catch my drift.”

“Mmm, put your shoes in the hallway for the scullery maid.” Thomas mumbled, Edward’s comment sparking a memory in him. “You ought to get to bed…”

“Oh but I am.” Edward said, turning back around with a crooked little grin, “Mr. Carson thinks I’m safe and sound across the hall… but here I am all the same. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“He knows.” Thomas muttered, closing his eyes only to blink them open rapidly once again. Damnit, was it really so hard to stay awake?

“He knows everything.” Thomas yawned, rolling over onto his side as Edward pulled off his uniform piece by piece. “He’s like…. God… without the beard.”

“Who says God has a beard?” Edward wondered aloud, “To me God was always a large, boisterous woman like your cook, with enormous breasts who’d swoop you into a tight hug the moment she let you through the pearly gates.”

“Believe it or not, I’m not fond of being squished between breasts.” Thomas mumbled. He closed his eyes, feeling quite at ease.

But Edward was getting into bed on Thomas’ other side, spooning him tightly and laying his head on Thomas’ pillow. It was cramped, but the pair of them had slept in far worse situations before… they’d easily fall asleep on clean warm sheets and fluffed pillows. Compared to the trenches, this was absolute heaven.

“What would you rather be squished between?” Edward whispered in his ear, teasing him softly.

“Your buttocks.”

Edward sniggered uncontrollably, pressing his nose into Thomas’ neck so that he might lay soft, sweet kisses. “I’ll see if I can manage that. I intend on having you between my buttocks as often as possible, anyways.”

“Oh don’t tempt me.” Thomas grinned, for if there was one image lovely enough to send him off to sleep it was that of Edward’s beautiful pale buttocks. Thomas hadn’t been intimate with Edward yet, there simply was no time or space in war… but he’d dreamed of Edward’s naked body so often that he felt for certain when the time finally came he’d be able to map every inch out like a finely penned landscape. Every mole, every dimple… every dip and curve would be Thomas’ to claim.

“Before we go back…” Edward whispered, his nose still in Thomas’ neck. “I think we ought to take advantage fully… to truly love one another.”
Thomas grinned, catching on.

“I agree.” He whispered.

Edward let out a little huff, straightening up a bit to turn off Thomas’ bedside lamp. In the time that Thomas had been away to war, the upstairs had been re-routed with electricity so that they could now have bedside lamps. It was nice, to not have to rely upon candlelight alone.

“But first… let’s stay here for a bit, and get you feeling better.” Edward murmured, cuddling up behind Thomas once again in the dark. “We’ll focus on you getting a full night’s sleep and feeling more comfortable in your skin… and when you’re ready we’ll leave here and go somewhere special… and make love.”

Thomas let out a tiny sigh, blissful at the idea.

“You’ll just have to be a little more patient, my darling.” Edward whispered in his ear.

“I think I can handle that.”
And Thomas was asleep before he could count to twenty.

---

“Pop!”

“Pop bang-!”

“CRASH!”

Canons shattering the silence-

“Hilfe. Hilfe uns.”

Greta’s brown eyes were boring into his own, as he held her wounded arm in both his hands. He was wrapping gauze but it didn’t seem capable of stopping the enormous blood flow.

“Help us.” She said, somehow now able to speak English fluently. “Help us, he’s going to kill us.”

“I won’t let him.” Thomas promised her. He looked about, but the space was dim and confusing. Somehow they weren’t in the German bunkers at all, but instead out in No Man’s Land. Bullet fire was echoing all around, cannons and screaming!

There were men rushing.

Blood
Dust
Rats
Flashes
Explosions
Debris raining down-
Mud, so much mud; swallowing up men whole!

POP!

Thomas whipped back around, absolutely muddled with confusion.
Edward was staring at him where Greta had once been with beautiful blue eyes marred by gas. A large dollop of blood rolled down Edward’s right temple, just as it had once done for Greta.

He slumped over backward into the mud, falling so hard and so heavy that Thomas could not keep him up. He struggled to grab Edward into his arms, but the mud was sucking him under. Inch by inch, Edward was disappearing and Thomas could not get him back-!!

Screaming, screaming so loud that Thomas thought for sure the whole world would be torn in two from the noise-

“Thomas! Thomas wake up! Wake up it’s just a dream-!”

But it wasn’t just a dream, because the screaming was still ongoing, loud and shrill as it brought the whole house down-

But suddenly Thomas realized the screaming wasn’t coming from within his dreams. It was too loud, too wild, and his throat was so sore- it was him! He was the one screaming!

And what was more, somehow he was now on the floor- had he rolled from the bed?

Edward was above him, holding him down- but why?

And yet, Thomas could feel a pain in his shoulder and the back of his head. He’d been thrashing like mad- by god, he was still thrashing!

“For god’s sake Thomas, wake up!”
O’Brien?

Shocked, Thomas finally regained the ability to detach from the nightmare and open his eyes. Above him were a sea of petrified faces, including Mr. Carson, Mrs. Hughes, and O’Brien. She was the closest of them all, and Thomas was shocked to realize she was holding him along with Edward.

“Faces-!” Thomas was babbling without knowing what he was saying. “So many faces!”

Greta, Edward, Roger, Helen, Cartwright- so many faces both beautiful and ugly pressing in on him. What did they mean? What were they trying to say?

“It’s alright, Thomas.” Edward was trying to pick him up off the floor, to hold him in his arms.
Thomas was as limp as a well boiled noodle, and could offer very little aid in the process. O’Brien helped as best she could, her expression pained. She had a long cast braid over her shoulder, her normally wrapped hair now undone to show it’s true length. It hung well past her breasts, frayed at the ends with dead tips.
“The mud-“ Thomas said, trying to express his horror with what little words he could garner in that moment, “The mud was coming! It was swallowing everything! It got her- it got you-“

“There’s no mud here, Thomas.” O’Brien said, “You’re safe and sound, now let’s get you back to bed.”

Edward had him beneath the knees and the neck. He was lifted bodily into the air, and placed back on the bed.

He was shaking violently, dripping in a cold sweat. Even with his eyes closed, he could still see the flashes of light from the canons.

“Cannons.” Thomas moaned, “The- the cannons. They’ll… I have to…”

“You don’t have to do anything.” O’Brien said, she was all but smothering him with affection, and it was the strangest thing Thomas had ever experienced in his life. She was petting his hair and shushing him, even as he continued to mutter and shake. He felt detached from his own body, floating over the scene to look down on how miserable he was.

“Can’t…” He whimpered, “Can’t save ‘em… S’too much. Too many… I gotta… get help…”

“Everything’s going to be fine, Thomas.” Edward murmured, gently rubbing his arm and shoulder. He could feel a bruise forming beneath the skin, “You’re safe and sound in England… you don’t have to save anyone. You don’t have to work. Roger and Helen are taking care of everything. Wavell and Allenby know you’re here. There’s nothing to be scared of.”

But Thomas was so weak, so disorientated from the dream that he could not summon up the energy to reply. Instead, he lay there shaking upon the bed, eyes closed, only to hear the others murmuring to themselves. O’Brien called out sharply to William in that moment, her tone merciless and bitter: “This is what you want! You realize that? Your daft to want to go to war when this is what happens to you!”

“Let’s let him sleep.” Mrs. Hughes cut O’Brien off before she could say anymore, and suddenly they were all pulling away.

“I’m staying with him.” Edward would not be moved. “I’ll watch over him.”

“I should imagine you already were.” Mrs. Hughes said, a tad bit reproachful.

“I’ll speak with His Lordship in the morning.” Carson murmured as he walked away, “Perhaps we should call on Dr. Clarkson.”

“He’s too proud for that, and you know it.” Mrs. Hughes whispered. He’s as stubborn as you are when it comes to getting help.”

The door shut.
Thomas slipped into fitful blackened sleep once more.

The next morning, Thomas awoke feeling absolutely miserable and sore.

No one approached him on his midnight mania, but Thomas knew that everyone was aware he’d
suffered a terrible nightmare. He dressed in civilian clothes for the first time in three years, and ventured downstairs to find nothing truly changed. Mrs. Patmore made him a full breakfast that could rival the upstairs, Mrs. Hughes barked at the maids to get the house up to snuff, Mr. Carson ordered William to iron the paper and re-check the dining room… all was as it should be, save that Thomas wasn’t a part of it.

He felt out of place when he was out of livery.

But Edward had a solution for everything, including awful nightmares of Ypres. He asked Mrs. Patmore to pack he and Thomas a lunch, borrowed some fishing equipment from Mr. Lynch the groundskeeper and groomsman, then took Thomas out on horseback with a full days worth of supplies in tow. Khamsa was a good sport, clearly glad to be back in England and away from the muck of Eastern Europe.

The sky was a piercing lovely blue, not a cloud to be seen. The wind was cool and uplifting. Everything was wonderful and sublime… so why did Thomas feel so awful?

Thomas had his face pressed against Edward’s back, his arms wrapped snug about his waist.

“Honestly,” Edward tutted, “You act like no one expected it.”

“I didn’t expect it.”

“Well I did.” Edward said.

They’d successfully traversed the entire length of Downton’s expansive grounds, and were now skirting the edges of the woods. Lynch had mentioned a stream ran through the property, and Edward was damned determined to find it for a spot of fishing.

“You’re no different than any other man whose come home from war. It’s rough at first, but it gets better. You have to keep telling yourself that this is where you are. That your surroundings are separate from the horrors of France.”

Thomas looked out across the woods, whole and intact with no muddy pits or bodies scattered amongst the fallen foliage. Where were the tents? Where were lines of smoke?

“It doesn’t seem real.” Thomas mused.

“It won’t for a while.”

Up and down the hills they went, the woods getting thicker by the minute. When they finally heard the sounds of a babbling brook, Thomas noted Khamsa’s ears began to swivel and point. She was just as excited as her master, snorting as she ducked her head through brambles and took them clean out the other side.

The river in question was fat and merry, with rapids gushing over beaten boulders. Thomas had known of this river’s existence for many years; it fed the lake and lazy stream on Downton’s eastern side. He’d never seen it, however, and was glad to do so now. It felt serene and sweet, like a pink painted sky or a deer nibbling on grass.

Edward dismounted, and helped Thomas down to the ground. The pair of them began to unpack Khamsa’s saddle rump, leaving her free to eat and drink along the river’s edge. Edward was rolling up his trouser legs and kicking of his boots before Thomas could count to five, and Thomas watched amusedly as Edward pulled his shirtsleeves to the elbow and unbuttoned his collar. He was incredibly handsome in that moment, wading through the river by hand with his breeches high on his
“What on earth are you doing?” Thomas called out to him, deciding to squat and perch atop a large mossy boulder that leaned over the rivers edge. Butterflies were perching and drinking, suckling up dew drops and gaining a few rays of sun before flying away across the dale.

“What on earth are you doing?” Edward said, turning to face into the rivers current and ducking down so that he could plunge both hands into the water. Curious, Thomas took off his boots and rolled up his trousers to lean over the edge of the boulder and cautiously dip a toe in. It was frigid, and he jerked his foot back at once to shudder. How could Edward stand such cold water?

“It’s freezing!” Thomas whimpered, “Come back in or you’ll catch cold!”

“Oh hush.” Edward tutted. It seemed he wouldn’t be fussed, “You little concrete baby.”

“What does that mean?”

“Shh, now, or you’ll scare the fish.”

Grumpy, Thomas fell silent and relaxed against the boulder, watching with arms laced beneath his chin as he lay on his stomach. The rock was warm from the sun’s rays, and Thomas felt a bit like a cat basking in the window of his master’s sitting room.

He closed his eyes, letting out a small huff.

“Seems a shame to bring fishing poles and not use them.” Thomas murmured.

“I brought them for you, darling.”

Thomas made a tiny noise in the back of his throat; he wasn’t in the mood to fish today. He’d much rather laze about and watch Edward catch a fish instead.

It was terribly poetic, to watch the river gush about Edward’s arms. He was like a serene painting in his whites and beiges, dark hair shining like gold in the sunlight. In that moment, though it was silly to do so, Edward reminded Thomas of Jimmy. There was something very youthful and sprightly about him fishing… something that tugged at Thomas’ heartstrings and reminded him of a boy he’d once adored.

It was hard to forget Jimmy, even now.

“That Matthew Crawley is a nice chap.” Edward spoke up. “He’ll do well for the estate. Carson’s a bit stiff though. My butler was always a nice fellow.”

“To you maybe.” Thomas said, for he was under no illusions as to the rules of favoritism, “To the staff, that’s another story.”

Edward grinned, but fell silent once more. Now that they’d brought of the topic of Edward’s staff, however, Thomas could not help but think of Edward’s family. Surely Edward wanted to see them before he returned home. At least his father—! Edward had always spoken so highly of him, and received correspondence from him frequently. Why wouldn’t Edward want to see him before returning to Ypres, when this war was so terribly dangerous and nothing was for certain?

“Edward…?”

“Mm.”
“Why don’t you want to see your family while you’re home?” Thomas asked. When Edward did not answer immediately, Thomas continued on, “You can tell me.”

Edward did not look happy. His brow was furrowed, and in that moment Thomas could not tell if it was from concentration or irritation.

“Because I hate my mother and my brother.”

Thomas felt a tiny jolt of surprise in his stomach. He’d not been expecting such an emotional answer. “I see.”

Edward did not look up from the river as he spoke, it seemed that fishing helped him to say what was in his heart. By allowing his body and his brain to focus on one task, he could allow his heart to indulge in another without becoming overwhelmed:

“She knows I’m different.” Edward began, “She was constantly saying I wasn’t good enough for my position. Said I wasn’t raised right. Said the nannies spoiled me. I think it was because she didn’t want to be married to my father, and my father adored me. So when my little brother Jack came around, my mother began to treasure him and say that he was the better child. It sort of became a war in our family…. So when the war came around, I all but leapt at the chance to leave the house. I don’t like going back.”

How awful, to have your family so divided. At least in Thomas’ family, he’d been the only black sheep. Thomas wondered how much worse his home life would have been if his mother had sided with him and his father had gathered Thomas’ siblings like bullets. By god, there wouldn’t have been one peaceful meal in that house. He could just imagine the fighting—!

And yet… it would have been nice… to be cared for by one of his parents. “Oh-!”

Thomas looked around at once to find Matthew Crawley of all people standing on the edge of the brook. He had on his waders and was carrying both a fishing pole and a picnic basket. It seemed that they weren’t the only ones to take advantage of the fine weather. Matthew was clearly embarrassed, pulling back a bit with a reluctant expression.

“I didn’t realize this river was taken.” Matthew said. For a moment, it seemed he was about to turn around and head back the way he’d come.

“It’s not.” Edward assured him, “I’m more than happy to share if you get down wind. Don’t want a lure in my hands.”

“Hand fishing? I don’t know if I have the skill for that. I’m afraid I rely on a more hand’s off approach.” Matthew was clearly impressed, ducking behind Edward to set down his picnic basket and prepare his pole. He was using a fly master, one of the newer rods with a glossy reel. He cast out with expert hands, his little furry lure drifting upon the water to be swallowed up by the heavy stream. Matthew tugged a few times, eager to get his line set.

“Don’t let my bravado fool you.” Edward teased. “I don’t always get a fish.”

His mood was improving. Talking about fishing made him happy, and so Thomas resolved not to mention Edward’s family again. They had a whole life time to discuss such awful things.
“Neither do I.” Matthew agreed, “But I don’t have much bravado to boot.”

For a moment the pair of them were silent, each fishing in their own manor. When the silence had grown comfortable, Matthew looked about and caught Edward’s eye again.

“I gather the pair of you are trying to enjoy a bit of peace before you return. Where will you be going when you leave?”

“Ypres.” Edward said. “Thomas is the Medical Officer in charge of fifth level triage. I’m responsible for the left mountebank field division. You?”

“I’m going to be in Ypres myself,” Matthew said, “Working underneath Colonel Wavell, come the end of the month. So I suppose we’ll all be going back together. I was in Flanders for quite some time.”

“Ech…” Edward made a face, “Heard the fighting’s shit over there.”

“Quite.” Matthew chuckled. “But I’m hardly complaining when I think of Ypres.”

Edward shrugged, making a soft noise. He was becoming too engrossed with fishing to be a good conversation partner, so Matthew turned to Thomas. It was the first time the pair of them had ever truly talked outside of Carson’s earshot. Thomas didn’t know whether he ought to be subservient or not.

“I hear that you had a rather difficult night.” Matthew said, apologetically.

“I suppose it’s the talk of the house.” Thomas decided not to be subservient and to simply see what happened. It wasn’t like he was a servant in his livery.

“Not really.” Matthew said, “I just overheard it when Anna and Ethel were straightening up the library. It seems that Ethel finds you terribly charming even if you have nightmares. She mentioned she’d like to rock you to sleep in her arms.”

Edward snickered loudly, grinning impishly: “You ought to ask her out to the pictures!”

“Quiet you.” Thomas took up a small pebble from atop the boulder and chucked it at Edward’s head. It bounced off the side of his temple, not even big enough to sting. Edward just grinned. “You’ll scare the fish.”

“That’s alright.” Edward wasn’t bothered, casting Thomas another coy look, “I’ll have you know I’ve already caught the best one.”

Now they were getting close to dabbling in dangerous waters. Thomas glanced at Matthew, nervous that the man might either take offense or grow too curious for their own good. But instead, Matthew just tutted with a tiny smile, reeling in a bit to re-cast with a now thoroughly wetted lure.

“I apologize,” Thomas said, unsure how to word his sentence without giving himself away, “We’re being rather silly aren’t we?”

“No need to apologize.” Matthew said, jerking a bit at his reel. It seemed he’d felt a nibble, but it hadn’t lasted. “I won’t pretend and be coy. I know that you’re… a different sort of man. More of an artist than a sportsman, isn’t that what they say?”

So it seemed Matthew already knew. Thomas flushed, unwilling to meet the man’s eyes. He stared out across the stream, deciding to count how many butterflies had landed upon a wet and mossy
rock. It seemed there were nine in total.

“And you don’t mind?” Thomas asked, which was quite cheeky of him. Once again, Matthew was unruffled.

“Not at all.” Matthew said. “I think there’s plenty enough to be cross about without getting into all of that. It’s not like you’re hurting anybody, is it.”

“Plenty of people would disagree.”

“I find the less people have to say, the more people tend to talk.”

“Here, here!” Edward spoke up, glad to find a companion in Matthew. Indeed, Thomas couldn’t help but smile as he regarded Matthew with newfound intrigue and gratitude. Who’d have thought Matthew was so liberal?

“So I suppose there’s more to the two of you than meets the eye.” Matthew added. “Or am I adding two and two and getting twenty-two?”

Thomas looked to Edward, only to find that Edward was grinning and shaking his head, “No you’re about spot on the money old chap. Though I should think we’d keep it to ourselves.”

“Mums the word. As a lawyer silence on tense topics is like second nature to me.” Matthew said. He felt another jerk and began to reel feverishly, only to pull up a tiny Perch that was no bigger than a hand. “Aha!”

Thomas slid down from his rock, curious to observe the fish. It was striped in varying shades of green, with bright orange fins on its underside and bulging yellow eyes. It was gaping and wriggling fruitlessly, no doubt shocked to have been caught in the first place. Matthew unhooked the fish, and held it up for Edward to see.

“Good show!” Edward said. “Not much for eating though, is she?”

“I think this ones still in booties and nappies.” Matthew grumbled, tossing the fish back into the river. It fell it with a messy ‘flop’ and lay dazed in the current for a moment before swimming back.

As Matthew re-cast his reel, no doubt hoping for a fish that could at least feed one mouth, Edward spoke up.

“You know, Thomas, you ought to tell him about O’Brien’s nagging—“

“Oh don’t start that.” Thomas begged. God forbid Matthew take offense to O’Brien’s plotting and bring it up with Lord Grantham. Thomas would never forgive himself if that mess got drug back into the light again after three years. Let it die and stay dead, he thought!

“What’s this?” Matthew wondered.

“You name got drug into a bit of banter with Thomas and that hag O’Brien.” Edward scoffed. “She tried to say that Thomas was plotting your death.”

Matthew looked about, shocked. Thomas gave Edward a dirty look.

“Thank you for refraining from theatrics.” Thomas muttered irritably, climbing back atop his rock, “I’m glad to know I can rely upon you to stick to the facts.”
“Tell the story yourself then-!”

Thomas sighed, weighing each word carefully as he considered how to tell Matthew the truth without invoking offense. He reasoned that, should O’Brien suffer from this conversation he would still probably die in Ypres… so honestly what did it matter?

“About three years ago, O’Brien and I were not happy with one another.” Thomas said, “She felt that I’d abandoned her, but in truth I just couldn’t stand her shoddy attitude anymore.”

“She is rather odious, isn’t she?” Matthew agreed.

“Dark horse if I ever saw one, and I ride a black Arabian.” Edward said, nodding his head to Khamsa who was munching on weeds without a care in the world.

“You see, I had a dream about you once.” Thomas said, glossing over the details lest it sound too forced, “Can’t remember much about it save that you were driving and weren’t paying attention. You had an awful accident.”

“Blimey.” Matthew scoffed, “I ought to watch my step.”

“I keep a journal, you see.” Thomas continued one, watching as Edward leaned left and right to maneuver with a fish. He was getting close to landing a catch. “I wrote down ‘Matthew dies in car accident. Could save if valet.’, because I figured if you had a valet in the car, they’d be driving instead of you and you wouldn’t have had the accident. It was stupid. The sort of thing you write in the dead of night and it doesn’t make sense come morning… but O’Brien snuck into my room and took it all the wrong way.”

“But what other way could she take it?” Matthew asked, “You’re hardly the murderous type. Course, I don’t know you well.”

“Ah, he’s about as dangerous as that fish you just caught.” Edward teased. Thomas stuck his tongue out, irritated at being named so bland and frail.

“Well she thought I was dangerous enough.” Thomas continued on, “So she told Carson that I was plotting your death unless I was named your valet.”

Matthew spluttered out a laugh, shocked by the audacity of it all, “She what-?”

“And the worst part is, I’d like to be a valet one day!” Thomas complained. Oh, how nice would it be to come home from war and be a valet instead of a footman. “I like working with clothing, and I have a good sense of style. Of course, Carson got to the bottom of it in the end and found out the truth. He wasn’t happy with O’Brien, I can tell you that.”

Matthew re-cast his reel, having come up empty once again. He smiled at Thomas, bizarrely unaffected by learning that Thomas once been accused of plotting his death, “I appreciate you being honest with me, though I can’t imagine you ever trying to plot someone’s death.”

“I’m afraid I’m much too busy not dying myself, but I could open up my schedule for you?” Thomas couldn’t help the bit of cheek. It was simply too good to resist.

“I wouldn’t ask that of your time,” and it seemed that Matthew could get cheeky back!

“Oh!” Edward looked about, suddenly hot at the idea of Thomas getting cheeky with another man, “Don’t you get chummy with him! He’s going to be my valet after the war, I’ll have you know. I plan on keeping him as close as possible.”
Matthew just laughed and laughed.

“I wouldn’t dream of depriving you.” Matthew assured Edward, looking back out over the river to continue fishing. “The truth of the matter is that I don’t think I’ll ever enjoy a man helping me with my clothes. Lord Grantham insists that I step into the lifestyle of an Earl, so I’ve been using Moseley… but mother is despondent without him. I suppose your lot think that we’re rather useless, don’t you?”

Matthew glanced at Thomas, suddenly looking rather embarrassed, “But I’m a middle class man, so I dressed myself until recently. I don’t want you thinking I’m a lame duck.”

“And what about Lord Grantham?” Thomas said, “Is he a lame duck?”

“I should think he’s a fat cat.” Edward said. “Same as my father and every other Earl on this planet. They haven’t worked a day in their life, and it shows- ah-!!”

Before Matthew or Thomas could say anything else to the contrary or in agreement, Edward suddenly stunned them both into silence by hoisting an enormous carp up into the air. Silver scales and plumed fins flashed in the afternoon sun as Edward cupped the beast to his chest. The fish wriggled, gaping noiselessly as it tried to get away. It was at least twenty pounds! How on earth had he managed to fish her out?!

And to think, she’d been swimming in the river right next to Thomas and Matthew and neither of them had seen anything! It was shocking to think what lay beneath the waves!

“There she is!” Edward crooned, stroking the slimy scales with pride, “There’s my beautiful girl!”

He turned to Thomas, holding up the carp like one would a prized trophy. His delights were justly warranted.

“Let’s put her in a pot!” Edward beamed.

Matthew just reeled back his line, packing up his fishing gear and shaking his head.

“That’s put me thoroughly in my place.” Matthew said. He sounded rightly depressed.

That night, Edward ate upstairs at the request of Lord Grantham and Mathew. It left Thomas downstairs, feeling put out and lonely as he sat in the kitchen and watched Mrs. Patmore cook Edward’s fish from scratch. She’d boasted of its size and flavor, showing off Edward’s catch to Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson before scraping the scales off with an enormous knife and deboning the beast with tweezers. It was meticulous, painstaking work, but it had to be done. God forbid one of the toffs swallow a bone and die from it.

Daisy was puttering about the kitchen, cleaning up the carp’s scales and starting a roasting pot for the oven. She’d cut up carrots, squash, asparagus, and zucchini, spreading them about the basin of the pan to form a bed for the fish to lay on. There were already several pots going, full of sumptuous smells from roasting artichokes and honeyed jams.

“My father used to catch fish with his bare hands.” Mrs. Patmore said, speaking to the kitchen at large. She liked to do this when she worked; she’d prattle for hours when she cooked large meals,
“Got the better of him one day though. He had a mate who was fishing for catfish, and stuck his whole arm up in a hole only to have the catfish bite his hand and carry away his pinky. My father had to take him to the hospital, carrying him on his back the whole way. They never dared to fish like that again.”

“Can a fish really do that?” Daisy wondered, wide eyed and naive, “Bite off a man’s finger, I mean?”

“They most certainly can!” Mrs. Patmore loved illuminating Daisy on the world. It was one of her favorite hobbies. “A fish may not look as fierce as a bull or a ram, but it’s just as dangerous. Some even have bones in their face that they can use. They’ll smash it like a battering ram and break clear through a femur!”

“But my sister won a goldfish once in a fair and it never did a thing like that!” Daisy just couldn’t believe it. “It would even eat from her fingers before it died. It was a lovely creature-“

“Every ram was once a lamb.” Was Mrs. Patmore’s wise reply.

Before this conversation could go on any further in Thomas’ presence, however, Mrs. Hughes came walking up the hall with her keys bouncing upon her hip. She entered the kitchen, spotting Thomas and making a bee line for him.

“Are you helping Mrs. Patmore to cook?” Mrs. Hughes asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

“I don’t know if I’m helping but I’m here.” Thomas replied. “She won’t let me do anything.”

“No, this is a woman’s work.” Mrs. Patmore grumbled, continued to de-bone Edward’s fish.

“Women have daintier hands than a man. It helps with de-boning fish.” But she chose this exact moment so mack her dainty hand onto the counter so that several bowls and dishes jumped.

“Becky didn’t I tell you to get that flour and cheese ready?” Mrs. Patmore barked. Becky, a scullery maid, scuttled back into the pantry with a gasped reply.

“Yes Mrs. Patmore; sorry so sorry-!”

“You’ll be sorry when I dash your ears!” Mrs. Patmore warned, before returning to de-boning the fish.

“As I was saying, it’s delicate work.” Mrs. Patmore said. “Thomas’ fingers are too large.”

Thomas looked down at his hands, flexing his supposedly too large fingers. They didn’t look big to him.

“I can only imagine what wonders those hands can do.” Ethel mused from the hall, her saucy voice slipping through the air as smooth as silk.

“Thank you Ethel!” Mrs. Hughes snapped, “That’s enough out of you!” Ethel trotted away, her scarlet hair flashing like a flame down the hall.

Thomas blushed scarlet, wishing that Ethel would let him be. God, couldn’t Anna tell her he was a homosexual? Surely someone could do her the favor and let her catch on. It was awful, to be looked at like a piece of meat.

Maybe this is what Jimmy felt like all the time. Thomas mused. No wonder he’d been so irritated over Ivy.
“Could I trouble you for a tray of tea?” Mrs. Hughes asked Mrs. Patmore.

“Certainly.” Mrs. Patmore waved a meaty hand, so that Daisy at once snapped to putting a simple tray together. “I’m more than happy to oblige.”

Something odd was going on between the two women. They seemed to be having a silent conversation, the pair of them seemingly aware of what was truly going on underneath the surface.

As soon as Daisy was finished with the tray, Mrs. Hughes took it from her. It was a modest creation, compiling a simple tea kettle with two cups and saucers next to a plate of vanilla biscuits.

“Thomas, would you come with me?” Mrs. Hughes said, “Some mail has arrived for you.”

One would think she’d simply carry the mail to him, and mail certainly didn’t require tea, but Thomas had a feeling mail hadn’t actually come. Any true mail would have been re-routed through the war office to Ypres… so more than likely what Mrs. Hughes wanted was to talk. Thomas complied without comment, following her back down the hall so that Mrs. Patmore’s voice got softer and softer as they gained more distance. By the time they made it to Mrs. Hughes’ tea room, it was all but a gentle babble in the back of their minds. She liked to hold private conversations in her tea room because it was at the far corner of her hall. This was where she could talk without fearing being overheard.

Thomas followed her in, and when she shut the door he allowed her grace of a simple question: “Is there really mail?”

“No.” She said, slightly stern. “And don’t pretend you’re surprised. Sit down.”

The pair of them sat on matching chairs that were a deep faded olive green. Mrs. Hughes fancied the color, and many of her throw pillows and quilts featured the same shade. Mrs. Hughes set the tea tray upon their shared table, and at once poured two cups so that she could hand one over to Thomas. He took it, sipping on it mildly.

“Have a biscuit.” She said, sliding the tray over to him.

“…You must really be cross.” Thomas mused. “You don’t usually make me take biscuits.”

“Well, I’m not cross yet.” Mrs. Hughes said, “But I may be by the time this conversation is through. It really all depends on you.”

Christ, he was in for it now.

“The other night, when you had your nightmare… I noticed something.” Mrs. Hughes said. Thomas swallowed another mouthful of tea, hoping that so long as he kept drinking he wouldn’t have to talk.

“It was a jacket. A soldier’s jacket.” Mrs. Hughes said, “It was laying across the foot of your bed.”

Edward’s jacket. Thomas licked his lips, nervous. What did this have to do with Mrs. Hughes’ anger?

Don’t be coy, a nasty voice in the back of his head warned, She knows that Edward was sleeping in your room and she’s not happy about it because you’re a dirty faggot.

Thomas winced, looking away.

“You see, the other night when we investigated the commotion in your room, I noticed the
Lieutenant Courtenay got there first. At least, he seemed to have, because he was already in your room when we entered… but he seemed oddly undressed, and there was a jacket laying across the foot of your bed. I realized that your jacket was downstairs being washed by the maids this morning, and so I put two and two together.”

Thomas set down his teacup. It rattled slightly in his saucer.

Mrs. Hughes’ eyes bored into his own, as keen as a hawks.

“Am I right that he was sleeping in your bed?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

Thomas felt decidedly nervous now, scratching at an itch on the side of his nose as he contemplated his answer. He could, of course, just tell the truth… but he had a feeling he’d get a chewing out if he did.

“I would appreciate an honest answer.” Mrs. Hughes warned, seemingly aware that Thomas was contemplating lying.

So instead of answering her straight out, Thomas decided to skirt around the truth.

“… S’nothing you’d disapprove of.” Thomas muttered, not meeting her eyes. “Wasn’t nothing indecent-“

“Did I ever mention the word ‘indecent’?” Mrs. Hughes asked. Though she did not raise her voice, it felt oddly in that moment like she was yelling at him. Thomas winced, shrugging as he avoided looking at her.

“Please look at me.” Mrs. Hughes said. “I won’t bite.”

But Thomas had been bitten too many times before to be sure. It took him a moment, and there was a great deal of looking away in between, but he finally met Mrs. Hughes eyes. He found her stern and exasperated, much like any parent would be upon catching their child in the act of something wrong.

“…I love him.” Thomas whispered. “An’ he loves me.”

Mrs. Hughes sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. She laced her fingers together, thinking over what she wanted to say. Thomas wilted, aware that she was trying to lay down the law without hurting his feelings. Whether she wanted to or not, however, Thomas’ feelings on this particular topic were as easily bruised as a banana.

“…You’re a different sort of boy, and there’s nothing wrong with that.” Mrs. Hughes began, “But Lieutenant Courtenay is not a simple man. He’s the son of an Earl, and he’s not part of our world.”

“…I didn’t think it would matter for men like me.” Thomas admitted, and this was the honest truth. It hadn’t once crossed his mind that, for his particular situation, class distinctions would make that much of a difference. Unlike Sybil and Tom, who’d had to elope and were socially outcasted, Thomas and Edward could never get married. What did it matter, then, if they weren’t in the same class?

“Well, it does.” Mrs. Hughes said. When Thomas tried to look away, she reached out and tapped the tip of his chin with a finger, forcing him to look back. He began to blush, horribly embarrassed at having his dirty laundry drug out in front of him for viewing.

Forced to look Mrs. Hughes in the eye, Thomas bared his soul to her: “He said that he wants to be with me for the rest of his life. That I’m the only one for him-“
“Thomas, think for a minute.” Mrs. Hughes snapped. Her voice had taken a slightly hard edge, and it made Thomas’ nerves twinge in fright. “Think about when this war is over. Do you honestly think that it will work out, when he needs to produce an heir to take his father’s title? When he has to return home to his own estate? How long do you think it will last before you’re found out?”

“We could run away—“

“I won’t hear such nonsense.” Mrs. Hughes was now cross, glaring at Thomas. She reached out, grabbing his hand tightly. “You’ll ruin your life chasing after a dream that won’t come true. Just because we don’t want to think about something doesn’t stop it from being so, Thomas. I’m terribly worried about you. Edward Courtenay is a fine young man, and I can see that you care for him deeply…but I am warning you to stop this now.”

At this, her eyes bore into his own. She wouldn’t let him look away. She wouldn’t relax her stance.

“If you don’t, you’ll get hurt. God forbid, you could even get arrested.” she added.

Thomas closed his eyes, unwilling to imagine such an awful scenario.

“That’s all I’m saying.” She gently let go of his hand, straightening back up. “Please… take my advice.”

But it wasn’t as simple as that.

~*~

One week turned into two, two turned into three, and suddenly Thomas time at Downton had drawn to a close.

It had been a beautiful thing, to be able to return home and see everyone again. Thomas had found himself healing, even if only by a fragile and thin veneer. It was easier for him now to detach from the battle, to remember what exactly he was fighting for, and he found that he nightmares were growing less infrequent with the time he spent away from Ypres. This gave him hope for the future, and for the fact that one day he may not have nightmares at all. He still couldn’t talk about Greta, but he could at least think on her without feeling a terrible insurmountable sadness. Greta’s death had been like so many others: pointless and avoidable. But that was the nature of war, and after three years in the trenches Thomas knew that the innocent and the kind were always the first to die. Greta’s soul had transcended this awful world, going beyond and into whatever lay next. After crossing the barrier of time and reality, Thomas knew that something great and magical must lay on the border after death. Whatever that was, wherever that was, Greta was a part of it…she did not miss her life.

Thomas had a feeling that if they all knew what was waiting for them in the afterlife, people would be jumping in front of trains to get their quicker.

The day that Thomas was to leave Downton was a quiet gray day. It was going to rain soon, and the air had a heavy feeling to it. The wind was blowing through the trees, sending leaves scattering to the ground, and birds were taking flight to get somewhere safe before the storm set in. Thomas and Edward were to catch the ten o’clock train to London, and from London would travel back to Dover
where they’d spend their final night in England at a hotel for soldiers. They’d then take a shutter boat back to Dunkirk early the next morning and from there would return to Ypres. With them, they would bring supplies and gifts from home. Thomas already had a crate full of canned food, baked goods, and wine. It would be gone within three days but it would bring some amount of cheer to camp and that was what was needed. Thomas would return a healed man, and would do his best to keep his fellow soldiers from dying. If he could just make it to 1918… the war would be over. And then? Then they could all go home.

His leave was treated with bizarre flare. Last time Thomas had left, he’d done so in the dead of night and hadn’t had much fuss besides Mr. Carson taking him to the station and Mrs. Patmore packing him a lunch. This time, however, the entire staff was lined up outside and the family had come to see him off. At least… part of them had. Lord and Lady Grantham were present, as was Mrs. Crawley and Mr. Matthew. The staff were in full form, headed by Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes. Khamsa had been washed and groomed by Mr. Lynch, and now stood waiting with her saddle full of packed goods. Edward was shaking hands with Lord Grantham, the pair of them sharing a private goodbye. After allowing Edward to stay at Downton for several weeks, Lord Grantham had grown terribly fond of him and looked pained to have to part.

“...
you can’t guarantee anything in war, I’m not naive, but you must promise me that you won’t do anything foolish if you can avoid it.”

“Like chase after a thief through No Man’s Land and get kidnapped?” Thomas offered, cheekily.

“Quite.” Mrs. Hughes said, her tone slightly clipped. “And if you’ll keep in mind other things that we spoke about, I’d be much obliged.”

Thomas could say nothing publicly to this, so instead he merely nodded his head.

“Will you take my advice?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

Thomas shook his head. Mrs. Hughes looked terribly crestfallen.

“Oh Thomas.” She sighed, her brown eyes misting, “How can I make you understand-“

“Let’s not talk about it anymore, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said, for it wasn’t like they could very well keep on in public. “It’s not something we can discuss-“

Mrs. Hughes reached out and squeezed his hand: “I’ll write.” She said.

Thomas had a feeling her letters would be filled with much of the same warnings. He squeezed her hand back, and continued on down the like.

O’Brien was next, looking terribly somber. Thomas wondered why she was so sad.

“Come home to us as quick as you can, and don’t do anything stupid.” She warned. “Don’t go running out in front of bullets if you can avoid it neither-“

“I’m usually in the medical tent.” Thomas said, “So that helps.”

“Well stay there, and take shelter if you need to.” O’Brien warned, “You’re no good to anyone if you’re dead.”

Well said.

Thomas nodded, stepping down the line to Anna and Ethel. Anna stepped forward, a sad little smile on her pretty face, but she was cut off all of a sudden by Ethel who stepped forward and put a letter into Thomas’ hands. Both Anna and Thomas were taken aback.

“I just wanted to say that you’re terribly brave Mr. Barrow…” Ethel murmured, her voice taking on a sinuous and sultry quality, “And I thought that this letter might keep you company.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.” Thomas said, tucking the letter into his pocket. God only knows what the damn thing said.

“I hope I get a letter from you in return… but you can keep the picture I gave you.” She added with a wink.

Thomas blinked, baffled. She’d given him a picture? Why would she do a thing like that? Pictures were hardly cheap-

Anna elbowed Ethel, finally making her way forward. Ethel skulked back in line, terribly put out to have Anna take over the spotlight. Anna, however, seemed to have been expecting Ethel’s antics and wasn’t put off.
“Please, come home to us just as fast as you can.” Anna said. “And every day you’re away we’ll pray for you.”

Thomas didn’t know what good praying would do, but it was a lovely gesture all the same.

“Thank you, Anna.” Thomas murmured. He wished that he could hug her, but unfortunately you couldn’t do that sort of thing in public. “For everything. You’re a lovely person.”

Anna just beamed. “Don’t be silly.” she said. She then turned to Mr. Bates, who was next in line and looking haggard as if he hadn’t gotten much sleep at all. There were deep bags underneath his dark eyes. What was troubling him?

“Goodbye, Thomas.” Bates murmured, shaking his hands. Thomas noted how Bates’ fingers lingered upon his own. “I’m sure Edward will take very good care of you.”

“It’s a mutual relationship.” Thomas said. He hoped Bates could understand what he was trying to say… that in their relationship it had been rather lopsided. With Edward, things were much more equal and (frankly) healthy. Bates pursed his lips but said no more, no doubt sensing what Thomas meant. Thomas knew from the past that Bates and Anna were essentially soul mates; she’d help him to move forward, and as soon as he knew the taste of her love he’d never yearn again in his life. He was just being moody because someone had taken away his favorite toy.

It was time for Thomas to face the family, and he did so with the demure stance of a lifelong servant. It was hard to toe the line when he was a medical officer. Lord Grantham kept wanting to be overly friendly, which he appreciated but could not reciprocate in front of Carson.

“Goodbye, Barrow.” Lord Grantham said, “And know that our thoughts and prayers go with you. He offered his hand, and Thomas accepted it in a warm shake at once. Pharaoh had passed away in Thomas’ absence, and in his place had come Isis. Just like before, the damn dog was a solid nuisance, lolling about at Lord Grantham’s feet and making a general mess of goodbyes. She kept wanting to nip at Khamsa’s enormous cloven feet. It was a mark of how well trained she was that Khamsa did not make to retaliate or skitter.

“Thank you, M’lord.” Thomas replied, “I truly appreciate that.”

“Hopefully the war will be over soon.” Lady Grantham said, “And then you can come home and be safe once more.”

But Thomas knew the war wouldn’t be over for another year. “I think we all hope so, M’lady.” He replied.

Matthew stuck out his hand, and Thomas shook it. Unlike Lord Grantham, Matthew’s familiarity wasn’t as difficult to deal with. Despite being the heir apparent, Matthew’s middle class background allowed him to speak freely with the servants of Downton Abbey.

“I’ll see you very soon.” Matthew said, for he was doomed to head to Ypres about a week after Thomas. “I’ll try not to get into any car wrecks along the way.”

Thomas snickered at the inside joke. “At least not until I’m your valet?”

“You won’t be his valet, you’ll be my valet.” Edward cut in, taking Thomas by the elbow and pulling him backward. “You keep forgetting that.”

Edward mounted Khamsa with expert ease, offering Thomas a hand to pull him up as well. Despite being in front of half the occupants of Downton, Thomas threaded his arms around Edward’s waist.
It was simply easier to hold on atop a horse when he had someone firm to latch against. No one batted an eyelash, so Thomas prayed that he was safe.

“Onward and upward!” Lord Grantham boasted as Edward took up Khamsa’s reigns. “May God watch over you both!”

“And you as well, sir!” Edward replied. Thomas looked over his shoulder at Carson and Mrs. Hughes, both of whom were clearly stricken. By god, O’Brien looked close to tears. But why?

Edward snapped Khamsa’s reigns, and they took off.

It took nearly all day to travel to Dover, and when they finally arrived the sun had long since set. The whole way, Edward was acting peculiarly, which was a queer comparison when you recalled that Thomas had been the one to fall out on the train ride to Downton. Now it was Edward who was acting dodgy, making phone calls out of ear shot and heading off to do ‘errands’ in Dover while likewise requesting that Thomas head to the hotel. Soldier’s were given barracks in Dover to wait for their boats overnight, and so their accommodations were sparse if not private. Edward had requested a single room with two beds and an attached ensuite bathroom. It wasn’t particularly glamorous, but it was clean and you could even request room service. Thomas and Edward, however, had eaten on the train. Upon making it to the hotel room, Thomas simply deposited his bags and took a shower. Once again, he acted upon Edward’s request, and complied with slight hesitation. Why was Edward so eager to get him out of the way? Who was he calling, and what errands had he run in town?

Thomas washed himself clean in near darkness, his only light a brass lamp that sat atop the commode of the toilet.

As soon as he finished washing, Thomas decided to go on ahead and shave. They would be rising quite early in the morning; it would be imperative that Thomas be as ready to go as possible so that he wouldn’t have to stumble around in the dark. After nearly three weeks of lazing around, Thomas would have to snap back to routine as quickly as possible.

He paused, blade upon his neck, when he heard the obvious sound of wooden legs scraping across the floor. What on earth?

Washing off the last of the foam dregs which still clung to the edges of his blade strokes, Thomas wrapped his towel tight about his waist, put his shaving kit away, and exited the bathroom to….

To….

Their little hotel room, which before had followed a normal layout of two twin cots separated by a joint bed stand, was now completely changed. The bed stand had been moved out from between the two beds so that the two cots could be pushed together. The blankets had been layered, the pillows fluffed, and the bed stand had been shoved back to the left of the bed now holding an ice bucket holding a bottle of champagne.

Edward was sweating, exhilarated from his little work out. He’d shed most of his clothes, now clad
only in trousers and an undershirt. His suspenders were slightly strained in their button holes, and his shoes were gone. He seemed to have re-oiled his hair, combing it back in a fashionable coif.

He held a small cluster of gardenias in his hand; it seemed he’d put his on this entire display for Thomas to walk into unawares. The bath, urged by Edward, had been nothing more than a coy ruse to buy time.

But where had the bottle of champagne come from, and the flowers? Had these been the bizarre errands that Edward had run?

Thomas didn’t know what to say. He was blown away, clutching his towel tight to his hips lest it fall and render him nude. Edward was smiling that little lopsided grin which sent Thomas’ heart into skitters. Who could ever imagine he’d love this much?

“Interior design is not your forte.” Thomas croaked, noting that the bed stand was lopsided after being drug and the two beds weren’t flush against the wall.

“Admittedly I’m not a student.” Edward agreed. He extended his hand, silently beckoning Thomas to come join him. When Thomas did not move, Edward said, “Come here, love.”

“…Why?” So paralyzed was Thomas by shock that he felt nervous for no good reason. Edward just took it in his stride, head tilted a little to the side.

“Because I want you in my arms.” He said.

Thomas approached, cautious, and when he reached Edward, Edward gently tucked him in against his neck and chest. Warm and safe, Thomas leaned his head against Edward’s shoulder to inhale his sweet cologne. Why had he gone to so much trouble?

Edward pressed the little bundle of gardenias against Thomas’ breastbone, and Thomas took it up. This was really over the top; he didn’t need all this…! But Edward seemed to differ. He peppered Thomas brow with kisses, speaking directly into his ear so that Thomas could hear every smokey timber of his voice.

“I have a question for you.” Edward said.

Why did he sound so nervous?

“Ask.”

Edward pulled back, and Thomas noted now that there was a pulse jumping in Edward’s jugular vein. Edward took several deep breathes, seeming to steel himself. Thomas didn’t know what to make of it.

Edward carefully took to the floor on one knee, looking up at Thomas with such misty eyed passion that Thomas was rendered speechless. No one had ever looked at him with such love and devotion. Like he were the center of the entire world. Like he was the only one that mattered.

“I realized something these past weeks.” Edward whispered. He took the back of Thomas’ calves in hand, pressing his forehead against Thomas’ thigh. Thomas could feel and see him shaking, the tiny quivers of his neck muscles bulging against the strain of carrying on.

“Edward?” Thomas reached out with one hand, using the other to hold up the towel; he stroked Edward’s hair, fingering the frayed ends still damp with perfume and pomade.
“Before we left Ypres, Roger spoke of marriage like it were a trap to be avoided… but with you, I know that nothing could make me happier than to wed you. That I am yours, even if the church or the law could never acknowledge it.”

And oh, how it burned to know that Edward’s words were bitterly true. Thomas held Edward close with one hand, closing his eyes momentarily as he imagined what a wonderful world it would be if only he could marry. If only he and Edward could stand before a priest and make their vows to God and to one another… but that could never be.

It made Thomas’ heart burn with that old familiar sensation of rage and envy. In a past now several years old, Bates had mocked Thomas openly before the others in the kitchen, stating after Gwen’s luncheon that Thomas was jealous of her. Little had Bates known at the time that Thomas was not only jealous of Gwen’s position but of her marriage. How her prim and proper little husband had clasped her hand atop the dinner table and no one had even looked twice. The gleam from their wedding rings had been almost blinding in the hot afternoon sun.

“That is the same.” He croaked, “But-“

Edward held up a hand, silently asking for Thomas to let him finish. Thomas closed his mouth, willing to hear everything before speaking again.

“I watched Matthew Crawley and the others these past weeks, speak to you about your future… and every time, there was no mention of me. Of us. Of our life together. And it burned me to know I could be so easily written off-“

Thomas shook his head, mouth opening, but Edward just kept pressing on.

“And I knew I had to do something, to make you mine.”

“I am yours.” Thomas could hardly speak around the knot in his throat, “In every way-“

Edward reached into his trouser pocket with one hand, solemn as he spoke, “Not in every way, but I intend to change that tonight.”

When he withdrew his hand, he did so with two rings.

Thomas had seen these sorts of things before, though he did not fully understand Edward’s plan. The rings were typical from street vendors, bullet casings that had been molded in a kiln and stretched out so be etched with anything from symbols to letters. They were the sort of thing you might send to your sweetheart, and soldiers in particular were prone to give them to their girls back home so that way they wouldn’t go cavorting off with an invalided man. Why had Edward bought these rings?

“But I know that…” Edward broke off, seemingly overcome with emotion. When he continued on, his voice was horribly watered. “I know that you and I can never be truly married in a church… but… if you’ll have me, I’ll marry you anyway tonight.”

Thomas closed his eyes.
So overcome was he, that he could not find it in him to breath properly.

“I don’t know what tiny bead of luck fell into my hands, to allow me to find you in this life.” Edward whispered. Little did he know that that bead of luck had been Thomas’ crucial intervention in his own fate.
“But I do know that I have to hold onto you as tightly as I can. Because there can be no me without you… we’re torn from the same cloth, bound by the same destiny. And yes, I may die in this war or in a hundred days after it, or not until I’m sixty… but every day that passes in between, I’ll still be yours.”

Edward stumbled over the words, unable to fathom their weight: “Your spouse, your partner… your husband… if you’ll have me.”

Thomas opened his mouth and tried to speak but nothing came out. His throat was closed up with emotion, too tight to get wind or voice through.

“…Marry me.” Edward said.

As Thomas realized he couldn’t speak, he began to nod. The action spurred a blubbering noise to come from his mouth, and he nearly dropped his towel as he collapsed onto the floor to throw his arms unceremoniously around Edward’s neck.

The joy flowing through him was a foreign experience. It made every joint tingle, every nerve raw. He wanted to cry, to scream, to praise Edward and their love all the way to the moon and back. But for some reason, all his strength seemed to have been robbed of him. Why now, of all times, Thomas’ body should fail him was a mystery. Perhaps, after a lifetime of so much unhappiness, to be given happiness was forcing his body and brain to reprogram. To remember what it was to be human.

“Yes-!” Thomas howled. He cried through his words, unwilling to pull back from Edward even as Edward attempted to put a ring on his finger.

Married— him, married! Married to the man he loved, married until the end of time itself!

Thomas cried and cried, a whimpering, blubbering mess as Edward just laughed and laughed. Where Thomas cried, Edward just beamed and kissed him. Though Thomas’ heart constricted so tight he thought he might pass out from the pain, he could not help but smile.

He’d never known a night so magical, a future so hopeful… and though Thomas had initially come to the past to save other people, he could not help but be incredibly grateful in that moment that somehow he’d saved himself.

In spite of the war, in spite of O’Brien, in spite of all that he’d suffered to get here, he’d somehow been so lucky as to fall in love with a man who was unafraid to love him back.

Who’d have ever imagined?

“Don’t cry, look it’s alright!” Edward kissed away the trails that his tears left. Thomas had fallen upon Edward’s thighs, and now sat cradled in his lap as Edward took Thomas’ shaking hand and pushed on one of the rings. They were malleable, made to fit many different sizes. Edward pushed and prodded, helping the ring all the way down Thomas’ finger. Thomas could hardly take it in, staring at where the ring now lay. Was this really his hand?

Was he really married to such a wonderful man.

Edward pushed his own on, but his fingers were slightly thicker so he had to stretch the ring a bit. When it finally rested upon his hand, he held Thomas’ own up alongside his so that they could compare.

Their fingers slid together, till they were palm to palm… bound tight.
Edward held Thomas tight with his other hand, till Thomas’ tears drifted into shaky silence and even Edward’s blissful grin was gone. After such an unbelievable rush of emotion, the pair of them were exhausted.

Now Thomas could understand the champagne and the flowers… why Edward had asked him to scuttle off for a bit so that he could have time alone. He’d been preparing for this moment, no doubt picking over his words so that his speech could be perfect.

Now married, the pair of them had no desire for fancy words or lavish gifts. They were all the other needed.

Edward stood up, and took Thomas with him. Thomas went willingly, though he fumbled on his feet trying to hold up his towel at the same time. Edward helped him to sit on the bed, and Thomas gratefully got off his feet. To be frank, he didn’t feel that he could keep his balance much longer anyways.

Thomas pressed a hand to his forehead, and felt the cool press of his ring against his skin. It was shocking.

“…What…” Thomas didn’t even know where to begin. There was so much to think about, so many decisions to make: “What will we do when everyone finds out?”

For how could they keep this quiet, with rings on their fingers? If the pair of them were to be married, then they would never be parted. Edward wouldn’t take a wife, or would he? Would Thomas have to share? The thought made Thomas’ stomach squeeze with nausea.

“…We’ll go into exile.” Edward decided, and frankly that sounded like the safest idea to Thomas. He momentarily thought of Matthew, of Sybil, of William even… but he just couldn’t wrap his head around it fully. Maybe if he could just try to sway events through correspondence?

But would that even work? Was it sane to put such heavy things in writing? Would people even read his letters after this, or would he become a social pariah even to the family of Downton Abbey?

Edward ran fingers through his hair before bringing his hands up to his mouth, eyes narrowed as he considered all the options.

“I have money.” He finally said, “Trusts and titles that belong only to me. We won’t have the wealth of my parents, but we don’t need it. We’ll move somewhere in the country, somewhere safe for men like us to hide… and we’ll hunt, fish, and shoot… live off the land as we like.”

That sounded perfectly fine to Thomas. Perhaps if they were smart they could move somewhere near Downton and Thomas could visit every so often to try and curb the fates of the three people who needed it most.

“But will it be enough?” Thomas wondered, looking up to Edward…

…His husband…

“What do you mean?” Edward asked.

Thomas could put it no plainer, “There won’t be a butler or a valet… it’ll be just you and me, probably in a tiny house, fighting off the elements and the unkind. Do you think you’d be happy with that? With just me? Or would you regret it in the end?”

But Edward wouldn’t even consider such a thing. He bent over, pressing his head against Thomas’
own, and kissed him so hard and full upon the mouth that Thomas whimpered in response. The noise was caught in his throat, trapped as Edward plundered his mouth with a moist and passionate tongue.

When he finally pulled back, Thomas felt light headed. He blinked up at Edward stupidly, watching as Edward carded fingers through Thomas’ hair and rubbed his swollen lips.

Thomas was hypnotized by the brush of Edward’s thumb upon his flesh. His breathes were slowed, his muscles relaxed.

“There is nothing I want, nothing I need… but you.” Edward murmured.

And when he pushed Thomas backward onto the bed, Thomas went willingly.

Edward reached with trembling fingers to the snug knot of Thomas’ tied towel.

When it fell away, Edward could not help but stare; he was mesmerized by the sight of Thomas’ pale skin.

“My god…” The words tumbled loosely from Edward’s lips, his eyes roving up and down as he turned his hands upon his knuckles and began to run them along Thomas’ thighs, pelvis, and stomach. He stared at Thomas’ penis, which was par the moment flaccid against his inner thigh. As Edward stared, Thomas’ penis began to fill with blood. There was something incredibly erotic about being watched while nude… and Thomas was rightly on display for Edward.

“Beautiful.” Edward crooned, stooping his head down just a bit so that he could press his lips in a chaste kiss upon the tip of Thomas cock.

Thomas let out a tiny cry of shock, overstimulated.

“Edward…” Thomas whispered, reaching out with twitching fingers to grasp at Edward’s suspender straps. “Please… Make love to me.”

Edward did not need telling twice.

He undressed with the kind of fury and fervor you’d find from a soldier trying to escape chlorine in tainted clothes. He ripped off his suspenders, so that one of them made a light pinging noise and broke from the button. He got momentarily trapped in his undershirt, prompting Thomas to burst into hysterical giggles as Edward struggled to get both his elbow, chin, arm, and face out of the same shirt hole at the same time. He helped as best he could, and finally Edward was free of his undershirt…. but it came at the price of his coif being destroyed. Edward blew out a long breath, trying to get hair out of his eyes.

But Thomas didn’t care about hair. He wanted his prize.

Thomas reached forward with both hands, fishing for Edward’s trouser snaps. He took them apart mouth salivating at the sight of the tent slowly rising beneath the tweed fabric.

Edward was so busy shoving his trousers off, he didn’t realize what a sight he was.

“Don’t wanna wait.” Edward finally got out, seeming to realize that Thomas was trying to drag out
the moment. “C’mere-“

And suddenly Edward was on the bed with nothing but his pants, rolling onto his back and side so that he could pin Thomas beneath him. They intertwined like snakes, hips rolling and hands groping.

This was heaven, this was wonderful!

"I love you-“ Edward couldn’t seem to stop saying the phrase. “I love you, I love you, I love you-“

He rocked his hips against Thomas’ leg, and the moisture Thomas’ felt was proof of his passion—but so was the ring on Thomas’ finger and the words in his ear.

They stared at one another for a moment, truly taking in the other. There were a few freckles on Edward’s nose that were as precious to Thomas as stars… and though Thomas did not know it, Edward found himself captivated by the varying shades of purple and pink that lined Thomas’ bagged eyes. He was secretly naming the colors, memorizing them forever so that they could never be forgotten.

“…This is our marriage bed.” Edward was shocked to discover it, “Our wedding night.”

And he rolled on top of Thomas to prove his point.

There was a tin can of hand creme in the bedside table, and Thomas was certain Edward had put it there. Edward was foolish, unsure of how much to use or what fingers to put it on. At the same time, he got there in the end.

Thomas drew his legs up, wrapping them around Edward’s waist. Edward was trying to get his pants off and put his hand up underneath Thomas’ spine at the same time.

Thomas used his feet to help Edward get his pants down. Now they were trapped around his knees but they’d just bloody well have to stay there… because Edward’s hand was searching.

After three years of kissing, groping, hiding, and yearning, suddenly they were at the threshold of fucking. Of finally being able to touch, hump, suck, and grind with nothing in between.

Nothing.

His fingers were at Thomas’ entrance, and then they were pushing. Thomas threw his head back, moaning aloud as Edward stretched him. It felt more raw, more deep, than any sexual experience he’d had before.

Dear fucking God!

“My darling-“ Edward whimpered into his mouth. “God my darling-“

He couldn’t handle it. The sensations, the emotions, the realizations— all of it were compiling and smothering him.

One finger became two. Edward didn’t understand how to properly stretch a man. He didn’t insert more fingers but instead made a ‘v’ motion with his fingers. He was scissoring and by god it hurt a bit… but Thomas could handle it because it was Edward hurting him.

And that made it beautiful.
Edward fumbled with the tin after a moment, no doubt wanting to coat his cock. So nervous was he that he ended up dropping the tin off the side of the bed, where it made a sharp metal clang against the wood and fell silent. Edward cursed, dropping his head upon the pillow.


Thomas stroked Edward’s sticky curls and held him close, rubbing his back as soothingly as he could.

“You don’t need it.” Thomas said, “Use your spit. I’m a brave lad.”

Edward didn’t seem to know whether or not to believe Thomas, but he ventured forward anyways. He drew his fingers up, and stuck out his tongue to begin laving his tainted digits. The sight was so erotic to Thomas he could not help but moan. He wanted those fingers inside of him, that tongue… the man entire.

When Edward returned to fucking Thomas with his fingers, Thomas had to turn his head and bite the pillow in order to keep from screaming. Edward was moving faster, pushing deeper—

“Oh my sweet boy…” Edward moaned in his ears, “My perfect, perfect boy.”

Thomas was far from a boy, but he’d be Edward’s anything if it meant they’d stay together.

Edward was just as impatient as Thomas. For three years, they’d lived underneath the edge of a knife; sex had been a luxury no one could afford. Taking your clothes off was dangerous enough on its own; you could get trench foot or worms up your arse. Hot tea, fresh meals, clean hair… all of it was a luxury. After three weeks in England, Edward and Thomas had been able to indulge in every delight they wanted save for one.

And that was unforgivable.

Edward lined himself up, Thomas’ thighs wrapped about his waist. With one hand braced upon their pillow and another between joined bodies so that he could place his cock against Thomas’ swollen opening, Edward rubbed their noses together and whispered in his ear.

“I’ve never done this before.” Edward said. “Not even with a woman.”

“I’ve never had sex with a woman either.” Thomas said. Edward tried to laugh, but he was so nervous it came out as a shuddering exhalation.

“Have you had sex with a man?” Edward whispered. Thomas nodded. He would not lie, nor pretend to be a virgin for Edward’s sake.

Edward lined up his cock better, rubbing his swollen head against Thomas’ fluttering hole: “You’ll have to tell me how I measure up.”

He pushed inside.

_Fuck me_, Thomas thought briefly, even as he let out a tiny shriek of delight, _My husband has a lovely cock._

It was an unbelievable rush, first to be fucked after three years of unwanted abstention and secondly to be fucked by Edward. Somehow, despite never having sex before, Edward seemed to know how to rock his body against Thomas’ own, creating the most perfect friction feasible on this earth. Maybe it had more to do with emotion the physical act; Thomas had been so deprived of both over
the years that it was hard to say. Maybe it had something to do with the ring on his finger, to know that he was being fucked by a man who wanted to stay with him for the rest of his life. Come hell or high water, imprisonment in Gaol… Edward would resolutely love Thomas. That was something you couldn’t say about most men in the world. Edward kept a hand resolutely upon Thomas’ hip, using the other to keep his cock lined up as he repeatedly fucked Thomas’ stretched hole. He was so incredibly tense from years of fear and strain that Thomas felt no choice but to let go. So intense was the pressure radiating through their joined bodies that there seemed no other way.

Edward kept methodically running his hands over Thomas’ prick, amazed at the feel of it beneath his fingers. He stroked Thomas’ balls and perineum, cupping the heated flesh even as it began to tense. His traveling hands ventured to the backs of his thighs. Thomas whimpered, unable to keep from making tiny noises of pain as Edward’s cock stretched him. He’d not been so well fucked in ages, not since Bates and Philip before that… but Bates hadn’t truly loved Thomas and Philip had always stressed keeping quiet. Edward did neither.

Edward listened to every noise he made, attentive to Thomas’ wants and needs. When Thomas made a noise too pained or too high, Edward slowed down his thrusts. When Thomas began to groan, quietly whimpering for more, Edward sped up.

“Christ, darling…” Edward could barely get the words out. Thomas could tell from how tight and hot Edward’s cock was inside of him that he wouldn’t last long. Oh, the woes of having sex with a virgin. “You’re too much. You’re like heaven-!”

But if this union was to end soon, let it end of Thomas terms. He wanted to get as much out of this night as he could, come hell or high water. No matter how things turned out, they would still have to get back on the boat to Dunkirk in the morning. They only had so many hours; Thomas was not about to waste time.

He’d learned the pitfalls of not seizing every moment.

Thomas rolled, hooking his knees about Edward’s hips so that he could pin Edward against the mattress. Now it was Edward’s turn to be speckled with Thomas’ sweat, as Thomas hoisted himself up upon Edwards’ lap. Like Khamsa trotting to battle, Thomas rode Edward as fast and furious as he could. He bucked his hips, canting backward each time Edward cried out. Thomas took a hand to his own cock, which was now leaking profusely against his taut stomach. He began to fuck himself, jerking hard and fast—

Edward batted his hand away, taking Thomas up himself. It seemed that while Edward had never had full blown sex, he’d certainly got his fair share of jacking off.

“That’s my boy,” Edward crooned, using the age old term again as he held Thomas tight at the hip with his other hand. Thomas rode faster, and Edward stroked with the rising tempo, “That’s my beautiful boy, my perfect wonderful boy— come for me. Come for me-!”

“Ah-!” Thomas couldn’t handle it. Being told to come for the man he loved was too erotic, too lustful, “AH!”

He came, shocked as he felt Edward rupture from inside him. Suddenly there was cum coating his inner channel, making Edward’s shaking thrusts slippery.

“THOMAS-!!” Edward howled his name, mindless to how loud he was being. He couldn’t contain himself; his beautiful blue eyes were glazed over, lost in passion.

He huffed against the pillows, slipping from Thomas and groaning at the loss of contact. Thomas
was shaking himself, unable to sit upright much longer.

But the wild adrenaline rush within him wasn’t for the sake of passion, nor for its after effects.

His throat was closing up tight, his eyes were burning wildly.

And suddenly, Thomas burst into wild tears.

“Sweetheart!” Edward cried out, shocked at Thomas’ display. He scrambled up from the pillows, holding Thomas close so that Thomas’ face was pressed into the crook of Edward’s sweating neck. “Darling! What’s wrong?! Are you hurt-?!”

But he wasn’t hurt, not but a million miles. In fact, the problem was the opposite: ‘I’m—so— happy-!’ Thomas howled, sucking in breathes in between words.

And Edward let out a weak laugh of relief, just keeping Thomas as close as he could. They fell together, backward upon the pillow. The wilted gardenia bouquet and the sweating bottle of champagne were all but forgotten.

“Oh darling…” Edward murmured into his ear, even as Thomas sniveled and internally cursed his weak wills.

“So am I.”

And in the end they slept there, twined up like an old fashioned spool of wool thread, with the champagne un drunk and the lights still on. Thomas had tear streaks and snot lines on his face. Edward’s cock was covered in cum. Come morning, when they would find the lightbulb in their lamp blown out and both their skins itching, they would feel quite silly.

But they wouldn’t regret it. Not by a long shot.

~*~

They rose with the dawn, and left as the first silver vestiges of light draped across England’s skies.

It was like the walk of shame, save that instead of feeling embarrassed about having a lay the pair of them were instead irked at the fact that they’d wasted a perfectly decent bottle of champagne. Without ice to properly chill it all night, the bottle had end up becoming ruined. Edward had been forced to put it in the bin, but Thomas had kept his squashed gardenia bundle, putting them in his duffle bag so that he could keep them always. As silly as it was, he considered the flowers his bouquet.

The ride to Dunkirque was a quiet one, with the only moment of respite being Edward offering Thomas a cup of hot tea from below deck. Khamsa nibbled on hay, her tail flicking off an irksome fly, and the skies slowly darkened overhead as a storm a few miles off began to brew on the channel. They were to load Khamsa up with a wagonette upon landing, and would be bringing large loads of supplies both to Dunkirque and to Ypres. They would be regarded in a kind light, Thomas knew… he wondered if Roger and Helen had burnt down the medical tent yet, arguing over getting married.

Even as he thought about it, he rubbed his wedding band upon his finger. He knew in the back of his mind that their marriage was never to be fully recognized. He could not go before a priest, nor a doctor, nor even Edward’s family and expect to find support. Indeed, Thomas had a feeling that should anyone ever find out (be they Mrs. Hughes, Lord Grantham, or others) he would be met with
disgust and outrage. By marrying Edward in a faded hostel with a crushed baby bouquet of gardenias and a forgotten champagne bottle, Thomas had no doubt ruined the ‘sanctity’ of marriage.

Meanwhile, Roger and Helen would no doubt marry, fuck, and divorce… bickering and snarling all the while. Others would congratulate them, and see their union as something to be cherished.

A long, drawn out fighting match.

Currently, Thomas sat next to Edward on a wagonette, with Khamsa leading the way. The stop in Dunkirque had been mostly uneventful. The fight was now squarely in Ypres and lower territories, with the Germans on the losing side. They were panicking, and the battles as a result were becoming more bloody. Thomas knew that their chances of dying were going to rise steadily as the battles became more violent and desperate.

The sky above them was a gloomy, dismal gray. The storms of the coast were long since blown over, but there seemed to be a lifeless quality to the northern borders of France and Belgium now. Thomas wondered if this area would truly ever spring to life again. Would the grass grow back? Would the people return home? Would there someday be cattle and flowers in these barren muddy fields?

“You seem pensive.” Edward spoke up. Thomas gave him a small smile, thumbing at the corner of Ethel’s letter. He wondered what she’d sent him.

“I am.” Thomas admitted. “You know it’s just going to get more dangerous… more violent. And I can’t help but wonder if we’ll ever fully be free of the chaos. Even when we return home, if we get that lucky, no one will understand. No one will let us be.”

“Our business is our alone.” Edward grumbled. He didn’t take too kindly to being told he couldn’t have what he wanted. “And they don't get a say.”

“How will we live without raising suspicion?” Thomas asked, "Two bachelors, living together in the same house out in the country?”

“That’s the beauty of having money.” Edward said, clicking Khamsa’s reigns so that she’d step a little faster through easier roads, “No one gets to ask you questions. You’ll share my wealth with me. You’ll see. We’ll take on animals, and make a proper little hunting lodge out of our home. We’ll make the others think you’re just my servant.”

“Oh goody.” Thomas muttered. “Do I get to sleep in the attic?”

He broke the seal on Ethel’s letter, and tore it open to pull out a peculiar pink stationary along with a tiny photograph covered in a wax paper to keep out dust.

“I’m afraid you’ll be sleeping with me.” Edward said. “I intend to have you in my bed every night for the rest of my life.”

“Well that’s something to look forward to at least— JESUS!”

His sudden shout of indignation nearly sparked Khamsa to a start. Edward jerked a bit on the reigns, shocked as Thomas began to howl with laughter, clutching Ethel’s picture in a shaking fist.

The woman was insane, absolutely insane-!
“What is it?!” Edward wondered, “Good god you nearly gave me a heart attack-“

“L-look!” Thomas could barely speak he was so tickled. He showed Ethel’s picture to him, revealing that it was nothing more and nothing less that a scandalous boudoir photo. Her breasts were as visible as her eyes and curly hair, nipples erect as she nibbled invitingly on her middle finger. Her knickers were barely covering the swell of her arse, plunging deep into the apex of her thighs as she crouched upon a prop bed.

The nerve of her to give Thomas a photo like this! The sodding nerve!

“Did she give you a picture of her tits?!” Edward barked, eyes popping as he took in Ethel’s rather large and perky breasts. “Mary, Jesus, and Joseph!”

“I think I’m gonna piss-!” Thomas howled, unable to get one breath in without laughing some more. Sodding hell, if there were stray Germans wandering these fields they’d have no trouble getting a shot in. Thomas and Edward had more than blown their cover.

“That girl is a lunatic!” Edward said, and without another word he tossed Ethel’s picture away. It hit the mud and was immediately run over by two of their wagonette wheels. “Giving you a picture like that. She hardly knows you!”

But now Thomas was reading the letter that had come along with the picture, unable to get the words out without giggling hysterically:

“My h-handsome soldier,” Thomas read aloud, “I dreamed of you l-last night, taking me on his Lordship’s bed. Won’t you m-make my dreams come true and l-love me when you r-r-return?!!”

“She didn’t actually write that.” Edward refused to believe it. Even for Ethel, the words were shockingly saucy. What if someone had intercepted this letter? What if Mrs. Hughes had found it? God forbid what she’d say, not to mention the audacious picture inside. Ethel would have been thrown out on her rump as fast as a bolt of lightning.

Edward took the letter from Thomas, scoffing aloud as he continued on.

“I imagine your manhood to be as strong and long as your gorgeous hands?!” Edward couldn’t get out the words without squawking in disbelief, “Take me and make me yours, claim me in a way that only a man can— my breasts are longing for your touch-“

“Imagine me touching a tit-“ Thomas didn’t think it would be physically possible. There was nothing about tits which intrigued him. They were rather disgusting when he thought about it, just sagging cases of fat and flesh. What was the point of enjoying breasts? They got in the way all the time.

“Christ, she is a tit.” Edward snapped. He threw out Ethel’s letter as well, irritated that someone should think to send Thomas such a racy note. “Doesn’t she know you’re married?”

Thomas just beamed, leaning his head upon Edward’s shoulder, “Clearly not.”

“Well she’ll find out in the end.” Edward grumbled. Oh, how sulky and crabby he could be when someone tried to take what was his! “I don’t share.”

Thomas just buried his face in the crook of Edward’s neck and shoulder, perfectly content to be claimed.

They laced their hands together, their bullet bands gleaming in the dull gray light.
The return to Ypres was, shockingly, not something that Thomas grew to hate.

It was terribly irksome after being home in Downton, to delve back into a lifestyle where he couldn’t bathe or eat hot meals. He missed Mrs. Patmore’s cooking something fierce, and more than once woke up in the middle of the night with awful aching pains in his back from the disgusting cot on which he slept. The rats were just as ravenous as ever, nibbling on crates of sodden gauze and tripping up soldier’s in the trenches. The only way to get hot tea was to boil it in a saucepan, which was filthy with tainted water.

And yet… Thomas somehow found himself able to cope. He reasoned that Downton was waiting for him back home, and Edward was now his partner in life. What he could not handle, he could share in burden. They had not been back a week, and already the fight for Ypres was gearing up to an explosive point. Edward more often than not came to the medical tent when his shift rolled over, hiding behind unused cots to sit with Thomas till they could retire to his dirty shack in the woods. If people watched them go and return together, no one said anything… save for Cartwright.

He openly mocked Edward in the trenches, calling him a lavender. Edward had punched Cartwright in the mouth, resulting in the pair of them being punished with digging work by Colonel Wavell. Edward had returned after midnight, filthy and exhausted but terribly smug at getting a good throw in. Apparently Cartwright had lost a tooth to the ordeal and was miserable about it.

When Cartwright entered the medical tent, swaggering about and asking for cigarettes from shy nurses, he made sure to ask Thomas if he’d “eaten any cake lately.” His broken tooth was incredibly obvious at the front and center of his mouth… and no doubt painful too. Still, Thomas would have no pity for Cartwright, and with his hands being the ones that dispensed morphine, Thomas would not allow Cartwright to find any relief underneath his watch.

“I don’t have time to eat cake, or to give morphine to whinging slackers.” Thomas would say. “So if you’re looking for something for that tooth you can clear off!”

Thomas would then turn right around and give a bit of morphine to the first person who asked for it, including but not limited to soldier’s recovering from minor surgery and one petrified teenager who’d had his arm thrown out of its socket.

Cartwright would skulk away, numbing his aching broken tooth with a piece of ice if he could find it, or a bit of plonk soaked on a rag.

Thomas wrote to Mrs. Hughes, telling her that he’d safely arrive back in Ypres and was grateful to all the kindness he’d received on his respite home. Thomas did not mention his marriage to Edward, nor did he even hint at it with coded language. He reasoned that there were some things even Mrs. Hughes would not be able to understand. He likewise did not mention Ethel’s scandalous letter, save to ask Mrs. Hughes to inform Ethel that he had ‘tragically lost the document while traveling overseas’. He had a feeling that, even without naughty details, Ethel’s letter would be viewed through wary eyes.

The battle for Ypres was growing in full force, resulting in Thomas and Edward being drawn back into the fray before they could grow comfortable with married life. Whether it was an act of God, furious that Thomas and Edward had destroyed the sanctity of his marriage, or whether it was simply
just shite luck, Thomas found himself nine days after returning to Ypres watching the battle lines of Germany and England be drawn in bloody and wrecked fields. The No Man’s Land had become a graveyard for fallen soldiers and horses. Wagonettes were crumpled into ash. Even rats dared not stray into those vile regions.

It was night, with dawn soon to come. The medical tent was quiet with only one patient currently under Thomas’ watch. It was a man recovering from trench foot surgery, sleeping peacefully with morphine in his veins (Thomas may or may not have given it to the man right in front of Cartwright).

Allowed a moment of respite, Thomas watched Edward pace in front of the medical tent. He, like Thomas, was watching the battle lines that the German’s were drawing. You could hear the distant shout for more arms, and could smell the acrid tang of chlorine.

There would be thousands of casualties come this time tomorrow. Even a fool could reason that.

Thomas exited the medical tent, but didn’t stray far lest it invoke trouble. You never knew what shadow Cartwright would jump out of now a-days, furious as being denied morphine for his broken tooth. He was having a hard time garnering sympathy from the rest of the staff however, given that they were both fiercely loyal to Thomas and hardly fond of prigs. Cartwright had tried to grope Helen’s arse, but had done it right in front of Roger. He’d ended up getting chased out of the tent with Roger spitting curse words and Helen taking up a soldier’s walking cane. If she’d whopped him soundly over the head, no one had made comment to Wavell or Allenby.

Even the lame soldier devoid of his cane hadn’t complained. He’d gotten his walking stick back in the end.

“This is it.” Edward muttered, looking out over the dark and bleary night. “If I can survive this battle, I think I can get Wavell to move me to a safer station. M’taking you with me, just so you know.”

“Leave me here.” Thomas said, shoulder to shoulder with Edward. “I’ll be safe in the tent and the men need me.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the men.” Edward scoffed. “S’not them I’m thinking of. I won’t be deprived of you.”

“Not even if I could save others?”

“Not even.” Edward’s selfishness only made Thomas smile… how silly he could be.

“You’re such a tosser.” Thomas chuckled. A soft rumble caught their attention, but it turned out to be nothing more than a crack of thunder, not a cannon.

You had to be careful to check, now a-days.

“I want you to know,” Edward said, “That in the event of everything going to shit… I love you.”

Edward looked to Thomas, blue eyes blazing triumphantly. “Truly. It’s an honor and a privilege to have you in my life. To have your companionship and love.”

If he kept it up, Thomas would start weeping again. Thomas just shook his head, taking up Edward’s hand. Even if Cartwright were to come along, catcalling and sneering, the pair of them wouldn’t be parted.

Life was short, and death was sure. You had to take advantage of every moment you could.
"I feel quite the same way." Thomas said.

"I swear to you if we make it through this… when we go back home, we’ll set up our little house in the woods… and we’ll fish, hunt, and shoot… make love… and never be parted."

It sounded like paradise to Thomas.

"It will be a beautiful life." Edward said.

There was an ominous ring to his words.

The sounds of soldiers approaching caused Thomas and Edward to drop their hands. For a moment, Thomas worried Cartwright would actually approach them and start another fight, but it only turned out to be Wavell and Allenby, taking a stroll around the perimeter of their camp before the battle.

"Ah, there he is!" Allenby boasted, walking up to Thomas and shaking his hand, "My best man… I’m glad to have you back Barrow. We missed you."

"I’m glad to be here sir." And Thomas meant it, truly.

"Crikey you sound like the old Thomas again." Allenby couldn’t have been more chuffed about it, "Bit of that English soil do you good boy? Get your fill of tea and biscuits?"

"And salted cod cakes." Thomas replied, "And fish and chips, and frankly every other greasy hot food known to man."

"God I envy you." Wavell groaned, "I’d given anything for my wife’s cooking. She makes this cheese and sprouts mix, with garlic and onion. I’d bathe in it if she let me, I swear."

"I think I ate that too." Thomas chortled, though he was certain Mrs. Patmore’s version wouldn’t satisfy Wavell nearly as much.

"Thomas ate his weight in good food." Edward said, "But I can’t talk. I spent nearly every day hunting and fishing. You should have seen the beauties I pulled ashore."

"Well done, old chap." Allenby clapped Edwards’ arm in praise. "Give the women folk something to write about, what what?" And at this he chortled at his own joke.

"See you got a haircut!" Wavell added, noting Thomas’ proper trim.

"Got it from a rather pretty girl too." Edward teased, "A beautiful maid named Anna."

"Ha ha!" Wavell’s eyes flashed with manic delight, "Did you get a good look at her tits?"

But a sudden wave of indignation and anger rolled over Thomas at the thought of someone daring to speak so bluntly about Anna Bates. They’d worked alongside one another nearly all their lives, and frankly Thomas had come to regard her in the end as a sister.

"She’s like a sister to me!" Thomas snarled. Wavell went white, sensing he’d stepped over a delicate boundary.

"I meant no offense." Wavell said at once. "I’m sure she’s a very lovely girl."

Thomas rolled his eyes. The nerve of some men.
“Tomorrow will be a day of reckoning my boys!” Allenby said, speaking not only to Thomas and Edward but Wavell too. “I was just telling Wavell here, we’ll need everyone to pull together. A few more thrashings out to do it, send the bloody devils back where they came from!”

“Yes sir.” The three of them replied in succinct unison. There wasn’t much else you could do when Allenby spoke.

“Barrow… you’re a good man for returning.” Allenby said, “Could have had you invalided out you know… but you came out, and you’re fighting the good fight. Can’t say that much about others.”

“Might have to invalid out Cartwright.” Wavell sneered. “The way he goes on about that tooth of his—”

“Oh, that bit of bother.” Allenby huffed, before reaching up into his mouth and— shocker of all shockers— pulling out two fake teeth so that he suddenly had a disturbingly large gap in his mouth.

“Los’ too teef in Afwica!” Allenby laughed at all their shocked expressions, before reaching back up and putting the teeth in his back in his mouth. A messy wet pop later, he could speak normally again. “Nothing a bit of ivory couldn’t fix! God it from the rhino that buggered with me, the nasty devil.”

Wavell just shook his head, disgusted.

“Carry on, my boys!” Allenby finally said, chest thrust out with pride, “That’s what’s needed in these moments. Even if the little blighter gives you trouble, Barrow. I know what he calls you, but you mustn’t let it bother you. There’s nothing wrong with being a gentler sort of man. You’ll have to show off your wife to Cartwright when you get home, that’ll shut him up!”

“How do you know I’m married, sir?” Thomas asked.

“Well isn’t that your wedding ring?” Allenby asked, gesturing to Thomas’ left hand.

Thomas looked down with a smile, fingering the bullet band. It gleamed dully from the light within the medical tents.

“…Yes.” Thomas said. “Yes it is.”

Beside him, Edward just smiled.

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“Saw, saw, saw!” Thomas roared, gesturing for Roger to give him his amputation saw. “Come on man, give me my saw!”

“Oh knock it off!” Roger snarled, bloodied hands flying over equipment and tables. “Take the damn thing or I’ll strangle you!”

Good luck with that. He’d need both hands and right now he could spare neither of them.

The battle of Ypres, or rather the second battle of Ypres, was just as wild and bloody as Thomas could have foreseen. The carnage was so intense and so disgusting that every aiding hand had been called in, and even soldiers from Dunkirque were coming for back up. The German’s wanted passage to the Northern Channel and desperately. They knew the only way to England was to get
across the sea; they couldn’t overtake France, and they couldn’t get past Belgium. The only way forward was to duke it out one last time… and they weren’t giving up until every last man in uniform was dead.

Thomas had already amputated over twenty limbs from canon blasts and gas attacks. The result was a pile of hacked arms and legs in a pyre out back that was continuing to burn. The acrid smell of dead flesh was enough to make you puke, and Thomas had nearly dry heaved on a patient as he’d pinned off another artery and begun the amputation of a destroyed leg. Of course, this had required his amputation saw, which Roger had been washing to try and get rid of bone fragments that had become stuck in the teeth. With a clean blade, Thomas made quick work of the ruined leg and handed the bloodied wreckage off to a nurse named Kate who promptly threw it outside on the pile.

“Salt packs!” Thomas barked; Helen quickly supplied them, pressing down on the unconscious soldier’s bleeding stump, “Get this man ready for the ambulance to Dunkirque. How many men are going out?”

When he wasn’t immediately answered, Thomas shouted over the din of wailing men and frantic nurses so that nearly everyone could hear him. “OI! WHOSE GOING HOME?!”

At least fifteen hands went up in the air. A few men were forced to raise stumps, their arms taken off at the elbows. Thomas counted them quickly, making a mental tally in his head.

“Good, good.” Thomas muttered. “That’ll free up some of the beds.”

But before Thomas could so much as sneeze or blink, he was being called into yet another surgery. Helen was crying out for him, gesturing him to a bed near the front of the tent where a new soldier had just been drug out of the muck.

“Quick, quick!” Helen cried out as nurses prepared another surgical tray and Thomas handed his saw off so that it could be washed and wiped again. “We’ve got another one!”

Like always, Thomas’ first thought was that it would be Edward, but it turned out to be nothing more than Cartwright, pale and bleeding from a bullet to the stomach. He had this ugly little sneer on his face, part pain and part irritation as he realized that he was suddenly in the grips of a man he despised on base principle.

“Don’t touch me!” Cartwright spat even as Helen and Thomas made to tear off his uniform so that they could better survey the damage, “Don’t put your filthy hands on me, you chit!”

Thomas paid him no mind, nor did Helen. They stripped his stomach bare to find his skin torn and the bullet embedded deep inside. If there wasn’t internal bleeding yet, there would be.

“Forceps!” Thomas snarled, and at once Helen searched their stockpile for a pair that weren’t completely filthy. There was no point of saving a man from hemorrhaging if he was going to die of sepsis.

But then Cartwright spoke again, and Thomas froze.

“Courtenay…”

There was something about the way he said it… something about how his lips were curved into an ugly smile.
It made Thomas’ heart skip a beat, made him want to make sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that Cartwright hadn’t done something dodgy whilst everyone was occupied trying to man the trenches.

“What?” Thomas snarled, even as Helen tried to pass him the forceps. “What did you just say?”

“Thomas, the forceps—“

“What did you say about Edward Courtenay!?” Thomas roared, speaking so loudly that they could surely hear him over the din and outside the tent. The nurses around him froze, frightening by his loud voice. Everyone on his team was aware of his famous temper, and when he got into a ‘mood’ no one liked to press him.

Cartwright let out a weak chuckle, a tiny bubble of blood popping at the corner of his mouth.

“Your fancy man… is *fucked*.” Cartwright said. He shuddered, groaning, and promptly fainted from the pain of the bullet embedded in his abdomen.

Thomas slowly straightened up, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of his neck. He first looked to Helen, who seemed pained by what to do next.

“We have to heal him.” She finally said, “Come on, take the forceps and get it over with-!”

But Thomas did not take the spreaders. Instead, Thomas stumbled away from Cartwright’s bedside and exited the medic tent to look out across the war torn fields. Men were squabbling in the muck, shooting at one another and screaming in wild bouts of exertion. There was no way to truly describe an active war scene than to say it was utter carnage. Absolute chaos.

You couldn’t rightly say that something was ‘out of place’ in a war scene because anything could eventually get dragged in. Even stray dogs had been known to yip and run through No Man’s Land, frightened of the loud noises and cannon blasts. But there was something out of place in this scene, and it seemed that only Thomas could see it.

A woman, in gypsy rags, with black hair falling down her back.

The Heichecera stood in the middle of No Man’s Land like she promptly belonged there. Like she’d merely woken up from a nap in the trenches and had gone on a jaunt to stretch her legs. She looked, with unseeing eyes, out across the fields, and stared into the wreckage where a familiar black horse was laying on her side in the muck.

It was Khamsa.

And there was Edward at her side, defending his fallen friend to the very end. He grappled with a German. He was down to his knife and the very last few shots of his gun, hand in hand as he tried to get free of the German’s grips.

The German was shot by another soldier; Wavell!

But even as the man fell, he scrambled at his belt to pull the pin on a flashing silver container.

Green and yellow gas suddenly blossomed from the ground, swirling about the scene as men ran for cover! They were screaming, stumbling through potholes and over the bodies of dead horses—Khamsa was immediately swallowed up in the gas, and the smell of burning hair sent every cell in Thomas’ body alit with horror.
Edward was coughing, staggering, sinking-!

Thomas did not think. He ran.

He discarded his white medic jacket and his stethoscope even as he flew across the trench lines, leaping like a wild hare from one ridge to the next. As he entered No Man’s Land, Thomas shot right past the Heichecera. The edges of her body rippled like smoke, though her image did not completely disappear. It seemed that she was everywhere and nowhere, as Thomas vaulted over the bodies of dead soldiers. He could hear Wavell screaming at him, begging for him to come back!

“What do you think you’re doing?” The Heichecera’s smoky voice resounded in his mind, so clear that she might have spoken in his ear.

Thomas did not answer her, did not stop running. Edward was trying to get away from the smoke, but he was dizzy and exhausted. He kept waving his hand in front of his face, trying too-

POO!

Thomas gasped in pain, suddenly brought to a halt and falling to his knees.

He looked down, and saw blood beginning to pour in a rivulet from right shoulder. He’d been shot.

But Thomas could not stop now, could not waste time! It didn’t matter if he was shot once or a hundred times. He had to save Edward, had to get him away from the smoke! If he fell into it, he would lose his sight. If he lost his sight, he would commit suicide.

Thomas wouldn’t allow it to happen twice! He wouldn’t!

“You can’t stop death, Thomas.” The Heichecera spoke again. Once more, Thomas paid her voice no mind, clambering back up to his feet and running at a sprint through the fields. He rounded a burnt down wagonette, only to hear the sound of a sniper’s rifle fire again. Suddenly pain was spreading through his right arm; he realized that he’d been shot again, but only in passing.

He kept running, nearly upon Edward. If he could just reach him-!

“You cannot prevent the inevitable.” She sounded annoyed with him now. “You can only prolong it.”

If that was the bargain Thomas had to make, then so be it. He could live with the rest.

“So be it!” Thomas snarled, and finally upon Edward, he grabbed him tight from behind and yanked him out of the muck and gas to throw him hard onto higher ground. It wasn’t much to pray for, only a wagonette with its back wheels blown so that its front wheels kept the base boards at a sharp tilt. Thomas did not recognize it at the time, but it was the very same wagonette that they’d carried from England through Dunkirque.

Edward fell against the wood, groaning and holding his face. His eyes were bleeding, blistering-!

“No!” Thomas shouted, throwing himself atop Edward to prevent any more gas from touching his precious face.
Even so, he felt an exploding pain in his back-!

Thomas cried out, gasping. There was a wild, burning ache in his chest and stomach- what had happened?! 

But blood was pooling on Edward’s ruined uniform, and it wasn’t his own. It was Thomas’. He’d been shot again.

“Ha…ah… he… a….” Thomas couldn’t even get words out. Beneath him, Edward was passed out on the wagonette. The gas rolled about their ankles, but could reach no higher at the fringes of its perimeter.

Lights were flying past Thomas’ eyes.
Colors. Images.

And suddenly once again there was the Heichecera. She stood next to the wagonette, and bent down a bit at the waist so that she was eye level with Thomas.

They stared at one another for a solid minute, even as Thomas continued to bleed out.

Was he about to die?
Was she coming to take him away?

“Not…him…” Thomas croaked. “Anyone… but… him.”

“You underestimate the power of death, Thomas.” The Heichecera said. “Even I have my limits.”

And it was with those terrible, ominous words, that Thomas’ world went black.

His eyes rolled up into his head, his body unable to handle anymore pain.

He fainted.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to comment. Thank you for your continued readership, and your loyalty to this story.
Chapter Summary

Thomas and Edward return home from war, wounded... and the past threatens to repeat itself.

Chapter Notes

Blah!

This was an interesting chapter to write. We're getting close to a pivotal change in plot for the story, so you're going to start seeing me building things up. Who knows what's going to happen? I guarantee things won't go in the direction you think! The Heichecera isn't through with Thomas yet.

trigger warnings for this chapter include surgical gore, anxiety attacks, blood, and a suicide attempt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The telephone rang three times in succession before Charles was finally able to pick it up.

“I shouldn’t dare touch it!” Beryl had snapped when Charles demanded to know why she hadn’t gotten it; Elsie was upstairs with the maids. “It’s like the cry of a banshee!”

And what was rather irritating about the lot of it was that Charles rather agreed with her. The ring of a telephone reminded him painfully of the factory bells that had once doomed his late cousin Patrick to an early grave. Patrick had been working on a belt line making parts for ship yards when a cog and gear malfunction had gone horribly wrong. The Carson’s hadn’t been given much back… just whatever the foreman had been able to pull out of the machine once they’d finally managed to shut the damnable thing off. Charles’ mother had wept for days, clutching a sodden handkerchief by a dwindling fire. Patrick’s late mother had been her sister; Patrick’s father had been a cad, wandering away from family life… so Patrick had been raised close to Charles, rather like a brother.

She’d taken his death personally.

Charles stormed into his office, even as the telephone rang for the last time. When it went cold, Charles let out an irritated groan, moping at his forehead where tiny beads of sweat had been awoken at his gallant trot. He’d tried so hard to get to the phone on time!

“Oh, bother.” Charles grumbled; what would he give to have one of his footman back again.

The whole house was having to learn to adjust without two of its finest workers. Where Thomas had been all about prompt schedules and intense planning, William had always been about pitching a
hand at the last second. Now, Charles didn’t have anyone to help him keep structure, or to offer aid when they couldn’t make the final corners neat. He didn’t know who he missed more, though he was at least content to know that William was still on English soil. God only knows what awful horrors Thomas was enduring over in Ypres.

But he had that Courtenay fellow… so that was something.

Charles turned away from his telephone, heading back into the hall. He hadn’t made it two steps when the phone rang again.

Charles froze, turning back around to see the telephone going off its hook, jiggling at the force of the vibrating bell inside its mantel column. Either a catastrophe had happened, or someone was errantly wanting a word with a member of the house.

With a war looming over their heads, Charles was solidly on edge.

He reached out, took up the telephone, and held the candle stick to his mouth to speak.

“Downton Abbey, this is Charles Carson, the butler.” Charles said.

“Receiving an emergency telephone call from RAMC Plymouth Division.” The operator replied. “Do you accept?”

RAMC Plymouth…. Thomas!

Charles mouth sudden went numb and dry, leaving him tripping over the most simple of words in his attempt to get his words out all the clearer: “Y-yes.”

“Hold please.”

What could have possibly happened; the lad had only been gone a week!

But worse disasters had occurred in only days, Charles had to remind himself. The Titanic had apparently sank in nothing more than three hours. A week was plenty of time for disaster to occur in war, even if Charles did not want to admit it to himself. He found his inner mind suddenly going through a wild jig and dance of Thomas when he’d last seen him… Exhausted but whole, and pained to say goodbye. It had been clear to Charles that Thomas had wanted nothing more than to stay… but still Courtenay had ridden him away on that exotic black horse.

Thomas had looked back twice over his shoulder during the retreat. He’d locked eyes with Charles, seemingly pleading with the man to change the tides of fate.

“Is this Mr. Charles Carson?” a sharp voice called out, jerking Charles out of his reverie and back into the present moment.

“This is.” Charles said; he attempted for decorum, though his voice shook, “May I ask who I am speaking to?”

“My name is Lieutenant Woodyard. I work with the RAMC Plymouth Division. You are listed as the next of kin for Thomas Nathaniel Barrow, Head Healer and Medical Officer RAMC. I’m calling to inform you that there was an attack in Ypres yesterday, resulting in the critical wounding of your son. He’s returning to England and will have to undergo immediate surgery to- “

Words kept leaping out at Charles like fireworks, popping in front of his open eyes: attack, critical wounding, immediate surgery-!
“But what happened?” Charles was shocked, for Thomas himself had said that he usually stayed safe inside the confines of the medic tent. Had there been a siege? Had Thomas been kidnapped again? God forbid—!

“The reports from the war office are stating that a gas attack resulted in your son’s accountability partner, Lieutenant Edward Courtenay, being critically wounded. Your son put himself in the direct line of fire to save his friend. It was very heroic but ultimately a disaster. Your son was shot three times.”

The war office thought it an act of heroic friendship, but Charles knew better. He felt a clenching feeling, tight like an iron vice, wrapping around his heart and lungs. It almost frightened him into thinking it was a heart attack but he realized it was only anxiety. Thomas hadn’t run into direct fire to save a friend…

Oh, how Charles wanted to thrash the boy! To wallop him for losing his senses! Why hadn’t he thought things through? Why had he gone running off from the safety of the tent—

You know why, a dark voice whispered in the back of his mind. You know what Courtenay is to him. You know what they’re doing.

Elsie had told him she’d begged Thomas to reconsider, to remember that Courtenay was the son of a Duke and a man for god’s sake!

But Thomas hadn’t listened. He’d been too in love, too blinded by emotion…
And now, he’d paid a horrible price.

“Sir—?”

The Lieutenant had been talking to Charles, but he’d been too shocked to listen properly.

“I- I’m sorry was…” He coughed, trying to regain control of his voice. “I didn’t hear what you were saying.”

“I understand sir, I only said that your son is on his way home now by boat. He’ll land in Dover and be operated on there… You’ll be called by the Dover Division if anything happens but… well…”

The man did not sound hopeful, “I won’t lie sir. The chances of him surviving to landfall are slim, and the chances of him living through surgery?”

He didn’t go on.

“Your son is a hero.” The Lieutenant said, tones warm with camaraderie, “If he dies, he will die a hero’s death and be rewarded by the king.”

But Charles had a feeling that Thomas, who’d never taken to the idea of nobility as Charles had, wouldn’t much care about the King. Thomas had always looked to people for their emotional and mental ties… he’d stuck to the family like glue with an incredible sense of loyalty. Thomas hadn’t wanted the fanfare of a hero, even in 1914 when he’d solidly defeated a German General… he’d only wanted to come home.

Now, it seemed, he was finally getting his bitter wish.

“…Thank you.” Charles could not find it within him to sound enthusiastic. “Please… keep me informed.”
“We will sir. You have our condolences. Good day.” And with that, the Lieutenant hung up the phone.

Charles sagged for a moment on his feet before crumpling into his chair behind his desk. So deflated was he, so sucked of energy, that he couldn’t find it within himself to hang up his telephone until it made a pitiful clicking and ringing noise. Wanting quiet, Charles slammed the damnable thing down, and pushed it away from the center of his desk.

But even as Charles sat there, feeling numb and cold, he found himself being drawn to his side cabinet where he’d tucked away Thomas’ long forgotten letter inside his personal stationary portfolio. With shaky hands, Charles pulled out his key ring from his trouser pocket and undid the clasp which bound his side cabinet shut. The old iron lock creaked as it swung on its hinge, and Charles pulled open the drawer to fish for his leather portfolio until he found it underneath his safety lock box which contained his life savings and what little items remained from his actual family…. his father’s pocket watch, his mother’s wedding ring.

Digging through his portfolio, Charles had to push aside several bits of stationary before finally finding Thomas’ letter. It was slightly yellowed with age at the corners, of poorer quality that Charles’ own stationary, and the glue had lost its holding seal.

Charles flipped the envelope about, finding Thomas’ thin slanted handwriting to be comforting in that moment:

Charles Carson
In the event of my death

But Thomas isn’t dead yet, a hesitant voice spoke up inside his head. You shouldn’t open this letter until you know for a fact that he’s dead. It’s what he wants.

And so, Charles could do little more but lock his side cabinet back up and set Thomas’ letter upon his desk. He fingered the yellowed and frayed edges a little bit more before finally tucking the letter into his inner jacket pocket.

Like Atlas before him, Charles felt a horrific weight upon his shoulders. He didn’t want to read this letter. He wanted Thomas home. He wanted to shove the damn thing in the fire pit and stand beside Thomas as the pair of them watched it burn… let this war be behind them!

But Charles didn’t get to make the rules like that. He decided he would wait for the call, wait for the absolute, definite, wretched call that Thomas had died. And then… he would open the vile, damnable letter.

~*~

Pain…

Horrific Pain…

White nothingness and an iron clench on his feeble lungs, only broken by the flickering image of himself being punched in the face by William. They were fighting, falling, screaming-

Everyone glaring down at him furious, Carson finally pulling him off only to all but fling him at a wall to get him to go away.
William being clapped on the back like a hero. Everyone glad to see him gone.

“No!” Thomas screamed out. He did not want to see these things. He wanted to change these things.

The white fog was thick, and would not clear. Like a nickelodeon screen, one image went passing by after another. He could hear the voices of other men but could not see them. It was as if they were struggling to reach him through the fog. Like they were searching for him in vain.

“Steady on!” He heard one man said, his voice echoing as if through a long tunnel, “You’re going home, soldier.”

But Thomas’ attention was taken up by the image of Jimmy Kent, furious in the moonlight, shoving him off his bed- screaming at him to get away-!

“STOP IT!” Thomas shrieked; the images were burning at his heart; there was a fiery, horrific pain in his chest. It felt like his very heart might burst into flames!

The Heichecera was there. She was watching him, menacingly, her black eyes burning and locked upon his own. She was staring down at him through the fog, and only then did Thomas realize he was actually on his back, not on his feet.

She seemed to be looming over him like a ghost, showing him these horrific images as if to taunt him.

She seemed to get a sadistic sort of pleasure out of Thomas’ screams.

“What d’you want from me?!” Thomas howled, “What do you want?!”

Anything to make her stop-
But the images just kept coming!

He watched through third person as he bullied Baxter in the boot room, bearing down on her with all the terrible fierceness he could muster. She shrank away from him, repulsed, only to break down and cry when he finally stormed away.

Thomas screamed.

He screamed and he screamed, only taking in one breath to shriek on another- Make it stop, he begged.

But there was the image of Jimmy leaving, shaking his hand only to hang on one minute too long… getting on a wagonette and riding away.

“I TOLD YOU!” Thomas tried to thrash, tried to turn his head way… it was like he was stuck in cement; how could he break free. “STOP IT! STOP IT!!”

“Give me another five hits, quick!” Shouted someone through the fog. “Who did this stitch work?! Who bound his wounds with metal twine?!”

“I- I dunno!” Another voice sounded terribly frightened, “I swear to you sir, no one did this on the boat!”

“Damn field medics, we’ll have to cut it- is that gold?!”

Images of Edward laying in a blood soaked cot-
“NO!” Thomas sobbed, trying to reach out. His hands were pinned at his sides, as heavy as lead, “Edward, no please-!” Was this the past he was seeing, or the future? Was there any difference anymore?

But there was Sybil dead. Matthew dead.

Thomas screamed and screamed, twisting and turning! He cried, he babbled, hardly making sense… anything to get away- anything to make it stop!

“I TOLD YOU! DON’T!! DON’T!!”

“Get me morphine!” A man shouted. “Hit him again! Everything you got!”

In that moment, Thomas almost felt like he was having a seizure.
His body shook, muscles twitching violently. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t scream, he couldn’t even blink. The white fog above him was sucking away, bleeding into gold, which was tainted with black as if ink had been splattered upon a fine silken tablecloth. Every corner, every edge of Thomas’ vision was soaked over…

He sunk into dark, dreamless sleep.
No existence.
No Heichecera
…No anything.

~*~

In a muggy and sluggish universe, where time had no consistent flow and movement ceased save for the movement of sound and light, Thomas felt the world around him shift.

He could hear things, but felt no reaction to them:

“Go on ahead and take this lot to Yorkshire… Harry-! Get over here-!”

“Yes, Captain-“

“This lot are your charge. North Yorkshire boys, all of them. You’ll stay with them on the train. Tag colors show you their towns. Reds go to Ripon. Yellows go to Northallerton. Blues go to York.”

“This fellow’s got a white tag. where does he go?”

“He’s a special case. Put him on the train to Ripon; there’ll be a man waiting to take him straight to Downton. Fellow by the name of Carson. Pass him off, make sure he signs the form. Don’t want a man unaccounted for… every man has to have a signature, the other boys will be accepted by officers waiting for you at the station. Your journey ends with this fellow. Stay the night over in Downton, then head back into York the next day for your orders.”

“Yes sir!”
Thomas would plunge deep into a gloom and lay there for long periods of time. When he’d wake again, he’d feel solid and weighted, existing only in the sense of the mental. His body was somewhere else, and his spirit would soar through the air. He felt like he’d learned to fly.

There was a rattling underneath him, a flooding warmth. Every so often, he heard the rustling noise of fabric shifting… of metal and wood being struck. Wheels grinding and women speaking. If a voice was familiar, Thomas did not sense it. Instead, voices were merely sounds, with no connection and no meaning. Words became like notes of a symphony, changing key and pitch until the song was concluded.

“Put him over here.”

“These are the effects he came with… his duffle bag and the rest.”

“We’ll have Nurse Crawley sort it all out. Damage report?”

“Three bullet removals. Severe bleeding, damage to right arm tissue and left iliac crest. No kidney damage as of the moment.”

“Descending colon?”

“Nothing that we can see, but keep an eye on it. The bullet seems to have been blocked by the pelvis… angle suggests it was a soldier already on the ground.”

“Dying breath and all that?”

“Righto.”


And then?

Coming out of a deep, drugged sleep was one of the most unique experiences a person could undergo. To come out from under the rug, to have the muslin gauze peeled back, was like taking your first breath after nearly drowning. Suddenly you had the ability to move but lacked the energy… a voice to speak with but a terrible rasping pain. You had thirst, a desire to urinate, stomach pain, neck pain, a headache… so many terrible conundrums that piled one atop the other till you were almost crushed beneath the horrific weight.

In this way, Thomas awoke and began to groan; his own voice was the charge back to a mental
consciousness.

There was a hand, stroking the fringe out of his eyes. He tried to open his eyes, but found they almost seemed to be stuck somehow… like the lids had become glued.

Finally Thomas managed to crack his eyes open. There was a crusty bit in the corners of his eyes, the proof in the pudding of his irritation.

There was a woman above him, with a white light filtering in from a nearby window. It illuminated her whole face, made her seem to shine, and Thomas sucked in an aching breath when he realized it was Mrs. Hughes.

Even flat on his back, even completely dazed and lost, Thomas could put together the fumbling pieces and recognize that he was either in Downton Village Hospital or somewhere close by. Mrs. Hughes wouldn’t have been able to come and see him otherwise; she had too much work to do.

He’d been shot.
He was invalided out.
He would not have to return to Ypres.

“Thomas…” Mrs. Hughes was trying to coax him into waking up fully; it was difficult to fully cement himself in the waking world after so many days of drifting in and out. “Thomas, you’re home. You’re in Downton. Can you hear me?”

As Thomas opened his mouth, however, the first word to fall from his cracked and chapped lips was a name. A prayer. A question.

“…Ed…ward…” His voice had no tone, no inflection. It was barely recognizable as his own, save for the fact that it was coming from his lips. Like looking in the mirror and seeing your eyes staring out of another’s face.

“What?” Mrs. Hughes had not understood him; who could blame her?

“Ed…ward!” Thomas tried to say the name louder, but it just came out choked. Like he was trying to speak from underneath the water. “Edward!”

“Oh-“, Mrs. Hughes seemed to understand at last; she tutted, resuming stroking his hair. “He’s safe, Thomas. You saved him.”

But there was more than being safe, wasn’t there? You could be alive, but in prison. What was the point of being alive if you were miserable? “G-gas…? Gas!”

Mrs. Hughes’ expression crumpled.

“…From what I’ve been told, he’s been blinded, yes. But you saved his-“

The wail that burst from Thomas’ chapped lips was like something you’d hear come out of a toddler’s mouth.

He’d been so damn careful, so bloody—!

But he hadn’t been careful enough, had he? He’d forgotten the end goal, had become too wrapped up in loving Edward and living in the moment. He’d been in his shoes before, he’d seen what would happen. When had he forgotten? When had he decided not to care?
He’d become blinded in his own way, and now they’d both paid the price for it.

Mrs. Hughes was trying to console him but it was impossible to do. Thomas was crying so hard, was so overwhelmed by grief, that he could not understand the concept of calming down.

Of carrying on.

He’d wanted to preserve Edward’s sight for as long as possible, to get him out of the war unscathed. Instead, he’d merely prolonged it for a year at most; Edward was still blind, and he was still undoubtably going to commit suicide.

And what about himself?

Thomas had been shot, three times to his reckoning. What would his recovery be like? Had he damaged himself irreparably? Would he live through this? Would he die of sepsis, or lose his job security? What if by trying to do better he’d ended up making everything worse?

In that awful moment, Thomas was terrified. He couldn’t even bring his hands up to his face to wipe away the tears and snot that fell because he was too weak.

Mrs. Hughes wiped them away with her own handkerchief, soothing him as best she could.

“God what have I done?!” He howled out, “I should have died! I should have- why did I-?! Oh god — I couldn’t stop it! I tried so hard and I couldn’t stop it!”

His voice just got higher and higher till he was screeching in hysteria. All this work, all this effort, had been for the sake of keeping Edward safe.

And still… he’d failed.

“Thomas-“ Mrs. Hughes crooned his name like a mother might have, her hands upon his sodden cheeks. She stroked at his high cheekbones with weathered thumbs, her brown eyes misted over with affection. “Thomas, Listen to me… You have done an incredible thing! Edward Courtenay was nearly killed and you saved his life!”

But Thomas just shook his head. What was it with people’s fascination with barely scraping by? If having a pulse was the highest you could aim for that didn’t say much about the human race, now did it?

“He’ll be blind!” Thomas whimpered. His eyes felt raw, his cheeks were burning. Mrs. Hughes dabbed away every tear, but her handkerchief could not sap out his fever. “This will kill him. It’ll be so much worse-!”

The image of a shrunken in Edward, hunched and frightened upon his bed, was more than Thomas could bear. Those beautiful blue eyes… would he ever see them again? Thomas didn’t want to live in a world without those beautiful blue eyes.

“Don’t say such things!” Mrs. Hughes didn’t negotiate her life in terms of fatalities and extremes. “Being blind isn’t the end of the world.”

Maybe not literally but Thomas knew how Edward was going to handle the news; he’d seen it all before!

“It’ll be the end of the world for him.” Thomas croaked. “It’ll kill him.”
But as Thomas spoke, he felt a terrifying wave of acid rise up in his throat.

He was going to vomit, he couldn’t stop it! He couldn’t turn his head or-

And just like that, Thomas vomited all over his chest.

Thomas had had some awful things happen to him in his life. When he’d been very small, probably only four years old, he’d once accidentally shat himself while sitting in the wash tub. He’d been constipated and his mother had given him some medicine from the chemist…. needless to say it had worked.

He’d spent the past… —how many years?

Well— he’d been thirty-six when he’d traveled back in time, and when he’d come back he’d been twenty-one years old. Now he was twenty-seven, so he was technically forty-three years old with everything combined.

So he’d spent the past thirty-nine years avoiding defecating and vomiting upon himself. He’d nearly made it four decades, damnit.

“Oh god-“ But just like that Thomas vomited again and simultaneously abandoned his faith in a higher power.

He began to whimper, wondering what other evils would befall him before the day was over.

“I’m so sorry.” He had vomit in his mouth as he spoke. His tongue was covered in a fuzzy acid.

“It’s alright.” Mrs. Hughes was a steadfast sailor. She didn’t even call for a nurse, instead propping Thomas up with two borrowed pillows to help him out of his soiled top. “It’s perfectly alright.”

With a calm and cool air, Mrs. Hughes unbuttoned Thomas’ sweated pajama top to reveal his bare chest beneath. Thomas could now see that his right arm was completely swathed in gauze. It wrapped like a sling around his chest and opposite shoulder, keeping his bullet wound concealed under layers of iodine and healing salves. Deep purple bruises and puffy muscles spread out like a bomb blast… all the way to Thomas’ naval. How long would it take him to recover? How damaged was he?

Would he become like Bates, needing a cane to simply walk around? Would these three bullets ruin his life?

As Mrs. Hughes carefully wiped his chest with a warm cloth, Thomas tried to swish at his mouth where the acid was stinging the inside of his cheek. He coughed, gasping for clean air…

Mrs. Hughes muttered as she worked, setting her soiled cloth aside.

“Here we are now—“ She poured him a cup of water from a pitcher on his side table, and gently pushed her hand beneath his neck so that she might support him as he drank.

He took one sip, and then another, trying to clean out his mouth. It didn’t do much, but at least he couldn’t taste vomit anymore.

Mrs. Hughes let him lay back on his pillows, and allowed him to relax. After crying and vomiting, Thomas was terribly drained.
“You’re recovering from surgery,” Mrs. Hughes said. She ran her hands upon his temples, trying to get stray bits of hair away from his mouth and nose. “Several of them, in fact. You need to be easy on yourself, and let your body heal.”

Thomas groaned, a tiny pathetic noise drifting from his throat. How had he been so stupid? He’d be out of commission for weeks, surely months… how could he help Edward now?

Where was Edward?

“…Is he… is he here?” Thomas whispered. His throat was still scratchy, but the water had helped a bit. “Edward-“

“You’re to be awarded by the King for your bravery, again-“

“Damn the king!” Thomas cursed, his voice breaking. Mrs. Hughes looked a little disappointed. “Edward…”

“He’s not here, Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes said, “And there’s no point in you getting upset about that, because now is not the time for folly anyways. You’re to heal and take care of yourself, not Edward.”

“It wasn’t enough-“ Thomas was so miserable he could not think to reply to Mrs. Hughes’ words. “Damn me for it… It wasn’t enough. I’ve failed him. I knew he was going to be blinded… I knew and I failed… Damn it, damn it, damn it-!”

“Thomas-!” Mrs. Hughes tone became relatively harsh. Exhausted and weak, Thomas could not fight her anymore.

She gave him a reproachful glare, a little huffy as she re-situated herself in her chair: “Listen to me. You have saved a man’s life. You have faced down an enemy as great as Satan himself and won. You have escaped this horrible war… and you have done so with the pride that you have saved another. Yes, Courtenay has been blinded. And yes, you’ve been shot at several times… but that’s not the end of it for either of you! You can still help Courtenay. You can help him to adjust. You can give him a good start in life as a changed man, and send him on his way. Now are you going to tell me that you’re not going to do any of that because you’re too busy feeling sorry for yourself?”

Excellent question, but it wasn’t one that Thomas could answer. Feeling sorry for himself was one of his favorite hobbies… even if it had inspired some of his worst life choices.

He had to ask himself, if Mrs. Hughes thought that he hadn’t known it was possible Edward could be blinded… had she read the letter? Had Carson?

“…Carson didn’t read the letter, did he?” He murmured.

“No.” She smoothed out her dress upon her lap, “He didn’t.”

She sounded quite righteous in saying so.

“If he’d read the letter, you’d understand.” He closed his eyes; even that simple act alone helped him to rest slightly better.

“Understand what?”

“… I wanted to save him, Mrs. Hughes. S’why I did so much. Learned so much. Worked so hard. I knew this was gonna happen to him. I watched over him so carefully. I knew… I knew he’d be
blinded.”

“And how could you have known that?”

“Because I’m from a different reality.”

It felt incredibly good to say it out loud, after so many years of silence. It felt like a type of revelation, to be reborn again… and to finally tell the truth. The full, honest, utter truth.

A soft, rhythmic stroking sensation started up again against his forehead. Thomas blinked open his bleary, bloodshot eyes and found Mrs. Hughes above him, smiling and running her fingers through his hair.

“And what reality is this?” Mrs. Hughes asked. Her tone was kind; Thomas wondered if she even believed him.

“It’s… just like this one… but in the other reality I was so awful-” It made him choke up, to remember how horrific his life had been. God, would he ever forget the sound of everyone sucking on their teeth as he entered a room? “You all hated me.”

“No, we don’t.” She soothed, like he were a babe instead of a fully grown man, “No one hates you, Thomas. We love you. We were so afraid for you. Mr. Carson was worried sick; he couldn’t sleep when he learned you’d been hurt. He sat up and waited a whole night until he got the phone call that you’d made it out of surgery and were coming home… you know, he even met you at the station, and sat with you and waited until the ambulance came to take you to Downton Hospital? Do you remember that-?”

“No- not this reality.” Thomas muttered, talking over Mrs. Hughes, “The other one. The real one that I’m actually from. You all hated me there. An’ an’ the sorceress… The Heichecera… she gave me a chance to come here and to make it right. That’s why… That’s why I’ve been trying so hard to do good. In the other reality, you hated me. You all did-“

But he had to break off in order to yawn. He felt terribly drowsy in that moment, like he was being smothered to death by a golden blanket.

Mrs. Hughes tutted; there was a tiny smile at the corner of her wry lips.

“I think the morphine is making you sleepy.” Mrs. Hughes whispered the words. “Why don’t you close your eyes and go to sleep?”

She didn’t believe him, “S’true…” He pleaded.

She just smiled, rubbing his forehead.

“Believe me,” And like a lamb, he bleated, “Please. Please say you believe me?”

“I believe you.” She said, no doubt just wanting him to hush and be still, “I’ll believe you if you’ll close your eyes and go to sleep.”

So he closed his eyes at her command and did not stir save to say, “…Thank you.”
Elsie Hughes watched Thomas Barrow sleep for a solid eight minutes before feeling certain that he would stay under. For a moment, Thomas jerked a tiny bit, his muscles slowly unclenching as his body relaxed and drifted into a deep, medicated sleep. Satisfied, she straightened back up in her chair and picked up the soiled linens she’d deposited at her feet; oh, such a mess!

A nurse with tightly wrapped hair spotted her, and came walking up the aisle in a sharp trot. She wound her way through beds of wounded soldiers, though this wing was only for those recently out of surgery. The men were whimpering in their beds, their wives, children, sisters, and mothers clustered about their sides to tend to them. In such early stages, it was often that the family cared for the patient, in order to give the nurses some relief.

“Out again?” the nurse asked, pausing to take a glance at Thomas’ clipboard which was hanging over the end of his bed. Whatever she saw, she liked, and she put it away to pick up Elsie’s bundle.

“Like a light.” Elsie sat back down, her feet slightly sore. “The morphine is making him say ludicrous things.”

Imagine it, Thomas Barrow talking about alternate realities. Elsie would have been more prepared if he’d begged her to believe he was a centaur.

“Oh, it usually does.” The nurse wasn’t troubled by it. She took the ruined linens and night shirt over to a hanging hamper which was tacked by a nail to the wall, then returned to Thomas’ bedside to monitor his morphine drip. “I had a soldier talking with his dead mother for half an hour before he realized he was just rambling to thin air. Didn’t remember a thing the next morning.”

Elsie relaxed a bit in her chair, though it was difficult to do with a straight back and no padding to sit on. She took up Thomas’ hand, noting several scratches upon his long pale fingers; she wondered where he’d gotten them from.

“He just told me that he’s from a different reality where everyone hated him.”

“Really?” The nurse mused, “That’s a new one. I’ve never heard that before!” With nimble fingers, she dialed back the morphine just a hair. “What else did he say?”

“He said a sorceress gave him a chance to come to this reality and make it right.” Elsie tutted.

“I wish a sorceress would give me a chance to have a night off.” The nurse sulked, casting Elsie a glance out of the side of her dull brown eyes. “My feet are killing me.”

“Onward and upward my dear.” Elsie praised. Nurses were the hardest workers in a hospital, and no one would convince her otherwise, “You’re doing great things for the country.”

Pleased to be commended for her service, the nurse took a shine to Elsie: “How about I get us a cup a’ tea.”

“Thank you.” Elsie said, for in truth a cup of tea would be lovely. “I think I’ll be here for a while.”

And indeed, she would sit with Thomas for another three hours before Sybil Crawley arrived for the night shift and took over her spot.
To say that Thomas had screwed the pooch by getting shot three times was a gross understatement. He’d officially gotten the pooch pregnant and been forced into a shotgun wedding.

The pain of getting shot three times was nothing like he’d experienced before; there was no simple stitch and repair of his hand muscles, no easy therapy of clenching a rubber ball and flexing his fingers. Every sinew in Thomas’ right shoulder was twisted like poorly wrapped wire, and even the simplest of actions required intense concentration. Thomas felt like an invalid, forced to ask for help even to use the restroom or pick up a cup of tea. It was shite luck that Thomas was right handed; it resulted in Thomas calling for a pad of paper and a pen in order to get back into the habit of using his hand muscles without tremendous pain.

Writing turned to stretching.
Stretching turned to holding.
Holding turned to moving.
Moving turned to lifting.

And so, hour after hour, day after day, as Thomas learned to grow strong again, his right arm eventually re-gained its use, though that wasn’t saying much. While he could no longer move with the same speed and dexterity he once had, Thomas was still able to use his arm in the way that a servant might… and for that, he was incredibly grateful.

His hip, however, was another story.

It turned out that when he’d been shot in the back, the bullet had missed his spine but had clipped his right pelvis, particularly the iliac curve. It was a sneaky and difficult injury, because so long as you were laying flat or standing up straight you didn’t notice the pain. When he made to sit or stand however, Thomas would feeling an aching grating burn that caused him to hiss and stall. Bending over was an awful affair, and picking something up from the floor took much longer than Thomas would like. When he took off his shirt and looked at his back in a mirror, he found the bullet wound to be ugly, inflamed, and hot. The nurses were quick to change his bandages and to give him salves… but it was by far the worse of his wounds. It had been the bullet to render him unconscious from the pain… the bullet to do the most damage.

But there was another thing about his wounds, something quite unnerving that no one had an explanation for… save Thomas.

Thomas’ initial surgeries had been bloody affairs, or so he was told by the nurses. He’d arrived on English soil, screaming and yet at the same time unconscious. Upon being operated on, the nurses had cut off his clothes to discover that his bullet wounds had already been stitched with black and gold thread, as tough as steel and as tightly wrapped as the knots in chicken wire.

The nurses had been extremely confused, and had tried to contact the Ypres division to find out who on earth had bound Thomas’ wounds so cruelly and forcefully. Colonel Wavell had returned the message, informing the medical staff in Dover that no one had operated on Thomas. He’d been pulled off the battle field and put directly onto an ambulance for Dunkirque. From the ambulance he’d been put on a boat… and from the boat to another ambulance and straight to the hospital.

There had been no time to operate, no one on both the ambulances and boat who could have been capable of such a feat.

So who had done it?

The nurses were mystified, the doctors were angry, and everyone assumed he was just stitched up by some random field soldier with metal thread. When the doctors had tried to cut the thread in an effort
to re-stitch him with more sanitary medical procedures, they'd found the wounds began to spurt with blood as if an artery had been split.

It was like the metal thread was trying to force itself back upon Thomas’ wounds… like it didn’t want to be budged.

So the metal thread had stayed, and the doctors had instead opened Thomas up with a separate incision in order to remove shards of the bullets. They’d even considered sawing off part of his pelvis to protect his body from infection… but the pelvic bone had apparently already been doctored on by somebody.

But who?

It had been the Heichecera, that was Thomas’ only explanation. Somehow, someway, she had gotten into his body and healed his wounds just as she’d done before during his initial cross over from his original reality. How she had done it was beyond Thomas’ understanding. The why… that was more confusing.

Why would she allow him to live? Why had she intervened?

More and more, as Thomas interacted with his reality and explored the edges of its boundaries, he found the Heichecera waiting for him. When John Bates had kissed him in a farmer’s field, the Heichecera had been there. When Edward had been shot and Thomas had intervened, the Heichecera had been there too.

Why…? Was she trying to tell him something? Was she trying to warn him?

When Thomas had finally grown strong enough to get out of bed, he’d begun to ask questions to anyone who would listen. Where was Edward? Was he safe? Was he even alive? The answers had come from Dr. Clarkson, who had inquired to the war office and had found that Edward was currently stationed in London, being operated on by an eye specialist. Apparently his family was funding the operations, which was the only reason why he hadn’t been shipped straight over to a local hospital and left to fend for himself like Thomas had. It was one of the many ways that toffs often had it better in life than the lower class.

Thomas would push the boundaries of his strength, then collapse into his cot and try to recover for another attempt. Mrs. Hughes would come and sit with him as often as she could, but the abbey staff were stretched so thin that no one else could manage it. Her visits had likewise been strained… so Thomas didn’t take it personally if he was alone.

He knew the only way he was going to be in good company was if he could get out of this damnable bed, and get back over to Downton Abbey so that he could be of use. Until Edward was finished with his rounds of surgery, and shipped back to Downton Village Hospital… well… Thomas was a man without a mission. He needed something to do, and he had a feeling Carson would appreciate the extra hands.

Getting there, however, was another event.

It was a balmy Sunday afternoon, and Thomas was taking his routine nap after undergoing intense physical therapy. It was no wonder then that, in a malaise, Thomas dreamed of a comforting image.

Someone with blonde curly hair… Edward?
No, Jimmy.

Jimmy was above him, a beautiful blue sky crowning his head like a halo. Those sweet aubergine eyes beckoned him back into the world of the living.

“Thomas…” He sing-songed. The curve of his lips was rosy and warm; if only Thomas could kiss them- “Thomas, wake up… wake up!”

Thomas sucked in a breath, then another, and finally managed to open his eyes.

It was darkening outside; dusk had come to pass. Next to his bed, Sybil Crawley was looking over his chart, seemingly impressed with the progress he’d made. She’d no doubt come to change his bandages.

It was a wonderful thing, to watch Sybil without her realizing. She had this intense look in her beautiful brown eyes, and her beauty was so obvious that even a man like Thomas could not help but admit her attraction. He certainly didn’t desire her… but he could understand why another man would.

“…Am I a poor patient, M’lady?” Thomas spoke up. His voice was broken from strain.

Sybil jumped, taken aback, and looked about with a quirky smile to see that Thomas was awake.

“Thomas!” She was in a cheery mood; Thomas wondered why. “You’re up. I’m glad, I’ve been working day and night to keep you ticking.”

She pulled down his covers a bit, fluffing his pillow and straining out a cool clothe to lay upon his forehead. Apparently he’d worked himself into a fever again… it was something he was prone to do after intense therapy.

Sybil rummaged through his bedside drawers, pulling out a stethoscope which she laced into her ears. She unbuttoned his top a little bit, placing the stethoscope upon his breast over his heart.

“Deep breath?” she asked. Thomas did as she requested; Sybil pondered whatever it was she heard on the other end, then nodded. Slinging the stethoscope around her neck, she said, “Dr. Clarkson will be please. It’s a miracle that you’re still here, really… but you’re doing quite well. I’m shocked!”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, M’lady.” Thomas muttered. It was good to know other people believed in him.

Sybil just tutted and turned away to put Thomas’ clipboard back over the foot of his bed. “Don’t be silly.” She said, “You’re my favorite patient.”

Well, that was nice to know!

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re my footman, and I think it’s right at some point in our lives we should give back to those that have done so much for us.”

Oh, but sweeter words were never spoken. Sybil bounced a bit on the balls of her feet, re-tying her hair cloth where it was beginning to slip a bit.

“Is that a guilty conscience I hear, M’lady?” Thomas teased. Sybil laughed.

“Maybe a bit.”
Thomas shook his head, which made him feel slightly dizzy. It still didn’t stop him from smiling though: “You don’t have to feel guilty, M’lady. Sometime’s its…” (absolute shit) “Hard to be a servant… but it’s never been hard to serve you.”

Sybil was charmed by this. She perched delicately on the edge of Thomas’ bed, lending a more comfortable atmosphere to their conversation. She was less of a nurse now, and more a friend lending an ear. The lights were low, the background was quiet… Thomas wondered how many other patients were asleep.

“No more talk of that now.” Sybil said, carefully straightening his covers so that his upper arms didn’t get chilled in the cooling night air. “You’re my patient now, not my footman, and I won’t have you tussling your blankets by making a fuss over me.”

But as far as Thomas was concerned, he’d gladly make a fuss over Sybil even if there was a bullet in his arm… and shoulder… and pelvis.

“Yes, M’lady.”

“And no more calling me that!” She admonished, “It’s Nurse Crawley, and I shan't be called anything else.”

Thomas wondered if Mr. Carson had heard of Sybil’s latest request. The idea of him calling her Nurse Crawley was a little far fetched.

“Yes, Nurse Crawley.”

“Very good.” She said. Thomas’ eyes were so heavy that he felt it was a crime to keep them open. Sybil didn’t seem to mind if Thomas was being less that polite. In fact, as Thomas found himself growing more relaxed into his pillow, he felt Sybil stand up and turn down his bedside light until he was swallowed up in the gloom.

When Thomas woke up hours later, someone had been kind enough to bring him a second blanket… he had a feeling it was Sybil, again.

~*~

Of course, Thomas was nothing if not consistent with his therapy.

After having studied extensively to become a head healer, Thomas found himself better equipped to understand how the body healed. There were bucket loads of small things that most soldiers did not know which invoked better health, and Thomas used them all to his flagrant advantage. He did not indulge in the same meals that most wounded officers did. Instead, he focused on foods high in protein and low in fat, constantly re-hydrating himself as he pushed harder and harder to get up his strength. He bound his feet at night to try and give himself better blood circulation, and did stretches in a hot bath to ease the ache of his muscles. He walked, daily, as far as his body would take him… and he drank cup after cup of water… not tea.

First he walked daily around the ward. Then he walked around the outer hall. When he finally made it to the nurse’s station, Thomas started branching out into the open courtyards, and finally got to where to he could do two laps around the whole hospital before feeling tuckered out. He pushed it as far as he could. Two laps became three, four… five! And quite suddenly Thomas didn’t get hit with waves of exhaustion anymore.
His right arm was still a pain in the ass, particularly when it came to rotating in its socket, but Thomas had given up long ago on the idea that his arm was going to behave normally after being shot at twice. He was damn lucky he wasn’t paralyzed either; the bullet in his back had gotten far too close to his spine for comfort.

On a sunny and chipper March afternoon, Thomas decided he wanted to go home… and Sybil Crawley couldn’t stop him.

She tried, bless her.

“Now, you mustn’t push yourself too much!” Sybil warned, helping Thomas to shrug on his jacket; it was still difficult to get his right arm to go backwards. “You took two bullets in this arm, and that’s going to slow you down. I mean it, Thomas! Don’t be hard on yourself-! You’re your own worst enemy.”

Funnily enough, Thomas had heard those words before.

“I can’t slow down, M’lady.” Thomas said, “Not when there’s things to be done. I’ll be no good in surgery now so I have to find some other use.” The safety net of a medical career was ruined. Who would want a healer with a ruined right arm?

Thomas picked up a suit brush, and began to carefully dust off any stray hairs or dirt. He wouldn’t want to return to the abbey looking a mess. Last time had been bad enough.

“Well, I’ll be coming up for dinner tonight and if I find out that you overworked yourself, I won’t be happy. I mean it!”

“Any word on Edward?” Thomas asked. Over the weeks, Thomas had relayed every bit of information on Edward he could to Sybil, begging her to ask Dr. Clarkson to his health. It was due to this that Sybil had become aware of just how dire Edward’s situation was, and had used her influence to ask Dr. Clarkson to let Edward be moved to Downton.

“Only that he’s not doing well.” Sybil said, taking the brush from Thomas over his shoulder to continue dusting him upon his back. “I’ve told Dr. Clarkson that you want him brought here, but he thinks he might be better suited to London. There’s more resources there for his eyes-“

“Well, he’s wrong.” Thomas snapped. He wouldn’t have Edward on his own in London, particularly if he couldn’t see! “Edward will be terribly frightened and glum. I know him intimately. I understand how his minds works. I need to have him here so that I can care for him.”

He hadn’t meant for his words to come out so harsh, but they bit like steel non the less. Sybil was reproachful, setting down the brush on Thomas’ bedside table before turning away.

“Well, as I say, I spoke to him.” She said, a little stiff as she walked off.

She didn’t get four steps before Thomas’ conscience bit at him and he had to call back: “Sybil-!”

She paused, turning on her heel; it wasn’t often that Thomas referred to her by her Christian name.

Morose, Thomas gestured aimlessly between the pair of them with his left hand, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. Certainly not to you of all people… you’re a fine woman, and a lady if I ever knew one.”
“Thank you, Thomas.” Sybil smoothed out her apron, “But there are more important things than being a lady. I’ve learned that as of late.” And she looked oddly perplexed as she said it. Thomas wondered if Tom Branson had begun to flirt with her yet. Maybe he had, and she was starting to wonder at the social lines that had so plagued her life as of yet.

“…Quite right.” Thomas said, before donning his hat so that his hair part was unimpeded.

He had work to do.

The walk back to Downton was broken only by Thomas hitching a ride from a thankful farmer. There was one thing to be said about being in uniform: you could garner favors everywhere if you were talking to the family of a fellow soldier. There was something people loved to glorify about a hero returned home, particularly if the hero’s injuries were inconvenient and painful, but not obvious or gory. It was an ugly, irritable truth that most soldiers who suffered burn victims and amputations were outcasted by the same men and women they’d given their limbs and flesh to protect. You’d think a bit of sympathy wouldn’t be too hard to find for someone who’d gone through having acid dumped on their face for the sake of your rights as an English citizen…. But some people were just picky like that.

Picky and full of shit.

The sight of Downton’s flag, fluttering in the afternoon breeze, was one that put a wild spree of joy in Thomas’ heart. The pangs of anxiety, wrapped in giddiness, were making it difficult to walk at an understandable pace when he was dropped off. The farmer wanted to ride him all the way down the drive, but Thomas wouldn’t hear of it. He’d been sitting behind the horse for a good half hour, and had watched the mare shit for a good half mile up the road. If Carson saw dung in the gravel, it’d be some poor hall boy’s job to scrape it up… Thomas didn’t want to make trouble if he could avoid it.

So instead, Thomas just hobbled like an idiot up the walk. Twice, he nearly tripped over the gravel. Despite his near blunders, Thomas did not slow down. There was such joy in his heart that every bound was like leaping over a mile. How hard had it been to go from Ypres to Downton? It had taken him three years, ungodly amounts of pain and suffering, and three bullets… but he was home.

He was finally home, and he’d never have to go away again. Could sweeter words be compiled from the English language?

As Thomas finally rounded the bend in the area yard, he found a hall boy chopping wood by the name of Robert. Robert would stay with Downton right up until 1926, which was the last year that Thomas had known of before being transported back in time. Robert had come to hate Thomas in the prior reality, having learned during the “Jimmy Escapade” that Thomas was a different sort of man. He’d nearly gone running to the police until Carson had made him shut up, and even then he’d been absolutely bitter about the whole scenario. The only reason that Thomas had been able to survive Robert’s heckling was because Thomas had ranked over him as Under Butler. Robert had been too afraid of the repercussions to dare voice his anger out loud.

Robert was not alone in the yard, too. Ethel was there, reading a magazine behind an enormous stack of chopped wood. She seemed to be sneaking a break, for Thomas could not imagine another reason for a maid to be outside during such a late hour. She ought to be helping Anna get the dining room
set up for dinner.

With his knowledge of Robert’s true colors, Thomas kept a wary eye on the lad. Even so, Robert was the first to spot him hobbling into the area yard, and the first to take interest.

“It’s you!” Robert piped up. He was only twelve at the moment, hardly a teenager, “The war hero!”

“Steady on.” Thomas said, for he was by no definition a war hero for Robert. He’d been shot trying to save his homosexual lover, not a beloved General. “Tell Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes that I’m home, please?”

At once, Robert left the area yard. It was a mark of his immaturity and inexperience that he did not put up his wood axe in its proper place. It lay upon the stone, doomed to collect rain and rust, till Thomas stepped forward and plucked it up. With his left hand, he took the axe and smacked it hard into the chopping block, which was nothing more than an uprooted tree stump from the abbey’s western yard.

Ethel came around the pile of chopped wood, her pretty teeth gleaming as she set her magazine aside.

“Mr. Barrow!” She spoke his name like it were smitten poetry, and at once Thomas found himself growing antsy. Damnit, he’d forgotten Ethel had a soft spot for him. Daisy had been bad enough-! “I wondered when I’d see you again. The house has been talkin’ about you comin’ home.”

“Here I am.” Thomas said. “I’m well enough not to need a hospital bed, and it isn’t fair to take up room when I can be of use somewhere else.”

Ethel chewed on her bottom lip, till it was flush and rosy with blood. She reached out with a careful hand, and petted at his lapels where his brass insignia was pinned. She fingered it, running a pale thumb over its dulled edges.

“Will you stay long?” She murmured in a sultry voice.

“…For as long as Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes need me.” Thomas said. He tried to pull back politely from Ethel’s grip, but he only ended up getting both her hands involved as she reached up to begin feathering at the felt of his lapels.

“Well….” She gave him a saucy smirk, “I never got the chance to hear back from you after my letter. I wondered if you… liked what you saw?”

Well, Thomas no judge of tits, but from what he’d seen Ethel had enormous knockers somewhere underneath that frayed maid’s uniform. That being said, he wasn’t really swayed into any sort of emotion by the thought of it, so he found himself stumbling over simple words as he tried to say: “Not really” and ended up saying “About that-“

But even as Thomas attempted to nip this whole insanity in the bud, the back door opened and O’Brien of all people came out. Ethel looked about, and immediately drew back in a sulky manor. Clearly she and O’Brien were still irritable with one another; thank god for animosities!

“Keep your hands off him, you silly cow.” O’Brien snapped, “He’s a soldier not a pretty boy in your magazine.”

“I can do what I like, can’t I? He wasn’t complaining.” Ethel sneered, snatching up her magazine and hiding it against her chest as if she thought O’Brien might rip it from her hands.
“Because he was shocked speechless.” O’Brien deduced, which was about right on the money. Now ignoring Ethel, O’Brien stepped forward to give Thomas an appraising look.

“… So… you’re finally home.” O’Brien said. She nodded to herself before continuing on, “Good, I was getting worried. What about your blighty?”

Thomas made a noncommittal noise, pointing to his right shoulder and upper arm before tapping at his lower left back.

“Nothin’ you can see with a livery on.” Thomas said, for which he was eternally grateful. He’d always been embarrassed by his hand after the war.

“Like all the good bits.” Ethel added. O’Brien looked like she wanted to set the girl on fire.

“Come inside.” O’Brien ground out through clenched teeth, “Mrs. Hughes is waiting for you in the servant’s hall. We’re a bit pinched.”

“I’m sure.” Thomas said, following after O’Brien as she walked away, “That’s why I’m here.”

To return to the downstairs, and to know that he wouldn’t have to leave back for Ypres was a gift from God himself. The life, the passion, the noise, the smells… Thomas surrounded himself in it, like a babe being swaddled in its crib. He passed Carson’s office and saw a half decanted bottle of wine sitting on the desk. He neared the kitchen and heard Mrs. Patmore snapping at a scullery maid: “Snap those peas! Don’t bend them! You’re cutting them short not limbering them up!”

The servant’s hall was a little askew, with Daisy trying to collect tea cups so that the table might be cleared for supper later that night and Anna in a tizzy as she looked for help with the linens. Ethel was a little embarrassed as Anna finally caught sight of her, crying out: “Ethel, there you are! Come and— OH!”

For the sight of Thomas stopped them all momentarily in their tracks.

Like a glitch in the cogs of a well oiled clock, the unnatural assault could not last long. The powers of Downton Abbey forced everyone to keep moving lest they be squashed in the gears, and so it was that Daisy set down her tray of tea cups to come about the table so that she could hug Thomas tight around the chest.

“I can’t believe it! It really is you-! Home for good-!” She squeezed him like she was trying to kill him, and Thomas groaned in protest.

“Eh-Daisy-“ Thomas coughed.

“Get off him!” O’Brien snapped, “He’s wounded, you daft goose!”

Daisy leapt back alarmed, as if she expected to see blood on Thomas’ uniform. There was no blood to be found, but Thomas could not help wincing as pain radiated from his shoulder. Christ, she’d felt like a python-!

Anna refrained from hugging him, thank god, but she still greeted him quite warmly. Daisy was now obviously embarrassed, stepping back so that Anna could come forward.

“Thomas, we’re so glad to have you home.” She said. She gestured to the other maids behind her, Lily and Helen… Both were familiar faces; the girls would stay until 1925 when they’d each head
off to get married.

“Lily, Helen, this is Thomas Barrow.” She introduced them. “You remember I’ve told you?”

Lily smiled, waving with sooty fingers, “How d’you do?”

Helen nodded her head, “It’s good to have you home.”

“Thank you.” Thomas said, nodding to both of them. “A pleasure to meet you both.”

What a queer thing to say to people you already knew.

But just then, Mrs. Hughes walked into the servant’s hall looking downright irritable!

“Oh, I can’t find her anywhere!” Mrs. Hughes snapped, “I even checked in the- Ethel!” She snapped, spotting the girl hiding by the piano now, “Where on Earth have you been? I’ve been looking for you all over, you’re supposed to be helping Anna get ready for dinner! Neither of you have changed into your black and whites and we’re crawling on five o’clock!”

“Thomas is home-!” Ethel threw out the excuse like a lifeline as if she prayed Thomas would net her back into safety, “I was making him comfortable!”

“Uncomfortable is more like,” O’Brien sneered. Mrs. Hughes looked like she wanted to give Ethel a longer talking to, but she set the matter aside for the moment as she instead turned to Thomas and gave him a warm, watery smile.

“Oh Thomas,” She sighed, reaching out to touch his right arm. She did so exactly over his bullet wound, and massaged the skin with care as if she was fearful for an ache. “Thank goodness you’re feeling a bit back to yourself. For a while there you had me worried… The things you said!”

“I’m sure I was a hoot.” Thomas’ tones were clipped.

“You did a lot of nattering, that’s for certain.” Mrs. Hughes didn’t seem to be holding it against him though, “But you’ve come out from under the water, and a good thing too. Mr. Carson was going to fall to pieces with worry.”

“Is it true you got shot?” Ethel asked. Mrs. Hughes looked about, eyes narrowed in distaste.

“Yes.” Thomas could see now that Ethel was clearly the trouble maker in the house. Everyone either looked to her for comedic relief or terror. O’Brien in particular was deeply displeased. But why? “I was shot three times.”

“You must be terribly strong to survive through such a thing,” Ethel said… but the way she said ‘survive’ made it sound like she was aligning Thomas to a super soldier.

“No. I’m just lucky. Better men than me have gone down for less.” He refused to pander to the idea that he’d somehow gotten through this tragedy by being better than the others. How many men had he seen run out onto the field only to get shot in the head and keel over dead? Had they been undeserving, somehow? Weaker, in a way that only certain people could see?

No, Thomas was certain it was all down to sheer ugly luck.

“But… I’m glad to be home,” Thomas said, “And I’m hoping I can be of some use again. Now that I’m shot I won’t be able to work in the RAMC. I was hoping that I could earn my keep here
“Don’t talk like that.” Mrs. Hughes soothed him, patting him gently upon the arm. It just so happened that when she did, she accidentally touched an inflamed bit of skin, so Thomas hissed automatically and withdrew a bit. “Oh-! I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s alright.” Thomas said.

“Where did it ‘appen?” Daisy asked, clearly embarrassed to be the center of attention as all eyes fell on her. She flustered at Mrs. Hughes expression of irritation, trying to explain herself better, “Just so we know so we don’t hurt you.”

Without a word, Thomas pointed to his right shoulder, his right arm, and behind his back.

“Shoulder’s a bit of a bother.” He told them all, “The socket’s sore in the rain. Aren’t I lucky I live in England?”

“Don’t you worry about that, we’ll keep you warm by the fire.” Mrs. Hughes said. “You’ll feel a mite better once you’ve had a cup of tea.”

At the sound of the gong, however, everyone stiffened. Anna and Ethel swapped a look of terror before both ran for the stairwell.

“Get into your black and whites!” Mrs. Hughes cried out, “Hurry, you haven’t got any time to dilly about!”

“Where’s William?” Thomas asked, for he hadn’t seen the lad anywhere. Why wasn’t he getting ready to take up dishes to the warming pantry? “He should be working-“

“Oh, he’s off training in the army.” Daisy said, now scurrying around the table to grab all the cups and mugs at a frantic pace.

“Oh no…” Thomas groaned aloud, cupping his head in his hand. Why hadn’t he just been shot a bit sooner, then he could have told William to stop acting like cannon fodder! It was all going downhill from here… He’d come home briefly, Thomas could remember that, but he’d still end up being killed! “God, I thought I’d get back in time to stop him.”

“Now, don’t say that.” Mrs. Hughes soothed, “This is what William wants to do, and he’s making us all very proud just as you did. I’m sure when he gets back from training, he’ll be delighted to see you again. You’ll have to send him off to war with a bit of wisdom!”

“Oh I’ll give him a bit of wisdom-“ Thomas muttered, watching as the house began to fall into its routine. Soon enough, the dishes would be ready to go up… but where was Mr. Carson? “But where’s Mr. Carson-“

Yet even as Thomas spoke, Mr. Carson appeared. Ethel and Anna were back, now in their white and blacks. Ethel’s hair piece kept falling out till Anna had to stop in mid-stride on the bottom stair just to help her pin it back in. Clearly curly hair was a burden and a blessing.

Mr. Carson was so busy spinning about in circles, trying to control four different things at once, that he didn’t even see Thomas. First he barked in the kitchen for the trays to be laid out, only to realize no one was there to lay the trays, then he did a double take at Ethel and completely forgot one errand to start another one.

“Ethel, get ready to go upstairs and help with the luggage.” Mr. Carson ordered, “They’re almost
back with Sir Richard."

“We’ve got a visitor, Mr. Carson.” O’Brien called out; when Carson spun on the spot, confused, O’Brien jerked her head in Thomas’ direction.

Carson looked once, twice, then jumped with a start clutching at his chest.

“My god!” Carson barked, clearly shocked to see Thomas back in the house. “I- I didn’t realize you’d be back today!”

“Mr. Carson, let me help with the luggage!” Thomas protested. “It ought to be a footman- Anna and Ethel need to get the dining room ready-“

“I can’t ask that of you.” Mr. Carson said, though it was obvious from the pained expression on his face that he sorely wished he could, “Not after all you’ve been through. You’re home now and you ought to rest-“

Thomas shook his head, taking off his hat and setting it upon the servant’s table.

“I cannot do that.” Thomas snapped, “I flat out refuse. I’m getting into a livery right now, and I’m helping you serve dinner tonight. You can’t just not have a footman, you’ll fall to pieces-“

“But we have no money to pay you-!” Mrs. Hughes protested.

“Call it rent.” Thomas sneered.

“Oh— I— well—“ Mr. Carson threw up his hands, unable to control all the variables that life chucked at him, “Alright, alright, but be snappy about it! We haven’t got any time!”

Hallelujah. He was going to be back in livery and comforted by the routine of the house. He was so delighted by the turn of events he could sing.

Thomas made a beeline to the linen closet, where the servant’s liveries were kept in a separate cupboard that Mrs. Hughes had to unlock. She followed him in, letting him have the free rein of the changing room, then began to pull out pieces from the bottom shelves where the footman’s liveries were kept.

“I’ve still got your old uniform right here. I kept it together in a box.” Mrs. Hughes said, “There might be a crease in a few places, but we’ll just have to deal with that as it comes.”

“I’m not bothered, honest-“ And Thomas let out a groan as he pulled out his green striped vest. Sweet dreams were made of these! “Oh, there’s a sight for sore eyes…”

He set his vest down, and began to unbutton his uniform to try and shrug out as fast as he could. His injuries, however, were slowing him up and causing him to wince. Even as Thomas tried to pull his undershirt off, he had to stop with a grimace.

“Damn…” He cursed. Mrs. Hughes was clearly worried, her arms now full of Thomas’ uniform pieces. “I need help getting out of this undershirt. My shoulder’s being a twat-“

He wondered if Mrs. Hughes might help him, but that seemed too personal even for a woman who had essentially wiped vomit off his chest and neck. The idea of her seeing him undress was like
something out of an uncomfortable dream.

“I need help, but I can’t ask you, can I.” Thomas mumbled.

“Well, I’ll be happy to fetch Mr. Lang.” Mrs. Hughes said, giving him a sympathetic smile.

“Who-?” Thomas was taken aback. Who the hell was…? Oh-…. Oh that was right! Lang was the valet that O’Brien had been soppy over. He had to wonder if there was something going on between those two, although to be fair the thought of O’Brien getting sweet on anyone made him want to be ill.

“Mr. Lang has replaced Mr. Bates.” Mrs. Hughes explained. Thomas cursed, knowing now that while he’d been away Bates had likewise been carted off by that nagging wretch of a wife of his. God, how that woman had been the bane of Anna’s existence! And now it was about to get worse, with Bates surely about to head towards the fateful disaster of being labeled a murdered under false pretenses. Thomas had to stop it! …But could he? Was that even in his power?

The more Thomas thought about it, as of late, the more he had to wonder what he could truly control.

“… I wish I could have done something.” Thomas murmured. In the tiny mirror that hung behind the closet door, Thomas studied his reflection. Even now, he felt like his age was showing. Maybe it was just the growing bags beneath his eyes. Twice over now, he was being forced to watch himself age… and he knew his eyes would never hold their youthful hue again.

He was grateful that Edward had been able to see him before he became tarnished by age.

“So do I.” Mrs. Hughes said, taking Thomas’ trousers from him so that he was now left in nothing but socks, garters, pants, and an undershirt. “Let me go fetch Mr. Lang-“

“No, no, I can manage.” Thomas didn’t like the idea of being dressed by a man he didn’t know. It was uncomfortably intimate, and frankly Thomas didn’t like a man seeing him half-naked unless it was on purpose.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I don’t like to be dressed by another man. Maybe you can imagine why.”

Mrs. Hughes smiled, patted him upon his left arm, and then left him alone to close the closet door with a curt snap. Alone and unbothered, Thomas began to try and pull his undershirt off one inch at a time. He could not do the simple action of crossing his arms and lifting, but he could take his shirt at the collar bone and pull it over his head with an almighty tug.

Thomas tried, only to end up halfway stuck with his arms pinned at the elbows. He felt like a dismal idiot as the door opened again; no doubt Mrs. Hughes was back to try and give him some more aid.

“Sorry-!” Thomas moaned, “Just- yank it over my head or something-“

But suddenly rather youthful hands were upon his arms, tugging his shirt away, and when Thomas’ vision was finally clear he was given the horrifying sight of Ethel Parks in extremely close quarters, grinning delightedly as she held Thomas’ undershirt to her breast like a trophy.

“Jesus Chr-!” Thomas couldn’t even get the words out he was so shocked. Had the woman completely lost her mind?! “Are you crazy?! Mrs. Hughes will have your neck!”
“Some things are worth dyin’ for.” Ethel said in a breathless voice. She was suddenly on tip toe, leaning in to run her hands upon Thomas’ bare chest. Thomas froze like a rabbit in the gaze of a double barrel, terrified!

“Ethel, stop-.” Thomas begged. “Please, I don’t-!”

The door opened, and for a moment Thomas was terrified he’d be caught by Carson. But it was only Anna, and the look on her face was that of absolute outrage.

“I thought I saw you sneak in here!” She hissed, furious, and pulled Ethel away by the arm so that she could no longer bother Thomas. “I won’t let you bother Thomas, you’re not meant to be in here when he’s undressing!”

“I was just trying to help him with his livery!” Ethel said, which may in all honesty have been slightly true, given how hurt she looked.

“I don’t believe you!” Anna wouldn’t be budged, “Now get out of here, or I’ll tell Mrs. Hughes! I ought to give you the smack!”

But Ethel now looked truly embarrassed, cheeks flushed as red as her curly hair. Cowed at being caught out, Ethel turned and left without another word. She looked like she might actually cry.

As soon as Ethel had left the linen pantry, Anna closed the door to the livery cupboard so that she and Thomas were now quite alone. Finally, a woman he wouldn’t mind seeing him half naked.

“She’s completely mad.” Thomas said, allowing Anna to help him pull out all the pieces of his livery. He immediately began to shrug on his trousers, buttoning them so that he was at least somewhat decent. Anna had brought a shoe brush with her, and she bent down to start polishing hurriedly so that the dirt of the outer world was hidden underneath a glorious shine.

“Mrs. Hughes told me to help you get dressed, but I saw Ethel sneak in when Mrs. Hughes’ back was turned.” Anna clambered back up, setting her shoe brush aside, but paused as she saw the bullet wound on Thomas’ back. The livid bruising, which stretched all the way up to the bottom of his shoulder blades, gave Anna pause. She did not know what to do but reach out and gently touch the bandage, horrified.

“…Oh, Thomas.” She whispered.

“There isn’t time.” Thomas said, which was quite true. He had to dress, and rapidly, if he was to help Mr. Carson with luggage and dinner.

Anna re-steeled herself, and helped Thomas to put on a clean undershirt. His shirtsleeves weren’t ironed well enough, and his bib had a slightly mothy smell but Thomas didn’t care. When he looked in the mirror, he saw a man that he recognized. That act alone was worth its weight in gold to him after three years in Ypres.

“Mr. Carson gave me this.” Anna said, pulling out a pair of cufflinks, “They’re a spare set from his office.”

“Thank you.” Thomas put them on at once, and Anna helped him to shrug on his outer jacket. Now it was all down to pinching the corners and smoothing out the wrinkles. She began to tug at his sleeves, trying to get the uniform onto his frame correctly. “Anna… I heard that Mr. Bates is gone for the moment.”
Anna tensed, and did not meet his eyes. Thomas could sense a great woe within her, and knew that Bates was a terribly sore subject for her.

…And why not, when she was in love with him?

As Anna turned to close the cupboard doors, Thomas took her by the elbow so that she had to stop. Anna glanced at him, her blue eyes round and innocent.

“It won’t be for long.” Thomas murmured, “I promise you.”

She nodded, but didn’t seem all that sure.

“He’ll come back!” Thomas urged, feeling a bit like an older brother consoling his younger sister over a beau. “She can’t hold him down forever, and when she’s out of the way he’ll come right back here to see you again. How could he not, when he loves you?”

Anna smiled, and in that moment there was such affection in her gaze that Thomas almost felt a heat spread over his skin.

“I’ve missed you, Thomas.” She said.

The feeling was mutual.

~*~

It was a simple process to carry in luggage for Sir Richard, and to set out the silver for that night’s dinner. Sir Richard was just as Thomas remembered him, slightly oily with a dark and smug look about his eyes and mouth which made Thomas’ stomach clench. Men that ran newspapers always had this keen aura about them, like they were constantly digging for their next scoop. So dangerous was Thomas’ lot in life that he found himself by base nature trying to avoid men who made their money off of scandals. How many of them would have loved to peg him down for a story… a homosexual deflowered by a member of nobility?

An article like that would ruin both his and Philip Prevet’s lives forever.

Thomas therefore avoided Sir Richard as best he could, and instead focused on keeping Carson from spinning out of orbit. The man was oddly flustered, even for a butler with no footman, and kept forgetting things until last second. Something was clearly pressing on his mind, but Thomas couldn’t imagine what it was. Had William going to war shaken Carson up so badly? Or was it because that Sir Richard was in the house, and Carson clearly did not like him?

Amid all of this tussle and confusion was Lang, who was as petrified as a mouse underneath Carson’s smoke and brimstone gaze. He was clumsy in white gloves, no doubt having never worn them before, and kept dropping the sauce spoons and serving forks as he looked from dish to dish all laid out in the warming pantry. Tonight was to be a sumptuous dinner, given in Sir Richard’s honor. The Dowager would be coming to dine, along with Cousin Isobel and Mr. Matthew. It wasn’t a large party for Thomas, who had waited tables of up to thirty before. Lang, on the other hand, hadn’t even waited a table of two… so a table of nine was downright terrifying.

“So-“ Lang looked from one dish to the next, unsure of what to do, “How do I…um…?”

“This is the sauce for the Melba toast.” Thomas said, showing Lang the creamy basin again, “You’ll
follow me around when I offer the toast; the family will spoon what they want onto their plates. Remember, you physically are not going to hand them food with a fork or a spoon. They’ll pick out what they want. All you have to do is offer the dishes to them at a height that is accessible. Best way to do it is to try and pretend like you need to blow out a candle on the table. Bend over low, but don’t let your hair get caught in the flame. Yeah?”

Lang was none too sure.

Mr. Carson entered the warming pantry, bringing with him yet another dish which was being kept on ice; tonight’s dessert was to be lemon box pie, one of Lord Grantham’s absolute favorites. The man was so fond of lemons it was incredible he hadn’t turned into one by now.

“Mr. Carson, what if my hands slip on the dishes?” Lang asked, fidgeting with his gloves, “Do I really have to wear gloves-?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, gloves are essential!” Mr. Carson wouldn’t even hear of such things, “We don’t need your fingerprints all over the Regina Silver set!”

As if trying to reel back in his temper, Mr. Carson drew a long breath and momentarily closed his eyes.

*My god, he’s ready to pop,* Thomas thought.

“We’re going to have to play this very carefully tonight.” Mr. Carson said, speaking in a more even tone, “You will carry the heavy dishes for Thomas, due to his shoulder injury. Thomas will show you how to serve them. Don’t speak to the family, don’t look at the family… don’t make any noise at all!”

As if in defiance of his order, Lang made a tiny, miserable noise in the back of his throat. He seemed to wish the floor would just swallow him up.

“Don’t worry.” Thomas said, hoping his vote of confidence would make this night go easier for all of them. “I’ll show you what to do. It’ll be easy. Just follow my lead.”

Mr. Carson rolled his eyes to the ceiling, “A demand if ever there was one.”

Thomas and Lang laid out the dishes for dinner upon the side board as soon as it was time. Mr. Carson oversaw the family in the sitting room, notifying them of Thomas’ return home and his consequential serving at dinner that night. Apparently Lady Sybil was present, and she wasn’t too happy to know that her patient was ‘working himself to death’. Thomas on the other hand was downright delighted to be back in action. It was so easy, so smooth and clean…! To lay dishes and to straighten the centerpiece on a table… to make sure all the spoons and knives were straight on the napkins. To ensure the forks had enough space between them.

He’d missed this sort of work.

As the family entered the dining hall, lead by Mr. Carson, Thomas and Lang stood straight back and tall. So many times, Thomas had witnessed this same scene: the promenade of glittering women and sleek men to their chairs, coaches, or parlor rooms… it was still serene to him somehow, like a connecting thread to the many tapestry fibers of his life. If you could take Thomas Barrow’s existence and divide it day by day, year by year, you could watch it unfold not in how many gray hairs he collected or the scars he bore but by how Lady Mary might wear her hair or if Lord Grantham brought out his formal tux.
Tonight, Lord Grantham was wearing his dinner jacket, but also his ruby cufflinks. He was trying to impress Sir Richard, but didn’t want Lady Grantham to notice. When Lord Grantham spotted Thomas against the wall, he broke out into a warm and genuine smile; he shattered tradition by approaching Thomas and offering his hand for a greeting. Sir Richard watched across the table, eyes narrowed slightly at the peculiar occurrence.

“Thomas, home from war at last.” Lord Grantham praised, shaking Thomas’ hand in a tight grip, “My dear fellow I’m so glad that you’re safe at last.”

Lady Sybil spoke up, her black and gold dress flashing in the candlelight. “Thomas, I told you not to over-work yourself! Now you’re in livery and helping Carson with dinner?”

“Forgive me M’lady,” Thomas said, bowing his head in a show of subservience, “But I couldn’t stand by and do nothing.”

Sybil tutted, but allowed Carson to pull out her chair so that she might sit. Everyone took their places around the table, the Dowager Countess glowering at Thomas like a stuffed vulture from her chair directly across the table. Sir Richard watched everything, which set Thomas’ teeth on edge. It was like he was almost hoping for a scandal… something juicy he could write about.

At Carson’s silent cue, Thomas began the slow promenade about the table, pouring water for every glass from a crystal jug. Carson was right behind him, pouring white wine for the beginning courses. Red would be offered during the heartier courses, and sherry would follow up at the very end. Lang looked at the red wine for a moment, pointing as if to ask ‘should I pour this now?’.

Carson looked ready to strangle Lang. Frightened, the man stayed put at the serving buffet.

“Is this normal?” Sir Richard asked Lady Mary, “To speak so openly with your servants?”

“Not particularly.” Lady Mary was light in her reply, but there was a tired edge to the way that she spoke that made Thomas think she was already starting to have second thoughts. It was difficult not to with Mr. Matthew at the table looking as cool and collected as always. Thomas was taken aback by the presence of a dainty and nervous young lady with strawberry blonde hair piled high atop her head… but then he remembered Matthew was likewise engaged to one Lavinia Swire. He’d not seen the woman in so long that he’d forgotten what she looked like. It was rather somber to see her now, and to know that she was to die a pitiful death from the Spanish Flu.

“You’ll find our house tends to dabble on the edges of tradition.” The Dowager said, though she shot Carson a look that clearly insinuated she thought the whole scene highly out of bounds. Carson narrowed his eyes at Thomas, and Thomas politely looked away to instead begin rounds with the Melba toast. Lane was to follow behind him with the sauce while Carson supervised.

Lane was trembling, his hands wrapped far too tight around the neck of the silver jug. If he wasn’t careful he’d end up spilling it.

Thomas bent down to offer Matthew toast, and was greeted with a warm if small smile: “I’ll keep our hellos quiet to spare Sir Richard.” Matthew murmured. “I’m glad to see you’re still in one piece.”

“I’m glad too, sir.” Thomas whispered, “But between you and me, don’t worry about sparing Sir Richard.”

Thomas had a feeling the man could look after himself.

As Thomas served Lady Edith and Lady Mary, he kept his eyes low. The Dowager was making small talk with Lavinia Swire, and seemed determined to wheedle some unpleasant fact out of her. It
was like watching a jeweled bug being prodded under the gaze of a microscope.

Thomas reached Lady Sybil, and served her Melba toast with pride.

“I’d rather hoped you wouldn’t do this.” Lady Sybil murmured in his ear, “Your shoulder must be hurting.”

“Not to fret, M’lady.” Thomas said, feeling rather stuffy for speaking so formally to Lady Sybil after all their encounters in the past weeks. Was he patient, friend, or servant now? “I’m quite up to the challenge.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but…” Sybil was taking longer than usual to pick her piece of toast from Thomas’ silver rack, clearly trying to keep him at her side for as long as possible. “There’s something you should know.”

“Yes, M’lady?”

“It’s about Lieutenant Courtenay—“

“Oh!”

The sudden, sharp shrill of Lady Edith cut the air like a knife. Thomas actually jumped, shocked by the outburst, and looked up to see Lang spluttering over an upended sauce dish. He’d gripped the handle too tight and ended up shaking a fair amount of the cream onto Lady Edith’s dinner gown, which was now graced with a rather hideous yellow blot the size of a melon.

Carson acted as if shocked by electricity, leaping into action and frantically taking away the jug from Lang like he thought the man might drain the whole pot over Lady Edith’s head.

“I do apologize, M’lady!” Carson barked, snapping at Lang to jump to attention; but the man was just frozen in place, frightened at being yelled at and unable to react. Carson, outraged, just pushed Lang aside so that he could try and pull back Lady Edith’s chair for her to stand up. “Mr. Lang- Mr. Lang get a clothe-!” Carson barked. “I—“

But then, something odd happened.

Carson seized, every muscle in his hulking body going rigid for a split second. His eyes bulged in their sockets, his face became flush and purple with blood-!

He groaned, clutching at his heart as if in terrible pain.

“Oh my god-“ Thomas blurted out, setting the melba toast rack onto the table to grab Carson from behind before he could fall down atop Lady Edith who was now rightfully traumatized.

“Carson, what’s the matter-?!“ Lord Grantham demanded, leaping out of his chair to come around the table.

“Sit down! Sit down right now!” Thomas barked, for as Lady Edith vacated her seat Thomas forced Carson to take it. If he was right, Carson was suffering from a heart attack. It could be fatal-!

Lady Mary was at Thomas’ elbow, helping to undo Carson’s bow tie. She was not alone, Mr. Matthew was right at her shoulder, clearly desperate to be of some use.

“Carson, don’t fret- everything will be fine-“ Lady Mary was clearly frightened.

The entire table was now stiff with panic, half of their party risen out of their seats to see what might
occur next. The Dowager and Sir Richard were the only two that remained in their chairs, both looking quite perplexed. Thomas turned to Lang, who was still frozen in fear, and called out an order just like he might have once done in Ypres.

“Lang-LANG!” Thomas shouted the man’s name, forcing him to snap to attention. He was sweating and pale, fearful of being blamed for the whole disastrous event. “Go get a Beecham’s powder from Mrs. Hughes. Go right now! NOW!” Thomas added when Lang did not immediately run off.

Bidden by Thomas’ anger, Lang turned on his heel and ran through the warming pantry to vanish out of sight. Thomas turned back around, and unbuttoned several of Mr. Carson’s stiff livery pleats to try and give him more room and air.

“This is a heart attack, I’m almost certain of it.” Thomas told them all as he worked, “If we give him a Beecham’s, it’ll help, but we have to get him a doctor now.”

“Edith, go with Branson and fetch Major Clarkson!” Mrs. Crawley said. She’d jumped into the role of leader without anyone’s request. “I’ll telephone ahead and explain what’s happened.”

But Lady Edith just gestured to her ruined frock, unsure of why anyone should expect her to go out in public when she wasn’t decent. “And what about my dress?”

“But Edith, we’ll get you a coat, now go!” Lady Grantham sounded outraged at her middle daughter, and frankly Thomas couldn’t blame her. Honestly, sometimes the upper class could be so damn ridiculous. Flustered, Edith left, and Lady Sybil now butted her way to the front of the crowd to help Thomas give Carson first aid. She wetted a napkin in cool water, and pressed it to Carson’s perspiring temples. Mrs. Crawley was out the door in the flash, off to telephone Dr. Clarkson.

“We may have to do chest compressions if he falls unconscious.” Thomas said, thinking back to his medical training; god in heaven if he was going to have to breath into Carson’s mouth he was going to be sick.

Suddenly Mrs. Hughes entered the room, a glass of fizzing cloudy water in her hands. Everyone let her through so that she could force Carson to drink his Beecham’s powder. She forced it upon him, leaving him little choice but to sip from the cup at his lips.

“Drink up.” She ordered him like she might a scatterbrained maid, “All of it!”

“…Fine…” Carson slurred, his words thick like cotton in his mouth as he sucked down a feeble sip, “M’fine…”

“All of it-!” Mrs. Hughes repeated; she wouldn’t be moved until he finished his glass. Bitter, Carson forced down swallow after swallow until he was too exhausted to get out much more. The Beecham’s wouldn’t stop the heart attack (if that was actually occurring) but it would at least get Carson to a slightly stabler state. Thomas caught Lady Sybil’s eye, nodding.

“We ought to get him upstairs and into bed.” Lady Sybil said.

“I’m… sure that’s nah necessary…M’lady.” Carson mumbled.

“When you speak so eloquently, it makes me think you’re faking.” Thomas muttered. He and Lady Sybil tried to hoist Carson out of his chair, but he was much too heavy. Thomas’ wounded shoulder would not support Carson’s weight, and Sybil wasn’t strong enough to lift Carson out of the chair by herself. The day was saved by Mr. Matthew, who butted his way into the fray and took Carson from Sybil’s hands.
“Right, Thomas and I can help him up the stairs, if Mrs. Hughes will show us the way, please.” Matthew asked. Mrs. Hughes nodded, in full agreement that it was jolly well time for Carson to get to bed.

“I can help-“ Lady Mary offered. Carson was dear to her, and it was clear that the sight of him in pain had her deeply upset.

“No, let me. I know what I’m doing” Lady Sybil urged. She understood her sister’s position when it came to Carson, no doubt sharing a better understanding with her than with Lady Edith. Still, it was with sad reluctance that Lady Mary stepped back. She seemed afraid to let Carson go, as if he might fall to pieces without her personal touch.

Thomas and Matthew attempted to raise Carson out of the chair, but it was a defeated effort since Carson was leaning heavily on Thomas’ right shoulder.

“Thomas, your shoulder-“ Mrs. Hughes spoke up.

“Matthew, swap places with him.” Lady Sybil instructed.

Silently, the two men swapped places, then tried again so that Carson was now leaning on Thomas’ left shoulder. This time it was a much smoother transition and they were able to help Carson back onto his feet. At first, Matthew tried to move towards the dining room door, until Thomas and Mrs. Hughes stopped him.

“This way, Mr. Matthew.” Mrs. Hughes gently corrected him, “We’ll take him through the servant’s passages.”

Lady Sybil, at Carson’s back, smoothly turned the three of them around so that they could now hobble out the way Thomas and Mr. Lang had come in.

It was an exhaustive hurdle, to take Carson up the servant’s stairs. There was hardly room for two men to walk side by side, nevertheless three, and it ended up with Matthew taking the brunt of the burden as Thomas and Sybil kept Carson up from underneath. By the time they made it all the way up to the attics, Matthew was sweating and Carson was out of breath. He needed to sit down, soon, and they were all quite grateful when they finally arrived at Mr. Carson’s door.

The room was neat and tidy, with the edges of the bed crisp and the bureau free of loose toiletries. Like everything else in Carson’s life, his bedroom was kept ship shape and Bristol fashion. Matthew and Thomas deposited Carson onto the bed, only to have Sybil hold him up in a sitting position. Mrs. Hughes was last through the door, shutting it to garner the five of them some privacy from the eyes and ears of other servants. News of Mr. Carson’s shock had run through the house like wildfire, and Thomas could hear the voices of maids demanding answers from a stuttering Lang.

“Let’s get him more comfortable.” Sybil said.

Mrs. Hughes fished through Mr. Carson’s bureau drawers to pull out a pair of pajamas, offering them to Thomas who unbuttoned the top and laid it on the bed.

“I’ll help with the livery but I’m afraid I’ll be a bit of a clot. Matthew apologized, trying to get Carson’s jacket off.

But Thomas shut this down, for in truth it ought to be him taking care of the livery while Matthew helped Mrs. Hughes to dress Carson for bed. Carson wouldn’t want Thomas to see him undressed, when Thomas was a homosexual. Carson would no doubt feel like Thomas was getting an eye full, and that was one nest of hornets Thomas didn’t want to mix up.
“I’ll take care of the livery pieces, if you’ll help him dress. He wouldn’t want me to do it.” Thomas said, taking Carson’s jacket and bow tie away. They would have to be ironed and hung up before bed so that they could be re-donned tomorrow without unseemly creases… but would Carson even be working tomorrow?

No. No, he would not. Neither Mrs. Hughes nor Lady Sybil would allow that, surely. So Carson’s livery ought to be washed.

Thomas put Mr. Carson’s livery pieces in his clothes hamper, even while Matthew helped Carson to don his pajamas.

“That’s not true, Thomas.” Carson said, and though his voice was weak his words seemed sincere. Even so, Thomas did not feel comfortable turning back around to face Carson when he was half-naked. There was something about seeing a man undressed when unbidden that Thomas did not enjoy. Just as he did not want men to see him naked, he did not want to see other men naked… unless it was asked for.

Lady Sybil caught Thomas’ eye as Thomas set Mr. Carson’s clothes hamper to the side. The maids would wash it and lay it out to dry; by the time that Carson was back on his feet, he’d have a freshly laundered uniform to go with it.

“Thomas…” Lady Sybil murmured, situating Carson’s covers about his chest as Mrs. Hughes plumped his pillows, “There’s something you ought to know.”

“M’lady?”

“I meant to tell you after dinner tonight, but seeing as all that’s rather shot, Edward Courtenay was transferred to Downton Hospital three hours ago-“

Thomas froze, hamper in hand.

He looked back around, eyes wide and pulse racing, to find Lady Sybil clearly nervous. Mrs. Hughes also had a fretful look upon her face, no doubt wondering what Thomas would do with this newfound information.

But there was no time to waste, no question of what Thomas should do; despite the lack of etiquette in front of Lady Sybil and Mr. Matthew, Thomas dropped Carson’s clothes hamper to the floor and bolted for the door.

“Thomas-!” Mrs. Hughes called out after his retreating back, desperate to make him stay-

But Thomas did not listen.

The attic felt tight and compact as he fled, like he might hyperventilate from not having enough air. His bowtie was stiff upon his neck; he pulled at it with a hard jerk as he descended the servant’s staircase. He went down to the main floor, then took a hard left to exit out into the main entrance hall. His best chance of getting back to Downton Village Hospital was to hitch a ride from Branson when he pulled up carrying Dr. Clarkson and Lady Edith.

The family were clustered in the library; Thomas could hear their murmuring. Dinner had been canceled, and so now they were to dine on small morsels Mrs. Patmore could put together on portable trays. So much food would go to waste, but none of that mattered now. Despite being in
livery, and despite being wounded, Thomas did not stop to catch his breath or change his clothes. He fled the house down the front steps, slick shoes skidding in the dewy gravel, and looked up to see the headlights of the Grantham limousine pulling down the front drive.

Thomas flagged Branson down; he must have looked a fright, running out onto the lawn with his bowtie hanging off his neck. Clarkson certainly jumped out of the vehicle with speed, his traveling bag clutched to his chest.

“Up in the attics! Start of a heart attack!” Thomas managed through wheezes. Off Clarkson went without another word, jogging through the gravel and up the steps to vanish into the house. Branson let Lady Edith out of the car, wrapped up in a thick peacoat she’d no doubt borrowed from her mother or sisters. But as Branson closed the passenger door, Thomas cut him off with a long legged step so that he couldn’t leave.

“You’ve got to take me back to the hospital!” Thomas begged, “Right now! It’s an emergency!”

Branson was baffled, “What’s happened now-?”

“I’ll explain as you drive, just take me there as quick as you can!”

Thomas gave Branson very little choice in the matter, opening the passenger door and clambering into the front seat before he could be stopped. Confused, Branson got back in and immediately started the car up. In a matter of minutes, they were puttering down the driveway; the sun was now heavily set, and the sky was a deep inky purple. Crickets were chirping, cows were silent in farmer’s fields… no one was on the roads. It might all have been very peaceful if Thomas wasn’t ready to crawl up a tree with anxiety.

He could not imagine how many strings had been pulled to get Edward transferred to Downton Hospital from the mazes of London, but now that he was Thomas kept having flashbacks of the last time Edward had been left unattended to. Would he be suicidal right away, or would his sadness grow over time to climax in an attempt? Could Thomas save him this time, and help him to break out of his malaise? Was Thomas about to watch the love of his life die before his eyes, one agonizing and heart aching day at a time? He did not know if he had the strength capable to survive that.

“Oh, what’s going on?” Branson demanded. His hat jiggled upon his head every time the car bounced over a pothole on the road.

Thomas narrowed his eyes, considering the implications.

Branson was a devout catholic, and though he’d eventually elope with the daughter of an Earl Thomas doubted that Branson would stray so far out of tradition as to be accepting of homosexuality. Catholics were rather pungent on those sort of topics; they were either secret homosexuals or the type to throw more kindling on a pyre. Too many of Thomas’ sort had made the mistake of trusting the wrong men. Thomas didn’t want to believe that Branson was the cruel sort… but he couldn’t take that risk where Edward was concerned.

“…I can’t fully tell you what’s happened, but someone has arrived at the hospital and it’s critical that I be there to receive them. They’re unstable.”

“Ah…” Branson smirked, and for a moment Thomas thought he was about to receive a rant on the British army and its many sins. Instead, Branson just cast Thomas a leering side eyed glance and said: “Edward Courtenay.”

Thomas’ eyes narrowed.
He knew Edward’s name, but what else?

“…Yes.” Was all Thomas said.

“Sybil told me.” Branson continued, now definitely smug about the whole affair, “She and I talk quite a lot about things, you know. She mentioned you had a fancy man coming in from London-“

“I don’t know what you mean.” Thomas cut him off as quickly as he could. For a moment, their ride was painfully silent. Then, Branson started again.

“I know.” He said, as calmly as he could. “You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve known for a while… but Sybil confirmed it for me.”

“And what did she confirm?” Thomas asked. He wondered if Branson could hear the tension in his voice. If he could notice the way that Thomas clenched his palms till his fingernails cut half moons into his flesh.

“You don’t have to be nervous.” Branson said. “I’m not going to do you in.”

“Yes, well forgive me if I don’t take that chance.” Thomas snapped. He looked away, out the window of the motorcar.

When Branson didn’t speak, Thomas added, “There’s too much at stake.”

Branson didn’t debate him on the topic.

They pulled up to a hospital almost shrouded in darkness, save for two rusted lanterns that framed the front walk. They cast an eerie, almost haunting light upon the place, and Thomas’ paranoia was rampant as he jumped out of the motorcar onto the drive. Branson looked almost guilty, offering him an apologetic smile as he tipped his hat.

“I have to get back to the house, they’ll want me there for Dr. Clarkson.” Branson said. “But I meant what I said, Thomas. You can trust me.”

“A catholic?” Thomas reasoned, “A devout man with deep Irish backgrounds?”

“…A human being.” Branson countered. “That can understand the Bible isn’t always right.”

“Careful, that.” Thomas warned, pointing up at the sky with an ominous expression, “Never know whose listening.”

Branson laughed, changing the gears on the motorcar to start the engine up in reverse. “You sound like me ma’am!” he called out, voice faint as he began to drive away.

Thomas found himself smirking, in spite of the dangers of trusting Branson.

He entered the hospital at a brisk trot, eyes peeled for any sight of Edward. By this point, his pelvis and shoulder was aching. He reached the front desk, where a night nurse was just settling into her
shift. She had a thermos of coffee with her, and was shocked to find Thomas out of his bed, returning from outside of all things in a completely different outfit than the one he usually wore. Thomas was a familiar face to these nurses, though he did not know this particular woman’s name. Rebecca? Roberta? …Something like that.

“Officer Barrow!” She stood up from her desk, elevated about a foot higher than Thomas due to her platform box, “Whatever are you doing out of bed, and what on earth are you wearing? You ought to be asleep now! Have you even taken your pills?”

“Lieutenant Edward Courtenay!” Thomas said, “Where is he?”

“I—” The nurse was startled, too confused to ask questions. She pointed over her shoulder down towards the northern ward, which was strictly for severely wounded officers. Thomas likewise resided in that hall. “Just down there— but—“

Thomas did not let her finish.

He ran as fast as he could through the main intersection of the hospital, nearly tripping over a wheeled cart that someone had left out stacked high with pads of gauze and vials of iodine. The northern ward was closed off at night, and kept guarded by another nurse named Myrtle. She, however, knew Thomas well and let him in at once.

“Back to your bed!” She snapped, “And take your pills! Molly’s coming around with the cart!”

He would be doing no such thing.

Thomas began to poke his head into every wing that he passed. He checked his own wing and did not see Edward, though sure enough a plump brunette nurse named Molly was making her rounds with a tray full of pills in cups. Thomas went back and forth across the ward, moving in a criss-cross motion as he checked one side and then the other. He’d gone through four doors before he drew to a pause, noting one of the final doors on the wing that was bizarrely closed instead of open.

Nurses usually liked these doors kept open for the sake of getting to a patient quicker. Why had this one been closed?

Thomas opened the door, finding the ward inside dark and quiet… And yet, not quite.

At the far end, near a window which had been closed to keep out the sound of crickets and night winds, one brass lamp was left lit. A soldier was huddled in the corner around a pile of blankets, shaking violently as if from a savage cold and rocking himself to keep away shock. He was sniveling, crying softly though it was barely audible from Thomas’ end of the ward; his face was heavily wrapped in white bandages.

But even distraught and disheveled, Thomas could recognize his husband. He could ascertain Edward from a crowd of people using only his hands and his nose. He could smell the familiar cologne… trace the outline of Edward’s wild curls and hooked nose.

Thomas ran to Edward’s bed, panting heavily as he waded through a sea of sleeping officers. These were men with horrific burns, the ones recovering from surgery and in need of quiet. Most of them were too drugged to notice anything askew.

Stopping in front of Edward’s bed, Thomas sucked in a breath. After so many weeks apart, he
almost didn’t know what to say.

“…Edward…” Thomas tentatively held out his hands, fingers trembling as he brushed Edward’s chiseled jawline.

Edward jumped about a foot in the air, petrified as he shrank backward against the wall and headboard.

“Who-!?!” Edward balked, fear evident in his voice, but his stuttering drained away to leave him leaning forward a bit more.

There was hope written all over his expression.

“Th…Thomas?” Edward whispered.

“Oh Edward-“ Thomas groaned, sitting upon the edge of Edward’s bed. He reached forward for Edward again; this time, Edward did not jump. “My sweet, sweet Edward.”

“Thomas-!”

Edward howled his name, shouting much too loud for a late hour in an intensive care ward. But then he began to bawl, sobbing like a frightened child into Thomas’ coat collar as he dove forward with scrambling hands to pull Thomas to him with every ounce of strength he had left. Thomas was, as a result, crushed against Edward. He could do little more than stay in Edward’s tight embrace and try to console him.

But it would be impossible to do… and Edward would only calm after two more hours had passed, even then unable to let go of Thomas as he slumped in Thomas’ lap instead.

It took a good half hour of Edward crying and shaking, but Thomas finally managed to get Edward to detach from him a little bit so that he could shrug out of his livery. The suit was constricting, and didn’t allow him to hold Edward as he would like. Shedding his jacket, vest, suspenders and shoes, Thomas sat in nothing but his trousers and untucked shirtsleeves with Edward cradled in his arms. Edward held Thomas tight around the chest, slumped against him. The drugs made him weak, his arms now riddled with bruises from constant injections and tests. He’d once been so tan, glorious and strong…now he was pale and frightened.

He’d transformed into the gaunt man that Thomas remembered from his original reality.

The man who’d died a pathetic death.

“This can’t be happening-“ Edward sniveled, so frightened that his voice had lost all recognition of his original brassy tones, “I don’t want to be blind. I don’t want to be blind! I’m going to die blind-!”

And suddenly Edward was howling again so that Thomas had to cradle him up from his lap with Edward shaking wildly in his arms.

“Shh….“ Thomas rocked Edward back and forth, desperate to sooth him. Edward was hysterical, on the verge of an anxiety attack. Suddenly Thomas could see why his arms had been riddled with injections… he’d probably been drugged through previous anxiety spells by nurses unable to handle his emotional turbulence. “Everything’s going to be okay, Edward. Calm down. Take deep
breathes.”

But Edward was shaking like a leaf, frightened out of his mind with misery and the impending doom of a dismal future in the dark.

Soldiers were shifting in their bunks, a few having woken from Edward’s crying. They did not speak out in anger, perhaps used to the sounds of agony by now. War numbed you to the sound of tears and screaming; you lost perception of why neither were desirable in normal situations.

The clack of heels upon tile preluded the sight of Sybil Crawley walking up the ward, back in her nurse’s gown. She seemed to have come back to the ward despite being called home for dinner and looked positively exhausted. In the doorway to the hall, she watched Thomas rock Edward in a protective embrace, but said nothing.

Perhaps she’d come back specifically to check on Edward and Thomas.

That seemed like the sort of thing Sybil would do.

As Edward continued to whimper, Thomas leaned into his ear and spoke: “Edward… Sweet, sweet Edward. This is not the end. I swear to you this is not the end. This is but another turn in the road of your life. We will ride it all the way out, you and I… There are still treasures to be felt, and smelt… and tasted… and heard. Treasures to be sensed in so many other ways. That’s just what we’ll do, you and I. We’ll hunt, and ride, and fish, and shoot. And do all the things that you love.”

Unable to comprehend such a positive ending, Edward clung to Thomas for dear life. The oil in their bedside lamp was growing dim, and as a result the ward around them was sinking into gloom. It left the whole atmosphere with an ominous feeling of tension.

“Don’t leave me.” Edward begged. His voice was raspy and throaty, exhaustive after all his crying.

“Never.” Thomas whispered in his ear. “Never, my sweet darling.”

He wrapped his arms around Edward all the tight, continuing to rock him back and forth. “My husband.”

Edward finally drifted off to sleep somewhere around midnight, and the ward fell back into a dismal quiet that was only broken by the occasional nurse making her rounds, or a patient groaning in their sleep.

Sybil was still there, though she kept having to sit down in a chair and had even gone so far as to unlace her shoes when no one else was looking. Underneath Thomas’ watchful gaze, Sybil took a small nap. Thomas could not blame her. She’d probably not slept in hours, and was no doubt ready to keel over. Her little doze only lasted about forty-five minutes tops, but it seemed to recharge her enough to get her to lace up her shoes again. She made a pot of coffee, and drank half the brew before returning to Edward’s bedside with a clipboard in hand.

She didn’t look too happy.
“I came to check on you.” She said by way of greeting, “He has an injection every four hours to help with his anxiety.” She showed a syringe, loaded with a pale murky liquid, but did not make to wake Edward up.

“I’ll take care of that.” Thomas said, and Sybil gladly handed the syringe over. Internally, Thomas decided he would not be giving Edward the injection unless he absolutely needed it. He knew what happened to men who relied to heavily upon sedatives— they ended up numb to everything, unable to handle life without a pill nearby.

“How’s Mr. Carson?” Thomas asked, keeping his voice soft and low so that Edward could continue to sleep. “Is he alright?”

“Dr. Clarkson thinks so.” Sybil said. The way Thomas figured it, Carson had survived before so clearly he could survive again. “He says it wasn’t an actual heart attack, just a warning. It was enough to scare him though, so I think he’ll stay in bed for a few days. Papa is determined to let Carson rest up.”

“Good.” Thomas carefully stroked Edward’s hair, watching as Sybil tucked Edward in a little better with his blankets. Even through the flannel, the nights could be cold in the wards. “You ought to get some sleep yourself. You’re no good to anyone half dead.”

“There’s far too much work to be done.”

Thomas smiled.

Sybil looked oddly enchanting to him in that moment, in a way that a woman had never been to him before. Usually Thomas existed unaware of the charms of womanhood, but he saw them plainly in Sybil now. In fact, if he’d been more of an artist he might have painted a picture of her… perched upon a patient’s tidied bed with a curl of her nutmeg hair creeping down around her ears… her eyes lowered to a clipboard as she observed the numbers.

“… Don’t take this the wrong way,” Thomas spoke up, catching Sybil’s eyes. “But one of the reasons you’re so dear to me is because you could very well have been a servant in a prior life. You have the work ethic of one. You understand what it is to be in our shoes… never a dull moment, never a second to spare. You know how to put other’s needs before your own. I wish I knew how to do that. Might have spared me a lot of grief.”

Sybil just smiled, enchanted by Thomas’ words. She shook her head, rising up tuck her hair back into place.

“I take that as a compliment coming from you… I rather admire you for your courage.” Sybil said. “Nothing scares you, like it scares me. You just keep going.”

Was that true?

He wasn’t really courageous if he thought about it. He was just…
Well… he was on a mission wasn’t he? He had to make things right.

“I have to make things right, Sybil.” Thomas whispered. “I did something awful, once. I lived selfishly. I can never do that again. You helped me to see that.”

Sybil said nothing for a moment, before reaching out to pat him tenderly upon the knee.
“We’re all guilty of that, Thomas. Even me.” She finally said, “Some people are just better at hiding it.”

And with that, she walked off. But as Thomas watched her go, he suddenly saw the image of her dead in her bed, flashing through his mind and searing his soul. It made him wince with physical pain, and caused him to call out to her.

“Sybil-!”

She turned about, looking back at him.

“… You’re a wonderful person.” he said, well aware that his voice was emotional and his words were bordering on impertinence. “And the world is a better place for having you in it. I mean it, truly.”

Sybil was slightly taken aback, but in the end she just gave him another small sweet smile.

“You’re barking, you are.” She teased.

With that, she left the hall.

~*~

Despite the fact that Carson was now despondent and without his footman, Thomas refused to return home. His determination to help at Downton Abbey had been hinged on Edward being in London; with Edward now at the hospital Thomas would not leave his side.

Edward was reliant upon Thomas for everything, be it relieving himself, bathing, dressing, eating, taking medicine, or going to sleep. He was terrified to be alone, and often stretched out his hand into thin air as if to grip at monsters in the dark so that he might throttle them. He swore that he heard things, and thought that men were creeping up on him from behind. Thomas soon found out that the reason why the door had been initially shut on the night of Edward’s arrival was because Edward didn’t like the doors being open. He’d demanded to be put in a corner where the walls could be felt behind him. He was scared to be out in the open, and often threw out his arms to try and touch things that simply weren’t there.

He was like a baby deer, trembling upon legs too weak to stand. How Edward had ever survived the first time around was a mystery to Thomas. Now with personal knowledge of Edward’s mental state, Thomas could see that he was, in a word, spiraling.

Mrs. Hughes wanted Thomas to return to Downton Abbey, and had even written him a letter asking him to ‘come home’. She felt that Edward’s health ought to be left to those that weren’t wounded, to those that had a better view of the circumstances. Thomas was, in her opinion, ‘too close’.

But Thomas watched the wives and lovers of soldiers come to the hospital daily to care for their wounded with intimate affection. He was determined to do that same for Edward even if he was wounded as well. A bullet did not change the fact that Thomas was Edward’s husband. Didn’t the vows read “In sickness and in health”?

At Thomas’ request, his cot was moved next to Edward’s so that he could attend to him during the night if needed. The nurses were more than forgiving; a patient cared for was a patient off their hands.
Edward’s bandages were removed the day after he arrived at Downton Hospital, and his face was found to be oddly inflamed. Where before, Thomas had seen a criss-crossing network of white scars and milky eyes, Edward’s eyes were now shown to be sealed shut with a goopy infection at the corners of the lids. His eyelids and upper cheeks were bright pink, making him appear as if he’d suffered horrific sunburn. It was Thomas’ greatest joy to realize that Edward’s damage was not nearly as bad as it had been the first time and, if they were lucky, Edward might actually be able to recover his sight. Now Thomas understood why he’d been taken straight to London and put through major surgeries. The doctors had been removing cataracts and curing infections, trying to give Edward’s sight a chance. It would take years for Edward’s recovery to really lay out… but there was a chance.

Thomas clung to it with all his might.

He covered Edward’s face in a disinfectant paste every night, and in the morning Thomas made Edward bathe in yet another type of antibacterial wash. Edward griped and groaned, clinging onto Thomas like a despondent child at his mother’s skirts, but Thomas took it in his stride. If they could get the infections to disperse from Edward’s eyes, and keep the damage to a minimum while the swelling went down, Edward had a chance. He had to learn how to see without his eyes in the meantime, just to keep on living and carrying forward… but he wasn’t doomed. Not by a long shot.

The problem with learning to see without the aid of your eyes was that you relied too much upon taking your surroundings for granted. With your eyes you could judge everything from temperature, shape, size, texture, and distance. If a chair was two meters in front of you, you knew it was coming and you could prepare for it. If you couldn’t see it, however, you had no idea until you touched it if it was prickly, on fire, two inches in front of your face… It was a minefield and Edward was tripping over every hole in the road. Quite literally.

Two weeks after returning home, Edward finally started to get his nerves together so long as Thomas was at his side, and allowed Thomas to take him out into the grassy lawns in order to try and stretch his legs more. Before, Edward had been frightful but too proud to let Thomas help him. In this reality, however, Edward had practically sown himself onto Thomas’ shirtsleeves. Thomas kept their arms linked together, murmuring into Edwards’ ear as they passed through doorways or too close to nurses.

“A nurse is passing your left.”

“We’re going through the doors to the patio now.”

“You’ll feel cobblestone underneath, but the lining is well done so you won’t stub your toe.”

“Here comes the step down onto the grass?”

All the while, Edward whimpered and whined, one hand upon Thomas’ arm and the other shakily grasping his cane.

He absolutely hated his walking stick, and often complained about it to Thomas insisting that it made him feel like an invalid. The cane was unnatural to him; he wanted to feel things with his hands. At the same time, however, the cane gave Edward time to prepare if there was a chair, wall, door, or table in front of him. He ended up banging his knees and bruising his legs for all the times that he dropped the cane just to feel with his hands. He was growing frustrated, wanting results fast, and Thomas was having a hard time calming him down.
He would either have to change his strategy or push Edward to go at a more refined pace.

April had arrived in England with the typical amount of showers and brouhaha. The soldiers all wanted to get outside, so the nurses took rounds setting up chairs and card tables for them to do their exercises in the grass. Edward was no different, with Thomas and Sybil setting up several chairs and tables so that he might have a practice banging around on his own.

The banging was a literal event. Edward kept falling into chairs and nearly upset a table by grabbing it too forcefully at the legs.

Still, Thomas refused to be pessimistic.

“Well done-“ Thomas murmured as Edward used his cane to knock about between a chair and a table. “Very well done, and see-? You can navigate with your hands at the same time-“ For sure enough, Edward was getting ready to cast away the cane as he stretched out his left hand to feel for the table’s edge.

“And trip with my feet.” Edward said, bitterly.

“Is it so scary to trip?” Thomas consoled, for in fact Edward had done quite a lot of tripping in the past few weeks, “We all fall down from time to time.”

Edward was getting morose, though. His face was screwing up, his breathing starting to turn erratic.

“I want to see.” Edward cursed, his voice tight. He bowed his head, his lower lip beginning to tremble.

“I know…” Thomas placed a loving hand upon Edward’s back; it was important for Thomas to assert that he was physically beside Edward when Edward could not see him. “And I understand why. I’m right here. We’ll get through this, you’ll see-“

“No we won’t.” There was moisture at the corners of Edward’s inflamed eyes. Had he been in good health, Thomas was certain there would be tears, “Nothing can change this, not even our love.”

“Oh, I think our love can change a great deal of things, Edward Courtenay.” Thomas refused to even consider otherwise. Edward was depressed, and couldn’t see clearly. Thomas would help him through the storm to the safety of the other side.

There would be better days. They just had to hang on… to keep strong together. So long as Thomas was beside Edward, Edward could live through this. Only by isolation would Edward collapse.

As Edward took a moment to recompose himself, Sybil Crawley came walking up. She seemed to be taking a break, at least she wasn’t with a patient or carrying a clipboard… she looked troubled about something. Thomas noted that, nowadays, Sybil seemed to have some unexplained weight upon her shoulders. He had to wonder if it was Branson, head over heels in love with her and causing her to push at the social boundaries that had normally constructed her life.

She walked up, careful to give Thomas time to announce her presence so that Edward did not start.

“Here comes Sybil.” Thomas murmured in Edward’s ear. Edward rubbed at his swollen face, irritated, and looked about in four different directions before he heard Sybil’s voice coming from his left.

“Thomas! Edward; I’m so glad to see you both up and about. How are we managing things?” She reached out with slim hands to fidget with the backings of chairs and the legs of tables that Thomas
“I’m a damn fool,” Edward cursed, “That’s how we’re managing things.”

“How are you a fool?” Sybil asked.

“Look at me!” Edward suddenly flew into a rage, fists clenched so tight that he was in danger of breaking his walking cane in two. The brittle wood popped underneath his iron grip, the dried surface beginning to bend. “Hitting at shite with a stick-!”

But when his mouth began to wobble again, Edward dropped his hands and looked away towards Thomas. He seemed about to bury his face in Thomas’ chest, something he’d done several times to get out of conversations in the past few weeks.

“Would you rather feel for it with your hands?” Sybil asked, calmly.

Edward sniffed, finally nodding when it seemed he could control his voice again. Neither Sybil nor Thomas held it against him, to be yelled or cursed at. They knew Edward was frayed; damaged.

“…Yes.” Edward mumbled.

“Then drop the cane and feel for it with your hands.” Thomas said. Sod the cane; he could manage!

At once, Edward cast it aside into the grass, and with two hands outstretched began to feel for the objects around him. The first thing he hit was a dining chair, which he groped at along the spine and sides to finally feel at the seat and the legs.

“What do your hands tell you?” Thomas asked, “What is that in front of you?”

“…A straight backed chair.” Edward finally said.

“Very good.” Thomas said. “And how many beams support it in the back?”

Edward clumsily reached up, finally feeling for the spine of the chair again to note that three beams ran along her middle. “Three in the middle. It’s short… just for one man.”

“There you go!” Thomas was ready to lead a parade in celebration. Every victory was something to sing about, nowadays. “So you know what it is! Feel around for more!”

Now Edward was fumbling about again, stretching as wide as he could with his arms to see what was next. He touched the edge of a table, and used the planes of his hands to feel along its top surface.

“And check the width of the space as well for any possible obstruction.” Sybil added.

“I can’t.” Edward griped, “Not without that cursed stick.”

“Nonsense.” Sybil wouldn’t hear of ‘I can’t’. She was a woman who worked in the positives. “Use your feet. Slide them about in an arc formation, like you were checking the ground for a hidden snake.”

Unsure, Edward held onto the table for balance and began to slide his feet. At first, he didn’t want to go wide, and when finally he gained the courage to do so he started to touch the edges of the chair legs and the far table legs.

“Nothing’s there.” Edward said.
“There, see?” Sybil praised, “No fear. So you know that you can step safely.”

Emboldened, Edward straightened up after a moment and took a cautious step forward. He even took two more steps, not using his hands or his feet in an arc. When he reached out again and found he was at the end of the table, he turned about to grope blindly in the air for Thomas.

“Thomas—” He said. “Where are you?”

“I’m at eleven o’clock.” Thomas said, referencing to Edward’s own position as a center point. At once, Edward stuck out his hand at an angle and Thomas reached to grasp at his fingertips.

Edward walked to Thomas blindly, so that Thomas had to come around the chair lest Edward crash into it and fall over in his desperation to be close again.

“Lieutenant Courtenay!”

The booming voice of Dr. Clarkson, walking over from the patio to observe their performance, sent Edward on edge. He jumped, nearly falling over the chair, and looked about in six different directions before Thomas finally wrapped an arm around his back and held him still so that he could face Dr. Clarkson head on (though he did not know it).

“Well done!” Dr. Clarkson said, observing Edward’s little minefield with pride. He patted the back of a chair, nodding to both Sybil and Thomas. Though before Thomas had often thought to salute Dr. Clarkson and try and use his sympathies to an advantage, now Thomas only inclined his head. He did not consider himself a soldier anymore, and he didn’t see the point in pretending to be Dr. Clarkson’s friend.

“You’re making very good progress.” Dr. Clarkson praised. Edward didn’t seem too sure, bowing his head in shame.

“S’all thanks to my saviors, sir.” Edward said.

Dr. Clarkson smiled, “So you’ll be pleased to hear that we’re all agreed that it’s time for you to continue your treatment elsewhere.”

Able to feel Edward’s body beneath his fingers, Thomas noticed every muscle in Edward’s body stiffening in response to Dr. Clarkson’s statement. He froze, jaw slack as his breathing started to become erratic.

But this was the very same thing that had happened last time; this was why Edward had committed suicide! Because he’d felt alone and outnumbered in a cruel and unforgiving world. Now Clarkson was going to try and send him away again, and he dared to insist that Thomas would actually agree to such a thing?

“What?” Edward stuttered, horrified.

“At Farley—” Dr. Clarkson began, but Thomas cut him off coldly. His manners were forgotten in that moment, for all he could think of was Edward’s wellbeing.

This time, Thomas would protect Edward. This time, Thomas would not let him suffer alone.

“No. No, we are not all in agreement.” Thomas snapped, causing Dr. Clarkson to freeze. The pair of them locked eyes, the two men waging internal war. Dr. Clarkson seemed to be under the impression
that Thomas had lost his senses, but Thomas would not be swayed.

“Dr. Clarkson, Lieutenant Courtenay is my partner in this war, and it is my job to support him. He cannot leave my side. If he leaves, I must go with him—“

“Officer Barrow, there is no room for you at Farley Hall, and you are not trained in specialist care—“

Not this song and dance again!

“I’ve been trained in the five levels of medical triage!” Thomas scoffed.

“He’s not ill or dying, your training therefor accounts for very little!” Dr. Clarkson’s voice was taking a most decidedly ugly turn, “He just needs more time to adjust to his condition—“

“And he will adjust best with me by his side!” Thomas finished up. Dr. Clarkson looked ready to throttle him.

But before Thomas or Dr. Clarkson could argue over the topic anymore, Edward cut in. “Please!”

His voice was fragile, close to breaking. He was frightened.

“Don’t send me away.” Edward begged. Dr. Clarkson seemed slightly taken aback.

When Dr. Clarkson did not immediately answer, Thomas stepped in. He rubbed Edward’s arm carefully, trying to comfort him despite them being in public.

“No one is sending you anywhere.” Thomas assured him.

But Dr. Clarkson didn’t like Thomas saying that out loud. He grew cold, and approached Edward with a clinical manner that Thomas found unnerving.

Dr. Clarkson reached out and clasped Edward’s arm in a pinching grip. Edward jumped, not expecting the touch.

“Lieutenant,” Dr. Clarkson said, his voice like steel, “You must know that every one of our beds is needed for the injured and dying from Arras… hmm?”

Dumfounded, Edward made no reply. Dr. Clarkson continued on.

“Farley Hall is staffed with excellent men and women, who can care for their patients just as intimately as we do here.” Dr. Clarkson glanced at Thomas now, and there was anger in his eyes, “You’ll do fine there, on your own. It’ll be good for you to learn to stand solo again.”

Dr. Clarkson let go of Edward’s arm and stepped back. His gaze and anger were reserved for Thomas alone now.

But Thomas was just as angry if not angrier than Dr. Clarkson. He was not afraid of the rage that he found pooled behind the older man’s gray eyes. He’d battled with greater dragons and had come out on top. He would slay this one just the same.

“Officer Barrow I’ll see you in my office.” Dr. Clarkson said.

Thomas did not even wait for Dr. Clarkson to finish his sentence.

“Sybil, stay with Edward.” Thomas cut across the man, unable to keep from sounding scathing.
“Don’t let him be alone, not even for a second.”

“I won’t.” Sybil seemed to recognize some awful calamity was about to occur. She even stepped up at took Edward’s arm in her own, holding him as tightly as Thomas might have.

She would need to keep his head above water till Thomas returned… and Thomas had a feeling the tides were about to get even choppier should Dr. Clarkson have his way.

It was with racing anger and fear that Thomas ventured to Dr. Clarkson’s office. Kept at the end of the eastern ward, just behind the library which was nothing more than a patient ward that had been emptied out for books and stores of medicine. Despite Clarkson being a pace or two behind him (practically storming up the ward), Thomas entered the office first and found himself before Dr. Clarkson busied desk. There were piles of letters, some open, others not… all of them would have to be addressed and returned in time. The man really needed a secretary-

The door burst open as Dr. Clarkson entered the room. He all but slammed it shut behind them both, sealing Thomas in with the demon, the devil, and the doom.

“Have you lost your mind?!”

Clarkson rounded on Thomas with such fury it was a mercy he didn’t topple over. But Clarkson was not someone whom Thomas relied upon, nor someone thatThomas cared about on an emotional scale… so Thomas didn’t care about his rage.

“I thought you were a man who knew where his head was at, now here you are disputing my orders right in front of me! In front of a patient, whose already had enough blather put into his mind by you and Nurse Crawley!” Dr. Clarkson rounded his desk, slamming his hands upon the mahogany counter.

“Oh, ‘Blather’ is that what you’ll call it?!” Thomas couldn’t even name all the reasons why that word in particular pissed him off. He turned on the man, glaring with all the ferocity he could muster.

Given that he was the notorious Thomas Nathaniel Barrow… that was rather a lot.

“What do you know about specialist care yourself, or when it’s needed. You’re a general practitioner! A country doctor- I’ve worked with Edward for three years now, both at home and abroad! I know him better than any other man on earth, and I will not allow you to send him away just because he’s an inconvenience to you!”

Dr. Clarkson slammed his fist down to try and cut Thomas off, “An inconvenience to me?! What of the wounded soldiers freezing or sweating under canvas, left to fend for themselves because one junior officer is depressed!”

But there was a fucking difference between feeling glum over the change in the weather and wanting to slit your wrists.

“Don’t pull the high and mighty act to me! Men like you are always the first to send boys to war, and I’ll mark you every patient in your ward knows it!” In that moment Thomas thought of Nicholas, the young boy he’d once had to perform an amputation on…. The boy who’d been so damn terrified of losing a leg in the first place.
They hadn’t had enough morphine to care for his pain.

“I was the medic in the fields, not you! I was the one who sawed off their limbs and numbed their pain with Plonk! Edward stays with me! He leaves, I go with him!”

Dr. Clarkson snarled, rolling his eyes with such derision he seemed ready to turn a shade melodramatic.

“Oh, do whatever the hell you want!” Dr. Clarkson barked; Thomas was shocked to hear the man curse. Dr. Clarkson seemed to realize that he’d crossed an unspoken line, and at once drew back his tone and mannerisms, but there was an oddly hurt look about him, as if Thomas had somehow wounded Dr. Clarkson’s pride.

“I have lost all my respect for you… I wanted you at my hospital. I wanted you to train underneath me and to learn more. I thought you had something special in you, something worthwhile… but in this hospital I have the deciding voice… and if you cannot respect that, then I cannot allow you to stay here.”

Thomas felt bile rise up in his throat.
This wasn’t his first time being kicked out of a house.
It was his third.

Dr. Clarkson took his seat behind his desk, bitter as he jerked out a sheet of stationary and began to scribble something down upon it. A letter, no doubt…

“Please help him prepare his belongings, he leaves first thing in the morning. As for you? Do whatever you want… but you will leave with him either way.”

Dr. Clarkson wouldn’t even look at him now. He was positively fuming at Thomas’ ‘treachery’.

“.… Thank you for being so understanding… sir.” Thomas spoke the word with such venom that it was shocking Dr. Clarkson did not begin to suffer from toxic shock.

He turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

~*~

Despite the day starting out relatively well enough, it ended with Edward hunched miserable in bed. A few nurses had started to help pack his belongings, but Edward had been without the energy to complete the task. Now he lay hunched over in bed, half his blankets drawn to his lap, with his valise laying at the footboard and his day jacket still on. Even though blind, Edward had an oddly vacant expression upon his face as if he were lost within himself. Thomas had tried to get him to eat, but Edward had refused. Thomas had all but had to force Edward to take his daily pills; it was like he’d lost all will to live.

Thomas knew Edward was in terrible danger, and refused to leave his side even for a second without someone standing watch.

He knew if ever there was a moment for Edward to attempt to take his life, it would be now.
Their sodden evening was kept company by a likewise nervous Sybil Crawley. Branson had come to collect her to take her back to the house for dinner, but Sybil had sent him home without a positive reply. When Mrs. Crawley had tried to offer her two cents on the matter, Sybil had likewise turned away and refused to listen. She was withdrawn in on herself, and bitter at the turn of events. Thomas was shocked to find that Sybil’s outrage and irritation was all for his sake. Thomas had known that Sybil could take a personal touch with those that she felt drawn towards, but so far had only seen it with Gwen and Branson.

Now, Sybil wanted to help him… and it was incredible to have such a powerful ally in his corner. He felt like he was keeping company with a brooding lion.

“Will you go with Edward to Farley Hall?” Sybil asked, from where she stood leaning against the wall next to Edward’s bed. In her hands she loosely clutched Edward’s clipboard, and every so often she checked her wristwatch for the time. Thomas knew that her shift would end soon; he wondered how exhausted she was.

“…I can manage.” Edward croaked; it was the first time he’d spoken in hours, and it shocked both Thomas and Sybil. “You stay here.”

“I will not stay here!” Thomas wouldn’t listen to such things. “I’m sticking with you no matter what happens, Edward. And anyway, Dr. Clarkson has decided to cast me out, so either way I have to go.”

“It’s insane!” Sybil couldn’t stand it, fuming, “You’ve done so much good for the men around here, they all look up to you, you know… I’ve heard them talking about your brave deeds in the war. You’re a hero. You’ve been wounded in the service of the King—“

“Oh, that doesn’t matter to him,” Dr. Clarkson was a doctor, not a Major, despite the fact that the war office had recruited him as one.

“This is his hospital and he’s the king. If you don’t follow his rules, you get out.” Thomas grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. He suddenly felt bone tired, and wondered how he’d keep strong to stay awake through the night. He didn’t want to fall asleep with Edward in such a dangerous state unless someone else was awake.

Edward shrunk down in his blankets, looking miserable and small: “I’d like to sleep now” he whispered.

Thomas reached, to try and help Edward get more comfortable underneath his blankets. But instead of taking comfort in Thomas, Edward just withdrew from his hands even more. Was it Thomas’ imagination, or did Edward’s skin feel terribly clammy all of a sudden?

“I’m fine.” Edward whispered. “I don’t need help.”

“I’m not helping you.” Thomas replied, pulling Edward’s blankets all the way up from where half had lain bunched at the footboard. “I’m tucking you in. I’m allowed to dote on you, you know.” And when he’d arranged Edward in bed, he leaned forward to murmur in his ear: “You are my husband, after all.”

Edward’s expression grew gray and stone faced.

“… You should let me go.” Edward whispered, turning his face away from the direction of Thomas’ voice. “I’m a burden to you.”

Thomas looked over his shoulder, catching Sybil’s eye. With an understanding look, Sybil drew the
curtains around Edward’s bed to garner them a small bit of privacy. The screens were thin but Thomas didn’t care, leaning in to brazenly kiss Edward upon his forehead. His skin was decidedly cold, and for a moment Thomas simply held Edward in his arms, trying to impart as much warmth and life as possible.

“Your love is the greatest gift I have ever been given.” Thomas whispered in Edward’s ear. “Meeting you… loving you… marrying you… I could not have asked for a more incredible life.”

He kissed Edward’s forehead again, and then (after another quick glance over his shoulder) upon the lips. Edward did not react to the touch. It was almost as if Edward had withdrawn into himself, trying to escape the physical world.

“Edward-“ Thomas tried to draw him out, cupping his lover’s cheeks in his hands. “Do not despair. We will go to Farley Hall together tomorrow, and we’ll get you well. And then we’ll go to the country, just like we always planned. We’ll fish, and hunt, and shoot. Anything that you want to do.”

“A blind man can’t do those things, Thomas.” Edward said. His tone was flat, “A blind man can’t do anything-“

“The only thing a blind man can’t do is see with his eyes.” Thomas would not hear of such nonsense. It wasn’t like Edward was the first man to lose his sight, and by god the damage wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been the first time around. He might even recover! “He can do anything that another man can, through his hands or his nose… through his ears… through his tongue.” When Edward did not react, Thomas continued on, “You’ve lost your sight, and it’s possible it won’t return. I won’t pretend either way… But you are a warrior. A survivor… and this changes nothing for me.”

“Well, it should.” Edward said, “You should forget about me and move on with your life-“

Thomas reached out and pressed his fingers onto Edward’s lips. They felt like ice in that moment.

Thomas reached out and took up Edward’s hand in his own, pulling it from beneath the blankets so that he could manipulate Edward’s hand to touch the bullet band that sat resolutely upon his left ring finger.

“Do you feel that?” Thomas asked. “Do you know what that is?”

Edward didn’t answer, so Thomas picked up his left hand and forced Edward to mesh his palm against Thomas’ own. Now their rings were touching, metal on metal.

“… I will never leave you, I will never forget you.” Thomas swore. “I am your partner until the day I die, and nothing will ever change that…. Okay?”

But before Thomas could answer, Sybil was suddenly at his shoulder to warn him.

“But Nurse Heathrow is coming!” Sybil hissed.

At once, Thomas got off Edward’s bed and pulled back so that he could look respectable. Nurse Heathrow was one of the original hospital attendees, and a good friend to Dr. Clarkson. She was an older, frumpy woman, and had iron gray hair in frizzy curls atop her head. She didn’t like nonsense, or things out of order; she’d never struck Thomas as the caring sort, but she did have an excellent bedside manner and was good to her patients.

Nurse Heathrow pulled back Edward’s curtains, letting in a bit of moonlight.
“All packed?” She observed Edward’s valise at the foot of his bed, “Your train will arrive tomorrow morning at eight. We’ll have a cab take you to the station; it’s not far, so you won’t have to worry about a long travel. Farley Hall is only about an hour away, and the staff are ready for your arrival. Since this is your last night, I’m to make sure everything’s been put to rights. Did you pack all your things?”

“Yes.” Sybil spoke up when Edward did not answer, “I checked over everything.”


“The staff of Farley Hall aren’t expecting you.” She said. “Dr. Clarkson told me that you were leaving us tomorrow as well, but he didn’t mention you’d be traveling to.”

“Well, I will be.” Thomas wouldn’t even hear of the latter. “I’ll take Edward to the station tomorrow.”

Nurse Heathrow just shrugged. She clearly didn’t know about the argument that had occurred between Thomas and Dr. Clarkson, “As you wish. Just make sure you’re ready to go by 7:30 in the morning. Nurse Crawley, this is the end of your shift. Go get yourself a cuppa from Nurse Maddock. She’s just made a fresh brew.”

Sybil nodded, rubbing her eyes tiredly. “Thank you, I rather need it.”

“God, so do I.” Thomas muttered.

“Go.” Edward whispered. “Go, I’ll be fine. You need to pack anyway.”

“No, I won’t leave you.” Thomas said, though in truth he did need to pack his valise and he would have to figure out how to get some sleep while watching Edward at the same time. How on earth was he to manage it?

But the answer came in the form of Nurse Heathrow, who caught his eyes and said: “Not to fret Officer Barrow. I keep a tight watch over all my patients, and Dr. Clarkson has asked me to watch over this ward specifically tonight. Should Lieutenant Courtenay need anything, I’ll be here.”

It was horribly tempting, but Thomas was unsure. How hard would it be for Edward to try and commit suicide with Nurse Heathrow watching? Thomas cast a glance back at Edward, remembering that he’d cut his wrists in bed. Determined to suss out whether or not there was a razor underneath his blankets, Thomas moved back to Edward’s bedside and began to make a small fuss over the arrangement in covers. In truth, Thomas was digging his fingers deep into the mattress underneath, fishing around for anything that oughtn't to have been there. Sybil watched, nervous.

But nothing was there.
Perhaps, by Thomas not leaving Edward’s side, Thomas had found a way to keep Edward from sneaking a razor.

“Sybil is everything packed?” Thomas asked, catching Sybil’s eye. “Edward’s clothes… affections… toiletries?”

“All of it.” Sybil replied. “I collected everything from the wash room earlier today.”

“No spare comb laying about? No books under a chair cushion? No razor hiding by the sink?”

“All in his valise.” Sybil said.
Thomas pursed his lips and picked up Edward’s valise, deciding the best thing to do would be to take it with him. Edward could hardly use his razor if Thomas was holding it hostage.

“I’ll only be right outside.” Thomas said. “And I’ll only be gone for just a few seconds… I’ll take your valise and put it with mine.”

Edward didn’t respond, save to sink lower into the covers, clearly miserable. Nurse Heathrow turned the dial on Edward’s bedside lamp so that the little oil flame housed inside grew smaller and finally went out.

“Try and get some sleep, Lieutenant.” Nurse Heathrow soothed, “I won’t be more than a bed or two away.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.” Edward whispered. In the dark, he seemed to evaporate into the gloom… like he’d lost his corporeal form.

“Nonsense.” Nurse Heathrow said, “I won’t hear of such things. It’s my job to care about you. I enjoy being employed.”

“Come on.” Sybil murmured, tugging at Thomas’ elbow. “Nurse Heathrow is like a hawk, she’ll watch over Edward. I want a cuppa.”

If Sybil trusted Nurse Heathrow, that was good enough for Thomas. She understood the consequences at stake better than most.

“You don’t need me for that.” Thomas said, though he followed Sybil out of the hall.

“Maybe I like the company.”

God, how exhausted he was! The role of caregiver was draining… and suddenly Thomas realized he’d not bathed or eaten a solid meal for days. He’d done nothing, really, but care exclusively for Edward. When had he forgotten to take care of himself?

…When it had become less important, of course.

The outer halls of the hospital were usually quiet and dark during this time of night, and now was no exception. The visitors were gone, the complaints of the villagers were settled, and Dr. Clarkson was retired to his office. All was as it should be, with Nurse Maddock at the nurse’s station pouring cups of tea and coffee for exhausted staff. This was the change of shifts, with the day shift leaving and the night shift arriving. Sybil was part of the day shift; she’d been at the hospital since six that morning. Nurse Maddock was a friendly face, and offered over a cup of coffee to both Sybil and Thomas when they asked for one. Together, the pair of them wandered aimlessly about the halls sipping their brews; Thomas stuck close to Edward’s ward, listening for the tell tale sounds of anything amiss.

Thomas sat down Edward’s valise, yawning.

“So will you go with Edward to Farley?” Sybil asked, “Even if they’re not expecting you?”

“I’ll go with him anywhere.” Thomas replied. If he had to sleep in the woods, then so be it. He’d figure it out in the end. They couldn’t keep him out during the day, could they?

“Well, I’m going to talk to Papa and tell him what’s happening.” Sybil said, which made Thomas groan. The last thing he wanted was Robert Crawley sticking his nose in this mess. As if Dr. Clarkson wasn’t angry enough!
“It seems horribly unfair for Dr. Clarkson to treat you so cruelly!” Sybil said at the sound of Thomas’ irritation. “It’s not right, and I plan to put a stop to it.”

“It isn’t cruelty.” Thomas said; he was practically an expert in the subject. “I’ve seen enough of that in my life to know when it’s in front of me. Dr. Clarkson’s just a stiff old crow.”

“Edward said much the same thing.” Sybil said, pausing to take another hearty sip of coffee. The aroma alone was enough to perk her up. “Though I suppose you two probably agree a lot.”

That was a fair assumption, but as of late they’d been on opposite ends of the spectrum. Thomas was the positive one, pushing for the future. Edward was without hope, weak and frightened.

“All his things are packed.” Thomas said, “I’ll have to leave out my shaving kit and comb for him to use tomorrow morning. I still haven’t packed my own valise… It’ll be a tight squeeze, to get him ready and out the door. I wish I’d put him to bed in the same clothes he’ll wear tomorrow. What a pain, we’ll have to get up at five in the morning.”

“Oh I took care of that already.” Sybil assured him. “You can shave and wash tonight. Corporal Dent was kind enough to let Edward borrow his toiletry kit for tomorrow morning so he wouldn’t have to unpack everything again. We’ll have to make sure it gets returned to Dent after Edward’s done though-“

Thomas paused, mid sip of coffee. His heart, for whatever reason, was beginning to bang wildly in his chest as if in warning.

“…Where is the toiletry kit now?” Thomas asked, praying to god it would be somewhere inaccessible to Edward.

“In Edward’s bedside cabinet.” Sybil replied. “I found a fresh pair of socks as well without an owner, so-“

But Thomas didn’t care about socks. He didn’t care about anything save for getting back to Edward as fast as possible to ensure that everything was all right. Edward’s bedside cabinet was right next to Edward’s cot, and though it might have had a latch and a lock it was still easy enough to open if you pressed around with your fingers. Edward was blind but he wasn’t an invalid, and what was more he was incredibly depressed.

There was no time to lose.

Thomas handed his cup of half-drunk coffee over to Sybil, who accepted it confused. Thomas offered her no explanation, and instead took off running with caffeine and panic pumping through his system. Edward’s ward wasn’t three doors away, hardly a stretch, but still it felt like a mile as Thomas dashed back to navigate through the beds. Nurse Heathrow was sitting at her desk in the corner, close but not close enough-!

Nearly crashing into the bed opposite Edward in his haste to return to his husband’s side, Thomas yanked back the privacy curtains concealing Edward’s cot and-

Blood.

Blood, everywhere.

On the blankets, pillows, mattress, and floor-!
“HEATHROW!! SYBIL!!” Thomas screamed the women’s names at the top of his lungs, diving forward to grab at Edward’s pale and lifeless wrists. The past was flashing before his eyes, time lost and opportunities wasted— it would not happen again! Edward had slit his wrists, but he’d surely only done it less than ten minutes ago. He’d gone under from blood loss, but he was still for the moment alive.

Ice was flooding Thomas’ veins, panic making him numb. He could see Edward splayed out on his bed in the past and present with his wrists slit and a toiletry bag upended on the covers, but could not connect with emotion. All he could do was rip at Edward’s sheets with fevered haste, grabbing Edward’s destroyed wrists and wrapping them tightly in shredded cotton as a woman’s hysterical voice echoed in his ears. Heathrow was there, but Thomas couldn’t focus on her.

He couldn’t even tell what she was saying. He was too frightened, too panicked.

“Get me a level five triage tray ready!” Thomas was barking orders, falling back into the routine of surgery and battle despite the change of circumstances. So long as he could detach he could survive this. If he just pretended this wounded man before him wasn’t Edward, he could do what was required and with haste.

Sybil Crawley was there, panicking as she turned on her heel and tried to run out the door for help. Thomas caught her by the elbow, his hands red and sticky with Edward’s drying blood, and pulled her back.

“Sybil there’s no time to run amuck-!” Thomas berated her, “Get me a blood transfusion ready as fast as you can! Go, hurry! Don’t stop for anything!”

“I— I— right-!” Sybil was just as shaky as he, now running out the door in the direction of the eastern wing.

Thomas grabbed Edward’s covers and yanked them back, exposing a bloodied razor tucked into the groove of his armpit. Vials of shampoo and shaving cream fell to the floor, shattering and turning the wood a milky white. Thomas did not stop to ascertain his surroundings, instead lifting Edward’s arms up high so that they could wrest against the headboard. Edwards’ skin was bone white, there was a cold sweat upon his brow… but his lips weren’t blue and there was still breath in this body! There was still a chance, no matter how small to save him!

Thomas would cling with it, would drive it all the way home or be drug under the motor.

Heathrow was back, the squeaking wheels of her tray Thomas’ only warning. He did not even look, grabbing blindly at the supplies with shaking hands till he’d found a needle, a spool of surgical thread, and a vial of iodine.

“You haven’t washed your hands yet-!” Heathrow begged, trying to make him pause for soap and water.

“There isn’t time!” Thomas barked; soap and water had never been close at hand during the war, and those men had survived sure enough. Thomas would soak the wound in iodine and wash his hands as soon as there was a moment to pause. Edward had already lost too much blood to slow down.

He threaded the needle, or at least tried to, but his hands were shaking too hard. He cursed, thrusting the items at Heathrow in the hope that she would do it for him. Now finally looking at the woman, Thomas could see that her normally ruddy face was bone white. She was in shock, but he could not stop to aid her. Despite her fear, she was still able to thread the needle faster than Thomas, and picked up a pair of Iris scissors to snip off the tail end.
Slathering iodine upon the needle, thread, and Edward’s right wrist, Thomas began to sew.

The cuts were deep, and an artery had been nicked. The first thing to do was to suture the artery closed, then resume stitching the entire wound proper. With this in mind, Thomas allowed himself to slip into a sort of sub-space, working without pause or awareness of the world around him.

But people were around him, clamoring for answers. The overhead lights had been switched back on and patients were waking up in neighboring beds. Sybil was back holding an enormous network of tubing. Dr. Clarkson was there as well, shocked and shouting at Thomas to answer him.

Thomas didn’t even acknowledge the man, instead speaking to all three in the hope that someone might aid him.

“First let me finish with this wrist, then insert the IV; get me wrappings ready as fast as you can.”

He was going to be ill before it was all said and done. He was shock, and knew that to continue recklessly onward would set him back health wise… But just like before when denying himself meals or sleep, Thomas knew that he had to save Edward before he could look to himself. There would be time enough later to fall apart when Edward wasn’t dying.

But even in the darkest hour, there was hope.

Dr. Clarkson had decided to stop yelling at him and instead help him. He was there beside Thomas, working along with him using tools from Thomas’ tray. He’d scrubbed his hands, washing his tools in iodine and hydrogen peroxide. Taking up Edward’s other wrist, Dr. Clarkson removed Thomas’ meagre bindings and began to stitch the wound closed.

Thomas could hear Dr. Clarkson’s voice, but couldn’t make sense of the words. It was as if the man was speaking another language, garbled and foreign.

“Nurse Heathrow, begin the blood transfusion-” Thomas’ vision was cut by the sight of a red tube passing near his right hand, which turned out to be Edward’s blood transfusion. The replacement would save his life and replenish his weakening organs. “Now take away these soiled sheets and bandages. Nurse Crawley, get me a vitamin and saline replacement. We’ll need to rehydrate him as quickly as possible to avoid organ failure.”

Thomas had finished stitching Edward’s wrist. He re-sterilized Edward’s now sutured wound, hands shaking violently. Heathrow offered him a steaming hand towel, and Thomas wiped Edward’s wrist clean. The pale skin was now stained dark yellow in places where the iodine had leaked through. Heathrow stepped in to wrap Edward’s wrist, giving Thomas a moment of reprieve… but Thomas didn’t know how to use it properly.

All he could do was fall upon Edward’s chest, and listen intently for the sound of him breathing.

…There…
So soft… so sweet. Edward was breathing, slowly but steadily.

“He’s breathing.” Thomas blurted out. He turned his face, pressing his nose to Edward’s sweating temple. He whispered into Edward’s ear, trying to wake him up.

“Edward…” Thomas murmured, “Edward can you hear me?”
But Edward’s breaths were turning into whimpers, soft and fretful. He was starting to come round, woozy from lack of blood and his near death experience.

As Edward began to cry, Thomas wrapped Edward up in his arms. He could not hold Edward very well, with his wrists now bound and his arms riddled with IV’s to stave off death and dehydration. Instead, Thomas just let Edward’s head lay upon his lap, rubbing his hands over Edward’s brow to try and warm the clammy skin. He spoke as if to a child, with his voice soft and his words sweet.

“Shh, now.” Thomas said, even as Edward wept under a malaise of wobbling consciousness. “It’s alright. It’s alright... Tomorrow we’ll go fishing, you and I. We’ll go fishing with our hands... we’ll go to that creek near the abbey. Do you remember when we went there in February? Do you remember catching the carp? How happy we were then?”

Dr. Clarkson watched but did not intervene. Nurse Heathrow had taken away the soiled blankets to return with clean ones, rolling up with a fresh cot whose mattress was unstained with blood. Edward’s was now ruined and would have to be burned to avoid contamination.

“Everyone to a corner, now.” Dr. Clarkson murmured. Sybil and Nurse Heathrow took Edward’s feet. Thomas and Dr. Clarkson took Edwards’ shoulders. Together, the four of them lifted Edward up from his ruined cot and moved him over in two quick steps. Edward groaned as he touched down on the fresh mattress, moaning against the soft, clean cotton.

Heathrow and Sybil pulled blankets up over Edward’s feet. Dr. Clarkson wheeled Edward’s IV over towards the new bed, looking utterly exhausted.

Thomas did not dare wonder what he himself might look like... if he was pale and clammy, half dead from the force of bringing another back to life.

His hands were still shaking.

Sybil was saying something to Thomas, but Thomas could not hear her. Instead, he could only watch her mouth open and close, her voice mumbled and muted. When he was pushed into a seat by Dr. Clarkson, Thomas did not have the energy to resist.

For a long while, Thomas simply sat and breathed into a paper sack.

It wasn’t his idea, at least not initially. Sybil and Dr. Clarkson insisted upon it, till Nurse Heathrow had practically shoved the bag onto Thomas’ head in an attempt to get his breathing normal and his oxygen levels back to a manageable amount. His hands were still bloody, and his shirtsleeves were stained up to the elbow. As a result, Dr. Clarkson made him take his shirt off, and wouldn’t let him have it back. So there he sat, suspenders banging about his knees and his undershirt soaked with sweat, allowing Sybil Crawley to monitor his pulse every so often to make sure that he wasn’t still in shock. When he finally did calm down, he was forced to eat a mince pie, an apple, and a three cups of tea to get his blood sugar back up.

Only after finishing his second cup of tea did his hands stop shaking.
Dr. Clarkson looked ashamed, and rightly so. Perplexed, he bowed his head in thought and occasionally looked from Thomas to Edward (who was asleep). Sybil was no longer on duty, with her hair out of its cap and her sleeves rolled up. She was just as shocked as Thomas, all of them wondering what on earth to do next.

Close to midnight, Dr. Clarkson checked Edward’s pulse and found his condition stable. He removed the blood transfusion, but kept Edward’s saline drip in just in case. They still couldn’t rule out what Edward’s mental condition would be upon waking, and the last thing they needed was to stress him out further.

“Can’t expect him to get on a train in six hours, can you.” Thomas spoke up. It was the first time the silence had been broken in over an hour.

Dr. Clarkson caught his eye, pursing his lips and taking off his stethoscope to lay it across the foot of Edward’s bed.

Next to them, Sybil was barely awake in her chair. She’d fallen asleep once already, and was hovering on the edge of unconsciousness. It was too late to go home or ring for Branson, and the nurse’s ward was on the opposite end of the building. She was too tired to move, so no one forced her hand.

“I never wanted this.” Dr. Clarkson said, gesturing to Edward laying on the bed between them, pale and quiet. “You must know that, Thomas?”

“I know.” Thomas wouldn’t hold something like that against Dr. Clarkson. He wasn’t merciless… just daft.

Weren’t all old men that way?

“He’s all I have, doctor.” Thomas said, catching Dr. Clarkson’s eye again, “I don’t have a hospital or an abbey… I’m not a middle class businessman with a career or an Earl with a title. I’m a working class lad, with nothing but the shoes on my feet, and the shirt on my back-

A rather ironic statement to make, what with Thomas not wearing an actual shirt at the moment.

“I cannot lose him.” Thomas said. “I hope you can respect that…. I… I need him. I can’t live without him.”

Dr. Clarkson shook his head. Thomas knew from the prior reality that Dr. Clarkson wouldn’t react negatively to knowing that Thomas was a man of another sort. Perhaps now, confronted with the whole truth, he would be able to respect Thomas’ position better.

“Well, I won’t pretend to be coy, or approve for that matter…” Dr. Clarkson said, perching himself on the foot of Edward’s bed so that the mattress squeaked in protest, “But you have to see that there was no other option for me to take. We have no room for men to convalesce here, and Farley is the nearest house that I can send them to.”

But Thomas knew that Downton would be turned into a convalescent. So maybe it was time.

“… Downton Abbey.” Thomas said. Dr. Clarkson and Sybil both looked up, confused. “… We have to get them to open Downton Abbey as a convalesce home.”

Dr. Clarkson scoffed, rolling his eyes to the ceiling, “Would they ever allow it.” He sneered. But
when he saw how Sybil watched him, her eyes wide with knowing and an intimate understanding, Dr. Clarkson’s irritation slid away. Indeed, he seemed to be wondering if Sybil would be the key to all of this, if she could somehow help them in their hour of need.

“Or even consider it?” Dr. Clarkson finished, a tad reproachful.

“I think they would.” Sybil said, looking from Dr. Clarkson to Edward who was still fast asleep in bed. “I think after this, they can be made to.”

~*~

The morning after found Edward pale, but still alive. Thomas slept for a good six hours, half curled up against Edward’s bed and half asleep in his chair. When he was awoken by Nurse Heathrow coming to do her final check up before ending her shift, Thomas was offered a cup of hot coffee and a fresh shirtsleeve to wear. Dr. He shrugged it on, buttoning it up and pulling up his suspenders; it was nice to wear clean clothes again. To have good, long sleep and to not have to worry about Edward.

Dr. Clarkson was gone, and so was Sybil. Thomas wondered if Branson had come to pick her up in the early morning hour so that she might get some sleep. Edward had managed to sleep all through the night, so that was something. Last night had been oddly good for them all, despite Edward nearly ending his life.

But even as Thomas finished his coffee and checked Edward’s pulse, Edward began to stir.

Thomas watched Edward wake. Where a man with sight might open his eyes, Edward’s way of stirring was to turn his head left and right upon the pillow. He was listening, trying to gather his surroundings from what little of his senses he had left.

Thomas sat beside him in his guest chair, setting his cup of coffee aside, and waited for Edward to speak.

“… I can’t see.” Edward said, sounding depressed. “I thought in death I would be able to see again.”

“Well, maybe,” Thomas said. Edward bristled, turning his head upon the pillow so that his face was in the direction of Thomas’ voice. “Whose to say… But you’re not dead yet, are you?”

“…Thomas…” Edward didn’t seem to know whether to believe it or not. With unsure hands, Edward fidgeted and tried to reach out towards where Thomas was sitting. The gauze on his wrists glared white in the morning light streaming through the center windows.

Thomas took Edward’s hand, caressing his knuckles tenderly: “Yes, I’m here.”

Edward’s bottom lip trembled.

“…What happened?” Edward asked. There was fear in his voice, and Thomas could understand why. Even in a modern age, suicide was looked upon with great disregard. Thomas would know… he’d been sorely tempted once, in a prior reality with a prior ending.

“I had a feeling you were up to something.” Thomas explained, “And I heard that Corporal Dent had offered you his toiletries to shave with, I realized what you might do. I only wish I’d been smart enough to check the bedside cabinet… I just checked the bed. I thought that you might smuggle a razor under your pillows or blankets.”

“I was afraid I’d lose it in the sheets.” Edward choked out. There was absolute misery in his voice.
… I see.” Thomas had no comment on it either way.

He watched Edward crumble and break down, tears coming fast and hard as he howled and lifted his hands to his swollen, itching eyes. There was gunk at the corners of his eyes from a night without antibiotics. It would be irritating, but not damning to Edward’s health.

“I’m sorry!” Edward howled, attracting quite a great deal of attention from men in their cots trying to eat breakfast off of trays. “I’m so, so sorry Thomas!”

But Thomas didn’t give a fig about the men having breakfast or the way that they stared. A terrible sense of empathy and love crashed over him. It left him powerless to deny Edward in his time of need, and so he swooped down to scoop Edward up in a tight hug. He let Edward cry upon his shoulder, arms fast about Edward’s shaking back. He buried his hands into Edward’s curly hair.

Edward cried and cried; Thomas didn’t ask him to stem his tears or urge him to think positively. Instead, he allowed Edward to feel whatever it is that he might be feeling, and supported him all the same.

No good would come of denying how bleak the circumstances were.

“Don’t you be sorry.” Thomas whispered sweetly in Edward’s ear, though it might have been hard to hear over all the crying. “Don’t you be sorry for a damn thing.”

“I’m so scared-“ Edward sniveled. “I’m scared every minute of the day. I can’t see how the world hasn’t ended-!”

“I know…” And he wondered how awful it might be, to wake up one day only to realize he’d never see again. Not another sunrise, not another christmas feast… not another bed whose sheets were rumpled from love making… his partner asleep and sweaty at his side.

“Day by day, minute by minute if we have to… we will make it.” Thomas swore to Edward. “We’ll live by our hands, our noses, our mouths and ears… Somehow we will make it.”

“Don’t leave me.” Edward whispered in his ear. “Just don’t leave me.”

“Never.” And Thomas meant it quite literally. He would never be parted from Edward, not until the day he died.

As Edward calmed down, he retracted himself a bit from Thomas’ arms. His face was damp with snot and tears; Thomas took out his handkerchief and wiped Edward’s face clean, careful to not harm Edward’s swollen eyes.

“There’s more to it than you know.” Edward sniffed, rubbing his nose so that the back of his hand was damp. Thomas tisked, carefully wiping Edward’s hand too.

“What else is there?” Thomas asked. Edward was growing exhausted again, too worn out from his emotional spiel to sit up straight any longer. He lay back in bed, head cradled upon his pillow.

“… I wrote to my father. In London.” Edward whispered. He shook his head, lips beginning to tremble again. Thomas took the moment to pull out a fresh handkerchief from the bedside drawer and dampen it in a pitcher of water. With the softest of touched, Thomas cleared the gunk away from
Edward’s eyes.

“And what did you say?” Thomas asked.

“… I told him everything.” Edward said. “That I was in love. That I’d married someone without his approval or consent. That I looked to a man—”

“Shh.”

“Oh what does it even matter?” Edward complained, a bit too loudly for Thomas’ liking. “I’m blind, aren’t I? What more can they do to me?”

“You’d be amazed.” Thomas warned, voice low and dark, “So keep your voice down if you’re going to mention things like that. You never know who might be listening. Remember how much of a cad Cartwright was? He’s not the only one of his sort in the world. Bastards are hiding behind every corner.”

“… Good thing you can still see them then.” Edward mused.

“Sometimes you can’t see them.” Thomas said, reaching out to stroke Edward’s curls. “Sometimes they blend right into the crowd. What good are eyes then?”

Edward didn’t reply. Instead, he sniffed and continued on with his prior conversation.

“…I thought he’d understand. I thought he’d love me.” Edward said.

For a moment, Edward seemed fine. His voice was calm and still, his lips did not quiver. And yet, just like the sudden shifting of a wind Edward broke down all over again. He howled upon his bed so that Thomas had to lay atop Edward in order to give him some semblance of privacy.

“Oh Edward…” Thomas didn’t even know what to say. How on earth could he console Edward when the same thing had eaten away at him for years? Had turned him into a spiteful little creature?

“First Khamsa, then my sight, now this?” Edward’s voice was growing so tight under a pinched throat that it was difficult for him to get the words out. “I can’t lose anything else. I can’t. I’m not even a man anymore— that’s what he said—“

“What else did he say?” Thomas soothed, “You can tell me. I’m not scared.”

“He… the … the lady at the hospital… she read my letter to me… he said he didn’t want to speak to me anymore. That I wasn’t his son—!” And now Edward was crying so loudly that he was starting to attract the attention of several nurses. Thomas waved them all off, angry at their badgering. Now was not the time for nagging!

“Now you listen to me, Edward Courtenay—“ Thomas was passionate on the subject, refusing to let Edward sink into despair just as he had done. What did Edward’s father know of their love, or of Edward’s worth? He was just one silly little man in a world full of noise and color. He was but a drop of rain in the ocean, easily lost in a crowd!

“He may be your father but he is still just a man, and if he cannot see your worth, then it is his loss not yours!”

Edward shook his head, still crying. Thomas pressed onward, determined to speak his mind.

“If he doesn’t want to speak to you, if he doesn’t want you to be his son, then he’s a goddamn fool!”
Thomas cursed, “And I don’t have any sympathy for fools. Think of all the new people that you can speak to. People who love you for who you are. People who are delighted to meet you, and who aren’t ashamed of what you are or think you mad. Men like us! Women like us!”

“W-women like us?” Edward spluttered, “They d-d-don’t exist.“

But Thomas had been to dark and hidden clubs underneath London’s oily streets, and had seen women snogging so passionately they’d nearly fallen off their chairs.

“Oh!” Thomas scoffed, “Do they ever! And the world is so full of different souls all on their own journeys… that one man- just one man who dares to say that he doesn’t want to be part of yours- is an utter idiot. And he’s just swallowed up by all the ones who do.”

For a moment, Edward still sniveled, but he was quieting down now and listening to Thomas’ words.

“I’m not trying to say that you can’t feel sad, Edward.” Thomas continued on, “God only knows… I felt sad when my own father rejected me.”

Sad didn’t cover it. Thomas had been distraught. It had taken him decades to recover, and by then the emotional damage had been too much.

It had destroyed his life.

“…When my father cast me out, I lost everything.” Thomas said, though it ashamed him to admit it, “I turned into a foul and hateful creature. I was vicious. I attacked every man I met, I never knew a friend… I was alone in an ugly world, and it was of my own making.”

But Thomas didn’t want to distress Edward, so he pushed on. “What I’m trying to say, Edward, is that… I wish someone had told me that what I was feeling was valid. That my pain was valid. That I was allowed to hurt, and allowed to feel sad. I think if I hadn’t felt so… different. So, evil… I might have stood a chance. That’s why I’m telling you now, that you’re going to be okay not because of some incredible force that’ll swoop in and save you… but because you’re… well…”

Was there any better way to put it?

“You’re just a man on your journey. And you’re going to balance out and find your way. We all do in the end.”

Even though some of them had to employ a Heichecera and travel back in time.

Edward sniffed, considering Thomas’ words.

“There’s nothing wrong with wishing my father could love me again?” Edward asked. Thomas shook his head, before remembering that Edward couldn’t see.

“No.” Thomas assured him, “I felt the same way for a long time.”

“Did it ever get better?”

“It took me understanding that I’d stopped looking to my actual father and started looking to another man for approval.” Thomas said. It had been an awful thing, to realize he’d sought Mr. Carson’s love
but couldn’t have it. Building a relationship with Mr. Carson in this new reality had been one of Thomas’ crowning achievements.

“Once I got over myself and managed to be honest with that man… well… things got better.”

“Carson.” Edward said. “It’s the butler, isn’t it? Carson? The one with the bushy eyebrows.”

“Was I so obvious?”

“He was.” Edward corrected Thomas. “The way he used to look at you with such pride… I wondered what that was all about. Now I know.”

Thomas smiled, trying to imagine what it would be like if Carson was ever ‘proud’ of him. He doubted that would happen even in this lifetime.

“The light is hurting my eyes.” Edward spoke up.

Thomas got up from his chair, and carefully pulled Edward’s privacy curtains closed so that the light coming in from the center windows was dulled to a soft pearly glow. Returning to Edward’s side, Thomas took advantage of the shield and kissed Edward tenderly upon the forehead.

“You just heal.” Thomas whispered. “Rest your mind. I’ll be right here every step of the way… and one day you’ll see. We’ll look back on these times and be grateful that we made it through.”

Edward sniffed again, reaching out a hand blindly for Thomas’ own.

“I’ve been silly.” Edward said aloud.

Thomas took his hand, their fingers interlacing upon the quilted duvet.

“Forgive me?” Edward asked, after a moment.

But Thomas just squeezed Edward’s fingers. “…For what, Edward?” Thomas shrugged.

“For what?”

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to let me know. Thank you for reading!
A Divorce from Sanity

Chapter Summary

Downton Abbey becomes a convalescent, but not without a few hiccups. Meanwhile, Thomas and Edward are forced to confront the reality of their marriage.

Chapter Notes

I know this chapter is a little late. This story isn't going on hiatus. I'm merely having to work both on this story and on graduate assignments at the same time. I likewise have other priorities, like my garden, my mother, my cat Frazier... so it's all very jumbled. You'll have to forgive me for that.

I also want to apologize to SlayerNina, who I am working on a commission for at the moment. I told you that I would give you the commission before this chapter went up, but unfortunately it's taking me longer than expected. I hope you can understand.

Trigger warnings for this chapter include period typical homophobia, and Branson acting like an idiot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Getting Edward interested in life again wasn’t so hard once Thomas realized what it was that Edward was lacking: emotional connection.

Certain people could get by, living a solitary life. Thomas had placed himself amongst that number for far too long, but what he’d found in the end was that he couldn’t endure without suffering eventually either emotionally or mentally. Edward was different; he couldn’t endure flat out, and when someone tried to make him he panicked and begged. He didn’t want to be alone. He didn’t put up a facade insisting that he was an island. To Edward, isolation was death and doom… so it was no wonder that the call to Farley Hall had been so ominous. Edward’s neediness wasn’t from a lack of ability, it was from a fear of loneliness.

With that knowledge under his belt, Thomas put Edward on a firm regiment of “getting his act together” whilst likewise praising him vocally and staying within earshot.

Downton Abbey was being turned into a convalescent, much to the displeasure of its occupants. Apparently Sybil had been like a brick wall, forcing submission to all in her path, and once Mrs. Crawley had learned of Sybil’s course, she’d manned it with such enthusiasm that Lady Grantham had all but been knocked off of her chair.

Edward’s near death experience and the subsequent recovery had prompted a new type of sympathy from Dr. Clarkson, who instead of isolating Edward further by making Thomas leave the hospital, had simply rescinded his order and allowed Thomas to care for Edward alone. As a result, Edward had opened up to Thomas more without fear of being torn away, and had begun to try and truly live his life as a blind man… or at least as a man who couldn’t fully see.
Edward’s eyes were healing, though they had miles to go. He could not open his eyes for more than half a minute without the stinging and burning reducing him to tears. As a result, he still couldn’t see properly but was at least making progress. He could see sources of light when he dared to open his eyes, and could even at times catch glimpses of vibrant color (such as the red of a woman’s coat or the blue of a blazing sky). He’d stare at the source for hours on end, tears streaming down his face and mystified by the simple pleasures, until Thomas pulled him away and made him rest again. Edward was nothing if not an enthusiastic student.

Thomas forced Edward to learn how to move about a room without looking like a newly born giraffe; back straight and chin up, Edward slowly began to walk with a normal gate and clipped pace. Another difficult task was learning how to eat on his own and without embarrassment. Thomas set up a mock table, and with true footman flair laid out an entire first class meal with dishes from the hospital kitchen pantry. By slowly sliding the sides of his hands across the spread, Edward carefully touched glasses, knives, plates, forks, spoons, and baskets with the tips of his fingers before making a move. They might have lost three wine glasses and a bread plate to the stone floor in the process, but by the end of the second week Edward had gotten the hang of eating on his own. He used his nose to sense the palate at hand, and ate at a slow pace.

At times, he spilled soup or got crumbs on his lap, but Thomas was there to dab at his face lovingly with a napkin, or offer him a fresh bread roll. After all, what were husbands for?

As the days went by, Thomas and Edward developed their own routine inside the hospital. They lacked the privacy that they might have had in a house, but they were still able to take time out to be alone together. Edward did not like to bathe with other soldiers, and neither did Thomas. Instead, they bathed together and Dr. Clarkson turned a blind eye. Thomas would carefully wash Edward’s hair, shave his face, help him to brush his teeth, and put medicine in his eyes before allowing Edward to chase Thomas’ body with a loofa and a bar of ivory soap. They’d play about, squirming under the freezing spray till they were squeaky clean, then towel off and get dressed in the changing rooms. Thomas became Edward’s valet, putting him to rights just as he would any lord. Edward couldn’t dress Thomas, but that was just as well. Thomas’ shoulder was still sore from getting shot at, and he needed the exercise stretching it.

It might have gone on like that forever, uncomfortable but emotionally dear… save for one fine May morning when the devil came knocking.

Thomas was sitting with Edward upon his hospital cot, legs stretched out and Edward’s head in his lap as he read the paper. Thomas was going over the latest news about the war, musing on battle plans and the movements of soldiers across the front when a black blur in his peripheral made Thomas take pause.

When he saw who it was, he let out a tiny groan.

“Oh, Jesus.”

Sarah O’Brien was coming up the ward, going from bed to bed and clearly looking for someone. Thomas had a feeling he was her destination, and so he set his paper aside to force Edward off of his lap. Edward sat up, pushing his hair out of his face and looking back and forth to try and catch a source of light.

“What is it?” Edward asked.
“O’Brien’s coming this way.” Thomas muttered under his breath.

“Tell me more.”

“Wearing her traveling clothes, she’s come for a visit but why? Nothing in her hands, save her purse… doesn’t seem very happy.”

“When is she ever happy?” Edward grumbled, and it was with that delightful comment that O’Brien finally reached Thomas and Edward’s hold. She paused, a stern and tight smile upon her weathered lips. O’Brien was a woman who didn’t smile much, so when she tried to do so it didn’t look natural on her face.

“Miss O’Brien.” Thomas greeted her as pleasantly as he could muster.

“Thomas.” She seemed oddly relieved to see him, which was queer since he’d been home from war for a few months now. Why did she look so pained? “It’s good to see you back on your feet, the both of you. How are you holding up?”

“I’m not.” Edward said, not even bothering to hide the bitter edge in his voice. Grumpy at being interrupted during his alone time with Thomas, Edward folded his arms over his chest and sulked near the edge of the bed, “I’m scraping along day by day with Thomas’ help. Re-learning how to live life is a delicate art.”

Thomas wouldn’t allow Edward to demean all the progress he’d made in a few short weeks. Learning how to walk, eat, and dress? For heaven’s sake, they were each commendable on their own!

“But what’s brought you out to our little corner of the world?”

“I wondered if you might like a smoke.” O’Brien said.

But these were the key words on which all their schemes had hung in the past. Smoking, for them, was more than just a vice. It was a stage setter for any true communication between the pair of them. In smoking, they could hide outside and divulge all their secrets away from the ears of maids or Mr. Carson. But neither Mr. Carson nor the maids were here now, so Thomas knew that O’Brien was actually afraid of speaking in front of Edward.

“I can hear anything that is said between us.” Thomas replied. “He’s my confidant.”

Alright then, fine-“ O’Brien gave an irritable flick of the head, “Outside, the both of you. I have something to tell you and I’m tired of keepin’ it on m’chest.”

Edward sidled off the bed, arm outstretched to feel his way through the room. Where before, he would have needed Thomas’ help to take even a few steps, Edward could now proudly march from one end of the ward to the other without making a scene. Indeed, Edward could practically feel his way all through the hospital, and did so brilliantly as Thomas kept a step or two behind.

O’Brien led the pair of them out onto the side patio, where nurses often smoked on their breaks. A few nurses were outside now, lounging on rickety furniture and reading a magazine or drinking a cup of coffee. O’Brien clearly didn’t want the company, so she just kept walking down the side road till they reached an archway through which supplies were often brought from the main junction. Edward had to hold Thomas’ hand at this point, unsure of where exactly they were going until Thomas helped him to feel the ivy along the wall and the arch of the brick.
“A grotto.” Edward muttered aloud.

“Yes.” Thomas agreed. This was another little game they’d play. Edward would make a statement about their surroundings, and Thomas would either agree or deny it. It helped Edward to feel just a little bit more certain about the world around him.

O’Brien was the one to offer cigarettes, for Thomas had abandoned the habit during his physical therapy. The smoke irritated Edward’s eyes, so Thomas and O’Brien stood off to the side so that Edward could be free of the noxious fumes.

As O’Brien began to smoke, so too did she begin to unravel her tale of woe… or rather the tale of Lady Grantham’s woe. Thomas was internally kicking himself as O’Brien explained that Isobel Crawley had become an absolute nuisance, taking over the management of Downton Abbey without even so much as a thought to the whims of the family. As a result, there was talk of mutiny and rebellion in the air, and O’Brien wanted a friend in charge. She’d put Thomas’ name forth, imagining that Thomas might be her best link to someone that knew Downton and likewise knew her darker desires. It was all just like before, down to the smallest crumb, and honestly by the end of her soliloquy Thomas was growing bored. It was like he could predict every word that was coming out of her mouth.

But Thomas wasn’t sold on the idea.

Before it had been incredibly tantalizing, to take over Downton and make Carson lick his boots. But in the end, Thomas had been the one to do the licking when the war was over, and it had all turned to shambles in lieu of Bates’ imprisonment. Thomas had become expendable, and when Bates had returned Thomas’ fate had been sealed.

Thomas had to think of Edward now. Had to remember that Edward’s health and happiness were his first concern.

“I don’t think I can come back and work as well as take care of Edward.” Thomas said, “The only way I’d do it is if we went together…. And I wouldn’t be coming home for good, you know. When this war ends and Edward’s healed, we’re leaving for a better life.”

“But the war’s not over yet, is it, and you’d be in charge!” O’Brien urged, a maniacal look sparking up in her eyes, “Imagine telling Mr. Carson what to do for a change–”

“That would never work.” Thomas shook his head. “The only thing I’d be doing would be annoying Carson. My situation would be superfluous… Carson would always remain in charge, truly. Honestly, Miss O’Brien, I know why you’re really here.”

At O’Brien’s stunned expression, Thomas carried on: “Mrs. Crawley’s become a bee in Lady G’s bonnet, and you can’t stand for things to rattle her.”

O’Brien’s change of heart in regard to Lady Grantham was nothing new. Thomas knew where it stemmed from, and why it was that O’Brien took a personal responsibility to her ladyship’s happiness. If she wanted Thomas’ help, she would have to be honest about it.

O’Brien looked away, pursing her lips bitterly, then turned back with her face grimly set. Honesty, with her, was an internal distress.

“Will you come if I can fix it?” O’Brien finally asked.

“Only if Edward can come with me. And with Carson’s blessing.” Thomas added for good measure. O’Brien rolled her eyes at that.
“I doubt there’ll be a problem with that.” O’Brien said. “He worships the ground you walk on.”

But that wasn’t true in the slightest. O’Brien was just in a sour mood at being called out for her queer fondness to Lady Grantham. Thomas tried not to take it personally.

“I’m off then.” O’Brien wouldn’t stay any longer than she liked, stubbed out her cigarette underfoot and fishing through her handbag for a peppermint. She unwrapped the sweet, popped it in her mouth, and left without another word. Edward waited until the sound of O’Brien’s boots crunching through gravel vanished into silence, then sought Thomas out with his hands.

Thomas stubbed out his own cigarette, taking Edward’s hand and holding it tight.

“I hate that witch.” Edward muttered. O’Brien was still within eye sight, at the corner of the road turning left for Downton. At once, Thomas shushed him.

“Edward, you can’t say those things around her!”

“I’m not scared of her.”

“Well, you should be.” Thomas warned, for if there were anyone in Downton that had the power to harm Edward, it was O’Brien. She had that merciless edge which caused her to turn on every man around her. Edward was unaware of the danger, running against O’Brien just as recklessly as he’d run into battle. The worst part was, Thomas didn’t know which was worse. Between getting shot again and facing O’Brien in another duel of wits, he’d almost prefer the bullet.

“She’s one of the most dangerous people I’ve ever met in my life, and I have lived many a year.” Thomas warned.

“Sod off, you’re only twenty-six.” Edward laughed.

“Twenty-seven, mind you!” Thomas said, internally thinking that he was actually in his forties if you included his prior reality.

“Well, I’m not afraid of her anyway.” Edward said.

They could argue about it, but Thomas wasn’t in the mood. Life was too short, and Edward’s presence in it was too precious. Instead, Thomas cast a quick eye at the patio to find it abandoned of nurses before reaching up and cupping Edward’s face. It was a quick touch, but it imparted all that Thomas longed to say.

“Good.” Thomas praised, “There’s some fire in you, so let’s use that to our advantage.”

Edward turned his face into Thomas’ palm, and gave Thomas’ thumb a chaste kiss.

~*~

Of course, O’Brien fixed it… Practically in days.

Thomas was approached by Dr. Clarkson one afternoon while setting up dinner for Edward, only to be told that he’d received correspondence from Lady Grantham asking for Thomas to come to Downton Abbey the next morning with Edward in tow. Dr. Clarkson was grateful to have several of his beds freed up, and seemed in a good mood. He imparted on Thomas the message to, once again,
consider a career change. Thomas wondered how many times Dr. Clarkson was going to ask before he got the message that Thomas had no desire to continue a career in the medical field. Ypres had been bad enough!

That night, Thomas packed both his valise and Edward’s, going through drawer after drawer as he made sure they’d leave nothing behind. They would not be returning to Downton Hospital after this. Thomas would get Edward well, and then they would leave Downton for the countryside. They’d set up a farm or maybe a hunting lodge… and they’d never want again.

But even as Thomas played out the fantasy in his head, the image of Matthew dead in a car crash caused him to stutter to a pause.

If he left, they would all die again.
Could he live with that on his conscience?

“Thomas?”

Thomas jerked out of his reverie, looking about to find Edward just over his shoulder. The ward was dark, men were asleep in their beds, and Nurse Mason was at the desk in the corner slowly going through a mountain of paperwork for soldier’s transferring to Downton Abbey tomorrow. Each would need to be written out of the hospital’s system, and officially put underneath the convalescent care of Downton. This helped the army keep track of where men went, particularly men who weren’t from larger cities like Ripon or Leeds.

“Sorry, I was just thinking.” Thomas shook his head, folding up Edward’s last pair of trousers so that they fit neatly into his valise.

“Talk to me.” Edward said. “Let me know what’s inside your head.”

“Well…” Thomas sighed, decidedly not telling Edward about the fact that he was struggling with life and death consequences. “You need to focus on healing, and Downton Abbey as a convalescent home can offer you the best care. I’ll be swamped managing the day to day bits. I’ll try to pop in on you as often as I can though, and of course I’ll make sure that we stay in the same room at night. I’ll make up some excuse; they’ll buy it. But it might raise suspicion which brings me to another topic.”

Thomas closed up Edward’s valise, snapping the clasps shut to slide it underneath Edward’s cot so that he could turn down Edward’s covers. Edward helped along, nimble fingers seeking out the pillows so that he could set them back against the headboard.

“Us.” Thomas said. “People you can trust with the knowledge of … us? Mrs. Hughes, Mrs. Patmore, Anna, Bates-” But Thomas caught himself, irritated to remember that Bates wasn’t in the house yet. Lang was still Lord Grantham’s valet. “Oh, that’s right! He’s not in the house yet… Well, when he comes back you can trust Bates. And that’s about it-”

“Bates likes you.” Edward said. Avoiding the subject completely, Thomas carried on.

“Don’t talk to Daisy, Lang, Mr. Carson— above all Mr. Carson!” Thomas said, “You can’t mention a word to him Edward, I mean it. He’s the worst one of them all.”

It wasn’t that Carson was bad as a man; after coming to terms with him before the start of the war, Thomas had felt they’d taken on a new role in their relationship with one another. It was that he desperately desired Carson’s approval, and he couldn’t stand to be looked at as vile in Carson’s eyes. So long as they stayed off the topic of Thomas’ inclinations, Carson was agreeable and even kind at times. The more trust they could build between the pair of them, the more Thomas felt that they could avoid the fights they’d incurred in the past. If Carson knew that Thomas and Edward were
married… Thomas could only imagine the shame that would rain down on his head.

But Edward was reaching out, cupping Thomas’ hand in his own, and Thomas reveled in his strength. Edward was sure where was Thomas was shaky; they made a good pair when facing obstacles.

“Let’s have a code word, you and I.” Edward said, “A safe word, and when it’s uttered I know I can speak of our I-“

“Shh.” Thomas wouldn’t even let him say the word. The soldier’s might look asleep in their cots… but who was to say? One of them could be awake, lucid even, and if he overheard Edward say something odd…. God only knows what might happen.

Edward pursed his lips, gave a tiny sigh, and carried on: “What’s a good word we can use?”

“Umm… teacup?” Thomas offered.

“No. It has to be something unique.” Edward said, “Nothing like ‘bananas’. We have to be sure we can be free to talk. Otherwise I might let something slip on accident.”

“… I can’t think of one.” Thomas said, positively wracking his brain. “I…” But then, Thomas caught a glimpse of one of the quilts hanging over a soldier’s footboard. It was a knitted gift, brought from home, and featured a Shetland pony amid a swampy marsh in fine Scottish colors.

“..Khamsa.” Thomas said. Edward nodded in agreement.

“Khamsa.” Edward spoke the name with slightest longing, and once again Thomas thought of that beautiful black Arabian sprinting through the Ypres mud… how brave she’d been, how strong and kind. It was rare that Thomas connected with an animal, but he’d looked at Khamsa and had seen another human being, not some dumb mare. She’d understood them, he was certain. She’d come to their rescue more than once.

He suddenly wished Khamsa was here now. If only he could jump on her back, and ride away from every other conflict.

He slept fitfully that night, unsure of what the next day would bring.

Morning was a pleasant affair, and involved Nurse Mason offering them a fresh cup of coffee as she ended her shift. They made up their beds, checked out with the nurse at the front desk, and left hand in hand for Downton. The air was crisp and cool, fresh from a slight rain shower that had fallen in the middle of the night. The birds were singing, children were calling out as they ran to the schoolhouse… Springtime in England was a beautiful thing.

The pair of them talked about trivial things as they walked. Of their favorite sports (fishing and cricket), their favorite seasons (fall and spring), their favorite colors (burgundy and mint green), and their musings on when the war would end (Edward thought it might last for another two years,
Thomas refused to tell him the truth either way). By the time that they’d made it to Downton, their feet were warm in the stiff leather of their shoes, and a fine sweat dampened their brows. They moped their faces with their handkerchiefs, re-tucked their ties, hats, and shirt collars, and then made their way up the front walk with their bags in tow. The gravel drive of Downton Abbey was packed with ambulances from near and far, none of which carried men but instead had brought supplies. Thomas knew from before that there would be cots, food, card tables, chairs, books, medical stocks, and a whole heap of fresh linens. All of it would have to be sorted, catalogued, and put in a safe space so that it couldn’t be mixed with the house stocks on accident.

Thomas could already feel the mountain of work beginning to pile atop him, and winced.

“Gravel-” Edward was once again speaking of the environment, detecting what he could from touch, smell, and sound. “Fresh cut grass… what am I missing?”

“You’re surrounded by cars, medical vans.” Thomas said, watching as a nurse traipsed past them carrying an enormous load of folded linens in stitched canvas sacks. “They’re bringing in supplies. Nurses have pillows, blankets, the like… Men have tables, chairs, bed frames. It’s a damn invasion, and Mr. Carson is probably crawling in his skin.”

Edward didn’t seem fazed by any of it, though he did reach out a hand to cautiously run his fingers over the sleek siding of a medical van. His fingers paused around each steel weld that he felt.

“Let’s go.” Thomas said, for they couldn’t spend all day waiting if they were to be on time. Carson liked his staff to be early, and even if Thomas wasn’t technically a member of Downton Abbey anymore, he still ought to do as Carson said to avoid a scolding. So much of his life had been spent devoted to hiding from Carson’s wrath that Thomas felt like he’d burrowed out a miles worth of tunnels underneath the ground of Downton Abbey, using each nook to wait for safer skies.

As they crossed what little remained of the front walk to mount the entrance steps, Thomas felt slightly guilty to not be using the servant’s entrance. He could remember, clear as day, how he’d returned to Downton Abbey the first time as a supposed Acting Sergeant… how he’d proudly rung the doorbell and been let in on the front stoop by a confused maid. Carson had been furious to find Thomas there, and so Thomas wondered if he was in for another scolding as he once again rang the front door bell.

He couldn’t take Edward through the servant’s entrance. It was too risky, the stairs were steep and they were carrying valises. There would be a commotion below, and the area yard was already crammed with vans and crates.

The door was opened by a maid, who suddenly perked up at the sight of Thomas and welcomed him in with a smile.

“Thomas!” Thomas had been introduced to this girl only a few days ago, and already he’d forgotten her name. What was it… Lila? Lily?

“Please let Mr. Carson know that we’re here.” Thomas said, helping Edward through the front door so that the maid could close it again. In the mud room, Thomas helped Edward to straighten his tie and put his hat a little better upon his nestle of curls. Edward was in uniform, but Thomas was not. Instead, he wore a suit of dusky blue that he’d had since before coming to Downton, and a tie of navy. Thomas checked his hair in an offered mirror, then took Edward by the hand and walked them both out into the entrance hall. It was a maze of rolled up rugs, sofas on the lam, and borrowed workers trying to clear a path for the mess tables. Thomas and Edward stayed well out of their way, not wanting to be a nuisance, waiting for the telltale sounds of Carson storming around the perimeter sulking about the lack of decency.
And yet, instead of the angry and vengeful butler that Thomas had been prone to know, he was instead greeted by the sight of a rather grateful looking Charles Carson, striding forward from the green baize door with a look of contentment upon his aged face. Thomas pinched Edward’s hand in his grip, a silent sign that they were to move, and drug the pair of them along the left side of the entrance hall so that they could speak to Mr. Carson before the grand staircase where all three of them would finally be out of the way.

“Ah, there you are!” Carson said as he walked up, “And looking much better I see-“

“Forgive me for coming through the front door, Mr. Carson-” Thomas said, but Carson waved the request off like an irksome fly, “I didn’t want Edward to have to walk through the servant’s hall when there’s some much going on downstairs. The staircase is too tight a spiral when everyone’s trying to get by-“

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Carson grumbled, but there was a gentle smile at the corner of his lips which melted Thomas’ anxiety. It was so queer, even now, to be the subject of Carson’s mercy. Thomas wondered if the man was aware how terrified Thomas was of him.

“How are you feeling?” Thomas asked, “Any better?”

But Carson just scoffed, bushy brows quirked as he looked from sofas to rugs, all of them misplaced.

“I won’t be feeling any better until this nonsense is gone and my world is put right again!” Carson said.

Thomas just smiled; it was oddly endearing to hear him say such a thing, “It won’t be long.” Thomas said, for by the end of next year the war would be over and all the men would be gone. “But you’ve been very gracious and kind to work with the hospital. I’m sorry for the nonsense-“

“Don’t try to fluff me up.” Carson said, but the tone in his voice alluded to a man already fluffed. Once again, Thomas couldn’t help but smile. “Do you have all your things from the hospital?”

“Yes.” Thomas said, gesturing with both their valises, “We’re all packed.”

“Good.” Carson said, “I’ve had a room made up for you on the gallery floor-“

“Mr. Carson!” Thomas scoffed, what a notion! Rooming on the gallery floor? What was next, eating at the family table?

“I really can’t have any more disorder-“ Carson tried to cut across, but Thomas wouldn’t hear of it. His rooms would always be in the attics.

“Mr. Carson, it’s not disorder.” Thomas said, “I’m going to help you as much as I possibly can, now that William’s on his way. Even if I am the house manager, I still feel responsible to you and to Mrs. Hughes. After the war is over, Edward and I will be moving on to make our own life, but until then… I want to be of aid; I won’t be sleeping in a room that isn’t meant for me.”

Mr. Carson’s face went through a strange ribbon of emotions. First he was oddly touched, them somber, then wary, then finally touched again. He ended up looking slightly irritated but still happy as a whole.

“…Well.” Mr. Carson huffed, “If you wish to sleep in your old room I will, of course, allow it… but Lieutenant Courtenay will not be rooming with you.”

“Mr. Carson, he’s blind!” Thomas begged, “He needs me in order to dress and navigate throughout
the day.”

Carson swept a hand through a now cramped entrance hall, full of boys working and medical helpers moving in mess tables, “And will there not be other men he can convalesce with? Nurses that he can use?”

“Mr. Carson-” Edward cut across; Thomas could note the slight nervous edge in his voice, the way that he seemed to be on the verge of shouting if only to get his point across, “I have to room with Thomas. I-”

“Edward, remember what I said-” Thomas cut across.

Edward fell silent for a moment, well aware that Carson was hardly their ally.

“…Please.” Edward finally said, his tone collected and his words sincere, “I beg of you. It’s… frankly, it’s a matter of life and death.”

Carson waffled for a bit, no doubt wanting to strangle the pair of them for being so improper. Even as he thought it over, Thomas silently pleaded with the man, his face contorted with wide eyed longing.

“… Oh, god in heaven.” Carson finally spat, cheeks colored and eyes narrowed, “You will be the death of me— if anything occurs, anything-!” Carson held up a finger, his line in the sand clear and strong.

“Nothing will occur of that you don’t strictly approve of!” Thomas promised, though this of course was a flat out lie.

“I don’t approve of you two rooming together.” Carson snapped. Reproachful, Thomas tried again.

“Well… it is a medical emergency, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. Carson sighed, rolling his eyes skyward no doubt to ask God for strength.

In an effort to change the topic and get Carson back in a better mood, Thomas gestured about at the flipped entrance hall, “So, are we ready for the big invasion? They’ll be here by tea time.”

“Not quite.” Carson admitted, his voice slightly weak. He seemed to be running over an internal monologue of all that there was left to do, “I’ve several more projects to complete, and it’s difficult to do while running the staff and attending to the family’s needs at the same time.”

“Right.” Thomas sat his valise down, shrugging his jacket off and beginning to roll up his sleeves, “I’ll take over the projects right now.”

“Thank god.” Carson let out a breath, reaching into his inner pocket and handing Thomas out a list that looked like it could double as a grocery check off. There were at least ten things left to do!

Still, Thomas took the list without question and put it in his pocket. He would get Edward squared away somewhere safe, and then he would get started. He worked best when his nose was to the grindstone, anyways.

“Come on, Edward.” Thomas said, picking back up his jacket and valise. “We have a great deal to do.”
It was with slight relief that Thomas and Edward dropped off their valises in Thomas’ room, along with their jackets and hats. Thomas took out the list, attempted to get Edward to sit in the library or relax outside, then finally gave in when Edward refused to be budged and decided to let Edward follow him around the house. Thomas immediately took over for Carson, allowing Carson to get back to work with his regular duties, and set the entrance hall to rights so that the hall boys could sweep and the nurses could line the mess tables with benches for sitting.

Lady Grantham was a bit overwhelmed, and Thomas could understand why. Mrs. Crawley was outside, trying to order soldiers about, and Lady Grantham looked ready to strangle the next person to question her moves. Instead of offering condolences, or trying to butter the woman up, Thomas instead allowed her to give him orders and followed them out as if he were nothing more than a footman. Thomas had the members of medical staff that could move heavy furniture without pain clear off three of the five sitting rooms for the uses of the convalescing soldiers. He then ordered the hall boys and one of the maids (Helen was her name) to take every valuable piece of fine china or silver up to the attic so that they could be tallied and kept safe from roaming hands. Thomas was almost certain there had been theft at the abbey during the first time around, and while it hadn’t bothered him much then it certainly bothered him now.

With an hour to tea time, Thomas was sweating profusely but the work load was neatly scraped clean. Gallery rooms were fleshed out for the soldiers, the three sitting rooms were turned into bunk rooms, and the ante library was divided off from the main library by folding Chinese curtains so that the family could have a private area away from the men.

Able to take a small break and not feel guilty, Thomas decided it was time to venture downstairs for a well deserved cup of tea and a biscuit. Edward followed along, dutifully holding Thomas’ hand as the pair of them entered through the green baize door and began the slow descent to the basement. Edward gripped onto the iron rail with white knuckles, each step steeper than he was used to.

“Christ, this is tight.” Edward muttered as they went round the circles.

“Just follow the rail,” Thomas urged as they hit the third landing. They were nearly at the bottom now, “With both hands if you need too! You wouldn’t be the first to slip on these stairs. If you want to meet everyone again-“

“I met them in February-“ Edward complained.

“Right, well, now that you live here, you’re going to be seeing them everyday. So if you want to meet them again, now is your chance. You better be friendly to them if you want hot tea and sweet biscuits! And don’t get into a fight with the cook, Mrs. Patmore. You’ll never win.”

“Where are we now?”

They’d hit the bottom landing, putting them right in front of the servant’s hall and the narrow corridor to the kitchen. Maids were running left and right, trying to keep linens organized, but the rest of the servants were puttering about mending collars for their ladies or shining shoes for their lords. The afternoons were quiet moments on days when there weren’t large parties, and the men arriving today were fed not by the house by the army so their meals were to arrive via a caravan of wagonettes from in town later on that day. This helped keep everything separate so that money was not spent errantly, and expenses could be easily tallied. It also greatly eased Mrs. Patmore’s work load.

Eager to get Edward adjusted, Thomas allowed him to roam on his own devices, hands outstretched and feeling along the walls: “What do you hear?”
“… The cook, yelling.” Edward said, which was quite true. Mrs. Patmore was snapping about cheese not being grated the right way to Daisy. “Pots and pans banging about…”

“So, where are we?” Thomas asked.

“The basement, near the kitchen.” Edward said.

“Yes!” Thomas praised, clasping his hands together, “Go on, use your hands. Go find the kitchen. I’ll be right behind you.”

“But I’ll get lost-“

“We’ll get there eventually.”

And of course, Edward didn’t actually get lost. As a matter of fact, he did wonderfully, feeling along the walls to search out the kitchen door down a long, narrow corridor that ran along the flank of the stairs. Once, he paused at a closed door that was actually a cupboard under the stairs, but then moved along to suss out the actual door to the kitchen which was much wider and flung open. Inside, Thomas found Mrs. Patmore working on a soufflé, with Daisy grating cheese for a casserole and Anna taking a cup of tea in her black and whites. Ethel was there too, but for whatever reason she looked oddly sulky when she saw him. She certainly didn’t try to seduce him with her eyes, for which Thomas was incredibly grateful. Maybe she was finally starting to get the hint that Thomas wasn’t the man for her.

“Thomas!” Daisy piped up, beaming at the sight of him, “You’re back!”

“I am,” Thomas said, “This time for good, and look who I have with me!”

Everyone made noises of welcome, with even Mrs. Patmore casting Edward a fond glance over a steaming pot of peas and carrots that were boiling in vegetable stock.

“Hello, Lieutenant.” Anna said, “Are you feeling a bit better?”

“Nervous, actually.” Edward said, which made sense. “I can’t see anything-“

“Just for the moment!” Thomas soothed. Edward was constantly doubting the future, insisting that he would never be able to see again, flat out. He seemed afraid that he might fall into some invisible trap by hoping for a better life. “You’re going to get your sight back. It just takes time! You can see light better, can’t you? And the swelling’s gone down. You’ll be able to see again fully, one day.”

Edward shook his head, a tiny smile upon his lip.

“I wouldn’t be able to cope without my savior.” Edward said. Thomas heard Mrs. Patmore make a tiny noise of amusement under her breath.

“So…” Thomas turned to Edward, giving him a gentle nudge in the back for courage, “You’re in the kitchen now. Feel about! Go on, use your hands. Tell me what you feel!”

But even as Edward reached out with both hands to start trying to feel for the countertops, Mrs. Patmore rounded on him, waving a wooden spatula like one would a sword, “Ah! Not my soufflé!”

“Give him a moment, Mrs. Patmore!” Thomas urged, “Let him settle himself!”

All the same, Mrs. Patmore took the soufflé away from the island counter and passed it to Daisy who put it in the warming drawer instead.
Edward timidly touched the kitchen island with just the barest tips of his fingers, and a silence overtook the kitchen as each woman watched to see what he’d do next. Instead of making a mess, Edward splayed his fingers out like a man on a piano would, gently rounding each edge so that he might slowly grasp whatever instrument lay out before him. Be it a bowl, a spoon, or a cookbook, Edward took his time feeling it over.

“A table… a countertop with working space.” Edward deduced, “Many things are on it. Bowls, spoons, books… I’ll wager there are spices and dishes with ingredients too. I can smell them.”

“Yes.” Thomas praised. He could not help the warm smile creeping over his face; he must look like an idiot.

Edward felt underneath, touching the top of a wire basket that was normally used to fetch eggs from the gardens outside. “A few things underneath.”

He then began to move about, heading dangerously close towards Mrs. Patmore’s direction. He no doubt felt the heat from the stove, growing closer and closer to the burning surfaces until Mrs. Patmore decided she’d had quite enough and muscled her way forward to cut Edward off.

“And I’ll thank you to not go feelin’ around for the stove.” Mrs. Patmore said, “You’re more than welcome to a cup of tea or a biscuit but you’re not allowed in my kitchen otherwise. It’s too dangerous, in here, and I say that as a woman whose had eye surgery!”

Put out, Edward stepped back and turned away. Thomas took him by the elbow, sulkily leading him from the kitchen back out into the hallway.

“Never mind.” Thomas grumbled, “Let’s go into the servant’s hall. Feel your way northward and don’t stop walking.”

So back up the hall Edward went, hands outstretched to feel along for the walls. As he reached the intersection where one might go left or right to continue an errand, he kept further northward and passed into the servant’s hall.

But even as Edward went back to work, feeling around the edges of the main table and its chairs, Thomas noted Anna walking in with her cup of tea. She was watching Edward still, and grinned impishly at Thomas when he caught her eye.

“Alright, feel about!” Thomas urged, “Tell me what you find.”

“Mm, this is where you eat.” Edward deduced, hands splayed out along the table to see if he might touch anything. But the table was bare, and so Edward would find nothing to grab. “I remember this room from before in February. There should be a mantle around here… somewhere-“

And sure enough, Edward stuck out his hands and tried for the wall until he found the mantle and the fire underneath.

“The fire and the mantle, I know this grotto.” Edward said. “Should be two pictures up above-“ He felt about till he touched the frames, “These are the King and Queen?”

“Indeed.” Thomas praised. How smart he was!

Edward let his hands drop, and inadvertently ran his fingers along the back side of Thomas’ favorite chair, “Ah… a rocking chair.”
“That’s my favorite chair.” Thomas said, “You can sit in it, if you like.”

Edward did so, easing back timidly until he was finally able to relax fully and go let with a deep sigh.

“This is a good chair-“ Edward said, “And I can see the light, a bit… It’s hard for me to open my eyes when I’m this close to the fire.”

But Edward dared to, blinking a tiny bit. The flashes of muddied blue and cream were the only bits you could see of his eyes before he had to shut them again.

“I can see a shadow.” Edward said, “Someone’s behind you, Thomas.”

“It’s me, Anna the housemaid. I’m sorry.” Anna spoke up, seeming to realize that Edward did not like having people in the room without his awareness. It was rather like being spooked by a ghost. “I din’t mean to frighten you. I just wanted to have a word with Thomas.”

“He’s just a friend, Edward. I’m allowed to worry about a friend.” Thomas tutted. Though Edward couldn’t see it, Anna was close to laughing at the silliness of it all.

“He asked you to marry him?” Thomas asked. Anna was shocked at Thomas’ insight.
“How did you know?” She wondered.

“Because he loves you.” Thomas shrugged; honestly, some things were just simple math, no matter what reality you lived in, “Because he can’t live without you.”

“I thought you said he had a wife.” Edward cut in, “How can he ask her to marry him if he has a wife already?”

“He’s trying for divorce.” Anna explained. “But he’s… well…” She looked away, “She just won’t go unless we force her. She’s a nasty woman.”

“She’ll be gone soon.” Thomas assured her, thinking longingly of the days when the name Vera Bates would be tossed to the wind and forgotten. “Just try not to think on it. Bates is here, somewhere. He can’t have vanished into thin air.”

But that got Thomas wondering about the Heichecera, and if he himself had vanished into thin air with his original reality…

He doubted anyone would have cared.

Edward sighed, drumming his fingers upon Thomas’ shoulders, “Can we go for a walk before the soldiers arrive? I want some fresh air.”

Thomas checked his watch; it was incredibly close to the time.

“Mm, I’m afraid not dar-” Thomas cut himself off before he could say the word ‘darling’. A flush upon his pale cheeks, Thomas caught Anna’s eye. She was giving him yet another cheeky grin.

“Go on.” She mouthed the words, her lips not making any sound.

“… It’s a little too close to time.” Thomas murmured, but there was sweetness in his voice that he’d so far been forced to hide inside the abby, “But I promise you, we’ll go on a walk some time today, even if its tonight.”

Edward was sated by that. His grip relaxed a bit upon Thomas’ shoulders.

“I heard you mouth that.” Edward said, speaking now to Anna. “The words ‘go on’. Before, I might not have caught it, but now that I can’t see I tend to hear better than the average man.”

Anna took it in her stride, “Well, I’m your friend.” Anna declared, “And Thomas is like a brother to me. So if you ever need any help at all don’t be afraid to come to me, Edward. Just ask for Anna and someone will help you out.”

“Good to know.” Edward said, and Thomas shared his sense of peace.

Just as Thomas expected, the soldier’s arrived in mass droves around tea time. Many had to be helped out of their caravans, sporting casts upon broken limbs and bandaged faces incapable of seeing or speaking. Thomas had never got around to having a cup a tea when he was downstairs, but that was no matter. He had more to think on now, and instead contented himself in his work while Anna helped Edward to find a warm corner in the library where Isis could sit in his lap. Edward had
a way with animals, and so he and Isis were quite content with one another; it allowed Thomas to work without worrying, and so he moved twice as fast as he helped men get comfortable with their quarters.

Most of the men were sleeping in mass quarters down below. These were the lower ranks, as well as men who could not feasibly get up and down the stairs everyday. Actual bedrooms were reserved for higher ranking officers, though no one was to room alone. It simply wasn’t feasible even in a house of this size. With a clipboard in hand, Thomas checked off each name as the men came through the doors and directed them to their new lodgings. From Thomas’ orders, nurses took the men in hand and helped them along. Those that could walk without aid were left to their own devices to free up help for those that could not make it. Thomas noted there were five other blind men at the abbey, three of whom were completely without sight and looking terribly down. He thanked God in that moment that Edward was not among their number.

The hours passed by at a relatively calm pace despite the influx of patients, with Thomas working out a system among the nurses so that no one was left hiding in the eves of the mud room unsure of where to go. By the time that the final few vans were being unloaded, it was getting close to supper. Thomas desperately wished to rest but knew it wouldn’t be kind to offer himself to Carson only to pull back at the last second. He’d have to find a moment to slip away so that he could get changed into his livery and return downstairs to bring up the platters.

But thoughts of dinner and swapping liveries were run from Thomas’ mind as a familiar face passed by.

At first, Thomas did not know why he felt such a surge of irritation in his heart at the sight of Major Bryant, who Thomas hadn’t known intimately before hand and who had never been one to rile Thomas up personally… but then Thomas remembered all that the man had done to ruin Ethel’s life. Thomas wondered if he could save her yet, if he could keep her from making the worst mistake of her life.

Major Bryant was lingering in the entrance hall instead of walking up to a nurse or to Thomas. His eyes were gliding over every fine tapestry and painting he could see; Thomas remembered distantly that this man was the son of a Lord as well. He was used to opulence, and was probably glad to be back in it again.

When Major Bryant spotted Ethel hanging beneath the grand staircase, his eyes were automatically drawn to her beauty. Thomas wasn’t a man for women, but he knew when another man was ogling one. The way that Bryant’s eyes ghosted over every curve of Ethel’s body made Thomas want to grind his teeth. There was nothing worse than a spoilt Lord who thought that servants were for his pleasure.

“Major Bryant,” Thomas stepped up, catching the man off guard and forcing him to finally tear his roving eyes away from Ethel. “Welcome to Downton.”

Major Bryant blinked, wary at Thomas’ familiarity. “Do I know you sir?”

Thomas tapped upon his clipboard rather curtly, his trimmed nail making a sharp sound against the wood and paper, “I’m Officer Barrow, head healer of the fifth order of triage in Ypres, and manager of this estate during this time of war. It’s my duty to know every man beneath this roof.”

“Crickey.” Bryant snorted, “You get about, don’t you.”
Thomas did not deign the man with a smile, instead looking through his clipboard till he checked Bryant’s name off and noted that the man was to be in the Armada bedroom with four other ranking officers. “You’re to be in the Armada bedroom. This way please.”

The pair of them made their way to the stairs, and began the long march upwards to the gallery floor. Thomas made sure that Bryant was first, determined that he should not spend any more unsupervised time around Ethel. Anna, standing at the base of the stairs with linens in her hands, seemed to likewise be aware that Ethel was staring at Major Bryant far too familiarly. They were close to diving into dangerous territory; Thomas would have to bring the subject up with her lest Ethel fall prey twice.

As they passed by one another, Anna gave him a knowing look.

Thomas did not get his chance to speak with Ethel that night, though he was given lucky reprieve from working as a footman at supper. The family went to dine with the Dowager at her own estate to avoid the hubbub of Downton, and Thomas fell into uneasy rest in his bed with Edward at his side, curled up tight in his husband’s arms to try and avoid the cold. The only time he felt safe was when Edward was close by… and the only time he could relax was when all other prying eyes were away.

That didn’t leave him many times to let his guard down. Midnight hours were his only reprieve, and even then there was always the danger of Carson sleeping three doors down. Would his life ever be restful?

Thomas couldn’t help but wonder as the shadows drifted over his speckled ceiling. Would there be a time when everything worked out, or would Thomas be doomed to wait in a middle land, one foot out the door, one foot stuck inside…?

Maybe this was the price he paid for dabbling in realities. Maybe he’d never be happy either way.

Still, Thomas tried to put those ugly thoughts out of his head and instead focus on the work at hand. There was a great deal to be done, and filling two roles both above and below Carson’s influence required him to be able to switch it up at a moment’s notice. The family weren’t adapting well to having strange men in their house, ergo Carson wasn’t adapting well. There was nothing Carson hated more than having moments of doubt, and there was nothing more doubt inspiring than bawdy rounds of Tipperary being sung in the Entrance Hall during breakfast.

Thomas did his best to keep the men quiet but sometimes he was outnumbered twenty to one. The nurses were no help at all. When they weren’t getting their bottoms pinched, they were flirting coyly over coffee cups and biscuits.

But the real problem wasn’t the cramped time schedules, Carson’s irritations, horribly sung war songs, or even flirtatious nurses though.

The real problem was Mrs. Crawley.

Head strong, domineering, and desperate to remain in charge, Mrs. Crawley had decided to stick her nose into every corner of Thomas’ work. She’d changed up his time schedules (or at least tried to), forced nurses to re organize every cabinet in the house, and had even gone so far as to try and make the servant’s eat at awkward times. This would not be stood for, because servant’s barely got to eat
anyways. With Mrs. Crawley’s time mismanagement, people like Anna were starving until supper… and that was unforgivable.

In the past, Thomas might have looked at this moment as an opportunity to do something snide or scathing. He might have even schemed against the woman, despite her being above his station, and god only knows what the catastrophic fallout would have been. Now, wiser for his years of being publicly shamed and hated, Thomas knew that the only way to deal with people like Mrs. Crawley was to meet her head on and to show no deference in the road he took. He would not sink beneath her, he would not rise above her. He would instead slam into her, an unshakable force reacting to an unstoppable object.

He had to wonder, even as he sat taking a cup of tea at the servant’s table with Anna and all the rest, who would be the first to give. At the head, Carson was resting his eyes in the spare moment that was given to him. He was utterly exhausted, and who could blame him?

Anna and Ethel were no longer starving, given that Thomas had re-arranged the servant’s time schedule with the help of Lady Grantham. Now content to take their tea and not rush, both girls were relaxing in their chairs and reading magazines. Ethel had an oddly cold atmosphere about her, and refused to even speak to Thomas. Thomas was not lacking in a conversational partner, however. O’Brien was glad to have him back in the house despite their initial squabbles back in 1914, and she routinely would strike up grumbling conversation about Lady Grantham’s varied woes or the irritations of having strange men in the house.

“The nerve of them.” O’Brien muttered, thumbing bitterly with long loose black threads that could no longer stay put on a spool. She was instead wrapping them about one another so that she looked like a type of poisonous spider with her fingers all done up in silk. “Going through the library, poking their noses in like they even belong. I won’t be pulling my forelock to them, whatever the times.”

“They’re not so bad.” Ethel spoke up. “They seemed rather friendly to me.”

“That’s not a vote of confidence coming from you.” O’Brien scoffed, “You’ll flirt with anything that moves.”

“Better a flirt than a dour old spinster.” Ethel said. O’Brien looked ready to set the girl on fire.

“Everyone’s goals are different, Ethel.” Thomas reminded her. “Some people are not romantically motivated.”

“So mind to your own business before I sort it out myself.” O’Brien added. The nasty edge to her voice was as good a warning as a harbor bell before a hurricane.

“That’s enough.” Carson grumbled, not even bothering to open his eyes. So tired was he, he could not give energy to a tiny spat.

Ethel no longer had it in her to scoff or be surprised at O’Brien’s acidic words. Instead, she looked to Thomas… there was a coldness in her gaze Thomas had not been expecting; why was she looking at him so angrily? What had he done to justify her hatred?

“And how are you motivated, Thomas?” Ethel asked, as calmly as she pleased. “By your own image?”

“That’s not nice.” Anna spoke up, “Thomas isn’t egotistical. He just wants to do what is right.”

“Spare me.” Ethel rolled her eyes, palming her chin and looking away. She seemed decidedly bored
now, and took up her magazine as if to go outside. But before she could even push back her chair, the sounds of someone walking up the hallway caught everyone’s attention. Suddenly they were given the unbidden sight of Mrs. Crawley, who seemed to be in a right fit of manic glee with blue eyes popping and a bright, domineering smile in place.

At once, everyone stood up, including Thomas. It wasn’t typical that they stood for members outside the family, but Mrs. Crawley was the mother of Matthew, who was the heir to the Crawley throne. She was as good as the regent mother in times like these. Mr. Carson lead the charge, but Thomas noted that he still looked exhausted.

“Oh blimey-“ O’Brien muttered, putting her silk threads away as she rose up, “Here she comes.”

“I’ll handle her.” Thomas whispered. “Relax.”

Thomas stepped out from around the table to address Mrs. Crawley head on, and though he did not speak with a cold tone, he did not also smile or give her notions of welcome. There was nothing more irritating than a member of the upper class who tried to make havoc on a servant’s schedule.

“Thomas!” Mrs. Crawley addressed him by first name, which wasn’t a welcome experience either, “Just the man that I wanted to see. I wanted to speak to you before we fully got underway with the servants and the staff. I understand that Dr. Clarkson has put you in charge of the day to day managing of this house-“

“No, ma’am.” Thomas replied. Mrs. Crawley was politely confused.

“No?”

“I have been allowed to assume the duty of manager through the grace of her Ladyship. It is by her command that I am here, not Dr. Clarkson’s.”

“Well then-“ This seemed to make Mrs. Crawley oddly happy, “You won’t mind if I take a bit of it off your hands, given that Lady Grantham is not trained in patient care-“

“As a matter of fact, I do mind, Ma’am.” Thomas said, once again forcing himself to keep his tone neutral lest he be seen as insubordinate. At once, Mrs. Crawley’s bright and bubbly personal began to withdraw as she realized that Thomas would not simply hand over the keys to the house.

“Her Ladyship put me in charge, ma’am, and so it is my duty to care for this house in her stead. Her Ladyship has not been specialized as a nurse, but she is the owner of this house, and so we are therefore here underneath her good graces. I cannot allow myself to be derelict in my duties.”

“Well,” Mrs. Crawley tried for an in-between, “I can oversee you, if you feel that strongly about it-“

“Forgive me, ma’am, but I am overseen by Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, tipping his head in the butler’s direction. “And he is overseen by Lord Grantham. So in fact I am underneath his control.”

“Well, then, Mr. Carson.” Mrs. Crawley turned her attentions to him, hoping for a more receptive audience. “We will simply have to look to you for a sense of order-“

But even as Carson opened his mouth to try and soothe Mrs. Crawley’s manic desire for change and control, their bizarre conversation came to an abrupt end by the arrival of Lady Grantham. Where her counterpart was bubbly at the idea of schedules and bossing others around, Lady Grantham looked absolutely livid. In her black and white striped dress, and flushed pink cheeks, she looked like an irate zebra ready to take down the first lioness that crossed her path.
“What’s going on?” Lady Grantham asked, looking from Mrs. Crawley, to Thomas, to Mr. Carson. Her tone made it clear that any answer she received would be diced with a cold negation. She’d no doubt come running down here after Mrs. Crawley, probably sensing danger afoot.

“I was arranging the household duties, where they overlap with the duties of the nursing staff—“ Mrs. Crawley said, unafraid of Lady Grantham or her wrath.

“Shall we continue this upstairs?” Lady Grantham cut across Mrs. Crawley.

“Well, I’ve made some charts, and I…” But Mrs. Crawley’s rant was cut off once again, as she seemed to realize just how truly angry Lady Grantham was. The stone cold silence in the servant’s hall was incredibly telling. Even Ethel looked unsure about what might befall Mrs. Crawley’s independent spirit. Thomas kept his expression neutral and his eyes straight ahead. It was not his place to intervene on these matters. He already had enough problems, thank you very much!

“Of course.” Mrs. Crawley said, and at once, Lady Grantham turned on her heel to leave in a huff. Unsure of what else to do, Mrs. Crawley followed her.

When both women had ascended the servant’s stairwell and were out of sight, the servant’s relaxed once again and took their places back at the table. Mr. Carson groaned as he sank into his chair, gently massaging his temple with his thumb and forefinger.

“Did you say you were the manager here, or the referee?” Ethel scoffed, retaking her seat.

“I’m going to be a football in the end.” Thomas said, wondering who would kick the shite out of him first.

“You see what we’re up against? You see the nerve of her?” O’Brien looked hot to trot, pink splotches upon her withered cheeks and her fists clenched upon the scrubbed table.

“I see what her ladyship is up against, but she has something in her corner that you’ve forgotten about.” Thomas said, thinking of Lord Grantham and how he could pop like a kernel in hot oil if he got in the wrong mood.

“And what is that?”

“Lord Grantham’s temper.”

Carson sat up a bit in his chair, fixing Thomas with a grumpy if gentle glare: “Lord Grantham does not have a temper, Thomas. He is a passionate man who is firm in his beliefs. That is all.”

Not desiring to get into a debate with Mr. Carson at the servant’s table, Thomas leaned in till he and Mr. Carson could speak ear to ear without everyone else getting a look in. Mr. Carson raised an eyebrow, but did not pull away.

“Mr. Carson, I find it hard to argue with you, you know that.” Thomas said, to which Carson gave a tiny nod, barely a jerk of the head, “But maybe on this, we can agree to disagree.”

Carson grumbled to himself, but did not openly complain. He sat back in his chair once again and began to massage his temple, seemingly deciding that Thomas’ plan was as good as any, and he already had enough of a headache without adding to the problem.

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It turned out that Mrs. Crawley did not win the ‘fight’ with Lady Grantham, and indeed her role
began to diminish week after week as Lady Grantham instead gave all the power to Thomas and Mr. Carson. Before, Thomas had had a hard time getting people to respect him in a position of power, and it had rubbed him the wrong way till he’d been frayed and snapping at everyone from Daisy to Anna. Now, respected by the downstairs staff and regarded by Carson as a good worker, Thomas was able to hold a level of responsibility without it getting to his head or making him seem cock-of-the-walk. He left as much as of the house’s management to Carson as he could, instead focusing entirely on the soldiers and their needs. He kept a tally of supplies gained and lost, and made sure that money brought in by the army was put to where it was needed best instead of being squandered on things that they did not need.

Thomas put the men on a regiment, though they didn’t entirely like him for it, and decided that the best way to health was to get up and get moving again. Soldier’s were not allowed to lay in bed all day, and if they tried to Thomas would instead force them to ‘lay about’ outside so that they were at least getting some sunshine. As a result, the house was full of activity but not the sounds of whining or complaining. Men played games, took walks, swam in the lake on the edge of the property, and did exercises on the expansive grounds. Those that had disabilities which would last them the rest of their life (such as amputations) were made to learn how to negotiate around their new pitfalls. Soldiers that had lost one leg were made to walk, climb stairs, even hop a bit. Soldiers that had lost both legs were made to stretch as much as possible, and double the strength of their arms so that they could push their own wheelchair. Soldier’s that had lost an arm or a hand that was initially their dominant were made to learn to write and work with their remaining hand. These men were the ones who complained the most, yowling that it was a waste of time even as they re-learned the alphabet and tried to send note home to their loved ones.

Thomas treated them like schoolchildren, warning that he’d give them a caning if they didn’t keep to their studies. As a result, he was given the mocking name of ‘teacher’, which men would sneer at him as he passed.

“Yes teacher, no teacher, may I stick this pen up your bum, teacher?”

Thomas took it in his stride, ignoring the men and instead focusing on Edward who was beginning to slowly but surely open his eyes again.

Edward couldn’t keep his eyes open for longer than a few minutes, but in his exercises Edward was starting to see in detail, and at times could even distinguish shape. He was made to take eye drops, vitamins, and to try and read from children’s books. He ended up getting most of the exercises wrong, but his ability to try and his determination to do better inspired a hope in Thomas’ heart that could not be diminished. One day, he promised himself, Edward would see again.

Until then, they took the victories slow. Their most endearing one as of yet had been Edward using Thomas’ bedside lamp to see Thomas’ face for the first time since February. He’d reached out with patient hands, pointing to Thomas’ eyes, nose, and lips, before kissing Thomas with his eyes open.

“I love you-“ Edward had said that night, the pair of them making love on the floor so as not to cause excessive noise in a packed house. He’d lain atop Thomas, with Thomas’ legs over his shoulders, and had sucked at Thomas’ throat even as he’d fucked him slow and hard. It had been the first time they’d made love since Edward had been blinded, and Thomas had been so overcome with emotion he’d almost wept.

But for every ounce of joy and delight, there were those who ran opposite in streams of sorrow.

For example, Sybil was looking more and more stressed by the day. Now, instead of working at the hospital, she worked at home, and kept the convalescing men in good spirits as they learned to walk and write again. But even as she poured her heart out, she kept an unusually frigid air about her.
Something was bothering her, everyone could see it, and even Lady Mary had begun pestering Sybil to tell her what was wrong. Thomas didn’t need the magic of a Heichecera to see that Sybil was now starting to have feelings for Branson. It was resulting in her becoming confused and angry… and soon everything would boil to a head. God, what a nightmare that would be!

Thomas tried to keep his mind off of it. Ethel helped with that.

Ethel Parks had decided, for whatever reason, that she did not like Thomas. She was the first in quite a long time to hate him, and so Thomas found himself growing dismally depressed whenever the girl was around. She treated him like an insect most of the time, scoffing at whatever he had to say and giving him leering glares. Before this had been common place activity in Thomas’ original universe, so Thomas wasn’t too surprised by any of it. Now, however, the attitudes of the house had shifted drastically around him and resulted in a great deal of people taking offense to Ethel’s rudeness.

For one, Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were thoroughly displeased. Mrs. Hughes more so, given that Ethel was in her charge as a member of the female staff. O’Brien, of course, had always disliked Ethel from the start, but her treating Thomas rudely had started off yet another string of fights as O’Brien firmly latched herself to Thomas’ side and declared herself his unwavering ally. Thomas wasn’t too sure he liked having O’Brien backing his corner, but he took it in his stride. It wouldn’t do to offend her unnecessarily and start up another war.

Anna was perhaps the most displeased, and given that she roomed and worked with Ethel, her temperament was the one that Ethel had to fear the most. After aligning Thomas to the title of ‘brother’, Anna had started to openly chastise Ethel every time she spoke rudely to Thomas. There was a strange air of irritation between the two women, and Thomas had to wonder how much Anna knew in regards to Ethel’s anger with him. Maybe she understood the real reason behind Ethel’s attitude, and thought it silly or pointless.

Either way, Thomas tried once again to keep his mind off of it. It would not do to be distracted from Edward.

But the universe was beginning to pick up its pace, the world spinning tighter and faster as events began to unfold. Thomas knew that by the time two years had passed, it would 1920 and everything would have changed wildly. Day by day, he struggled with the constant question… should he go with Edward when Edward was healed? Would it be feasible? Would it even be sane? If he went with Edward, he wouldn’t be able to save Matthew or Sybil… and that was unforgivable.

Thomas didn’t know what to do, but the world wouldn’t slow down long enough to give him time to think. Soon, the circumstances were going to be outside of his control.

It was a fine May day, and the men were exercising outside. General Strutt, on a tour back home, was going to be viewing Downton Abbey as a convalescent home to see if it was up to snuff. As a result, a great deal of the nursing staff and the house staff were eager to get the abbey in pristine condition. For this reason, most of the men were outside today instead of playing games in the library, and even Isis had been banished to a long healthy walk with a gaggle of men who needed a stretch. She was adored by the patients, and so when they’d come forward to Lord Grantham asking for balls they might throw to her or toys they might wrestle with, he’d more than happily allowed the soldiers to pilfer through his personal collection of dog treats. Thus, Isis was now surrounded by men who wanted to pet her, play with her, throw to her, and swim with her. She couldn’t have been happier if she’d been made queen for the day.

Thomas was still inside, and had Edward with him. He was technically supposed to be overseeing
the nursing staff as they took beds and blankets for a deep cleaning. Instead, however, he was hiding in an alcove and making Edward use his sight in a gloomy atmosphere. So far, this had been Edward’s downfall… but Thomas was determined to try and change that. By using a subject that Edward knew intimately (Thomas himself) Edward could start to regain his confidence in the dark without having to fear small blunders. What was more, when the sun wasn't shining in his face, Edward didn’t have to repeatedly shut his eyes. He could even keep them open for as long as ten minutes without having to blink or use eye drops.

“I think I can see… yes-!” Edward hissed, keeping his voice down though he was elated. “Yes, I can see your profile. I can see your nose; you're standing to the side.”

“Very good!” Thomas grinned, but the work wasn’t done yet. “And what’s behind my ear. Can you tell?”

Thomas had tucked a yellow Welsh poppy behind his ear, hoping that Edward might be able to see the detail even in the dark. The yellow stood out in sharp contrast to Thomas’ black hair… but would the lack of light leave Edward in the gloom (literally)?

“…I… see something… odd.” Edward muttered, craning his neck.

“Don’t come closer.” Thomas teased. Edward liked to cheat from time to time. “Keep still, just use your eyes. Let it focus naturally. You're not on a time crunch.”

Edward grumbled, growing impatient. “It’s… round…”

“Good.”

“But it looks… crumpled somehow.”

“Good.”

“It’s not a pencil or anything like that-”

“Excellent, go on?”

“It’s more like… a flower I guess. Or a weed.”

“Wonderful! Can you tell what color it is?”

Edward muttered for a bit, seemingly tilting his head from angle to angle as if that would somehow make the vision clearer.

“White?” Edward finally guessed. Thomas made a tiny noise, but kept disappointment out of his tone. Every step forward was a milestone, and deserved to be celebrated.

“Yellow,” Thomas corrected, “It’s a welsh poppy; I found it by the lake. But you did wonderfully.”

“Damn.” Edward cursed, turning away. He closed his eyes, rubbing at them were dew had begun to form along the lids.

“Ahah!” Thomas snapped, turning into a mothering hen in an instant. Edward knew not to rub at his eyes! Why did he constantly insist on doing so? Thomas pulled out a bottle of ointment from his trouser pocket, wetting his handkerchief so that Edward could lay the damp cloth over his strained eyes.

“Keep your face tilted upward.” Thomas ordered, “And don’t scratch! That’s vital Edward, you
“Know this.”

“Yes, teacher.” Edward sneered.

Alone in the alcove and feeling cheeky, Thomas reached out and smacked Edward lightly on the bum. Edward jumped, and then burst into a round of snickering.

“And if you keep that up, I’ll give you a pinch too.” Thomas whispered in Edward’s ear. “Don’t get cheeky with me.”

“What’s next, a caning?”

“Only if you’re lucky.”

The pair of them were suddenly flirting, getting rather brave as Edward reached out with one hand still holding his cloth to his face. He found Thomas’ belt and drew him in close, his hand reaching down for Thomas’ bum which he squeezed.

“Edward-!” Thomas hissed in his grip, “Don’t harass your teacher!”

“I’m a naughty boy, professor.” Edward whispered back. “You’re going to have to bend me over your desk. We can use Mr. Carson’s-“

“Absolutely not!” Thomas slapped Edward’s pectorals, his tone turning sharp. There were many risky and cheeky things that Thomas was willing to do in the name of love… but none of them involved going near Carson’s desk. God forbid-!

“Oh come on, pet.” Edward tried to pull him back on. Now Thomas was wriggling, pretending to be sour. “I bet you anything he’s got a rattan cane in one of his drawers. You can use it on me, if you like. Give me a swat-!”

Thomas might have very well gone through with the act, rattan cane or no, had it not been for the appearance of Sybil Crawley. She was wandering the halls, lips pursed and eyes bright; it looked like she was searching for someone.

And indeed, she was.

“Thomas-!” She made a beeline for him, her white hat jiggling a little bit atop her dark chestnut hair. She had to hold onto it at the edge to keep it from falling off; it seemed to have come unpinned in her ennui.

“Sybil- “ Thomas stepped out of the alcove, with Edward lingering behind in the dark.

“I hate to bother, but I need to speak with you.” Sybil said. “It’s rather urgent.”

“Of course.” Sybil could come to him anytime for anything, and it wouldn’t be a bother. Thomas reached out, taking Edward’s hand in his own, and carefully pulled him into the light. “Try and keep your eyes open, Edward.”

“I can see the red cross on your uniform.” Edward told Sybil. “It’s easier to keep my eyes open in the dark for longer.”

“Then we’ll stay here.” Sybil said, “I shouldn’t want you to strain your eyes. I can talk in the dark as well as the light.”

“Then what’s bothering you?” Thomas asked. Now with the three of them firmly remaining in the
alcove, Sybil could speak without fearing being overheard. “You look nervous.”

“…It’s Branson.” Sybil said. Thomas made a noise of understanding; it seemed that he was correct in assuming Branson was growing more close to Sybil’s heart. It would only be a matter of time now.

“He’s angry,” Sybil explained, “And with General Strutt coming for a visit I’m afraid he’s going to do something.”

But Thomas could remember plain as day that Branson had tried to do something. He wasn’t too sure what, he’d not been in the dining hall the first time around and had only heard about it in passing from O’Brien who was likewise in the dark… apparently Carson had stopped him from carrying out ‘something’. But what had that something been?

“I see…” Thomas wondered if anything had changed in the circumstances to render Carson incapable of giving aid. Thomas didn’t think so… but he’d been wrong before.

“Would you talk with him?” Sybil asked, “I’m unsure of who else to ask.”

“I’ll try.” Thomas promised her, though he didn’t relish the idea of going into a tete â tete with Tom Branson on the subject of politics. “But it won’t do much, I fear.”

Sybil was crestfallen; Thomas hadn’t himself for putting fear in her heart.

“Why is he angry?” Edward asked.

“Because he’s Irish and a revolutionary.” Thomas said, “He believes in socialism, and despises the English monarchy and it’s army. Who can blame him after all that his family must have lost in the Eastern Rising?”

“He lost a cousin that I know of.” Sybil agreed, “Shot dead for no reason.”

“…Yes,” Thomas pursed his lips, “I’m sure many could say the same. I’ll see what I can do.”

But Branson would have to wait, and anyways, General Strutt wasn’t coming for several more days. The real and present danger was Ethel, who was flirting wildly with Major Bryant and getting on everyone’s nerves. Even as Thomas and Sybil spoke on the idea of giving Branson a talking to, Thomas caught wind of Ethel ‘tucking’ Major Bryant in. He didn’t know much about women tucking men into their chairs with a blanket, but he had a feeling it didn’t include groping their thighs. Then again, he was a homosexual. He wasn’t exactly a fountain of information on the wicked ways of women.

That night, as Thomas and Edward got ready for bed, Thomas decided that he would use the night cover to his advantage and speak to Ethel where she couldn’t avoid him. He knew that she was rooming with Anna; if he was smart, he might be able to get Anna to let him into her room. Anna knew that he was a queer fellow, and anyways she looked at him like a brother. Hopefully she’d allow him into her room for just a moment, if only to speak to Ethel. He wouldn’t take long, and then he’d be gone and he could once again rest easy at night knowing he’d done everything he could to protect Ethel from harm.

The real trouble was getting through the glass door, but Thomas knew how to jerry rig a lock.
“You know, I think I’m getting the hang of it.” Edward murmured, looking up at the wardrobe, “I can see a shape, I know what it is… it’s not clear but I can at least see color. Everything’s just a blur besides that. Is that all I’m going to get I wonder?”

Thomas bent down, in pajamas, and pressed a chaste kiss to Edward’s temple: “It’s only the beginning, darling. Soon you’ll be able to see details, and all the rest besides.”

Edward smiled, but seemed none too sure. “I think you’re just having me on.”

“Mmm-“ Thomas wouldn’t hear of such things. He kissed Edward again and again, nibbling affectionately at the corner of Edward’s mouth until Edward grinned and fell back on the bed so that Thomas could kiss him fully on the lips.

“Now I’m having you on.” Thomas whispered, fingers locked in Edward’s luscious curls; how could it be that he’d lived life without loving this man before?

_I wasn’t living_, Thomas reasoned. _That other reality wasn’t my life. This is._

As Edward relaxed into the bed, content to be caressed and pampered with kisses, Thomas pulled back to tap Edward upon the tip of his long Roman nose.

“Now stay here.” Thomas said, “I’ve an errand to run, and I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Don’t leave me.” Edward whined. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Oh you big baby-“ Thomas groaned, straightening up. Could he feasibly sneak Edward into the girl’s side?

Well… it was dark, wasn’t it? Edward would be able to use his eyes without much strain.

“Alright, get up.” Thomas said. He staggered off the bed, shrugging on a housecoat and handing a spare over to Edward. Edward fumbled with the belt, nearly dropping it before firmly knotting it; he sought out Thomas’ hand and Thomas took it up.

“Where are we going?” Edward asked.

“To Ethel and Anna’s bedroom on the women’s side.” Thomas said, “I’m going to tell that little hussy to knock it off before she ruins her life. But you have to be quiet, Edward! If we get caught we’ll be in terrible trouble.”

“Alright.” Edward said, “Bit like sneaking through the enemy’s side, yes?”

“No difference if you ask me.”

They chuckled, the pair of them sharing an inside joke as Thomas fetched a bobby pin from his bedside drawer and headed out into the hall.

Silent as church mice, the pair of them crept from one end of the hall to the other. Edward held his hand tight, his other hand outstretched as he passed by door after door. Thomas could hear the hall boys sharing a light night thimble of whiskey (Mr. Carson would do his nut if he knew). He could likewise hear Lang whimpering from his own room… another night terror no doubt.

They reached the women’s side with ease, but now came the hard part. Crouching down, Thomas bent his bobby pin out of shape and began to try for the lock. Working in a counter-clockwise
motion, Thomas searched for the row of pins that would normally be touched and turned by the key. When he finally found them, Thomas had to all but break the bobby pin in order to get the metal high enough in the lock to keep constant pressure against the other pins.

The door slowly unlocked, and it groaned lightly on its ancient hinges as Thomas and Edward slipped inside.

Now there was the real danger of being caught trespassing. As they passed by Mrs. Patmore’s door, Thomas was grateful to hear her snoring. Indeed, it seemed the only ones still up were Anna and Ethel; Thomas could see the light gleaming beneath their door sill.

Luck was on his side.

Pausing by the door, Thomas pressed a finger to Edward’s lips to warn him to be quiet and then carefully knocked on the door.

When it opened, it was to Ethel in a nightdress. She took one look at Thomas, eyes widened in shock, and them hastily closed the door in his face.

“Ethel!!” Thomas hissed at the crack, “Ethel let me in! I just want to talk-!”

“Go away!” Ethel was right at the door, it seemed, hissing back so as not to wake up Mrs. Hughes or Mrs. Patmore, “You have no right to be on this side!”

“Oh don’t you go pulling the high and mighty act on me-“

But Thomas could hear an argument on the other side of the door; when it opened again it was to Anna in a house coat. Peculiarly enough, half of her hair was curled in a fine fashion; it seemed she’d been having a go at Lady Mary’s curling iron.

“Thomas?!” Anna whispered, eyes widening as she saw Edward hiding in the dark behind him, “Edward! What on earth are you two doing over here? How did you get in-?”

“Never mind that, I have to talk to Ethel. It’s important, please?” Thomas asked.

Anna looked over her shoulder, gesturing for Ethel to do something behind the view of the door; Thomas had a feeling she was shrugging on a housecoat too.

“Come in.” Anna stepped aside, allowing Thomas and Edward to pass into her rooms, “But be quick about it! You shouldn’t be over here, no matter your leanings. You’re still a man.”

Once Edward was over the threshold, Thomas shut the door so that all four of them were carefully closed inside.

Anna and Ethel’s room was set up much like shared rooms on the men’s side, but there were several differences that Thomas relished in viewing for the first time. Instead of a bureau full of hair tonics and shaving combs, the girls had set up their dresser with pictures of loved ones and feminine creams. Their black and whites were hanging over the back of an ironing board; it seemed that Anna had been sitting at a vanity mirror where small makeup powders in cast iron tins and lip cremes were put in neat rows. The cast iron curler was on its hot plate, getting warm again.

Ethel was wrapped up tight in her housecoat, lips pursed and green eyes glaring with unwelcome ferocity.

“That’s nice-“ Thomas gestured to Anna’s curls. Anna smiled, carefully patting at her curls with a
hand.

“I’m practicing for Lady Mary, “She explained, “I promised her I would.”

“It looks good.” Thomas praised. Anna beamed.

“What looks good?” Edward asked. Thomas caught Anna’s eye, wondering how to best explain what Edward couldn’t yet see in strong light.

But Anna had the answer, she reached forward and took up Edward’s hand to place it against the side of her hand. Edward carefully felt at her curls, the corners of his beautiful mouth turning up with a quirky smile.

“Oh… that is very pretty.” Edward praised.

“Thank you.” Anna let his hand drop. Edward hung against the back wall, hands in the pockets of his house coat.

“So what do you want?” Ethel snapped, “You’re not supposed to be on this side, you know. Or have you forgotten that after being in the army?”

“No.” Thomas grumbled, “I have not forgotten.”

“So why are you here?”

“I’m here to speak to you about your behavior towards Major Bryant.”

“Jealous?” Ethel asked, which of course was rather jumping the gun, “Now that I’m lookin’ to another? You didn’t take advantage when I gave you the chance-“

“Khamsa.” Thomas said, notifying Edward in code that they could not freely speak about their relationship. Given the all clear, Edward let out a huffy scoff.

“Bit difficult for him to feel jealous when he never loved you in the first place.” Edward snapped.

“Oh what would you know?” Ethel demanded, hot splotches of bright red upon her plump cheeks, “You’re blind, aren’t you-“

“He’s not blind! Not fully.” Thomas was starting to get into a temper, which wouldn’t bode well for any of them. Pursing his lips, Thomas reigned in his tone before continuing on, “Before you go running your mouth again, there’s three things you ought to know so you better sit down and listen up.”

“I’ll do as I like in my room.”

“Fair enough, but don’t blame me if you fall out in shock.” Thomas didn’t know how Ethel would take the news, but he prayed that in a house full of allies he had the backing to admit his most dangerous secret.

Ethel quirked a ginger eyebrow. Thomas took a breath, and spoke the truth: “I’m not for women, Ethel. I was never going to look at you, no matter how much you threw yourself at me or tried to tempt me with your body. I don’t find women attractive. I’m an artist, not a sportsman.”

Ethel scoffed, looked to Anna incredulous, but when Anna gave her a knowing look with dark warning, Ethel slowly dropped her sneer to instead stare blankly at all of them.
“…You…” Ethel tried again, confused. “You mean to say-“

Thomas said nothing, allowing Ethel to come to her conclusion as slowly as it took.

Ethel pointed from Edward to Anna. Anna nodded, with sage understanding. And just like that, Ethel looked incredibly embarrassed.

A silence suddenly cut their little back and forth shut. Ethel took a moment to recompose herself, all the heat fleeing from her eyes and cheeks as she instead pouted and sat back upon her bed. When she spoke again, it was with a calm and slightly reserved tone. She seemed oddly put out.

“…Oh.”

A good sum up, if ever there was one.

After another beat of silence in which no one made to comfort Ethel or give her an out for her behavior as of late, Ethel carried on. “Well, that explains a lot.”

“Indeed.” Thomas growled, arms over his chest, “And just so we’re all on the same page… Edward and I are for one another. We had been since before I met you back in February…”

“So… when you read my letter-“

“I got rid of it.” Thomas said. “And no, I didn’t tell anyone.”

“What letter?” Anna said, looking from Thomas to Ethel. Ethel blushed, looking away so that Anna could not see the embarrassment in her face.

“Tried to give him a picture of her, starkers.” Edward spoke up. Thomas turned about, shushing Edward with a reprimanding noise.


Anna, on the other hand, was scandalized.

“You…” She didn’t seem to even know where to begin, a hot pink flush in her cheeks. “You did….what?”

“It’s not that strange.” Ethel tried to defend. “Girls do it all the time!”

“No girls that I know!” Anna cut across, angrily. “That’s not the right impression to give a man, even if they are like Thomas!”

“He should take it as a compliment!” Ethel snapped, unable to give much more of a defense.

Thomas caught Anna’s eyes, wearing a look of dry derision. Compliment, indeed.

“Oh Ethel…” Anna sat at her vanity stool, head in hand. “You just… you just can’t do things like that! You’ll get into terrible trouble-“

“Which is why I’m here.” Thomas agreed. “I know you’ve been having your fun with Major Bryant but I’m warning you now to cut it off and immediately. Bryant’s not a gentleman. He’ll take advantage of you and leave you with the consequences.”

Burned, Ethel turned nasty. “He is too a gentleman! He’s just not like you; your sort are different. You don’t behave like normal men!”
“Do we not?” Thomas snapped, his voice rising with anger. “How interesting, as far as I was aware I act exactly like other men!”

“Amen.” Edward echoed from behind.

“Oh yeah, then why didn’t you like my picture?” Ethel demanded, “Any real man would enjoy a picture of a girl!”

“And would Mr. Carson and Mr. Lang enjoy such a picture?” Thomas demanded, “Do you think they would be happy if you gave them such an item by surprise? Or do you think they’d be angry to be taken advantage of in such a way? A gentleman doesn’t ask for a lady to do such things to herself, nor does he expect it. Look at Bates and Anna. Do you think he’d ever ask such a thing of her, or want her to put herself in such danger for his own amusement?”

“He would not.” Anna declared with pride, “He’s a good man.”

And while Bates was also terribly annoying at times, Thomas could not deny that Anna has a solid point.

“Well, Major Bryant is a good man too!” Ethel declared.

“Oh sure he is.” Thomas sneered, “An I’m a Russian prince.”

“What would your sort know?” Ethel demanded. “You’re not right in the head, none of you are!”

“Ethel!” Anna gasped, shocked at her ugly words, “You don’t mean that! What about your brother?”

So it seemed that Ethel had a homosexual in her own family. Scorned, Ethel looked away, and Thomas was pleased to see that she looked rightly sorry for being so rude.

“I hasten to remind you that I’m his sort too.” Edward growled, “And I’m the son of an Earl. If Thomas says it’s so, it’s so.”

“… I didn’t mean it like that.” Ethel said, bitterly, “I only mean that your sort have to be quiet, don’t you? You can’t be forward in public. That’s all that Major Bryant is. He’s forward.”

“I won’t sit here and bandy words with you all night.” Thomas had no desire to argue with someone whose head was in the sand. The longer he stayed on this side, the more danger that he put himself and Edward in. While Thomas was willing to risk his own neck, he would not risk the neck of the man he loved.

“I’m warning you Ethel, and if you’re smart you’ll take heed.” Thomas said, using a voice so dark and ominous that he felt rather proud of himself. Years taken away from being nasty on a daily basis had made him slightly rusty to the practice, but he hadn’t fully lost his talent.

Unsure, Ethel curled backward a bit. There was fear in her eyes.

“If you keep down this path, you’ll lose everything.” Thomas said, remembering how broken and defeated Ethel had been to be forced into prostitution… to lose her son Charlie, “He’ll take what he wants, and he’ll leave you with the consequences. If you sleep with him-“

“Thomas-!” Anna was shocked at his language. Thomas pressed on.

“You’ll make the greatest mistake of his life.” Thomas declared, “Your job, your reference… your dignity and your life. You’ll lose it all if you become pregnant with a man like that. Is that what you want, Ethel?”
But the topic of sex and becoming pregnant had pressed a sore nerve with Ethel. She was back to glaring at him, but now there was a sullen and ugly gaze in her eyes that Thomas did not like to see. It seemed that she’d had enough of hearing what he had to say.

“… I want you to get out.” She said, cold and furious.

Thomas knew when to take a hint. He raised up his hands, silently signaling that he had now washed his hands clean of this nonsense.

“I wash my hands of it.” Thomas declared. “So don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

With that, he turned to go, and took Edward with him.
He didn’t see it with his back turned, but Ethel’s face crumpled as he left.
She was heartbroken.

~*~

With Ethel done and dusted in his mind, there was nothing left to be done but try to curb Branson’s enthusiasm for mayhem. Thomas knew that Branson would try to do something when Strutt came for a visit, and so he gave himself a deadline of the day before. Mr. Matthew was returning home and William would likewise be coming back for a visit, so the house would be packed. There would be no room for error lest Branson slip through his fingers and the whole house erupt into chaos. General Strutt had known General Allenby during the war, and the two were on good terms. Thomas had to wonder if he’d be seeing his old General too, and what Allenby would say if the pair of them were face to face again.

“Thanks for abandoning your post and running out into No Man’s Land to save your Nancy lavender lover.”

Maybe it was better if Allenby and he didn’t speak again.

The day before Strutt’s visit, Thomas put his affairs into the hands of Sybil Crawley so that he could go below stairs and begin helping Mr. Carson to pull the luncheon together. Thomas would be serving in an attempt to lighten the load, though of course Carson didn’t know that yet.

Thomas had a spring in his step as he went downstairs. One day soon he wouldn’t be at Downton Abbey anymore, instead off living with Edward in the countryside somewhere. He would miss the flow and the function of the downstairs… his little family.

As Thomas walked through the halls searching for Mr. Carson, Thomas came upon the back hallway with the door flung open. The air was getting stuffy now in the humidity of the high spring, and so this wasn’t too uncommon from time to time (particularly when the hall boy was outside chopping wood). Instead of spotting the hall boy, however, Thomas spotted Branson sitting at the area table working on what looked like a piece of engine. It was gleaming in the sunlight, illuminating a heavy sweet upon his forehead. For whatever reason, Branson seemed to be rubbing at the engine piece with bits of wet newspaper.

Curious, and on a mission, Thomas exited the house through the servant’s area door and closed it behind him so that he and Branson could have a bit of privacy. Branson looked about, giving Thomas a small smile.
“What are you doing down here?” Branson asked, “Aren’t you supposed to be monitoring the men?”

“I’m going to help Mr. Carson with the luncheon tomorrow.” Thomas explained. He sat next to Branson on the work bench, pausing for a moment as he watched Branson buffer at the strange iron dish. It looked a bit like a deep pot, the sort you might try to put a stew in. But there were plates inside, cutting off the view and hiding all sorts of valves and gauges. What the hell was this thing?

“What on earth is that?” Thomas asked, gesturing to the machine in Branson’s hand.

“It’s a cylinder.” Branson “The pistons go through her, but she’s in need of a bit of cleaning so she can drive faster.”

Thomas blinked, unsure of what Branson had just said. Branson grinned at the confused expression upon Thomas’ face: “It holds the parts that make the car go fast. It gets dirty often so you have to clean it out or the car will stall and slow.”

“Ah.” Thomas said.

“So tell me,” Branson said, “How do you feel about generals in the house?”

Thomas shrugged, looking away. He didn’t much care for generals. Too many of them were quick to dismiss the value of a soldier’s life.

Branson caught his eyes, and Thomas noted there was a dark expression lingering there. Branson was normally so jovial and bright; when he grew angry or dark it was a scary thing to witness.

“Don’t like them?”

“Don’t care much.” Thomas corrected, “General’s are everywhere these days. What’s one more luncheon to me… and why are you rubbing that thing with wet newspaper?”

“Keeps the scud away.” Branson explained, “A little trick that mechanics used. Learned it from my brother, Kieran.”

Thomas could remember Kieran. He was rather boorish and low class to boot. He’d been alright, but Thomas hadn’t had much in common with the man.

“So are you excited?” Branson asked.

“But the wet newspaper?” Thomas grumbled, looking away again, “Not really but I’m more reserved than most.”

Branson laughed under his breath; Thomas was glad he bring the man humor for a moment.

“I meant about the luncheon.” Branson finally said with a small grin, “It’s going to be… interesting.”

“Why?” Thomas asked, catching Branson’s eyes, “Because you’re planning on doing something you shouldn’t?”

Branson stopped dead, shocked.

For a moment the two men stared at one another. A breeze fluttered through the area yard, bringing with it pollen and a few twittering birds. Neither man was moved by the serene beauty of it, too focused on the other. Branson was gray faced, amazed that Thomas had seen through his guise of supposed calm. Little did Branson know that Thomas had Sybil to illuminate the way.
“… You’d be a damn fool.” Thomas said. “You could lose everything.”

“What’s freedom to an Irishman in England?” Branson asked. His voice was soft, but incredibly bitter.

Thomas shook his head.

“I was referring to Sybil.” Thomas replied. Shamed, Branson bowed his head.

“I’m not the sort to know the love of a woman.” Thomas admitted, “We both know that… but God help me if a woman like that loved me… who knows. I might just be tempted.”

“Really?”

“No.” Thomas doubted even Sybil Crawley could shift his love for the form of another man. “But I wouldn’t risk it either way. You don’t meet a girl like that in every reality.”

“Is there more than one?”

“You’d be amazed.”

Thomas stood up, brushing off his lap. Tiny bits of wet newspaper had broken off from Branson’s main piece during the methodical rubbing of the cylinder, and as a result Thomas’ trousers were now dirtied.

As Thomas turned away, making to head back inside, Branson spoke up: “You know, when you were loopy from the medicine you told Mrs. Hughes were from a different reality. I overheard her telling Mr. Carson.”

Thomas paused.

Had he said such things? He couldn’t remember.

He wondered what else he’d said… and if Mrs. Hughes had taken any of it for the truth.

“Are you?” Branson asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Would you believe me if I said yes?” Thomas asked.

“No.”

“Then what’s the point of asking.”

Thomas took the door in hand, and left Branson in the area yard. Though Thomas could not see it with the door closed behind his back, Branson sat there watching the spot Thomas had abandoned for quite some time.

Carson returned downstairs after a few hours, and found Thomas in his pantry. Though Carson had not known it, Thomas had been there for quite a while taking a cup of tea and thinking about his prior reality.

He’d been wondering if there would ever come a time when Thomas would be able to tell someone honestly and be believed. He doubted it.
Alone in Carson’s office and allowed some time to think, Thomas felt a little more level headed now. When Carson opened the door, exhausted and eager for a moment to decant his wine, he spotted Thomas in his guest chair with a half drunk cup of tea and smiled.

“Ah.” Carson shut the door behind him, “I was wondering when I’d be running into you again.”

“It probably won’t surprise you.” Thomas said, standing up in the butler’s presence, “But I’m here to tell you that tomorrow, I’m going to be a footman. So you can rest at ease regarding the luncheon.”

Thomas was amazed when Carson closed his eyes and smiled. The man looked genuinely relaxed, as if Thomas’ words had taken a heavy weight off his heart: “How did I know you were going to say that?”

“Because you’re the ring master and I’m your faithful trick pony?” Thomas teased.

Carson let out a dark huffing laugh, taking out his keys to unlock the silver pantry so that he could get a firm look at all the items inside. Shelf after shelf gleamed with silver, till the whole office was lit up like a gala for royalty.

“I wouldn’t trust a pony with this luncheon that’s for certain.” Carson clucked his tongue.

Thomas shrugged off his jacket, taking out a pair of white gloves from the side drawer beneath the cabinets of the silver pantry. They were cool and soft, a friendly and familiar presence. Mr. Carson took up the clipboard, flipping to a fresh page without writing so that he could begin tallying up everything that would have to be polished and used.

But a sudden smirking smile came over the corner’s of Carson’s lips.

“I wonder…” The man murmured, “Do you remember the names of our tools?”

Did he ever.

Thomas didn’t miss a beat, starting with the lowest shelf so that he and Carson wouldn’t have to worry about knocking soup tureens or enormous plates off their pedestals up high.

“Asparagus server.” Thomas said, pulling the server forth with gloved hands so that he could set it aside on Carson’s side dresser. This area was laid out with red velvet, and while it hosted nothing more than a few silver photographs when bare, it was also the place where they laid instruments to be polished during tallying.

Carson waved a hand, grinning from ear to ear now as Thomas continued to pull out items.

“Aspic server,” Thomas said, now just pointing until Carson silently beckoned for Thomas to pull an item forth, “Bon bon spoon, bone holder, a butter pick with one tine, there’s another with two tines. Cake breaker, carving knife, cheese pick-“

On and on he went, never missing a beat. By the end of it, Carson was pleased as punch and the velvet topped side dresser was gleaming with silver.

“Sardine fork, sugar shell…. oh-!” Thomas set both aside to instead pull out the toast fork and the tomato fork. Neither could be left out for luncheons: “Can’t forget the toast fork and the tomato fork. Both are very important.”

Thomas set them aside on the side dresser, then turned back to face Mr. Carson. Carson looked so pleased and proud that Thomas couldn’t help but blush.
“And that’s just the cutlery,” Now Thomas was just showing off, rocking on the balls of his feet a bit with his hands behind his back, “We’ll probably use the Brahms set, classical and thorough but not the finest. That would be the Victorian set, which we only use during holidays, or the Regent set which we use for weddings, births, and if the Dowager is coming to visit to see how standards are being upheld.”

Carson chuckled, carefully closing the doors of the silver pantry to lock it back into place. Thomas used the joints of his fingers to press down where they met with his palm on the opposite hand, forcing the glove to fit him more snugly.

When Thomas looked up, it was to Carson gazing at him fondly. Thomas relished the moment; though Carson did not know it, it was helping to heal an old wound in his heart.

“I have missed you.” Carson praised quietly. “Keeping me sane during times like these.”

“I could say the same.” Thomas said, wondering how Carson would eventually take it when Thomas had to leave the abbey behind. It was easy to not think about the future when he was helping Carson work.

A sudden knock on the office door broke the moment. The door opened to reveal Branson, stony and set.

“Mr. Carson, might I have a word?” Branson asked. It seemed like the man was trying to ignore Thomas' presence.

“Ah. Branson…” Carson set his clipboard aside. Thomas silently began to sort the silver upon the top of the velvet dresser, deciding the best thing to do would be to polish the plates and then sit the serve ware atop it. This way they could be carried in a group and not one at a time. “We’re a little busy at the moment getting ready for the dinner tomorrow night.”

“Well, that’s just it.” Branson said. “I don’t expect you’ll be using Mr. Lang, not after last time.”

Carson scoffed, picking up a punch bowl from the table and handing it over to Thomas so that he could sit it atop a serving tray. “No, I will not! But I have Thomas now, and there’s a mercy.”

Branson wet his lips, eyes darting from Thomas to Carson, “Well, I wonder if I might be any help too. I’ve waited a table before.”

Carson was taken aback, shocked into stillness as Branson kept his eyes.

Branson had never waited a table before in his life, Thomas was almost certain… why was he trying to get a budge in with the luncheon? What on earth was he hoping to accomplish? He wouldn’t actually dare do something in the dining hall would he? Not in front of the family?

“Do you mean it?” Carson sounded shocked, and Thomas couldn’t blame him, “I know I’ve no right to ask it of a chauffeur-“

“We have to keep up the honor of Downton, don’t we?” Branson said. There was something in his tone that Thomas did not like, and in that moment Thomas suddenly realized just how dangerous Branson was. By god, he was dangerous enough to try something right under Lord Grantham’s unsuspecting nose.

It wasn’t just England’s king and army that Branson did not like… it was England’s noble class…
and here he was with a foot in the door to a home turned convalescent. King, country, and capitalism all in one. Branson wanted to cause chaos… what better way to do it than to strike Downton at its heart?

“I’m very grateful, Mr. Branson, I’ll not hide it. Very grateful indeed.” Carson praised, and he even turned about to give Thomas a warm smile.

In that moment, Thomas’ anger spiked. His fingers clenched tight around the punchbowl, the tips of his cotton gloves slipping a bit in their hold.

“You know where to find a livery, I presume?” Carson carried on. “Thomas can help you sort it all out.”

With a tight lipped smile, Branson nodded and turned to leave. But even as he reached out his hand to take up the doorknob, Carson cut across: “Oh, and I gather you won’t be leaving us after all? I should hope it’s nothing too serious… Lord Grantham mentioned that you’d failed your physical after being enlisted.”

“…No, nothing serious. But who knows what the future will bring.” Branson said, his back still to Carson.

He left without another word, Carson now glowing and bouncing upon his heels as he resumed sorting silver.

“Well!” Carson boasted, “You can’t ask for more than that, can you? Two footmen again, I’m pleased as punch… Branson may not be William, but he’ll do just fine, Thomas. Don’t you worry. He’s not shaky like Lang.”

“No.” Thomas sat the punch bowl down. He yanked off his gloves and made a beeline for the door, “No, he knows exactly what he’s doing. Excuse me, I’m going to get a word with him before he leaves for his cottage; he’s never worn a livery before.”

It was a pale excuse, given that Branson actually had worn a livery for several years as a chauffeur, but Thomas was willing to fling anything at Carson’s plate in order to get to Branson before he was out of earshot. He ran off down the hallway, chasing after Branson’s shadow into the area yard. Branson seemed to be heading back for the garage, no doubt wanting to stew in private where none could bother him.

“Hey-!” Thomas barked, running after Branson and nearly tripping upon the flagstone underfoot. “Hey, chum!”

Branson turned about, confused and slightly irritated. When he found Thomas upon him in a rage, Branson had the sense to take a few steps back alarmed.

With shoulders thrown back and eye glaring, Thomas bore down on the man with all the wrath he possessed. Given that he was a repressed homosexual trying to fight the laws of a confusing alternate reality, he possessed rather a lot.

“What the hell was that?!” Thomas demanded, “You think I’m stupid or something? I saw what you just did! You’re going to do something at the luncheon! I know what you’re planning-“

“And what’s that, eh?” Branson sneered. Thomas flushed, not too happy with the tone Branson took. “What could I be hiding up my sleeve? An Irish mick without a penny to my name-“

“Oh shuttup.” Thomas barked; if he mentioned one more word about Ireland Thomas was going to
strangle him. Branson was the one to get hot now, brown eyes narrowing dangerously.

“What did you just say to me?”

“I told you to shut up!” Thomas put his hands on his hips, “Prattling on about being some kind of victim, what’s the matter with you? You’re willing to set the world on fire, but you’re going to burn people who’ve never done you a wrong their life! People like Mr. Carson who just wants to take care of the family! And the family-!” Thomas scoffed, “You say you love Sybil, but you clearly don’t think very much of her if you’re willing to let her suffer like—”

Branson took another step, now pressed chest to chest with Thomas. Thomas had been hit by another man too many times in his life not to see what might just happen if he kept pressing on. He fell silent at once, mouth slightly ajar as Branson seethed and clenched his teeth.

One more word, and Branson might just pop.

“… You know nothing about my love for her.” Branson hissed. “Men like you don’t understand-“

“Love?” Thomas growled, “Are you trying to say I don’t know what it is to love just because I don’t love women-“

“To suffer!” Branson snarled. “What would you know of my life, when you’re-“

“Suffer?!” Thomas howled the word. Oh, he could smite the man! “You have the bloody audacity to tell me of all people-?!“

“You’re English! A right proper little soldier in your little hat and boots! The king awarded you personally, didn’t he?! Loved it when you took a bullet for him-“

“I never took a bullet for him, I took a bullet for Edward.” Thomas snarled. “I don’t give a fig about the King and I never have, don’t make the mistake of thinking we’re all the same just because we’re different from you!“

“But you are all the same in one respect.” Branson seethed, “You don’t care about Ireland.”

And there was something about the way he said it… like not caring about Ireland was the deepest sin in the world.

“… Are you…” Thomas shook his head, trying to get the water out of his ears from this ridiculous conversation, “Are you trying to tell me that unless I personally set this abbey on fire in the name of Ireland, that I’m the enemy?”

“Yes.” Branson said, triumphant in Thomas’ conclusion. Thomas blinked; he wondered if Branson realized just how idiotic he sounded in that moment. Jesus, the man was mad!

“… You…” Thomas couldn’t even get the words out first. “You’re not worthy of Sybil Crawley. You’re not worthy of her at all, if this is how you really feel. And I’m going to tell her everything that you’ve said.”

Branson staggered; it was as if Thomas had punched him.

“…You wouldn’t dare.” Branson fished for something to fling at Thomas, desperate and backed into a corner.
“I have no choice.” Thomas said coldly, “I won’t let you embarrass Mr. Carson or—“

Branson started raving, mad at the world and everyone in it for things he couldn’t change, “Mr. Carson?! Oh that’s rich! What are you, in love with him or something? I had a feeling you wanted him! You probably wouldn’t mind being his lover, I bet it’d be right up your ally—“

A spark of wild anger flew through Thomas.
He reared back, and slapped Branson hard across the face.

Branson stumbled back a few feet, a hand over his now swollen cheek.

He seemed to have realize what he’d just said, what he’d been saying for a good ten minutes now. Horribly ashamed, Branson looked in that moment like he might cry.

Thomas’ hand burned in the center of his palm, fingers tingling from the force of the slap.
Branson took in one breath, then another, before slowly straightening up and letting his hand drop.
His left cheek was reddened, to the point where you could see Thomas’ individual fingers in long scarlet lines.

Thomas didn’t want to talk to Branson anymore.
He turned away, heading back for the house.

“Don’t tell her!” Branson cried out after him. “Thomas, I’m sorry—! I didn’t mean what I said— Please don’t tell her!”

There was anguish in his voice.

Thomas closed the door behind him, unable to even respond through the horrible hot lump blocking his throat.

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It was hard to have a good day after that.

Thomas went through it in a sort of haze, checking off activities for the men and allowing others to do the heavy labor as he instead hid in darkened corners of the abbey and considered Branson’s cruel words.

He knew that, deep down, Branson hadn’t meant it. Branson was many things but he was not a bastard; if anything, he was fighting a losing battle and on the wrong side. He was frightened, and couldn’t see a way out. Men in tight corners were known to act wild, so Branson wasn’t much a unique case in that regard.

It was just that Thomas had always considered Branson one of the ‘good men’… and it was hard to see him now in the role of ‘bad’.

Thomas lay in bed while Edward stroked his hair, considering what he ought to do. The luncheon was tomorrow… there wasn’t any time left to come up with another plan.

Should he tell Sybil? If he did would it result in Sybil falling out of love with Branson and Sybbie never being born? Thomas couldn’t bear to imagine a world without Sybbie in it… She had been the only thing to make the passing of Sybil bearable, and the second crack in the ice compacted around Thomas’ ancient heart.
The first had been Jimmy.

“What do you think he’ll do?” Edward asked. The lights were off. They were safe in bed with one another. There was no need for a guise now. No need to fear being overheard or punished for their love and marriage.

Palms pressed and fingers intertwined, Thomas closed his eyes and soothed himself to the sensation of Edward loving him tenderly without word or time constraint. Such moments to Thomas were like salt water pearls, ripped from the jaws of an unforgiving and inconstant world:... stollen but untainted all the same.

“I dunno.” Thomas said, and it was the honest truth. What would he give to have prior knowledge! To rely on his previous reality like he’d done for so many other obstacles...

“You don’t think he’d actually try to hurt General Strutt?” Edward asked. “I knew Strutt before Ypres. He was a decent fellow. A little sharp but he always had a way with the men, and you weren’t guaranteed that with every commander you came across.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to stop him.” Thomas said, “Of that much you can be sure. I just pray I’m smart enough and quick enough to make it in time.”

“Don’t put yourself in danger, darling.” Edward pressed a hand to Thomas’ forehead as if checking him for fever. “I can’t lose you.”

Thomas reached up and grasped Edward at the wrist, holding as tightly to him as he might a life raft in a wild ocean storm.

“What can I do to help you?” Edward asked, “I know I’m a bit shoddy.-“

“Nothing about you is shoddy.” Thomas cut him off, “You’re perfect.”

“Well then, if I’m perfect then ask me to do something.”

Thomas considered what Edward could feasibly do, should disaster break out. If Branson actually went wild and lost his edge, trying to attack a General, Edward could always be relied upon to bring Branson to the ground. Edward was taller than Branson, stronger too, and was trained in battle. Even if he couldn’t see the details of Branson’s body, he could easily make out moving shapes and even colors now.

Thomas would block Branson’s target, Edward would bring him to the ground.

“I’ll block him, you bring him to the ground.” Thomas decided. “If he goes wild, if he does something mental… you grab him from behind and hold him down.”

“I can do that.” Edward agreed. “It’d be fun to wrestle with Branson. Irish Mick like that… angry at the world and everyone in it? Just the sort of fight I like.”

“A ruthless one?”

“An Irish one.” Edward teased. “My father hates the Irish you know… but that’s the same with all men their age. I never much cared, but he wouldn’t even allow one on the staff.”

“Mrs. Hughes is Scottish.” Thomas mused. “I wonder if we’ve any bit of the Isles in us.”

“Course we do. England is a nation of bastards. We’re all fucking each other.”
Thomas chuckled, unable to keep from laughing as he rolled in Edward’s lap so that he could relax more and try to get some sleep.

“That being said—” Edward carried on, “How about you fuck me? Turn that pretty little head around and suck me into your mouth—”

“How dare you speak to me like that.”

“We’re married; I can speak to you any way that I like.”

“Oh I see. Is that how it’s going to—”

But before Thomas could enjoy making yet another quip, a sudden sharp shrill of a scream cut through the air like a knife!!

Thomas sat bolt upright in bed, covers clutched tight to his chest as his heart pounded wildly. What in the hell-?!

But there went another scream, and another-!

“Branson—” Thomas blurted out, at first thinking that Branson must have done something truly insane like set fire to the abby. But how could Branson get through a locked door when he ought to be in his cottage? And Thomas couldn’t smell smoke either, and the screams sounded oddly close-! No, no, this was all too fishy to be as simple as an act of arson. Something was not right!

The pair of them clambered out of bed, throwing on their housecoats and following out into the corridor where people were gathering in dismay and alarm. Everyone was tousle headed, carrying lit candles and trying to find the source of the screaming.

But even as Thomas stepped into the hall, he realized who it must be.

It was Lang, having a nightmare.

Carson stumbled out into the corridor, throwing on his housecoat furious at the brouhaha.

“What’s going on!?” Carson demanded, looking to Thomas for an answer.

“It’s Lang.” Thomas deduced, turning about face and pressing a hand against Edward’s naked chest to make him stay put, “Edward stay here!”

The door to the women’s side opened, revealing Mrs. Hughes, Anna, Daisy, O’Brien, and Mrs. Patmore, each of whom was carrying a candle and looking frightened. O’Brien in particular was terrified, and abandoned her candle to run down the hallway after Carson and Thomas. Mrs. Hughes brought up the pack, crying out into the dark: “What in heaven’s name is happening?”

Carson got to Lang’s door first, and opened it to reveal Lang contorted into an almost inhuman position upon his bed. The covers were upon the floor, shoved off in Lang’s distress and desperation to get away from some invisible monster. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, shrieking as if a man were trying to kill him with a knife!

“I CAN’T DO IT!” Lang screamed. His eyes were pinched shut; he was still asleep.

“Mr. Lang!” Carson tried to rouse the man, using his own candle to light Mr. Lang’s bedside lamp
and setting it aside so that he might shake Lang with both hands. “Mr. Lang wake up, you’re having
a bad dream-!”

But Carson wasn’t prepared as Lang suddenly jerked back into waking reality, too infused in his
dream to determine what was real and what was not. Lang went wild upon the bed, twisting and
turning in his spider web of a sheet to grab at Carson with both hands. At first, Thomas thought Lang
might actually try to strangle Carson; he intervened, holding Lang back even as Lang scrambled at
thin air with sharp fingernails.

“IT’S THE SOLDIER’S, MR. CARSON!” Lang howled.

O’Brien was trying to hold onto Lang as best she could, effectively sandwiching the man between
herself and Thomas.

“IT’S THE SOLDIER’S BUT I CAN’T GO BACK! NO MATTER WHAT!”

“No one is asking you to go back, Mr. Lang!” Mr. Carson shouted, trying to make himself heard
over the deafening squall.

“You’ve had a bad dream, that’s all!” That’s all it is! O’Brien said. Thomas was shocked to hear
tears in her voice. Why was she so upset at this? Could it be that she actually loved Lang? Or had
someone else close to her experienced this awful conundrum?

Lang was shivering wildly, pupils dilated and pulse jumping.

“The soldiers- the soldiers-“ He just kept rambling the word, unable to wake up.

Thomas grabbed the man by his sweaty cheeks, forcing Lang to stop shaking and rocking so that
they could stare at one another eye to eye.

“Lang… LANG!” Thomas barked. Lang jumped at the sound of his name, frightened by Thomas’
commanding tone.

It was the tone of an officer.

“Tell me your name, eh?” Thomas demanded of the man. “Your full name. Tell me!”

“Eu-“ The man stuttered, unable to get the words out with a cotton tongue, “Christopher Eugene
Lang.”

“How old are you?” Thomas asked.

“Th… Thirty eight.” Lang said.

“Where were you born?”

“York.”

“And where are you now?” Thomas concluded.

For a moment, Lang didn’t seem to know the answer. He looked left, right, up, and down, taking in
every terrified face alit by a sea of candles dripping in columns of wax.

“…Downton.” Lang finally said.

“That’s right.” Thomas let go of the man’s cheeks, sitting back a bit so that O’Brien could hold him
more tenderly, almost like a mother would, “Downton Abbey.”

So there would be no more confusion on the subject of violent soldiers coming for blood.

“…Just a bad dream.” O’Brien repeated, rubbing Lang between his shaking shoulders. She caught Thomas’ eyes; Thomas winced at the sight of her unshed tears.

“Is it…?” Lang turned around, looking to O’Brien. “Is it a dream?”

She nodded, afraid to do much more than that.

“Oh… Thank god—“

And suddenly Lang was crying, sobbing hysterically as he held tight to O’Brien’s arm around his chest. “Thank god!”

Lang fell back upon his bed, almost taking O’Brien down with him.

In an attempt to give Lang more room, Thomas cautiously clambered off the bed and took several steps back until he was arm in arm with Anna and Mrs. Hughes. The two women shielded him from the scene, each reaching out as if to protect him from what he was witnessing.

And suddenly, with their hands upon his arms, Thomas remembered he’d once had a nightmare much like this in his own room.

“Hilfe. Hilfe uns.”

Thomas bristled, turning away.

He didn’t want to remember that dream ever again.

“Come away.” Mrs. Hughes murmured, urging everyone out the door from Mrs. Patmore to Daisy. They all shuffled back outside, and when she shut the door behind them it was only O’Brien and Carson still inside. They would see to Lang.

The crowd was dispersing. The hall boys were returning to their beds, the maids were doing the same. Only Anna lingered behind, rubbing Thomas’ arm up and down as if to shake him from his own horrible nightmare.

In the dark, Edward was able to walk up the hall. He’d waited outside Thomas’ door the whole time, unsure of how to help. As he approached Thomas, he noted Thomas’ graying complexion. Amazing how much Edward could see, even now… the man might not want to acknowledge it, but he was getting better. The day would soon come when Edward would be able to see clearly in both night and day. Thomas prayed it was soon.

“You alright?” Edward whispered, a hand upon Thomas’ back. He was stroking Thomas just as O’Brien had done for Lang.

“…Was… Was I like that?” Thomas asked them both, nodding his head in the direction of Lang’s door. “That night I had a nightmare?”

“No.” Anna said, and at first, Thomas felt a slight bit of tension ease from his mind until Anna added, “You were worse.”

“How?” Thomas couldn’t see anything being worse than that.

“You were talking.” Edward explained. “You kept screaming a name. Saying you were sorry.
Begging forgiveness.”

“Whose name?”

“…Greta.”

~*~

The next morning, everyone was tense and unhappy.

There was much to do, and with Thomas now downstairs to aid Mr. Carson for the day the men were unsure of what their schedule was. Sybil was likewise out of uniform, required by her family to attend to General Strutt as a lady of the upper class instead of a nurse. As a result, the soldiers were scattered and childish, getting away with sleeping in and not following their daily exercise schedules. When Thomas got wind of it, however, he marched upstairs in livery and all to promptly scream his head off at the men, ordering them to get out of their beds, get dressed, and stop behaving like “little beasts”.

He’d yelled and foamed for a good five minutes, men panicking and running from him on every side, and when he’d finally finished his little rant order had successfully been restored. The men were now back on schedule, each of them frightened to get on Thomas’ nerves lest he start shouting again.

As Thomas was heading back downstairs, he heard one man say “‘E’s worse than my Gran!”

Good.

The maids were in their black and whites early today. Even Ethel was on her best behavior, not daring to stray out of line lest Mrs. Hughes give her a smack. Branson was in a livery, and looking incredibly nervous. Thomas couldn’t tell if the man was struggling with a decision or if he’d already made a decision and was now panicking over it. It was an absolute nightmare, and the whole time through Thomas kept running over whether or not he should tell Sybil.

If he lost Sybbie, he’d never forgive himself.

As the hour of General Strutt’s arrival dawned upon the abbey, every member of staff save for the kitchen crew was out front for a good presentation. Lang was exhausted from lack of sleep, gray faced and trembling. Thomas wondered if the man might fall out when Strutt arrived, but as the motorcar pulled down the driveway with Strutt, Matthew, and William in tow, Lang remained upright and steady upon his feet.

And suddenly, moment had arrived.

General Strutt was a stern man with a hard chin, the kind that looked like he could chew on a tin can and spit out a nail. Despite this rather grizzly facade, he still put on a charming smile and hopped out of the motorcar without issue. Matthew had kept him company in the backseat with Dr. Clarkson. William was in the front, and got out along with Strutt’s driver to beam at Thomas and the rest of the staff. With the servant’s blank, Thomas could not allow himself to slip up… but he was glad to see William in one piece.

He looked like a right little tin soldier, his uniform crisp and his cheeks freshly scrubbed.
Strutt introduced himself to family, taking particular care to thank Sybil by name for her service to the crown. He shook hands with Lord Grantham, and allowed the man to lead him indoors. As he passed, Thomas noted that Strutt caught his eyes and held it with a warm smile; why?

Did Strutt know him?

But before Thomas could think over where he and Strutt might have run into each other during Ypres and Dunkirque, Thomas was approached by Clarkson and had to snap back to reality fast.

“Thomas!” Dr. Clarkson saluted him. Unsure, Thomas saluted Dr. Clarkson back despite being in livery.

“How are things?” Dr. Clarkson asked. O’Brien, three people down the line, caught Thomas’ eyes and held it. She was scrutinizing him, perhaps wondering if he would help get Mrs. Crawley out of the way or if he’d forgotten in the hubbub last night.

Not to worry.

“Mrs. Crawley is none too pleased to be playing the second fiddle, sir.” Thomas explained.

“Well,” Dr. Clarkson looked slightly disappointed, “I hope she doesn’t spoil things.”

“Well, sir, I think I need to speak with you about that.” Thomas explained. A whole parade of upper officers were following in after Strutt now, having followed the man’s motorcar in their own wagonette. They were highly decorated, each delighted to be received at an Earl’s estate.

Thomas and Clarkson stayed well out of the men’s way, having their conversation to the side.

“You see, Lady Grantham is trying to run a tight ship, and how can we blame her when this is her house.” Thomas said, gesturing to Downton Abbey behind him, “But take it from a servant, sir? You can’t have two cooks in the kitchen.”

Dr. Clarkson nodded, he seemed to understand perfectly.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Dr. Clarkson said, “Will you walk with us?” The end of the parade had passed through the arch into Downton. Now Clarkson was the only member still left inside.

“No.” Thomas said.

“But you’re the manager-“

“Day to day, yes.” Thomas said, “But I’m also a servant in this house, and we have a very large luncheon today. I need to help Mr. Carson.”

Clarkson sighed, clearly growing exhausted with the return of the age old argument: servant or doctor?

“Thomas, you can’t be both a servant and a manager.” Clarkson urged, “I’ve tried to say that before, but it’s time for you to make up your mind. I know I was unhappy at first, and I apologize for the things I said last month. I amend it now, by setting the record straight. I want you to come back to the hospital, and to work with me.”

William, over Clarkson’s shoulder, ogled Thomas with amazement at such an offer. Being a doctor was a large step up from being a servant… and to be fair, Thomas wondered if the position of Doctor
might afford him and Edward a better life.

But Thomas was still struggling terribly with the death of Matthew Crawley, and Sybil. If he left, what would happen to them?

In lieu of Thomas’ silence, Dr. Clarkson carried on.

“You could make good money.” Clarkson said, “And… well…” he leaned a bit, so that he and Thomas could share a conversation without the other servant’s overhearing. They were each heading back down the steps to the servant’s area yard save for Mr. Carson and William who were greeting each other with warm handshakes.

“I know you’re a different sort.” Clarkson whispered, “But you could finally have your own house, and do whatever you liked there. You can’t tell me that doesn’t appeal to you on some level?”

Carson caught Thomas’ eyes, as did William. While neither of them hadn’t heard the last bit of Clarkson’s offer, each seemed to realize Thomas was struggling with an enormous battle.

But what mattered more, he wondered? Sybil and Matthew or his own happiness?

Yet through the door to the abbey, Thomas could see Sybil. She was beaming at her sister Edith, whispering with a giggle into her ear until both women were smiling about some trivial matter or another.

The image of Sybil, dead upon her birthing bed, made Thomas’ blood run cold.

“… What appeals to me, Dr. Clarkson, is righting my wrongs.” Thomas said, never taking his eyes off of Sybil lest he lose his nerve or forget his way. “I must stand with Downton and protect its family.”

Clarkson was deflated and disappointed. He sighed, folding his hands behind his back as he waited for Thomas to finish his sentence.

“I don’t expect you to understand.” Thomas finally said, “But I do ask that you respect my decision.”

“… I won’t stop asking.” Clarkson murmured. “You’re a good worker, and an excellent doctor. I see the potential in you, and I won’t let it die so easily.”

“I’m afraid my answer won’t change, Dr. Clarkson.” Thomas said. “The only potential I care about is the potential to be a better man. That’s why I’m here.”

Clarkson nodded, and headed inside.

Thomas turned for the servant’s area, eager to make up for lost time. But even as he hurried off down the gravel path, he was stopped by the sound of Carson calling his name.

Carson looked proud of him, and was smiling warmly as he and Thomas evened up side by side. Now the pair of them were walking together, with William heading inside after Dr. Clarkson. Mr. Matthew wanted William at his side, as his assistant.

“That was rather poetic of you, Thomas.” Carson praised, “But tell me this: what wrongs are you trying to make right? By my books, you haven’t got a bad bone in your body.”

“But that’s just it, Mr. Carson.” Thomas replied. They entered the area yard, and found it crammed with maids straightening their caps and hall boys chopping firewood. “I used to have another body.”
Carson didn’t know what to say to that. For some reason, an odd expression flickered across Carson’s face. It was as if he was remembering something, and wondering what Thomas meant.

But Thomas didn’t dwell on it. He could never tell Carson the truth, and he’d long since made peace with that.

“Excuse me,” Thomas said, “I better get the silver grouped.”

“Don’t forget-!” Carson called after him.

“My gloves!” Thomas cut him off.

He didn’t hear or see it as he vanished through the area door into the inner hallway, but Carson was watching him go with a waning smile.

Thomas was unaware of Carson’s sorrow, of how Carson was wondering what Thomas’ words truly meant.

“Another body…” Carson murmured to himself. “But how?”

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In the silver pantry, Thomas worked side by side with Branson refusing to look or talk to the man. To his credit, Branson looked rightly ashamed of himself. Thomas double checked each piece of silver, allowing Branson to take each large vessel to the kitchen where it would now start being piled up with food. There was a soup to lay out, sandwiches to arrange, a tray of game pheasants, and enormous rounds of fruit and cheese. This luncheon would be slightly heavier than usual to make up for the fact that the army men would all be hungry. The servers were Thomas’ responsibility, for they were the easiest to get dirty and drop when you were wearing gloves.

He tallied them up, side by side with Branson. Branson kept watching him, somber.

“…I’m sorry.” Branson whispered. Thomas did not reply.

“I’m so sorry.” Branson said again, as if this time Thomas might deign him with a response.

Thomas continued to say nothing. It was good and well for Branson to be sorry, but he’d touched on a horrible deep nerve the other day and Thomas wasn’t too sure if he’d ever forgive him for that.

“…I shouldn’t have said what I said about Mr. Carson.” Branson said.

“No. You shouldn’t have.” Thomas agreed. If his voice was slightly colder than usual… well…

“Did you tell Sybil?”

Thomas paused in his tallying, feeling slightly guilty: “No.”

Branson nodded, grim and gray faced. “…I just… I had to find something to fling at you to make you feel bad, after what you said. Even if it wasn’t true. I hope you can understand that.”

“I can.” Thomas said, for he’d done much the same thing in his prior reality with everyone who’d angered him. “But there’s more to it than you can know or appreciate.”
“How’s that?”

“...Men like me are often called perverted.” Thomas said, bitterly. He set his clipboard down, turning away to lock up the silver cabinet. Though it wasn’t strictly protocol, Carson would often allow Thomas to do this duty so that they could keep on schedule. Normally the Butler was the only one with keys to the silver.

“They think because we like men... that we like every man.” Thomas continued on. “So imagine someone pulling away their five year old son, because they think you might seduce him.”

“That’s awful.” Branson agreed.

“It is.” Thomas said. When Carson had argued that Thomas was trying to seduce Andy Parker in his prior existence, Thomas had been absolutely devastated. “And it’s not true.”

“I know that.” Branson assured him, “It’s just... sometimes you act like Carson’s the most important person in your world. Like you can’t bear to disappoint him.”

A beat of silence passed between them.

Thomas did not turn around.

“... I can’t.” Thomas agreed.

Branson said nothing to that.

The door the pantry opened, causing both men to jump. Carson was there, slightly flushed but looking determined.

“Ah, good! You’re both spry in your saddles.” Carson said, “Branson, I wanted to remind you that because Thomas is recovering from his shoulder would you’ll have to carry the heavier trays. The soup and the pheasant plate will be the worst. Thomas will show you how to lay them, just follow his command.”

Branson nodded.

For some reason, he was beginning to sweat profusely.

“Thomas, William wanted to see you before you went upstairs.” Carson asked. Thomas set his clipboard aside, carefully taking off his white gloves so that he could pocket them. It wouldn’t do to spoil them before the luncheon.

“Branson, get the soup ready.” Carson ordered. “That’ll be the first dish to go up.”

They left him alone in the pantry, white as a sheet. Thomas wondered if he was actually getting stage fright.

Thomas found William in the servant’s hall, being served a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits despite the rush. William had always been the golden child, and was now the center of attention as Mrs. Patmore, Mrs. Hughes, and Daisy all fawned over him.

Upon seeing Thomas enter the hall, William stood up and came around the table. For whatever reason, he twirled on the spot, arms outstretched, as if to show off his khakis.
“What do you think?” He asked, cheerfully. Thomas couldn’t help but smile a bit; William was such a child in his enthusiasm.

“I think you look better in uniform than I do.” Thomas praised. William just grinned.

“Back in livery, I see!”

“We have quite the luncheon today.”

“So we’re all to face battle.” William said. He talked like a general, square shouldered and chin raised up high.

_Oh you have no idea..._ Thomas thought, wincing at William’s enthusiasm. _You have no idea what you’re about to face, do you?

“Are you scared?” Mrs. Hughes asked, gently.

“I wouldn’t say I’m scared.” William said, he pondered over it a moment, making up his answer as thoughtfully as he could, “I’m nervous, of course I am... but not scared. I think I’m ready.” He turned to Thomas, “Were you ready?”

“In my own way, I was.” Thomas said, “But then again, I was no stranger to battle. You’re doing everyone proud, William... you just have to remember that when you’re over there. Remember, you don’t belong there. You belong here. War is the exception, not the norm.”

“I’ll try.” William said. Thomas wondered if he would actually succeed.

Mrs. Patmore gave a hearty sniff. Everyone looked at her; she waved them all off, “Oh, don’t mind me. Only I’m thinking of what your dear mother would say.”

William grew pensive. The subject of his departed mother was always a sore one, “I wish she were here to see me off.” He finally said.

“Oh,” Mrs. Patmore almost started crying, her voice thick, “She’d be so proud. Why, when we waved off our Archie... I remember...”

But she broke off.

“What do you remember, Mrs. Patmore?” Mrs. Hughes asked her kindly, and when Mrs. Patmore could not bring herself to answer. “I’ll tell you. You remember a fine young man who enlisted before he had to, and who gave his life for his country. Because he’d be alive and well today if he hadn’t chosen to go to war.”

“She’s right.” Daisy whispered, hoping to bolster Mrs. Patmore’s spirits.

But Mrs. Patmore didn’t seem so sure.

“...There’s no such thing as cowardice in war, Mrs. Patmore.” Thomas murmured. Mrs. Patmore seemed nervous at Thomas’ mention of the word ‘cowardice’, as if she feared he might accidentally say something damning to Archie’s memory.

“Soldiers in the trenches, they have an understanding with one another.” Thomas explained, “An intimate one, really. We know what the other must do to live, to keep from dying. We don’t blame or judge. I say that as a man who livd in Ypres, the heart of this war, for three long, bitter years. The ones who decided Archie’s fate had no right to do so.”
William nodded, “He’s right.” He caught Mrs. Patmore’s eyes, “There’s no such thing as a cowardly soldier. S’like a cook without a tasting spoon.”

“A footman without white gloves.” Thomas added.

“Mr. Carson without bushy brows.” William teased. Mrs. Hughes scoffed at this.

“You two will be the death of us.” Mrs. Patmore said, but even as she spoke she smiled… so Thomas supposed it was worth it.

“Daisy,” Mrs. Patmore sniffed, clearing her throat, “Back to the grindstone.”

The pair of them headed off down the hall to the kitchen; quite suddenly William jumped and tried to run after them.

“I just wanted a word with Daisy-?” William called out after the two women.

“I’m needed in the kitchen.” Daisy was starting to look uncomfortable again, as she always did when William tried to show her affection.

“There’s plenty of time for that later, William, we have a luncheon!” Mrs. Patmore reprimanded him. She and Daisy vanished into the kitchen, and out walked Branson.

He was ashen and sweaty. Thomas noted the tiniest drop of black ink on his white gloves. He wondered where Branson had gotten an ink stain from. That was the problem with wearing white gloves for the first time; you didn’t realize how everything could leave a stain.

There was something marvelous about being part of the downstairs during a magnificent party. This luncheon was by no means on the grander scale; before the war they’d served massive numbers and Thomas knew from the prior reality that they would host better come 1921 when an Opera singer would visit. This was really all about national loyalty, the undying trust of the troops and so on. Having been one of the troops, and forced to endure unspeakable horrors in the name of the king, Thomas wasn’t particularly keen on revisiting that brand of blind adoration. It was better for him to stay a servant in this hour, and to pretend instead that he’d never been a part of the war. It helped him to focus, to know that Edward was safe upstairs and that neither of them were to be forced back overseas to Ypres. If General Strutt wanted to run around the Somme in mud soaked trousers eating rats, that was his own affair.

Lang hid downstairs, soaked in sweat and shivering in a corner. The presence of soldiers in the house, generals in particular, seemed to have terrified him. Thomas had a feeling he would be falling out before the day was over.

But for now, Thomas did not burden himself with such thoughts. He focused instead on the luncheon at hand, surveying the massive spread of food with care. Branson seemed just as nervous as Lang, which Thomas accredited to stage fright. If Thomas could just keep an eye on Branson, he could keep him out of trouble.

“Take up the toast, tomatoes, and soup.” Carson barked from out in the hall, storming upstairs with a crystal decanter full of white wine.
Thomas made to take up the silver soup tureen, only to be stopped by Branson who grabbed it rather abruptly from beneath Thomas’ hands to hold it close.

“I’ll take this upstairs.” Branson offered.

“Oh, right you are. That’s too damn heavy.” Thomas agreed, picking up the toast trays instead. It was a little demeaning but all for a good cause. He really did not need his shoulder acting up today.

“No swearing in my kitchen unless it’s me--” Mrs. Patmore barked, carefully ladling out decorated slices of tomato, mozzarella, and whole basil leaves in a mandala formation.

“You’re not the one whose been shot.” Thomas complained.

“And I’ll shoot you again if you don’t take up these tomatoes!” Mrs. Patmore barked, batting Daisy’s hand away even as she continued to drizzle on a Balsamic Modena upon the flowering design.

“Oh I’d like to see you behind the barrel of a gun.” Thomas snorted, juggling the toast tray to his aching hand in order to pick up the heavier tray with his better arm.

“Believe me, Thomas Barrow, the day you see me behind the barrel of a gun is the day they mount your head on a wall.”

“Keep it clean,” Thomas teased, turning away, “My mother always said I had a pretty face!”

So nervous was Branson to get upstairs that he fled the kitchen first, but Thomas allowed it. The soup needed to be set on the side bar, anyways. He doubted Branson would actually try to serve the soup by himself; Carson would be upstairs, and he could look to the butler for advice as well as direction.

Still.

Thomas followed up after him, passing Mrs. Hughes on the way who kept looking over her shoulder as if she’d just seen something disturbing.

“Thomas, help Mr. Branson.” She urged, “He nearly ran into the wall he was so frightened.”

“Of course, Mrs. Hughes.”

Upstairs, the luncheon was being attended to by Carson with the white wine. Branson was standing outside the door of the dining hall, hiding in the serving pantry as if unsure whether or not he could in fact serve a party.

“Come on. And don’t you try anything, neither.” Thomas murmured, reproachfully. He scooted around Branson, taking the lead as he entered the dining hall.

The General’s were elbow deep in conversation, speaking to one another amicably with Strutt in the middle. Even if you didn’t know who Strutt was, one glance would tell you all that you needed to know. His breast was adored with row after row of gleaming medals; his chin was square and hard set. As Thomas passed with the toast and tomatoes in hand, Strutt caught his eye and held it. There was an understanding in his gaze; perhaps he had passed Thomas by in Ypres and recognized him out of uniform. The others were too engaged with their small talk to pay much attention. Sybil was glittering amongst duller company, charming the table with her sweet smile. Lady Mary was speaking softly to Mr. Matthew at the far end of the table; she seemed to be bitter about something.
Thomas wondered if even now she was in love with Matthew.

It wouldn’t surprise him.

As Thomas laid out the toast and tomatoes, Branson set down the soup tureen.

He did not let go of the handles.

In lieu of Branson’s bizarre behavior, Thomas decided to gently push him in the right direction.

“Take up the tomatoes.” Thomas whispered. “Follow after me. I’ll serve the toast. We don’t serve the soup until they’re done with the first course.”

It was like Branson couldn’t hear him.

His knuckles were white upon the handles of the soup tureen.

Thomas kept watching, unsure of what he was exactly seeing. Why wouldn’t Branson behave normally?

Unless… was he about to do something?

Thomas opened his mouth, unsure of what he was about to say; yet before he got the chance, Thomas noticed a flurry out of the corner of his eyes. He looked about Carson storming up the side row, his eyes ablaze with fury. His decanter was gone. Anna was right behind him.

Thomas looked from Carson to Branson, to how he was clutching the soup tureen.

Branson grabbed the lid, making to rip it off.

Thomas launched himself, grabbing Branson’s hand pushing down hard so that whatever was underneath the lid stayed there. Carson was just a split second behind Thomas, his own heavy hand now hard atop Thomas’ own so that Carson’s sweat made Thomas’ fingers moist. The pair of them flanked Branson on each side, both of their hearts hammering wildly even as the chatter of the table continued on.

They’d diverted disaster by a hair, and no one was the wiser.

The fucking soup! How had Thomas not thought-?!?

“No…!” Branson hissed, bitter. Thomas felt his hand jumping beneath both of theirs. He was still trying to get the tureen lid off.

“Yes.” Carson hissed back. There was such fury in his eyes that Thomas thought it a wonder of science that Branson did not immediately catch on fire.

“You stupid bastard-“ Thomas spoke so softly he wondered if Branson could even hear him. He looked over his shoulder at Sybil, “Think of her!”

Sweating, pulse jumping in his jugular vein, Branson looked about at Sybil as well.

Sybil was too busy speaking with General Strutt to notice that men were looking at her.

The sight of Sybil, so carefree and innocent, seemed to be the cold water to Branson’s sizzling temper. He deflated, and his hand grew slack beneath Thomas and Carson’s joined grip.

Carson felt the tension shift and used it to his advantage. With his free hand, he reached up and took Branson by the shoulder and steered him towards the door. Thomas took Branson’s arm, not trusting the man to not try and wriggle out of trouble.
Behind them came Anna, trotting up in her black and whites to pick up the damning soup tureen. Clearly there wasn’t soup inside.

The four of them exited the servant’s hall, Anna bringing up the rear with the tureen and whatever it carried. As soon as they were out of earshot of the family and guests, Carson’s grip turned violent.

He grabbed Branson’s arm and twisted it hard beneath his back, taking his other hand and pinching Branson by the neck so that it was either walk with Carson’s lead or being put under in a head lock. Thomas was ready to throttle Branson with his white tie, thanking his lucky stars that Carson and Anna had realized something was amiss with the soup tureen.

The fucking food! Why hadn’t Thomas thought to check-? He’d been so intent on watching Branson that he hadn’t thought to watch what Branson was serving. God only knows what was inside. A gun? A knife? And where was the actual soup now?! Would they have to scrounge up a second course from scratch?!!

“Get downstairs now-!” Carson snarled as the four of them wedged through the green baize door. He pushed Branson hard, forcing him down the stairs.

He was so angry, he had a feeling steam might start pouring out his ears. The nerve of Branson!

“I told you!” Thomas barked as they stormed down the stairs, “I told you again and again, but did you listen to me? Oh no! No, you couldn’t be arsed! Now you’ve really shoved your foot in it!”

“Allright, alright, there’s no need to be so rough!” Branson yelped. He almost tripped from the manhandling, but with Thomas at the front he didn’t have much room to try and fall. For all that Carson pushed, Thomas pulled.

They hit the bottom of the stairwell. Thomas drug Branson back into the kitchen and Carson finally let Branson go so that he could stagger away. Everyone was clustered inside, from Mrs. Hughes to Mrs. Patmore. Anna sat the soup tureen upon the island counter, now bare of platters. Everyone stared at it like it might explode; what on earth was inside?

“There’s every need!” Carson seethed, shoulders thrown back in righteous anger, “To stop a murder!”

“Murder?” Branson folded his arms over his chest, disheveled and dismayed, “What do you mean murder?!"

“You were going to assassinate the general!” Anna cried out. Thomas caught Anna’s eyes, noting that Anna was gesturing to a hand written note clutched tightly in Mrs. Hughes’ shaking fist. So it seemed that Branson’s downfall had been to leave a note, but to who?

Sybil? How had Anna found it first?

“Kill the general?!” Branson sneered, “I was not!”

Now Thomas really wanted to know what was in the soup tureen.

He reached out, grabbed the lid in hand, and yanked it off to see what—

_Oh, dear god-!!_

“Ah-!” Thomas nearly wretched from the horrific smell. He slammed the lid shut, his sentiments echoed by his work fellows. Anna nearly fainted from the stench, her normally pretty face now livid with rage.
“Oh my god!” Mrs. Hughes cried out in dismay.

“What is that?!” Anna snapped, agog at Branson’s insanities.

A gun or a knife would clearly have been much too simple for Branson. Instead of a fancied vegetable and beef soup, there was a black sluggish mass inside the silver tureen. It smelt of foul eggs, rotten milk, and fecal matter. Thomas had to purse his lips shut, almost vomiting in the kitchen from another wave of the stench.

“Oil, and ink, and a bit of a cowpat all mixed in with sour milk…” Branson sulked, looking away like a child.

Anna and Thomas were both scoffing, so irate and disgusted that they couldn’t get out words. Daisy was hiding behind Mrs. Patmore as if hoping her girth might protect her from the smell. Mrs. Patmore, gagging, reached above the kitchen sink to open up a side window so that they could get of a fresh breeze.

It helped, but not nearly enough.

“He’d have needed a bath right enough, but not a coffin.” Branson muttered. He sighed, leaning heavily against the kitchen wall. He was embarrassed, which served him right. Thomas had never seen such a childish thing and that included all of Jimmy’s antics!

“I thought you’d taken the soup up.” Daisy spoke up, gesturing to a heavy ceramic pot that was sitting at the edge of the kitchen counter. It seemed that this had been the resting place of the actual soup while Branson caused chaos, “But you just left it in the pantry.”

But there was no time to delay. For every minute that they sat down here arguing and cursing Branson’s antics, their party was still upstairs unfed. At least the second course was still consumable. But how could they use the tureen now?

Mrs. Hughes, taking charge, grabbed a copper sauce pot off its wall hook to offer it to Daisy.

“We’ll use this!” She snarled. Thomas had never heard her sound so mad! “It’s not been heated, but the hell with it… and we’ll decide what happens to you later!” She added, glaring at Branson.

“Never mind later!” Carson said, looking about, “How do we keep this dinner going now with just Thomas? His arm is wounded, and I won’t risk him getting harmed further, I need him too much!”

“I’ll serve Mr. Carson.”

Everyone looked about.

There, in the corner of the kitchen, was William Mason in his uniform.

He’d slipped in without being noticed, his peers too interested in tearing Branson a new arsehole to notice him. Now, however, William presented himself as a shining beacon of light. Thomas felt a weight being lifted off his chest, and knew that Carson would likewise be relieved.

“I don’t mind.” William assured them all. As he spoke, Mrs. Patmore and Daisy carefully transferred the soup into the copper pot, “And who knows when I’ll have the chance again?”

“…The livery-“ Carson flustered. But there was no time to change.

“There’s no time, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, “I don’t think they’ll mind. William, you take the
actual soup-“ At once, William walked around the kitchen island to take the real soup up with a well practiced hand.

“And you-!” Thomas added, pointing at Branson who immediately flushed and looked away, “You are a solid idiot!”

It was a sentiment echoed long after Thomas and William headed back upstairs.

After that, the luncheon went off without a hitch.

It was rather like old times, save that instead of Thomas carrying the more important trays and William following up with the sauce or the side dishes it was the opposite. William handled the pressure with grace, never spilling a drop. Their party ate unawares of the turmoil boiling just beneath their feet; the only remnant of the disaster was the slight fire in Carson’s eyes… the way he gripped the decanted wine just a little too tight by the neck.

When luncheon was over, General Strutt wanted to be shown about the abbey to see the amenities that were being offered to the convalescing men. It was at this time that Lady Grantham took over of the visit, showing Strutt around with the rest of her family in a glittering fashion that only a lady of the upper class possessed.

Now with a moment of reprieve, Thomas returned downstairs to try and make some order out of the chaos Branson had left. He’d been banished, forced to return to his cottage by Mrs. Hughes who ‘didn’t want to see his face for the rest of the week’. The soup tureen that Branson had used to carry his little potion was now filthy. The hall boys had emptied the waste into the weeds out in the area yard, but the inside of the tureen was still coated inky black from the concoction.

Furious, Thomas had to take the tureen out to the well pump in order to try and wash her with some fresh water. It helped, but little ink patterns were still coating the inside of the silver and it reeked of sulfur and shite.

Thomas returned inside, taking the ruined tureen into the silver pantry to try and dry her off. He’d ruined a hand towel in the process, his hands now covered in a grayish tinge from the washed ink. The smell of rotten eggs was starting to linger in his nose. As a homosexual, he’d had his fair share of accidentally smelling shite on his hands but this was just damn ridiculous!

He tried to washed the tureen with a mixture of lemon juice, salt, white vinegar, and baking soda. He scrubbed and he scrubbed until his fingers were raw from the harsh chemicals, but still the tureen was tainted in tiny strings of black. This tureen was probably worth fifty quid, and now it was undoubtably ruined.

He could kill Branson!

After about three hours of cleaning, Thomas had to stop. His hands hurt too much from the lemon juice and the white vinegar, and the remaining scent of cow pat was making him nauseas. He left the soup tureen in the silver pantry, heading back out into the hall to find Carson in the servant’s hall grappling with Mrs. Hughes over what to do about Branson.
Thomas intruded upon the moment, his fingers swollen and hot pink.

“Mr. Carson… please don’t make me clean the tureen anymore.” Thomas begged, well aware that he sounded like a child. Mrs. Hughes smiled a tiny bit, as if touched by Thomas’ whining.

“Please!” Thomas gestured with his ruined fingers, “I can’t stand that smell anymore!” His wedding band was turning slightly green from the white vinegar and baking soda.

“Don’t worry.” Carson grumbling, turning to set his clipboard and schedule upon the letter desk at the head of the servant’s hall. “You’ve done more than enough on that front. Branson will clean the tureen as a part of his punishment.”

“Oh, thank you god.” Thomas sighed, looking up to the ceiling as if God would be waiting there with a grin and a thumbs up.

“Off to the kitchen with you. Wash your hands with Mrs. Patmore’s tonics.” Mrs. Hughes said, “That’ll take out the sting of the vinegar. Lieutenant Courtenay came to call on you, but I told him your were busy. He’s waiting for you there.”

Surprised, Thomas, headed into the kitchen to find Daisy and Mrs. Patmore now puttering about a clean kitchen and preparing for dinner with a recipe book. William was there in his uniform, hands washed from luncheon and face pink from getting to speak with Daisy again. Daisy looked nervous but was still grinning impishly.

As promised, Edward was in the corner of the kitchen with Mrs. Patmore. When Thomas entered, he walked straight over to Edward. He couldn’t touch the man, not with tainted hands, but spoke instead to alert Edward of his presence.

Yet before Thomas could open his mouth, Edward looked up with eyes closed and said, “I can smell you. Mrs. Hughes was right… you’re stinking of sulfur.”

“I could kill Tom Branson.” Thomas declared. Edward laughed, rose up from his seat, and felt his way around the kitchen counter till he could lean next to the sink. Thomas followed and began to wash his hands, scrubbing at each of his fingers with oatmeal goat soap that Mrs. Patmore was fond of. It helped with rashes and dry skin, and Thomas used it gladly in this moment. Thomas carefully took off his wedding band, washing it separately, then put it back on.

Edward leaned in, speaking into Thomas’ ear, “Just so we’re clear, I love you no matter how you smell.”

“Good for you.” Thomas grumbled, “Because a hundred years from now when they open up our crypt they’ll still be able to smell it on me.”

He paused, rinsing his hands in cold, clear water, to hold his hands up to eye level and look at his fingernails which were still slightly inky at the cuticles. Cursing, Thomas began to scrub again, this time using a small brush to try and get underneath his nails with the soap. He couldn’t wear white gloves if his fingernails had ink and shite under them.

Stupid, stupid Branson!

Behind Thomas, Daisy and William were elbow deep in conversation. William had a nervous edge to his voice, but Thomas was used to it by now. The boy was hopelessly in love with a kitchen maid and that was just the way of the world.

“Have you got that picture for me?” William asked.
“I might have.” Daisy said. She wiped her hands upon her frayed apron, reaching into her pocket to pull out a tin picture in a crisp paper frame. Curious, Thomas shut off the water and wiped off his now clean hands on Mrs. Patmore’s tea towel. He looked over Daisy’s shoulder, observing the picture. She was sitting upon a stool, in a dark day dress with her hair combed back… she looked beautiful, if not a little shy.

“When did you have that done?” Thomas teased, grinning at Daisy over her shoulder, “Very proper of you, isn’t it?”

“William wanted it.” Daisy said, handing the picture over to William who took it up at once. He gazed upon the picture as if it was of the Madonna, and even pressed it against his heart for a moment. Thomas rolled his eyes, pulling away to relax against the sink with Edward.

“Fat lot of good a picture would do some of us.” Edward whispered.

Careful not to be seen, Thomas stood up a little straighter and snuck his hand behind his back so that he could clasp Edward’s fingers within his own. They couldn’t move lest they be seen showing affection to one another.

“I keep telling you.” Thomas whispered. “You’ll be able to see again soon.”

“I admire your enthusiasm.” Edward murmured. Thomas squeezed his fingers lovingly.

But quite suddenly, Thomas’ attention was taken up by William.

“Because, you know what I’m going to ask you…” William paused, “So, will you?”

Daisy blanched, taken aback.

Thomas froze, shocked to suddenly be witness to a marriage proposal. He knew that Daisy didn’t love William, and grimaced as he realized what Daisy would undoubtably say… He didn't want to watch this.

“William, you’re not sure,” Daisy begged, “You can’t be sure!”

“I am sure.” William corrected. The blood seemed to drain from Daisy’s face. Next to Thomas, Edward bowed his head. The pair of them were in cahoots, wishing the floor could swallow them up so that they didn’t have to hear a man be rejected before heading off to war.

“And so is she.” Mrs. Patmore spoke up.

Thomas looked about at Mrs. Patmore, horrified; what on earth? Was she forcing Daisy to marry William? Surely not-! But…

“Aren’t you Daisy?” Mrs. Patmore added, “Isn’t this just what you told me you hoped would happen? It’s like a fairy story.”

The look on Daisy’s face left nothing to the imagination. She’d clearly never said such a thing to Mrs. Patmore. So why then was Mrs. Patmore putting words in Daisy’s mouth, making it seem like Daisy was in love with William? It wasn’t fair to either of them, and it was going to end up with William having his heart broken!

Thomas opened his mouth, but the glare that Mrs. Patmore shot him suddenly forced him into silence.
Don’t say a word, she seemed to be insisting. Keep silent or you’ll regret it.

My god, Thomas wondered in a daze, Why are you doing this?

“Is she right Daisy?” So oblivious was William whether it be out of desperation, love, or naivety, that he could not seem to see that Daisy was terrified. “Are we- are we engaged?! Because if we are, I know I can tackle whatever may come!”

Mute, Daisy tried to speak several times before weak words finally tumbled out of trembling white lips: “Go on then,” she whispered.

Delighted, William swept Daisy up in a hug.

Daisy did not hug him back.

Edward was stone faced behind Thomas. Unconsciously, Thomas leaned back into Edward wishing that Edward could hold him publicly in this tense moment. Instead, Edward could do nothing but clench Thomas’ hand tight in an iron grip. Thomas savored the contact, wondering what he could possibly do to aid Daisy now even as she grew slack in William’s tightening grip… it was like watching a python suffocate a field mouse.

But suddenly Mrs. Hughes was in the doorway, coughing tersely so that William was forced to let Daisy go.

“Boys, do you want to go up top?” Mrs. Hughes asked, looking to both Thomas and William. “The General’s leaving and Mr. Carson likes a full compliment.”

William left without another word. When Daisy tried to follow him, Mrs. Hughes cut her off with a laugh: “Not you, Daisy. The war hasn’t changed everything.”

Thomas looked over his shoulder as he left. Mrs. Patmore was oddly somber. Daisy looked dumbstruck.

Mrs. Patmore would not meet his eyes.

As Thomas headed up, Edward followed behind him. William was a good landing and a half ahead of them, and so they spoke freely without fear of being overheard. Behind them, Mrs. Hughes was trying to round up the other servants so that the General could be sent off with style.

“She didn’t want it.” Edward said, “I couldn’t see it but I could hear it in her voice. She was terrified. Why did they force her? Why did the cook make her do it?”

“To keep William’s spirits up as he heads off to war.” Thomas surmised, bleak at the outlook. They headed into the main hall, with Edward’s arm wrapped about Thomas’ own to keep from being left behind. The soldiers, convalescing in the hall, always enjoyed watching the servants mill about. For those from the upper class, it was a taste of home away from home. Thus, as William and Thomas walked across the floor, all eyes seemed to follow them.

“That’s not fair.” Edward spoke as if he was cursing instead, bitter and short, “That’s not fair!”

“I know.” Thomas agreed. None of it was fair.

They paused in the mud room, with Thomas straightening his white bowtie and making sure the lapels of his livery were flat against his breast. Outside, several cars were pulled up. The General was
about to leave, now milling through the hall with the family. Mrs. Hughes skirted past with Mr. Carson, and behind them in duckling like fashion came the others: Mr. Lang, Ms. O’Brien, Anna, Ethel, Lily, Helen, William, and finally Thomas. Thomas lingered in the doorway of the house, however, making sure that Edward was tucked into the side of the mud room where none could trip over him or raise an eyebrow at his appearance.

“Now, you stay right here.” Thomas urged. “You know where we are, right?”

Edward opened his eyes just a scant bit, and for a moment blood shot blue eyes met Thomas’ own. Edward scanned the room, but the bright light was too much for him to bear so he closed his eyes again. “Mud room,” Edward deduced, “I’ll just hide in the corner shall I?”

“Good.” Thomas praised.

He cast a quick look over his shoulder, but Carson was too close to show Edward any type of affection. Instead, Thomas just squeezed Edward’s hand. Their bullet bands clicked, metal on metal. It was as good as a kiss for them.

Out Thomas went, sidling up next to Mr. Carson and William. William was bubbly, delighted by his engagement to Daisy. He seemed to be on the verge of bouncing, a blissful grin upon his cherubic face. Lang, on the other hand, was a stark contrast pale and sweaty. He was beginning to gasp shallowly, fingers trembling at his sides as he tried to stand up straight.

Thomas had a feeling that Lang would faint if they pressed upon him much longer.

“Stiffen up.” Carson hissed out of the corner of his mouth, and on instinct Thomas stood a little straighter with his chin up until Carson muttered, “Not you, Thomas. I was speaking to William. Relax your shoulders or you’ll make yourself sore.”

Thomas did as he was told, dropping his chin a bit. Thomas heard William take a soft breath in and out, trying to focus on his servant’s blank.

The family came pouring out the doors of their ancestral home, with General Strutt and Matthew in the middle of the throng. They were shaking hands, bidding everyone farewell. General Strutt seemed pleased, and Thomas was glad. The publicity would be good for Downton Abbey, and shed a positive light upon the family’s efforts.

But even as Lord Grantham and General Strutt spoke, Lang began to shake wildly. He was now on the verge of having a panic attack. Thomas could not turn his head without abandoning his servant’s blank.

But he didn’t have to. Lord Grantham had already spotted the problem.

“Oh my god.” Lord Grantham said in dismay, walking up to Lang with a look of concern, “Lang, are you alright, old chap?”

But Lang was far from alright; indeed, he suddenly collapsed against Lord Grantham’s chest so that Lord Grantham jumped a bit in fright. Carson was ready to have an aneurism, gaping in astonishment at Lang’s lack of decorum. Thomas winced, knowing full well that any sign of emotion from a servant was enough to make Carson lose his mind.

Lang was in deep trouble now, even if it was slightly unfair.

“Come, come man.” Lord Grantham whispered, looking over his shoulder in alarm to make sure
General Strutt hadn’t seen, “Things can’t be as bad as all that. Carson-?”

Carson interjected himself, pulling Lang back from Lord Grantham to force the man to stand up straight. “Mr. Lang, what’s happened?”

“Sir…” Lang rasped, shaking and in a fevered sweat, “The Generals and all these officers… I don’t have to go back with them, do I?” His eyes darted from man to man, noting the cars now loading up with officers heading back with Strutt, “Because I can’t sir.”

“…No.” Lord Grantham caught Carson’s eyes, an unspoken message going between the two men. Lang couldn’t continue to work at Downton, not if this was to become the norm. The man needed help.

“The General’s looking for you, M’lord,” Mrs. Hughes said, and Lord Grantham pulled back from Lang to instead head over to Strutt who was making his final goodbyes. In lieu of Lord Grantham’s presence, Carson took Lang by the shoulder and pushed him to stop bowing at the back.

“Pull yourself together.” Carson hissed, not without sympathy.

It might have all ended there, with Strutt getting in the car and leaving… but Thomas’ day was about to take a turn for the horrific.

Blindsided, and completely unprepared, Thomas spotted Strutt walking over to him and did not make to move out of the danger. In hindsight, he would later wish that he’d walked into the house or claimed illness…anything to avoid speaking to Strutt.

How was he to know the questions Strutt was about to ask?

“This is him.” Lord Grantham said, walking up with Strutt, “Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas saluted General Strutt, who smiled and then offered his hand for Thomas to shake.

“I’ve been wanting to meet you since I came here.” Strutt said, “I heard that you were the famous head healer of Ypres who killed the fiend Albrecht.”

Thomas did not like the way that Strutt painted everything so rosy. Albrecht’s death hadn’t been nearly as cut and dry as all that: “I’m the man who was forced to perform a botched double amputation for Albrecht, yes.”

“And you saved three prisoners of war, including my man Major Rawlinson.” Strutt paused, turning about to gesture for a man to get out of the wagonette. Suddenly Thomas was shocked to be confronted by Henry Rawlinson, one of the same men that he’d helped to escape Albrecht’s clutches back in Ypres.

Major Rawlinson walked up, spotted Thomas, and broke into a massive grin.

“I knew it.” Rawlinson praised, extending his hand at once for Thomas to shake. Rawlinson’s grip was tight and his praise was enthusiastic, “I knew it was you! I spotted you serving the table but I thought at first you must be a look-a-like. General Strutt mentioned you were here! Healer Barrow… I owe you my life!”

“I-“ Thomas waffled about, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. He could see the way Mrs.
Hughes was beaming at him from the corner of his eyes… how Carson’s chest was thrown out in pride. “Come now, it’s not all like that. You were there, you know I didn’t save your life—“

“But you did.” Rawlinson disagreed. “You saved all our lives! ‘Cept those German broads of course.”

Thomas grew still, an ugly ice cold feeling growing in his chest at the crude mention of Greta.

Thomas coughed, turning his attention to Strutt.

“I wanted to thank you personally for your service, Barrow.” Strutt said. “General Allenby is a good friend of mine, and he spoke nothing but the highest praise of your courage and talents. Your wife’s a lucky woman.”

“Sir?” Thomas asked, for he most certainly did not have a wife. Strutt chuckled, bowing his head.

“Forget my familiarity.” Strutt explained, “General Allenby told me you were married. He said you’d spoken on it during the war once. Is she here?”

Oh, Thomas thought, all the blood draining from his face as the group around him went deathly silent, Fuck me.

He’d never ever expected that the little lie he’d told Allenby back in February would come to haunt him in such a fashion. Though Strutt and Rawlinson were completely unaware, all those around Thomas knew that he wasn’t a man to take up a wife (or any kind of woman for that matter). To hear this lie, spoken so plainly and proudly from the mouth of a General who’d sooner eat dirt than lie was incredibly damning.

They knew Thomas wasn’t married to a woman.
What they didn’t know was that Thomas was married to man.
If Thomas didn’t play his cards right, they were going to find out.

“I’d rather…” Thomas flushed, bowing his head not to meet Strutt’s eyes, “I’m a bit private, General.”

Lord Grantham was extremely confused, looking from Carson to Hughes to see if either of them could make sense of this new admission. But neither of them had any answers either. Indeed, they were quite alarmed. All of them were no doubt wondering why Thomas wasn’t flat out denying he was married.

General Strutt just laughed, “Come now, man. Don’t be shy!”

“I’m not really married.” Thomas blurted out.

“Isn’t that a wedding band on your hand?” General Strutt teased.

Thomas hid his offending hand behind his back once again, heart pounding wildly in his throat. Strutt now looked slightly concerned himself, glancing to Rawlinson as if to silently ask what was going on.
“… I didn’t mean to offend you.” Strutt murmured, “I should hope your marriage isn’t on the rocks? After all the sacrifice you’ve given our country-“

“It’s nothing like that sir.” Thomas mumbled, “But… you ought to hurry on your way if you’re to catch your train.”

Strutt blanched, but accepted Thomas’ defiance with calm understanding. Though Strutt didn’t know the details, he was a smart enough man to amass that something was going on underneath the surface. The English, as a rule of thumb, didn’t like to wash their dirty laundry in public.

“Of course.” Strutt said. “You’re quite right. I hope that whatever’s occurring solves itself soon… and if doesn’t don’t fret. There are plenty of fish in the sea, Barrow, and you’re a catch in the eyes of the country. Your wife’s a fool if she thinks otherwise.”

Strutt saluted Thomas again. Shakily, Thomas responded in kind.

“Goodbye Barrow.” Rawlinson offered his hand in a shake again, “And I’m sorry about your wife.”

Thomas’ grip was sweaty and slack in Rawlinson’s. As the men walked away, Thomas could feel the heat of Mrs. Hughes’ gaze. Could see the way that Lord Grantham was slowly beginning to realize that something dodgy was afoot.

Thomas was a shoddy liar; he’d never been able to hide from trouble for long. His only consolation was that Anna and O’Brien had not heard. William, on the other hand, was gazing at Thomas in astonishment as Strutt and Rawlinson climbed in their motorcar. He’d heard everything, and was beaming in amazement.

“You’re married?” William hissed, even as General Strutt’s motorcar started up. “I didn’t know! When did that happen? Why didn’t you say anyth-“

“It’s my business, William.” Thomas shot him down. William gave him a reproachful look. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

And with that, he turned to leave the line up, knowing full well that Carson would have his neck for breaking rank. At the same time, Thomas couldn’t be arsed with staying presentable now. The cat was almost out of the bag, clawing and meowing at the mouth of the sack for all to notice. He had to go somewhere private to calm down, to collect his thoughts. He couldn’t face the others now, when he was so nervous and frightened; he’d admit the truth and not mean to!

But as Thomas entered the mud room, he found Edward there waiting for him.

“What’s wrong?” Edward asked, following Thomas out of the room and using the sound of Thomas’ footsteps as a trail, “You’re walking too fast-“

“Thomas!”

Thomas froze, recognizing the voice of Mrs. Hughes. He looked over his shoulder to find the woman in the entryway, flanked by Mr. Carson and Lord Grantham. All three were making a bee line for him, each concerned and curious. Edward moved to the side, reaching out with knowing fingers to take up Thomas’ elbow.

Thomas waffled, trying to think of some excuse, any excuse, to feed to the three of them.

“Thomas, is it true?” Lord Grantham demanded. Behind their backs, the family and the servants were slowly making their way back inside; Lady Mary was trying to catch one last word with Mr.
Matthew… Anna and O’Brien were helping Lang down the servant’s path. “Are you married?”

Thomas didn’t know what to say. He supposed his petrified expression said it all.

“I.” Thomas fumbled around a tongue too thick to lie, “It’s…” But he couldn’t tell a tale.

“You are…?” Lord Grantham gasped in amazement, eyes as wide as saucers as he looked down at Thomas’ damning hand. At Thomas’ elbow, Edward was gripping him painfully tight. Now he knew why Thomas had been so damn adamant to get the hell away.

“My god…” Carson was shocked. “But, to whom?”

“I.” Lord Grantham scoffed, looking over his shoulder to make sure his wife and daughters were well out of ear shot in the mud room, “I shouldn’t go into it but I never took you for the marrying sort.”

Thomas said nothing, head bowed in sudden shame. They thought him married to a woman.

“…Thomas?” Mrs. Hughes spoke up, urging him to look at her. Thomas could not bear to do it. “What’s wrong? Why won’t you look at us? Is there something we ought to know?”

“You didn’t marry a girl on the fly, surely?” Carson urged. “Not some French girl?”

“No.” Thomas whispered.

“Then who?” Lord Grantham asked. “Why be ashamed if you’re married-”

“It’s complicated.” Edward spoke up.

“How?” Lord Grantham asked.

Neither Edward nor Thomas spoke. Lord Grantham, unnerved, grew cautious in tone: “Edward… my dear fellow… tell me what’s going on? As a friend of your family, surely you must know that I can be trusted.”

“I don’t think you’d like to hear what I have to say.” Edward said. He placed both hands upon Thomas’ arm in a show of support, but in doing so accidentally showed his own bullet band.

Thomas batted Edward’s hand down, but the damage had been done.

Next to Lord Grantham, Mrs. Hughes glanced let out a tiny gasp. Her eyes were full of fear now, all warmth and familiarity vanished in an instant as she let one hand clap over her mouth.

“Oh my god.” She whispered, her words barely breaking the air, “Surely, surely you wouldn’t have done such a thing like that?”

“Done what?” Lord Grantham asked. But then he looked at Thomas and Edward, both stiff and guilty unable to meet anyone’s eyes.

Slowly, it dawned upon Lord Grantham that the shame was being shared by two men, not one.

“… Oh my god.” Lord Grantham groaned is dismay, “No. I can’t believe that. I won’t believe that! That’s impossible.”
Carson looked like he might be sick.

“Excuse me, M’lord.” Thomas trembled, “I- I have to…”
But he didn’t even finish the sentence.

He turned, walking as fast as he could without running. Though he’d batted Edward’s arm off of him a second before, Thomas took up Edward’s wrist again to pull him along so that he wouldn’t be left to the wolves.

They’d admitted nothing outright, they’d never spoken the damning words… but it seemed that Thomas’ reputation and Edward’s accidental show of hand had done the damage for them.

Thomas hurried through the green baize door, tugging Edward through so that he could close it and give them a brief respite.

Thomas let out a shaky breath, petrified of what would come next. They suspected, and possibly even knew… but what would they do?

Would they let this slide, shocked but unwilling to dabble? Or would Downton’s ‘wisest son’ suddenly have to explain himself to Downton’s ‘downstair’s parents’?

Would they let this go, when Thomas was suddenly so important in the staff?
Thomas had a feeling… no.

“We’ll get through this.” Edward whispered, clutching Thomas’ elbow tight, “We never said the words. They can’t pin us if we don’t say it outright.”

“They know, Edward.” Thomas was miserable, and it showed in his voice. “And they’ll do what they like.”

~*~

Following the departure of General Strutt, Thomas and Edward didn’t know what to do but hide downstairs.

Lord Grantham was completely unaware of Branson’s blunder, and so for the most part the rest of the day went without comment. The maids changed bed linens and stayed in their black and whites to serve dinner. Thomas did not return upstairs to take over the schedule, nor did he offer explanation to the absence in his work. Instead, he hid in the corners of the downstairs with Edward, secretly plotting what they might need to do should everything go pear shaped. They were five turns away from being thrown into a fruit salad, in Thomas’ opinion, and it wouldn’t do not to have a plan B.

Thomas had money saved up from the war, around fifty pounds. Being a head healer in the war, he’d been paid around 15 shillings a week, an incredible up charge from his original 2 pounds as a mere sergeant. He’d had to pay for his share of rations and supplies, but he’d been meticulous and had scrimped every pence he could get his hands on so that he’d incorporated a tidy nest egg. It wasn’t enough to live on for long, but it would at least get the pair of them out of trouble if they were kicked out of the abbey.

What Thomas wrestled with most was the fear that he would be kicked out before he could save Matthew or Sybil… and what of William? What of Mr. Bates, soon to be sent to jail for the death of a woman who’d sworn her vengeance upon his happiness?
He had no answers to these questions, and the lack of a way forward terrified him. Could it be that one day he would have to choose? A world without George and Sybbie or a world without Edward?

Gloomy, Thomas hid by the hearth with Edward at his side. Edward kept his hands upon Thomas’ shoulders, comforting him in the only way that was publicly allowed. At the servant’s table, Anna and Ethel sat enjoying a moment of rare peace. Dinner was done and dusted, with the family now taking tea in the ante library. Normally they would have taken tea in a sitting parlor (usually the pink one)... but those were for times before war.

Thomas was largely ignored. William was the topic of conversation... for tomorrow he would leave again with Mr. Matthew for Ypres.

Thomas knew it would be his doom. He’d tried to protect William as best he could... but that was out of his hands now. One more body to count to his pile of failures, should William end up dying again.

“I thought you might like to know, Barrow,” Ethel spoke up with a lofty tone, putting far too much malice into his last name for polite conversation, “Major Bryant took me to the pictures and he was the perfect gentlemen.”

“Really.” Thomas muttered, half-listening as he pulled out a cigarette from his breast pocket and struck it up with his silver lighter. Edward moved out of the stream of the smoke, not wanting to have his eyes irritated. Normally Thomas would be more conscious of Edward’s needs, but tonight he was frightened.

He’d not seen Carson or Lord Grantham in hours. He had a feeling their next meeting would be a staged one. What would he say when confronted?

“And did he keep his hands to himself?” Edward asked.

Ethel looked away, nose up in the air as if affronted by Edward’s forwardness. “A lady doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“That’s a no.” Anna scoffed. Ethel gave her a shrewd look. When Anna merely continued to sip on her tea and pen a letter to Bates, Ethel let out a dramatic sigh and looked up and down the table.

“Where’s Mr. Branson?” She asked, curious.

“Mr. Carson sent him back to his cottage to stew in his own juice.” Anna said.

“Better than the slop he made up.” Edward said, “I can still smell it on Thomas’ clothes.”

Absent minded, Thomas brought his hands up to his nose and sniffed. The smell of oats and goat’s milk helped mask the worst of it, but there was definitely an offensive odor clinging to the tips of his fingers if you smelt deep enough.

Oh...! He could just kill Branson! He detested being dirty.

William finished his tea, sitting his emptied cup upon his saucer and looking over his shoulder. When Daisy appeared a few moments later, bearing yet another tray loaded with cheese biscuits and freshly cut apples, William gave her a grin as sweet as honey and held out his hand for her.
Daisy did not take it for a moment, ashen faced. She sat down her tray, meek at William’s side.

“Will we see you in the morning, William?” Anna asked, “To wish you luck?”

“Oh, yes.” William said. He took Daisy’s hand, earning him reproachful looks from the others. Physical contact between servant’s was forbidden in the eyes of Mrs. Hughes, even for the ‘good little children’ like William and Daisy. “But I’ve got something I’d like to say now, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t.” Daisy pleaded, “Not yet.” There was such misery in her voice. How could William be blind to her terror.

Thomas felt like he was watching some form of cruel and unusual punishment.

“They must know sooner or later!” William said, slightly confused as to why his blushing bride to be wasn’t… well… blushing.

Behind Thomas, Edward squeezed his shoulder’s painfully tight.

“Daisy and I are going to be married!” William declared.

Ethel gasped, her green eyes sparkling with mischievous delight. For all her impish qualities, she was not a cruel person: “You never have!” She declared with joy, “When?”

“After the war.” Daisy blurted out.

“I’m not sure I can wait that long.” William wondered with a laugh. At this, William looked over his shoulder to Thomas who’d yet to declare his own congratulations. “Now we’re both going to be married, Thomas!”

Anna gave a start, nearly choking on her tea. She looked up, catching Thomas’ eye. Ethel was likewise confused, despite not enjoying Thomas’ company and using every given opportunity to annoy him.

Daisy’s mouth had fallen open. She looked around, twisting in William’s grip till she was facing Thomas directly.

“What?” Anna demanded.

“You’re engaged?” Ethel scoffed. “You can’t be!”

“He’s already married!” William corrected her.

Burned, Thomas looked away so that he could instead stare into the fire. What would he give to slap some mending tape over William’s fat flapping mouth?

“I heard it straight from General Strutt’s mouth!” William explained to the shocked crowd, “He knows Thomas’ old general from Ypres. It seems that Thomas has been keeping secrets from us!”

“But…” Daisy shook her head, puzzled, “You can’t be married. I thought you-“

“Daisy,” Anna cut Daisy off, giving her a pleading look as if to add ‘Don’t say anything more.’

Cowed, Daisy fell silent.

“… There’s no way you’re married.” Ethel shook her head, “It’s impossible.” And with this she folded her arms over her chest.
“Don’t take on so!” William was quite shocked that his normally jovial workmates weren’t celebrating for Thomas’ “joyous” news. “It’s quite possible. Can’t a red blooded Englishman take up a woman he loves to wed? Or have the huns already taken over?”

“Thomas isn’t red blooded.” Ethel muttered.

And it was on these wise words that Mr. Carson appeared.

The aged butler looked more weighted than ever in that moment, with his brows deeply furrowed and his mouth set in a firm line. He was deeply troubled, his eyes searching the crowd as every servant rose up to greet his presence.

Mrs. Hughes was at his side, hiding in his shadow. She too was disturbed. They were looking for Thomas.

Completely unaware of the drama about to unfold, William greeted Mr. Carson with enthusiasm.

“Mr. Carson, I don’t know if you’re heard my news?”

“I have heard and I congratulate you both.” Carson said, tipping his head politely to William and Daisy. Daisy was more miserable than ever in that moment.

“Thomas, we need to speak with you and Lieutenant Courtenay in Mr. Carson’s office.” Mrs. Hughes said.

“It wouldn’t be because Thomas is married?” Ethel grumbled from the table, just a little too loud for comfort. Mrs. Hughes glared at the girl, hands suddenly upon her hips.

“Mind to your own flowers, Ethel.” Mrs. Hughes warned, “That’s how our gardens grow best. And I’ll remind you that you’re not without your own weeds, or do you think your little trip to the pictures slipped past me? You’re not to be caught outside the house in the company of men again, not while you’re under my roof at least.”

“But Anna-!” Ethel cried out, gesturing angrily at Anna who sat silently next to Ethel with a calm expression of benign acceptance.

“Anna is my concern, not yours!” Mrs. Hughes warned, cutting off any type of retort Ethel might think to throw at her, “And so is Thomas.”

With that, Mr. Carson silently gestured for Thomas to follow.

Thomas rose up from his rocking chair without so much as a squeak, the room now unnervingly silent as every servant present seemed to realize that something was amiss. Edward followed dutifully after Thomas, taking up Thomas’ elbow and using his other hand to feel along the walls.

Mr. Carson led the way down the hall. Mrs. Hughes brought up the rear.

So it seemed that they were to have this conversation tonight, Thomas reasoned. He’d still not made up his mind on what he wanted to say, and even as Mr. Carson opened the door to his office Thomas was still grappling with the choices before him.
It was either lie or tell the truth… and Thomas was unsure he would ever be able to lie to Mr. Carson again.

The door opened to reveal an office already occupied. Lord Grantham was waiting by Carson’s desk. He was tense in his dinner jacket and white tie, his face grimly set. He was standing by Carson’s telephone, looking as if he’d just got finished speaking to someone upon it.

Thomas wondered if they’d already rung for the police.

Mrs. Hughes shut the door behind them all, effectively sealing them in though it wasn’t much in the way of privacy. Maids tended to congregate by Mr. Carson’s door to listen in on whoever was getting a smack inside.

“Lord Grantham is here.” Thomas whispered, turning a bit so that he could speak to Edward who was still behind him.

“Sit down.” Edward urged him, “I’ll stand behind you.”

“I can’t sit in his Lordship’s presence.” Thomas said.

Edward said nothing, instead urging Thomas silently with his hands. There was a guest chair, though it wasn’t facing Carson’s desk directly and instead was off to the side. When Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson made no comment to Edward’s request, Thomas slowly sat down in the guest chair. Edward sidled up behind him, hands upon Thomas’ shoulders and massaging the stiff muscles he found there.

Lord Grantham observed all of this with silence. Thomas noted that though he looked discouraged, Lord Grantham was oddly focused on Edward, not Thomas.

“Edward,” Lord Grantham addressed him first, “I’ve asked Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes to fetch you both so that I may speak to you directly. It shouldn’t surprise you after this afternoon, but I’ve just spoken with your father and asked him a few questions that needed clearing up. I’m afraid the news isn’t good in your favor.”

“And what news is this?” Edward asked. Even now, it shocked Thomas that Edward could be so open and frank with Lord Grantham where all the rest of them were made to fear him like a god.

“That you have done the unthinkable, by your own admission.” Lord Grantham said, “That the war has addled your senses, and caused you to defy the word of God.”

“What words?”

“The law that marriage should belong to a man and woman.”

Edward was unfazed, even in light of this ugly turn, “If I have sinned, it is on my own conscience. It is not my father’s affair, nor yours-“

“And yet you have made it mine.” Lord Grantham snapped. “Because you have committed this sin with one my best servants.”

Edward continued to rub Thomas’ shoulders with his broad thumbs. He did not tremble of fall frail in the light of admission… and that was more than Thomas could say for some.

“Then let us be frank with one another.” Edward decided, “Thomas may not be able to speak to you
in such a way, but I am of equal rank to you as the son of an Earl… and you are a good friend of my family. I declare to you now that I married Thomas during our leave in February. I did so with great pride, and haven’t regretted it since.”

Lord Grantham could not find the words for a moment. Mrs. Hughes’ face was slowly draining of blood. Carson…

Thomas couldn’t raise his eyes to meet Carson’s own. He was too terrified to find out what lay there. Edward was right to have me sit down, Thomas thought bleakly as Lord Grantham continued to stutter around his words, I would have fainted otherwise.

It seemed that Thomas wasn’t the only one capable of sensing his lover’s needs.

“My god…” Lord Grantham finally managed to get out. That, it seemed, was the crux of his thoughts.

“What have you done?” Mrs. Hughes asked, directing her question to Thomas.

Finally forced to speak, Thomas did so to the floor with his fingers twisting nervously in his lap.

“I’ve done nothing to be ashamed of,” He said, speaking more to himself to try and bolster his courage, “I’ve wed someone that I love. I intend to be with him for the rest of my life. That is what marriage stands for—“

“Have you lost your mind?” Carson barked. Thomas jumped, frightened of Caron’s rage. He shrank backward into the spine of the chair, wishing he could suddenly turn invisible and vanish into the scenery.

“Two men cannot be married,” Lord Grantham repeated, “It is against the laws of God and of this land.”

“It’s against the laws of common sense!” Carson added, spluttering with fury, “Marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman!”

“But are they also not for people in love?” Edward cut across angrily, “For those that adore one another?”

When Carson could not answer him, Edward carried on in a brazen voice: “That little kitchen girl is scared out of her mind to reject the soldier boy, but no one allows her the ability to say no because they don’t want to send him off to war with a broken heart. It doesn’t take working eyes to see that she doesn’t want to marry him. Marriage is for the willing! For those who cannot bear to be torn asunder! That girl—“

“We’ll keep the matters of this house inside this house, Lieutenant.” Mrs. Hughes said. Thomas was unnerved to hear the anger in her voice, an element rarely seen even in moments of absolute chaos below stairs. “You may be of higher rank than me, but I won’t hesitate to say that you’ve turned into a nuisance!”

Edward bristled, but did not rebuke Mrs. Hughes for the remark. Lord Grantham looked at Mrs. Hughes with a respectful light, no doubt musing on her courage and forwardness.

“Thomas is one of our lot. War might have turned him into a medic, but he was a servant from the start. A boy of the lower class. He’s not an upper class lad that you can frolic with at school in some kind of summer dalliance, and you’ve snatched him up—“
“He’s done nothing of the sort, Mrs. Hughes!” Thomas said, unable to keep the edge of begging out of his voice. Mrs. Hughes seemed ready to smack him round the face if he kept it up, but Thomas had to defend his husband.

It was as easy to him as breathing.

“Hasn’t he?” Lord Grantham demanded, “Then tell me, Thomas, whose idea was it to commit such a fraudulent ceremony? Edward’s father seemed to believe that the blame lay with Edward. Is this wrong?”

Words failed him.

Ashamed, Thomas bowed his head. It had in fact been Edward to initiate the idea of their union… Edward to buy Thomas their wedding bands and a bottle of champagne.

Edward… to make such tender love to him. To adore him until Thomas’ throat had been raw from screaming out his joy.

“Your father begged me to help you, Edward.” Lord Grantham said the word ‘begged’ with derision, “To try and save your addled senses. To keep you out of trouble. He asked me if you truly were married, and I was forced to lie to a friend to keep you from being arrested this very night!”

He barked the words, eyes popping with fury.

“… What did you say to my father?” Edward asked, “That he should think to arrest me? That I’d snatched up your footman like a thief in the night?”

“I’ll warn you that your mother was the one to threaten with the idea of the police, should the rumor be true.” Lord Grantham said. There was slightly nasty edge to his voice, as if the conversation involved had been grating to endure. “I didn’t want to tell her you actually were married until I knew it for myself.”

“And now?” Edward asked, “When you know the truth? Will you damn me for loving… for having the audacity to want to spend my life with someone I adore?”

Edward scoffed, shaking his head, “How dare I be so vulgar as to know happiness. Sounds very typical of my mother.”

Thomas reached up, taking Edward’s hand and holding it tightly.

Were they to be damned?

And yet… even as Thomas feared the worst, Lord Grantham’s anger seemed to drain away. He closed his eyes, bowing his head as if in prayer. Maybe he was asking the Lord for strength.

“… No.” Lord Grantham finally said. “No I will not. Thomas does not choose to be the way he is, even if you do. I will not have Thomas punished for your indiscretions.”

Edward scoffed, but Lord Grantham carried on.

“Have you told him?” Lord Grantham asked. “Does he know about Lady Elizabeth? Or have you been so content to play out a fantasy that you’ve completely forgotten reality?”

Elizabeth? Thomas looked about, confused. Who was Elizabeth?

Edward gritted his teeth, fists balling in rage upon Thomas’ shoulders, “I don’t know what you’ve
been told, but Lady Elizabeth is not my fiancé—"

“No?” Lord Grantham folded his arms over his chest, “I thought that was what you called a woman you were engaged to marry.”

“I cut it off.” Edward snapped. “I wrote to her during the war—"

“How very charming of you.” Lord Grantham rolled his eyes. “Did you both with a few pages, or did a simple paragraph do?”

Edward took a moment to compose himself, seemingly trying to reign in his infamous temper. Thomas found himself amazed to know that Edward had been engaged, but not upset by the fact. Edward hadn’t been unfaithful, not truly… and honestly, it was different for their sort. They couldn’t live as normal men did, so they couldn’t be held to the same standards.

“I will not apologize for loving Thomas.” Edward said. “He is my husband, no matter what you may think or like… and our unity is not hinged upon your acceptance.”

“And what is it hinged upon?” Lord Grantham almost laughed, as if this was all very funny, “What exactly did your little ceremony consist of? Did you even have a priest bear witness?”

“No.” Edward said, “I couldn’t find one.”

“I should hardly wonder why. And where did you get the rings?”

“I bought them.” Edward said, “As is the right of any Englishman with a wage and a desire for purchase.”

“Take it off!” Mrs. Hughes snapped. She stepped forward, addressing Thomas head on.

Frightened, Thomas recoiled from her.

“No!” He said, holding the evidence to his chest with his other hand; he wondered if she might physically try and snatch the ring from him.

“You can’t!” Thomas begged, when she gave him an incredulous look, “It’s my property; it’s done and paid for! It doesn’t impede with my work—"

“It impedes with your sanity!” Mr. Carson barked.

So frightened, so upset was Thomas at the mention of Carson’s cruel view on his homosexuality, that Thomas almost burst into tears.

He bowed his head at once, hiding his petrified expression in shame. Carson, too angry to realize that Thomas was on the verge of a collapse, just kept raging.

“After so many years of thinking you changed, you show me that you’re just as petulant and selfish—"

“No!” Thomas blurted out.

All he could see was his hard work collapsing around him; Carson rejecting him and thinking him a cad even after all that he’d striven to show. Carson had denied the existence of Thomas’ heart; surely now he wouldn’t do the same? But Carson was set in his ways, and no amount of tugging on heart strings would make him change his mind.

Thomas stumbled up from his chair, nearly tripping over numb feet. He prostrated himself before Mr.
Carson with hands clasped like a man to prayer. Anything to make him see-

“Mr. Carson, I have changed!” Thomas begged, “I’m not like I was before, please, you must believe
me! I’ve not caused trouble or made a ruckus! I haven’t stolen or lied! I just want to be with the one
that I love-”

Carson was burned by Thomas’ insanities. He looked away, as if disgusted to face Thomas.

Weak in the face of Mr. Carson’s anger, Thomas felt he might faint. He looked to Lord Grantham,
who was unmoved… to Mrs. Hughes who was disturbed.

He could cry, he felt so defeated.

“I cannot allow this to continue.” Lord Grantham said, “For both your sake, and Edward’s. This
must come to a close.”

“I will not be taken away from him.” Edward said.

“If you love him, truly love him, you won’t resist.” Lord Grantham said. It was the first time in
Thomas’ life that someone had ever spoken about a man loving him without outright scorn. Indeed,
Lord Grantham was now more concerned than angry; perhaps his rage had bled off in the face of
Thomas near tears.

Edward snorted, but Lord Grantham continued on. If Edward’s eyes were open, he would surely be
rolling them.

“You know what could happen if this knowledge falls into the wrong hands, Edward!” Lord
Grantham snapped, furious that Edward would act so flippantly in the face of Lord Grantham’s
wisdom. “You’re a man of Eton, you studied the history of our kind! You might not have been
reading the news at the time of Oscar Wilde’s trial, you were probably just a boy, but I was a man
and I saw it happen. It was a merciless and bitter thing; he died in agony. Alone. Is that what you
want for Thomas?”

The mention of Oscar Wilde made Thomas feel sick to his stomach. Weak, Thomas returned to
Edward’s side and hid in his shadow. For the past months Thomas had been the one to take care of
Edward; now, however, Thomas needed someone to protect him.

He thought he might crumple if any more weight were put on his shoulders.

“It’s no one’s business what we do.” Edward said, “I have my own money-“

“Your father will disinherit you if you continue this.” Lord Grantham snapped, “Don’t be a child.
This isn’t fairy land.”

“Then I can make my own money-“

“Doing what? What skills do you have?”

“I’ll find work-“

“You have no background in manual labor, and you’re blind!” Lord Grantham said, “Love has made
you foolish, Edward. It’s time to wake up!”

“I did wake up! I woke up from a suicide attempt!” Edward shouted. He was so loud, so aggressive,
that Thomas jumped. He felt almost raw from the excessive emotion; he wished he could go
somewhere quiet and dark to sleep.

“I saw the world for what it really was, with my eyes long gone! There was nothing but Thomas, nothing but his love for me, and my love for him! He is everything to me, my very soul, and I will do what it takes to keep him for my own!”

“… Keep him for your own?” Lord Grantham repeated. He was almost disgusted, “You’re quite the babe playing with your toy. You’re so selfish, you won’t let him go even if it will keep him safe.”

“I can keep him safe.” Edward growled. He said it with such conviction, even Lord Grantham almost seemed to believe him for one moment.

But he wouldn’t budge in his stance.

“Thomas… I speak to you as a master to his servant.” Lord Grantham said. Thomas winced, hating how small and pathetic he felt in that moment, “The days of this frivolity have come to an end. Take off your ring.”

Thomas cupped his ring hand to his chest, and shook his head. Like a child, he pursed his lips to keep from crying.

“As an Earl, I’m ordering you to take off your ring!” Lord Grantham said. He was losing his temper again, growing angry at Thomas’ stubbornness.

Could he deny such a request?

Mr. Carson’s heated stare upon Thomas’ neck was making him feel faint. He was well aware of how low he must have now sunk in the man’s eyes; he felt like a worthless insect crawling on the face of the Earth.

Miserable, on the verge of bursting into tears should anyone so much as raise their voice at him, Thomas shakily took off his wedding band. There was an ugly green stain around his skin where the iron of the bullet had rubbed off on the underside of the ring. It was a mark of poor metal, and in that moment it felt like a comforting brand… like even if he were forced to take off his ring, his ring would still be with him.

He held it tightly in his hand, cupping it to his chest so that it would not fall to the floor.

“Give it to me.” Mr. Carson extended his hand. Thomas shrunk back from him like he’d tried to slap him, much to his dismay.

“Just let me keep it.” Thomas croaked, “I won’t wear it but let me keep it-“

There was a strange look of anguish upon Mr. Carson’s face, like Thomas’ words were wounding him to the core. He was emotionally irate, and in a moment of anger Carson reached forward to pry open Thomas’ numb fingers so that he could forcibly take the ring from him.

He’d never seen Carson do such a thing; it was absolutely shocking. It almost felt like he’d hit him.

Staggered, Thomas stood there shaking like a child, completely numb. His lips quivered; his eyes burned with unshed tears.

“Fine so take his ring!” Edward blurted out, furious, “You can’t take mine from me! The only way I’m taking this ring off is if you pry it from my cold, dead hands! And even if you do take it, we’ll still be married! You can never change that-“
“Really? Because I think Gaol can change quite a lot.” Lord Grantham bit out.

“Oh god.” Thomas moaned, burying his face in his hands. Gaol? They were truly considering Gaol?

All I wanted was to love him, Thomas thought bleakly. Why did this have to happen?

“You wouldn’t dare-“

“I? Edward, I have nothing to do with it!” Lord Grantham said, “Your father is the one considering the options, and I’ll remind you that his temper is quick to burn. He’s told me a great deal of his mind, and your mothers. Both of them feel that you’ve lost your sanity. Your mother wants to disinherit you. Your father is at his wits end trying to keep her quiet. Should she but write to the police, you realize that your entire world will be obliterated-“

“Please.” Thomas begged, realizing how very childlike he must appear in that moment. “Please I beg of you-“

“Yes,” Lord Grantham was icy in that moment, apathetic to Thomas’ request, “You do quite a lot of begging, Thomas. I’ve noticed that about you. But the world will not change, no matter how hard you try to bend it to your will.”

Thomas couldn’t even summon up the words. His heart felt like it was squeezing to death in his chest.

“I cannot save you from your mother, but I can save you from yourself.” Lord Grantham decided. “We must break this union off immediately. I will no longer allow the two of you to sleep in the same quarters, blindness or no. There are plenty of nurses and hospital staff that can see to your comfort, Edward. I’m wary to send you away from Downton, given you moment of weakness in March, but Thomas is officially off limits to you. He is no longer your spouse. He is a member of my staff, and the manager of Downton Abbey. Consider this a decree of divorce.”

When neither Edward nor Thomas spoke in their defense or anger, Lord Grantham seemed to deflate. Thomas was still yet to cry, but he knew that any moment now he’d start. He dare not even look at Edward, too frightened that he’d be punished further.

“… I do not mean to be cruel to you.” Lord Grantham said.
It was hard to believe him in that moment.

“Thomas, you must understand me: Niles Courtenay is furious. He knows how to make your life absolutely miserable. He told as much tonight over the phone. He swore that if nothing changed, he would have you arrested and thrown into an asylum. Even I could not save you from that.”

Thomas closed his eyes. Three fat tears fell down his cheeks.

“You’re one of my best.” Lord Grantham praised; his voice was tight and full of emotion, “I look on you with such pride, you and Anna… William… I know that our statutes are different, that we exist in a rigid world that declares you my servant and me your master… but I see you as a human being, I always have. I do not want you to get hurt, Thomas. I know you do not choose to be the way that you are… but you are on the brink of a knife’s edge. I must save you, to sooth my conscience if nothing else.”

Thomas gave a wet sniff, swallowing around a knot in his throat. When he opened his eyes, two more tears fell. “So…” He croaked, his voice small and miserable, “So we’re to live in misery or face worse?”
“Yes,” Lord Grantham said, “I’m afraid that’s how it seems. And that’s why we must take this in blows, and make it easier. You and Edward will co-exist in Downton Abbey until he’s ready to leave… and when he does, he will go his way, and you will stay here. In return, I will not tell his father the truth, I will not confirm that Edward has married you. I will instead tell him that Edward was addled when he wrote, and that he actually had married a French prostitute. That it was something simple, easy to ignore in the eyes of English law. I can save you from Gaol and worse, but I cannot save you from loving him, Thomas. I offer this aid, in exchange that the pair of you hold to my conditions and do not continue with your frivolities. Do I have your word, Thomas?”

Thomas’ eyelids fluttered as he chewed on his tongue in his mouth.

It was incredibly unfair. A horrific thing and one that he did not want to allow. But Thomas knew how terrifying Gaol was, and could understand easily that their awful situation would only get worse if he didn’t agree. Lord Grantham might have to play the role of unwilling villain in this situation, but he was also Thomas’ savior.

Thomas nodded, sniffing. Another tear fell down his cheeks. They were now soaking wet to the touch, and in need of a handkerchief.

No one offered him one.

“And you, Edward?” Lord Grantham said. “Do I have your word?”

Edward scoffed.

“…No.” Edward finally replied, his voice as cold as a frigid February morning. “You do not have my word. You have nothing but the cold dead hand that I promised you should you ever try to take my ring from me. I’ll find a way out of this… I’ll appease my father’s stupidity, and I’ll take Thomas from this house. And you can’t stop me.”

“I can try.” Lord Grantham replied. His expression was gray and stony.

When Edward did not make a witty comeback, Lord Grantham turned to Mrs. Hughes. She was just as frigid as he, and seemed almost sick to her stomach from the drama that had unfolded.

“Mrs. Hughes, please go upstairs and help Edward to pack up his things.” Lord Grantham ordered. “He’ll change rooms tonight, and sleep with the other men on the gallery floor. Find him a suitable bed for his status as Lieutenant.”

“…M’lord.” Mrs. Hughes whispered. She turned to the door, opening it wide in a silent command for Edward to follow her.

Edward did not do so immediately, instead looking to Thomas though Thomas dare not meet his gaze.

“… I’m so sorry.” Thomas whispered. His voice was so tight that the words did not form correctly on the air.

“We’ll be alright, darling.” Edward declared.

In front of God and Lord Grantham, Edward dipped in and pressed the chastest of kisses to Thomas’ cheek.

Carson bristled, turning violently green. Thomas wondered for a moment if he would actually be sick from disgust.
“I’ll find a way out of this.” Edward said. It was both a comfort to Thomas, and a warning to Lord Grantham.

He left, and Mrs. Hughes closed the door after them.

Thomas sank into Carson’s visitor’s chair, pressed a fluttering hand to his trembling mouth, and burst into tears.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know.
Consequences

Chapter Summary

A visitor to the abbey gives Thomas and Edward pause, and Thomas wonders if his charitable actions could have uncharitable consequences. Meanwhile, Ethel makes a tragic mistake and Thomas experiences the horrors of being on Mrs. Hughes' bad side.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

I hope you're continuing to enjoy this story. I wanted to go on ahead and let everyone know that I have created my own website, featuring my skill sets as an author and my works. It includes covers for all the fanfictions, including Volver, and showcases my original work *The Cry of the South*. You can find it at www.subrosawriter.com

Please come by and visit me? It would really help support me as a writer if I had subscribers and visitors.

Warnings for this chapter including period typical homophobia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weeks passed, and then months.

Time started to crawl, as if General Strutt’s visit had sucked all its enthusiasm away, to be replaced with the dull grinding typical of a life without meaning. In its grips, a helpless vole trapped by a mighty falcon, Thomas took on a new lease when it came to life. He could not have the thing that he wanted, so in retrospect he decided he would have nothing.

No friendship, no mock lover to fill his husband’s shadow.

The green tint which shadowed the iron wedding band he’d once so lovingly wore was now faded away. At times, Thomas would rub the skin with hands in a new nervous habit. He would try to remember how the ring had felt when he’d taken baths with Edward and allowed soap to slip beneath the band. It was as if by summoning the ring from his imagination, Thomas could physically bring it back to life. But his finger remained as cold and bare as his bed.

Lang was forced to leave, though he did not go with a wave of scorn. Instead, Lord Grantham shook Lang’s hand, Mr. Carson saw him to the station, and everyone regarded his memory with pity. O’Brien was mournful in the absence of a man she’d grown connected too. In another time, when joy had filled Thomas’ heart and curiosity had followed suit, he might have been keen to learn more about it. Now, however, Thomas was too consumed with his own grief to spare much thought for
In the morning, he rose before the other servants, and left the attics. He ate in the halls with the men, and went to bed while the servants were all at supper. In this way, though he slept among them, he did not see the downstairs staff save for in passing when Anna and Ethel were cleaning up the hall or Mr. Carson was going to answer the door.

Several times, each had tried to engage Thomas in conversation. He’d pretended not to hear them, turning away to some task or another until they’d finally let him be.

He did not want to talk to them anymore.

Though Thomas knew that Lord Grantham’s absence of a valet was a strain on Mr. Carson, he did not offer himself as aid nor did he make to serve meals with Carson anymore. He found himself unable to withstand the sound of Carson’s voice. It grated on his nerves, rubbing him raw, reminding him of the hellish night when Thomas had wept in Mr. Carson’s guest chair and yet received no sympathy. Because of them, Thomas had lost his husband… and that was unforgivable.

And yet, even in the darkest moments there was always hope.

It was true that Edward and Thomas could no longer socialize in public, nor could they sleep, bathe, and eat together as they’d once done. There too many eyes watching, too many people waiting to pounce at the first sign of weakness. But Edward’s love for Thomas was too strong to be denied by simple societal standards. He was regaining his sight, as if his anger was fuel for his health, and with each day Edward became more cunning in how he might circumvent Lord Grantham’s rules. He hid love notes for Thomas in secret spots about the house, written with eyes that could not yet fully see but could at least make out letters. Thomas would spot him in the entrance hall, cramped over a table packed with men having tea and biscuits. Like a guardian angel, he would watch over Edward in all things even if from afar, and when Edward would glance up his eyes would rove about the hall to find the blotted shadow that was Thomas’ presence.

“Every day, before I dine with the men, I look for you.” Edward wrote… and so he did. Each morning, Thomas would oversee breakfast with the men. Edward would sit as close to Thomas as he dared, and before he made to break bread or pour a cup of tea from a communal pot he would catch Thomas’ eyes.

He could now keep his eyes open without them stinging, or so he wrote. Shapes were not clear, and colors were not brilliant… but Edward could see.

Thomas thanked God each day for this blessing. Soon the war would be over and they could make their way to a better life. He’d hoped that with such scorn and cruelty, his overwhelming anxiety about leaving the abbey and its residents to the forces of life and death would fade. Instead, however, Thomas found his nights plagued with images of Sybil’s death… of Matthew’s car accident. He found himself wondering whether a third party was involved, whether the Heichecera herself was trying to push Thomas towards one destiny or another.

I won’t be parted from him, Thomas thought venomously. Even by you.

He wondered if the Heichecera could even hear him.

It was now summer, and William and Matthew were fighting on the front. Thomas watched the days slip passed, counting his coins and waiting for that fateful telegram when the war would officially be over. He even found himself looking at jobs and houses in other counties, wondering if he might
feasibly be able to find work and take Edward away from Downton. Would they be chased by the police? Would Edward’s family find out and yank them apart? Would his life, once a second chance full of hope, become nothing but a nightmare?

Thomas found himself suffering heart palpitations when he thought about it for too long.

To distract himself from such melancholy stimulations, Thomas instead focused on the physical running of the abbey. He found, with great relief, that he did not have to interact too much with the staff so long as he kept ahead of their schedule. After working as a footman, valet, and under-butler for fifteen years, Thomas could call up the time tables by heart. So long as he did most of his meddling during times when the servant’s ate (8:15, 12:00, and 10:00) and stayed away from the dining hall when the family ate (9:00, 1:00, and 8:00) Thomas found he could become a ghost in the house.

A concert was to be held in Downton’s main hall to raise charity funds for the men abroad as well as rouse the spirits of convalescing soldiers. As head manager, Thomas was tasked with overseeing the show, and did so with as little enthusiasm as possible. For whatever reason, Sybil Crawley was delighted by the idea of the concert and set up a time slot to get convalescing men to be acts. Servants, of course, were forbidden from taking part in the events although Lord Grantham had already given consent for them to watch from the sidelines during the show. Most men that had signed up were already in good health, including Major Bryant whom Thomas was steadily growing to dislike more and more as the days passed. There was something about the man’s sneer which just put him on edge… made Thomas realize that (whether he liked it or not) Ethel Parks was doomed.

He saw the way that she flirted with the man in dark corners. Twice, he’d caught them kissing when lights had been blown out and the soldiers ought to have been in bed.

Part of him wanted to run and tell Anna, but that would mean going near the servant’s hall, and that was not something Thomas was willing to do.

It was a calm and quiet Thursday, with only a week left to go until the concert was held. As a result, festivities were picking up and supplies were being gathered. A stage had been constructed by a few men in the village composed mostly of wood plucked from ruined wagonettes and old apple crates. Even a band was coming in, though it consisted only of retired soldiers and a few merchants from the town. Banners and decorations were slapdash at best with lack of supplies, and moral was low… worst of all there were no women to be found for singing or piano playing. You’d think this wouldn’t be such a problem, but the word amongst the heterosexual men (stalwart defenders of the joys of women) were downright hysterical about the lack of tits.

As the messenger of such sorrows, Thomas was forced to “go find some women”… which was just about as easy to him as finding a nugget of 24 karat gold.

Women, indeed!

From his prior reality, Thomas knew that the ones to ask were the Crawley sisters, which made enough sense; they were women and had tits… which apparently was the mark to hit with straight men.

He found his target meandering around the gallery stairs; Lady Edith was walking about with a stack of books in her arms, clearly having gone on a round of pick-up with borrowed novels. She was quick witted, happy to run errands for soldiers who wanted a stack of playing cards or a newspaper. As a result, she’d grown to be incredibly popular among the men. One or two were getting soft on her, which wasn’t going to help anybody. Thomas kept a firm eye on the men whenever they drifted near the Crawley sisters… he’d be lying if he claimed he hadn’t caught a few watching them walk
You could gaze fondly through the glass of a candy shop all day long; put your hand in a sweet jar, however, and you were going to get smacked.

“M’lady!” Thomas called out to her, flagging Edith down so that she came to a stop. Unlike her two sisters, Edith was not particularly fond of straying over the line that divided her world from the downstairs. She was a romantic, who enjoyed the classic feel of her birthright. At the same time, however, she possessed an incredible warmth that was difficult to ignore, even from a distance.

“Please forgive the intrusion, but I’m afraid I must ask something of you and Lady Mary.” Thomas said, gesturing to his trustworthy clipboard upon which he’d scribbled every detail of the concert.


“The men are despondent that there are no women in the concert.” Thomas said, “They were hoping you and Lady Mary might consent to sing a song or two? Possibly play a piano piece if you don’t feel up to it?”

Edith sighed, as if this was a terrible inconvenience. Thomas had a feeling it was more to do with being forced to tag-team with Mary than having to do a favor for the soldiers, “I’ll ask Mary and see if she’ll be willing.”

“Thank you, M’lady.” Thomas said. Lady Edith departed without another word, heading for the tea rooms where convalescing soldiers kept their bunks.

Thomas headed off, making rounds about the main hall as he poked his head into sectioned rooms. Some men were napping after vigorous rounds of physical therapy. Others were playing cards or reading a newspaper by the fire. The men tended to group together, enjoying each other’s company in lieu of silence. The few that kept to themselves were those that still needed rest, and it was in one of the quieter halls that Thomas found Edward carefully pacing around marble busts of Crawley’s long dead. He smiled, unable to hide his adoration as Edward stepped back from a bust as if trying to make conversation with a living person. Edward could use his eyes now, without having to shut them for fear of stinging pain. They were slightly cloudy, and red around the rim, but their beautiful blue color still shone through and for that, Thomas was grateful.

Edward was alone, so Thomas stepped inside the parlor and carefully shut the door behind him. He locked it for good measure, un-eager to be intruded upon.

Their affairs during the daylight hours were quick. Edward and Thomas were both well aware that they could no longer afford the luxury of leisure, in a house full of enemies.

Edward looked up, saw Thomas standing in the doorway, and smiled.

“You’re wearing a blue tie.” Edward murmured. “It has stripes on it.”

“So it does.” Thomas praised, and he stepped forward with three long strides to kiss Edward tenderly upon the mouth.

Edward wrapped his arms about Thomas’ waist, hands settling upon the base of his spine. As their lips met and merged, Thomas took a deep breath through his nose. Edward’s aftershave and pomade sparked a deep arousal within him… a beautiful ache.

They broke apart from air; Thomas laced his arms about Edward’s neck to toy gently with the hairs he found there. Grinning lazily, the pair of them swayed back and forth for a moment.
“I’ve been observing things.” Edward said, “I can just about see properly again. Just you wait. Soon I’ll be completely well.”

“Good.” Thomas praised, “I knew you could do it.”

“Yes, you did.” Edward said, and suddenly he pulled Thomas at the base of his spine so that he could dip Thomas and kiss him soundly on the mouth. Thomas squawked, grinning and holding on tight to Edward’s neck.

When Edward put him right again, Thomas leaned against his chest with a loving smile. He smelt the sweat at Edward’s neck, wishing he could crawl underneath Edward’s clothes and hide there like owls that hid in a burrow from the garish day.

“Tonight, where shall we meet?” Edward asked.

“The library.” Thomas decided. “I want you to make love to me on Lord Grantham’s couch.”

Grinning in his ear, Edward whispered his affection so that Thomas shuddered with delight.

“I look forward to it.”

The rest of the day was spent deep in imagination, with Thomas content to plan out all the delightful debauchery he would soon undergo. During his self-imposed tea break, Thomas scanned through a copy of the Yorkshire Times that he’d pilfered from a sleep soldier to see if there were any new job postings he could take interest in or cottages that looked hopeful for renting. He didn’t have nearly enough money to approach the offers that were listed in the paper, and began to lament at his poverty until he was forced to put the paper away lest he become gloomy. He then began to imagine what his life might have been like if he were rich, picturing himself for a moment as the son of an Earl instead of the servant. He imagined a wardrobe lined with the most expensive of suits… posh learnings at fancy universities and a life spent in secure luxury.

Had he been born into the aristocracy, Thomas had a feeling he’d have found it very hard not to fall in love with one of his servants. And oh-! What a dark and devious lord he’d be. He imagined for a moment some beautiful footman, with golden curls and eyes of aubergine-

Wait-

Thomas shook off the image of Jimmy Kent, unsure of why it had sprung upon him so suddenly. It was as if someone else had planted the image inside of his head, trying to get him to mentally cheat on Edward.

What poppycock. Thomas wouldn’t be addled by such maudlin images. Jimmy was never to be… Thomas accepted that, even though it stung. He was for Edward, and Edward alone. What was more, despite longing to be the son of an Earl, Thomas would never be anything more than the bastardized son of a clock maker. His lot in life was to scrub and clean until his fingers bled and broke. He’d never have a wardrobe full of finery or a willing footman between his silk bedsheets.

It was best not to even dwell on such concepts.

When dusk fell and the men dined in the great hall, Thomas kept watch on the outskirts as he always did. Tonight, they were having roasted chicken with mash and greens. Like a mother hen, Thomas
walked up and down between the mess tables, urging certain men to stop “eating just the mash and have some greens”. Honestly, some men were like children when their wives weren’t forcing them to ingest spinach. One man even tried to hide his spinach beneath his mash when he saw Thomas walking up, like a petulant four year old caught in the act.

Isis trotted about the men; two tried to feed her spinach from their plates before Thomas put a stop to it. Honestly-!

When the men were done with their meals, Thomas allowed the nurses to clear away the plates and helped to fold up chairs. At night, they sat upturned atop the tables, so that the maids could hoover up any dust and debris the next morning. When the chairs were neatly stacked, Thomas did his rounds through the rooms to make sure everyone was tucked into bed.

Most of the men were content to lounge in their cots and play card games with their neighbors. A few read, while one chatted with Lady Edith and thanked her for running an errand. Thomas dwelled among them, casually watching the hours pass from nine to midnight all the while waiting for his chance to slip out.

At ten, the lights were doused, and men were bidden to sleep.

At eleven, all men were in their bunks either reading or sleeping.

At eleven thirty, all men were asleep period.

At twelve on the dot, Thomas silently slipped out of the sitting parlor where he’d taken up watch over a group of convalescing amputees and headed for the library.

It was during this hour that Thomas liked the abbey best.

With no men roaming about the halls and a soft silence overtaking the air, there was a serene beauty instilled in the carpet and the drapes. Moonlight casually drifted in through whatever slit it could find, and the fires were extinguished in their hearths. There was nothing to stir, save for the muted, dull tick of a Werston clock, dutifully keeping the time at such a late hour. Rooms like the library and such were locked at such late hours, but Thomas had a master key to the ground floor as the current manager. It did very little good, save to unlock a door that had accidentally gotten jammed during the day… but at night?

Oh, at night the possibilities were endless.

As Thomas crossed the hall, he checked the gallery stairs and the green baize door for the sounds of people stirring. He was met with silence every which way he turned, and so he waited patiently near the library door for Edward to appear. Edward would not be able to get in without him, and Thomas would lock it as soon as they were over the threshold to keep a lurking threat from finding them out.

When Edward finally did appear, it was ten past midnight and he was holding a jar of petroleum jelly.

Edward beamed, waltzing right up to Thomas in his pajamas, but as he made to take Thomas in his arms Thomas put a hand out in warning.

They could not act boldly in the open, even if it was past midnight.

Pressing a finger to his lips, Thomas turned to the library door and pulled out his key.
He inserted it, twisted it…

but it was already unlocked.

Confused, Thomas’ brow furrowed. He slowly pulled back the key, careful not to make even the smallest of sounds.

The library door was locked strictly by Carson each night at ten before he went downstairs to his own supper. Someone ignorant to the lives of servants might imagine it simple for Carson to forget a lock and so take this unlocked door for a blessing instead of a burden. But Thomas knew Downton’s schedule and what was more he knew Carson.

There was absolutely no way that Carson had forgotten to lock this door, which meant that someone else had unlocked it and not locked it back.

The only people in the house with keys to the library were Mr. Carson, Mrs. Hughes, and Thomas.

Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes would surely both be in bed at such a late hour… so who in the hell was in the library now?

“What’s the matter?” Edward whispered in Thomas’ ear.

So wary was Thomas that he accidentally jumped, nearly dropping his key. He looked over his shoulder to find Edward ghostly and pale in the moonlight.

“The door’s unlocked.” Thomas whispered.

“Key’s do that.”

“No you numpty, it was already unlocked when I put in my own key.”

“So?”

“It shouldn’t be unlocked unless someone has stolen another key. So whose in there now?”

Comprehension dawned upon Edward’s handsome face, his beautiful mouth falling slightly open as he glanced from Thomas to the library door.

Stepping around Thomas, Edward carefully took the ancient brass knocker in hand and ever so slowly pushed it to about an inch.

Stooping beneath Edward’s chin, both Thomas and Edward peered into the library through the slit in the door, careful not to push it anymore lest they cause the antique wood to squeak in its hinges.

It was hard to make out detail in the gloom, but someone was most certainly inside the library upon the couch. Indeed, it seemed that two someones were in the library, joined together as one sat upon the couch and the other rode atop their partner’s waist.

Dying embers from the library grate threw Ethel Parks and Major Bryant into light. Ethel was riding him in ecstasy, her naked breasts open to the air as she bounced at a merry pace in her love making. She was gasping, panting, a heavy sheen of sweat coating her neck and temples. Her scarlet hair was like liquid flame between Major Bryant’s fingers. With one hand, he held her hair; with another, he chocked her at the neck so that barely a sound could escape her lips.
Ethel’s eyes were hooded, glazed… but when they fell upon Thomas’ face in the doorway, they flew open with shock.

Thomas quickly stepped back, yanking Edward away from the door to close it. He did not make to lock it, instead taking Edward by the hand and trotting away down the hall at a brisk pace. He was frightened of being found out by Major Bryant, who had a temper and was a brute when pressed. They hid in a side parlor, one often used for smoking and brandy when the Crawley’s were hosting savvy company. Thomas unlocked the door, let Edward inside, and then closed it so that they were quite alone again. He locked it once more, taking slow and even breaths to try and still his frantically beating heart.

Edward was just over his shoulder, still holding to his little jar of petroleum jelly.

“What should we do?” Edward finally asked, his voice no longer in a whisper. “You saw what was going on, right?”

“…Yes. Yes I saw it.” Thomas pulled back from the door, sitting his master key atop a side table and sinking onto a fainting couch. Edward stood before him, casually tossing the petroleum jelly from one hand to the other.

It was a sign how well he could see now, a testament to his recovery.

“Are you going to tell the housekeeper?” Edward asked. “You ought to. She’s well out of bounds.”

“So are we.” Thomas reminded Edward. He looked slightly guilty but then shrugged.

“I’ll leave it up to you.” Edward decided, which was just as well since Thomas didn’t have a fucking clue what to do either.

Edward reached out with a free hand, gently cupping Thomas’ chin. He raised Thomas’ eyes so that they could stare at one another as they used to be able to do.

It was a glorious thing… to know that Edward could see him again, even if his vision was blurry.

“I’ve wanted to see you for so long.” Edward whispered. “I’d dream about it at night… of you on your knees for me. Loving me as a husband ought to.”

Thomas smiled, leaning his chin into Edward’s warm palm.

“Soon, I’ll be well enough to shove this place off for good.” Edward said, “And when that day comes I’ll take you from here, no matter what Lord Grantham says.”

“What if he has a point?” Thomas whispered. “What if we’re doomed?”

Edward shook his head.

“A life without you… only that would be my doom.” He replied.

His words made Thomas’ chest ache.

Kissing Edward’s palm and wrist, Thomas took deep care to lovingly press his lips against the white scars where Edward had nearly killed himself. Little did Edward know that Thomas too had once had to cut his wrists in order to gain a better life. Sucking tenderly upon the flesh, Thomas reveled in the pulse.

He would have his taste for flesh before the night was over, and in the morning the taste would linger upon his tongue.
Even as Thomas lingered over newspapers unsure, and watched each paycheck for a pence he could put away, the rest of the world was continuing to turn. Just like before, the past was unfolding and Thomas could do little to stop it.

Bates, had been found working in a pub, the Red Lion in Kirby Moorside. This wasn’t a surprise to Thomas, though he’d forgotten the name in the years past. Anna had been the one to find him, and though last time Daisy had overheard Thomas gossiping on the subject much to Thomas’ displeasure this time Thomas did not venture downstairs to speak with O’Brien on the subject. Indeed, he didn’t speak with her on anything. He was too busy to talk, and she was too busy to seek him out.

Anna was no doubt tearing her hair out trying to figure out how to get Bates back in the house, but even Thomas’ help wouldn’t make the answers come easier. Vera Bates was a hound from hell, and if the scent came through her nose she’d chase her quarry down to the ends of the earth. Besides, Thomas didn’t even know where Vera lived, though he had a feeling it was a larger city than Downton. Maybe London or York?

But that wasn’t all. Lady Mary had agreed to marry Sir Richard Carlisle with so much reluctance you’d think she was signing a contract instead of falling in love. When Thomas saw her passing in the halls, he found her rarely with a smile in place lest she was talking to Lady Sybil… and even then she looked exhausted.

It seemed the effort of living a lie was slowly killing her. Thomas understood her pain completely.

It was three days after catching Ethel with Major Bryant, and Thomas had still not told Mrs. Hughes. Instead, he’d kept his head down and had refused to think about it any longer than absolutely necessary. The image of Ethel’s breasts bouncing up and down from the force of her lovemaking had frankly been a nauseating sight to him.

Still, the image was like a brand in his mind; it had burned the skin, sizzling it raw, so that whenever Thomas’ conscience ghosted past he jerked back instinctively.

Sitting upon a chair in the library, Thomas occupied a quiet corner while a group of men played pingpong on the opposite side. They were absorbed in their little back and forth, quite content to leave Thomas alone as he went over the expense report for the past month. The concert, though hardly up to brass and tack, was still costing their accounts a fortune. Who’d have thought that renting musicians for three hours was so expensive? Honestly, if someone handed Thomas a trumpet, he had a feeling he could hack out a tune at half the expense.

Don’t be ridiculous, Baxter’s voice sounded in his head, You couldn’t play to save your life. Just pay the men and don’t complain.

Grumbling under his breath, Thomas wrote yet another check.

Suddenly, a mint green skirt frayed with heavy starch and ironing came into view.

For a moment, Thomas did not look up and instead continued writing, but then the tip of a feather
duster began to play trails atop his desk, exhausted feather tips bending as they were pressed and released against the force of aged pine.

Thomas looked up, and found Ethel before him. She was chewing her lip, her scarlet hair tucked tightly beneath her starched cap, and looked reproachful.

Thomas looked back down and continued to write. No emotion flickered across his face, no tell of fear or anger.

“Thought you didn’t like me anymore.” Thomas spoke up as he wrote, filling out a receipt stub for the latest check, “When did that change?” He finished his sentence with a sharp rip of the nib tip against parchment, and he screwed the cap back on his pen to set it aside. He relaxed in his chair and folded his arms over chest. His left foot began to jiggle, toes bouncing so that his knee began to jerk in the air.

“When you saw me with the Major but didn’t tell.” Ethel said.

Thomas nodded; he could see why that act had been endearing. Ethel played on the dark side of the tracks, and so did Thomas. Though she didn’t know it, there was an unspoken pact between them not to tell when the other broke the rules. By not running to Mrs. Hughes, Thomas had reminded Ethel of that bond, and now she was getting a little soft on him.

Still, the circumstances had not changed: “You do know what will happen, eventually?” Thomas murmured, keeping his voice low so that none could overhear, “If you keep this up, you’re going to get pregnant, lose your job, have no reference, and he’ll leave you penniless and broken.”

Ethel looked away, scorned.

“I’ve tried to tell you but you won’t listen-“

“Well you don’t know him like I do!” Ethel said. Thomas had to admit, her love for Major Bryant was oddly touching. Too bad she didn’t realize he was a bastard… but maybe that was the price of being in love.

“No, and that’s why I’m not taken in by the guise.” Thomas agreed. He stood up from his work desk, picking up all his documents to shuffle them rapidly in a neat little stack. “I try to stay away from dangerous men.”

“Hasn’t stopped you with Courtenay.” Ethel sulked.

Immediately, Thomas looked about to make sure that her words had gone undetected. Mercifully for him, the men were more concerned with getting in another round of ping pong than detecting any nearby lavenders.

He glared at Ethel, who grew reproachful.

“Look… all I’m sayin’ is that you could have told but you didn’t. So why?” Ethel asked.

But telling had nothing to do with Thomas’ motives. What would telling matter?

“…Telling won’t stop you.” Thomas said. Ethel looked confused, so he continued on, speaking as softly as he could so that none would overhear, “You’re going to screw around and get pregnant anyways. The only thing I’m interested in is getting you to stop… but you’re…” He gestured at her, thinking of all the words he could say:
Promiscuous, wild, rebellious, slightly heathenistic-

“You can’t understand until it happens.” Thomas finally said, trying to remain as objective as possible, “I guess…. one day you’ll realize I’m right. I just it isn’t too late.”

Ethel said nothing, though her mouth was slightly open as if she was trying to summon up the nerve. Thomas had never seen her look so vulnerable or open.

He took advantage of the moment, urging her to see sense:

“If there was anything I could do to save you, anything at all… I’d do it.” He told her, “I swear I would. Is there?”

Ethel didn’t know what to say.

Thomas waited for a solid minute, hoping that she might tell him some incredible secret that he could use to make her step back from this awful path. Instead, Ethel’s eyes slowly began to fill up with tears as if Thomas’ words had moved her.

“Thomas-!”

A nurse called out to him from the doorway, looking slightly heckled with her white cap coming undone from her blonde hair. “There’s a man at the door, he says he’s with the band, and he wants to know when they’re getting paid.”

“Oh god’s sake.” Thomas groaned. He turned away from Ethel, taking his checkbook with him.

He doubted it would do any good to continue to speak with her anyway.

After dealing with a rather annoying tuba player at the door, Thomas found himself with a spare moment of time to sort away his checkbook and to take a cup of tea. Tea could be found in communal pots in the great hall, so Thomas sat amongst the men for a while enjoying stale biscuits until he felt centered enough to get up and get going again. Edward was wandering about, unable to get close to Thomas in public but clearly looking for him. He strayed around the corners of the great hall, chucking one of Isis’ favorite balls up and down in the air. Each time he swiped a hand out to nab it as it fell, Thomas could not help but smile.

Edward’s sight really was getting better; and thank god-!

“Thomas.”

Thomas was in the middle of dusting his hands free of biscuits crumbs when he felt his stomach drop out.

He swallowed, a slight gummy paste behind his back molars, and looked about to find Carson only a few feet away. In his tux and crisp whites, Carson was just as proper as ever. It was the first time that he’d addressed Thomas in months, and there was an odd, stiff edge to his voice as if he was struggling with some internal debate.

“His Lordship wishes to speak to you.” Carson said, “He’s in the ante library.”

Thomas did not know what to do or say, but to dip his head in a show of respect and say: “Mr.
Carson.”

Walking away from Carson as quickly as he could, Thomas headed for the ante library which was divided off from the main hall by a folding Chinese barricade. He passed by Edward, who was still tossing a ball, and shot him a quick smile as he stepped inside. Isis was on her back, rolling about the entrance of the ante library in the vain attempt of getting a belly scratch should anyone convenient pass by. She whined at his ankles, wanting affection, and so Thomas stooped over to pet her fondly upon her swollen stomach.

She panted, a perk pink tongue lagging from her mouth.

“Spoiled rotten, you are.” Thomas declared.

“I’m afraid you’re quite right.”

Taken aback, Thomas shot up to find that Lord Grantham had come out of the ante library with Lady Grantham at his elbow. Both had clearly been taking tea, and perhaps were about to go on a stroll around the grounds to get away from the men who were having another boisterous round of ping pong. At once, Isis got up on her feet and leaned heavily into Lord Grantham’s calve. Her tail thumped upon the floor in a hearty wag.

“M’lord.” Thomas said, “Mr. Carson said you wanted to speak to me.”

“I did.” Lord Grantham said, “I wondered if we might speak in private… perhaps my dressing room.”

He wants to talk to me about Edward, Thomas thought, even as he inclined his head in as how of subservience. At once, Lord Grantham lead the way, departing from Lady Grantham who instead headed for the mud room and the entrance hall. Perhaps she was going for a drive?

Unsure, Thomas and Isis both followed Lord Grantham. He mounted the stairs, then took a right as Lord Grantham headed for his dressing room which sat detached from his bedroom. Like most dressing rooms, it operated on a set of opposite doors, one which opened outward from the hall, and one which opened inward from the room itself. In order to enter, you had to pass through both doors. This served as a deterrent when the room was occupied so that Lord Grantham wouldn’t have anyone accidentally walk in on him undressed.

In a force of habit, Thomas opened the door for Lord Grantham to step inside, then shut it so that they could have a bit of privacy.

The room was tidied, despite Lord Grantham not having a valet, though Thomas noted there were no clothes hanging out for dinner upon the clothes horse, and the ceramic washing bowl was slightly lined with the remnants of Lord Grantham’s last shave. It was obvious to the trained eye that Lord Grantham needed Bates back soon… or at least needed someone to wash his bowls better.

“Forgive me for the theatrics, but I thought you would appreciate some privacy.” Lord Grantham said, “I wanted to speak to you on the subject of Edward Courtenay, and his father Lord Bicester.”

When Thomas did not speak, Lord Grantham carried on. “It’s been brought to my attention by both Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson that you’ve made yourself scarce amongst the staff. That they haven’t seen you for months. Carson told me he even checked in on you while you were sleeping once, because he thought you weren’t in your room.”

Irked, Thomas felt his left eye twitch a bit, but said nothing.
“You’ve often spoke in the past of how your role as a member of staff in this house brought you great pride. I wondered if something had changed in that regard.”

“Yes, M’lord.” Thomas replied, his tone short but polite, “Something has.”

“Is it that you were found out with Lieutenant Courtenay?” Lord Grantham asked, taking on a stern tone as if he were reprimanding one of his children for being irksome.

“No, M’lord.” Thomas said, wording his sentence as carefully as he could, “It is because I was forced apart from my husband.”

Lord Grantham bristled, and after a moment he looked away. “I wish you wouldn’t call him that.”

Thomas bowed his head, a stab of regret and self-loathing going through him as he realized once again just how abnormal he was.

Sighing, Lord Grantham rubbed his brow: “No, that was cruel of me. I shouldn’t berate you for speaking of Courtenay in such a way. I know you’re fond of him, and I know that you cannot change what you are.”

Lord Grantham stepped towards the window, looking out across the sea of green that marked his vast property.

“I should make it clear, that Mrs. Hughes, Mr. Carson, and I wanted nothing more than to keep you safe from Lord Bicester.” Lord Grantham said, catching Thomas’ gaze and holding it. “What we did, we did out of an act of charity, not cruelty.”

Charity was a poor description for forcing someone to remove their wedding ring.

When Thomas did not comment on Lord Grantham’s words, Lord Grantham carried on, “I’ve been in touch with Lord Biceter— rather, he’s been in touch with me. He wanted to tell me that he’d written to Edward… he’s trying to re-initiate the courtship between his son and Lady Carlisle of Oxford. Edward has been less that enthusiastic. I thought I might reach out to you and see if you would be willing to offer your aid.”

“My aid, M’lord?” Thomas could not imagine what aid he’d be willing to give on the subject.

Lord Grantham tensed a bit, seeming to chew on his tongue for a moment as if weighing up how best to approach the situation.

“I understand that this is… hard…” Lord Grantham said the word with care. “I accept that you ….care for him,” Lord Grantham fixed him with a stern gaze, “But it is time to set this aside, Thomas, before true damage is done. Lord Bicester will disown Edward or worse if he thinks that Edward is still fraternizing with abnormal ideas.”

“You want me to tell Edward to…” Thomas’ throat closed up tight, making him pause as he fished for the word, “To…”

“I want you to talk to Edward and get him to see reason.” Lord Grantham said, and his tone was exceedingly gentle. “If he truly cares for you, he’ll listen to you.”

“…and what if he doesn’t, M’lord?” Thomas asked, well aware that he was bordering on impropriety. In recompense, he kept his voice soft and delicate. “What if he decides he’d rather be disowned?”
“Is that what you want for him?” Lord Grantham countered. “Do you want him to be penniless, and cast off from his family?”

Burned, Thomas broke eye contact to instead stare at the floor. The floor was far less judgmental.

“I don’t know what I want.” Thomas said, and it was the terrible truth. “I’ve been… struggling with that for a while now. I don’t know if I want to stay here or leave. I don’t know if it will do any good either way.”

“The world can be unkind.” Lord Grantham agreed, “And time waits for no man… but just so you know, I have always viewed you as a pivotal member of staff, as an upstanding young man, and a superb footman. I want you to stay on my staff, Thomas, and I’m not alone. You might not believe it, but Carson still wants the best for you. He’s tired of you avoiding him. I suggest you detach yourself from this bizarre romance and try to make peace with the staff. It’ll make things easier when Edward eventually has to leave.”

Thomas pursed his lips, and for a moment he considered simply dipping his head in subservience and walking out.

But then, his masochistic streak got the better of him: “What if I leave with him, M’lord?”

Lord Grantham looked disappointed, but not surprised. “I think we both know how that will end.”

But where Thomas had once been filled with terror at the idea of living life in the open, he now was unsure whether or not to take Lord Grantham’s advice. What honestly would happen to him if he left with Edward? They’d head off into the open English countryside, and try to find a cottage to live in, preferably one they could let out to tenants. Maybe they’d change their names and maybe they’d pretend to be cousins. If they were smart, and covered their tracks well enough… how would anyone ever find them?

But then, Thomas had to consider what would happen if he did leave with Edward.

If he left, he knew for a fact that both Sybil and Matthew would die. Maybe before, when Thomas had been detached from the abbey’s residents, it hadn’t been such a quandary. Everyone died, after all. You couldn’t run from death forever…

But now, Thomas knew Sybil intimately, and liked Matthew just the same. The idea of both of them dying again, when he knew it was going to happen and might be able to prevent it… it just… well…

It ate at him. It made it difficult to be selfish.

But selfishness was part of human nature, and those that were humble and kind often had to dissuade their own inner urgings in order to be empathetic to their fellow man. Where Thomas was battling with his future, another man had already made up his mind… and was on his way to the abbey.

The day after Lord Grantham’s warning, Thomas found himself in the library once again, working
on checks and balances for the upcoming concert. He now only had three days left, and found himself constantly being flagged down for tiny details that weren’t ironed flat.

Par example, the musicians wanted to warm up before the concert, but couldn’t do it in the great hall because the stage would be undergoing construction in the hours before the performance. This meant, Thomas had to find somewhere in the abbey where eight brass musicians and two drummers could practice without being a nuisance to either the family or the staff. You’d think in a building the size of Downton Abbey, that wouldn’t be too hard to do, but they were also hosting over two hundred convalescing soldiers.

this meant that the band had to practice inside the stables, and they weren’t too happy about that. As a matter of fact, no one was happy about it, but no one wanted to offer up another solution so Thomas was left with several yowling mouths and no way to please them all. If he had one more person complain, he was going to scream aloud and light his hair on fire.

“Happy place, happy place, happy place…” Thomas muttered under his breath, casually flipping through the tallied expense reports.

He thought of Edward naked, laying upon expensive sheets, plucking at swollen ripe grapes and licking his lips.

He thought of himself as a lord, posh and polished in a soft and deep armchair, with Edward upon his lap. He’d wear a bow tie, but it would be slightly crooked so Thomas would have to have the butler punish him-

But then he had an image of Carson yelling about bowties and grimaced, flipping irritably to another page in his accounts.

“Thomas-?”

It was Mrs. Hughes.

Pursing his lips, Thomas took a deep breath through his nose and looked up. Ever since Lord Grantham had spoken to Thomas, both Carson and Mrs. Hughes had been trying to initiate contact. So far, Thomas had successfully been avoiding them both due to the fact that he was swamped with work... but early today Carson had tried to beg Thomas to get the musicians to practice somewhere else, so Thomas had a feeling that Mrs. Hughes was about to do the same.

“If this is about the musicians, Mrs. Hughes-“

“It’s not.” She said, rather sternly. “It’s about Lieutenant Courtenay-“

Thomas groaned aloud, palming his forehead.

“Please… I’ve had a long day.” Thomas moaned, “And I haven’t even gotten a tea break yet-“

“I’m not here to chastise you,” Mrs. Hughes chided, “I’m here because I can’t find him and his father is looking for him.”

Thomas’ head snapped up.

Where only a second before he’d been fuming over irate tuba players and an afternoon without a cup of the Crawley family blend, now Thomas felt nothing but cold dread.

Edward’s father was here…?
But- but why?
Why would he have come to Downton unless…

Was he here to take Edward away?

Thomas staggered up from his chair, noticing with only passing interest that Mrs. Hughes’ expression had grown pale.

“Thomas, what-“

But Thomas did not listen to hear what she was about to ask.

He left the library, completely abandoning his accounts book though it contained vital financial information for the Crawley household. Devoid of his duties, Thomas entered the entrance hall to and scanned it at once for the sight of an unknown figure.

He found no one out of sorts, no one that might fit the image of a “Lord Bicestor”.

“Thomas-“

A hand upon his shoulder nearly made him jump. He looked around to find Mrs. Hughes, fretful and nervous.

“Where is he?” Thomas demanded of the woman, “Where is Lord Bicestor?”

“Outside, he-“

But once again, Thomas left before she could finish.

He found himself running across the entrance hall, as if Lord Bicestor had bidden him run in lieu of dire consequences. As Thomas reached the front doors and pulled them open, however, he did not immediately see a figure waiting upon the doorstep.

The gravel was clear, save for one pristine motorcar with a driver smoking by the hood. He’d taken off his hat, and was mopping his brow with his free hand; the weather was slightly balmy in the afternoon.

And there, just beyond the car, pacing beneath the reach of an elm over one hundred years old, was a man in a top hat.

Thomas walked out to meet him.

Lord Bicestor, Edward’s father, was a tall man. Incredibly tall, to the point of being gaunt and wraithlike. He was slightly bowed at the shoulders, with thinning blonde hair dampened by a gentle curl and a sunken sallow face. He looked like he hadn’t slept well in years, with deep purple bags beneath his eyes, and he gripped an ebony walking cane in his left hand. Though it was August of 1917, and the heat was sweltering in the afternoon, Lord Bicestor still wore a black cloak. He looked the sort of man who held to propriety no matter the cost.

Men like that were always dangerous, in Thomas’ experience.

Lord Bicestor looked around, momentarily scowling in the hot summer sun as he tipped his hat back to view who was approaching. When he found Thomas before him, not wearing a jacket and with
his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, Lord Bicestor was surprised.

And then… he wasn’t.

“… Who are you?” Lord Bicestor asked, eyes narrowing. His voice was deep, bizarrely so for a man so tall and thin.

Thomas opened his mouth, but didn’t have it in him to answer.

Lord Bicestor leaned a bit upon his ebony cane, shifting his weight so that he could view Thomas better without the sun in his eyes.

“I say, are you ill?” Lord Bicestor demanded, “Do you not hear me speaking to you?”

And yet, even as Thomas’ mouth worked to come up with some sort of reply, he found that nothing in his brain could come up with the defense needed to conquer the task at hand.

Lord Bicestor’s blue eyes narrowed as Thomas continued to be mute.

“…You’re…” Thomas swallowed, “You’re Edward’s father?”

Lord Bicestor blinked, first opening his mouth as if to berate Thomas once again for his impropriety.

Then, Lord Bicestor began to grow dangerously suspicious.

“…Who are you?” he repeated, this time with more intention upon the ‘are’. “How do you know my son?”

But even as Thomas opened his mouth to tell the man the damning truth, the sound of crunching gravel and cursing filled both their ears.

Thomas looked around, his heart leaping to see Edward sprinting from the house.

“Thomas, stay back!” Edward shouted, as if he thought his father might leap out and try to strangle Thomas with his bare hands. Thomas stumbled backward, watching as Edward put himself physically in front of Thomas like he’d once done in Ypres when danger had been all around them. He barred the way to Thomas, proud and strong with his chest out and his chin in the air.

Lord Bicestor’s blue eyes were gleaming, but not with anger. He was incredibly emotional, a muscle in his jaw jumping as he took in his eldest son for the first time in years.


The soft crunch of gravel gave Thomas pause. Frightened, he looked around only to find Mrs. Hughes walking up. Like any seasoned servant she was tentative in the face of the nobility, making herself as small as possible.

Thomas had no idea why she’d followed Edward out of the house. Maybe, when she’d found him, she’d told him everything that was happening and was nervous as to the inevitable conclusion.

Thomas looked back around to find Lord Bicestor distraught. Edward was not the happy youth he’d sent to war. Instead, Edward was now a man… furious at being denied the thing he desired.

“Why are you here?” Edward demanded. “I thought our business was finished, or have you changed
“… Lord Grantham told me he’d spoken to you.” Lord Bicestor explained, bitter. “And… the other one… I wanted to speak see if- well-“ the man became flustered. “Damnit, Edward, I want you to come home!”

His voice almost broke on the word. Almost.

Edward was unmoved by his father’s emotion. In fact, it just seemed to make Edward angrier!

“My god.” Edward sneered, “The stone you possess. To think I’d actually be moved by that after all you’ve said to me.”

Burned, Lord Bicestor looked away.

“I was hurt.” Lord Bicestor said, “You wounded me to the core, Eddie. You broke it off with Elizabeth, when our families are so close, and you barely told her a word why. And when you explained the rest to me… I couldn’t take it. It was heartbroken-“

But Edward just laughed, as if it were all very funny. Thomas did not like this Edward, and winced at the sound of his cold voice. Where was the Edward he loved? The one who was so brave in the face of hardship?

“Edward, please.” Thomas whispered. “Don’t be cruel-“

“Don’t waste your pity on this man, Thomas.” Edward warned him, “He’s not worth your time.”

Lord Bicestor looked from Edward to Thomas, and when his eyes fell upon Thomas’ fearful face, his blue eyes flew open in sudden knowing and rage.

“You.” Lord Bicestor hissed the word. He took a savage step towards Thomas, as if to strangle him-!

Afraid, Thomas took two steps back only to nearly hit Mrs. Hughes who was just behind him. But Edward put both his arms out, like Christ upon the cross, and stopped his father cold with a murderous stare.

“Yes.” Edward said, with violent victory, “Him.”

Lord Bicestor struggled, a man of morals and high breeding suddenly plunged into a world of violent desires and murderous rage. Seething, but unable to act, the man trembled upon the gravel and clenched both fists tight.

“You heartless little wretch.” Lord Bicestor seethed, “I ought to have you thrown in prison for molesting my son-!”

The words prison and molesting jumped out at Thomas like they were going to attack him. He shrank back, hiding in Edward’s shadow even as Edward grew more into a fury.

“Good luck with that, old chap!” Edward said, “I’m the one who molested him!” And at this he barked out a laugh so ugly and deep that it hardly sounded human.

Jarred, perhaps even a little terrified, Lord Bicestor rounded on his eldest son and slapped him hard
across the mouth. Mrs. Hughes sucked in a breath, horrified.

Edward seized, the sensation of his father slapping him bringing his laughter to a halt. Furious, he raised his own fist as if to strike his father, but Thomas lunged out and grabbed on tight so that Edward could not land the blow.

“No, Edward!” Thomas begged, pulling him back a bit, “Stop, I beg of you stop. It’ll only make things worse!”

“No, Edward!” Edward seethed, “Worse than what, worse than your own father writing and telling you to kill yourself-?!”

“I was hurt!” Lord Bicestor barked, as if this was any good excuse for telling your child to end their life, “You wounded me Edward! You wounded me to the core with this little stunt-!”


“This isn’t love!” Lord Bicestor seemed sickened by the concept, “Men can’t love other men. If anything it’s… it’s some sick lust. Something you contracted during the war—and I’ll have you know that their lot have different diseases than us!” Lord Bicestor added, throwing a nasty finger at both Thomas and Mrs. Hughes, “They don’t bath properly like we do! That’s probably where you got it from!”

“Oh what a crock of shit!” Edward cursed. Thomas heard Mrs. Hughes wince from the word. “I’ve never heard such malarky in all my life! What’s the matter, has mother gone and crawled up your arse again-?!”

“Don’t be sharp with me, I’m here for you! To try and save you!” Lord Bicestor wrung his hands in the air, whether to strangle Edward or Thomas was a mystery. “And I’ll have you know I’ve been the only one in your corner-”

“What like I ought to thank you?” Edward demanded. “Like I ought to be grateful that you wrote to me and told me to die-?!”

Lord Bicestor was burned. He looked way, took a few shuddering breathes, then turned back with a face set like stone. His anger was starting to get the best of him. Thomas had a feeling that no headway would be made by either party now.

“Edward please…” Thomas said. He stepped close to Edward’s side, and though he did not touch Edward he kept his voice loving and soft. He was afraid to reach out to Edward in this moment, afraid that if he so much as even looked at Edward the wrong way, Lord Bicestor might snap and throttle them both. “Please listen to me. Neither of you will change… so just let it go. Let the anger you’re feeling go. It’ll destroy you if you don’t.”

Suddenly, Thomas thought of his own father, and how his self-loathing and longing had once ruined his life in an alternate reality. Thomas clenched his fists, feeling the thin skin upon his slit wrists tighten up. “My father was the same way, and the anger I felt nearly destroyed me once. But it won’t do any good, don’t you see?”

“I won’t give him the chance to hurt you.” Edward said, and at once Thomas shut his mouth. He feared that Edward might grow angrier should he try and dissuade once again. “He can hurt me all he likes, I won’t mind-“

“Hurt you-?” Lord Bicestor cried out, “Hurt you, you little fool, don’t you understand that I love you!? You’re my son!”
“You disowned me!” Edward shouted back. “I am not your son!”

“Well—I take it back!” Lord Bicestor flung out a hand again, desperate to wipe away the past and start afresh, “I should never have disowned you in the first place. So let’s come away from here and start over again! We can leave England, you and I… travel like we used to! It’ll be just like it was before—!”

“No.” Edward said, and Lord Bicestor’s face crumpled with awful emotional defeat. “Nothing will ever be as it was before. You cannot take back what you’ve done to me. Return home to your son, and your wife. They’re your family now.”

Lord Bicestor looked like he might cry.

Desperate to try and soothe someone, anyone, to ease this awful passing, Thomas tried for Lord Bicestor’s better senses instead of Edwards:

“M’lord…” Thomas said, speaking in the same gentle voice that he’d used for Edward, “M’lord, he speaks in anger, but there is truth in his words. You have another son, and he though he is younger he looks to women as a natural man should. Why not let him be the successor, let him be the Earl of Oxford, and let Edward do as he pleases? He has titles to his name, his own money, he seeks nothing from you—!”

“Money?!?” Lord Bicestor grew spiteful in that moment, “Oh you’d like to think that, wouldn’t you, you little rat. Well, you hear me now! There’ll be no more money, not another penny! If you want to lay about like some… some… filth, then you can bloody well—“

“You’re speaking in pain, M’lord.” Thomas begged, “Can’t you see that you don’t mean what you say! Only seconds ago you tried to take back your—“

“Silence!” Lord Bicestor roared. His voice was so loud it sent birds scattering from the trees.

Cowering, Thomas shrank back. Once again, he found himself close to Mrs. Hughes, who seemed just as fearful as he. The pair of them were side by side, breathless as they watched Lord Bicestor turn purple in the face.

“You…” Lord Bicestor hissed the word, furious at Thomas, “All of my life. All of my miserable life, what have I ever done to deserve you? You disgusting, vile little roach? You heathen from hell!”

Thomas shook his head, but his voice was rendered mute. He was too afraid to speak.

Edward bristled, his eyes narrowing.

“You have taken my child away from me!” Lord Bicestor shouted, and Thomas was shocked to see tears in the man’s eyes.

“No—“ He blurted out, pleading.

“Mark my words, I will have you thrown in the deepest, darkest hole I can think of!” Lord Bicestor pointed to the very ground on which they stood, as if hoping a portal to hell would open up so that he could chuck Thomas inside.

“No, I—“

“And you will never see the light of day again!”
“Please, M’lord-!” Thomas prostrated himself before the man, thinking in that moment of every asylum in England just waiting to swallow him up at the man’s word. One phone call, one shilling, and his life would be over. Even the Heichecera wouldn’t be able to save him, he was sure.

“Please??” Lord Bicestor howled the word, eyes bulging in rage, “You have the nerve, the audacity, to beg me?! You have taken away from me the only thing in life I loved! My own son in my own image, and you have left me with nothing! A broken home! A broken marriage! An empty life! Yet here you still stand, a dragon atop his hoard, asking me for a little bit of pity so that you may keep your pretty prize and not have to pay the price-“

“M’lord-” Thomas’ voice was shaking. He was breathing shallowly, his heart pounding in his ears. He’d not been so frightened in years. “I don’t want to cause you pain-“

But Lord Bicestor just sneered, deaf to Thomas’ pleas.

“I… I… I never…” But Thomas was too weak to go on.

“You think to frighten the man I love.” Edward said, and there was such cold fury in his voice that Lord Bicestor was momentarily taken aback. In all his rage at Thomas, it seemed he’d momentarily forgotten about Edward. Now, instead of being furious, Lord Bicestor grew reproachful. It was as if he was ashamed Edward had heard him speak such words.

“You coward.” Edward cursed, “You absolute coward.”

He shook his head, disgusted, “You disgust me. I renounce you. I renounce your name, your home, your very image. Fair thee well, and may we never meet again! This is the last time you will see my face!”

“Damn you…. “Lord Bicestor looked away. His voice was tight, his face slowly screwing up with grief. “I came here to take you home. To save you!”

“Save yourself!” Edward snarled. “I am well looked after by my love. And I mark you… should you dare to send hell upon his head, you’ll miss your mark and find my hatred instead. I’ll hide him away, I have my means… and when you come for him you’ll find me waiting in his place.”

“Do what you like.” Lord Bicestor choked out, but there was such grief in his voice it seemed he could not hold any more of a conversation. “But I curse you…”

Lord Bicestor looked back to Thomas, eyes bloodshot and wet. “You snake.”

Lord Bicestor yanked his top hat off his head, storming away in a fury down the gravel road and back towards his motorcar. At once, his man leapt to attention, hastily stubbing out his cigarette and jamming his hat back on his head.

“Take me away!” Lord Bicestor howled at the man, unnecessarily sharp with his servant as he yanked open the carriage door and barricaded himself inside. Slightly cowed, the chauffeur got back in the driver’s seat and started up the engine.

But where was he going now, Thomas wondered, even as the car puttered off down the drive and back towards the main road. Was he going to the police, or to a priest? Was he going to the post office so that he might send a telegram to have Thomas flung into Gaol—

A sharp, stinging sensation rocketed through the base of Thomas’ spine.
It occurred to him only fleetingly that he’d fallen down, almost fainted, and was now crumpled upon the gravel road.
“Thomas!” Mrs. Hughes swooped down upon him, wrapping her arms about his shaking shoulders. It was only be acknowledging how hot her touch was that Thomas realized how cold and clammy his own skin was.

It took Thomas several minutes before he had the strength to stand again.

Though he’d not ventured downstairs in over five months, Mrs. Hughes did not hesitate to take Thomas to the servant’s hall when she finally managed to get him to stand up again.

He was clammy, dripping in a violent sweat, and there was a buzzing sound ringing in his ears. He wondered, mildly, if he was in shock. He reasoned instead that he was simply terrified, for he’d felt much the same way when Jimmy had flung him out of his room all those years ago. Edward was broiling over, furious at having to confront his father on issues long since decided. Thomas found himself grateful that Edward was growing strong, for in that moment as he sat clutching a cup of tea with shaking fingers, Thomas realized that he was too weak to defend them both anymore.

Once again, power shifted hands between them. Edward the defender now replaced Edward the convalescing blind man.

Thomas’ appearance in the servant’s hall had gathered a small crowd, simply because no one had seen him for months. Now he sat flanked by both Anna and Ethel in their black and whites, each looking unsure of what to say. His situation was well known to them, though it remained an undisclosed topic to both Helen and Lily, the other maids. Though none of them knew exactly what Edward’s father had said to Thomas, it only took one look at Thomas’ complexion to wager the conversation hadn’t been a productive one.

O’Brien, however, knew everything.
She’d overheard Mrs. Hughes whispering to Mrs. Patmore.

Sitting across from Thomas in the servant’s hall, O’Brien had paused in a round of sewing in order to give his conundrum her undivided attention. Both Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore were whispering in the hallway to the kitchen, with Mrs. Patmore looking right frumpy as Mrs. Hughes explained what had occurred. Every so often, Mrs. Patmore would glance over Mrs. Hughes’ shoulder and catch Thomas’ eye.

She was worried. All of them were.

“What’s happened to you?” Ethel asked Thomas. Though in the past she’d rankled him and gotten on his nerves, he’d grown oddly fond of her in the past months. “You look right shaken up—“

“Leave him alone.” O’Brien snapped. Ethel pursed her lips, a scowl hooked upon her face, but she did not make to return the quip. Maybe she could sense that Thomas wasn’t in the mood for another argument.

Mrs. Hughes finally walked into the servant’s hall, keys clinking upon her hip, and gestured to both Ethel and Anna.
“I know it’s your hour of rest, but why don’t you take it outside.” Mrs. Hughes offered to the girls. “It’s a fine day out.”

“It’s too hot.” Ethel complained.

“Do as you’re told, you silly cow.” O’Brien said. Affronted, Ethel looked ready to snap her head off at the neck until Anna reached out and petted Ethel upon the shoulder.

“Let’s go fetch a cup of tea.” Anna said. Ever the sensible one, she both diffused the argument and the tension by taking Ethel from the room.

O’Brien watched the pair of them go, her dark eyes sliding as they followed Ethel’s every move. When she was finally secured away in the kitchen, O’Brien let out a low tisking sound and turned back in her chair to stare at Thomas once again.

“Last thing you need is that little nitwit on the case.” O’Brien grumbled.

“Thank you Ms. O’Brien.” Mrs. Hughes said, and at once O’Brien shuttup before she could be reprimanded further.

With pursed lips, Mrs. Hughes regarded Thomas in stern fashion: “Well, I hope you see now what your silliness will get you.”

Thomas said nothing. He found that he was rendered mute, in light of recent conversation.

Edward leaned in, bracing an arm around the back of Thomas’ chair to speak softly so that very few could hear.

“He won’t dare do anything, Thomas.” Edward said, “He was bluffing. He used to do the same thing to me and Jack all the time. The man doesn’t have a black bone in his body. He once whipped me with a belt, but stopped because the act made him physically ill. He wouldn’t hurt a fly-”

“What about a snake?” Thomas croaked.

For a moment, Edward was quiet.

Then, he tried again.

“If he sends for the police-“

“Mmm, he won’t.” Thomas shook his head, barely a twitch of a movement. All the energy had been sucked from his body, so that he felt numb in his chair, “He’ll send for the men in white coats-“

“That’s enough, Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes warned him, “Your hysterics won’t get you anywhere. Drink your tea and calm down.”

But Thomas couldn’t drink. He didn’t feel he had the cognitive function to swallow at that moment.

“He’s not being hysterical.” Edward said.

“We know him better than you do.”

Edward ground his teeth, fists clenching upon the washed wood. It was like he was fighting down a terrible beast, as if he wanted to lash out at Mrs. Hughes, and once again Thomas could not help but feel that something was wrong with Edward.
That Edward was changing, and not for the better.

Mrs. Hughes raised a dark eyebrow, wary of Edward’s temper, but even as Edward opened up his mouth to no doubt say something ugly he was stopped by the arrival of Daisy.

In this hour, after having washed pots and pans for the family’s tea and before the dinner had been laid upstairs, Daisy had a few tiny moments to herself to claim for relaxation. She did so at the table, sitting down to pull out one of her caps from her apron pocket that had had a hole worn near the elastic.

“Ms. O’Brien, may I please borrow some needle and thread?” Daisy asked.

“I suppose you want scissors to go with it as well?” O’Brien grumbled, fishing through her button box till she’d found a white spool of thread and a needle. Her scissors were a precious commodity, silver handled and a gift for ten years of loyal service to Lady Grantham. She did not pass them over, but Daisy collected the spool and needle all the same.

“It’s fine.” Daisy mumbled, pulling out a dull knife from her pocket. She unspooled a decent amount of thread, and used the slightly sharp edge of the knife to cut her amount off.

To Daisy, a dulled knife was just as perfect as a pair of silver handled scissors. Thomas wondered if she knew how incredible an asset that was.

Thomas wondered if anyone would ever tell her. If William even saw it in her when he looked at her.

And that got him thinking about what he saw in Edward, as Daisy sewed her cap back together. When Thomas looked at Edward, he saw the man from the past, the man he’d allow to die. He saw a second chance, and a future he’d never envisioned possible.

But did he see Edward? And for that matter, did William see Daisy?

“Daisy.” Thomas blurted out her name. She looked about, eyes wide and naive.

“Yes?” She asked, pausing in her sewing.

Thomas rose up from his chair, unable to keep his eyes off her own. In this life and that past, Daisy had always been such an honest, beautiful flame. She’d never strayed from the truth (although maybe once she’d garnished it with soap shavings), and she’d always held to her own path.

Thomas wondered what she’d do, if she was given a chance to relive her life. Would she meddle in the affairs of others, or would she stick to the same path as before… and what did that say in reflection about Thomas?

“Don’t marry William.” Thomas blurted out.

“Thomas!” Mrs. Hughes spluttered, appalled that he would say something so horrid out loud. Mrs. Patmore had turned a shade slightly paler than her apron. O’Brien was so taken aback that she accidentally dropped her silver handled scissors.
“No, I have to say this!” Thomas was steamrolling now, desperate to get this aching burden off his chest while he still had the chance. Who knew if his days were numbered?

Instead of looking afraid or pale, Daisy was simply staring at him. It was as if they’d connected on a molecular level, the pair of them so in synch with the other that she might have been able to read every thought in his mind like she were turning the pages of a book.

“Daisy, you’re a smart girl.” Thomas urged, “People may say that you’re naive, but they’re wrong. You know that marriage is only for people who love one another deeply, utterly. It’s not for good friends who do it to make one another happy, and it’s not for people too scared to say no! If you don’t love William, if you don’t feel that William is the man for you deep down in your soul, then do not marry him! Because I tell you this—"

“Thomas for heaven’s sake—"

“Not only will you regret it, but he will too!” Thomas raised his voice to be heard over Mrs. Hughes. “Maybe you’re giving him a dream right now, but what about when he wakes up!? You’re smart, Daisy! You know he’s going to wake up, and what will he say then—"

“Thomas Barrow, that is enough!” Mrs. Hughes shouted. “There’s no reason to say these things in public, and even if you were in private that’s hardly something to discuss with a woman who isn’t a member of your family—"

“She’s close enough.” Thomas replied, and he said it with such passion that for a moment he thought he could see tears shining in Daisy’s brown eyes.

“… Why don’t we take a walk.” Edward said. In light of Thomas’ outburst, he was oddly calmer. It was like watching Thomas get mad had enabled him to regain his sense of balance, and all the irritation that had been radiating from him earlier was gone.

Mrs. Hughes was glaring at him so ferociously Thomas was momentarily taken aback. He couldn’t help but feel terribly disappointed in the woman at that moment, thinking of how miserable Daisy had been with both her and Mrs. Patmore forcing her to marry William.

“… She doesn’t want to marry him.” Thomas said, speaking to Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore. “Why do you two keep forcing her?”

“We’re not forcing her to do anything.” Mrs. Hughes replied; Thomas had never heard her voice so clipped before. “And I’ll thank you not to stir the pot anymore than you’ve already done. I wouldn’t have believed such bullying from you.”

“Bullying.” Thomas repeated the word agog. “You think I’m… bullying her?”

“I know you are.”

Politely, quietly, Thomas pushed his chair back from the table and straightened the bottom of his vest so that it wasn’t wrinkled where it met his trousers.

“… That’s really disappointing, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said. He felt sick to his stomach for how disgusted he was at that moment.

“Come on.” Edward muttered. He took Thomas by the elbow and pulled him to the door. They made their way out to the area yard, without another word said to the staff.
He just couldn’t grasp it; it felt like someone was forcing him to hold an object too big and too heavy for his body to manage.

Why was Mrs. Hughes acting like this? Why on earth would she and Mrs. Patmore cause Daisy such grief all over William? Was he so dear to them that Daisy came in second, or was it because they simply felt sorry for him now that he was at war and facing the Germans? If it was pity, that wasn’t a good enough excuse to make Daisy miserable. If it was because William came first… that was even worse.

Thomas allowed Edward to lead him out to a bench on the grounds, rather near the spot where Lord Bicestor had begged Edward to return home. The drive was clear of motorcars, and save for the random nurse that walked by pushing a convalescing soldier in a wheelchair they were left quite alone.

For a long while, the pair of them simply sat and allowed each other to calm down. As the sun started to sink, the hours slipping by, neither Thomas nor Edward made to move. They ought to get up and get something to eat… but it seemed tonight that both of them would be going to bed hungry.

After several hours of watching nurses walk soldiers back inside the abbey, Edward slid his hand across the rotting wood of the bench beneath them, taking up Thomas’ hand in a way they hadn’t been able to do for ages. The lights of Downton Abbey began to glow from the inside, casting a dazzling golden hue over each of the window panes. Thomas could imagine, like clockwork, what was occurring inside. The family were eating… and the servants were working.

“…No matter what happens, I love you.” Edward finally said. “And I’m proud of you for standing up for Delilah today.”


“Gotta get better at that.” Thomas heard him whisper.

Charmed, Thomas smiled and squeezed Edward’s hand.

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They were too late for supper when they finally made it back inside, and so hunger compelled them to venture back downstairs.

Not for the first time in his life, Thomas found himself as a social outcast. This time, however, instead of most of the staff ignoring him and Mrs. Hughes showing him kindness, it was the opposite. Indeed, both Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore were furious at Thomas while everyone else just treated him as normal. Dinner had already been served to the staff by the time that Thomas and Edward managed to square a meal away from Daisy, but she didn’t seem to mind. Indeed, there was an unexpected warmth in her touch and in her smile as she offered Thomas and Edward bangers and mash.

They ate with haste upon a fold out card table in the kitchen, not wanting to be downstairs any longer than necessary. Mrs. Patmore was so irritable with Thomas that she wouldn’t even be in the same room as him. Instead, she was sequestering herself away in the pantry, making chores for
herself when really her work for the day was done.

Daisy sat at their card table, casually refilling their tea cups every time they were in danger of getting low. It was oddly charming.

“It was awfully brave of you to say that today.” Daisy praised him. Thomas smiled, wiping his lips of a slight tracing of gravy. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes I did.” He corrected her, “And you shouldn’t spare another thought over it all. I’m sick of the way they’ve been treating you about William. Don’t marry him unless you want to.”

“I won’t.” Daisy said. “I’m going to tell him when he comes home. I’m not going to marry him.”

“He’s not your type.” Edward declared. Daisy gave him an impish look.

“How do you know what my type is?” Daisy teased. Edward shrugged.

“Well a guess.” Edward said, relaxing back in his chair as he looked Daisy up and down.

“I don’t want to think about love.” Daisy told them, “I want to learn things. I feel like I’m waisting my life away down here.”

“Then go to school.”

“It’s not that easy, Edward.” Thomas warned him. “You’re brought up with choices. You’re told the world is yours for the taking if you work hard… but our lot aren’t.”

“Ah…” Edward tossed a hand about, rolling his eyes. “I don’t like to think about class differences. It’s so… dismal.”

But Thomas just shook his head. It was impossible to describe to a man born of nobel blood what it meant to be a servant. Thomas didn’t hold it against him, but Edward would never understand the woes of being a servant.

Daisy just smiled and pulled out her cap again from her apron to continue sewing.

“Thomas.”

Thomas looked up, turning about in his chair to find Mrs. Hughes in the doorway to the kitchen. She was tense, but some of the anger from earlier had bled out of her.

Thomas rose up from his chair, greeting Mrs. Hughes silently in the doorway.

“Have you had your supper?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes.”

“I should imagine you a mite hungry after hiding out on the lawn all day. Lady Sybil was wondering where you’d trotted off to. Just because you have your troubles doesn’t mean that you can hide away from your responsibilities. I’d have thought Mr. Carson would have taught you that.”

Thomas just sighed a bit, looking back over his shoulder to where Edward and Daisy were now head to head over her sewing. She was showing him how to make intricate knots, something that before his blindness Edward wouldn’t have cared much about. Having gained his sight back, even if his vision was blurry, helped Edward to have a newfound appreciation on the world around him.
“Have you spoken to his Lordship?”

“What about?” Thomas asked, a little absent minded.

“About Lord Biceston, I would have thought.”

“No.” Thomas shook his head, turning back to Mrs. Hughes. Disappointment was dripping over every feature of her face. “There’s no point involving him in such things. The future will unfold either way.”

“Maybe.” Mrs. Hughes said, “But I’d have thought you’d like to have a hand in its shaping.”

Little did Mrs. Hughes know that she’d hit the nail right on the head.

But before the pair of them could continue on their bitter conversation, they were intruded upon by Mr. Moseley. Thomas immediately turned away, finding it hard to enjoy conversation with a man that had a personality akin to dry toast. He collected Edward from the kitchen table, pulling him away from Daisy who was showing him how to embroider flowers now, and the pair of them made their way back out into the hall to decide what to do next.

“Pack.” Thomas murmured, “We haven’t heard from the police, so that’s a mercy anyhow, but we can’t know what his mind will be like tomorrow morning once he’s had a night to sleep on it.”

“I’m telling you, he wouldn’t dare.”

“Well, pack anyways.” Thomas decided. “And… I’m unsure where we ought to go to?”

“We can’t go abroad, not while we’re at war.” Edward mused, “I think our best bet is to go somewhere rural, somewhere he won’t think to look for us. What about… Scotland.”

Thomas winced. He didn’t fancy living in Scotland if he could help it.

“Do we have to?” He muttered.

But the pair of them were forced to pause their conversation as Mr. Moseley and Mrs. Hughes came back up the hall. Moseley had his coat over his arm; it was clear he’d just returned from dressing Lord Grantham. Any day now Bates would be back, so Thomas hoped for Moseley’s sake he wasn’t getting too comfortable.

“Cor stay out of his way.” Thomas whispered as he leaned against the wall of the passage. Edward followed suit, bending an ear to hear what Thomas had to say about Moseley, “He’s got the personality of a dried up leaf.”

“Hasn’t got the color of one.” Edward teased, and it was quite true. Moseley was just about as pale as Thomas.

Though… not quite.

“Goodnight, Mr. Moseley.” Mrs. Hughes said, even as Mr. Moseley shrugged on his coat, “You’ve been a great help to his Lordship, I can tell you.”

“Oh, Mrs. Hughes, before I forget-“ Mr. Moseley paused, having a bit of difficulty shrugging on a sleeve of his coat. “I might be wrong but I thought I saw one of the officers by the maid’s staircase just now.”
Thomas paled.

There was absolutely no question in his mind as to what Moseley had seen, or why. If you lined up
the maids and looked at who would be vulgar and dangerous enough to dare let a man into her
quarters, it was Ethel. Anna was a saint, Helen had a beau in town, and Lily was practically still a
child.

Ethel, on the other hand, was none of these things.

“… Go pack.” Thomas bade Edward, heart hammering in his ribs as he watched Mrs. Hughe’s eyes
begin to narrow. “I- I have to do something.”

And with that, he left the hall.

He wouldn’t be able to stop Mrs. Hughes from finding Ethel, but he could at least buy Ethel a few
minutes to spare her life.

_Damnit, you stupid woman!_ Thomas cursed internally as he ran up the servant’s staircase. Mrs.
Hughes was right behind him, not going nearly as fast but still walking with a brisk purpose. _I told
you, I bloody well told you-_!

But Ethel had been too proud, too defiant to listen. She’d though Major Bryant her savior from a
world of toil and perpetual slavery. She’d never considered that Major Bryant was just as vile, just as
cruel as the men they were forced to serve.

She was about to find out the hard way if Thomas couldn’t get to her first.

Knowing that he was breaking a cardinal rule of servitude, Thomas took a sharp left where normally
he would take a right at the attic level, and made his way up the maids’ staircase. He pressed his ear
to each door as he passed, praying he might hear the sounds of Ethel making love to Major Bryant.

But this was slowing his pace, and giving Mrs. Hughes a chance to catch up-

Even as Thomas rounded the corner and pressed his ear against yet another door, a sudden sharp
hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

Thomas whipped around to find Mrs. Hughes, scowling murderously.

“You’re not to be here!” She hissed, pointing her finger towards the glass door at the far end of the
hall which divided the women from the men, “Go to your side at once.”

“I have to find Ethel.” Thomas protested.

“Well, that makes two of us.”

Mrs. Hughes gave him one last irritable look before gently opening the door to Anna and Ethel’s
bedroom. Thomas winced as he saw Anna in bed, curled up like a mouse and gold hair fanning over
the pillow. Ethel’s bed was bare, and the evidence was damning.

Mrs. Hughes closed the door with a soft click, turning back around to scan wary eyes up and down
the hall. She began to walk towards the way they’d come, and instead of looking to bedrooms she
started looking to closets.

“She— she could just be in the yard havin’ a smoke-” Thomas protested.
“I saw her come up the stairs half an hour ago.” Mrs. Hughes wouldn’t be taken for a mug.

“But-“ Thomas protested, desperately trying to conjure up yet another excuse to stop Mrs. Hughes from searching the rest of the rooms.

Yet even as Thomas’ mouth formed new words, the sound of a muted giggle broke the balmy silence of the attic.

Mrs. Hughes looked around, eyes wide and blazing. The noise had come from a coat room two doors down.

“…Oh no.” Thomas whispered. There could be no denying who must be on the other side.

“Oh yes.” Mrs. Hughes seethed.
She stormed up the hall, brushing right past Thomas, and before he could stop her she grabbed the door in hand to yank it open.

She turned on the light, and suddenly the lewd scene was revealed.

“What the bloody-?!”
There, crouched upon the floor with nothing but a blanket for decency, was Ethel Parks.

“ETHEL!” Mrs. Hughes barked, furious at the display.

Major Bryant had been atop her, that much was obvious, but the minute that Mrs. Hughes had flipped on the light he’d gone and grabbed another blanket to preserve his dignity and had scrambled up to his feet. Ethel was petrified, cowering against the wall. Bryant was beet red, stammering out one excuse after another even as Thomas stepped into the room after Mrs. Hughes, horrified.

“Oh god-“ Thomas moaned aloud. How would he ever save her now?

“We were only-!!” Major Bryant tried to say, but Mrs. Hughes cut him off.

“I know precisely what you were doing, Major!” She snarled. God but she was in a temper! “I may not be a woman of the world, but I don’t live in a sack! Now, if you will kindly take your things and go downstairs!”

It was a show of Bryant’s disturbing character that he didn’t even spare a second glance for his lover. Instead, he scrambled to pick up his discarded clothes, tucked them close to his chest, and squeezed his way out the door while desperately trying to avoid Mrs. Hughes and Thomas. Ethel watched him go, eyes silently pleading with the man she loved to do something, to save her.

But Bryant had never cared about Ethel, and Ethel was doomed to find out the hard way.

“Mrs. Hughes-“ Thomas protested, praying that he could at least talk down some of her anger. But Mrs. Hughes would not listen and spoke right over Thomas, glowering at Ethel like she were a snake in her chicken coop.

“Ethel, you are dismissed without notice and without a character. You will please leave before breakfast.”

“Mrs. Hughes, please-!” Thomas begged.
“I didn’t think-“ Ethel whimpered, tears dripping from her sparkling green eyes.

“No.” She cut them both off, her voice full of loathing, “And that’s a problem. You never do.” She turned, catching Thomas’ eyes, and for the first time in his life Thomas saw Mrs. Hughes gaze upon him like he were vermin. “Neither of you have the wits about you to think of the consequences for your actions! And you have the nerve to go crying for help when the consequences come!”

Mrs. Hughes turned sharply on her heel and stormed out of the room, leaving Ethel shaking on the floor and Thomas pale in the doorway.

“Help me.” Ethel whispered.

“I’ll try and reason with her.” Thomas promised, not even thinking twice as he ran after Mrs. Hughes. She seemed to be walking without a route destination in mind, too mad to consider her final stop. Thomas caught up to her easily, and reached out to try and block her path.

“Mrs. Hughes, listen to me!” Thomas said, well aware that he was speaking far too loudly. Mrs. Hughes glared at him but did not make to push past. “She made a mistake, give her another chance. I’m begging you! At least allow her a character-!”

“Do you know what you’re problem is, Thomas?” Mrs. Hughes snapped.

Thomas staggered, mouth stumbling over words that would not come.

“You live in a world inhabited by fairies, where you can solve any little problem that comes your way by trying your hardest and believing in golden ideals. Normally, the rest of us would like to join you there, but there’s one little difference between the two of us that I’m afraid is going to get the better of you soon. You constantly forget about the consequences for your actions. Its time that both of you learned that lesson.”

And at this, Mrs. Hughes’ rarely seen Scottish temper seemed to finally get the better of her. In an emotional state, she blurted out, “I’m tired of having to explain to the pair of you over and over again why it is that you cannot frolic with the devil. Let the devil have you!”

And with that, she moved his arm aside and stormed out of the hall.

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Ethel was gone before breakfast the next day.

Thomas had tried to catch her, tried to at least offer her his condolences or support, but Ethel was gone. In her wake, she left a broody Mrs. Hughes, an overjoyed O’Brien, a confused Anna Smith, and a bitter Thomas Barrow.

So many times in his life at the abbey, Thomas had run to Mrs. Hughes for support or protection. She’d been the one capable of wrangling Carson in when Carson had wanted to throttle Thomas by the neck. Now, however, Thomas considered that Mrs. Hughes was the one with the temper, that instead Mr. Carson was the one who offered him support, and it made him sick to his stomach.

Did Mrs. Hughes have a point with her angry wisdom? Was Thomas truly forgetting the consequences of his actions? Over and over again, he had to admit that his love for Edward while deep had also blinded him from his initial goals of returning to the past. It had been his desire to make things right, to try and live a life that would give him some sort of inner peace. Instead, he had
Lord Bicestor no doubt wagering whether or not to call the police and Mrs. Hughes ready to scratch his eyes out.

Thomas had cheated death by saving Edward’s life back in March. Was death trying to warn Thomas of the dangers to come should he continue to meddle? Or was this the Heichecera’s way of getting her own back at him after he’d gone and pulled Edward away from the ledge?

*There must be some way I can win this,* Thomas thought gloomily.

It was midday, and the men were having their lunches while the staff prepared for the family’s meals. Thomas and Edward had been waiting for a sign that Lord Bicestor would be coming back, but had received nothing. They could not decide where to run away to, each place seemingly too dangerous or too far, and the money between them wouldn’t last either way. If they were to leave, Thomas would need a character… and in order to get one Carson would have to be in a willing mood.

But Mrs. Hughes had already told Carson of all that had occurred, and as a result, Carson was refusing to give Thomas his character reference until he “found the time”… whatever that meant.

To escape from the oppressive gloom of the abbey, Thomas had decided to take a walk that had ended up at the docks lining the lake on the abbey’s western side. This was where the surrounding rivers drained into, and fat carp swam in lazy trails only inches beneath the cool surface. If only Thomas had more than half an hour to spare, he might like to go swimming. After all, plenty of the men had been indulging in the hotter months. Thomas didn’t like being nude in front of other men, so he’d have to do it at night when no one was looking, but he just didn’t have the nerve to go through with it.

And besides, at the end of the day he was exhausted. He didn’t have the energy walking down to the lake, much less swimming a few laps.

“There must be some way.” Thomas whispered aloud, eyes drifting across the lake’s sparkling surface to the other side where a grass snake was sun bathing upon a rock. She was rather beautiful, her pearly brown skin looking ready to shed.

The dock shifted beneath him, a soft tap tap tap occurring as a gentle wind past by. But as the wind grew still again, the tapping continued. Indeed, it seemed to be getting louder, and Thomas could even feel the vibrations in the wood.

He looked about, worried that the dock actually might be too old to withstand his weight, but paused at the sight of a shadow just over his shoulder.

There were a pair of brown flats, polished dully with sub-par cleaner… woolen gray trousers, and a walking stick.

Thomas looked up, the sun slightly in his eyes, and could not help but break out into a smile at the sight of John Bates, valise in hand and bowler hat cocked over his eyes.

“Finally!” Thomas said aloud, a strange joy filling his heart as he rose up and shook Bates’ hand. Bates would not stand for such simple greetings, and took Thomas’ grip to pull him in close so that the two of them might embrace tightly. Thomas could feel the sweat upon Bates’ cheek from walking in the summer heat, could smell the soft dust inhabiting the man’s clothes. He was smiling so wildly, his cheeks hurt.

“Did you miss me?” Bates teased.

“Yes.” Thomas said, for it was the absolute truth. Bates was as integral to Downton for Thomas as
Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson. It felt good to have the man back (and frankly Thomas was looking forward to the days when Moseley wouldn’t be in the house again)... what was more, Thomas knew that Anna would be absolutely overjoyed. “Does Anna know you’re here yet?”

“Just Mrs. Hughes. I called from the station.” Bates said. “I saw you sitting on the dock and I thought I’d say hello. I’m early enough, Lord Grantham won’t need me for a few more hours yet.”

“God, I’m so glad you’re home.” Thomas sighed, “I was getting right sick of Moseley.”

“Why?” Bates asked, curious, “He’s a kind man, or so I thought.”

“Maybe but he’s got the personality of a pile of wood shavings.”

Bates burst into a round of snickering, unable to hold it in. “My god, I’ve missed your mouth.” Bates sighed.

Thomas tried not to hear a double meaning in that.

The pair of them walked together across the lawn, taking their time. Thomas shucked his hands in his pockets, taking deep breathes of the clean countryside air. For some odd reason, he felt more relaxed with Bates back home. It was like a small piece of the world had slid back into place.

“Mrs. Hughes told me that you’ve been having a difficult week.” Bates said. Thomas shrugged, imagining that right about now Mrs. Hughes was ready to rant about him to the first person she passed.

“She’s angry at me.” Thomas said.

“No.” Bates replied, “She’s not. She’s embarrassed.”

Now that was new. Thomas gave Bates a dry look, “What makes you think that?”

“She said.” Bates explained. “She told me quite a lot actually, though she had to word it carefully. You know how things are...”

Did he ever.

“She told me that you married Edward Courtenay.” Bates said, and Thomas noted that there was something cold in his voice, like he was angry.

“Are you angry?” Thomas asked.

“Not exactly.” Bates didn’t illuminate on the subject though, “She told me there was some todo regarding Courtenay’s father visiting the other day.”

“Yes, it was an upsetting affair.”

“Well, she said that it all collided together rather hastily, after she found Ethel doing something. She wouldn’t tell me what she caught the girl doing but she said that it was against her beliefs and religious views. She apparently was wound up as tight as a spring, and she snapped at you without meaning to. She wants to apologize to you, but she says she’s been having trouble finding a moment to break away from work. She says she wants to give you back your bullet band... whatever that means.”
Thomas paused, so that Bates momentarily had to slow down lest Thomas be left behind.

Had it really been just a misunderstanding all along?

“I wonder what Ethel was doing.” Bates mused aloud, “Mrs. Hughes made it sound like the girl was conjuring the devil… which I suppose wouldn’t be too out of character.”

“She was caught sleeping with one of the soldiers.” Thomas explained, for while Ethel was admittedly tenacious she most certainly wasn’t satanic, “A Major Bryant. He’s a bastard.”

Bates’ eyebrows were in danger of vanishing into his hairline, “You’re joking.”

“No.” Thomas only wished he was, “No, I’m not. That’s why Mrs. Hughes sent her away in such a bad fashion. Without notice and without a character.”

Bates sighed, pursing his thin lips. They rounded the alley towards the servant’s area, pausing as Bates found a better grip on the handle of his valise.

“You can’t say she wasn’t asking for it.” Bates mused.

“I can.” Thomas disagreed. “She was in love with a man and she made the wrong decision. She didn’t know he didn’t love her back. I tried to tell her but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Love makes fools of us all.” At this, Bates paused and set down his valise. Thomas wondered if Bates’ leg was smarting. Bates whipped out a handkerchief, wiping his sodden brow and temples before re-fixing his tie and tugging at the bottom of his gray vest. He jerked his head towards the woodshed, mouthing the word ‘private’, and so Thomas and he discreetly made their way over to the woodshed to sequester themselves inside. It was dark and stuffy, but it would provide them with the cover that they needed to speak on dangerous topics.

God, the whole place smelt like cedar.

“There’s something I want to say before we jump back into the fray.” Bates said. “I don’t like that you’re with him.”

“Oh, don’t-“ Thomas groaned.

“He’s not one of us.”

“I know-“

“And he’s leading you up a dangerous path. Mrs. Hughes thinks so too! He’s not right for you and it’s going to end in disaster-“

“I know but…” But what? “But I love him.”

“Why?” Bates demanded, refusing to let a sleeping dog lay. “Why do you love him? What does he do for you? What does he give to you that makes him so special? He’s pulling you from this house, Thomas. This is where you belong-“

“It’s hard to explain,” Thomas said, thinking of how he’d initially started this romance with such passion. Now, with Edward’s sight nearly back, he seemed to be changing personality wise. He was getting angrier, sharper, and it was scaring Thomas. “I… I can’t tell you as much as I wish I could. Truly.”
“Sure you can-“

“I can’t.” Thomas shook his head, for while he and Bates had a good relationship now, it most certainly wasn’t stable enough to introduce the topic of Thomas’ true backstory. Bates would think him mental. “But… Please understand that I do love him, even if he’s a little difficult.”

“Am I difficult?”

Thomas actually screamed, so terrified at having been caught speaking about a dangerous topic that for a moment he was terrified someone unfriendly had found him and Bates together in the dark. Instead, it was only Edward, looking slightly murderous in the door of the to the woodshed. Thomas gasped for breath, clutching at his throat where he felt a slight zipping pain from his awkward yelp of terror.

“Oh my god, Edward!” Thomas wanted to curse he was so angry, “You scared the hell out of me!”

“What are you doing in here with him?” Edward demanded. He reached out, grabbed Thomas by the hand, and pulled him brusquely back outside the woodshed. The open air was oddly cool, compared to the stuffy insides. Thomas winced, Edward’s grip on his wrist a little too strong.

“Edward stop!” Thomas protested, pulling his hand free. When Bates stepped out of the woodshed, Edward advanced on the man with unnerving speed. At once, Bates dropped both his valise and his cane, his hammish fists balling up in defense. Neither man made to strike the other, but Thomas knew a fight was close to breaking out.

“Stop-!” Thomas argued, pushing himself physically between the two men so that suddenly he was pinned on either side. He put a hand on both their chests and pushed hard, forcing Edward and Bates to both step back. “Just stop it! You’re like children-“

“What were you doing with him in there?” Edward demanded. “Why were you in the dark like that?”

“We were having a private conversation.” Bates replied, “It’s not illegal is it?”

“Nothing’s private where it concerns Thomas and I.” Edward warned.

“You’re not his keeper.”

“I’m as good as.” Edward hissed through clenched teeth, “I’m his husband. Technically that makes him my property.”

“Your what?” Thomas demanded agog. Property, was he? “I most certainly am not your property!”

“You are if I say you are!” Edward barked.

Thomas paled.

Edward at once seemed to realize what had come out of his mouth, and snapped his jaw shut. He blanched, blinking rapidly as he reached out and touched his mouth.

“…” It was as if Edward had been possessed, and was now coming too, “I’m so sorry, I don’t know why I said that. I don’t think that Thomas, surely you must know that.”

“Then what do you think?” Bates asked. “Because you’re not painting a very good picture for yourself, are you-“
“Stay away from my husband, d’you hear? He doesn’t need you, he has me. We’re perfectly content with one another-”

“His my friend, Edward.” Thomas said, reproachfully.

“You can make other friends.” Edward said. There was such ugly finality in his voice that Thomas felt like he’d been slapped.

Edward took Thomas by the hand and pulled him away from Bates, towards the area yard. Thomas stumbled backward, fighting the pull, but it was fruitless. Edward took Thomas down a side alley near the area yard, which had once been one of Thomas’ favorite smoking spots in his prior reality, and then let him go so that the pair of them were sequestered in three square feet of space. Edward blocked the path out into the area yard.

“Edward!” Thomas cried out, furious. Edward rounded on him, eyes blazing.

“How could you betray me in this way?” Edward demanded, as if he’d caught Thomas kissing Bates instead of having a private conversation, “You think I don’t see the way he looks at you?”

“You’re not making any sense!!” Thomas berated, “We were just having a conversation, it had to be in private! You know how things are, don’t be such a child!”

“So I’m a child for wanting you to be faithful to me?”

“I am faithful to you!!” Thomas could have screamed the words if they weren’t damning to a passerby. “When have I ever not been faithful to you?”

“That’s rather up for you to say, isn’t it.” Edward snapped, “Since I’m so ‘difficult’ in your opinion.”

“Well, you’re certainly being difficult now.” Thomas snapped, crossing his arms over his chest.

Edward spluttered, looking quite ready to strike Thomas for all the anger he was feeling.

“Do our vows mean anything to you?” Edward demanded. Now Thomas was the one to get hot under the collar. How dare he-?!

“How dare you!” Thomas seethed, stamping his foot in outrage. “Do you have any idea how much I’ve sacrificed for our vows? How much I’ve suffered?! Mr. Carson will probably never look at me like a human being again, and you-“

“Oh as if that matters-“

“IT MATTERS TO ME, EDWARD!” Thomas shouted, purple in the face. Edward paled, taken aback.

“Why?” Edward asked, “Why do these people matter to you? We’ll be well shot of them anyways-“

“They’re my family, and this is my home!”

“They’re your co-workers, and this is your job!” Edward snarled, “You can get another job! You can have other co-workers! But I’m the only husband you’ll ever have in your life, now which one is more important?!”

Burned, Thomas felt a sizable knot swelling up in his throat. He almost wanted to burst into tears out of frustration. Edward didn’t understand, there was so much more at stake than pleasantries with co-workers and a stable source of income. Sybil and Matthew were in terrible, grave danger, and
Thomas was the only one who knew it was coming. If he left, he if just abandoned his post, they’d die all over again and Sybbie and George wouldn’t have a mother and father. How could he live with himself after that? How could he forgive himself?

When Thomas felt his eyes growing wet, he looked away. He sniffed, bringing a thumb up to the corner of his eyes as he tried to hide the damning evidence.

“Am I so unimportant to-“

“Just stop talking.” Thomas cursed. “Let me have a moment for pities sake.”

Edward fell silent, but only for an awkward second.

“I don’t understand why this is such a hard choice for you-“

“Thomas?”

Both Edward and Thomas froze, as a sharp Scottish brogue heralded the arrival of Mrs. Hughes. She was not alone, joined at the side by both Bates and Anna. Bates had dropped off his valise, it seemed, and had even taken off his bowler hat. Anna was standing rather close to him, a shining look in her eyes like all the warmth of the sun was pooling in her soul. She was in love, delighted to have the man she adored so close again. Thomas could not help but feel jealous, what with his current spat.

“Is everything alright?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“Everything is fine, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said, though his voice was thick, “I was just telling Edward how Anna and Bates are soon to be married.”

“I see.” Mrs. Hughes glanced at Edward, who was stony in light of this sudden development. “I suppose you want to offer your congratulations, Lieutenant?”

But Edward said nothing in return, his lips pursed into a thin white line.

Finally Edward stiffened his upper lip and spoke, but it was only to Thomas. He seemed to be avidly ignoring Mrs. Hughes and her company.

“It’s either me or them.” Edward said, “And soon enough you’re going to have to make your choice.”

Thomas gave a watery sniff, still not turning around to look at him.

“Why don’t you go for a swim, Lieutenant,” Mrs. Hughes warned. “The cool water might do well to calm your temper.”

Burned, Edward pushed past Bates, who stood blocking the path to the alley, and left the area yard with a murderous expression upon his face. Thomas watched him go, chewing on the corner of his lip as his eyes grew wetter still.

He turned even further away from Mrs. Hughes, Anna, and Bates. He now had his back to the group, allowing himself to have a private moment to shed three tears which he hastily chased up with the back of his hand.

“…Are you alright?” Anna asked, pensively.
“Fine.” Thomas said, though his throat was tight and his voice was weak. He dried his face, took a deep shuddering breath, and turned back around with a forced smile upon his face. He could not allow them to see his misery, not when it would be impossible to explain the situation fully.

“I’m just fine.” Thomas said, “Edward just has a temper, that’s all. Sometimes he likes to say things he doesn’t mean.”

“If you say so.” Was Mrs. Hughes’ gentle reply. “Perhaps you’d consent to come out of the alley now? You’re muddying your shoes.”

Thomas looked down to note that a bit of rubbish had gotten caught under the soles of one of his feet. Irritable, Thomas shuffled his foot against the stone to scrape away the gunk, then moved out of the alley and back into the open of the area yard.

“I shouldn’t dally.” Thomas said, sniffing, “I need to get back to work—“

“As a matter of fact, I wanted to speak with you.” Mrs. Hughes replied. Her voice had resumed its gentle quality. It was a welcome change to the anger Thomas had recently faced. “So perhaps you might spare a minute more?”

Thomas knew that he didn’t have a choice: “Certainly, Mrs. Hughes.”

The four of them returned inside, with Bates and Anna collecting Bates’ valise to take it upstairs into the servant’s quarters. Anna was beaming, a rosy warmth tingling her dimples as Bates began to tell her all about his travels. Thomas watched them go, feeling terribly envious of their obvious connection. As much as he loved Edward, he’d never felt that soulful connection… the sort of weird tugging sensation that you felt when you knew you had a soul mate.

Only one person had ever filled that role, and unfortunately for Thomas they weren’t inclined to the stranger side of life.

Don’t think about Jimmy, Thomas chided himself as Mrs. Hughes led him into her tea room, You’re married, and Jimmy’s a lady’s man. It’s unfaithful to Edward, even if he’s being a berk.

Mrs. Hughes shut the door, sequestering them inside, and gestured for Thomas to take a seat. She’d been having an afternoon cup of tea, and offered him some which he silently accepted. His eyes still burned a bit, and Thomas had to force himself to swallow in order to get rid of the lump in his throat. He gave another wet sniff, before Mrs. Hughes sympathetically offered him a handkerchief.

Thomas stared at it for a few moments, then accepted it to dab at the corners of his eyes.

“It must be hard,” Mrs. Hughes said, “To know he’ll never understand.”

They sat at Mrs. Hughes’ tea-table, a spindle legged antique that held nothing more than a brass lamp and a large amount of doilies. The steam from Thomas’ teacup twinkled in the glimmering light, accented by the rose hue of the bulbous glass.

“He’s difficult sometimes.” Was all Thomas knew to say. “I knew that when I married him.”

“Are you regretting it? Marrying him?”

Thomas shook his head, “That’s not something I want to answer straight out of an argument.”

Mrs. Hughes took a small sip of her tea, then set her cup aside to cool. “If you say so.”
She fixed him with a gentle look, “But if you were regretting it, no one would hold it against you.”

Thomas sighed, declining to answer. Instead, he merely took a long sip of tea though it scalded his tongue. When he set his cup back down, Mrs. Hughes was still watching him.

“I have something I want to give to you.” Mrs. Hughes said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out Thomas’ bullet band, a little tarnished and in need of a polish but still the same as ever. Thomas accepted it at once, and with slight hesitation slid it back onto his finger. In lieu of his argument with Edward, it felt odd to wear the wedding ring again… but by rights it ought to stay on his finger.

“I was wrong, to want to take it from you in the first place.” Mrs. Hughes said, lacing her fingers together atop the table, “I shouldn’t have condoned it, and I know that now. I shouldn’t have spoken to you so cruelly either, and I’m sorry for it. You caught me at a difficult moment. I hope you know that.”

“It was difficult for Ethel too.” Thomas said, defensively. “And she’s out of a job and character.”

Mrs. Hughes would not be swayed on that subject, “Thomas, I am willing to overlook a great deal as we walk into the modern age, but an unmarried girl having her greens is not one of them.”

_Having her what? Since when was that expression still in use?_ Thomas wondered. He didn’t question it though.

“Can’t you give her a character?” Thomas asked.

“No.” Mrs. Hughes replied, “I can’t. So don’t ask me to.”

At least you tried, a small voice in Thomas’ head spoke up, _That’s what matters._

Bitter, Thomas took another sip of tea. It was slightly cooler now.

“… I wanted you to know,” Mrs. Hughes spoke up, changing the subject from Ethel, “I’ve spoken to Lord Grantham about what occurred with Lord Bicestor. He told me that he’s going to try and speak with him for peace. I think hearing words from another lord, a friend and a father too, it might help.”

This made oddly good sense; Thomas supposed he’d been too paranoid to consider the options. Grateful, he bowed his head in thanks. “Thank you, Mrs. Hughes.”

“…So are we friends again?” Mrs. Hughes asked, slightly timid.

Thomas looked up and caught her eyes.

Though it had been years, and a reality ago, it was easy to remember how Mrs. Hughes had protected him during the fall out with Jimmy… how she’d been so quick to insist to Mr. Carson that Thomas was not foul. That he was, for better or for worse, merely a ‘difficult man’. Mr. Carson had never believed her, but that hadn’t stopped Mrs. Hughes from showing him kindness… even after she’d gotten married and had left the abbey.

“We never stopped.” Thomas replied. Mrs. Hughes gave him a watery smile.

In an act of affection rarely shown in public, she reached out and gently took his hand. Her touch sparked a sense of hope within him, and reminded him that not all things were lost.

“He’ll come round.” Mrs. Hughes said, gently. “You don’t have to choose, and he shouldn’t have
Thomas nodded, but said no more on the subject. Mrs. Hughes didn’t press him, either way.

In light of the argument, Thomas did not speak to Edward for two days.

It was bizarre, to work and live in a house side by side with his husband and to yet find himself estranged. Edward was petulant, bitter and angry every time he saw Thomas. He’d sulk in his chair, or curl up in his cot while rolling away to face another direction. Thomas did not push Edward, still feeling incredibly hurt that Edward would be so ugly to him. All the while, as Thomas worked, ate, and ventured once more downstairs for cups of tea, he had to wonder if his relationship was doomed to fail.

He didn’t want it to fail, but…
He wasn’t happy, and he knew that now.

The day of the concert arrived with a great deal of fanfare, all of which Thomas had to direct. From an early hour, Thomas and Mr. Carson set to work with a few volunteer soldiers rolling up the carpets and re-arranging the great hall. Normally used for eating, the men were now to eat outside today on picnic blankets which delighted Isis to no end. She trotted from man to man, urging them for a bit of bacon or white pudding before trotting off with a mouth full of stollen goods. Edward took up a blanket with a couple of other soldiers who were friendly with him, and Thomas tried not to be distracted as he felt Edward’s eyes lingering upon his flesh. Instead, Thomas had the tables and chairs moved out onto the gravel for storage in a wagonette, before setting out foldable chairs for the concert and helping the village workers construct a stage. The sound of hammering was obnoxious inside.

Then there were banners to raise up, flowers to place, and pamphlets to put out on every seat. The musicians arrived around four, and immediately went to practice in the stables. This resulted in a great deal of cacophony that sent Lord Grantham’s horses skittering into the fields and chickens squawking from their coops. No less than thirty minutes passed before Mr. Lynch, the groomsmen, finally lost his temper and ordered the men out so that he could restore order.

The band set up in the fields instead, which queerly enough attracted the attention of neighboring cows. Instead of baying woefully, the cows lined up along the neighboring fenceposts and swayed back and forth, clearly delighted to be entertained for the afternoon. Who’d have figured that cows were fond of classical music?

Inside the great hall, Thomas distracted himself by working on twisting a large spool of white ribbon around the bannisters of the stage. He hummed delicately under his breath, keeping time with the band outside.
The men who’d signed up to perform acts were beginning to show off for their companions, gathering materials and practicing in spare rooms. Thomas was too far away to hear the comedic routine of Colonel Lewis, but he could watch from the door of the library as Lewis went through his acts, accentuating every punch line with a forced laugh and a charismatic grin.

It was going to be a disaster, Thomas could already tell.

As he finished one spool of ribbon, Thomas made to sort out another from a stack of supplies brought in from the village; the sight of Major Bryant performing magic tricks in the pink parlor stopped him dead though.

Thomas bristled, straightening up.

There was something smug and downright irritating about the way that Bryant hid a copper coin for his friends. How dare he look so downright carefree, when Ethel was god knows where and probably pregnant? This man would return to living in the lap of luxury, completely unaware of the fact that Ethel was bearing his bastard in the frigid cold. What kind of man, what kind of human being, could allow his lover and child to suffer in such a way? What kind of callous shit head cared so little for lives of those that loved him?

Burning with fury, Thomas gave a loud sneer at Bryant’s magic act. It caught the attention of several soldiers who were watching, including one that Thomas knew rather well: a Corporal Johnson who was a favorite of Lady Edith’s.

“How do you not like magic, Healer Barrow?” Johnson asked, curious about Thomas’ livid expression no doubt.

“Oh, I’ve already seen Bryant’s best trick.” Thomas scowled. Bryant bristled, a dangerous look in the man’s eyes as he silently warned Thomas to hold his tongue.

But Thomas would not be cowed into turning the other cheek.

“What trick?”

“Oh it’s a laugh.” Thomas snapped, his tone ugly and cold, “He pretends to love a girl so that he can bugger her out of wedlock, make her lose her job, get her in the family way, and then force her to fend for herself in poverty and squaller without so much as a character to her name.”

Bryant went white; several of his onlookers turned to stare, a few quite upset.

“You what?” One man asked Bryant, “Did you really do that?”

“Who did you bugger?” Demanded another soldier. “You know you can’t touch the maids. That housekeeper will have your goat!”

“Oh he’s safe.” Thomas scowled, so that all eyes quickly flickered back to him, “Look at him… son of a Lord, never worked a day in his life. What does he care if a housekeeper catches him. He wasn’t the one who got kicked out without notice or a character. He’s not the one who’ll suffer for a lie.”

“You little-” Bryant seethed, bursting his way through the men. He even dropped his copper coin, where it rolled away underneath a table and vanished from sight.

Run, a voice in Thomas’ head warned him, Run now.

“Don’t try and defend yourself!” Thomas turned on his heel, hiding his slight cowardice by
pretending to be angry instead, “You know what you did. I saw the whole thing—“

He took a side corridor, hoping to sequester himself somewhere Bryant couldn’t find him until his temper calmed down, but suddenly he felt a hot tight hand grab him hard by the arm and push him with vigor against the wall!

He was pinned by Bryant, the man only inches from his face, and there was such seething rage in his eyes that for a moment Thomas wondered if he was about to get the living daylights beat out of him.

He took a shuddering breath, then another, but held his ground. He tried not to let fear show on his face, but wondered if he was even succeeding.

“…Now listen here… you fag.” Bryant growled, his breath hot and heavy in Thomas’ face. Thomas bristled, turning his nose away to avoid the offending smell. “So you caught me buggering some mirror warmer, so what?” He said the word with absolute venom, his fists tightening against the collar of Thomas’ shirt. He was close to getting strangled.

“Least I’m a proper man.” Bryant said, “Not like someone I know.”

Thomas pursed his lips, too frightened to speak.

“Think we don’t know what you do with Courtenay?” Bryant continued on, “Hmm? Think we’re too busy to notice you ratbagging bastards sneaking off to every corner you get? So don’t test me or I’ll jam something up your arse you won’t like-!”

Burned, Thomas was momentarily stunned speechless. How he hated this! To feel so small and useless-

But someone was marching down the corridor, with such a sharp step to their walk that Thomas fleetingly thought one of Bryant’s buddies was about to double team him in the dark.

But it wasn’t a friend of Byrant’s.

Edward reached out with a bony hand and grabbed Bryant hard by the back of the collar, jerking him away from Thomas so that he was freed from the wall. Bryant was shocked by the sudden upheaval, and nearly tripped as he staggered to his feet. He looked about, completely confused, only to see Edward glowering at him murderously over his shoulder.

“Oh look, it’s your boyfriend.” Bryant teased bitterly. “Come to save your princess-?”

Edward grabbed Bryant by the throat and pinned him hard against the opposite wall, so that suddenly Bryant’s threatening position was reversed upon him.

Thomas trembled, too frightened to act on Bryant’s behalf and pull Edward away.

“… You talk too much.” Edward growled against Bryant’s cheek, “So I suggest you learn how to shut your flapping gob… before I have to shut it for you.”

“Think you can threaten me, Courtenay?” Bryant asked.

“I do not threaten.” Edward replied. “If I want you dead… I kill you. I’m a hunter not a solicitor. Didn’t you ever wonder why war was such a good fit for me?”

*This isn’t you,* Thomas thought, fearfully. *You’d never say such things. When did you become so*
Bryant struggled for words, unsure of how to make a comeback against such a dark warning.

“…I’ll tell.” Bryant warned. “If you hurt me, I’ll tell the police what you are-“

“…You won’t get the chance.” Edward replied. “I’ll kill you before you can so much as scream.” And with that, his hand tightened about Bryant’s fat neck in clear warning.

Bryant struggled, jerking back only to bang his head against the wall. Able to struggle away from Edward, Bryant recoiled as if he’d been bitten by a snake, and stared at Edward alarmed.

“…You’re crazy.” Bryant blurted out. “Both of you are absolutely crazy! You damn miserable faggots-!”

Edward pointed a finger at Bryant, but spoke not a word. The message was clear: Tell and I’ll kill you.

Bryant paled, and without another word hurried back up the hall before Edward could follow him and throttle him again.

Suddenly left in the quiet, alone with Edward for the first time in days, Thomas bitterly began to put himself to rights. He straightened the Windsor knot in his tie, and carefully flattened the collar of his shirt sleeves where Bryant’s fists had crumpled it.

Edward ran a hand through his curly locks, still steaming.

“…Are you alright?” He asked, gently. Thomas nodded.

“Nothing I haven’t dealt with before.” Thomas said, which was unfortunately true. He brushed his hair out of his eyes, using the slight residue of pomade upon his fingers to act like a comb so that he could put his hair back in place.

Edward took a step forward to him, then another. Suddenly, they were chest to chest again though the threatening air had been dissolved. Thomas found it difficult to look at Edward in that moment.

“…I’m sorry.” Edward whispered.

Thomas nodded, but wouldn’t look up.

Edward reached up and carefully placed his hands upon Thomas’ cheeks, gently urging Thomas to finally meet his eyes. Thomas searched in vain, to find something in those blue depths that reminded him of the Edward from the past.

But it was like that man had vanished, and suddenly, Thomas felt absolutely miserable.

“Why are you so angry?” Thomas whimpered, “Why are you so mean? When did you grow to hate people so much?”

“…I don’t know.” Edward admitted. Thomas’ bottom lip quivered.

“I… I just want to live with you. I be happy with you. And I keep wondering if the rest even matters-“
“Of course it matters.” Thomas choked out. “Happiness is meaningless unless it’s shared.”

Edward let this wisdom sink in, then leaned forward to press a chaste kiss upon Thomas’ forehead.

“I’m sorry.” He mumbled against Thomas’ skin, “I shouldn’t have said what I did. I just… I don’t want to lose you to Bates, or this house. I’m ready to leave, and I want to take you with me.”

“… I can’t leave.” Thomas mumbled, “I’m the manager.”

“We’ll talk about it later.” Edward wrapped an arm around Thomas’ back, pulling him into a hug. Thomas crumpled against Edward, and though Edward could not see, there were tears in his eyes.

*Have I caused this?* Thomas thought miserably as Edward petted his hair. *Have I made him this way by saving his life?*

Something awful deep down told Thomas…. yes.

Though their argument was far from settled, Edward and Thomas spent the rest of the afternoon together. It at least helped Thomas to hang the banners that much quicker, though he noticed Anna’s eyes lingering upon him when she walked past carrying a handful of pamphlets for the seats. With Bates back and the concert underway, the schedule was starting to return somewhat to normal so that by seven o’clock dinner had been served preemptively early and the family was gathered downstairs to watch the proceedings. The band was, of course, well rehearsed though their shoes were slightly muddy from playing in the fields.

The seats were filled with soldiers in bandages, hobbled by amputations or horrifically scarred from burns. Yet for two hours, as the band played rousing favorites and war time jaunts, the men seemed transported from their woes. This would help to boost moral and raise money, which gave Thomas a reason to smile even as he hid along the back wall next to the staff. Mr. Carson and Lord Grantham had graciously agreed for the staff to watch, and so Thomas was elbow to elbow with Edward and Mrs. Hughes. Anna and Daisy sat in front of them, with Bates next to Anna, and Mr. Carson kept somber watch behind them all. Mrs. Patmore’s leg jiggled to the tune that the band held, swaying a bit in her seat. Lily and Helen were enraptured, having never seen a live band play before.

The band finished out with “I Vow To Thee, My Country” which was rather fitting and resounded upon by all the men. As Lady Mary and Lady Edith sang along, the men followed their suit.

But Thomas felt an odd shiver run up his spine as Lady Mary chorused: “*The love that never falters, the love that pays the price, The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.*”

Was the universe trying to warn him of something with those words? Or was it merely coincidence.

As the manager of the house, it was Thomas’ job to introduce each act as it came up, and so he had to make his way silently through the crowd as the band left the stage, in order to mount the platform himself.

He did not allow himself to relish in the applause that greeted his appearance, though he did note that the most enthusiastic clapper was Daisy who looked delighted to see him underneath the spotlight. Thomas tipped his head to her with a tiny smile, before stepping up so that all could hear him:
“The men have been kind enough to gather a few acts of their own—“

“What’s your talent?” A random soldier from the crowd shouted near the back, only to be shushed upon by several men including Mrs. Patmore and Mr. Carson.

Thomas narrowed his eyes, irritable at being interrupted.

“My talent is sarcasm.” He replied, “For which you are wholly unprepared, I assure you.”

The audience was dead silent, with the band having taken their places in the crowd.

“Mmm.” Thomas grumbled, before taking a deep breath and continuing on. Maybe there was something in the tone of his voice, but no one made to interrupt him again.

“The men have been kind enough to gather a few acts of their own which we’ll show tonight for charity, but before we do I wanted to say a word of thanks.” Thomas said, briefly tallying up the money in his head to a rough estimate, “We’ve been blessed enough to raise over a hundred pounds for local men on the front, for which we’re all grateful. We also owe a debt of gratitude to Downton Village Hospital for its staff and supplies that have been donated to our cause. I also wanted to thank Mr. Lynch, who graciously allowed the band to practice in his stables for a grand total of thirty minutes.”

He thought he heard someone snicker in the audience.

Thomas did not ponder on it, “With that said, let’s continue on with our next act which comes to us from Major Thompson… who apparently can juggle.”

Whether he could or not they were about to find out.

Thomas abandoned the stage, allowing Thompson up with three stollen croquet balls, and wormed his way back through the crowd to where the staff were hiding in the darkened alcoves.

“Who cut me off?” Thomas hissed, irritable as he reached Edward’s side, “Did you see who it was?”

“No.” Edward whispered back, “But I think it was Bryant’s crowd.”

“Talent indeed.” Thomas muttered viciously, crossing his arms over his chest as Major Thompson began to juggle with croquet balls. Surprisingly enough, he was rather good at juggling.

“Looks like he’s good at fondling his balls.” Edward whispered in Thomas’ ear. Thomas snickered, only to feel a sharp elbow in the ribs. Mrs. Hughes was glaring at him, her eyes narrowed murderously.

At once, Edward and Thomas straightened up and stopped acting like children.

When Thompson’s act concluded, he bowed to thunderous applause and allowed Thomas a moment to make his way back up onstage. This time, Thomas was scanning the audience for hecklers, well aware that any moment now he might get yelled at again.

“The next act is from Colonel Lewis, who appears to be doing a comedy routine.” Thomas said dryly, “God help us all.”

He left the stage just as quickly, returning into the dark as Lewis took the stage to sharp and happy applause. Lewis was popular among the men, and to be fair he did have a quick wit. Thomas just
didn’t know if it would be good enough to keep fifty men entertained for ten minutes.

“Thank you Healer Barrow!” Colonel Lewis had been queer enough to bring up a top hat, which he donned to Thomas in a show of politeness, “You ever get the feeling he wants to eat us for breakfast, and not in the friendly way?”

The men laughed and jeered.

“Let me practice in the pink salon, he did, but he went and closed the door on me after a few minutes. Guess he didn’t appreciate my act!”

No one laughed, Thomas palmed his forehead, letting out a tiny sigh of irritation.

“But enough about Barrow!” Lewis bounced right along, desperate to keep his audience’s attention for as long as he could, “What about the army, eh? That’s what we’re all here for isn’t it boys? You know I used to be an artist in the army, but I got invalided out after drawing too much enemy fire!”

Lewis laughed at his own joke.

“Someone shoot me. Again.” Thomas muttered nastily. Mrs. Hughes elbowed him again. “Stop it!” He hissed at her.

“Be quiet, and let the poor man perform.” Mrs. Hughes warned him.

Thomas rubbed at a sore spot on his ribs, wondering if he’d get a bruise come morning.

“What’s the difference between God and a General? God doesn’t think he’s a General!”

That got the audience laughing, and at once Lewis was spurned into another round of joke telling.

“Did I tell you boys about my girl?” Lewis asked, “Patriotic she was, very patriotic! Once on leave though, she threatened to give me back my ring because I called her Hunny!”

“Christ.” Edward griped.

“Back to war I went! And I had to pass through all the gate points! You’d hear them shouting!” At this Lewis began to stoop with an hand pressed comically to his ear:

“Halt who goes there? Scots guard!” He put on a Scottish accent that had Mrs. Hughes scowling.

“Pass Scots! Who goes there? The buffs! Pass Buffs! Who goes there?” and at this, Lewis straightened up while jaunting a hip and pretending to smoke a cigarette.

“Mind your own goddamn business!” Lewis said in a horrifically nasal French accent.

“Pass French!”

At this, the crowd burst into laughter. Thomas rolled his eyes, sighing as he relaxed into a stone pillar behind him.

“Good old prejudice.” Thomas muttered dryly, careful to watch out for Mrs. Hughes’ rib should she attempt to poke at him again.

“Speaking of the French, how do you confuse a French soldier?” Lewis asked the audience, only to answer his own question, “You give ‘im a rifle and ask ‘im to shoot it!”
The men were howling now.

“Now I shouldn’t speak so cruelly of the snipers though!” Lewis said, “French snipers have incredible camouflage. I looked into it you know, cause I wondered how they got so good at hiding in the wild! Turns out they don’t even use men! They use women!”

“Mmm, no they don’t.” Thomas muttered, for he was certain that had any woman been given a gun around Lewis she would have shot him dead on sight.

“Don’t think that women should have guns, Thomas?” Mrs. Hughes murmured. Thomas caught her eye and smiled.

“Nothing of the sort. A woman would have shot him by dead now, is all.”

Mrs. Hughes laughed a bit, but kept her voice soft.

“—That camouflage mates? It’s not camouflage! It’s armpit hair!”

“Shoot him.” Thomas said aloud, “Shoot him in the head.”

“Hush!” Mr. Carson whispered, attempting for order from behind.

“Boo!” Edward said, just a tad louder than he ought to. In front of them, Anna was starting to laugh, unable to help herself with Thomas and Edward’s antics.

“Hush!” Carson warned, slightly louder than before.

“Yeah, they’re easy enough to spot if you look for the French flag.” Lewis said, “It’s a white cross emblazoned on a white background. I don’t know about you boys, but I’d rather have a German division in front of me than a French one behind me-!”

The audience cheered and laughed, applauding for Lewis’ prejudice.

Thomas gasped, eyes sparking up. That was a quote! Lewis had just ripped off a quote from Mark Twain.

“That’s a bloody quote!” He hissed, looking about at the others, “The little cheat isn’t even using his own material-“

Suddenly a hot breath was upon his neck. Thomas bristled, aware that Mr. Carson was now extremely close to him and waiting for him to put one more toe out of line.

Thomas snapped his mouth shut, lips pursed to keep from accidentally saying something out loud.

Lewis’ act ended rather abruptly, due to the fact that one of the soldier’s had a step mother who was French and wasn’t particularly thrilled with his comments. Thomas had to thread his way back out to the front in order to separate the two men and take the stage, waiting until the hubbub had died down before speaking out again.

Unfortunately for Thomas, the next act was Major Bryant, who was waiting just off stage with an ugly sneer upon his lips.

“… I’ll now kindly direct your attention to our next and final act before a return to music.” Thomas said, his voice dulled with a lack of enthusiasm. “Major Bryant who will dazzle us with magic.”

The word dazzle was not spoken with kindness.
Thomas marched his way off stage, brushing rudely past Bryant to find his way back in the dark to Mrs. Hughes and Edward. As Bryant mounted the stage a great deal of men cheered, but his applause was not nearly as loud as Lewis’ had been. Thomas noted that none of the servants were clapping, including O’Brien and Carson.

“Thank you, Thomas!” Bryant said, eyes gleaming maliciously, “You always know how to make a man feel… welcome.”

Edward drew up a finger, tracing it in a line across his own neck as a warning to Bryant of what might happen should he dare continue.

Bryant coughed, swallowed, and began his magic act.

“Don’t tell me you’ve gone and gotten on his bad side.” Mrs. Hughes whispered.

“Is there a good side?” Thomas whispered back.

Bryant began his act with the simple trick of hiding a coin, which he later escalated to hiding an egg. Thomas half-wished the damn thing would break on his face, but unfortunately for him Bryant was rather good at magic. Clearly he’d been practicing in order to impress.

“He’s going to try and hide the sausage, next.” Thomas whispered to Mrs. Hughes. Mrs. Hughes scoffed, eyebrows raised at the highly suggestive tone of Thomas’ comment.

Thomas suddenly felt a pinching grip on his shoulder as Carson clapped hands upon him.

“Hallway.” Carson growled in his ear, tugging him along.

“But-!”

Carson refused to listen to excuses, taking Thomas out the back way into a side corridor that was used by servants to carry back and forth food to the dining hall. Thomas winced as Carson closed the door, well aware he was about to get chewed out-

“Hide the sausage?!” Carson hissed, in a rage. “Have you absolutely no shame?”

“I just- it was a joke-“

“You will hold your tongue for the rest of this performance, or you will be out front raking gravel!” Carson warned.

“… I don’t even work here right now.” Thomas mumbled, for raking the gravel was a job strictly reserved to hall boys and those that Mr. Carson was punishing.

“For which you should be soundly grateful.” Carson replied. Thomas pursed his lips, looking down at his shoes.

“… I’m sorry Mr. Carson but what he did to Ethel was wrong-“

“Men will always be men.” Carson replied, “It is not Major Bryant’s fault that he was undertaken by Miss Parks’ lust.”

Thomas scrounged for words, scoffing at the rudeness of it all, “That’s-! That’s not true! I’m a man and I’m not like that!”

“… Well I’d rather be abnormal than a brute.” He said, bitterly.

For a moment the pair of them simply stood there in the hall, made awkward by the other. Then, Mr. Carson sighed and seemed to grow exhausted.

“… Mr. Bates told me that there was some to do regarding Lieutenant Courtenay.” Carson said, “Perhaps now you see that your tryst has been a folly?”

“… I don’t know what I see.” Thomas whispered, and it was the damn truth. “There’s more to it than I can say aloud.”

“I shouldn’t think to ask.” Carson said.

“… You could ask, if you wanted to.” Thomas paused, slightly nervous to meet Carson’s eyes. “Unless you think me a heathen now?”

“… I do not, nor have I ever thought you a heathen.” Mr. Carson corrected him, his tone stern but gentle. “I think you confused, and I should hope that you return to your senses soon.”

“You mean… turn away from Edward.”

Mr. Carson did not illuminate on the subject, but it was pretty clear that Thomas had hit the mark.

“You’re not a child anymore, Thomas.” Mr. Carson warned, though he spoke the words with pride. “You’re an adult, and must act like one in light of difficult circumstances.”

Carson turned, and began a slow walk towards the end of the hall where one could turn out into the great hall. Thomas followed, trotting along as the sound of Lady Edith on the piano and Lady Mary singing began to trickle through the air. It was rather haunting from afar, like they were listening to a ghost instead of a living person.

“Your place is here.” Mr. Carson reminded Thomas, voice lowering as they neared the hall. “And you must remember that above all else.”

They parted ways as they stepped back into the Main hall, with Carson turning to the left in order to greet someone who was waiting outside at the door, and Thomas turning right to head back into the ground. Mercifully, Bryant’s act was over and he’d been swallowed up in the crowd. Rejoining Edward at his side, Thomas kept himself as subdued as possible while the Crawley sisters sang and played. The men were delighted, some with dreamy smiles upon their face that made Thomas want to smack them around the back of the head.

You can look but you can’t touch! Thomas wanted to tell them. He couldn’t wait till all these men were gone; the way that they behaved around the women of the family-!

“I wish a pal I had, say one like you…” Lady Mary had a far off look upon her face. Thomas wondered if she was thinking of Matthew, and longing for him to return from war.

“Someone within my heart to build a throne… Someone who’d never part to call my own.”

And all the men broke out singing, with even some of the staff delighted to join in. Thomas, like before, kept silent. He found it difficult to sing of love in public when he was damned for his feelings towards other men.
“You’re not singing.” Edward whispered in Thomas’ ear. Thomas almost jumped, slightly taken aback at the intrusion upon his inner thoughts.

“I don’t like singing about love around other people.” Thomas whispered back, “They’ll never accept my brand of love, anyway.”

“I understand.” Edward replied, and though it was incredibly dangerous Edward reached out and gently touched Thomas’ wrist with the tips of his own fingers.

Thomas pulled his grip away in warning, shaking his head with tiny movements.

“Don’t.” He said out of the corner of his mouth. But suddenly, all the singing stopped and for one heart stopping moment Thomas was terrified Edward and he had been spotted by the crowd as acting overly friendly. He almost panicked until he saw heads turning in a different direction, and looked about to find Matthew and William walking down the main aisle. It seemed that these were the visitors at the door, and an audible wave of relief washed over the house.

The family had risen from their chairs. Lady Mary looked punch drunk. In the prior reality, Thomas had been surprised to find Matthew and William alive and well. Now, Thomas was merely content to know that two more people were back at Downton. It was like his social world was coming back together.

The arrival of Matthew and William was a joyous occasion, marked by an uprising of song and the end of the concert. As the soldiers disbanded and the band members left with their brass instruments, Thomas rested along the back wall and kept out of sight. He felt like a guardian, watching over the denizens of the abbey as they flocked around William and Matthew to congratulate them on their return. Though Thomas knew that William would soon be wounded and returned home to his doom, he looked completely fine for the moment.

God, how he wished he could stuff William in a broom closet and keep him there until the war was over.

Edward milled about for a while, shaking hands with Major Thompson and making slight conversation with a few more. Thomas found it difficult to talk with others, although one or two members of staff attempted to rope him into conversation about William’s return.

Edward noticed Thomas lingering in the shadows, and came to join him.

“Shall we go on and have it out?” Edward teased? “Hen peck each other till we’re bloody?”

“Not up here.” Thomas muttered, for there were far too many eyes or ears to avoid. “Why don’t we go downstairs? They’ll be at this for a while with Matthew and William home.”

The green baize door was an excellent divider, muffling the ensuing party as Thomas and Edward headed downstairs. Most of the lights were off, since the staff was upstairs, so the gloom was comforting and warm.

“Where should we go?” Edward asked.
“Somewhere away from the stairs.” Thomas said, thinking fast as they hit the bottom. Their best bet was to head down the hall to the area yard, where several coat closets and tea rooms offered excellent hiding spots. For whatever reason, Lily the housemaid was downstairs, and heading hurriedly back up the hall towards the staircase so that they met halfway.

“What are you doing down here?” Thomas wondered.

“The backdoor bell rang,” Lily said, “I have to go get Mrs. Hughes!”

“Why—” But before Lily could give an answer she was running away up the stairs. She looked slightly disturbed.

“Well then I guess we don’t have much time.” Thomas sighed, irritable. “We should have gone to the attics instead, but it’s so stuffy during the summer.”

“We can start our conversation down here and finish it as need be,” Edward supplied. “I know you want to have it out with me… so let’s have it out.”

“No, I don’t.” Thomas denied, though in truth he had a great deal on his mind and suspected Edward could tell. “I’ve just been very stressed with the concert—”

“You’re lying.” Edward said, “You don’t give a fig about the concert. Something else is bothering you, so out with it and tell me.”

“Nothing is bothering me—”

“Is it Bates?” Edward asked, “Are you having thoughts about him—”

“Oh my god will you let it go about Bates!” Thomas snapped, his temper popping under great strain, “Bates isn’t even like us, he’s for Anna! He just… had a moment of insanity with me, and it was years ago—!”

“But he thinks that you shouldn’t be with me.” Edward countered, “And you didn’t deny it—”

“Because you’re a lord!” Thomas explained, “He thinks that you’re too lofty for me, that you have different ideals, and he’s not half wrong! We grew up in different worlds, with our societies telling us different things. There are some aspects about my life that you’ll never be able to comprehend, including the allure of a stable paycheck!” He added. “You don’t understand the value of money because you’ve always had it.”

“But that’s—” Edward broke off with a small scoff, irritated and unable to get his words out in the proper fashion, “Money isn’t the real issue here! Money’s never been an issue between us—”

And he was right. The real issue was that Thomas was terrified Edward was changing. That he’d somehow become more violent and dangerous now that Thomas had interceded with fate’s natural course.

But Thomas could not say this. Edward would think him mad.

“… You’re just…” Thomas swallowed, a knot forming in his throat, “You’re so different. You’re… angry. You say things that are mean.”

Edward looked like Thomas had punched him in the stomach.

“I…” Edward mumbled, ashamedly. He bowed his head, scuffed the toe of his shoe upon the
flagstone underfoot, “I know I’ve been a little hot, an’ I’m sorry. Seeing my father put me in a rough place. I don’t… I don’t know why I’ve been so angry lately but, I promise you I’ll stop. I’ll try and control my temper. I love you Thomas… I love you more than anything else in this world. You’re my every dream, my angel—“

A strange, shuffling sound gave Thomas pause. He brought up a hand, heart hammering in his ribs. He’d heard someone moving in the hall. Someone was listening to their conversation.

Looking about, Thomas took several steps down the darkened hallway to the area yard, wary of being jumped out at by an unfriendly snoop.

“…Whose there?” Thomas called out. “I heard you moving. I know you’re here.”

For a moment, there was nothing, and then…?

A dark shadow shifted inside Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room.

She appeared, pale and bedraggled wrapped in a coat slightly too big for her. At first, Thomas was terrified it was the Heichecera, but the woman’s skin was too pale and her hair was auburn.

It was Ethel. She was shaken, looking as if she’d seen a ghost.

“… Ethel…” He whispered her name, amazed at the state of her.

But there were footfalls upon the stairs, harried and sharp. Ethel jumped back into the shadows of Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room, too frightened to come out in public. Sure enough, Mrs. Hughes appeared downstairs, a wary expression upon her face as she made her way up the hall.

“Lieutenant-“ She said in greeting, only to pause when she saw Thomas too. “Thomas? What’s going on?”

Thomas gestured to her sitting room, where Ethel was hiding. “We have a visitor, Mrs. Hughes.”

“A visitor at this time of night? Who?”

And so, Ethel crept back out of Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room. Shame dripped from her features; green eyes once so proud and sure were now downcast and inflamed with fallen tears.

Mrs. Hughes was scandalized, both that Ethel would show up, and that Ethel would dare force her way inside after being thrown out without notice or character.

“Ethel!” She hissed, casting a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure no one else was watching. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“I had to come, Mrs. Hughes.” Ethel said, talking quickly as if she feared she would be thrown out on the stoop before she could finish her sentence. “I’m sorry to push in, but I was sitting alone until I couldn’t stand it no more. You’ve got to help me.”

Mrs. Hughes scoffed at the notion, her Scottish temper flaring back up. “I haven’t got to do anything. But what do you mean? Help with what?”

Ethel looked down, pale and trembling.
Crestfallen, Thomas realized why Ethel must have come back seeking their help. She was pregnant. After all, that’s what had happened before, and Thomas hadn’t been able to stop Ethel from carrying on with Major Bryant. So why should anything have changed?

“… You’re pregnant.” Thomas surmised, dismayed.

Ethel looked back up, amazed that he’d guessed her secret.

“That’s what it is, isn’t it?” Thomas asked, afraid of the answer, “You’re pregnant?”

Ethel looked down again, humble, “I know I shouldn’t be talkin’ to you about such things, not after all the advice you gave me warnin’ against it… but you’re right an’ I can admit that now. You’re right.”

She looked back up, locking eyes with Thomas before turning to face Mrs. Hughes who was grave and ashen like someone had pronounced the King was dead.

“…I’m going to have a baby.” Ethel said.

Down the hall, Edward watched everything unfold, speechless.

Everyone cast eyes upon their comrade, as Thomas, Mrs. Hughes, and Edward all exchanged glances.

No one knew what to say.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know.
The Wrath of William

Chapter Summary

Thomas must make the difficult choice of whether or not to save William Mason, while likewise having to grapple with the shocking revelation that his return to the past was to save another.

Chapter Notes

Did you miss me?

Well, I'm out of my fall quarter, and have a break until January when I start my winter quarter. I'm going to try to get a few more chapters out. Things are about to get very interesting, and I'm excited to say that I have a clear end in sight for this project. Initially I wanted it to be very long. Now, however, I know what I must do. It'll be about thirty chapters long.

Thank you for your patience. As a reward, enjoy more time with the Heichecera.

Trigger warnings for this chapter include medical gore

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He was walking down a corridor, dark and quiet. His destination was a door near the middle of the hall. He could tell by the way the boards squeaked underfoot that he was in the Servant’s Attics… that he was on the men’s side. After a lifetime of walking these floors, he could not be mistaken.

He reached the objective door, tentative, and pushed it open.

Somehow, despite not knowing where he was going, he’d reached his own room.

But there was someone already sleeping in his bed, curled up tight in his faded quilts. Curious, he walked forward to perch on the side of the mattress, sinking down an inch or two under the added weight.

With cautious hands, he reached out and pulled the covers down-

But Thomas wasn’t himself at all; he realized that now. He was suddenly able to look upon the scene as if from third-person and realized that the he’d actually been in the body of another-

Jimmy Kent.

Jimmy was in pajamas, tousle haired and terribly nervous. With shining eyes and swollen lips, he bent over a sleeping figure who was lying in Thomas’ bed…

‘It’s me-!’ Thomas thought, seeing himself asleep.

Jimmy was breathing shallowly, as if terrified.

He tilted his head, closed his eyes-
Someone was shaking him sharply awake.
For five-seconds, Thomas actually thought it was Jimmy and his heart suddenly skipped a beat. He thrashed a bit, trapped beneath his covers, only to resurface and gasp for air. It was in fact Anna, not Jimmy, in a housecoat and carrying a lit candle. She looked terrified— What on earth-!?

“Anna?” Thomas demanded, agog. He looked to the clock on his bedside table; it was 2:30 in the morning, “What on earth is going-?”

“Never mind that-“ Anna begged, “You have to come quick.”
Fearing absolute disaster was afoot, Thomas hurriedly jumped out of bed and grabbed his housecoat. He followed Anna out into the hallway, the very same one he’d just dreamed about, and fled down the servant’s stairs, barefoot. In his rush, he forgot his house slippers.

It was August of 1918, and a year had passed since Ethel had vanished off the map. Though Thomas had witnessed Ethel begging Mrs. Hughes for assistance with his own eyes, Ethel seemed to have disappeared without a trace shortly afterward. He’d spent the next months running the house with only mild enthusiasm, counting the days on his personal calendar to see when she would undoubtedly have her baby. But no word had come, no letter or unexpected visit, and slowly but surely Thomas found himself giving up hope that he would ever be able to aid Ethel at all.

He felt like a bastard for not having stopped her from sleeping with Bryant; if only he’d been less wrapped up in Edward-!

But Edward was another issue, and one that Thomas did not like to address mentally or verbally. Where before they’d been swept up in a wave of nuptial bliss during the war, Thomas now felt ill at the thought of their broken marriage. As more time passed since Edward’s near suicide, he’d become hot headed and bitter, lashing out until other soldier’s began to avoid him and even Mrs. Hughes had had to reprimand him. He’d not hit Thomas, not yet, but Thomas could tell it was coming. There were times when they would argue and Thomas could see the wrath just inches beneath the surface of Edward’s clammy skin. Could see Edward’s personality and love being slowly eaten up by a beast that wanted nothing but chaos.

*I’ve done this,* Thomas had decided, *And I will never be able to repent from this sin.*

The most he could do was try to find a way out of this mess, and pray that the damage wasn’t too great. Pray that Edward’s soul could still be saved despite Thomas’ meddling.

The bottom of the stairwell was lit, despite it being an ungodly hour. Servants were clustered in the unnatural glowing light of a solitary brass lamps, each in their housecoats and their hair in braids. It was the queerest thing in the world to see Carson without shoes, but there he was… blinking sleep out of his bagged eyes and shuffling pale toes upon the flagstone floor. Thomas wondered where on earth his house shoes had gone, until he remembered that Isis the labrador had accidentally taken off with them a few days earlier. What a pity, when the man should surely need them now!

The reason for this early morning scuffle came in the form of one Joseph Moseley in a housecoat and riding boots. It seemed that he’d run up from Crawley house in the village, had possibly even taken a
car or merely wandered through the woods. The tassels of his housecoat were untied, showing him to be wearing maroon and beige striped pajamas. He looked positively ill, clutching a crumpled telegram in a shaking hand.

“What is it?” Thomas asked, for he could not recall such an event happening the first time around in his prior universe. Had something queer happened to Matthew or William? Something different that Thomas had (unknowingly) caused?

Mr. Moseley was clearly shaken, “It’s a telegram for Mrs. Crawley from the war office, but with her gone to France…” he shook his head, lips pursed into a thin white line, “I didn’t know what else to do.”

Though he was barefoot, and clearly only half awake, Carson was still in charge, “Upstairs with you,” He ordered Moseley, “Miss O’Brien, alert her ladyship.” Moseley left without another word, nearly running up the stairs.

“Right.” O’Brien did not even waste a moment, hurrying up the servant’s stairwell with her flowered dressing gown flapping in the air. Thomas noted that her house slippers were embroidered with white rabbits, which was a queer thing that he hadn’t expected of the woman. She was gone in the blink of an eye.

While the others stood waiting in fear, Thomas was mentally calibrating when William and Matthew had first returned home from war. They’d come home wounded about the same time as now… it had certainly been in August, and in the year of 1918. This must be what all the kerfuffle was about, and the reason that Thomas was now in on it was because he had better relations with the staff. He could see, in his minds eye, a scene from his original universe in which he lay slumbering in a cold and uncomfortable bed while the ‘downstairs family’ huddled together in grief and support. They hadn’t even thought to wake him, though he’d served with Matthew in the war. Even then, even before he’d become an underbutler or a valet, he’d been despised amongst the staff.

But he couldn’t afford to think about such things now. There was no changing the past, at least not in his prior reality. All he could do was try to do right in his present one.

“He’s coming home.” Thomas whispered. Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson both looked up to meet his eyes, the pair of them disturbed at the thought, “They don’t send letters like this unless they’re coming home. I know this better than most.”

“But what in God’s name could have happened to him?” Anna fretted.

“And William.” Bates agreed, hair askew and in good need of a combing.

“One thing at a time.” Mr. Carson warned, “Let’s go up together and see what his Lordship says.”

So they all walked up in a pack, everyone from Mr. Carson all the way down to Daisy. It was a funny thing to see them in their nightclothes, when during the waking hours they were always in uniform. In a way, they were now changed into a new type of livery, though it was dotted with moth eaten nightgowns and housecoats faded around the edges. A few details caught Thomas’ eye, and forever embedded themselves within his mind. Daisy’s housecoat was a soft rosy pink. Mrs. Hughes’ nightgown was embroidered with Scottish designs. Thomas considered himself in his own dressing gown and housecoat. He wore navy pajama bottoms, his undershirt concealed by a navy housecoat that he’d stolen from home when he’d first run away. It had belonged to his grandfather, and though it was ancient it was one of the few things that Thomas had to remind himself of his family. He had to wonder if Daisy’s housecoat was a family heirloom, or if she’d been given it as a gift.
She certainly couldn’t afford it on a scullery maid’s meager salary.

When they reached the main floor, they found the lights doused save for two near the entrance to the library. They could hear hushed voices, and Carson quieted them all down with the wave of a hand as he strode across the marble hall and quietly slipped through the door. They would be forced to wait near the green baize door, nervous about stepping out lest they be called upon for impertinence in these trying times. As a result they were all tightly packed together. Thomas gave a hearty yawn, unable to hold it down; Daisy gave one too.

Then Anna, then Bates- dear god if it wasn’t contagious.

“What if he’s…” Daisy couldn’t even finish the thought.

“He’s not.” Thomas said. Daisy turned to look at him with misting eyes. She was close to tears, terrified for their futures.

“But if he is, what will happen to me?” Daisy asked, afraid, “What will happen to us?”

“That’s not for you to worry about, Daisy.” Mrs. Hughes warned her. “Mr. Matthew may very well still be alive, so I urge you to keep him that way in your thoughts and prayers. As for the rest, God will guide our way forward.”

Anna whispered her own prayer under her breath. Thomas found that he had no faith to rely upon in these moments. What God would listen to him, after all the things that he’d done?

A few moments later, the door to the library opened, and out came the family. They were each in housecoats, though Thomas noted with slight bitterness that their fabrics were rich and their linings embroidered with golden thread. What would he give to try on such expensive clothes for once in his life. Lord Grantham seemed fretful and exhausted in that moment, clutching Mr. Moseley’s telegram in both hands. Carson was in the front, and lead the way over to the stairwell where all the servants dithered nervously. Mrs. Hughes was clutching at the neck of her dressing gown, as if by hiding her throat she would somehow hold her strength together.

Lord Grantham stopped just short of the threshold to the servant’s stairwell, and spoke in an unnervingly calm tone: “It appears that a few days ago, Captain Crawley was wounded. It’s serous, I’m afraid, but he’s alive and on his way home to the hospital in the village.”

“Where there’s life, there’s hope.” Mrs. Hughes declared. It was as good a motto as any in these trying times.

“What about William?” Daisy asked, and suddenly Thomas wondered if it hadn’t been William she’d been thinking of before instead of Matthew. “Is he alright?”

“I’ll find out what I can tomorrow.” Lord Grantham assured her, although by all accounts tomorrow was already today. “I’m not sure there’s much more that we can do tonight.”

“William’s father will have had a telegram if anything had happened.” Mr. Bates agreed. At this, Lady Edith perked up.

“I’ll drive over in the morning.” She decided aloud. Given her supposed ‘skills’ behind the wheel, Thomas had to hope that no one was on the road when she did.
It was difficult to get to sleep after that, with Thomas grave and silent in bed. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, but still he could not shake off the fears that kept him awake. His mind kept flashing back to the past, reminding him of the most ugly moments of his prior life and how he’d been unable to avoid any of them. He thought of this new universe, and how he’d done so much to try and shape his world into something more pleasant. He had to wonder, was any of it worth it? Even if he was in better relationships with the staff… would it truly change anything in his life?

He thought of Ethel and her baby, no doubt cold and alone.
He thought of Jimmy Kent, god only knows where he was.
He thought of all the things in between, and still he did not sleep.

The next day, Thomas was like a mindless drone stumbling about his work. He wasn’t the only one lagging behind. Lady Mary looked ready to fall into the first open grave she found, and Daisy was practically asleep at the kitchen sink. To keep his blood pumping and his brain occupied, Thomas took long walks around the abbey looking for work that needed to be done. Of course, he didn’t find anything; Carson was meticulous and Mrs. Hughes had an army of maids.

Still, it made him feel better to know that everything was in order.

He ended his walk in the servant’s area yard, which he found abandoned save for Bates who was outside polishing shoes at the workbench. This was technically an indoor job best saved for the boot room, but Bates had often complained aloud that the fumes made him dizzy when cramped and he preferred to get some fresh air if he could. Frankly, Thomas could not blame him. Their daily lives offered little chance to simply feel a breeze or listen to the birds.

Honestly, Thomas was glad to see him. When Bates was near, Thomas almost felt like the man served as a deterrent to keep Edward at bay. There was no telling what pillar you’d find Edward hiding behind now a days. Several times, Thomas had had the living daylights scared out of him by Edward leaping from the shadows, trying to block him into a conversation he didn’t want to have.

He was solidly terrified of his husband.

Bates glanced up, found him standing there, and smiled timidly before setting his shoe polish rag aside; “I didn’t expect to find you out here. Thought you’d be upstairs.”

“We both know that it’s only temporary, me working for the military.” Thomas replied. He sat down next to Bates, yawning. He had to refrain from rubbing at his eyes, until he remembered that Bates wasn’t near as strict as Carson when it came to decorum. He wouldn’t mind if Thomas acted like a human in public.

Thomas rubbed his eyes aggressively, trying to wake himself up.

“I was actually referring to your fancy man.” Bates explained. Thomas grimaced.

Bates resumed polishing, rubbing with a fever to try and get out a scuff mark on the tip of his Lordship’s riding boot.

“I couldn’t sleep after I found out, could you?” Bates asked.
“No.” Thomas said, “But I confess I have a lot on my mind, already.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

But that was the thing, wasn’t it. Thomas could never tell a soul about his troubles because if he did they’d all think him a nutter. “If I told you, you’d think me mad.”

“You always say that whenever someone asks.” Bates complained, pausing in his polishing once again, “Do you trust me so little?”

Thomas would be remiss to ignore the hurt he heard in Bates’ voice. Thomas smiled, leaning against the table and catching Bates’ eyes. They were pensive, waiting for his answer in these trying times: “That’s not what I’m trying to say, John.”

But before Bates could reply, the back door opened to reveal Anna. She was in her day dress, not yet down to her black and whites. She looked grim, and wore a frown that did not suit her pretty face.

At once, Bates set aside his polishing things again completely to instead give his full attention over to Anna. Thomas was painfully reminded in that moment how he’d often done the same whenever Jimmy had walked in the room.

Don’t think about such things, Thomas berated himself internally, even as Anna sat down on Bates’ other side.

“Lady Edith’s back.” She said, “William was caught in it… he’s gone to some hospital in Leeds.”

Bates was dismayed. Thomas had already been expecting the news, so nothing was really surprising to him anymore.

“…I’m very sorry.” Bates said, bitterly.

Thomas looked away, not wanting to appear callous.

“We might have known.” Anna sighed, “All the other households were touched… and we already nearly lost Thomas.”

Thomas shrugged, still not looking at Anna or Bates: “You know what you sign up for.” Was all he could think to say.

“Will he come through it?” Bates asked Anna.

“Her ladyship said it sounded bad,” Anna was tentative, unsure of the future and fearful to be pessimistic. “But we don’t know any more than that. Can you walk with me to the church this afternoon? Both of you?”

Thomas started, turning back around with narrowed eyes. Take Anna to the church? But why?

“If you want me to.” Bates said immediately. At this, he turned to look at Thomas for support. Thomas was baffled.

“I’d like to say a prayer for them.” Anna continued on, perhaps sensing Thomas' trepidation, “Both of them.”

“I’m…” What could he honestly say? “I’m afraid God won’t listen to me. I’ve broken too many of his rules.” It still surprised him that he could walk over the threshold of a church without bursting into flames.
“Don’t think like that.” Bates urged. Anna looked sorry for him in that moment; it was an expression he hated to see her wear.

“I’ll go with you if that’s what you want,” Thomas said, if only to make Anna stop looking at him like he was some sort of street urchin shivering in the cold. “Thought I don’t know what prayer I could say.”

“Say the one you mean,” Was Anna’s wise response, “The one that’s honest. That’s the one that God wants to hear.”

Thomas was amused by her insight, regarding how among all of his co-workers both past, present, and future, Anna was the one most akin to an angel. “I guess you’d know, wouldn’t you?” Thomas teased with a cheeky smile, “Angel that you are.”

Anna blushed, and swatted playfully at his leg.

It was easy for Thomas to find time to walk to the church when he wasn’t on a servant’s schedule, but it took a bit of convincing from Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes to allow Bates and Anna out of the house at the same time. Anna had to change from her day dress to a coat and frock, with Bates swapping out his vest and shoes so that he might be more fashionable for the English heat. Thomas did not change at all, save to put on his walking jacket and fetch his trilby hat. He wore his pinstriped blue suit, and kept his pocket watch upon an Albert chain at his waist. The road to the village church was quiet and dull, with the heat of the August afternoon causing a slight ripple effect upon the air. Horses were lazily grazing in their pastures. Farmers were busy tending to their crops. A slight dab of perspiration collected at the back of Thomas’ neck from the heat, and he sorely wished he could rub at it with his handkerchief. It wouldn’t be proper with a lady present, though.

As they passed into the cooler glen of a thicket of trees, Anna began to speak.

“My mother never had two nickels to rub together, but she saved up every last penny she had to buy me and my younger sister dresses for church.” Anna said. There was a wistful smile upon her face as she looked up to the canopy overhead, “I can remember it, even now. It was green, with a bow in the back. I loved it.”

Neither Bates nor Thomas made to comment, so Anna just carried on, “Church was such a wonderful time for me. I got a proper wash and I was always able to sing with the choir.”

Thomas had a feeling that Anna would probably be a very good singer.

“I always found the stories to be interesting,” Bates agreed, “My father was good friends with our local vicar. He’d come round for tea on Saturdays and tell me all sorts of things.”

“What about you, Thomas?” Anna asked, curious. “Did you like church growing up?”

Normally, a youth of the 19th century might say ‘yes’. After all, Church was a sacred time, meant for socializing with other members of your community in an otherwise droll and repetitive environment. But church was also for those who could resign themselves to a lifestyle of strict expectations, and while some did not take issue with this others were squarely cast out into the cold.

Par example: Thomas.
“No.” Thomas hoped they would let it be, but still Anna persisted.

“How not?”

“Church is for those that can handle the rules of God’s calling.” Thomas said. “Some of us don’t have it so easy… It’s hard to find much enjoyment in Church, when every time you go all you hear is how you’re inevitably going to burn in hell.”

Anna scoffed, “Sounds like your church was too much fire and brimstone.”

But Thomas just shook his head. His church hadn’t be so different from the one in the village.

“Not for everybody,” He finally said. “Just me.”

Anna did not make to contradict him again.

The Downton Village Church was not a familiar sight to Thomas. Though every Sunday the abbey staff were granted small leave to attend church alongside the family, Thomas had never gone in the past. In the present, Thomas still did not attend. It was a silent secret that the house kept, and something Thomas was well aware set him apart from everyone else in the village. Still, he knew the way and found the church much the same as it had always been. Quiet, grave, musty, and overbearingly archaic.

Who was it that said they’d found church outside in a garden…? Thomas couldn’t remember the author off the top of his head, but in that moment he found he quite agreed.

Bates and Anna led the way inside. Thomas stayed a good few paces behind them, eyes drifting to portraits of Christ and stained glass windows of the saints in prayer. He wondered what they might have been like in real life if they’d even existed at all. Had they all looked so clean and polished? Thomas had a hard time imagining anyone living in a dessert without shelter and being so… well washed.

Or white.

Anna and Bates had reached the altar. Anna turned, found Thomas still wandering in the main aisle, and beckoned him forward.

“Let’s pray together.” She urged.

Bates and Anna knelt together, with Bates having to carefully set his cane aside lest it be a nuisance to retrieve. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas knelt by Anna’s other side, mimicking how Anna and Bates laced their hands and bowed their heads. He’d never actually done this before.

He felt like an absolute heathen, pretending to be a devout Christian before a fucking altar of all places.

Anna was the first to pray, her voice soft and melodious as she spoke directly to God: “…Dear lord, heavenly father, please show mercy on our great house and spare the lives of William Mason and Matthew Crawley. Grant us the chance to know a life with them still in it.”

That made Thomas’ eyes burn, when he considered his own plight… to try and meddle with fate in order to make sure both men lived. Was it sane? Was it feasible?
Was it wise?

“Show us some kind of way forward.” Anna closed her prayer, and remained silent. Bates caught Thomas’ eye.

Thomas shook his head with a minute movement. Bates nodded, and took over speaking.

“…God, grant us the courage to see through these upcoming days.”

Thomas could not help but think of his own days, and how his courage had inevitably fled. Was God even listening to them at this point?

“Hold us fast, and true to our course. Let us know the value of the life that we have been given, and rejoice in the joy and happiness that we find even in these dark times.”

Anna reached out and took Bates’ hand in her own, steadfast in her prayer.

What joy and happiness had Thomas ever found though? He found himself hard pressed to think of two times in his prior life that he’d ever been truly happy.

And it suddenly occurred to him that even if he spoke to God, God would be unwilling to answer. That maybe God had robbed him of his happiness because of his homosexuality.

Thomas looked up at the cross hanging down from the beams. At the image of Christ, whose face was so miserably contorted with pain and ancient lacquer.

I hate you, Thomas thought bitterly. I hate you for making me this way.

Bates had stopped praying aloud, and now both he and Anna were looking to Thomas for a continuation.

Thomas’ eyes were burning horribly. In that moment, he detested this church. He wanted to run from it and never be burdened by the sight of it again. He wished Anna had never made him come here.

He wished that God would let him be, and forget he even existed. Maybe then, something good would happen to him.

“…You have burdened me with the unthinkable.” Thomas finally spoke aloud, eyes raised to the rafters of the church. He wondered if he would find God there, looking down at him with a murderous expression. “And for that, I hate you.”

He heard Anna suck in a sharp breath, shocked that Thomas would use such awful language when speaking to God.

“You have never given me anything in this life.” Thomas said, “All that I have, I’ve taken forcibly for myself. Any solace I’ve found has come at the sacrifice of another. And this burden that I bear… this awful, awful burden that I can never tell another about-”

A dual reality, a love for another man…

“It’s all you.” Thomas finally said. “And yet…”

He was suddenly brought to a pause, as an image bloomed into his mind, crystal clear and radiantly warm. He saw Jimmy, playing at the piano, golden and fair with eyes as beautiful as a bright blue
sky. Lips sweetly carved out of pink marble, and hands incredibly soft against ancient ivory keys.

Had God planted that image in his mind?

“… And yet, you gave me him.” Thomas said. “You gave me the chance in my prior life… to know him. And I can’t help but wonder if that was you too. If you’re really not the one to blame for all my misery. If instead, it’s other people who act in your name. And if that’s the case… then what do you really want for him? And when are you going to show me the way forward?”

But he was getting off of topic. He was here to pray for Matthew and William, not whimper about his own misfortunes.

“… Whatever you do, I have no choice but to accept it.” Thomas said. He paused, looking up, “But… if I can change it… if I can help them… then shouldn’t I?”

But God didn’t answer.

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His unanswered question to God haunted him for the rest of the day, floating after him like a specter and hovering over him that night so that he found he couldn’t even breath properly. It was like the questions had embedded themselves inside his chest, like they were so deep inside of him that they were running thick through his blood stream and infecting his brain.

It was pitch black, warm and quiet with all the house asleep around him. Still, Thomas found himself unable to settle down.

Images were darting past his eyes, all of them featuring Jimmy.

He tried to embed himself fully in a memory. To remember how he’d sat with Jimmy and played cards at the servant’s hall table. How Jimmy had shown him a trick with a card, and had beamed when Thomas had applauded him. How Jimmy had sat a little closer to Thomas in order to show him the card trick, all the while never knowing that Thomas actually already knew the trick.

Thomas had let Jimmy teach him, and with great pleasure.

And suddenly, the scent of peppermint was in Thomas’ nose.
With his eyes closed, Thomas opened his mouth a bit, and remembered how Jimmy’s skin had felt against him. Soft and sweet, like he was biting into a ripened honey comb.

How lovely and pure Jimmy had looked against his pillow, fast asleep.
Even now, knowing that Jimmy was a proper lady’s man… Thomas couldn’t help but be awed by how wonderful he was.

Distressed, Thomas sat up in bed and rubbed at his eyes.
He found himself going mad, in that moment, desperate to talk to the Heichecera if only to speak to someone who knew the full truth about his circumstances. Edward, William, Matthew, Jimmy…

He needed someone to help him make sense of it all. Someone to remind him of why he was actually here, and what he could feasibly pull off without ruining everything.

So it was that at 11:43 at night, Thomas got dressed again and left the abbey without a word. The halls were quiet and bare, a sort of unearthly aura falling upon the abbey with none moving inside it. Maybe for another house, it wouldn’t be so queer, but the abbey was almost constantly full of life. If its halls weren’t packed with maids or barking dogs, it felt almost haunted. In this way, Thomas
considered himself a ghost, slipping down the servant’s stairwell into the basement to find it quite bare. The only noise came from the hearth in the servant’s hall, where the very last log was crackling low in its hold. The hall boy Robert was fast asleep in his cot, tucked in close to the warmth to try and rest easier. Thomas tiptoed around the boy, careful not to make any noise as he slightly slipped into Carson’s office, took the area key from its hook on the wall, and made his way out the back door without fuss. He locked it as he left, eager for none to disturb the abbey in his absence.

He knew he would be unable to flag down a passing wagonette at this time of night, but it did not bother him. He found he needed the walk, and the fresh air was doing him good. In the still of night, with none around him, Thomas’ footsteps upon the gravel were unnervingly loud. The methodical ‘crunch’ almost reminded him of walking through snow, though it was certainly not a winter wonderland in the middle of August.

When he made it to the main road, Thomas picked up the pace. He trotted through the night, listening intently to the wind hissing through dehydrated trees.

He began to mentally calibrate how long it would take him to get to Thirsk and back to Downton on foot. It would be at least two hours, both ways, leaving him very little time to speak to the Heichecera. He would have to be concise, and began to mentally formulate all the questions he would ask her as soon as he’d entered her-

“You do not have to seek me out, Thomas.”

He halted dead in the middle of the road, slowly pivoting on his back foot to look up the way he’d come. There, emerging from the dark like the specter of Christmas Future, was the Heichecera.

Her faded patchwork skirts were oddly muddied in the dark. Her dark hair, oiled thick, was spun in a heavy braid atop her head. With each step she took, the soft ‘chink’ of bent coins could be heard upon her elegant wrists and neck.

It had been a while since the pair of them had been before one another… not as a hallucination or a dream, but as two people in the flesh.

Cautious, Thomas took a few steps in her direction. Soon the pair of them were only a few feet apart. Thomas had to wonder if he would be able to touch her, should he reach out his hand. Would she disappear, instead? Was she really here at all?

Had she ever existed in the first place, or was she merely a by-product of the universe?

“You’re starting to lose faith in your path,” The Heichecera deduced. “You’re realizing you’ve made a mistake.”

That was a word for it, “Can I save him?” Thomas asked. It was difficult to say who he was talking about first.

“Who do you speak of?” The Heichecera asked, “William Mason, the boy doomed yet to die, or Edward Courtenay… the boy you’ve forced to live?”

“Both. All.” He might as well make the most of his time.

The Heichecera offered no easy answers, “William Mason is not your problem, Thomas. Your
Well that was hardly a surprise, was it? Thomas scuffed at a pebble underfoot, chewing on his bottom lip as he tried to formulate what to do next. The only solution he could come up with was to beg for help and advice.

He felt like a child before such a powerful woman.

“What do I do?” Thomas begged. “How do I fix this?”

The Heichecera did not condemn his pathetic plea. She laced her fingers, long nails dipped in fine red lacquer.

“He must pass from this life.” The Heichecera said. Thomas winced. “He’s changing. His soul is darkening, rotting in a cavity meant for cruelty to fill. You know this.”

And Thomas did know this. It was so bloody obvious it was frightening.

“Can I at least stop it from getting worse?” Thomas asked.

“No.” Once again, Thomas winced. “You can only give it the ability to end. You have meddled in something far beyond your power, Thomas. Far beyond my power, even. This territory belongs to another, much more ancient than I.”

“Who?”

The Heichecera shrugged, and looked up to the starry sky as if she thought she’d find the answer there. She even raised a hand, gesturing to inky black. Thomas noted that her lacquered fingernails seemed to glimmer in an unseen light.

“Death.” She finally declared. Who knew that death was in the sky?

“Then…” Thomas felt like such a fool, grappling with something far beyond his understanding, “Then let me talk to death.”

The Heichecera scoffed, her hands upon her hips. She shook her head, “You would not survive the encounter, my dear.”

“Let me make that decision.” Thomas urged. He wasn’t afraid of death-!

And least… he didn’t think he was.

But the Heichecera changed the subject entirely, suddenly becoming quite irritated, “I gave you a second chance, and this is how you choose to waste it?” She demanded, “Taking on responsibilities that are not yours, and ruining other people’s lives in the process?”

Thomas felt terribly ashamed. A heat spread across his cheeks.

“There are things for you to do, Thomas Barrow.” She urged. “People that you must save. Edward Courtenay and William Mason are not those people!”

“Well…” Thomas waffled, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“Death will tell you no different.” The Heichecera added. “And if you tried to bargain, you would easily find yourself in over your head. Death would not accept loss without gain.”

But that just got Thomas thinking. What was gain to Death? How did Death even negotiate these
deals? There were questions Thomas had, burning deep questions. Maybe Death could provide the answers instead.

“How do I speak to Death?” Thomas asked. The Heichecera gave him a very disappointed look.

“If you must know, it’s a rather ancient magic. Almost as old as me. You must offer a sacrifice at the divide between worlds.”

“What kind of- wait, hold on a minute-“ Thomas paused, using a hand to cut through the air, “How old are you? You make it sound like your decrepit, but you can’t be more than thirty, can you?”

The Heichecera tittered, as if amused by Thomas’ assumption. “I appear this way for convenience. My actual age is... quite different.”

Well, that was slightly terrifying.

Moving on from the subject of her age, the Heichecera went on to answer Thomas’ unfinished question. “A sacrifice in the eyes of death would deplete your spirit, Thomas. For as much as you like to pretend that you are above the concept of hurting, your heart bleats to me like a lost lamb.”

Thomas scowled. The Heichecera just smirked.

“Thomas, I gave you this chance because I saw what your future could be. Don’t make me watch you squander it twice.”

Thomas deflated, exhausted from this conversation. So it seemed that Edward would have to die, that there simply was no way for him to continue on without Thomas making some horrific sacrifice to death. The ugly, bitter truth of it all was that Thomas didn’t feel his was selfless enough to make a sacrifice for Edward, particularly one that horrific (whatever it may be). There were very few people on this earth that Thomas would sacrifice himself for.

Edward was not one of them. Not anymore...

“...Do I have to kill him?” Thomas mumbled. The Heichecera shook her head.

“Let him go.” The Heichecera murmured. “Death will do the rest.”

In that moment, Thomas could not help but feel like death was all around them. This massive, omnipresent being that one could never run from. The inevitable, which had always been an unspoken but obvious truth to Thomas now suddenly felt terrifying. If the Heichecera was here, where was Death? Was God real? What about angels and demons? Suddenly, Thomas felt very small and feeble in his world.

The Heichecera seemed to know what he was thinking. She didn’t look down on him for his fear.

“Death is not a beast, preying upon the weak.” The Heichecera informed him, “It is an old friend, who comes to take us home at the end of an exhausting day.”

That helped, at least a little bit, but it was still unnerving to think about.

“...and there’s no way I could change Edward’s soul from being mutated?” Thomas asked, just for reassurance. “No way at all?”

The Heichecera shook her head, somber. “No...” She sighed, and suddenly wrapped herself up in a large flowing orange scarf as if a sudden chill had taken her. “But it was my fault to ever let you
imagine you could. I should have warned you from the very beginning.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you.” Thomas was oddly ashamed in that moment. Though he technically did not know the Heichecera, he still felt like he owed her something grand. Something incredible. “I wanted to thank you for giving me this chance. It means everything to me.”

“I know.” The Heichecera smiled, “That’s why I gave it to you.”

And, timidly, Thomas stuck out his hand to see if he could actually touch the Heichecera. But as his fingertips brushed over what would surely be her skin and clothes, she began to dissolve like ink into water. The world around them grew dim, then quiet, and suddenly blackness overtook Thomas’ vision. It slowly receded to reveal Thomas’ room in the abbey, just as he had left it. He was in his bed clothes, once again.

He turned about, and looked at the clock.
It was 11:44 at night.

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It was through the Dowager Countess’ vast connections that William was brought back to the warmth of Downton Abbey. Though last time Thomas had faced stiff opposition in finding William room, this time he was well within his power to acquire William a bed in the south wing and keep him there. Daisy was growing more pale by the day, looking sickly as if the weight of her lies were crushing her to death. Thomas felt terribly sorry for the girl, and wondered what he could do to save her.

He felt as if the strain was beginning to take him too. Like he was crumpling at the knees underneath the burden of keeping everyone happy.

William arrived at the abbey around teatime, with most of the family already downstairs in the northern library garnering what little privacy they could still keep. William’s arrival was heralded by a string of ambulances bringing more men to their convalescent, most of whom were in such dire shape that they couldn’t walk on their own. The war was drawing to an ugly close, and in its wake the fighting was getting worse. It was now time to kill or be killed, with no one being spared. Not even William Mason.

Thomas was at the door, waiting for William to arrive when the very last ambulance pulled up. Thomas noted that it was from Leeds, a clear sign that William was inside. It seemed that William’s condition had become so frail that putting him on a train was written off for a poor idea. It was a sign of the boy’s impending doom, and Thomas grimaced as he signed off for William’s release of care just as he had done for hundreds of other soldiers over the past year.

“Here we go-“ The ambulance driver pitched in, joining a team of four men to help pull William out of the back of the truck. He was bedded down with leather straps to keep him from jostling about, and his normally cherubic face was now waxen like a corpse.

“We’re taking him to the South wing, gentlemen.” Thomas declared, leading the way into the abbey, “If you’ll follow me?”

“Righto-!”

The South Wing was a normally reserved for guests, a quiet corner near the bachelor’s corridor that
only boasted a few rooms normally left untended to by the maids. They were named after colors: blue, pink, and green. In lieu of William's arrival, the blue room had been made up; their trek through the abbey gathered a smattering of followers, with both Mrs. Hughes and Lady Edith eager to be of assistance. William's father, Mr. Mason, had ridden with William from Leeds in the back of the ambulance. He looked ready to keel over, ashen and unkempt from days without a proper wash and a comfortable bed.

Thomas opened the door to the blue room for all of them, stepping aside so that the medics, William, Mrs. Hughes, Lady Edith, and Mr. Mason could enter one at a time. He was the last through the door, closing it curtly so that they could be garnered a bit of privacy. Mrs. Hughes turned down the covers at once, aided oddly enough by Lady Edith. The medics laid William out on the bed, undoing the gurney traps and slipping the canvas backing from beneath William's spine so that he could be neatly deposited atop the bed with minimal fuss. They left without another word, tipping their hat to Lady Edith as they passed. They were due to return to Leeds, and had a long way to travel before their day was done.

The last medic out handing Thomas over a loaded clipboard; it was William's chart, and the amount of negative marks he found made Thomas wince. Christ… it was shocking to think William had actually lived through the ambulance ride.

Thomas flipped through the pages, noting that William's blood pressure was disturbingly low and his prior doctor had made extensive notes about William having possible dyspnea and hypoxia. In short, William couldn't breath, and what breath he could garner wasn't oxygenated enough. This wasn't hard to garner, though, even for one without medical training. William's lips were blue, as were his eyelids. He was listless, seemingly unable to realize where he was or what was going on. He lay comatose upon the bed, eyes closed and breathing shallow.

Before Thomas could get much of a look in, however, he was greeted by Mr. Mason who approached him with a pensive expression.

"Are you Thomas Barrow?" Mr. Mason asked.

"…I am." Thomas shook his hand, "And I can guess who you are, Mr. Mason."

In truth, William Mason's father had always been a topic of much debate for Thomas. In the aftermath of William's death, Thomas was solidly outcasted from the social circles of Downton Abbey, regarded as a bastard in lieu of the angelic presence William cast. William had often spoke about his family with such tender love and care, yearning for his mother even before her death and heading home every half day that he was granted. Thomas, in retrospect, had grown bitter in light of William's loving household. In particular the relationship William had had with his father was one of much heartache for Thomas. He could not help but think of his own father, and how the pair of them had been doomed from the start.

He could not help but wonder what his life would have been like... had his father loved him. He wouldn't have been a footman, for a start. He would have taken over the family shop and gone into business proper.

"My William spoke about you to me," Mr. Mason said. "He said you were a great healer. One of the best."

"He was exaggerating." Thomas said. Mr. Mason just shook his head.

"I don't think so. My boy isn't the kind to stretch the truth."
There was again, yet another little reminder that William was the golden child. He could remember Mrs. Patmore and Mrs. Hughes both making snips at him in his prior reality, insisting that Thomas was just ‘telling tales’ or ‘coloring outside the lines’. They’d had a phrase a day to label his queer behavior.

“Thomas, I have a favor to ask you,” Mr. Mason pleaded, seemingly oblivious to anyone else in the room. Both Edith and Mrs. Hughes were tending to William, trying to get him settled.

Thomas was suddenly nervous to meet Mr. Mason’s eyes, well aware of what the man was going to ask him.

“I know I have no right, when we’re complete strangers… but I’m a father and he’s my only living son. I hope that you, as a man, would be able to understand that.”

“Mm.” Thomas didn’t trust himself to speak in that moment.

Please don’t ask me, Thomas wanted to say. Please I beg of you—!

But it seemed that Mr. Mason was going to ask either way, “Please, can’t you save my boy?”

Mrs. Hughes and Lady Edith both looked around, amazed at Mr. Mason’s request. After the conversation that Thomas had had with the Heichecera the night before, he could feel the blood slowly but surely draining from his face.

“They say that you’re a legend on the battle field.” Mr. Mason continued on when Thomas didn’t make to agree, “That you’ve saved so many men you’ve been awarded by the King.”

“I- I’m afraid the damage is just too great.” Thomas said, gesturing with the charts in hand, “I don’t think I can—”

“But will you at least look at him?” Mr. Mason protested.

Thomas pursed his lips, frightened to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

“I think it’s a good idea, Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes spoke up, tenderly. Thomas could not meet her eyes.

“It can’t hurt,” Lady Edith gently added.

He busied himself with looking at the chart, completely at a loss for what to say or do. He wished he could throw his cares aside and tend to William, but he knew better now. William’s soul would be in terrible jeopardy, should he dare to intervene with death. If Thomas just kept wandering around, meddling with fate, what kind of awful world would he end up creating?

“I…” Thomas tried to weasel a way out for himself, “I can’t promise anything.”

“I understand.” Mr. Mason said at once, his tone becoming more fevered with hope, “And it means more to me than you could ever know, to do this for my family. I’ve lost all but one of my children… James, Rebecca, Robert…” Mr. Mason looked ready to cry, “My sweet wife, Bryn… I can’t lose him, Thomas. He’s all I have.”

Mrs. Hughes seemed ready to cry herself. She tried to keep busy, turning away to tuck William in deep beneath the quilted coverlets.

“Don’t tuck him in right away, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas felt miserable as he said it, setting aside the
clipboard to unbutton his shirtsleeves at the wrists. “I’m going to need some privacy-“ He added, when no one made to move. He didn’t know how he’d feel about Lady Edith being in the room when he unbuttoned William’s pajamas.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Lady Edith knew when to take a hint. She paused at the door, giving Thomas another smile, “Can I get you anything?”

“A stethoscope, if you can M’lady,” Thomas asked.

“Right.” Lady Edith left, closing the door behind her.

“I’d like to stay, if that’s alright,” Mr. Mason asked. He’d taken off his tweed newscap, and was twisting it fretfully in his calloused hands.

“I don’t think he’d mine me being here.” Mrs. Hughes kept a healthy distance though, taking an almost motherly approach at Mr. Mason’s side, “Do you?”

“No, not at all.” Mr. Mason said, warmly. Mrs. Hughes smiled, touched at the Mason’s inclusion of her in their trust.

Lady Edith returned, a stethoscope in hand. Thomas took it, gratefully, and Lady Edith was gone in a flash again. As soon as the door was closed, Thomas perched himself on the side of William’s bed, and made to unbutton William’s shirt.

But he stopped, hands frozen over William’s cotton lapel.

He shouldn’t be doing this, undressing William when he was laying in bed. It was too similar to Jimmy, to much for Thomas to bear, and he leapt off the bed again to pace feverishly at the foot of the bed.

“I’ll do it, shall I?” Mrs. Hughes said, hurriedly. Perhaps she saw the panic in his face, and realized what it was for. Her work was fastidious, tucking each of William’s buttons until his marred chest was revealed to the room. Thomas was disturbed by the speckled bruising over William’s lungs. How his chest seemed oddly swollen somehow. Thomas had worked far too closely with William over the years to have the wool pulled over his eyes now.

Something was definitely off about William, and it wasn’t just bomb blast.

Curious, Thomas perched himself upon the edge of the bed and threaded the stethoscope in his ears. He listened intently, the sensitive pad pressed above William’s heart. There, the organ beat on, though it was sluggish and weak. What was more, Thomas could hear something odd… a fluid swishing noise further impeded upon by clicking.

Wary, he drew back and tried to listen from a different angle. He heard the same thing. Then he tried from yet another angle. Still, the same thing.

So something was definitely going on in William’s lungs, completely aside from the fact that his frame was weakened from a massive explosion. it was like his lungs were swimming in fluid, which would account for a great deal of symptoms Thomas was seeing (like the swelling) and hearing (like the swishing). The queer thing was, if Thomas was right and there was fluid in William’s lungs, a surgery could very well save his life. If Thomas was wrong, however, and it was bomb blast, a surgery would most certainly kill him.

But there was more.
The closer Thomas got to William’s chest, the more he realized that the bruises which mottled William’s skin weren’t actually bruises at all.

They were scabs.

“… What the hell are those?” Thomas muttered, squinting his eyes to try and get a better view. Dissatisfied, he pulled back to find both Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Mason watching fretfully.

“Mrs. Hughes, could you get me a magnifying glass and a pair of … tweezers, I suppose?” Thomas asked.

“You’re in luck.” Mrs. Hughes, fishing about with her chatelaine, “I carry a great deal many things on here, you know.”

And she very well did. There were a pair of scissors, a vinaigrette, a miniature letter opener, a fold out screw or shifty bolts, a watch, a thimble, a household seal, a heart shaped emery for sharpening needles, a silver needle book, a heart-shaped pinwheel, a tape measurer, a pair of tweezers, and a fold out magnifying glass. This, of course, was accompanied by over ten different sets of keys from everything be it the pantry, the linen cupboard, the wine cellar, all the way up to the family rooms.

It was a miracle the woman didn’t walk with a limp.

Mrs. Hughes handed Thomas over her tweezers and magnifying glass, unclasping both from the silver chains on which they hung. They were small in Thomas’ hands, but they would do just as well.

“Miracle you don't lean to one side with all that you carry.” Thomas joked, bending back over William with the magnifying glass up to his eyes.

“It’s better that I have it with me than need it.” Mrs. Hughes said.

“Is there anything that you can do for him?” Mr. Mason asked, twisting his cap with both hands, “Anything at all? The other doctors all said that he… that he…. that all we could do was make him comfortable.”

“I shouldn't interfere with fate,” Thomas said, feeling like a bastard for even insisting as such to a grieving father, “But something isn’t right, and I want to know what-“

“Well I appreciate that.” Mr. Mason sounded close to tears, “I do.”

“Mrs. Hughes can you make the light brighter?”

“Of course.” At once, Mrs. Hughes turned on the bedside lamp so that the room was filled with a vibrant warmth.

By god if he wasn’t right, amazed at the lines of flecked and dried blood upon William’s abdomen. One in particular was bulging at an alarming proximity, with the skin purpled from strain trying to hold something in. Nervous, Thomas used his tweezers to ever so timidly pull back on the scab that held William’s aching wound closed.

A dollop of silver slid out in a tiny pool of browning blood. Wary, Thomas plucked it up with the tweezers and held it to his eye.

It was a fragment of metal. Thomas could just make the smallest bit of blackened cursive on the fragment. Whatever it was, it had once had writing upon it.
Unnerved, Thomas sat the metal down upon William’s chest and looked around at Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Mason, disturbed.

“… I think I need to call Dr. Clarkson.” Thomas said.
He wanted someone else’s opinion, and fast.

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Dr. Clarkson came after an hour or two had passed, unable to get away from the hospital on such short notice without small issue. When he was free, however, the man arrived with traveling bag in hand, and went promptly to the south corridor to see what all the fuss was about. There he met Mr. Mason, still keeping watch over William, and called for Thomas to come to his aid. Thomas had been downstairs having a cup of tea, and when he’d been fetched Mrs. Patmore had come too. She’d been terribly worried, always having a fondness for William and wanting to see how he was getting on. The hour was drawing close to dinner but Mrs. Patmore’s main work was done. Now it was up to Daisy and the girls to get all the side dishes ready while Mr. Carson finished decanting the wine. The house was running smoothly and wouldn’t miss them if they were gone for a few moments. The pair of them went upstairs together, only to sit on the sidelines as Dr. Clarkson listened to William’s lungs and observed the fragment of metal Thomas had found in William’s scabs. Lady Edith had likewise joined their numbers, having stopped in to check on William like all the rest of her patients.

The look on Dr. Clarkson’s face was incredibly telling. He too was worried.

Yet when he finally pulled back, he did not address Lady Edith, Mr. Mason, or Mrs. Patmore. Instead, his steely eyes sought out Thomas first.

“I’ll speak with you in the hall.” Dr. Clarkson said. He rose up, took off his reading glasses to stow them in his breast pocket, and let Mr. Mason to tend quietly to his son. Thomas slipped out after Dr. Clarkson, closing the door carefully so as not to disturb their sleeping patient. Dr. Clarkson walked several feet down the hall, not wanting to be overheard, then turned on the spot and faced Thomas with a look of slight exhaustion.

“I heard it.” Dr. Clarkson said. Thomas instantly felt justified, and was glad to have called on the doctor for a second opinion.

“I think I know what it is.” Thomas said, “I think it’s debris in his lungs; he must be drowning in his own fluid.”

“It’s Pulmonary Edema.” Dr. Clarkson clarified, with a slight edge in his voice. “And if you’re right a surgery could save him-“

“But if I’m wrong a surgery will kill him.” Thomas finished. Dr. Clarkson shrugged, dismayed at their bleak circumstances.

“We both know he’s going to die anyways.” Dr. Clarkson whispered, keeping his voice as low as possible, “He doesn’t have long. At most, I’d give him 72 hours. His heart can’t take any more strain.”

“Well wouldn’t we rather he die in one piece?”

“I’d rather he didn’t die at all.” Dr. Clarkson scoffed. Burned, Thomas looked away. Dr. Clarkson
seemed to take this show of cowardice as some form of stage-fright, “Thomas, you’re an excellent healer. You know what you’re doing.”

“I’m a footman with a scalpel,” Thomas reminded him. Dr. Clarkson gave him a knowing look.

“Well… he’s a footman with Pulmonary Edema.”

They returned to the room after that, with Thomas the last to enter. He was grim faced, leaving Dr. Clarkson to do most of the talking.

“Well, can you save him?” Mr. Mason was the first to speak, at this point flat out begging for a miracle. Dr. Clarkson shushed him with a gentle wave of the hand, wanting silence in order to get out all his talking points before the debate started.

“Mason doesn’t have Bomb Blast,” Dr. Clarkson announced, “He has what’s known as Pulmonary Edema. A fluid build up in the lungs. Thomas was right to spot several telling symptoms, and alerted me for a second opinion. I’ve done my examination on the boy and happen to concur. William was misdiagnosed, and it is possible that a surgery could save him. But it’s beyond my skills as a doctor. If it were left up to me, we’d have to take William to London for surgery.”

“But-“ Mr. Mason looked ready to weep, his voice rising with exhaustion and terror, “But I don’t have the money-!”

“Don’t give up hope just yet.” Dr. Clarkson declared, “I think I have a solution which will benefit all of us.”

At this, he turned to Thomas. Thomas went white.

“Thomas could do the surgery, for free.” Dr. Clarkson said. Thomas swallowed, suddenly ready to be sick.

“I…” Thomas’ tone was feeble, hardly his characteristic tempo. “I shouldn’t-“

“What are you saying?” Lady Edith asked, agog. “Do you want money?”

“It’s nothing to do with money at all, M’lady.” Thomas cut her off, desperate not to be taken for a bastard. “It’s just that…” His voice faded away, rendered mute by the look on Mr. William’s face.

A tear had slipped out of his left eye, and was beginning to trickle down into his gray bushy beard.

“Thomas… please, I beg of you.” Mr. Mason spoke in a throaty voice, “He’s all I have. I know you can save him. I feel it in my bones. You’re my only hope now. Please don’t make me bury my only child. I can’t do it again-“

And suddenly, the man broke down to weep.

Mrs. Patmore let out a string of piteous noises, fetching her handkerchief for Mr. Mason to use. Lady Edith urged Mr. Mason to sit down, and so the man did, sniffing heavily until he felt he could control himself.

Thomas had shrunk so much in stature that he was in danger of vanishing into the rug. Everyone was now looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to step forward and be the hero. To declare ‘I will
save him’!

But could he, when he knew what would inevitably happen?

“… Mr. Mason, if I’m wrong, surgery will kill him.” Thomas said, trying to paint as bleak a picture as possible in the prayer that everyone would give this up as a false hope, “If it is Bomb Blast, which I don’t think it is, his body wouldn’t be able to recover from the damage of surgery. I’d have to cut into William, and remove the fragments of debris from his lungs. I’d have to drain the fluid, inserting sharp tubes between his rib-“

Mrs. Patmore nearly fainted, falling against a dresser with sudden gasping noises. Both Dr. Clarkson and Lady Edith, reached out for her, shocked.

“Mrs. Patmore!” Dr. Clarkson barked, “Stay with us!”

“Oh, you-!” Mrs. Patmore looked ready to cave Thomas’ head in with a meat tenderizer. “What’s wrong with you? You can’t say such things aloud!”

“S-sorry!” Thomas stuttered; in his ennui, he’d forgotten Mrs. Patmore was a traditionalist like Mr. Carson. The concept of Thomas cutting into William had clearly been too much for her to take. “I forgot-“

“You’re no good with women at all.” Mrs. Patmore said with such scorn that Thomas felt his cheeks flush bright hot.

“Admittedly.” He agreed, weakly.

“If I give you permission, knowing full well the risks, will you perform the surgery?” Mr. Mason asked. His hands were still clasped, as if in prayer. “I understand your conviction, truly I do Thomas. I know you don’t want to do this because you’re scared you’ll fail-“

You’re wrong, Thomas thought bitterly, I’m scared I’ll succeed.

“But even if you do fail, at least we tried.” Mr. Mason implored. “That to me will be worth all the risk.”

Thomas bowed his head, the stifling silence in the room weighing heavily upon his mind. What could he do to navigate out of such a tight channel? What could he say to these people to make them change their minds?

“I need to think on it.” Thomas finally said.

“What’s to think on?” Lady Edith demanded, gesturing at William irritably, “You have the skills and he’s in need. I thought you were fond of William, of doing the right thing-“

“I am, M’lady but it’s very complicated.” Thomas was on the verge of getting cross, which would bode well for no one. “And I don’t want to hurt William. My fear is that what if it’s his time? What if by interfering with some higher plan-“

“What on earth are you babbling about?” Mrs. Patmore demanded, “If it was a higher plan, he’d already be dead, wouldn’t he? You’re here, he’s here, and you’ve been given the chance to save him. If that’s not a higher plan, I don’t know what is!”

And with that, Thomas’ doom was essentially sealed.
It was with maudlin grief that Thomas went about the rest of his day. Dr. Clarkson made initial plans to return to the abbey tomorrow morning, deciding they would do the surgery during the day when they had the light on their side. He would bring with him supplies to aid in William’s recovery, along with an anesthesia that would give William peace during the operation. All of this would come at no expense to Mr. Mason, who’d already drained the family accounts by having to travel back and forth to Leeds several times. The man was so grateful he was near hysterics, collapsing into several bouts of crying while he praised Dr. Clarkson, Thomas, and God in succession. Dr. Clarkson was polite, gently reminding Mr. Mason that nothing was set in stone yet. Thomas, for his part, could do little more than nod or shake his head. He’d been essentially rendered mute by this point, so frightened of what would come next that he found he couldn’t speak.

He ate dinner in his room that night, and only ventured out near midnight for a cup of tea. He found he couldn’t sleep, with his mind buzzing.

The downstairs was dark and quiet, with everyone from Daisy to Mr. Carson now safely in bed. This meant that Thomas could work in peace, heating a kettle upon the dwindling rang which had been left to simmer with glowing coals deep in its belly. It took longer for the kettle to boil, but Thomas didn’t mind. It was nice to fetch his own cup of tea, to measure out his leaves and pour the water. With his brew steeping, Thomas sliced a leftover lemon and put more honey than strictly necessary into his cup. Normally he couldn’t get away with such things while everyone was watching… but with no one near, it was easier to sneak extra sweets.

He ventured to the servant’s hall, sitting down in his favorite armchair by the fire to think.

He felt like an utter putz, played for a fool by the very people he was trying to protect. If only he could explain to them; if only they would listen!

He took several sips of steaming, sweetened tea, wondering what to do. Would the Heichecera be furious at him for going through with the surgery? Would his reputation survive if he turned Mr. Mason’s request down? Perhaps he could do something to incapacitate himself tomorrow, like ‘accidentally’ fall down the stairs.

But what if that killed him?

“Oh bugger it.” Thomas sighed, quietly.

After a few minutes more, Thomas relaxed his eyes and leaned back in his rocking chair. He tried to get himself to go to sleep, aided by the warmth of the fire and the honey in his tea. But even still, he couldn’t get his brain to quiet down.

He paused mid-rock, sighing irritably, and opened his eyes again to instead take in the lazy details of the hall.

The coals, so low in the hearth, were casting beautiful shadows over the ancient rickety furniture. The table looked majestic somehow. The windows seemed to have been spun from sugar glass. It was all rather pleasing, and Thomas suddenly wished that he could paint this scene to forever capture it in his mind.

But his reverie was broken by the sight of shadows drifting upon the floor and wall. Someone was walking into the hall; a woman, judging by the shape of the shadows bent at the angle of a skirt.
“S’just me,” Thomas spoke up. When the woman, whoever she was, did not make to respond, Thomas sat up a little straighter in his chair. “Mrs. Patmore? Mrs. Hughes?”

Neither replied.

With a swish of beaded satin and clinking antique coins, the Heichecera walked into the room. Thomas knew she’d come to chew him out some more, and fell away, groaning.

“Don’t start…” He muttered underneath his breath.

The Heichecera didn’t seem to mind too much. She sat down atop the servant’s table, jaunting one leg over the opposite knee so that her skirts swished and clinking. With hands astride her hips, the Heichecera observed the servant’s hall with mute interest.

“You made a compelling argument,” The Heichecera praised.

Oh pish poodle. What did that amount to in the end? “I looked like a prat.”

Irritable, he pulled a pack of cigarettes from atop the mantle and struck one up with a communal matchbox. He drew a deep breath, smoke wafting about his hands and face like spiderwebs.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Thomas asked, after a moment, “It’s that… Pulmonary whatsit Dr. Clarkson said?”

“You are.” The Heichecera agreed.

“So he died because of an error made by another doctor.“ Thomas rose up, taking his tea with him so that he could smoke and drink at the same time. He paced, a little feverish.

“Yes.”

“Then why does he have to die?” Thomas demanded, “Why, if it was an honest to god mistake?”

“Because of the consequences, had he lived.” The Heichecera reminded him calmly. “He would have become a monster.”

“What consequences?” Thomas demanded. “William’s a lamb. He’s probably never even cursed. How could you call him a monster?”

“Daisy Robinson might disagree with you.” The Heichecera said. “Imagine… being forced to marry someone you don’t want to. Being raped in your own marital bed.”

That made Thomas stop dead, a cold feeling of dread rotting his very bones. The thought of Daisy—of any woman in their house—being raped, made Thomas want to be sick to his stomach. He turned about, staring in shock at the Heichecera.

She nodded, solemnly.

“Oh yes.” She murmured.

For a moment, Thomas could do very little but smoke. When he finished his cigarette, he weakly tossed the butt into the fire and then fished for another. Out of politeness, he offered one to the Heichecera. She turned him down, even as he struck up his second fag for the night.

“We have a kettle going.” Thomas said, his mouth slightly full around the butt of his new cigarette, “Would you like a cuppa?”
He paused to light his cigarette, and blew out another pillar of smoke into the air. The Heichecera gave him an expectant smile, unperturbed.

“You’re very kind, but I’ve not indulged in food or drink for three thousand years.”

It was unfortunate that Thomas had been in the middle of sipping tea, because he suddenly choked, nearly spraying his brew upon the flagstone floor. Three thousand-?!

“Three thousand-“ Thomas couldn’t even get out the whole phrase, “Three-! Three?!”

“Oh honestly, Thomas. Did you think I was some common gypsy?” She tutted, re-crossing her legs. She drew her fingers through the smoke, and where she touched the air seemed to come to life. Tiny purple and white lights danced near the tips of her fingers, like fairies, spiraling around the gloom of Thomas’ smoke. She cupped her hand and the sparks began to swirl in a circular formation like a miniature universe. It was so incredibly beautiful that Thomas almost forgot to keep a firm hold on his teacup. It was close to spilling it on the floor by accident.

“… Didn’t think you were a common anything…” Thomas mumbled. The Heichecera smiled, tending to her little dancing sparks like one would a helpless animal.

“How very true,” She said. The sparks seemed to flash brighter for a moment as if in merriment. “You do realize, do you not, that you are slowly rotting your lungs from smoking.”

“Are they going to kill me?”

“No,” The Heichecera said, sadly. There was something odd in her voice, something that made Thomas feel like she knew exactly what was actually going to kill him. Oddly, it didn’t frighten him.

Death would come either way, wouldn’t it?

“What if Dr. Clarkson saved William’s life?” Thomas asked, “Same problem?”

“The problem was not his death. The problem was his life.” The Heichecera corrected him. “You’re thinking of Edward, whose death was traumatic. Traumatic deaths, when avoided, rot the soul. Think of ghosts, from souls ripped too fast from this world or too slow. William’s death was a peaceful one.”

“So… What if I interfered and saved Daisy from him?” Thomas asked.

“How do you think William would react to that?” The Heichecera asked. Her thumb was waving in and out of the smoke, making it ripple like she was touching water, not air.

“…think he’d probably be upset, but he’d get over it eventually-“

“William Mason is not an angel.” The Heichecera warned. “He is spoiled by his father, the only surviving child. You have never known a parent’s love, so you do not understand what a drug it can be. If you deny William the woman he loves, he will never forgive you. The rest of his life, he will hate you with all his heart. He will scorn you, disdain you, and attempt to hurt the things you love. Can you live with that? Can you accept the price?”

Thomas thought about it, chewing upon his lip.

The fact of the matter was, he wasn’t a stranger to scorn. The Heichecera knew this well. But at the same time, Thomas had been wanting to start his life over. To try and make a new world for himself, where he could be loved by everyone. Clearly this would be impossible, but was that what was
really important? What about Mr. Mason, so close to losing everything? What if emphasis was being put on the wrong person? What if this wasn’t even about William at all?

“His father will be alone.” Thomas said. The Heichecera watched him, patiently. “If William dies, he’ll be completely alone.”

“For a moment,” She concluded, “But in the end he will gain Daisy, and so he won’t be totally alone.”

But would that truly replace a child of his own? Thomas wasn’t too sure.

“No one can replace a child.” Thomas said. The Heichecera looked very sad, all of a sudden, as if recalling a past where a child had been taken to leave a terrible aching gap. “If William survived, I would be the one punished. I can live with that. Is that what you’re saying to me?”

“Daisy and William’s father would suffer too.” The Heichecera warned. “William would inflict terrible anger upon Daisy… and his father would have to watch him fall slowly apart. William will inevitably ruin his life out of his rage towards you.”

That was an ugly, bitter pill to swallow.

“Maybe… maybe he’ll get better?”

“Maybe, but it will be a long road to understanding.” The Heichecera said. “There will come a time when William will see something shocking. Something that will make him realize he was wrong. He’ll change after that, but not before.”

“So be it.” Thomas decided, growing emboldened with his decision. Who didn’t make mistakes in life? Maybe it was finally William’s turn.

“…I think I have to do it.” Thomas concluded, when the Heichecera simply continued to watch him, “To save face. If I don’t do it, they’ll hate me. I can afford to lose William’s love. But not the others. I can’t lose their love, not when I know what it is to not have it.”

“I thought you’d say the same about William?”

“I knew what William was even back then.” Thomas warned, thinking on how in his original universe he’d utterly despised William, “William was never an angel to me.”

He paused, glancing at the Heichecera. He wondered, what would the true consequences be? “Will you damn me for going against your request?”

“I never damned you in the first place, Thomas.” The Heichecera corrected him gently, “But saving William will come with its consequences, just like saving Edward. Death is not something to run from or to. It works on its own schedules, and like an old friend it comes to take us home when it is time. If you deny death its claim, you will know its wrath.”

Now that was enough to put a chill in anyone’s step. Thomas shuddered at the implications, wondering what on earth he’d be facing for denying death twice in a row. Would he be visited by some terrifying specter in black robes bearing a harvesting scythe?

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked. “What’s the wrath of death?”

The Heichecera sighed, as if internally struggling with some great burden.
“Oh Thomas…” She muttered, shaking her head, “How do I explain something to you that is so terribly beyond you?”

“Well someone had to explain it to you,” Thomas gestured to her, “You were born a mortal like me, weren’t you?”

The Heichecera shook her head, “No, I was never born into this world. Death and I… we’ve known one another for a very long time. I’m sort of an…agent, if you will. It’s my job to keep the balance and order of this world in times of great sorrow or strife.”

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked. He felt like someone was prying open the top of his brain with a crowbar to let all the secrets of the universe pour in. “What are you?”

The Heichecera shrugged. The little galaxy in her hand was growing more animated, more brilliant as she spoke, “I am what is required of me by the universe, as are you. An ordinary man wouldn’t be able to do what you’ve done with me, Thomas.” She paused, smiling lovingly, “It requires someone of incredible fortitude. Someone brave beyond all imagining.”

And suddenly, Thomas was shocked by the sound of Phyllis Baxter, whose voice radiated out of the smoky galaxy in the Heichecera’s hand.

“To put yourself through such pains to achieve your goal... think of what you could do if only you set your mind to it.”

There was suddenly a sizable knot in Thomas’ throat. It was difficult to swallow around it.

He wanted to reach out to the little galaxy. To scoop Phyllis out of it and hold her close. He suddenly realized just how much he missed her. How much he’d love her.

“How did you do that?” Thomas whispered. “Can you do it again?”

“This is but an essence of who you are,” The Heichecera explained again, oddly touched by Thomas’ emotional reaction. “Memories that you hold dear. To me they are as easy to pluck up as the strings of a violin.”

Thomas took a step closer, and then another one. He was nervous, eyes misting and throat burning… but…

“…Let me hear… again…” He could not get the words out.
He wondered if the Heichecera could understand what it meant to him. To hear words from loved ones.

She caught his eyes and held it, those beautiful amber depths slowly beginning to milk over with the force of her power. The galaxy in her hand was pulsing, slowly turning from purple to the most beautiful shade of light blue that Thomas had ever seen. It almost reminded him of Jimmy’s eyes-

“You were brave, Mr. Barrow. Very brave.”

Bitter, Thomas reached out with timid, trembling fingers to try and touch the little galaxy. Some part of his brain, no doubt muddled by lack of sleep and stress, seemed to think that if he only touched the lights, Jimmy would come back to him. Would appear before him, and love him.

But even as Thomas reached out, the Heichecera closed her hand. The lights vanished, and the pair of them were left in cold, quiet gloom.
“All in due time,” Was her gentle reply to Thomas’ nonexistent question.

But the sudden sound of the backdoor opening caught Thomas’ attention. He looked around, confused and slightly afraid as to who was entering the house at this time of night. He’d thought the back door was locked up tight!

“Someone’s coming-” Thomas hissed at the sound of heels clicking upon the flagstone floor, “Who on earth-?”

But then another thought hit him, and it was one of panic. Whoever this person was, coming up the hall, they would surely not expect to see a gypsy sitting in the servant’s hall. Thomas could face serious trouble if Carson or Mrs. Hughes ever found out he’d had a guest after hours, and a peculiar one at that-!

“You have to hide!” Thomas almost wanted to push the Heichecera under the table, and nearly made to do so until his hands sank right through her. She’d turned into a holographic mist, visible but untouchable. Once again, Thomas was in awe of this incredible woman.

“Do not be afraid,” The Heichecera replied, calm as could be, “I am only for your eyes. Be alert, your destiny is in motion.”

Afraid for the worst, Thomas stepped against the hearth to hide in its shadow as the unwanted visitor entered the room. Without the lights on, Thomas could discern very little. Whoever they were, they were slightly shorter than him in a long coat and a hat- a woman, then it seemed.

Wary of it being Vera Bates, Thomas leapt out with his fists up.

“Who are you?” He demanded angrily, “You can’t be in here-!”

At this, the visitor let out an unearthly scream, petrified of being approached in such an ungentlemanly way. They flattened themselves against the wall, a hand pressed over their erratically beating heart. As the woman came into the light, Thomas was horrified to see it was none other than Mrs. Hughes!

“M-Mrs. Hughes-!!” He spluttered, shocked at her appearance. What in the hell was she doing out so late? “I- I’m sorry-!”

“You-!” She couldn’t seem to find words in both the English and Scottish vocabulary to express her anger with him at that moment. “Thomas Barrow, I could hang you for your impertinence! Jumping out at me like that!”

She gasped for breath, and for a moment Thomas was terrified he’d given the poor woman a heart attack. Instead, she recovered herself with due time, and gave him a withering look.

“What are you doing up?” she demanded. “You ought to be asleep.”

“Well-” And now he really was on the verge of being impertinent, “You’re… the one sneaking about in a coat and-“

“I do not sneak.” Mrs. Hughes spoke the word with such dry derision that it was as good as a curse in her eyes, “If you must know, I had a late errand to attend to.”

“Oh.” Thomas looked back over his shoulder, to find the Heichecera still sitting there, watching their conversation calmly. Why had she told him his destiny was in motion? That didn’t make any sense if it was just Mrs. Hughes coming home from an errand.
“Ask,” The Heichecera commanded.

Thomas turned back around to look at Mrs. Hughes. She’d taken off her hat and was pulling a long hat pin out of her curled hair.

“… So… if you don’t mind me asking… what were you doing out so late?”

For a moment, Mrs. Hughes seemed to consider telling him to bugger off. Then, she deflated, and gave him a somber look.

“I was visiting Ethel, if you must know,” Mrs. Hughes admitted, sadly.

“You found her!” Thomas was shocked. No one had heard from Ethel in over a year!

“Yes,” Clearly whatever else she’d found had not been heartening, “I found her, or rather she wrote to me to ask for help.”

“How is she?” Thomas asked at once, “Has she had the baby?”

“Yes… she’s had the baby.” Mrs. Hughes said. She began to unbutton her coat, hanging it upon a coat rack near the door to the side hall. “A little boy she’s calling Charlie.”

Thomas’ heart clenched tightly in his chest out of jealousy. What would he give to have a child of his own? It made him think of George, Sybbie, and Marigold… he missed them all so terribly. They were the only aspect of his past that he longed to return to.

Mrs. Hughes noted the jealousy on his face, and gave him a perturbed look, “Oh Thomas, don’t go yearning for a child just yet. You’re young, and life is long.”

“M’afraid it doesn’t matter how long or short it is for me.” Thomas said, bitterly. “I’ll never have a child, will I? Not unless men somehow learn to conceive.”

Mrs. Hughes looked slightly disturbed, but shook it off, “Well, that’s where I was, since you wanted to know. But I promise you’ll keep it to yourself? I don’t want others to know.”

“Is she alright?” Thomas asked, for Mrs. Hughes made it sound like Ethel was in a grave way. “Tell me where she is and I’ll-“

“No, I will not.” Mrs. Hughes refused to budge on the subject, placing her hat atop her coat hook. She waved her hat pin about like a conductor would a baton, pointing at him rather aggressively, “You are already muddled enough without her helping along. She made a mistake and now she must live with it.”

“Mrs. Hughes we’re all guilty of that!”

“Not on that scale, we’re not.” She replied smoothly. “Now off to bed with you. You’ll need your sleep for tomorrow if you’re to help William. I’ll say goodnight.”

With that, she marched for the stairs. Thomas watched her go, feeling as if something terribly important had just sailed over his head. In the quiet, Thomas returned to the table where the Heichecera was perched.

“Shall I tell you a secret?” the Heichecera asked in the gloom. The very final coal in the hearth had finally died away, leaving them in near total blackness save for what light could come from the kitchen.
“I’d imagine you know many.”

“You have the ability to save two people, without consequence. Two people who were lost to you, before.”

Thomas was amazed by this, eyes widening as he looked at the Heichecera. She did not meet his eye, slowly but surely disappearing in the dark. The beautiful galaxy of lights that she’d hidden before now seemed to shine through her image. It was as if Thomas could see where she’d been keeping it, right inside her breast bone.

Suddenly all he was talking to was that little galaxy of lights. The Heichecera was gone, the rest of the world vanishing to.

Thomas crouched down, his face almost pressed against the light.

“How?” He asked the light.

“Go to her.” The light (or was it the Heichecera) replied, “And you shall see”.

The light vanished.

The world went black.

When the gloom receded, Thomas was in his bed, under the covers once again.

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A gleam caught upon the surgical trays, so normally bathed in a fluorescent light. Today, borrowed by Clarkson from the hospital in the village, they were allowed to bask in the yellow and pink gleam of hurricane lamps and dusty chandeliers. In the South hall, a small group of people had gathered at the behest of the patient. Mr. Mason had come, along with Father Travis from the village for a quiet prayer. Daisy had been asked upstairs, and stood tentatively at William’s side holding his hand. Lady Edith, so normally able to care for soldiers, had been asked to remain away from the South hall so that her sister Sybil could instead serve as aid. Thomas had not worn a doctor’s coat since returning home from war. He did not feel comfortable doing so now, and kept staring at his reflection in the standing mirror. Of course, he was also staring at the Heichecera, who was visible in the glass only and was fretting by the foot of William’s bed.

They had a private understanding, but nothing could change the expectations set before Thomas now. Despite being the one skilled in surgery, control had been ripped solidly from his hands.

“Remember,” The Heichecera spoke from the glass, “There will be consequences.”

Thomas nodded, seemingly to no one. Sybil gave him a confused look, unsure of what he was doing.

“By ‘eck it were worth it, if I get to hold your hand.” William murmured from the bed, stroking Daisy’s hand like it were made of gold.

“Don’t be daft.” Daisy whispered. She looked miserable.
After what the Heichecera had said the night before, of Daisy being raped in a marital bed, Thomas felt sick to his stomach the sight. He wanted to rip Daisy away, to hide her from William. But at the same time, Thomas had to grapple with the concept that William as he was now (untainted by a lifeline marred) would never rape Daisy. Would be sickened by the mere thought. It was only the William who was pushed beyond the blanket of death who would turn into a monster (just like Edward). Thomas would have to monitor the situation closely, and make sure that he was the only victim of William’s anger. It would take healing, and an understanding that Daisy wasn’t meant for him, but eventually the world would be put to rights.

What Thomas did today, he did for Mr. Mason and no one else. …The man who had already lost so much.

“I’ve never slept in a room as big as this.” William look up at the canopied ceiling in amazement. Jeweled cherubs holding bouquets of birds smiled down at him, “Where am I?”

“At the end of the South Gallery,” Sybil explained. She prepared in a steep glass a dark liquid that looked like tar. It was an anesthetic, and would be used to help ease William under during surgery. Once out, a gas mask would be applied to his nose to keep him under. His body had already endured far too much to be forced in and out of consciousness. This drink would be easier to digest on a wounded system. “Now, take this.” Sybil ordered, passing William the drink.

William stared at the glass, blinking before he instead addressed Sybil with more questions. It was like he was putting off the inevitable.

“Any news of Captain Crawley?” He asked.

“He’s doing much better, thanks to you.” Sybil murmured with a sweet smile.

William stared down at the drink, thumbing the rim of the crystal glass. “So,” He said, looking up to address Thomas instead. “Is this the drink to put me under?”

Thomas looked away, unwilling to respond. It wasn’t normal that he got to talk to his patients before he operated on them. They were usually already knocked out cold, or screaming in pain. Neither were good states for conversation. To busy himself, Thomas straightened scalpels upon his surgical tray. In his head, he named them, touching one instrument after another like he’d been bidden to memorize them all.

“It is,” Sybil replied when Thomas did not. “It’s easier to digest than morphine. It tastes a bit funny though, and I’m terribly sorry about that.”

“So it’s either I drink this now, and never wake up… or wake up from surgery healed?”

“That’s correct. Yes.”

“Can I have a moment alone with my family?”
Daisy tried to pull away. William held tight to her hand.

“Stay.” He whispered lovingly. Daisy trembled at his touch.

And so, Dr. Clarkson, Thomas, and Sybil all retreated from the room with Travis in tow. The man finished his prayer, shook William’s hand, and left without another word. Thomas found himself at odds in the hallway, staring up at the ceiling and thinking only of the Heichecera’s words from the night before. The whole morning, he’d been unable to contemplate anything else, amazed at the realization that he was to save Ethel Parks. He found himself thinking of her, of how she’d been in tears upon being discovered. Of her son, Charlie, and how he wouldn’t be more than a few months
old at most now. Thomas so yearned for a child of his own, he could not help but wonder if Ethel might be willing to let him help with raising Charlie.

The idea of it put butterflies in his stomach, but he wasn’t there yet. For now, he had to take care of William.

But even as Thomas made to check his pocket watch for the time, the door to William’s room was flung open so that Daisy might make an escape. She was in tears, and pelted down the hall looking like she might wail at any moment.

“One!” Thomas called after her, worried that William had done or said something to upset her. But then, Mr. Mason followed her out, and he looked near tears as well.

“… He’s taken the medicine.” Mr. Mason said. The man blinked back tears, trying his hardest to stay strong in that moment of terror. “My darlin’ boy.”

Lost in a fit of ennui, Mr. Mason could do little more than follow after Daisy down the hall. He would be kept company in the servant’s hall, allowed to dine on fresh biscuits and hot tea while Clarkson and Thomas did their work.

“Yes, Dr. Clarkson watched the pair of them go, before catching Thomas’ eye. “Let’s begin.”

The first thing to do was strip William’s bed of all decorative sheets, and wash their hands. Sybil worked fast, able to do everything on her own as Thomas and Dr. Clarkson washed their hands in a heavy lye soap. It stung at the skin, but ridded them of germs. When Sybil was done, she helped Thomas to don a surgical smock, tying him up in the back before doing the same for Dr. Clarkson. A lamp so normally adorned with a beaded shade was now bare of its trappings, and the unfiltered light was powerfully bright upon William’s bare chest. His pajama bottoms had been taken away, with a clean cloth covering his legs for modesty. Thomas could not look at William’s nakedness and keep the image of their relationship in his mind. It was important for Thomas, both as a homosexual man and as William’s workmate that he view William as nothing more than a body on a bed. He’d never had thoughts like this during the war, though from time to time he had seen a gorgeous man covered in blood pass through his tent. But today was different, if only because Thomas had an intimate relationship with William. They’d never shared a bed, nor sweet words, but they were still workmates, and frankly Thomas was disturbed by the idea of cutting into him.

But he had to. He had no choice.

“We’ll make several incisions—“ Dr. Clarkson said. Bending over William’s bed, he pointed with a finger and used his stethoscope to scout out any abnormal sounds. For each sound he found, he allowed Sybil to mark the area with non invasive felt tipped pen. By the time he was finished, there were more than twelve areas, notably rimmed by bruises where the shrapnel had entered William’s body.

“Thomas, you’ll be in charge of retrieval,” Doctor Clarkson said, silently designating himself in charge of their motley gang. “I’ll drain fluid and assess any additional damage. Nurse Crawley, you’ll stitch the wounds closed with my direction. Are we clear?”

“Yes Dr. Clarkson,” Thomas and Sybil spoke in calm tandem.

“Very good,” Dr. Clarkson liked order when it came to his work. “Then let’s begin.”
As one, they stepped up to William’s bed. Before them, their patient lay comatose upon a comforter better meant for a feudal king than a farmer’s son. The cherubs smiling down from above seemed to be mocking them.

“Iodine.” Dr. Clarkson commanded. At once, Sybil loaded up a wad of gauze with dark yellow liquid, using a pair of forceps to wipe down William’s chest so that he suddenly looked twenty shades tanner than he actually was. His chest rose and fell slowly, a beautiful tango of life and death with two doctors wielding scalpels standing over him.

Dr. Clarkson was watching Thomas. So was Sybil. They were waiting for him to begin.

Thomas looked down at his hands, and realized they were shaking. His mouth was bone dry, his heart jumping in his throat.

He glanced in the standing mirror. The Heichecera was no longer there.

Thomas took a deep breath, bent over, and began.

He started from the bottom, knowing that he ought to save any incision close to the heart for last. Dr. Clarkson was close behind, with Sybil offering him both spreaders and forceps bearing magnetic tips. They were used mostly for threading wire with sutures, but now they would be used to retrieve metal debris. Thomas cut through several layers of skin, muscle, and fat, until quite suddenly he was fishing delicately around William’s naval. Blood pooled around his nimble fingers, staining the sheets crimson in macabre blooms. Sybil suddenly looked green, but Thomas could not afford to spare her a second glance. All his attention was saved for William, and for the shards of metal that he was slowly but surely extracting from deep within.

One became two… became five…
Became twelve.

Thomas was up to his elbows in torn muscle and ligament while Dr. Clarkson shoved him aside every so often in order to insert a rubber tube into William’s lungs. Using a large plunge to pull ounces of fluid, Dr. Clarkson slowly but surely became the follow up to Thomas’ incisions. Where Thomas cleared the way, Dr. Clarkson showed his true colors and worked miracles.

Thomas could not help but reflect in that moment on all the people who had forsworn Dr. Clarkson was a poor physician.

They were wrong. Thomas knew that now.

“Careful now, careful now…” Dr. Clarkson muttered, seemingly to no one. Sybil was growing paler by the minute, somehow unnerved by the sight of William’s body fluids. Thomas tried to catch her eye once or twice as he made the last incision, but couldn’t spare her another glance when more blood began to flow. As William loss fluid in his lungs, his heart rate grew stronger. As he lost blood, however, his heart was in danger of growing weaker again. This was a disturbing and lopsided balancing act. Any clot could spell disaster. Any misstep could be the premature end.

“Nurse Crawley, check his pulse?” Dr. Clarkson ordered. “Thomas, you suction the fluid, I’m going to use the stethoscope.”

Thomas did as he was told, forgoing his forceps and tweezers with bloodied hands to pick up the tube and plunge. Dr. Clarkson listened intently in several different places, focused on the task at hand even as Sybil took William’s pulse with shaking fingers.
“Getting stronger,” She said, only to pause and turn green again, “I think I might faint.”

Thomas glanced up, realized that Sybil was about two minutes from falling over, and immediately put the situation to rights.

“Sit down,” Thomas ordered her. It was the first time in his life that he’d ever told a lady of the gentry what to do. Sybil was more than happy to acquiesce however, and all but collapsed upon William’s bedside. She took several warbling breathes, even going so far as to take off her nurses cap so that she could hold it over her eyebrows.

Thomas suctioned out even more fluid, wondering when the hell they’d hit the bottom. They’d take out surely more than a pint.

“How could he breath with so much fluid?” Sybil wondered.

“He couldn’t,” Thomas replied. That was the whole point. William had been drowning in his own fluids. Now, with the fluid removed and the debris from the bullets pulled out, he would finally be able to heal and breath normally again.

“It’s incredible he even lived this long,” Sybil took another deep breath, seeming to gain a bit more natural color back in her face. It seemed that watching the fluid rise from William’s lungs had been the line for her. No longer having to look, she was regaining her courage.

Thomas pulled against the stopper until it bottomed out, “We’ve hit empty, captain.”

“Let’s pull back,” Dr. Clarkson decided, “We’ve finished. Let’s stitch this up and bring him round. Nurse Crawley, can you assist?”

“I think so,” Sybil said, rising up off the bed and retying her cap. She took a deep breath, turned about, and picked up a needle and thread to begin stringing it.

“Very good,” Dr. Clarkson said. With careful hands, Thomas passed off the plunger to Dr. Clarkson so that he might pull the tubes out from William’s chest. A strange stoppering noise occurred, as ribbed tubing rubbed against the tender bones of William’s ribs.

Sybil had stopped moving, seemingly enraptured by the sight. Thomas glanced up, and found her face to be bone white. She looked like a ghost, and it disturbed him.

“Sybil?” He said.

Sybil trembled, her head falling backward till her chin was in the air. Without another word she crashed to the floor, a tangle of limbs and beautiful chestnut hair.

“Sybil!” Thomas cried out her name, completely forgoing William. He dove to the floor, grabbing Sybil up in his arms to tap at her pale and clammy cheek with sharp hands, “Ey-! ey! Come on now, lamb. Wake up!”

“Thomas-“ Dr. Clarkson was calling out, whether for aid or for reassurance Thomas did not know.

“Take care of William, I have her.” Thomas said, confident that Dr. Clarkson could finish off the job. At this point, it was just a matter of stitching his wounds closed and cleaning up their surgical trays. Technically, it was a job that should fall to a nurse. Today, however, it would be the doctor’s duty. Sybil needed tending to all her own.

He rubbed Sybil’s cheek vigorously till some of the rosy hue had returned, then popped it once for
good measure. He felt like an absolute prig for slapping her; cor, it was like kicking a kitten!

“Oh…” Sybil moaned as her eyes began to flutter open. She blinked twice before finally being able to come back to herself, “Oh, I’ve been so stupid-“

“No!” Thomas wouldn’t hear a word of it. “You’re completely fine. I shouldn’t have subjected you to a sight like that. It’s my fault, Sybil. Not yours. Put your arm around my shoulders?”

She did so, trembling violently against Thomas’ chest. He took her beneath the knees and the neck, scooping her up and staggering to his feet. He had to use one of the four bed posts as a sordid lean-to, slightly out of shape from time off the battlefield.

“Get her to fresh air,” Clarkson commanded, “And away from all of this. Get her water.”

“Right.” Thomas could have figured that out by himself, but he wasn’t going to burst Dr. Clarkson’s illusion of being superior. He headed for the door, Sybil in his arms, and when they were upon the threshold it was Sybil to reach out for the handle with a shaking hand. Her assistance allowed them to get into the hall quicker, and Thomas kicked the door quietly closed behind them. Now on their own, they headed out of the South Gallery and towards the East Corridor where Sybil’s room lay.

Sybil lay her head against Thomas’ shoulder, her eyes falling closed—

Suddenly, Mrs. Hughes came around the corner of the gallery hall, keys clinking on her hip. She stopped dead at the sight of Sybil indisposed in Thomas’ arms.

“Oh my god, Lady Sybil!” She cried out in dismay, hurrying to Thomas’ side so that she might press a wrinkled hand to Sybil’s sweating forehead.

“She’s had a fainting spell,” Thomas told her, “Can you get me some cold water/ I’m going to take her to get air.”

“I just… I just need to lay down.” Sybil said, sluggishly.

“Take her to her bedroom,” Mrs. Hughes ordered, juggling with the keys on her hip to pull forth an ornate master key that could unlock any door on the gallery floor. She lead the way, with Thomas bringing up the rear, and allowed them entry into Sybil’s bedroom. It was a beautiful, pale yellow room full of sunny flowers and doves mid-flight. Thomas lay Sybil upon her bed, propping her up carefully amid her many throw pillows, and took off her nurses cap at once so that her hair fell unburdened onto her shoulders.

Mrs. Hughes poured Sybil a glass of water from her silver pitcher, only to hold the glass herself as a guiding aid for Sybil’s shaking hand. Together, they helped Sybil to take several healthy swallows. Mrs. Hughes left Sybil’s side only for a moment, hastily throwing open her bedroom windows so that a cool breeze could flood in. Sybil took refuge in the air, her skin regaining considerable color after a minute.

Thomas got up, and steeped a hand cloth in Sybil’s pitcher. He wrung it out, then returned to her bedside to lay the cloth upon her forehead. Sybil’s eyes fluttered at the sensation, a tiny smirk upon her rosy lips.

“You’re making a fuss over me. William…”

“Dr. Clarkson has William,” Thomas wouldn’t hear a word about it, “You are my patient now. How the tables have turned.”

Sybil smiled in earnest now, “I feel quite looked after.”
“So you should,” Thomas said, moving to Sybil’s feet so that he could unlace her shoes.

“Should I fetch her ladyship, M’lady?” Mrs. Hughes asked, unsure.

“OH no… no, I’m fine.” She sighed, “Just a bit stiff.” What she really needed to do was take off her corset, but he had a feeling that even Sybil would be uncomfortable with Thomas aiding her in such a quest. Some things were best left to women.

“Mrs. Hughes, have Sybil change into something… breathable. Like a nightgown.” Thomas instructed, gesturing wordlessly to his own ribcage. Mrs. Hughes nodded, getting the drift. “I’ll… uh…” Thomas looked about, trying to find something to do. He found nothing, and instead headed for the door.

“S’fine-“ Sybil mumbled. “I know what you are. You’re hardly the type to fear-“

“I’m more afraid of you than you of me.” Thomas snorted, for there was no way on God’s green and glorious earth that he was going to stay in the same room as an undressed lady. He left Sybil’s chambers without another word, hearing Sybil and Mrs. Hughes laugh softly under their breath at his nervousness, and waited outside till Mrs. Hughes opened the door again and let him in.

Sybil was now in a simple white nightgown, with lavender thread making a beautiful pattern about her neck and elbows. Underneath her covers, she was quite relaxed, and seemed to be slowly regaining her senses.

“Honestly, I shouldn’t be in bed.” She sighed, even as Mrs. Hughes fluffed her pillows. “I should be working. It wasn’t such a tumble-“

“Fainting is no laughing matter, Sybil.” Thomas warned, returning to her bedside to check her forehead again. It wasn’t particularly hot. He took her pulse at the wrist, and found it elevated but slowing. What was more, tiny red splotches were starting to occur at her fingertips. Her body was beginning to circulate blood normally again. What she really needed was a nap and some chamomile tea. Something to calm her mind.

“I’m so stupid.” She whispered, closing her eyes for a moment, “Whatever came over me? You must think me so weak, after the life you’ve both led. Working the way you do, day and night, and here I go fainting like a fool-“

“There is nothing weak about you, M’lady.” Mrs. Hughes shot the notion down at once, her tone firm but kind. “You’re as strong as they come.” She paused to turn to Thomas, asking in a slightly cheeky tone, “Is there anything else I can bring you, Doctor Thomas?”

Thomas narrowed his eyes at her. He noted Mrs. Hughes had the funniest smile crooking at the corner of her mouth. So she thought she was cheeky, did she?

“A cup of chamomile tea for the patient, Nurse Hughes.” He said, just for the hell of it. Mrs. Hughes burst out laughing at this, waving a hand as if to brush him off before leaving the room. He could hear her laughing all the way down the hall, clearly in hysterics at the idea of being called a nurse.

As silence fell, Sybil sighed and closed her eyes. She looked terribly weak in that moment, like a newborn kitten struggling to walk.

Unsure of why, compelled beyond reason, Thomas reached out and took Sybil’s hand in his own. She seemed slightly surprised, but merely smiled.

“You’re more soft than Tom,” She teased.
“You’re dear to me.” Thomas replied.

“Now I have two suitors; Mary would be jealous,” But then Sybil looked suddenly horrified at her slip of the tongue, “Oh-! Oh no, why did I say that aloud? Please don’t repeat that-“

Silly Sybil. She must be terrified he was going to run and tell Lord Grantham. Thomas just smiled and shook his head. The breeze blowing in from outside was soothing, the sound of birds a natural lullaby.

“I know that he loves you,” Thomas whispered. Sybil’s brown eyes widened in shock, her pert pink lips softened into the shape of an ‘O’. “I know he wants to marry you. I’ve known for a long time. I’ve not told a soul before now, and I don’t plan on telling one after I leave your bedroom…. Tom Branson is a good man.” Thomas paused, thinking bitterly back to the spoiled luncheon for the General, “A bit of an idiot, but a good man.”

Sybil was chuffed, clasping his hand tightly, “I don’t know if I want to marry him yet, but… I’ve been thinking how wonderful it would be. To get away from all this and live with him in Ireland. We could be happy there, an ordinary couple with no cares for the courts of this land or papa’s money. We could start a family of our own-“

But suddenly, quick as a flash, the image of Sybil dying in her birthing bed made Thomas grow cold. She was envisioning the start of a family with joy… but it would end in disaster and heartbreak. There was nothing Thomas could do to save her that wouldn’t end in the damnation of her soul. If William would end up harassing Daisy to the corners of the earth, and Edward had turned violent… what would happen to Sybil if she lived?

The idea of her soul rotting made him want to be violently ill. He shuddered involuntarily, taken over by a terrible chill. Sybil was perplexed, and reached out to cup his cheek.

“Thomas?” She spoke his name as if to summon him back, “You went horribly pale-“

“Oh Sybil-“ Stupid words were slipping out of his mouth. He shut his eyes tight, trying to block out the image of her dying in agony, “I wish I could save you from what’s going to happen.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me.” Sybil soothed him at once, “Papa might be furious at first, but he’ll come to see that Tom’s a good man just like we have. “

He couldn’t stand it. Thomas looked away, burned.

How could he convey to her her death? How, when it would change nothing?
He was powerless, and Sybil… was doomed.

He did not carry on with pointless conversation. Instead, he sat by Sybil’s side until Mrs. Hughes returned with her cup of tea.

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Of course, William was well looked after by Dr. Clarkson, and recovered from the anesthesia at a normal pace. It was a solid day before William could honestly open his eyes and look around, and another three days before he could make meagre conversation. He asked for Daisy and his father constantly, mumbling in his sleep like a lunatic about ‘golden summers’, whatever that meant.
Thomas wondered if the anesthesia had done more damage than initially thought, but tried to put it out of his mind. Until things were settled, Thomas’ greatest concern was Daisy, who was steadily declining for every advance that William made in his health.

She was petrified of being alone with William, having been bullied up the garden path by Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore both. She did not want to wed him. She did not even want to be his sweetheart. But now, after pretending for over a year that she was blissfully in love, Daisy was too frightened to speak the truth anymore. When Thomas ventured downstairs for tea, he heard her whimpering in the pantry. She was upset, frightened of the future and what it may hold.

But she needn’t have been worried. She had a staunch ally in Thomas, who refused to submit to the pressures of the upper staff. He would save Daisy from William, and he would do so with great pride. Daisy was like a little sister to him: annoying but dear all the same. Somewhere out there was Andy Parker, no doubt slumming it off at school and pretending to read out of magazines in front of his friends. Andy was for Daisy, and that wouldn’t change just because William got to live.

A week after William’s surgery, Thomas was upstairs roaming the gallery halls to try and find Mrs. Hughes. He needed her signature on a shipment of military linens and dry goods which were to be stocked in the abbey’s cupboards, but couldn’t seem to find her despite rumors that she was chiding maids for improperly making beds. Clipboard at his side, Thomas ducked around corners, listening hard for a Scottish brogue. Instead, he heard the whispers of a kitchen maid, and paused as he came upon the sight of Mr. Mason and Daisy outside the south gallery. Daisy was pale and timid, looking sleepless and haggard. In a change of demeanor, Mr. Mason was back to his regular health, having finally gotten several nights good sleep. Mr. Mason was speaking to Daisy with a kind expression, but it was not returned.

“—Asked you, hasn’t he?” Mr. Mason murmured. Thomas did not move from the mouth of the south gallery, waiting for confirmation before he acted, “I knew he would. You’ll do it, won’t you?”

“I don’t think he should be botherin’ about it now. He needs to rest.” Daisy mumbled.

“What else should he be bothered with?” Mr. Mason asked, bewildered, “He’s been given his life back, Daisy. He adores you. Isn’t it natural that you wed?”

Thomas scowled, and approached Mr. Mason and Daisy with a brisk pace.

“It would be natural if the emotion were reciprocated.” Thomas said cooly. Mr. Mason looked about, surprised to find Thomas about on the gallery floor.

“Thomas!” There was such shining gratitude in Mr. Mason’s eyes that Thomas was slightly alarmed. Oddly enough, Daisy looked terribly pleased to see him too, though Thomas suspected it was because she knew him to be an ally.

“Dr. Clarkson’s patched him up. He says you saved William’s life. You’ve given him a true fighting chance, and I can never express what that means to me.” Mr. Mason was ready to cry, beaming from ear to ear. He reached out, and shook Thomas’ hand in a pinching, sweaty grip. “Thank you, my dear dear boy. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Thomas replied, “It’s a long road to recovery.” At this, Thomas looked to Daisy, who was pale and miserable. She hid at his elbow, seeming to want to get away from Mr. Mason.

“Daisy, how are you feeling?” Thomas asked. Daisy, pale and shaken, did not reply.
“You look terrible,” Thomas said, “Why don’t you go to bed? I’ll tell Mrs. Patmore that you’ve
taken ill.”

Instead of bargaining, Daisy just nodded and walked off. She looked like she might vomit, with her
face a queer sour apple green.

Mr. Mason and Thomas both watched her go, the pair of them separately sympathetic. When they
were alone, Mr. Mason spoke quietly to Thomas.

“He’s asked her to marry him, but she won’t give an answer.” Mr. Mason said.

“She doesn’t want to marry him, Mr. Mason.” Thomas replied. Mr. Mason was taken aback.

“You can’t know that.”

“I can Mr. Mason. And I think you can too.”

For a moment, the pair of them stared at one another, with Mr. Mason’s expression slowly growing
more miserable.

“She might change her mind.” Mr. Mason offered.

“Maybe,” Thomas said, because he wasn’t in Daisy’s head after all, “But either way, she doesn’t
want to marry him and William needs to accept that.”

“He won’t want to hear it from me.”

“I know.” Thomas said, “But he won’t be hearing it from Daisy. She’s too fragile for such a
confrontation.”

“Then… who?” Mr. Mason wondered.

Thomas took a deep, suffering sigh. Was there really any question as to who?
Irritable, Thomas stepped forward into William’s room, knocking softly and entering to find William
sitting up in bed. He was awake, but still slightly sluggish, and had a dreamy expression upon his
face.

When Thomas closed the door, William looked about hopefully.

“Oh… I thought you were Daisy,” William said. “Is she still out there?”

“No.” Thomas replied, walking up to William’s bed to stand at the footboard, “I’ve sent her to bed.”

“Bed?” William wondered, looking out the window at the pale afternoon sky, “But it’s hardly four in
the afternoon.”

Thomas did not reply. William went from curious to wary, his expression slowly growing stony as he
noted how bitter Thomas appeared.

“Why are you lookin’ at me like that?” William asked. “You look like you have bad news.”

“I do have bad news.” Thomas said. William grew gray faced, groaning up to the canopy.

“I’m gonna die-“

“Well you were always going to die.” Thomas replied, for William was by no means immortal. “But
no. You’re not going to die of your wounds. I’ve come to talk to you about Daisy, William. It’s time you knew the full truth.”

“What truth?” William asked. “Has something happened to Daisy?”

“Yes.” Thomas said. “She’s been forced to be dishonest.”

“What?” William couldn’t believe such a thing, for honestly naturally went against his creed, “Why? Who would make her do such a thing?”

“Mrs. Patmore and Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said. Now William was even more agog, eyes bulging in their sockets.

“I can’t believe that.” He swore it like an oath before god, “I’d never believe such a thing.”

But when Thomas did not make to negate him, once again, William grew more afraid.

Thomas tilted his head, using his right hand to scratch behind his left shoulder blade where an itch was forming. He felt unsettled in his skin, like he wanted to run and hide somewhere until it was safe to come out again.

Get it over with, came a voice from within. You know what’s coming. Don’t be a coward and hide from it. This is your punishment for letting him live.

“… When you went off to war, you spoke of your affections for Daisy.” Thomas said, “Daisy agreed, because Mrs. Patmore forced her to. She didn’t want you to be sent off to war broken hearted. Daisy never cared for you, not as a lover anyway, but she had no choice. She knew your life was quite literally in her hands. She pretended, and when you were wounded she kept up the act. She didn’t want you to lose hope so close to the gun. Now, you’re safe from war and your life has been given back to you. It’s time for the delusion to end. Daisy is your friend, but nothing more… and you cannot ask her to be anything else. Not a mol, not a lover, not a wife.”

Thomas fell silent again. William said nothing.

All the blood, all the emotion, seemed to be fleeing William’s face. When he’d been stone silent for a good minute and a half, Thomas spoke again.

“Let her go, William.” Thomas said, his expression and tone neutral, “Let her go, and find another girl.”

“There is no other girl.” He whispered. His tone was murderous.

“I’m sorry, William. Truly I am.” Thomas knew a thing or to about unrequited love, “But I cannot allow Daisy to fall into misery just to make you comfortable-“

“Get out.” William said, bitterly. There was such hatred in his voice that Thomas felt slightly queasy.

Sensing that no further argument could be made, Thomas did as William requested. He left without another word, closing the door silently behind him. In the hall, Mr. Mason was sitting in a chair by a side table. He stood, and watched Thomas go with a pained expression that Thomas did not like to see.

He could do nothing to help the Mason family anymore.
The day after confronting William Mason, Thomas sat in the library silently going over accounts. Money was tight, but supplies were paid for and that was what mattered. The men played ping pong and cards, oblivious to the drama going on below and above stairs. Distinctly absent from the crowd was Edward, who had been missing for a day now. His bunkmates swore he was in bed every night, but no one saw him at meals and no one saw him during exercises. He seemed to simply vanish off the map, hiding somewhere for hours at a time until he’d turn up again in the oddest of places. He often wore a glazed expression, bitter and pale, and Thomas was steadily growing more afraid of him as the days passed. Where was Edward now? Thomas could not help but look up and around, wondering if he might see the menacing form of his husband hiding in the corners of the library.

Edward was not there.

Sighing, Thomas bowed his head and returned to his accounts, finishing the tally for August and blotting the paper carefully to keep the ink from spreading. He closed the book when it was save, capping his ballpoint pen, and relaxed a bit in his leather arm chair. He closed his eyes, wondering if he might be able to take a slight nap-

But suddenly, a pair of heavy cold hands fell upon his shoulders, squeezing at his tightened muscles in what might have been an endearing gesture. Thomas gave a start, opening his eyes and looking up to find Edward above him.

How in the sodding hell had Edward managed to sneak behind him when Thomas was literally sitting in a corner? How long had he been there? Thomas was almost frightened that Edward had materialized, and recoiled slightly from his strong hands.

Unperturbed, Edward came around Thomas' chair, sitting at his side upon the matching ottoman so that the pair of them could speak quietly.

“I haven’t seen you about for a while,” Edward said. His tone was as cold as his hands, and it made Thomas nervous of an impending argument. “Hiding?”

“…There was a surgery,” Thomas finally replied, keeping his face and tone neutral lest his bait Edward to anger, “I had to tend to a fallen soldier.”

“Yes, I heard.” Edward said, accentuating the ‘s’ slightly too long. He reached out, and though they were before a mixed company of several men, he took up Thomas' hand. Thomas froze, disturbed, and tried to pull back.

Edward wouldn’t let him.

“…Edward, we’re in public.” Thomas said.

“Are you so frightened of me?” Edward asked, “That I cannot even hold your hand anymore?” His tone became sharp, and he suddenly squeezed Thomas’ hand so that his knuckles popped audibly. Thomas winced at the sudden pain, and though it would surely get him into trouble he yanked his hand away from Edward irritably.

Edward froze, his hand still oddly clutched upon Thomas’ knee. It was like he was a statue, his flesh more like marble than skin.

“Stop being a pest,” Thomas warned. “You know the stakes. We can’t act in public or we’ll suffer
for it.”

“Suffer.” Edward repeated the word with derision, “You know nothing of the word—“

But before a row could start, the door to the library was suddenly opened by Lily the maid. She looked terrified, for whatever reason, and ran across the carpeted floor in her day dress to stop before Thomas and grab him by the hand.

She was trying to pull him from his seat, babbling as she went!

“Thomas, you have to come quick! Please!” She begged.

“What’s going on?” Thomas asked, pulling himself free from the girl but following her out the door. They left Edward in the library, watching after Thomas with a black expression. Lily was rambling, tripping over a hall runner as she headed for the green baize door.

“It’s Daisy!” Lily kept repeating, “Thomas we have to hurry! You’re her only hope!”

He couldn’t make much sense out of the girl besides that, but it mattered not. He had a feeling he knew what was going on below stairs, and if his assumptions were to be true, Thomas swore he’d commit murder in Daisy’s name.

William was going to try to force her to marry him. Today.

Down the stairs they went, and even from the main landing Thomas could hear Daisy crying. She was wailing, with the voices of others chorusing around her so that a sudden cacophony greeted Thomas’ ears as he hit the bottom step.

Nearly all the servants were in the hall, each of them trying to calm Daisy down as she cowered by the table in her best dress. Initially, her hair and makeup might have been done, but now after crying and screaming she looked more ready for a bath than a wedding. Her curls were damp, her mascara was running down her cheeks, and her bouquet had been thrown upon the dirty stone floor to lay untouched. She was holding onto Mr. Carson’s chair for dear life, unwilling to let it go like her only life line lay in the aged wood and worn leather.

“What’s going on here?” Thomas demanded, angrily. Several people looked about, with both Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore wearing guilty expressions. Upon seeing Thomas in the doorway, Daisy finally let go of Mr. Carson’s chair to run at him like she meant to knock him over. Instead, she hid her face in his chest, staining his shirtsleeves with her lipstick and rouge.

“Don’t let them!” She howled, clutching tight at his lapels, “Don’t make me do it! I can’t do it! I won’t do it! I won’t be dishonest before God!”

“Wait, wait— wait!” Thomas barked, finally able to get his arms free and grab Daisy by the shoulders. He shook her a bit, trying to get her to snap back into a sane state of mind. “What’s going on? Daisy, tell-“

But before he could say ‘me’, Daisy buried her face in his chest again. Her tears were more quiet now, but they were bitter things and they broke Thomas’ heart.

“Daisy…” Mrs. Patmore began, sounding just as miserable as Daisy; she paused when Daisy did not address her, throwing up her hands and looking to Mrs. Hughes for support. Mrs. Hughes looked quiet guilty.
“Tell me what happened, and I’ll fix it.” Thomas promised Daisy. “There’s nothing I can’t put right, you know that.”

Daisy gave a wet sniff, pulling back a bit. Her face was shining from snot and tears, and Thomas fished out his handkerchief to offer it so that she could wipe her face. With every dab she took, more face powder and lip cream came off. His handkerchief became a swirl of pale peach and sweet pinks.

“William kept askin’ and askin’ me to marry him,” She managed to get out through broken sobs. She spoke more to his handkerchief than to him, as if she had something to be ashamed of, “An’ I kept trying to tell him no, but he wouldn’t listen to me. Then his father heard and William said t’call the vicar and now they’re all tryin’ to make me marry him. I can’t do it Thomas!” She looked up, brown eyes shining with hysteria, “I don’t love him! He’s my friend but I don’t love him and they won’t let me be!”

At this, she collapsed back against his chest. Like a train, she’d run out of steam, and was now left sagging in her tracks. Thomas looked up at the crowd of servants, with everyone from Bates to O’Brien in attendance. All of them despaired at Daisy’s lack of affection, with Mrs. Patmore and Mrs. Hughes the most miserable. This had all started out with such good intentions, but now…?

Now everything had gone horribly wrong, and Thomas had to put it right.

“Daisy,” Mr. Carson spoke up, slowly bending over with a slight grunt to pick up her squashed bouquet. “It could be that you grow to love William. Marriage is not a prison-“

“It is if you don’t want to be married, Mr. Carson,” Thomas reminded the butler. Mr. Carson pursed his lips, but did not make to argue.

Daisy gave another wet sniff. Thomas carefully pulled back, taking her by the upper arms again so that they could stare at one another face to face. She was reproachful, frightened that Thomas would abandon her.

“Daisy, listen to me.” Thomas said, as calmly as he could muster. “Do you want to marry William?”

“No.” She shook her head. A couple more curls fell loose by her mousy ears.

“Then you’re not going to marry him.” Thomas decided, “So, sit down and dry your eyes. I’ll go talk to William.”

Daisy took another audible sniff, then staggered over to the servant’s table and collapsed into a chair. She even went so far as to put her head upon the table, the very picture of a weeping angel with her makeup ruined and her finest clothes on.

Thomas turned for the stairs, his expression sour, and made his way up. Mrs. Patmore followed after him, remarkably quick for a woman of her age and size.

“What will you say?” She demanded, afraid.

“The truth, Mrs. Patmore!” Thomas snapped, “Which seems to be in rampant abundance on this subject!”

“Oh- Thomas-!” Anna was following after him now, leaving Bates in the servant’s hall to charge up the stairs. “Wait for me!”

They were now neck and neck, the pair of them heading fast for the gallery level.
“Please, you have to be kind!” Anna begged, “I know it seems unfair, but William is frail and he loves her so!”

“He’s tougher than he looks,” Thomas said, whose thoughts were solely for Daisy and how broken she’d been at the servant’s table.

They reached the gallery floor, and headed at once for the south gallery wing. Thomas was disturbed to see that someone had shredded rose petals for Daisy to walk upon, so that the carpet was littered in foliage. Thomas whirled past in a storm, petals falling to the side, and entered William’s room without so much as a ‘how do you do’. He found Mr. Mason and the vicar Mr. Travis inside. Travis was in his black and whites, holding a faded bible in his hand. Mr. Mason looked miserable, oddly enough, and was sitting at William’s bedside. William was sitting up, looking in much better health and spirits. When Thomas and Anna came through the door, however, William’s chummy expression dropped at once. It was like someone had deflated the air from his balloon, causing him to sag against his headboard and plush goose feather pillows.

Thomas faced William just as he’d done the day before, this time with Anna at his side. Mr. Travis was agog, blinking at this rapid development.

“Mr. Travis, your services are no longer required.” Thomas said. The sight of William’s four bedposts wrapped in flowers put him in an even worse mood.

“I don’t understand,” Travis said, confused.

“The bride is unwilling to marry the groom. There will be no wedding today. You may leave now.”

“That can’t be-!” William spoke over Thomas, furious, “That can’t be!”

He even tried to get out of bed, only to fall back gasping in pain. Thomas barked at the boy, furious at his brash actions.

“Stay still!” Thomas warned him, “Or you’ll re-open your wounds.”

Travis had still not left, even as William groaned against the bed and Thomas stared him down murderously.

“Mr. Travis, that will be all, thank you!” Thomas snapped. There was no kindness in his voice.

Travis left after that, quite disturbed to be ousted mid-ceremony by someone as notorious as Thomas. He shut the door, and Mr. Mason fell upon William’s bed to carefully help him sit up. His father had an arm about William’s back, and was whispering softly in his ear.

“Son, it can’t be.” Mr. Mason begged him to reason, “I’ve told you. She’s just not willing-“

“No, it’s a lie!” William howled, thrashing weakly in his father’s arms. “It’s a damn lie! She didn’t say no when I asked!”

Did she say yes?’” Thomas demanded.

“Shut up you stupid lavender!” William cursed, causing Anna to gasp in shock, “I hate you! In the face of God and all his angels, I swear before the cross that I hate you! It’s you whose changed her mind, I know it! You’ve taken away my wife! You’ve ruined me!”
“He saved your life!” Anna said, reproachfully, “How can you say such things-“

“Son, you’re speaking in anger.” Mr. Mason begged. “You don’t mean these things. “

But William just seethed, arms wrapped about his chest which no doubt ached from the strain of trying to break loose. Anna had become quiet afraid, having never seen William wear such an expression of hatred before.

Thomas was used to it. He didn’t budge an inch, unflappable in the face of pure anger.

“I thought you were my friend.” William hissed, “I thought you’d turned over a new leaf. But I see it now. You’re no better than before, you’re worse!” He added, as a furious afterthought, “You’re worse and you’ve gotten everyone under your guise!”

“She doesn’t love you William,” Thomas didn’t even comment on the rest. “Let it go. There’s nothing more to be done.”

“Oh there’s something more,” William cut him off again, brown eyes burning with rage. “We’re not finished you and I. Not after this. We’ll never be finished until I get my revenge.”

“William!” Mr. Mason was horrified at his son’s words. Anna was speechless, a hand over her chest.


Thomas cracked his neck, rubbing irritably at a spot above his left eye where a tension knot had begun to form.

“Suit yourself,” He replied. “You don’t scare me.”

Yet as Thomas and Anna headed for the door (Anna slightly shell shocked), William spoke up yet again. There was something terribly cold and detached in his voice. It was like the true William had been covered over by a veneer of rage and wrath.

“I don’t have to scare you.” William said. “I just have to kill you.”

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know.
It was with somber farewell that William left the abbey a week later.

He did not walk away so much as he hobbled, held up by his devoted father who attempted to raise his moral with tales of home and promises of favorite dishes. William’s face was gray and steely, his jaw set like iron. He could not be swayed to sympathy or reason, forswearing vengeance on Thomas and Daisy both after being jilted at the altar. It was a disturbing notion, that the abbey’s servants once so keen on William and happy for his love were now sided against him. Anna had told everyone of William’s terrifying words, prompting another wave of tears from Daisy that even Mrs. Patmore hadn’t been able to soothe. Some had even wanted to ring for the police or a doctor, fearing that William had gone mad. But Thomas had known better, had known that he was only viewing a taste of the powerful evil now residing deep within William’s bitter soul. William and his father would have to be strong to wrestle it out, but if they were fortunate William would be able to walk away and live a long, healthy life. Whether or not that life was happy was not something Thomas could now control.

Thomas watched William go from the stoop, having been forced to wait until William was on the wagonette and halfway down the drive before he could show his face. William had forsworn that even so much as a glimpse of Thomas or a breath of his name would result in a fury the likes of which were found only in hell. Unwilling to tempt fate, Mr. Carson had therefore made sure Thomas stayed well out of William’s way.

A cold rain had begun to fall as William’s wagonette finally made it to the main road. There, on the front steps of the abbey, Thomas waved him silent farewell and wished him god speed. Though it was improper for their time, and a source of great irritation for Carson, Daisy had come up from the kitchens to stand at Thomas’ side. The pair of them were William’s final onlookers, and the only members of staff to wait it out as the rain continue to pour. Daisy’s pale pink dress was becoming soaked at the fringe, turning a muddy coral. Thomas’ pomade was beginning to lose hold.

“I would have let him die,” Thomas told Daisy when none could hear, “If only they’d given me the
opportunity."

Daisy silently clasped his hand, in a show of alliance and strength.

On the same week of William’s departure, Matthew Crawley arrived home. He was in a wheelchair, and weak, but he was gaining strength fast with the aid of Lady Mary. Though she was technically engaged to Sir Richard, she cared nothing for her fiancé. It was obvious, even to an outsider, that her heart was for Matthew. She tended to him night and day, pushing him around the grounds on long healthy walks and sitting with him while he ate, prayed, and shaved. She talked to him, kept him company, and probably sane as well. Thomas watched all of this, like one would a fond nickelodeon reel, and reasoned that soon enough they would all be shot of Sir Richard and his irritating little London drawl. Mary and Matthew would be one.

The question was… could Thomas persuade death to give Matthew his life without succumbing to the tortures like William and Edward?

Edward himself had come into a new stage of being that both terrified and confused Thomas. Instead of having a violent temper all the time and refusing social graces, Edward now convalesced with the men like before. This time, however, he had a cold and queer veneer about him that put several people off their lunch. It was like something foreign had taken over him, and Thomas almost certain he knew what it was. Whatever was inside of Edward’s soul, it had won the fight and had now claimed Edward’s body as its territory. The Heichecera had demanded that Thomas ‘let Edward go’, but now, Thomas didn’t think that Edward would go even if he shoved the man out the door. Edward wasn’t leaving, not unless forced… and Thomas just couldn’t think of a way to feasibly go about that. He was stuck in a terrifying situation until he could think of a solution to worm a way out.

It was a dark, rainy night in October when it happened.

The war was growing to a close. Thomas knew that by the eleventh of November it would all be over. Now, halfway through October, they were on the cusp of the end of the great war. Victory was so close Thomas could almost taste it. He yearned for the days when the abbey would be rid of soldiers. When it would be only the family, and the servants once again. He dreamed of the hour when he wouldn’t have to deal with Edward anymore, as sick and ugly as it was. The Edward he’d loved, the Edward he’d saved, was gone.

Now, something much more dangerous lay in his place. Up until now, scurrying around and trying to save William, Thomas had been underneath the thin disguise of naivety. Edward hadn’t been a problem, though he had been a fright. Thomas was about to find out just how dangerous Edward had become. It was the inevitable conclusion to an era of ignorance.

There was talk in the servant’s hall of the future, but Thomas was not partaking. Bates and Anna were growing worried, even though Bates had the decree nisi. It was only a matter of time now before Vera and Bates had their fall out. Thomas prayed that prison could be avoided this time around, but he just didn’t know how far his dominion of control reached. Could he persuade Vera to let Bates go? Would she even listen to him, when he was a stranger and a friend of her estranged husband?

Unable to wrap his head around it, Thomas hid in the boot room and made a pyramid out of empty
shoe shine tins.

It was a dumb thing, really, but it soothed him and it allowed him to gather his thoughts. The Heichecera had left him with a great deal to consider, particularly in regards to Ethel.

*You have the ability to save two people, without consequence. Two people who were lost to you, before, The Heichecera had said, Go to her, and you will see.*

But who had the her been?

By speaking with Mrs. Hughes about Ethel, Thomas had put his destiny in motion. That was the wisdom imparted by the Heichecera. Could it be that he was to go to Ethel? But why? And what would it achieve? Would she help him find the two people who’d been lost to him? Was she integral in all of this, to helping him save someone’s life?

The only person that Thomas could think of in regards to loss, was Jimmy Kent. Thomas had lost Jimmy due to several factors, most of them rotating around that miserable cow Lady Anstruther. Perhaps Ethel held the key to keep Jimmy close, to keeping him safe at the abbey. But how would any of that fall in his favor, when Jimmy was still for women?

Oh, it gnawed at his brain! It gnawed and ached-!

“Thomas.”

Thomas jerked out of his reverie, accidentally knocking several cans of shoe polish onto the flagstone. He stumbled off his bar stool, being over to collect the tins on his knees. He saw, in the doorway, Charles Carson. The man was holding a clipboard, perhaps looking to check inventory in a down hour, and seemed perplexed to find Thomas playing with tins like they were building blocks.

“What on earth are you doing?” Carson asked, as Thomas re-stacked the tins atop the buffering counter. It was nicked in several places from boot heels, a scuffed and aged workbench that ought to be replaced.

“Thinking, Mr. Carson.” Thomas admitted with a sigh, “Which wasn’t doing me any favors, I can tell you.”

Perturbed, Carson set his clipboard aside and began to collect the dirtied tins so that he could toss them in the waste bin. Left without a ‘toy’ to play with, Thomas twiddled his thumbs impatiently.

“Maybe I can offer you some clarity?” Carson said, and in a strange move he sat down across from Thomas at the buffering station to lace his own fingers atop the workbench. They were mirror images of one another, though they couldn’t be farther apart.

“I doubt it, Mr. Carson, but I’m grateful.” Thomas said, “If I told you what was bothering me, you’d-“

“Think you mad?” Carson supplied dryly. Thomas pursed his lips, and then nodded. “Which is what you always say when prompted.”

“Well, that’s because it’s the truth,” There was no simple way to say ‘I’m not from this reality’.

“Truth is a delicate thing, Thomas.” Carson said, wisely, “Maybe I’m more up to sniff that you’d like to believe. I’m not an old man, but I have seen my fair share of the world.”

But he’d only seen this world, and that was the problem.
Thomas smiled, still pleased to know that Carson would even consider being so kind to him. The memories of a spiteful Carson forever burned in the back of his mind, reminding him how different their relationship could be.

Deciding to test the waters, albeit very delicately, Thomas progressed forward.

“…Mr. Carson, can I ask you something hypothetical?”

“You can.” Carson replied, calm as could be.

“Suppose that when it comes to life and death, there’s a set time for us to die.” Thomas said. Carson listened patiently, and did not make to comment. “Suppose that God created our fate before we were born. Now imagine that you know about it, for whatever reason, and you decide to cheat death. What do you think would happen then? Do you think you’d suffer from it? That your soul would rot? That you’d become something… awful?”

But instead of Carson offering him a hypothetical answer, Carson took two and two and got five.

“Thomas…” He tutted gently, “You’ve done an honorable thing by saving William. I know that this past week was difficult— he added when Thomas let out a long drawn out sigh. But this wasn’t about William-!

Well, technically it was, but not in the way Carson thought-!

“I’m not saying that I agree with how William has acted towards you and Daisy… but he is hurt. He will need to recover. His soul is not rotten, nor has he become something awful.” Mr. Carson finished.

Thomas looked away, pursing his lips. When he did not make to reply after several moments, Carson cautiously spoke again.

“Or is this about Edward Courtenay?”

“Maybe.” Thomas replied, still not meeting Carson’s eyes, “He’s been a difficult creature, hasn’t he.”

“Difficult how?”

“Imagine that… you look into someone’s eyes, and you don’t see them anymore.” Thomas said, “Imagine that you’re stuck with a shell of a person you once knew, and something awful has taken over. Like a puppet with its strings being pulled-“

“You know what you must do, Thomas.” Carson said. Thomas shook his head, too muddle to make straight sense of it all. Carson took initiative, pressing harder for the results he desired. “You ought to have done it a great deal while ago. This union of yours was damned from its creation. It must end.”

“… This is my fault.” Thomas said, the words like poison upon his tongue. They soured his throat, and made acid churn in his stomach. Of all the awful things he’d done in his life, he’d never once been accused of something as terrible as this.

“Then you must make it right.” Carson said. “Let him go, before it gets any worse, and when the war is over he will make his way home as he always should have done. It does not do to try and force fate.”

Don’t I know it, Thomas thought bitterly.
“Go wash your hands,” Mr. Carson ordered, for sure enough there were tiny smudges of shoe polish all over his fingers now, “Or you’ll stain your li-“

Thomas blinked at the near slip up. Carson seemed quite embarrassed to have almost said ‘Your livery’.

“Well as I say,” Carson gestured, and as Thomas left the boot room Mr. Carson swatted him in the small of the back with the clipboard, “Make haste about it now, while we’re young. Boot polish has poison in it!”

So Thomas and Carson entered the hallway, one after the other, bound for the washroom near Carson’s office. But instead, the pair of them paused mid-stride and became enraptured with the area door. Normally it wasn’t that much of a thing to look at; just a plain wooden door bolted by several well oiled locks. Tonight, however, it was housing two women.

Mrs. Hughes, with her back to Carson and Thomas, handing over what was clearly a large sack of canned goods to an exhausted and frightened young woman with dark curly red hair. She vanished in the blink of an eye, so fast that Thomas almost thought he’d imagined her.

But clearly he hadn’t imagined her, because Carson was now striding up the hallway with a look of fiery wrath upon his face. He confronted Mrs. Hughes, who gasped when she turned about only to find Carson right on her toes. Thomas, at Carson’s elbow, could not help but be enraptured by the thought that he’d been yards away from Ethel.

“Was that-?” Thomas asked, just for clarification as Mrs. Hughes shut and locked the area door with a bitter expression.

“Yes.” She said, “Yes it was.”

“And was that our food you were giving her? Food from the abbey’s stores?” Mr. Carson demanded, with a tone that clearly expressed he’d thought better of Mrs. Hughes.

“Supplements.” Mrs. Hughes bit out. She looked very irritated indeed, and suddenly Thomas realized he was about to be granted a first row seat to the argument of the century: Mrs. Hughes versus Mr. Carson.

“Do you think it right to give our food away to a harlot, when rationing has tightened our pockets?” Mr. Carson demanded, “Why not give food to murderers and foreigners while you’re at it?”

“A murderer and a foreigner are not the same.” Mrs. Hughes warned. “And I don’t think it right to let a baby starve-“

“Nor do I!” Thomas cried out in staunch defense. The thought of Charlie, so young and so desperately in need of a protector, put terrible knots in his stomach.

“Well I think her ladyship has a right to know, given that it’s coming from our accounts.” Mr. Carson declared, “And I think you should be the one to tell her, seeing as how you were so eager to give it all away.”

“I did not give it all away. Honestly, have Mrs. Patmore’s meals been lacking?”

“That is not the point-“

“That is exactly the point, and I won’t bother her ladyship about this-!”

“Well I think stealing is a bother!”
“Mr. Carson, Ethel’s baby will starve—” Thomas tried to cut in, hoping to be an ally to Mrs. Hughes in that moment. Instead, he was suddenly getting shot down on both sides by Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson, who in their rage had decided to band together to take it out on a common irritation.

“Thomas, as you so bluntly put it, you have enough problems. Kindly do not make this one of yours as well!” Mr. Carson warned.

“Ethel is not your concern, Thomas. You put far too much on your shoulders and the strain is beginning to show!” Mrs. Hughes added, “If you had it your way, you’d be her savior. I can see it in your eyes—“

“I won’t have you running about pandering to a prostitute!” Mr. Carson declared.

“She is not a prostitute-!” Mrs. Hughes scoffed, taken aback at the notion, “I would hardly give our food to such a woman-!”

“Is she?” Mr. Carson demanded, “Then where is the father of her baby? Oh, that’s right-!” He said sarcastically. The tone he took made Mrs. Hughes cheeks flush bright scarlet.

Thomas, having decided that he was thoroughly outnumbered, took a step back.

“I’m just going to… run a…” He gestured aimlessly with one hand to the ceiling, but the word ‘bath’ was too soft and small to be heard by the arguing butler and housekeeper. Pursing his lips, Thomas inched away and finally gained enough ground to scoot off down the hall.

Christ, that had been a little too much to bear!

Up the stairs Thomas went, pondering over Ethel and Charlie as he did so. The Heichecera had told him to go to a woman. Could it be that Ethel was the one she’d spoken of? The only other person Thomas could think of was Baxter, and he’d never heard back from her after writing a letter to her in 1914. He wondered if she’d even read it at all, or if she’d simply given up on him. If it truly was Baxter that the Heichecera had referred to, Thomas would have to find a way to get up to London and force his way into Baxter’s house. He was unfamiliar with her masters, but perhaps if he lied-?

No, no.

Thomas shook his head, troubled as he entered the attics. The polish, just as Carson had worn, had somehow traveled all up and down his arms, with small flecks now on his clothes. Why had he been so foolish as to play with the tins?

He headed for the bathroom, and entered to find it dark and quiet. He moved by memory alone, turning on water from the tap and plugging the basin when the temperature became comfortable. Pondering, Thomas unbuttoned his vest, letting it drop carelessly to the floor before shucking his suspenders and working at his shirt sleeves.

Lying was far too difficult, and it backfired every time for Thomas. He didn’t know Baxter’s house well enough to lie, and besides he wasn’t entirely certain the Heichecera had been talking about her. Honestly, Thomas was almost certain the Heichecera had meant Ethel, and that presented a few other problems. He didn’t know where Ethel was residing now, but doubted it was any place worth writing home about. She couldn’t be in the village, but maybe somewhere closer? Thirsk or even Rippon? Thirsk was the more obvious candidate, with Rippon being slightly farther away. But though Thirsk was hardly York, it was still a damn large town to search on foot. Would Thomas have to knock on every door, or could he somehow squirrel the information out of Mrs. Hughes?
He’d have to wait for her to calm down.

Thomas turned off the tap, testing the water and—

The bathroom door opened.

Thomas looked about, scandalized to have been walked in on with his chest bare and his trousers almost shucked. He’d feared it was Carson, but instead was greeted with the sight of Edward who seemed to have gone looking for Thomas and not found him in his bedroom.

Edward shut the bathroom door, blue eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

“Edward-!” Thomas hissed, snatching up his shirt and holding it to his bare chest. Why now was he so worried about modesty? Edward seemed lost in translation, partly furious and partly agonizing over something.

“What are you doing?” Thomas begged, hardly daring to speak louder than a whisper lest they were overhead. The hour was past supper, and the servants were all soon set to retire. Carson would be the last to come up, but even so if anyone else caught wind, Thomas would be in terrible trouble!

“You have to—“

But Edward didn’t care much about ‘have to’. Instead, he took several paces forward to close the distance in between them and draw Thomas into a tight and powerful kiss. Thomas squeaked at the sensation, his desperation caught mid-sound Edward plundered his mouth raw and pushed him up hard against the bathroom sink. The cold tile bit at the bare skin of Thomas’ back. When Edward finally broke away, Thomas was left gasping for air, light headed and dizzy.

“Please, Edward-“ He found himself babbling, terrified. Edward’s erection was obvious, even through two sets of trousers and pants. “Please, I’m so tired- don’t do this to me- I don’t- I can’t- not anymore-“

And just like that, shunned, Edward stepped back to suddenly leave Thomas aching and empty. He shivered, cold and frightened with his suspenders banging about his knees.

Edward looked wrathful now, furious as he paced back and forth. Thomas was too frightened to move, wondering if Edward might go so far as to hit him.

“I- I mean no offense-“ Thomas begged.

“Offense?” Edward scoffed at the word; his voice had grown steely, far from the warm tones that Thomas had once loved, “Why would I take offense? The love of my life finds me repulsive-“

“That’s not what I said,” Thomas quickly cut him off.

“That’s not what I said,” Thomas quickly cut him off.

“It’s what you meant,” Edward seethed.

Thomas bit his tongue, his bottom lip beginning to quiver. He found himself remembering every dire warning the Heichecera had bid him about Edward. Every message she’d passed along, telling him that Edward’s soul was lost. That a terrible beast had wormed its way inside Edward’s body and would soon devour him if he did not cast Edward out. That death did not like being cheated out of violent or tragic ends.

Thomas shrank against the bathroom wall. It would do him little good.

“… I’m gonna go to bed now,” He whispered, deciding the bath and his ink stains weren’t worth
getting his head bashed in along the rim of the tub. He tried to make a break for the door, but was suddenly jerked back as Edward grabbed him by the wrist and tugged him painfully away.

“Ow-!” Thomas proclaimed when a bone in his wrist popped. That had hurt-!

“Look at me!” Edward snapped, using both hands to force Thomas to turn around so that the pair of them were chest to chest. Edward bore down on him with all the wrath he possessed, which only served to frighten Thomas even more. The last time someone had looked at him with such scorn, it had been Carson, upon finding out that Thomas had kissed Jimmy in his sleep.

“I-“ Thomas did not know what to say, “I-“

“Am I so foul to you?” Edward demanded, “Am I so loathsome and wretched that you cannot even bear to be with me for five-seconds?”

“Edward it’s dangerous,” Thomas tried to turn Edward’s senses towards something more detached, something more logical, “Anyone could see-“

“I don’t care. I’m not scared,” Edward said, in a way which very much suggested that he thought Thomas was a coward, “I’m not afraid to tell the world I’m in love.”

He shook Thomas a bit when Thomas did not immediately answer. “Do you love me or not?”

Thomas could not answer. Could not confirm nor deny.

“Well?”

Thomas did not answer.

“Well?!“

Still Thomas did not answer.

But before Edward could crack Thomas about the face for being insubordinate, a terse voice outside the bathroom door called out, “Whose in there?”

It was Bates, and when Edward did not immediately answer, Bates opened the door. Garish light cut across the gloom, blinding the pair of them for a moment as Bates realized just what he’d walked in upon.

Thomas’ heart was pounding painfully in his ribcage. What would Bates do now?

“…Let him go.” Bates demanded. The cold, warning edge in his voice was a danger sign, though Edward was oblivious to it. Indeed, Edward was oblivious to anything in that moment. It was like the world was playing on repeat, flashing past Edward’s glazed eyes without truly moving forward or backward.

Bates had no idea what he was going up against. Thomas had to warn him.

“Mr. Bates, leave us.” Thomas implored, “I can handle this-“

“I don’t think you can.” Bates said, and to be fair he had a solid point. “I think you need help, and I’m happy to provide it.”

“Oh I’d shudder to think what you’re happy to provide.” Edward said, his fists slowly unclenching from Thomas’ upper arms so that Thomas could slink back and away from the danger. Now,
Edward was advancing upon Bates.

Bates, in a show of warning, let go of his cane so that it could prop against the bathroom wall. The shadow it flung upon the wooden floor was deep and long, like a snake waiting to strike.

“We can start with peace of mind,” Bates said, ticking it off on a finger. Edward didn’t seem to realize that Bates was using his middle finger. Thomas’ eyes widened to the size of coins, shock at Bates’ lewd display. Why was Bates so angry? Was he truly this bitter on Thomas’ behalf? “Thomas has been struggling because of you for far too long. If I need to be the one to cut the apron strings, then I will.”

“Apron strings?!?” Edward was ready to vomit fire from the insult, blue eyes blazing, “You son of a whore, I’ll kill you for that-!”

And Thomas believed it.

“Stop it!” Thomas cried out, and though it was terribly dangerous he threw himself between Edward and Bates, arms spread wide to prevent damage from falling upon either party, “Stop it now, someone will hear-!”

Edward shot a hand out like a javelin, grabbed Thomas by the arm, and tried to push him away. Bates took him by the other arm, so suddenly they were playing tug of war with him like two errant children.

“Let him go!” Bates snapped, which was a queer thing to say when he was likewise tugging Thomas along.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?!” Edward spat, “Admit it, you bastard!”

Thomas spluttered, stumbling over his words. Edward knew that he and Bates had been intimate. Maybe that was spurning his jealousy on even worse.

“D-don’t be ridiculous!” Thomas stuttered, “He’s not for me, he’s for Anna-!”

“I wasn’t talking to you!” Edward seethed, his eyes flashing. His grip on Thomas’ arm suddenly became painfully tight, and Thomas instinctively let out a cry of pain.

“Edward stop!” Thomas wailed, “You’re hurting me!”

“You’re hurting me!” Edward roared.

He tugged, and Thomas’ arm nearly popped out of his socket.

Bates had to let go. He was given no choice in the matter. Edward’s grip was much too strong, and his lame leg gave him very little ground to stand on. The inertia only pushed Edward’s hold to a new level, and suddenly Thomas found himself flying across the bathroom floor right towards the tub-!!

**Crunch!**

With a sickening sensation, Thomas slammed against the tub, his ribs catching on the porcelain rim. Thomas heard one of his lower ribs break, and shrieked in pain as he fell to the floor clutching his stomach. He’d not felt pain like this in quite a while, and it staggered him.

Terrified, eyes brimming with unshed tears of pain and sorrow, Thomas looked up from the floor to Edward. He fully expected to see the man towering over him, ready to kick him or stomp on his face.
But instead, Edward was stock still, mouth shaped in a perfect ‘o’ and his expression that of obvious horror. Suddenly, for the first time in months, Thomas saw a flash of the man he’d adored and married. The real Edward, that had been stolen away by something not quite of this world.

“What have you done?!” Bates grabbed his cane from the wall, trying to beat Edward to the punch so that he could shield Thomas from further attack. But further attack was not coming. Instead, Edward crashed before Thomas on trembling knees, reaching out but not quite touching him with clammy hands.

“I- I-” Edward could not even come up with the words. Amazed, Thomas found his fear falling away as he stared into Edward’s eyes and finally saw his old friend again. Could it be that violence against Thomas had allotted Edward strange relief from his possession? Was it over, or was it just a pause?

“I didn’t—” Edward’s voice was choked, dry and raspy, “I swear I didn’t mean to— I’d never— my darling I’d never—“

But their interlude was not to last.

There was stomping upon the floor, voices issuing from the hallway, and quite suddenly Carson had appeared, still dressed in his livery save that his tie was missing. Clearly he’d been in the middle of undressing when he’d heard the commotion from the bathroom.

Finding Thomas upon the floor, half dressed, with Edward above him and Bates keeping queer company, Carson was far from soothed.

“What the ruddy hell is going on here?!” Carson demanded, gesturing from Thomas to Edward. It was odd, he didn’t even seem to acknowledge Bates. “What are you doing up in the attics at this time of night? He’s not even dressed-!”

Thomas had no answers. Edward was stuttering, unable to get his tongue around a lie quick enough to sate Carson.

But in that moment, when things could truly go pear shaped, Bates stepped forward as a sudden and unexpected savior. It was so queer, Bates could easily damn Edward in this moment and take him down for assault. But why wouldn’t he? Why when he’d seen Edward throw Thomas against the tub?

Because he’s protecting you, a sly voice whispered in the back of Thomas’ mind. He knows that if Carson thinks something fishy was going on you’d go down too.

“Thomas fell, Mr. Carson.” Bates said at once, “He’s hurt himself. He asked me to fetch the Lieutenant, so I brought him.”

Edward met Bates’ eyes. Like a deer, caught in the scope of a hunter, Edward did not move for fear of death.

Carson turned on the bathroom lights, so that garish light flooded the room. Thomas winced, his eyes forced to adjust rather abruptly. Carson stepped around Edward, crouching low to see how Thomas held at his lower stomach. At once, Thomas curled in on himself and reached with shaking hands to snatch up his shirtsleeves so that he could begin redressing.

“Is it serious?” Carson asked.

“I— I was just— I wasn’t thinking-“ Thomas was babbling, lying to Carson, and it made his
stomach turn to ice. He didn’t want to lie to Carson. Lies lead to heartbreak and scandal. Lies had made him the dark horse of this blasted abbey. “It’s nothing— I’m tired, I’ll go to bed—“

“If you’re injured, you should call for Dr. Clarkson,” Carson said in dismay. Thomas couldn’t even meet the man’s eyes, his gaze upon the floor as he picked up the rest of his clothes and held them to his chest. He couldn’t even stand up straight, the pain was so blinding!

“He’s much too busy with the hospital-“ Thomas shirked from both Carson and Bates’ hands. He didn’t want to be touched in that moment. He was too sensitive. Too shaken. “I shouldn’t be a nuisance. I don’t know what I was think. I just got scared. I apologize, Mr. Carson. It won’t happen again. Goodnight.”

And with that, he hobbled out the door.

That night, Thomas had to sleep on his opposite side so as to alleviate the pain. He was forced to ask Bates to fetch gauze from the army storehouses in the cupboards, binding his ribs by the light of a candle so that he didn’t wake anyone up.

He wondered if Edward was having just as much trouble getting to sleep.
He wondered if Edward was in just as much pain as he.
He wondered if Edward had been taken back over again.
He wondered if Edward had ever even been free to begin with. If that man he’d seen in Edward’s eyes, that reflection of the past and the kindness he’d once known, had actually been nothing more than a veneer.

Something meant to lure him into a false sense of security.

He said a prayer for Edward that night in bed, though he was not the type to pray and he doubted God would listen to him.

The next morning, Thomas’ lower ribs were colored in mottled green and yellow with flecks of purple. He knew he ought to go to the doctor, but there wasn’t much that could be done save to take a tonic for the pain. Somehow, Thomas felt like the pain was what he deserved, and so instead of going to Clarkson he just re-bound his ribs and put on his suit for the day.

It was by pure self-indulgence that Thomas decided to give himself a half day, feeling that it was impossible for him to make a full day’s work when his ribs hurt so badly. He decided he would return to work in the afternoon, taking the morning off, and so he went downstairs to the servant’s hall for breakfast around nine. The table was empty, and the servants were hard at work, but Thomas was able to scraped a plate of scrambled eggs and toast from Mrs. Patmore. He ate silently in the servant’s hall, returned his cutlery, and then ….?

Then he sat in his chair by the fire, and wondered on what to do.

The way forward was easy, if he detached himself from all emotion. He had to get rid of Edward and quick. He ought to have Edward sent to another convalescent. Maybe he could make up some sort of story, or maybe he ought to write to Edward’s family and beg them for help. Maybe if they thought
him remorseful for their ‘sinful’ affair, they would agree. But Edward’s words from the night before were haunting Thomas, making it difficult for him to breath (or maybe it was just the bindings).

“You son of a whore, I’ll kill you for that-!”

Would he have killed Bates if Thomas hadn’t been there to stop him? Would he have truly taken the man’s life, or would they have just duked it out on the bathroom floor until someone called the bobbies?

Edward had been shaken when he’d seen Thomas on the floor in pain. What if, when he’d tried to hurt Bates, he’d been likewise knocked back to his senses?

Or was it because of something else? What if it wasn’t remorse, so much as it was love? What if it went even deeper than that? What if it was because Edward’s soul knew (somewhere deep inside) that Thomas was the reason Edward was still alive? What if, in its desperation to stay alive, it didn’t want to hurt its protector?

Thomas winced, pulling back to see that he’d bit a little too close to his fingernail. In his nerves, he’d been chewing at himself.

The sound of heels upon the floor brought Thomas to his senses. He looked up, curious, and found Mrs. Hughes in the hallway to the area door.

He abandoned his chair when he realized that she was carrying a sack full of canned goods. He knew where she was going, and he wanted to go with her.

Mrs. Hughes was absorbed in buttoning up her navy peacoat, and did not realize Thomas was watching her until she made to pin on her hat in the mirror and caught his reflection over her shoulder. She looked about, and gave him a small smile.

“Mr. Carson said you took a tumble last night,” Mrs. Hughes said, “Are you alright?”

“No.” Thomas couldn’t lie anymore. Mrs. Hughes was dismayed. “Are you going to see Ethel?”

She pursed her lips and returned to pinning her hat. When she was quite certain her hair was tidy, she turned back to him. “Yes, I am.”

“Take me with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to get out of this house,” Thomas said, and it was the truth, “Because Ethel is my friend, and I want to make sure that she’s okay. Please. Just…” He closed his eyes for a moment, desperate and broken. The sigh that left him was one of dejection and exhaustion. When he opened his eyes again, he found Mrs. Hughes looking terribly sorry for him. It burned, but he couldn’t avoid it anymore, “Please, Mrs. Hughes. I don’t want to be here right now. I’ve taken the morning off. Let me go with you.”

She dithered for a small moment, but finally caved with a sympathetic smile. “Oh, alright. Go fetch your coat and hat. Be quick about it. We have a bus to catch.”

Despite his bound ribs, Thomas all but ran up the stairs and was back at Mrs. Hughes side in under eight minutes.
The walk to the bus stop was a quiet one, with Thomas taking Mrs. Hughes's satchel so that she wasn’t burdened down by the weight. Side by side, the pair of them strolled through the Grantham countryside. It was starting to get cold again, with the promise of snow not too far off. Farmers were reaping their fields one last time, with the harvest heralding the end of autumn. Scarecrows, stuffed with dried hay, offered them macabre smiles of paint and buttons as they passed. Crows, irritated at the company, lingered by rotting wooden fences, cawing incessantly as they bickered over the unlucky grub that had been dug up. Every so often, a wagonette passed bearing a farmer and his dog heading in or out of town. Thomas was able to flag one down, bearing large bushels of hay and ears of corn, which both he and Mrs. Hughes boarded so that they could make faster time into town. The farmer’s name was Warley, and he was in a good mood with his sheep dog keeping him company in the front of the cart.

He dropped Thomas and Mrs. Hughes off at the local bus stop before continuing onto the grocers. From the corner, as they waited for the noon bus, they were able to watch Warley haggle for his ears of corn with the local shops. His dog was obedient, waiting patiently upon the wagonette as Warley did business inside.

The bus came a little early, with Thomas paying for their fair (much to Mrs. Hughes thanks). They took their place near the back, not wanting to be disturbed, and were soon escorted out of town in the direction of Thirsk.

So it seemed that Thomas had been right to think that Ethel was nearby.

It was about twelve minutes into their bus ride when Mrs. Hughes finally spoke. She did not sound happy.

“Mr. Bates spoke with me last night,” She said, “I caught him fetching gauze from the store cupboards and asked him why.”

“What is it with you and the cupboards?” Thomas wondered, for she’d caught him when he was trying to find gauze as well. Did she have a sixth sense? “Are you gifted with a sight?”

“Hardly.” Mrs. Hughes said, dryly. “Mr. Bates said that Edward had thrown you into a tub.”

“I mean, you caught both me and Mr. Bates.” Thomas said, trying to avoid the change in subject for as long as he could. “It’s not too much to assume that you’re gifted.”

“He said that Edward was violent with you. That you were terrified.”

Thomas did not answer. Instead, he looked out the window to the countryside rushing past, “Do you think we’ll get a lot of snow this year?”

For a moment, Mrs. Hughes did not reply. She watched Thomas carefully, perhaps noting the haunting ache lingering dully in his blue eyes. “I think we’ll get snow sooner than you’ll talk to me about this.”

Thomas shrugged, saying nothing. Mrs. Hughes reached out and tenderly patted his hand where it rested upon his thigh. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. It’s time for you to put this affair behind you, before you end up like Ethel and I’ve three mouths to feed.”

Thomas sighed, letting his head rest against the seat behind him so that he could close his eyes. “That won’t happen Mrs. Hughes.” He had a feeling that the Heichecera wouldn’t allow it. She was fond of him, wasn’t that what she’d said?
“Well.” Mrs. Hughes muttered, tutting to herself as she let go of Thomas’ hand, “You can hardly end up with a baby, can you?”

They took the first stop into Thirsk, which wasn’t so much a true stop as it was a curb on the very outskirts of the wilderness. Like any town, Thirsk had it’s areas of poverty and wealth. The very farthest reaches of Thirsk were upon Station Road, the main branch that you could take right into the heart of town and back. The Vale of Mowbray was all around of them, an idyllic English country scene, or at least it would have been had it not been dotted with ghettos composed of derelict cobbled buildings and vagrants in tents.

Mrs. Hughes lead the way, with Thomas close behind. He did not feel it was safe to let her stray too far. The men clustered around campfires, unshaven and haggard, were eyeing their canned goods with clear longing.

The road turned into mud. The houses became more cramped and rundown, with many of the windows featuring broken glass. There were children in the streets, filthy and wild shrieking over a cricket ball. They’d made up some sort of game that involved beer bottles, and were knocking over like skittles. One child had on nothing but a pair of pants, thin and shivering on the stoop of what at one point might have been a local barn. Now, there were no animals in the holds. No hay to eat. No water in the troughs.

Thomas wondered if that babe would survive the winter. He doubted it.

Mrs. Hughes stopped before a door with chipped blue paint, which was set down at basement level and required you to crawl over a mop bucket in order to gain entry. As they waited on the stoop, a rat scurried past their feet. It had been making its home in the mop bucket, and clearly wasn’t keen on visitors.

Mrs. Hughes knocked upon the door with a leather gloved hand. They waited patiently for a few moments, and were received as the door opened to reveal an ashen and broken woman.

For a moment, Thomas thought that it must be Ethel’s sister, for though the woman looked unnervingly similar to Ethel there was no way that she was the same proud woman who’d once held court in the abbey’s basement. But even as Thomas searched the woman over, there could be no denying that it was Ethel. There was a certain freckle at the corner of her left eye that marked her as an individual. There were bags beneath her green eyes, which had lost their glimmer and hope. Her red hair, once so vibrant and beautiful, was now unwashed with weeks worth of grease and tied into a heavy bun. Her clothes were threadbare and gray. There was a bruise at her pale throat which looked terrifyingly like a handprint.

Ethel took Thomas in, and did not even so much as blink.

“Come to see me in my shame?” She asked in a whisper.

“Far from it.” Thomas said at once.

“I’ve brought your rations for next week.” Mrs. Hughes said, and Thomas offered the food to Ethel at once, who took them immediately and let them inside. Her house was nothing more than a one bedroom hovel. She had no stove, not even a table. Everything she owned seemed to have come
from someone else’s backdoor. She’d strung twine up on the ceiling from the hook of a rusted nail. Nappies were drying upon it, slightly browned in areas from stains that simply couldn’t be fully scrubbed away. Ethel seemed to be sleeping upon a set of box springs covered in a flannel sheet. She had no pillows, and instead was using coats. She had a wash bin that was serving as a sink, but there were no dishes inside. Instead, she was using tin cans that she’d no doubt gotten from her rations to hold everything from baby paraphernalia to string. One can in particular caught Thomas’ focus and held it for far too long.

It was a gathering of Daisies.

But the flowers, which had impacted him deeply for whatever reason, could not hold his attention fully for long. There was someone else in the room, taking up residence in a cot layered in faded towels. Charlie Parks was not happy at being ignored, far too little to be left alone for long. He whimpered and cried, his face a ruddy hue and his chubby legs kicking at the air.

“Ey-!” Thomas could not stop himself. His heart yearned to love a child, and so he staggered forward as if pulled by the strings of a marionette. Though Ethel did not give him permission, though it was improper to pick up someone else’s child without warning, Thomas did so and held Charlie close, “Ey now! What’s all this? What are these tears for?”

Charlie hiccuped, but began to soothe. Thomas’ coat seemed to warm him, and so he shrugged it at once to wrap it around Charlie’s shoulders. Charlie gurgled, confused at the new fabric.

There was something terribly compelling about this moment. To have a babe so close to his breast that trusted him implicitly. No right, no wrong. No homosexual. No heterosexual. Just love… love that could be shared and understood.

Praised.
Accepted.
Appreciated.

“There now.” Thomas whispered, sitting down in Ethel’s lone chair. It squeaked, a little distressed at Thomas’ sudden weight, but Thomas did not care.

Charlie’s eyes were green, like his mother’s. His hair, however, was a dark brown just as Bryant’s had been. In the right light, it almost looked black. Thomas ran his fingers through Charlie’s thin locks, trying to get a tangle out. Charlie did not pay attention, far too captivated by the brass of Thomas’ buttons.

“Well, I’m afraid the jig is up, my girl.” Mrs. Hughes was saying. Ethel was pacing, putting canned food away in crates that had surely once held fresh fruit. Now, they served as her cupboards.

“What d’you mean?” Ethel asked.

“Mr. Carson knows I’ve been feeding you, and he’s none too happy about it.” Ethel paused, mid-pace, her hand still outstretched and clasping a can of peas.

Thomas rocked Charlie close to his chest, considering the obstacles in their path. So what if they couldn’t use the abbey’s stores? Thomas could easily steal from the army’s wares. They had more than enough food, and it wouldn’t be missed. He made up his mind to do it at once.

“That won’t be the end of it, Ethel.” Thomas promised her. “I’ve an ace or two up my sleeves.”
Mrs. Hughes gave him a dry look, “Well there you have it. You’ve now got a proper angel on your side.”

Ethel wondered at Thomas, but still did not address him. Thomas wondered if she was embarrassed.

Charlie was drooling around one of Thomas’ buttons, trying to eat it. It wasn’t going very well, but he was trying and that was what mattered most.

“Not that I think it’ll come to anything, but Lady Grantham has offered to have Lord Grantham appeal to Bryant’s better nature,” Mrs. Hughes said, which caused Ethel’s eyes to spark with slight hope. “As if he has one,” Mrs. Hughes muttered under her breath, crossing her arms over her chest.

“But surely, if his Lordship asks him, he must do something?” Ethel said, her voice growing slightly fast as her hope became apparent. So low was she that she was willing to cling to any lifeboat. A port in a storm like this couldn’t be ignored lest it prove to be her savior.

“Why?” Mrs. Hughes wasn’t too hopeful, “What difference will it make? We’re not in the 14th century.”

“But when he hears that Lord Grantham knows what he’s done-“

“What’s he done?” Mrs. Hughes demanded, and once again Thomas heard a slightly steely edge to her voice. It was the same that he’d bore witness to the night Ethel had been found out, “That all men aren’t anxious to do behind the bicycle sheds every night?”

Thomas scoffed aloud, taken aback. All men, was it?

Mrs. Hughes shot him an apologetic look, “No offense.”

“I’m finding it hard not to be offended, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas grumbled. In his lap, Charlie had laid his head against Thomas’ chest, as if listening to his heartbeat, “I don’t do that.” He cupped Charlie’s head, fingering the feathery brown locks at the nape of neck.

“Well, you aren’t normal-“ Mrs. Hughes said. Once again, Thomas had to shoot her down.

“Mr. Bates doesn’t do that, an’ he’s normal!” Thomas said. “You never see him trying to take Anna behind a bicycle shed!”

“Mr. Bates is a gentleman.” Mrs. Hughes corrected him, tersely.

“That’s the real truth of it,” Thomas said, hoping to illuminate both women on the subject of errant men. After a life and a half, he’d run into a few, “It’s got nothing to do with who you love. It’s got everything to do with how you treat them. Gentlemen don’t look for fast excuses. Bryant was not a gentleman.”

“Here, here.” Mrs. Hughes agreed tersely, before returning her attention to Ethel. “I wouldn’t put your faith in him either way.”

Ethel looked about at her hovel, listless and exhausted. She looked to her baby, now soothing upon Thomas’ chest, warmed by his coat, “…Then what am I going to do? If Major Bryant doesn’t come around?”

“Who knows?” Mrs. Hughes wondered, just as bitter and exhausted as she. She dwelled on it for a moment more before saying, “Go to a big city. Invent a past. You’ve broken the rules, my girl, and it’s no good pretending they’re easily mended.”
But something big was beginning to stir deep within Thomas’ heart and it wouldn’t let him be. He looked at Ethel, and in that moment he saw the beautiful girl who’d once made lighthearted jokes in the servant’s hall. The maid who’d sighed at a rag and imagined herself as an actress. The dreamer that had wanted more for her life.

Were they really so different? He could be her. He’d been her.

Thomas held Charlie close, and placed the softest of kisses atop Charlie’s head. The skin was warm to the touch, his hair smelling lightly of coconut milk. Though Ethel was unwashed, Charlie had clearly had a bath sometime recently. It was a show of Ethel’s love for him, a silent protest against the poverty that they shared. Charlie had no way of knowing how truly dire his situation was, and it seemed that so long as Ethel had any say in it he never would.

A mother’s love was a powerful antidote, perhaps the only capable of curing the poisonous sting of reality.

Returning home that day was not a pleasant experience for Thomas. After seeing Ethel’s poverty and misery, it was difficult to feel comfortable in his own skin. He found himself truly observing the cleanliness of the abbey. The warm smells radiating from the kitchen reminded him that there was food to be spared. The air was warm, lit by several fires both above and below stairs. There was a general air of calm and hope, which had all but fled the outskirts of Thirsk where children froze in the early winter chill.

No wonder Ethel had resorted to prostitution. Who would, when they were faced with such bleak circumstances? For god’s sake, she had a baby to feed, and if she wasn’t careful Charlie could get deathly ill during the winter. The thought of that little babe, shivering in his cot, made Thomas want to be sick to his stomach. There had to be some way he could help, some way he could save them both… but how?

The answers were far from easy, but Thomas made himself useful as best he could. Ethel could no longer be fed from Downton’s stores, with Carson watching and Mrs. Hughes chastised by Lady Grantham. Instead, Thomas was now the one to feed Ethel out of the army surplus that the abbey was granted each month. The rationing imposed by the monarchy had resulted in a great deal of food being shipped to the boys abroad. But there was still a great deal more being sent to bases and hospitals, so the abbey was stacked, food wise. The only downside was that everything was canned, but that was the price you paid during war. So, one quiet evening, Thomas found himself locked away in the army surplus stocking his valise full of cans to give to Ethel the next day. She did not know he was coming; he felt oddly like Father Christmas stuffing his sack.

He’d made sure to pack cans of baked beans, asparagus, fish, ham, sardines, mushroom soup, peaches, tomato soup, and Vienna sausages. It was far from a healthy diet, but it was the best that Thomas could offer Ethel until he could find her a way to get her fresh food. He likewise had decided to give Ethel his spare coat, as well as a scarf he often wore and some pairs of socks. He could not afford to give her much more, not without freezing himself in the coming winter, but he was desperate to provide warmth for Charlie and Ethel both. Their survival, he reasoned, would
entirely depend upon Thomas’ ability to provide for them. They were under his charge now, though it might be slightly illogical to say so.

The sound of the storehouse door opening made Thomas panic, and he dropped his valise at once to kick it underneath a stack of linens so that it could not be seen. For a moment, he thought even to duck down and hide himself, until he reasoned that he was the manager of Downton and he had every right to be in the storehouse if he so chose.

But the sudden shaft of light, which fell through dusty air, illuminated not the face of a maid or Mrs. Hughes coming to count cans... but Edward.

He seemed aged, in that moment. Ashen and clammy. Thomas wondered if he was ill.

Edward shut the door, oddly nervous in that moment. After their terrible interaction in the bathroom, Thomas felt afraid to be alone with Edward again.

He picked his valise up, and snapped the clasps closed. For a moment he kept his back to Edward, until he felt that that too was dangerous and turned back towards Edward so that he could see any movement coming.

Edward seemed to realize that. He wasn’t too happy about it.

“…What’s this?” Edward asked, gesturing to Thomas’ valise, “Running away?”

Bitter, Thomas refolded the linens that he’d kicked to hide his valise. He couldn’t meet Edward’s eye for the moment. “…Is that really the first thing you’re going to say to me after what you did?”

Edward didn’t have it in him to look ashamed.

“I had a temper.” Edward said, “I’m s-“

“You threw me.” Thomas cut him off. He would not allow for bandied words, “Like a rag doll. Into a bathtub. You broke one of my ribs.”

“Look I said I was sorry.” Edward said, “Or I would have if you’d let me talk-“

“And what good would talking do?” Thomas asked, hands on his hips. “What, would talking erase the past? Would talking heal my rib?”

“If it could it’d already be healed, wouldn’t it.” Edward snapped, “You never shut up, do you.”

Thomas scoffed, rightly angered. He turned away, re-locking the cabinet which held the military’s supplies of canned good. The sound of the metal snap, with the lock closing on the catch, was disturbingly loud. At first, when the sound of the door opening was heard again, Thomas thought it was Edward leaving. But instead, the voice of Mrs. Hughes cut through the air.

“Oh-!”

Thomas whipped about, unable to hide his valise. Mrs. Hughes looked from him to the locked cabinet behind him. It seemed that she’d come snooping out trouble like a bloodhound, and had found it in the form of a soldier out of bounds and an unlocked cabinet. When neither Thomas nor Edward explained. Mrs. Hughes made several noises underneath her breath.

“Well. I see you’ve found the army’s collection of canned goods.” Mrs. Hughes said, “Aren’t we feeding you well enough?”
“Oh I say you’re feeding him fine enough.” Said Edward, bitterly, “Put on a right bit of weight hasn’t he?”

Mrs. Hughes did a double take, shocked at Edward’s tone. “I beg your pardon?”

“Stop,” Thomas ground out; he wouldn’t stand to have Mrs. Hughes put in the middle of all this, “Not while she’s in the room.”

“What, I thought you said that she could be trusted?” Edward said it as if it were a fix-all. It only served to anger Thomas further.

“That’s not what this is about!” Thomas cried out, whirling on the spot. Mrs. Hughes seemed quite shocked to find herself in the front row seat of a lavender argument. Part of her seemed transfixed by the exoticness of it all. And to think, all of this over an army surplus and canned spam?


“Fine way to talk to me.” Thomas said, “Your husband.”

“Oh are you back to being that, are you?”

“I dunno if I ever was to begin with.” Thomas snapped. Edward did not answer him, somehow shocked by the fact that everything was falling apart so quickly in front of his face. He’d come here to be the aggressor, but instead he was being attacked. In that, he was defenseless and slightly shamed.

Mrs. Hughes had pursed her lips. She seemed afraid to speak, lest something shocking come out. Instead, her brown eyes merely flicked from Thomas to Edward. When neither man spoke after a moment, she was the one to interject. Her tone was tender, gentle… soft like a dove.

“…Thomas…” Mrs. Hughes whispered. “…I think it’s time you said what need to be said.”

Edward looked at her, “Time for what?” He asked, “Are you going to show me my marching orders, lady?”

Thomas shook his head, “Do not speak to her in that tone of voice-“

“I’m not-“

“Do not speak to her in that tone of voice!” Thomas repeated, though this time it was in a shout. Mrs. Hughes jumped a bit, not used to the quarrelsome tone. “Do you understand me!?” Thomas snapped, truly furious in that moment. The thought of anyone being rude to Mrs. Hughes just… just… it set his blood boiling! “That woman is a saint and you will respect her!”

Edward stumbled over his words, slightly shamed in that moment.

Good, Thomas thought, Have some damn humility.

“You won’t be the first man that’s turned his tongue to me, Lieutenant,” Mrs. Hughes warned, “But it’s Thomas who you need to remember to respect. If you love him, it won’t be hard.”

“Yeah but does he love, me back?” Edward asked Mrs. Hughes, “That’s the real question. It’s been ages since he’s even so much as looked at me.”

Edward seemed to be hoping this would shame Thomas. After the other day with the tub and the broken rib, it wouldn’t.
“…I’ve been thinking Edward,” Thomas was talking without his mind catching up to speed. “I think it’s time for you to consider that this… this was not a good idea.”

“You can’t even put a name to it, can you? You’re so full of shame for your own kind, for the things you do in your bed-“

“Shut up-“ Rage was building within Thomas, making him sick to his stomach. All the terrible things he thought of at night were coming back to him. All the ways that he’d looked at Jimmy only to regret it seconds later. The terrible shame he’d felt, when Carson had declared him a vile freak of nature. Mrs. Hughes looked ready to faint.

“No, I won’t shut up!” Edward declared, “You need a good talking to! Running around with this lot like it’s your place, like you even belong here. Do you forget the way we lay together-“

“Edward, stop it!” Thomas cried out, agog. “Think of what you’re saying! There’s a woman in the room, for Christ’s sake! A woman I deeply respect and admire!”

“She knows what you are.” Edward didn’t seem able to stop himself, “She knows you’ve been bouncin’ on my cock-“

“Oh!” Mrs. Hughes let out a tiny cry of horror, “My word-!”

Thomas could not stop himself. He reared back a hand and slapped Edward across the face. **Hard.**

Edward stumbled backward, the sound of Thomas slapping him like a cracking him like a bullwhip in the dusty air. Thomas’ hand burned with a fiery passion, but he did not care. He was trembling with rage!

“… Get out.” Thomas hissed under his breath, tears burning in the corner’s of his eyes. He could not say if they were from humiliation or regret. “You bastard.”

Edward opened his mouth, tried to find a retort, and failed.

He eventually stumbled away, more ashen and clammy than ever. As he left the store cupboards, neither Mrs. Hughes nor Thomas made a comment. The sound of the door closing was like a judge’s gavel to him in that moment.

Ashamed, Thomas sat down atop a crate of canned pears and nearly burst into tears. He turned his face away from Mrs. Hughes so that she could not see the terrible burning in his cheeks.

“…M’ so sorry.” Thomas finally managed to scrape out, but his voice was weak. “M’ so sorry, Mrs. Hughes. I never wanted you to hear that.”

“Well I…” She didn’t seem to know what to say, “It wasn’t a secret but… I didn’t like it being flung in my face. But I think you see now that this has to end.”

“I know.” Thomas hated to admit it to himself. “I know.”

“… Shall I tell Lord Grantham to send him away?” Mrs. Hughes asked, kindly, “Maybe he can put a word in-“

“No.” Thomas mumbled, wiping his cheeks lest she see the traces of his shame. He rose back up, sniffed, and plucked up his valise. It was almost unbearably heavy. “I’ll … think of something.”
“Well do it quick.” Mrs. Hughes urged, slightly petulant in that moment. “Before he says things like that in front of someone else.”

“God help us all.”

After that harrowing conversation, Thomas put away his valise in the attic and returned downstairs to have a smoke in the area yard. It was odd, sometimes he’d smoke like a chimney and sometimes he’d be sober for weeks. This was a chimney sort of moment, and he found himself on his third cigarette when company came calling. At first, he feared it was Edward, and regretfully looked around. But it turned out to only be O’Brien who looked terribly convicted about something or the other. With a huff, she took a seat beside Thomas at the work bench, and let out an ugly scowl. With smoke suddenly wreathing her face, she looked like a very irritable if not exhausted dragon.

“Fancy a fag?” She asked, noting that Thomas was burning through a cigarette like it owed him money. Her tone was sarcastic.

“Two, if you can spare it.” Thomas replied.

O’Brien scoffed, “You’ve already got one in your mouth.”

“Both hands are empty then.”

Agog, she pulled out her pack of black cats, lighting them up and taking a swift drag. Her cigarettes were for women, thinner and made of a lighter brand of tobacco. Thomas found them wanting, compared to his own woodbines.

“What on earth is eating at you?” O’Brien asked.

“A demon of my own making.” Thomas said.

“Can’t be worse than the one Bates has on his back,” O’Brien made another ugly noise, rolling her eyes to heaven for a sign of redemption, “That wife of his is downright nasty. I should never have written to her.”

Oh they were back to that, were they?
Yes, now Thomas could remember. O’Brien had been the one to write— damnit, why hadn’t he been thinking of that? Why had he allowed Bates’ situation to deteriorate?

Edward, his mind supplied. Thomas pinched his brow, trying to come up with a solution. He couldn’t think of one. He knew absolutely nothing about Vera Bates. In order to weasel Bates out of this one, he’d have to get close.

“Try not to talk to her anymore.” He offered.

“Difficult not to when she’s coming up here and making a right misery of herself, the stupid cow.” O’Brien cursed. “If only I could get her to put a sock in it. The way she prattles on.”

Thomas thought of Edward running his mouth in front of Mrs. Hughes, and let out a little huff. O’Brien cast him a glance, and found him pale.

“…Honestly, what’s the matter with you?” she asked, annoyed. “You’re as shaken as a milk maid.”
“If I tell you, it’ll curl your hair.” Thomas said. O’Brien reached up to her forelock, where it lay already heavily curled upon her forehead.

“No harm there”, She muttered bitterly.

“Edward… had a conversation with me today in front of Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said, biting out each word like it were made of ice. O’Brien listened, enraptured by the juicy gossip of his affairs. “And he decided it would be wise to say…and I quote…”

But he wouldn’t, not the whole way.

“She knows what you are. She knows you’ve been bouncing on my…. “He did not finish the sentence. Instead, he merely gestured to his lap.

O’Brien’s jaw dropped, smoke billowing out. She looked ready to beat Edward unconscious with a sock full of nickels.

“She didn’t.” She gasped. “What kind of an idiot have you shacked up with? I ought to give him a piece of my mind, you can’t say things like that in front of a lady!”

“And just to be clear-“ Thomas added, unable to help himself, “I haven’t been bouncin’ on anything!”

“Don’t!” O’Brien waved it off, irritated, “I don’t want that image in my head. God, I think I’m going to be sick-“

“Oh well, thanks!” Thomas scowled. “Glad I trusted you-“

“You’ve got to get him to shutup!” O’Brien urged. “Surely you must have something on him! Anything! Thomas, if he says the wrong thing to the wrong person, you’ll swing. You know that, right? Or are you completely an idiot?”

“You know, funny enough, after living my entire life in hiding I am well aware of the ramifications of the truth.” Thomas spat. Sensing the heat in his voice, O’Brien pulled back a bit.

“Well.” She said, in clipped tones, “As I say, get him to shut up or get him out. But don’t let it carry on any longer.”

Thomas shook his head, at a loss. “I dunno what to do.”

O’Brien smoked for a moment, her dark eyes slowly filling up with inspiration. “You know…” She said, when Thomas offered no solutions, “I could always…” She gestured with her hand. “Speak to Lady Grantham?”

“No,” Thomas was terrified of O’Brien meddling, “No, you’ll leave this to me. If you’re caught up in it, it’ll be ten times worse than what Bates is dealing with. Edward’s dangerous, and this topic… it’s not simple.”

“That’s a word for it.” O’Brien grumbled. Unfortunately, the real word could never be said between them. Thomas fought this battle alone.
It was a quiet, gray November afternoon when Thomas came to visit Ethel again.

Though he had not intended on taking Mrs. Hughes with him, the discovery of Major Bryant’s death had to be relayed and so he was now accompanied by the housekeeper back to the outskirts of Thirsk. Thomas had to admit, that Bryant dying right before the end of the war seemed like petty justice. He’d been such a prick, and honestly Thomas wouldn’t miss him a wink. But he was also Ethel’s only hope and prayer, at least initially, so now what was there to do now?

Slowly, an idea was coming to Thomas. It was a crazy idea, the sort you might dream of when you were half-awake, but it was also persistent and kept popping up in the oddest of moments. Every time he thought of Ethel and Charlie, freezing in their derelict hut, his heart strings were tugged so violently he thought he might weep. The others warned him not to take on Ethel’s troubles, but how could he ever make them understand? He’d been in Ethel’s shoes before. He’d been facing the storm and much worse. This damn society of theirs had all sorts of outcasts, not just lavenders. Ethel understood what it was to be pushed out of the nest. To be forced to face the world before you were ready. For that reason alone, Thomas felt a tender sort of love for her. The sort he’d had for Baxter.

And god only knows when they would meet again.

“I should have you know, Edward has not apologized to me.” Mrs. Hughes spoke up. They’d made their stop, and were now walking on the dirty lane to Ethel’s shack. The children were scarce in the streets, all of them seeming to cluster around doorways and flaming trashcans where homeless men were trying to warm. The smell of rubbish and burnt plastic was horrendous upon the air.

“I’m not surprised.” Thomas said. “But I’d like to apologize-“

“Well too little too late.” Mrs. Hughes grumbled, “It’s not like you can take away what was said, can you?”

“No, but I can try.”

Mrs. Hughes seemed to consider this before giving in, sulking a bit as she tugged her coat closer. “Honestly, the nerve of him.”

“I know, I know-“ And Thomas was well aware that she had every right to be disgusted. “Mrs. Hughes I just…” He paused in the street, forcing their quarry to come to a halt. Now the pair of them were facing one another, with Thomas’ heavy valise between them. “… I’m sorry.” He said, soft and gullible.

Mrs. Hughes’ stern scowl melted away into something sorrowful and understanding.

“It shocked me, I won’t deny it.” She said, “But I accept your apology.”

“Thank you.” Thomas said, and just like he’d done with O’Brien he was quick to clear up the air, “And just so we’re clear I never did any sort of bouncing-“

She reached out with a hand up in a firm ‘stop’ motion. Thomas pursed his lips, knowing when to hush up.

“I don’t want to hear anymore.” Mrs. Hughes said “Am I clear?”

Thomas nodded, chastised.

“Very good,” She said, before turning back towards Ethel’s house, “Now come on. We don’t have much time and we have a lot to relay.”
Ethel’s doorstep was just as dark and gloomy as before. The bitter chill outside only seemed worse inside, however that was possible. Charlie was asleep in his cot, seemingly frozen with slightly blue lips. Thomas at once swept himself upon the babe, opening up his valise to reveal his spare coat. Mrs. Hughes had all but choked on her tongue when she realized Thomas was now giving Ethel his clothes, but Thomas paid her no mind. He swaddled Charlie in his coat, and sat by Ethel’s tin can fire to warm him better. There, with no one to force him off, Thomas lovingly whispered every lullaby he knew to the lad. Soon, Charlie’s lips were rosy in hue, and his breaths were even and deep.

Ethel, on the other hand, was far from soothed.

The news of Bryant’s death had a staggering effect upon her. All the light seemed to flee from her eyes as she clutched her weathered shawl and hid in the shadow of her wash bin. Mrs. Hughes dithered with her hands in her lap, unsure of what to say.

The facts were laid bare, and no amount of smuggled cans good could change them.

“…But…” Ethel swallowed several times, trying to find her voice again, “But if they’re read her ladyship’s letter, won’t his parent’s knows?”

“I don’t think so,” Mrs. Hughes mused, “She only wrote to invite him to pay a visit. She thought the subject of the baby would come better face to face.”

Ethel paced, a finger to her mouth as she chewed a bit at the nail. She was trying to find another way out, another avenue to peace and prosperity for the sake of her son. “Could I write to them?”

“You could try, but where’s your proof?” Mrs. Hughes asked, the sadness evident in her voice, “With him dead, you’ve no evidence at all.”

Ethel grew ill, pale and withdrawn as she hid in the shadows of her hovel. “Then I’m ruined,” She whispered, her face turned away.

But suddenly a voice hit Thomas, bubbling up from the dark recesses of his mind to haunt his thoughts: “Have you heard the phrase to know when you’re beaten? Well I am Mr. Bates. I’m well and truly beaten.”

Thomas bristled, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of his neck.

He rose up, leaving Charlie to nap by the fire.

“No, you’re not.” He declared, voice full of pride. Despite this, Ethel would not look at him, “You’re not ruined yet. We’ll figure this out, Ethel. For you and Charlie both.”

But Ethel was beginning to brood, pacing and fretting as she continually chewed at her nail. By this point, she was down to the damn nub.

“How’s that maid getting on?” She asked, bitterly. “The widow with the little boy?”

Ah, so she was thinking of Jane? To be fair, Thomas didn’t know much about the woman. She was the placid, plain type, with a delicate smile and nimble fingers. She was like flour, the sort of thing that you’d find in every city in every county. Thomas didn’t have much feeling for her either way.

“Very well, thank you. Why?” Mrs. Hughes didn’t seem willing to get involved with this
conversation, but here they were all the same.

“I was just thinking.” Ethel said, but thinking wasn’t the term. She was brooding, “Well, everyone wants to help her, to feed her, to find her work, because her son’s father is dead. But so is the father of my son. Where’s the difference?” She rounded on them both, emerald eyes blazing.

Thomas had seen this sort of rage before. He’d looked it in the mirror, every day, watching Bates and Anna elope while he was forbidden from so much as looking at Jimmy. He hated to see it now in Ethel’s eyes.

“There’s no difference,” He swore, but Mrs. Hughes cut him off with a sharp retort.

“The difference is that Jane is a respectable married woman that some man chose to be his wife.” She said. “And I’ll thank you not to go putting nonsense in her head, Thomas!” She warned, cutting him a sharp glance.

But Thomas wouldn’t hear of it. “Oh what is marriage anyway?” Thomas demanded angrily, “Look at me! Look at what I’ve endured! Marriage isn’t always possible.”

“Well it was possible for Ethel and the Major!” Mrs. Hughes said.

A sudden wail broke out from the crib as Charlie was roused from his nap. At once, Thomas swept to Charlie’s side, reaching down into his crib to pluck him up.

“Hey now!” Thomas soothed, even as Charlie whimpered and whined. “Hey… ‘Ey-!” He yelped. Charlie had grabbed a lock of Thomas’ hair and pulled hard, “Hey now, alright, I got the message-” He gently tugged his lock of hair out of Charlie’s hand, pulling back a bit so that the two of them could look each other in the eye. Charlie’s blue eyes were full of tears, his rosy lips quivering traitorously.

“I won’t shout again,” Thomas promised him, “I just got agitated is all. That’s just the way I am! Curmudgeonly,” He said with affection. Charlie gurgled, unsure of whether to believe Thomas or not.

“I am, I swear it!” Thomas placed the gentlest kiss on Charlie’s forehead. Satisfied, Charlie took several huffy breathes before laying his head upon Thomas’ neck. Thomas rocked him, murmuring nonsensical whispers into his tiny pink ear. It was like the perfect conch shell.

Mrs. Hughes and Ethel were watching him. Embarrassed, Thomas looked away.

“Ethel, this is not the end.” Thomas swore to her, “We’ll figure this out, you and me. I won’t let you fall to ruin. Bryant was never going to help you anyway. He wasn’t a man, he was a boy in an officer’s uniform. There’s no difference for you now with him dead.”

“I disagree.” Mrs. Hughes said, in a dignified but stiff voice. “The difference is that the last proof Ethel needed is gone. So we can’t rely upon the fortune of the Bryant family to save her now.”

But Thomas didn’t care. Fortunes could be won and lost in this land. He’d fight for Ethel, and he’d fight hard.

“I don’t care!” Thomas declared, quite proudly, “I’ll think of something, and I’ll save her-“ He turned his attention to Ethel, who was staring at him as if he was a shining vision from Camelot. “I’ll save you Ethel… I swear to you I will.”
Ethel bowed her head in shame. It seemed that with Thomas' words, Ethel was getting the final realization that she's sunk low enough to need to be saved. That she was no longer a youthful and peppy maid at a warm and safe servant's table.

“… You ought to go.” She whispered, turning away, “Edward will wonder where you are.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say. The truth of the matter was he could hardly help Ethel when he couldn’t help himself. How was he to save her when he couldn’t get Edward under control?

“Ethel, I…” Thomas felt helpless.

“I wish I could help you,” Mrs. Hughes said, and it was clear that she meant it, “Truly I do. But you’ve made your bed, and that’s just the way things are. I tried to get you to-“

“Just go.” She said, cutting Mrs. Hughes off. Her voice wasn’t hot or cruel, but there was an empty aching ring to it that shut both Thomas and Mrs. Hughes up.

In Thomas’ arms, Charlie slumbered on, completely unaware that his feeble future was slipping away.

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It felt like he was scraping a layer of filth off his skin that night.

It was close to midnight, and the servant’s were all winding down with most in their bed’s asleep. Thomas had spent the whole day doing tasks, avoiding Edward, thinking endlessly about Ethel and her situation. He could not help but draw arrows to his own experience with Jimmy. This, inevitably, led to thoughts about Jimmy.

And that could not be tolerated.

To combat this, Thomas cleaned his room. From top to bottom, he scrubbed the place inside out until he remembered Jimmy cleaning silver and had to stop. Then he re-organized his bureau until he remembered Jimmy stripping in his room, and then had to turn away. Finally, he gave himself a haircut and a shave, and mercifully the memories stopped there… but then Thomas noticed how damn filthy he was. He was like this the last time that he’d visited Ethel.

Taking a whores bath in his room, Thomas wrung out a damp flannel and ran it up and down his arms, pausing to sniff at his armpit only to grimace and pull back. Christ, why did he always smell so bad?

“Gonna get me a powder.” Thomas muttered to no one in particular.

“It’s stress.”

Thomas jumped about a foot, dropping his flannel and looking around to find that he was not alone. The Heichecera was sitting at the foot of his bed, casually stroking his many quilts.

“Do you fuckin’ mind?” Thomas demanded, gesturing between the pair of them, “I think I nearly wet myself, there.”

“Stress makes your hormones spike,” The Heichecera said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the
word, “You’re stressed, and your body is responding. That’s why you smell. Of course, a powder would be nice, but it’s not permanent.”

Thomas re-wetted his flannel and began to wipe himself off again. He even struck up a cigarette, feeling a bit like a heathen out of his shirt and in only his pants. Then again, this woman had seen him in the bathtub so… maybe it wasn’t such a big deal.

“Well,” Thomas said through a mouth full of a cigarette and smoke, “She’s fucked right and proper. And I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t you?” The Heichecera asked, “I think you do.”

“Do I?” They were going round and round like a pair of fools on a happy horse, “Because I had to wrap a freezing baby in a spare coat today so I’m pretty damn lost.”

He glared at the Heichecera, only to soften as she gave him a tender smile.

“You’re afraid,” She said.

“Well Edward is terrifying right now,” Thomas said, thinking of how quick the man had been to throw him into a bathtub, “I don’t know how to be shot of him.”

“You’re not afraid of Edward,” She declared.

Really? This was a first, to Thomas. As far as he knew, he was god damn terrified of the man. At the snarky expression on Thomas’ face, the Heichecera went on to clarify, “You’re afraid of yourself.”

“No I’m not.” He’d never heard of such foolishness.

“Oh, yes, forgive me, what do I know?” The Heichecera let out an exaggerated sigh, rising to her feet and crossing the floor. She walked like she trod on smoke, more gliding than pacing. “I’m only the one who mastered the five archaic truths and lived three thousand years, brought you back from time and-“

“Alright, alright-” Thomas cut her off before she could yap anymore. They were face to face now, mere inches apart. Up close, he smelt something dark upon her… like clove but sweeter. “I get your point.”

“You are a coward, Thomas Barrow.” The Heichecera declared, and he was five seconds to taking offense until she added, “That’s what makes you so brave.”

“… How does that work?” Thomas asked, curious. “I’m a coward so I’m brave?”

“A brave man is not without fear.” The Heichecera clarified, “A brave man is fearful, but persists none the less.”

And with that bit of logic, she left him once again.

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November tenth dawned bright and clear, leaving Thomas in a refreshed but pensive state. He knew by the end of the night the war would be over, and so he internally rejoiced as he went about his main duties. He observed the state of the cupboards, did inventory on military supplies, spoke with several recuperating soldiers about their updated physical state, and helped Sybil Crawley to get one
patient up and walking after a leg amputation. Once or twice, Thomas thought he saw Edward in the background, a sort of shifting black cloud that vanished from sight when he stared too hard or too long. Once, when Thomas had been helping a patient back into bed, he’d caught sight of Edward in the reflection of a standing mirror. Edward had been sulking in the doorway of the common room, eyes burning a hole into the back of Thomas’ head. When Thomas had bent over to put the patient to bed and stood back up straight, Edward had vanished.

The day had progressed unusually slow. Thomas had kept looking at the clock, noting the shifting hours like sand trickling through a glass.

One o’clock.

Two o’clock.

Three o’clock.

Then came afternoon tea, and Thomas was momentarily distracted by the leaving of several men who were finished convalescing. A wagonette from town came to pick them up, and so Thomas had shaken each of their hands before signing off on their forms and bidding them farewell.

Six o’clock.

Seven o’clock.

And then the family were served their supper. Thomas took his own meal downstairs, deciding he would eat with the rest of the servants. From there it was a matter of keeping Mrs. Patmore and Daisy company in the kitchen while they finished serving out the seven courses to the family. Thomas watched a baked salmon get whisked away by Mr. Carson, then a tray of ice asparagus and sliced heirloom tomatoes.

By the time the syllabub went up, Thomas was fidgeting nonstop. He checked his watch once… twice…

Nine o’clock.

Dinner was over.

And so, in flood of merriment and chattering voices, the staff returned downstairs for their own supper. They were to dine on baked chicken, steamed cauliflower with cheese sauce, and kedgeree.

The announcement of cheese sauce at the servant’s hall dinner table was one that you’d align to childhood merriment. Was it strictly kosher for cheese sauce to be put on baked chicken, butter rolls, or kedgeree? No, not particularly, but that didn’t stop most of the maids from doing it. Thomas, of course, was a sucker for butter bread, and despite it already being heavily buttered he added another tab of butter just for the hell of it.

Of course, all the butter and cheese sauce in the world couldn’t make Branson shut up about politics. The German overhaul was on everyone’s minds, and Branson was quick to declare this would be the beginning of a German republic. That the monarchies of Europe were as good as dusted.

Carson had a lot to say about that, naturally.

“It’ll be the dawn of a new age,” Branson declared with pride to anyone who would listen, “We’ll have ourselves a German republic before it’s all said and done. And soon, it’ll happen in England
“Too-“

“A German republic?” Carson wondered aloud, one bushy eyebrow reaching dangerously close to his hairline, “No, I don’t think so, Mr. Branson. The Kaiser will go, I’ll grant you, and maybe the crown prince too, but there’ll be a regency, mark my words. Monarchy is the lifeblood of Europe.”

He said it as if it were the greatest title in the world. As if to have a monarchy was to be akin to god. Thomas supposed that in Mr. Carson’s eyes, it was.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Carson, but I think you’ll find the kings and emperors have had their day,” Branson wouldn’t back down from his corner without a fight. “If President Wilson has anything to say about it-“

“I should have you know-“ O’Brien’s voice in Thomas’ ear brought him to a short pause. He looked about, finding her boring eyes into his temple. “Your little friend Edward was right nasty to Bates earlier today.”

“What did he say?” Thomas asked, casting a sharp glance across the table to Bates who was knee deep in conversation with Anna. Neither of them looked entirely happy.

“He said,” and at this, O’Brien leaned in so that none but they could hear, “That if he couldn’t have you, no one else could, and that included Bates.”

“Oh-“ Thomas scoffed, rolling his eyes and taking a menacing bite out of his bread, “What a tosser. I’m about ready to chuck in the towel.”

“I wish you would.” O’Brien said, leaning back and returning to what remained of her kedgeree. She had a fondness for the dish, “Before he goes and does you in.”

She had a point there.

Across the table, Bates and Anna’s whispers were growing progressively louder with a dip in conversation around them.

“I’ll have to go up to London,” Bates was saying.

“But what will you say to her that you haven’t said already?” Anna wondered.

“I don’t know but I know that staying here won’t make any difference,” And suddenly Thomas realized that Bates was talking about his estranged wife. Thomas had to wonder what could be done to spare them from the pain soon to come. Could Thomas somehow stop Bates’ wife from killing herself? What if she wouldn’t listen to him, or to anyone?

“You’re always going up and down to London these days, Mr. Bates,” Amazing how even now, O’Brien could not let go of a grudge. Bates recognized the old enemy on the horizon and stiffened as he pulled back from Anna and moodily stabbed at his roasted chicken breast.

“I have business in London.” Bates finally said, if only to get O’Brien off his back. It wouldn’t work.

“Oh, yes?” O’Brien kept trying to heckle. Thomas felt like he was crawling in his skin, suddenly reminded of days gone past when O’Brien had nearly had him thrown out of the house because of her anger at Bates.

“Mr. Bates,” Thomas cut across whatever Bates and O’Brien were about to say, determined to steer conversation towards a more stable area. “Perhaps I should go to London instead. Maybe I could
help in some way—"

“I don’t think so,” But Bates was clearly touched by the idea. He gave Thomas a gentle smile, “But I appreciate it, Thomas.”

And then, just as Thomas opened his mouth to assure Bates that there was nothing to it, Robert Crawley descended the stairs of the servant’s passageway, and announced the news that Thomas had been waiting to hear since August of 1914.

A cacophony arose, as every single chair in the servants hall was pushed back so that its occupant could rise. Lord Grantham was beaming, gray eyes burning with an incredible fire as he surveyed his staff with pride.

“I’m sorry to disturb,” He said at once, chest huffing and puffing beneath his five piece tux, “I’ve just heard news from the war office and I thought you’d all like to know… that the war is over!”

Bursts of elation rose to the ceiling in a beautiful hymn of praise. People were turning, embracing one another in fondest brotherhood. Bates and Anna were holding one another tight. Mrs. Patmore had come out of the kitchen and all but squashed Daisy against her massive breasts.

But suddenly Thomas was besieged upon by a pair of arms that shocked the life out of him. In front of God and Mr. Carson, O’Brien reached up and swept Thomas into a tight hug that all but choked the air from his lungs. Never in living memory had O’Brien done something so loving and gentle in public! In front of the other servants of all people. But here she was, hugging him now, and she seemed to be fiercely proud as she pulled back to survey him once more.

“You’ve survived it!” She declared, “You’ve done it Thomas. You’ve outlasted this bloody war!”

To cover up O’Brien’s cursing and Mr. Carson’s sneering irritation, Lord Grantham decided to finish up his errand.

“The ceasefire will begin at 11 o’clock in the morning of the 11th of November.” He declared.

“Why can’t it begin now?” Mrs. Patmore demanded, still slightly punch drunk from the war ending and watching O’Brien hug someone.

“It’s 11:00 of the 11th.” Thomas said, a stupid grin upon his face, “Pretty tidy if you ask me.”

“We will mark the moment in the Great Hall and I expect all of you, including the kitchen staff and hall boys, everyone, to be there!” Lord Grantham said, and with that he took his adieu. Like a king to his throne, Lord Grantham ascended the dirty stairs back into the golden light of his inheritance. He left in his wake a delirious staff and choruses for champagne and beer. Thomas, Bates, and Branson were slapped on the back as the three of them went downstairs into the cellar to pull up whatever Carson deemed appropriate for the occasion. They couldn’t crack into the family’s best wine, but they were still allowed to have the half-finished bottles and the cheap champagne that no one wanted. Beer, of course, was a staple for downstairs living so an entire keg was brought up that everyone might have a pint. One of the maids sat down to play piano, jaunting out several merry tunes (though she couldn’t play near as well as Jimmy) while Branson brought out a pack of playing cards and enticed several members of the staff into a drinking game. Thomas felt like a child in a candy store, watching with devious eyes as Branson demanded they all play a round of Ring of Fire, which involved flipping over cards from a deck and using their number to follow a rule.

Three rounds in, it was past midnight and they were thoroughly, deliciously, in their cups.
“Queen!” Branson slurred, flipping over the Queen of Hearts. He turned aggressively to his right, nearly butting heads with Thomas. “What’s yer favorite color-“

“Why should I tell you?” Thomas parried. It was a game of questions, and whoever could keep it going the longest would avoid having to take another sip. Given how tipsy he already felt, Thomas was hoping he could win.

“Why can’t you just answer the question?” Branson asked.

“What’s my favorite color to you?” Thomas demanded.

“Is it such a crime to want to know a man’s favorite color?”

“Do you have -hick!- Do you have any means for my favorite color?”

“I dunno what you’re sayin’ mate.” Branson shook his head, “What’s a mean-“

“Aha!” Bates pointed a finger in Branson’s face, “You lost! Drink up!”

“No!” Branson wailed, rubbing at his head blearily, “No, I’m not losin’ I’m confused and there’s a difference.”

“You didn’t answer with a- hick!- Question!” Thomas couldn’t stop hiccuping.

“Can I- can we go again?” Branson asked. “I don’t feel too good.”

“Maybe we should stop.” Bates yawned, checking his pocket watch, “Christ, we’re only going to get a few hours sleep at this rate.”

Thomas checked his own watch before sighing in dismay. Bates was right, it was close to 12:30. They needed to go to bed.

“Alrigh’, alrigh’” Thomas waved them both off. “You two go up, I’ll… clean up this shit.” He grumbled, gesturing to the cards strewn about. There were also articles of clothing, and a few tankards that had gotten knocked over by hallboys with clumsy elbows. They’d been empty, thank god, but one had rolled underneath the china cabinet and it would be a bitch to get out.

“G’night, Tommy!” Branson said, before slapping Thomas hard on the back. He stood, stretched, and then gave an obscene belch which made Thomas wrinkle his nose in disgust. Bates looked mildly impressed.

Branson tittered, waving a hand in front of his face. “Sorry!” He said, not sounding sorry in the slightest. He left, taking with him his coat, hat, and tie, and left shoe. Hobbling off down the hall, Branson didn’t even make to put back on his boot as he exited out the area door.

Bates let out a long breath between his teeth, sweeping up the cards with outstretched fingers so that Thomas could begin to right their chairs. He began to hum to himself, walking on a cloud at the thought of things returning to normal.

“Finally over…” Bates said with praise. “Thank god.”

“Aw, you did well.” Thomas teased, “I bet- hick!- I bet you’re not even drunk!”

“No, not the game.” Bates shuffled the cards till they were in a neat stack, putting them back into
their box and sliding them into a side drawer of the china cabinet, “The war.”

“Oh…” Thomas had a dopy smile on his face as he began to douse the lights, “Oh that’s wonderful, isn’t it? Now everything will be back to normal.”

“Soldier’s gone,”

“Beds out of the drawing room.”

“… Courtenay out the door.” Bates finished. Thomas paused, slightly nervous at the thought of him. Bates grew pensive, coming around the table so that he could perch on the rim next to Thomas. Thomas, to his credit, did not meet Bates’ eyes and instead busied himself by wiping down the table with a flannel left behind by one of the hall boys. Mr. Carson would have their hides if the table was sticky come morning.

“Do you love him?” Bates asked, unafraid.

“I used to,” Was the only way Thomas could think to respond.

“So why don’t you break it off?”

“M’scared.” Thomas admitted. He stopped rubbing the table down, now still in the gloom. Bates sniffed, brushing downy hair out of his brown eyes. “Of what’s going to happen, of him, of myself… I dunno.”

Tired, he sat back down at the table now in the dark. Bates followed suit, so that the pair of them were side by side.

Bates did not press him, though he did reach out and tenderly clasp Thomas’ hand.

“… Today he told me if you left him, he’d kill you,” Bates said. “That if he couldn’t have you, no one else could.”

“… I know.” Thomas said. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Well, I’m not afraid of him.” Bates said with pride, “And you shouldn’t be either. He’s just a spoilt child, Thomas. He might have been a good man once, but something’s changed within him. Maybe it’s the war. Maybe not. Who knows… but he doesn’t love you anymore. He just loves… possessing you. It’s like not being in control of you makes him mad.”

And though Thomas could never tell Bates the full truth, he knew that Bates had all but hit the nail squarely on the head.

Thomas nodded, his head bowed and eyes closed.

“… I miss the days when… when I wasn’t in a soldier’s uniform.” Thomas admitted. “I miss being a footman here. I miss …”

He missed being held by a man who didn’t try to throw him into a bathtub.

Bates seemed to sense what he was trying to say. He reached out, with gentle hands, and began to caress the entirety of Thomas’ right arm.

“I’m going to marry Anna soon.” Bates whispered, “Just as soon as I can get rid of my wife. How does that make you feel?”
“I dunno.” Thomas said, which was true, “I’m envious of Anna in a way. You don’t try to throw her into a bathtub.”

“No,” Bates agreed, “I don’t.”

Thomas turned to Bates, opening his mouth to say something or the other about how Anna was lucky and Bates was a better man than most. But even as Thomas leaned in to speak, Bates read his body language wrong and met him halfway with a warm if drunken kiss on the mouth.

Thomas froze.

It had been years since he’d kissed Bates, and in truth he’d forgotten a bit how it felt. Bates was possessive when he kissed, but it had a different edge to it than Edward. Edward had a way of sucking Thomas under with his kisses. Of drowning him. Bates, on the other hand, possessed him with the intent of bathing him. Like every kiss was a flower petal being laid upon his skin.

Thomas pulled back, glassy eyed. Bates was somber and silent.

“…John… We can’t do this.” Thomas whispered. The sober side of his brain was warning him that kissing a man in the servant’s hall was god damn dangerous no matter what time of night it was.

“…Anna doesn’t mind,” Bates said, “…An Edward can get buggered for all I care.”

He scooted a bit closer to Thomas, “So if that’s your reason for thinking we shouldn’t… Well…”

And with that, he leaned in once more to kiss Thomas sweetly on the mouth again.

How could one describe being kissed with love when you’d only recently been kissed with cruelty? There was something incredibly moving about the way that Bates held him. Like Bates was determined to keep him safe from everything and everyone.

Bates pressed him against the rim of the servant’s table, his tongue tasting of beer and tea in turn. Thomas fell against the wood beneath them, too drunk to sit up at an angle without support. Splayed out upon the table where they so normally ate, Thomas let Bates stand between his legs and place loving kisses upon his neck. He was sucking at the skin, forming bruises just out of sight behind Thomas’ collar and tie.

“He doesn’t deserve to kiss you,” Bates whispered in Thomas’ ear, even as he began to palm at the apex of Thomas thighs. A bulge was forming, slowly but surely, as Thomas allowed himself to become swept up in the fantasy. Was it so wrong to have one moment? To have one night with this man? Bates could be so strong, so brave against the rest of the world. Thomas needed Bates’ courage to do what must be done.

Bates switched to Thomas’ other ear, placing fresh kisses by his lobe, “To have you beneath him.”

“John…” Thomas shuddered, eyes closed.

“Just to be fair, I don’t deserve you either.” Bates teased, “But if you’ll give me the opportunity I’ll aim to try.”

A lazy grin began to spread across Thomas’ face. “Mmm. How?”

“Oh… I could think of one or two ways.” Bates assured him, “There’s oil in the kitchen… an’
everyone’s asleep upstairs. An’ maybe, just maybe, I want to bugger you at this table where we eat every day. So every time you sit down you remember what we did here.”

And with this, Bates added with a quirky grin, “In more ways than one.”

“Cheeky.” Thomas gave a breathless laugh. The idea of being buggered by Bates was a delightful one, and the more he thought about it the more his beer soaked brain delighted at the idea. Why shouldn’t he have a bit of fun? He’d deserved it, right? He’d been good, taking care of Ethel and letting Edward throw him into a bathtub. He’d earned a bit of time being buggered good and proper by Bates.

Fuck it.

“Go get it,” Thomas hissed into Bates’ ear. He didn’t need telling twice, abandoning Thomas upon the table to fetch a bottle of Mrs. Patmore’s olive oil from the kitchen. What she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her, and it wasn’t like they’d be tainting the entire bottle. Indeed, Bates went so far as to pour a bit of olive oil into a saucer, so that the bottle could stay in the kitchen. He returned to Thomas, saucer in hand, and put it down to return to the most important task at hand.

Kissing Thomas senseless.

“Well can’t be slow—” Thomas managed to get out around heavy breathes. His blood was like electricity in his veins. charged by the naughtiness of what they were about to do. Bates flipped him over on his stomach, so that Thomas was spread out upon the table face down.

“Someone will see…” But Thomas had his eyes closed and his mouth open in a dreamy smile.

Bates was rubbing the palms of his hands methodically over Thomas’ backside, squeezing and stroking… Every time his fingers gripped, Thomas felt another zing of delirium pass through him.

If only he’d opened his eyes, Thomas might have seen the slender shadow upon the wall, crossing the stairs to pause as if stumbling upon a prize.

~*~

She couldn’t see much, but what she could see shocked her to the core.

She’d seen Thomas scowl, smile, laugh, cry, ponder, and shout in turn. She’d see John just the same, and had thought she’d catalogued every human emotion between the pair of them over the past five years. But now, hiding upon the stairwell in her housecoat and slippers, Anna Smith was shown a completely new emotion to memorize.

Lust.

Thomas was laid against the servant’s table, his shirtsleeves hitched up around his chest and his vest discarded, and from Anna’s viewpoint near the middle of the stairs she could see something pale near the edge which she was certain was Thomas’ backside. His normally perfect coifed hair was askew, his lips curved in the strangest little smile and his eyes closed. If he’d opened his eyes, Thomas would see her. Even if he couldn’t, he’d still be able to see her shadow upon the wall.

But Thomas remained oblivious, and Anna was rooted to the spot.
“-Ah!” Thomas whimpered, his face screwed up as if from pain. Behind him, John paused, tender as he placed both hands upon Thomas’ shoulders to rub and squeeze them in turn. What were they doing? Anna couldn’t see-

But she knew. She knew because there could be no other answer. The pair of them were engaging in *sodomy*, and suddenly every filthy image she’d been warned of in church was flung in her face. But the hell fire and demonic rituals were absent. Instead, there was only two young men, both of them fragile and vulnerable as they exposed themselves to the other.

Thomas was whimpering softly under his breath, brow knitted and bottom lip between his teeth. John was shaking, as if from a violent cold. He leaned down, whispering something to Thomas in his ear. Thomas nodded, managing to push himself up a bit from the table if only to take a few steadying breathes.

“Yeah-“ Thomas said, in response to whatever John had asked him, “Yeah it’s… yeah. Go on. M’fine.”

John must have asked if Thomas was alright.

“Even if you’re not, you’ll be fine in a minute.” John teased in Thomas’ ear. Thomas let out a tiny giggle, delirious, then laid his head back down upon the servant’s table to promptly stuff his fist into his mouth.

*Why would he do a thing like that?* Anna wondered, but then a thrilling jolt of shock slammed through her as John began to… well…

There was no polite word for it. He was buggering Thomas senseless.

Part of Anna wanted to run away, to lock herself within her bedroom and scourge her eyes with lye soap. Another part of her wanted to watch, the same part that had been entranced by her grandmother’s passing and her father slaughtering a sow for Christmas. In a way, she wished that she could be even closer, could watch only inches away as John devoured Thomas whole. Thomas was gasping, even around his fist, and seemed to be lost in delirium.

At her core, Anna felt a terrible ache… a desire to know what it felt like to be wrapped up safe in John’s arms. She knew that he loved her. She knew that one day, come hell or high water (or Vera) they would be man and wife. But, like most things in her life, it seemed that she would have to wait longer than usual. That she was drug along behind a cart, the unwilling passenger to a life without love.

In a way, Anna had always felt close to Thomas because she was certain he could understand completely.

“Oh god-“ Thomas whimpered, the noise slipping out from between his fingers. It was not the cry of a man in pain, but a man overjoyed. A man lost in a sea of warmth and adoration. A man de-thawing under the force of a blazing inferno that could not be squashed.

“Anna?”

Anna jumped, sucking in a terrified breath. She whipped around, horrified to find Mrs. Hughes upon
the stoop. She was still a flight up, coming down in her tartan dressing gown and her braid over her shoulder. Mrs. Hughes was completely oblivious to John and Thomas, had no way of knowing what was going on only two flights below her.

_You have to save them_, came a fierce cry within Anna. _You can’t let her see!_

And so, with quick thinking, Anna reached out and turned off the lights to the stairs so that the pair of them were plunged in slight gloom.

“What are you doing up?” Mrs. Hughes wondered. “Have the others gone to bed?”

“They’ve just gone up,” Anna lied, taking several steps up the stairs so that Mrs. Hughes would not have to crane her neck over the rail in order to converse. Now the pair of them were on the second landing, with Anna internally resolving not to let Mrs. Hughes pass come hell or high water. “I was just turning off the lights. I think they were a bit squiffy.”

“Oh-“ Mrs. Hughes rolled her eyes with a terse sigh, “I ought to go check to make sure everything’s tidy.”

“No need.” Anna lied again, “I did it myself. Great minds think alike, I guess.”

Mrs. Hughes gave her a tender smile, and to Anna’s relief she turned to start walking back up the stairs. “I don’t know what I’d do without you Anna.”

“Don’t be silly,” Anna teased, following Mrs. Hughes up.

She could not help but look over her shoulder as she went, wondering at the two men below in the servant’s hall.

That ache within her belly was beginning to grow again.

~*~

The next morning, Thomas was greeted by a terrible splitting headache and the sounds of joyous voices downstairs. Groaning, Thomas tossed and turned in his bed, hiding his face underneath his pillow and ignoring his clock.

By god, how much had he drank last night-? Oh, he could kill Branson! It was all that stupid Irish mick’s fault. Drinking games, of all things! Why hadn’t Mr. Carson put a stop to it?

_Because Carson had already gone to bed_, an annoying voice sing-songed in his ear. Whimpering, Thomas curled up even tighter and prayed for death.

Instead, he got a gentle knock on the door followed by the sound of Mrs. Hughes’ crisp Scottish brogue.

“Ah. Thought so.” She grumbled aloud. Thomas could do nothing besides whimper underneath his covers.

“Sit up,” Mrs. Hughes commanded. When Thomas did not do as she said, Mrs. Hughes got annoyed, “Thomas, sit up now. I’m not leaving until you do.”

Thomas whined beneath his pillow, curling up even tighter.

“Kill me.” He pleaded. Unfortunately for him, Mrs. Hughes wasn’t the murdering type.

She forced him to sit up, cupping him beneath his shoulders and pulling his blankets off. The light
was so bright that Thomas almost felt stunned, and whimpered as he covered his sore eyes with his hands. Sitting up, Thomas suddenly felt a terrible flaring ache in the base of his spine which made absolutely no sense until.

Oh. That’s right.

*Christ!* Thomas thought in horror, remembering how Bates had buggered him against the servant’s hall table. What in the sodding hell had he been thinking? But that was the point, wasn’t it? He hadn’t been thinking at all. He’d been drunk off his tits and left to his own devices. Naturally, as a heathen, his first inclination was to let any man nearby screw him.

But it had been so much more than that. Thomas had been torn by Edward’s transformation. Had needed someone to hold him and love him. Bates had done both with pleasure, and the sensation of being taken by a man after a year of abstinence had been nothing short of heaven on earth. What was more, after they’d finished Bates had cleaned Thomas up with such care. Had kissed the bruise where Thomas had broken his rib. Had told him that he was safe.

And for the first time, in a long time, Thomas had actually believed it.

“Come on now,” Thomas’ hands were forced down by Mrs. Hughes. The sound of fizzing caught his attention, and he squinted through the white haze to see a beechams being dissolved in a cup of water.

“Bless—“ He croaked out, taking the cup from Mrs. Hughes and guzzling it down at once. The taste of the medicine was foul and made him want to gag, but still he drank to the dregs. He had no choice if he wanted to get better, and if he had this headache for much longer he was going to start crying like a child.

“And let that be a lesson to you,” Mrs. Hughes reprimanded him, “Drinking leads to consequences.”

*Such as buggering someone else’s husband.*

“We’re going to be marking the hour in the great hall at eleven. You’re to be there a good few minutes before, I’ll remind you!” Mrs. Hughes said, stooping over to pick up Thomas’ shirt sleeves and vest. He’d shed both without care last night in his delight to fall into bed.

“Thomas?” Mrs. Hughes said his name with a sharp crack, a silent warning to answer.

“Yes Mrs. Hughes.” He croaked out.

“Up.” She demanded, “Get dressed and get some eggs in you. Mrs. Patmore has seen fit to bless you with infinite mercy and won’t be making you go hungry.”

“ ‘Kay,” Thomas mumbled, staggering up to try and reach for his wardrobe, only to trip over the dregs of his covers and crash to the floor. He lay against the stone, moaning quietly in pain.

Mrs. Hughes let out a long, irritable sigh. Thomas could tell she was five seconds from throwing in the towel.

But she didn’t.
Because she was a saint.

Twenty minutes later, Thomas was downstairs dressed in his army uniform for the first time in quite
a while, blearily accepting eggs and toast from Mrs. Patmore. He likewise got two links of sausage left over from the upstairs breakfast, and nibbled on it all timidly until he had to go throw up in the bathroom. When he returned, he had two cups of coffee, another beechams, and was finally quite ready to face the day.

“Look like death warmed over, you do.” Mrs. Patmore grumbled as Thomas deposited his dirty dishes in her sink. Daisy took them up at once, scrubbing them with a fever to keep her workload low.

“Feel like it too.” Thomas said. “Did Mr. Bates and Mr. Branson get off well?”

“Mr. Bates tried to put his Lordship’s vest on the wrong way this morning.” Mrs. Patmore scoffed.

“And Mr. Branson?”

“Crying in the garage.”

Well then. At least he was in good company.

10:30 that morning found everyone gathered in the great hall, be they man, woman, child, or whimpering chauffeur. If Thomas thought that he was bad off, it was nothing compared to Tom Branson. It turned out that after going back to his cottage, Branson drank even more, so while Bates and Thomas were buggering away, Branson had been finishing half a bottle of Black Bush. Now cloistered amongst a hundred other people, Branson was three shades paler than Thomas and slightly green around the edges. He hid his condition by sulking behind a pillar until Sybil found him and fetched him a beechams. Where Thomas and Bates had taken theirs with water, Branson had just upended the packet dry, and swallowed the whole thing in his mouth. He might have even eaten the paper slip it came in had Sybil not stopped him.

But this comical sight was subdued by the arrival of Edward Courtenay, who stood across the great hall from Thomas in a long line of soldiers. Thomas was the only soldier to stand amongst the servants, and Edward did not take kindly to being jilted in public. His lips were pursed into a thin white line. His blue eyes were blazing with the sort of black anger that heralded a pub fight. But he could do little to rage against Thomas when Thomas was supported on all sides. In a long line, Thomas stood between Bates and Anna, both of whom were likewise watching Edward with looks of disapproval. This was nothing compared to O’Brien, who was silently waging a one man war and winning.

Oh Edward, Thomas thought in dismay, catching Edward’s eyes and holding them, Why can’t you just let go? Why are you fighting so hard?

“Sleep well?” Bates asked, and though no one else would be able to tell, Thomas knew he was referring to their midnight act of hedonism.

“Sleeping was fine,” He replied, “It was the waking up part that was hard to do.”

“Mrs. Hughes told me she gave you a beechams.” Anna said, “I told her you ought to have some breakfast too. Settle your stomach and all that.”

“Did you let Branson have any breakfast?” Thomas asked, noting that four people down the line Branson was weaving slightly upon his feet.
“He couldn’t hold it down.” Anna said. “Took one bite and dashed out into the yard.”

“I’m never drinking again.” Bates resolved.

“Oh I’ll drink again,” Thomas scoffed, “Just not with Branson.”

Anna held down a giggle, pursing her lips around the sound.

At 10:50, Lord Grantham along with the rest of the Crawley family came into the great hall to command total and respectful silence. The dying voices of soldiers and servants alike gave way to an ominous silence, broken only by the sound of Isis barking in the front yard and the grandfather clock ticking at the base of the stairs.

Thomas schooled his expression to something close to somber, not wanting to appear disrespectful in this awful moment. It was only five minutes away from 11:00.

“I think while the clock strikes, we should all make a silent prayer,” Lord Grantham commanded, standing next to the grandfather clock with his hand upon the mahogany side. “To mark the finish of this terrible war. And what that means for each and every one of us. Let us remember the sacrifices that have been made, and the men who will never come back, and give them our thanks.”

It was 10:58.

Two whole minutes passed in silence, with every man stiff to attention and every maid quiet in her black and whites. Eventually, even Isis’ barking faded into silence, so that no sound could be heard save for that of the grandfather clock ticking.

But then, a flurry of movement caught Thomas’ eye. He watched, amazed, as the Heichecera stepped out from behind the grandfather clock and walked right through Lord Grantham in a fluttering of smoke. The man was completely oblivious, silent and somber in his contemplation of the future and the past. The Heichecera looked left and right, surveying all the men lined up, and then walked straight for Edward to stop dead in front of him. It was as if he was a specimen in a zoo for her to observe. Thomas wondered what she was doing.

The hour struck eleven. The clock began to chime.

Each toll of the bell from deep within the heart of the clock echoed about the empty walls. Stone, saturated in dust and the tears of its servants, soaked up one more bit of pain as every soldier lingered over the thought of a fallen comrade. Though it was pointless, Thomas could not help but think of Greta, and where she might be now. If, upon death, Great had found wisdom in the true circumstances of Thomas’ journey. Maybe she was looking down on him now from heaven, laughing at the way he stood to attention with his bum sore and his brain aching.

The Heichecera moved from man to man, until she turned her attention upon the servants and walked up the line. She paused in front of Anna, then stopped dead so that she was now eye to eye with Thomas.

Thomas caught her gaze and held it, even as the clock finished out its tolls.

Upon the eleventh strike, the Heichecera vanished into smoke. She thinned out, eventually fading entirely until it was as if she’d never been there at all.
“Thank you, everyone,” Lord Grantham said, completely oblivious to the fact that a sorceress had entered and exited his house, “Remember this is not just the end of a long war, but it is the dawn of a new age. God bless you all.”

And so everyone was allowed to depart.

Thomas let out a sigh, rubbing at his temple gingerly where it still ached. Anna noticed this straight away, “Are you still having a headache?”

“Think I’ll be having it for the next two months, to be honest.” Thomas muttered.

But Thomas’s conversation with Anna was cut short by the sight of Edward approaching. He paced like a panther across the carpeted floor, making a beeline for Thomas who winced and took an involuntary step backward.

“Christ, not again,” Thomas muttered, wondering how he could best put Edward off. Maybe he should try to strike up conversation with Lord Grantham or Mr.-

But there was no need. Even as Edward arrived, he was side-stepped by O’Brien, who swooped upon all four of them like a vulture to a carcass.

“Excuse me,” Edward tried to step around O’Brien. O’Brien parried him back, following his movement so that she was still right in front of him. Edward stiffened, realizing that O’Brien was a roadblock to Thomas.

“I don’t think I will,” She decided. “You’re a soldier, it’s your job to stay with your fellows, isn’t it? We’re servants, so what do you want over here?”

“What’s it to you?” Edward sneered.

“It’s quite a lot to me.” O’Brien warned, “I like things orderly.”

“Then get out of my way, servant.” Edward snapped.

Now that, Thomas wouldn’t stand for.

“Edward, what’s the matter with you?” Thomas demanded angrily, side by side with O’Brien and Bates, he felt unbelievably strong, “You don’t talk to people like that! You’re better than that! At least, I thought you were,” He added ruefully.

Edward opened his mouth, perhaps to say something rude, but then paused and squinted his eyes. He was making an investigation of Thomas’ neck, right where his collar met his bare skin.

“… Is that… Is that a love mark?” Edward demanded, pointing at Thomas’ neck. Thomas bristled, remembering how Bates had kissed him the night before, and pulled away.

“Don’t point at me like that,” Thomas snapped, “It’s rude-“

“That is, isn’t it?! It’s a love mark!” Edward’s voice was getting louder and louder, attracting the attention of passing soldiers and Mr. Carson “I ruddy knew it! You … you…-“ but he couldn’t find a word strong enough to voice his displeasure.

He wasn’t given the opportunity to rant for much longer. Mr. Carson’s beady eyes were followed by Lord Grantham’s swift feet, and suddenly Edward was pinned by five people, all sides now covered and cut off.
“Edward,” Lord Grantham’s tone boded ill for any further argument, “Are you quite alright?”

For one moment, Edward opened his mouth, and it seemed that he was a hair’s breadth away from spilling everything. From openly declaring Thomas a homosexual and pointing the love marks on his slim neck. But then, Edward caught sight of O’Brien, her expression like thunder and her eyes gleaming.

Oddly, she seemed to be the one to frighten him the most.

“… It’s nothing,” Edward said, before turning on his heel and pushing hard past Mr. Carson. Mr. Carson scoffed aloud, eyes blazing at such indecency.

“Edward-!” Thomas cried out, furious at Edward’s horrible behavior. “Apologize to Mr. Carson! What’s wrong with you??”

But Edward did not reply. He vanished down the south corridor, and was gone. Where to, it was hard to say, but he certainly wouldn’t be receiving any company when he got there.

Thomas found it curious that he was panting, but it seemed that even the tiny spat in the great hall had brought his anxiety to an all time high. He suddenly felt like a fool, with everyone from Carson to Lord Grantham giving him knowing looks. Thomas could not help but remember how, when initially wedded to Edward, he’d been so quite to defy them all. So adamant that their love would last. That they would beat the odds.

They hadn’t, and Thomas couldn’t stand it.

He turned, and stormed out of the great hall through the green baize door. He was heading, for whatever reason, to the pantry. He supposed that after a lifetime of keeping secrets below stairs, there were a few haunts which simply attracted an angsty servant. The boot room and the pantry were the two favorite spots in Downton Abbey.

Thomas reached the far western corridor before anyone else, and secluded himself in the pantry to at once start stamping on the floor and cursing aloud.

“Buggering fuck!” Thomas snarled to no one in particular, “God damnit!”

He even kicked a crate full of apples, but that particular scheme backfired atrociously so that Thomas was suddenly hopping on one foot and cursing in pain.

Moaning aloud, he sank down on his backside, pressed against the wall as he hastily undid his shoelaces and pulled his throbbing toe free. Oh-! The idiocy of it all. Why had he thought to kick something so… so…. solid?!

The door opened, only to show the welcome sight of Bates and Anna. Anna swept down upon him at once, quick to notice the tears sparkling in the corners of his eyes.

“What did you do?” She wondered at his toe. The tiniest speckle of blood was showing up on his sock. It seemed that he’d broken his toenail in his haste to cause a ruckus.

“M’so stupid.” Thomas moaned. Bates shut the pantry door, secluding them once again. He squatted down beside Thomas, reaching out to rub him tenderly on the shoulder. “I thought… I thought we’d beat the odds. I was such a damn fool, and you all knew. But I was so certain. And now look at us, squabbling in the great hall— Mr. Carson will have my neck for that. An’ O’Brien has to stand up for me because I’m too chicken to do it myself.”
Thomas looked up, catching Anna’s eyes. In desperation, he exclaimed, “What’s wrong with me? Why did I let it go this far?”

“You were in love,” Anna replied, simply. “And we’re all fools for love.”

If only she knew. Thomas’ backside was still aching from the night’s conquest.

“Mr. Carson told me that Edward has been acting out for weeks,” Bates explained, “His Lordship won’t blame you for that. He’s aware that Edward’s been causing trouble.”

“But he’s not like that!” It was vital to Thomas that both Bates and Anna knew Edward was not a prig. “He’s not… he’s not been like that before, ever!”

“War changes people.” Anna said, “And it’s changed him. He needs help.”

“He needs to go somewhere new.” Bates added, “Somewhere away from you.”

But Thomas could not help thinking of the Heichecera’s words. Edward’s turn was all his fault. He had to remedy this solution… but how?

“… This is my fault,” he said aloud, “How do I fix it? Do I… Do I have to… hurt him?”

“No!” Anna was taken aback, “Of course not! You just tell him that it’s over. Mr. Bates will stand right beside you. We’ll even get Ms. O’Brien if it helps. And we’ll all tell him that it’s time for him to go, and Dr. Clarkson will help him to the station, and that’ll be the end of it.”

“You don’t understand, Anna.” Thomas said, “Edward won’t leave. He won’t let me live.”

“It’s true.” Bates added when Anna shook her head. Anna gasped at the insinuation.

“But… but surely he wouldn’t do such a thing.” Anna worried. “Surely, he’s not that mad?”

“He threatened me in front of O’Brien.” Bates explained, “Said that if he couldn’t have Thomas, no one could.”

Anna looked like she might be ill.

“… We shouldn’t be talking about such things in front of you.” Thomas sniffed, wiping at his eyes. “It’ll shock you.”

“Oh…” Anna suddenly looked humored, “Trust me, after what I’ve seen nothing can shock me.”

“I know you know what I am but… you don’t need to bear witness to it more than’s strictly necessary.” Thomas said, touched that Anna would be so considerate to his abnormalities. Anna blushed, pursing her lips.

“…Well…” She glanced to the door of the pantry, no doubt checking for the sight of shadows at the cracks, before dropping her voice and continuing on, “That’s just it… I… already have.”

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked. What on earth had Anna seen? She wasn’t the type to go out to bars for a soda water, so surely she couldn’t have seen anything raunchy in town. Was in Lady Mary? Had she accidentally seen one of her conquests?

“… Last night… after everyone had gone to bed,” But already, ice was starting to solidify in Thomas’ stomach. He pulled back, the blood fleeing from his face, “Mrs. Hughes tried to come downstairs to tidy up. I stopped her.”
The only sound that could be heard was the muffled complaints of Mrs. Patmore yelling at Daisy.

“What do you mean?” Bates asked in a rush.

“… Last night… I came downstairs to see if… well… I saw a lot.” Anna admitted.

“Oh my god-“ The words fell out of Thomas’ mouth in a wave of horror. And suddenly, he felt like a wretch upon the floor. An urchin, crawling in the muck and the grime. How could he ever beg for Anna’s forgiveness? How could he ever explain? He’d ruined their relationship, tainted it forever, and suddenly Thomas wanted to be violently ill. So much so that he actually put a hand over his mouth in case he was sick.

“Anna, I-“ He blubbered like a child, prostrating himself before her. Why wasn’t she angry? Why wasn’t she wholluping him upside the head with a broomstick? “I’m so sorry. I… I don’t know what to say.”

But where Thomas was frantic, Bates was stoic. He was calm as he met Anna’s eyes, a bizarre understanding passing between the pair of them.

“I know you can never forgive me, for doing something as foul as that with the man you love- But I- I-“

“You don’t have to apologize.” Anna clasped his shaking hands in her own, squeezing his clammy fingers lovingly, “I told you before, I don’t mind. Mr. Bates and I have an understanding. We’re to be wed, we’re to have a normal happy life… with children and a cottage and all that we desire. I know you can’t have the same. I know that you have feelings for Mr. Bates on some level. I’m not angry at you, Thomas. I understand. I care for you, like a brother but deeper, and I know that you’re dealing with something terrible. If this helps… then it helps. And I didn’t mind.” She blushed at this, her cheeks turning rosy with a sudden flush of blood. “I… I actually wanted to… watch.”

“………. What?” Thomas felt the word fall from numb lips, dumbfounded at what he was hearing. Was he having a stroke?

Anna actually grinned, as if she were an errant girl caught with a sweet in her mouth. “… I… liked… it. Watching it.”

Bates was mildly impressed, “You naughty girl.” He murmured appreciatively.

“I’m a woman of mystery, Mr. Bates.” She teased.

But Thomas still couldn’t understand, and pulled back from Anna to try and gather his bearings. She let him go, seeming to understand that he was shaken up.

“…Tell me… what you saw.” Thomas demanded, wanting to be absolutely sure he wasn’t over jumping the gun. “What did you see, that you didn’t mind?” For surely, she hadn’t actually seen them buggering. It would have set her hair on fire.

Anna flushed even deeper, averting her eyes, “I … saw you two at the table.”

“… Did we happen to have any pants on?” Bates murmured.

“No.” Anna replied.
“But…” Thomas couldn’t accept it, “But you didn’t see… it?” he dare not say the word aloud before her.

“I saw you shove your first in your mouth.” Anna said. Thomas cursed aloud, horrified.

“Fuck me.” He said in a breath. Anna blinked, startled.

“Language!” She said, reproachfully.

“You saw me getting buggered and you care about language?” Thomas hissed, terrified to speak loud lest someone outside hear.

“Well, one I mind. The other I don’t.” Was all Anna said.

Thomas couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Anna had not only saved them from being caught by Mrs. Hughes, she’d watched? She’d watched and apparently enjoyed it, wanting to see even more?

 “…I don’t know what to say,” and it was the damn truth.

“Maybe… sometime in the future…” Anna paused, her cheeks so pink that she seemed to be radiating heat, “We could… talk some more about it.”

“What on earth do you want to talk about?” Thomas was almost certain he was having a stroke, and even checked his pulse at his wrist to see if he was still alive. But his pulse was strong, if not quick, so clearly he wasn’t the one going mad. “Are you— Anna, you cannot be saying these things! I must be losing my mind!”

Anna just shrugged, grinning from ear to ear.

Bates wore a wicked smile. Thomas looked between the pair of them, suddenly feeling very trapped.

“…What are you two smiling about?” He demanded.

“… Just having ideas.” Anna said. Thomas immediately threw up a red flag, wanting to be very clear what ‘ideas’ meant to Anna.

“Anna, you’re… closer than a sister to me,” Thomas said, “But I can’t… I can’t. I just.” There were no words for it. “I’ve tried- “He admitted, suddenly shamed by the memories of his youth. How once, in his first time during the war, he’d been besieged upon by a French prostitute. She’d tried to show him a good time, only to give up when she realized he wasn’t interested.

“I just can’t do it.”

“Don’t be silly-!” She cut him off, and she even began to laugh, “I was talking about me and Mr. Bates, you goose.”

“Oh.” And he let out an immediate sigh of relief. If all she wanted was pointers, he was more than happy to assist. “Oh thank god.”

And he started laughing.

His laughter set Anna off, and then Bates, until suddenly all three of them were cackling like children.

“Your face!” Anna beamed, “oh Thomas your face. You were terrified-!”
“I was!” He agreed, for the thought of being forced to have sex with a woman sent chills up his spine. “I confess it, I’m terrified to be with a woman.”

“Are we so frightening?” She teased.

“To me? Yes.” But before Thomas could illuminate on just why it was that a pair of tits could send him scampering, the pantry door opened to reveal Mr. Carson. He was glaring disapprovingly with a telegram clutched in his hand.

“I thought I heard caterwauling.” Mr. Carson grumbled, which was a bit of an over statement. They’d hardly been screeching. At once, Thomas, Anna, and Mr. Bates each got to their feet, though Thomas still didn’t have his left shoe on.

“…Thomas.” Mr. Carson started with him, “Why do you not have both your shoes on?”

“I hurt my toe, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said, stooping back over at once to hastily pull on his boot. “I apologize.”

“You will keep both shoes on your feet from now on, and never appear downstairs in a similar state of undress.” Mr. Carson said, and though he complained it was without heat. “I won’t accept poor behavior from you of all people.”

“Sorry, Mr. Carson. Yes, Mr. Carson.” Thomas straightened up when he was finished, stiff backed and proud. Mr. Carson gave him a once over, seemingly satisfied with what he saw.

…I wanted to speak with you about just now. His Lordship is contemplating what to do with Courtenay and has asked me to relay to you not to get involved from here on out. You clearly upset the boy and deprive him of his senses.”

“Yes Mr. Carson,” Thomas wondered what Lord Grantham would decide to do.

“Mr. Bates-“ Carson was clearly finished with him. He offered the telegram, which Bates took at once. “This came for you.”

When none of them attempted to move, Mr. Carson added. “Don’t you have something to do?”

“Yes Mr. Carson.” They all answered in unison and left the pantry so that Mr. Carson could close the door behind them. Anna straightened her apron straps as Bates tore open his telegram, with Thomas hovering over both their shoulders. Mr. Carson stormed off, immediately setting himself upon the hall boy who wasn’t mopping the floors correctly in the servant’s hall.

Bates began to read the telegram only to freeze. Every muscle in his body went stiff.

“…Mr. Bates?” Anna asked, cautiously.

Unnerved, Bates thrust the telegram into Anna’s hands, and then headed for the area door without another word. Thoroughly befuddled Anna read the telegram at once only to stare blankly at the document as if it had pronounced the beginning of another war.

“What is it?” Thomas demanded, though he feared he already knew.

“…. It’s his wife.” Anna said, staring listlessly off into space. She was strained; preoccupied with fear as she fiddled with the telegram in his hands, “Someone found her dead this morning.”
And with that she left after Bates, taking the telegram with her. Thomas watched her go, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know.
Loose Ends

Chapter Summary

With the war over, things return to normal at the abbey... but issues with Edward, Ethel, and William leave Thomas feeling conflicted.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for enduring this long wait. Happy 2018. This time last year I was writing Spare the Rod. Crazy, right? God I'd love to do another omegaverse. Let me know in the comments if you'd be interested in that!

Warnings for this chapter include an act of **drunken violence, and police brutality**. If that frightens you, be aware of it's presence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Downton Abbey’s return to normal happened over a period of six days, each folding back in on itself like the spades of an accordion until all was as it should have been from the start.

Soldier’s still in need of convalescing were sent to different institutions. Some went to York, but most went to Leeds. They left in droves on wagonettes, with a few having to take an ambulance lest their fragile state fall back into critical condition. Those that were no longer in need of convalescing returned home. Some left in groups, heading together in merry bands for the train station with valises in hand. Some left with their families, who came to pick them up in motorcars or on wagonettes. A few left alone, with no inclination to where they would go next or what they would do.

Edward was the very last patient to leave, and he did so on the wagonette which likewise carried Thomas to Dr. Clarkson.

The next thing to go were the medical supplies. Army surpluses were re-directed to still-open convalescents and hospitals. The food, medicine, cots, tables, chairs, and paraphernalia all went out in droves. First it was checked off by Thomas, who then handed his paperwork over to the Army Depot in town. Then, it was taken away in a series of dusty trucks that came skittering up the drive sending gravel into bushes and Isis running in circles. Soldiers and nurses alike loaded up everything, shook Mr. Carson and Lord Grantham’s hand, and then left to Downton Hospital where Dr. Clarkson would take everything back into his inventory. At this point, the maids of Downton went into deep cleaning mode, scouring the drawing rooms, great hall, library, and any other surface a foreign man might have touched. It resulted in a general hubbub, with all hands to the pump so that the family might return to their sane and solitary lifestyle. Lord Grantham just couldn’t stop smiling. He was far too delighted to have his house back to normal.

On the day that the final wagonette left from Downton, it carried Thomas, Edward, and several nurses from Downton Hospital. Thomas had been called for by Dr. Clarkson, who wished to speak with him in closing regarding his duties to the army and the convalescing men.
Thomas boarded the wagonnette in a three piece suit, with Mrs. Hughes at his elbow. She wore a warm smile, and patted him fondly on his knee, “When will we see you back?”

“Just as soon as I’m done.” Thomas promised. He did not plan to be gone longer than three hours at most.

“Very good,” Mrs. Hughes said, “Mr. Carson wants to speak to you as soon as you’ve returned, so be prompt.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas said, and with that Mrs. Hughes waved to the driver of the wagonette to signal he could take off. The driver snapped the reigns, and four plow horses took off with a string of hospital furniture and nursing staff behind them.

Edward, now having no where to go, was offered temporary board in the Grantham Arms by the army though he was warned he would have to vacate as soon as he made further plans. Thomas did not speak to Edward on the ride down, praying that Edward would not consult with him and would simply head home. He had a sinking feeling that things wouldn’t be so easy, but it wasn’t a crime to hope.

The English countryside was beautiful today. Thomas could not help but feel optimistic, though it was terribly chilly. It was now December, and one could not leave the abbey without coat, mitts, hat, and scarf. Thomas had given away his spare coat to Ethel, so Mr. Carson had let him borrow his own instead. Thomas enjoyed sticking his hands deep in the pockets, only to feel a small scrap of paper folded at the bottom. Curious, he withdrew his hand and opened the note to find that it was a forgotten shopping list of only one item:

**VIM**

Thomas smiled, refolding the note and putting it back into his pocket. Vim was a cleaning product used for scouring silver. Mr. Carson must be running low. He decided while in the village that he would stop by the grocers and pick up a tin. It wasn’t too much of a trouble, and he was certain Mr. Carson would pay him back.

Upon arrival at Downton Hospital, Thomas found it bustling with activity. Normally full of sick soldiers, today it was full of nurses and orderlies returning to the ‘hub’ from the abbey. Friends were reuniting, hugging and taking a trip to town for a cup of tea. Colleagues were swapping notes from curious case files, and logging everything down in massive records books that would be kept for at least ten years. This was the war to end all wars, and everyone was talking about it.

As promised, Thomas headed to Dr. Clarkson’s office upon arrival, and found the man barricaded in his study with at least twenty open cases on his desk. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a month, with deep bags beneath his eyes and a grayish complexion.

“Ah, Thomas!” Despite his ashen appearance, Dr. Clarkson was in good spirits. He let Thomas into his office, shutting the door behind them both, and gestured for Thomas to take his guest chair. Thomas supposed that Clarkson must have simply not gotten a decent nights sleep in quite a while. That was why he looked so peaky.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” Dr. Clarkson said, “Is everything in order?”

“Yes sir.” Thomas said, “The last of the equipment and men arrived with my wagonette.”

“I’m sure the abbey will be glad to have things back to normal.” Dr. Clarkson teased.

“More than you know.”
“Well, now that the convalescent home has been taken down, I wanted to formally approach you with an idea for your future.” Dr. Clarkson said. Thomas shifted uncomfortably in his chair. How many times had he told Clarkson no? Was he going deaf?

“Yes?” Thomas said, already knowing what he was about to ask.

“Would you consider working at the hospital, as my apprentice?” Dr. Clarkson asked. “I’d give you your own team of nurses, quarters in the village, a better paycheck than you’d find at the abbey… you could have an illustrious career learning from me.”

Thomas did not answer. Dr. Clarkson carried on, “Imagine it, Thomas. We could travel together, visit interesting places and see rare medical discoveries. In the past, you’ve claimed the defense of wanting to stay a servant, but I can’t see how you could possibly want that now when you’ve known a better life.”

But he hadn’t known a better life. Ypres and the Somme had both been hellish. Every day during his time abroad, Thomas had longed for the abbey, had wanted more than anything to return home. Being shot had been a blessing, once again.

Thomas shook his head, keeping his face neutral so as not to betray his anger. “The war was not a better life, Dr. Clarkson. Everyday I was away I yearned for home. Now that I’m here, I don’t intend to leave again. My answer remains the same, sir. I’m staying a servant, no matter the cost.”

Dr. Clarkson looked thoroughly disappointed. “I was afraid you’d say that. You’ve disappointed me, Thomas. I won’t lie.”

Thomas didn’t care.

“If that’s your final answer, then of course I won’t push you again.” Dr. Clarkson said, his tone turning slightly sour. “But I wish you’d change your mind. I could show you the world.”

“I don’t want to see it,” Thomas replied. There had been a time in his youth when he’d been wild and yearning for possibilities. But that had gotten him nowhere. Dreams were for the rich, and the privileged.

Dr. Clarkson offered him no rebuttal.

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It was with a happy air that Thomas ventured into the village for a tin of Vim’s polish, then caught a wagonette back home. He’d slipped out the back of the hospital before Edward could see him, and had not met the man in the village. Thomas felt like he’d been freed from shackles, though he knew that Edward would undoubtedly venture back to the abbey for closure. He would want to speak to Thomas one last time before they were parted. Thomas was certain of it. Until then, Thomas would just have to put Edward from his mind and hope that in time his heart learned to heal. It was the same way that he’d dealt with the loss of Philip, though of course Philip had never hurt him quite as deeply as Edward had.

The abbey was buzzing with merry activity as servants took their tea break. Thomas returned just in time for a hot cup, donning Mr. Carson’s coat back on the wall hanger and taking a seat between Anna and Mrs. Patmore. She’d come out from the kitchen to offer them all sweets for their hard work, and so everyone battled for orange biscuits while she idly sipped her own cup of tea. Mr. Carson was upstairs with the family in the library, so Thomas decided he would wait until Carson
had descended before seeking him out. He let the polish of Vim sit on the table, admiring it’s shiny red wrapper.

“Will you miss the extra staff, Mrs. Patmore?” Anna asked, for along with a great deal of nurses the Army had likewise sent a few kitchen hands to help with the extra workload. They’d been pleasant enough girls.

“Not really,” Mrs. Patmore shrugged. After regaining her eyesight, nothing fazed her. “When push comes to shove, I’d rather do it myself. Though god knows what I’m to feed them on. There’s nothing out there to be had.” At this she lifted her eyes to the ceiling in devout praise, “Oh well. The Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.”

Shorn lamb or no, Thomas was resolutely not sinking his money into the black market again. Mrs. Patmore rose, yawning a bit before collecting the empty biscuit tin and returning to the kitchen. Her orange infused biscuit recipe had been a smashing success. Thomas hoped she tried it with raspberries (they’d always been his favorite fruit).

“What about you, Thomas?” Daisy asked as she poured him a cup of hot tea, “What will you do now?”

“I don’t know.” Thomas admitted, stirring in some honey while Daisy offered him a freshly cut lemon wedge. He squeezed it into the brew, letting the rind sink to the bottom, “Dr. Clarkson wanted me to join as his apprentice, but I told him no. I never want to pick up a scalpel again.”

“I’d pick up a machete if it meant a better future.” O’Brien scoffed.

“I don’t blame you,” Anna directed her words to Thomas, mulling over her own cup of tea, “I couldn’t stand to deal with things like that. It’d make me ill.”

“I suppose I just went numb in the end,” Thomas said, recalling how many grizzly operations he’d performed in Ypres. “Not that that’s a good thing, either.”

“I bet the hospital will revert to the way it was before the war.” Anna said. Thomas nodded in agreement.

“So what does that leave you with?” Daisy asked him.

“Ah, Thomas.” Carson was pleased to see him, only to pause as he spotted the tin of Vim on the table. “What…”
Thomas plucked it up, taking the lead towards Carson’s office. “I found a note in your pocket to pick some up. So I did.”

Carson clucked his tongue, letting Thomas into his office before shutting the door behind them, “I hate to tell you but I already got the Vim. I suppose I forgot my note. I’ll be sure to reimburse you, but at least we have an extra tin.”

Slightly embarrassed, Thomas took Carson’s visiter chair. Carson took the can of Vim from him and fiddled with it as he sat behind his desk. He plucked off the red wrapper, which made a loud crinkling noise, only to set the bare bottle upon his desk and leave it be.

“How much was it?” Mr. Carson asked, “A bob?”

Thomas nodded. Carson reached into his desk drawer to pull out his wallet, fetching a shilling from a coin pouch and handing it over to Thomas who pocketed it at once.

Carson put his wallet back up, and re-locked the desk drawer.

“We don’t have long, so I’ll make this short.” Carson said, “What do you intend to do now that the war is over?”

“Honestly, I don’t know, Mr. Carson.” Thomas admitted, “Dr. Clarkson wanted me to join the hospital, but I said no.”

“Have you considered returning here?”

Considered? He’d dreamed of it since 1914. Thomas scoffed, beaming at the notion of being wanted. Of being asked for. “Mr. Carson, I’ve dreamed of nothing else since I left. But is there room for me?”

Mr. Carson gave him a warm smile, “There is always room for you.” He said, as if Thomas were special to him among the servants. “I need a footman desperately while I’m still here, and when I’m gone with Lady Mary, you and Mrs. Hughes can help keep the house going until another butler steps in.”

But Thomas knew that Lady Mary would not end up taking Carson because she not end up marrying Carlisle. Content, Thomas nodded. “Then I am ready made.”

“Praise be to god, I have a footman again.” Carson sighed, as if it was the greatest blessing a man could acquire in life beyond healthy children. Thomas almost felt like laughing.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Carson demanded, his tone suddenly turning sharp. Thomas jumped in his chair. “I’ve rung the gong and you’re sitting here undressed without the table being laid!”

But Carson was smiling. Beaming in fact.
Thomas had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. He leapt out of his chair and scrambled for the door.

“Get to work!” Carson roared after Thomas’ retreating back. Thomas could hear him chuckling down the hall.
Putting back on a livery again was like slipping into a soft and comforting glove. He re-oiled his hair on the go, using a spare comb in his trouser pocket to walk up the stairs and fix his pompadour at the same time. He wiped his sticky fingers on his handkerchief, then re-fixed his bowtie and entered the dining room to start laying it for supper. They were about ten minutes behind schedule which could bode disaster for an inexperienced footman but was easy for Thomas. He lay the napkins first, then the silver, finally finishing up with the crystal. By the time he’d completed this, Anna was finished dressing Lady Mary, and had returned to help him in the dining room dressed in her black and whites. She looked oddly… perplexed.

“Oh-!” Anna was surprised to see Thomas in the dining room. “So that’s what Mr. Carson wanted.”

Thomas grinned, offering Anna his silver lighter as she made to get the candles going. She was fascinated by the mechanisms of the lighter, pausing to enjoy how easy it was to strike a flame before returning to her task.

“It’s good to be back.” Thomas said, as if he had not been back at the abbey for over a year.

“Can I talk to you about something?” Anna asked. “Only, something happened just now that was a little odd.”

“Of course.” Thomas said, wondering what Anna had run across to perplex her so. She finished lighting the candles and returned his lighter to him before fixing the flower centerpieces to their best light.

“It’s about Sir Richard.” She said.

“God.” Thomas could not help but gripe. “I can’t wait till we’re shot of him.”

“Well….” Anna paused, perplexed, “He… He just asked me to spy on Lady Mary.”

Thomas turned about, a spare crystal goblet in hand. He fiddled with it, wondering at Anna’s words. Spy on Lady Mary? But why?

“Spy on her?”

“Mhmm.” Anna nodded.

“What did you say?” He asked.

“I told him I wouldn’t have time and left it at that.” Anna said, “As if I’d ever do such a thing.”

“No, not really your type, is it.” Thomas considered, for Anna had always been incorruptible.Spying was much more his forte, not that he was in the mood for it anymore.

“It’s just…” Anna leaned against the table, which wasn’t really proper but Thomas wouldn’t scold her for it. “Do you think I should tell Lady Mary?”

“…..No.” Thomas decided, “Not yet.” Lady Mary would probably not be willing to listen. She was growing used to Carlisle’s systematic abuse, and wouldn’t be able to view it with a clear head. “This whole thing is rather tricky. We may have to play it by ear.”

“I’ll leave it to you then.” Anna said with a quirky grin. She took the free goblet from him to put it back in the pantry, “You’re much better at this than I am.”
All through dinner, while he ferried about roasted duck and plum sauces, Thomas kept his eyes on Sir Richard Carlisle. He had to admit, the idea of spying on your potential wife just seemed sick to him. Couldn’t the man hold a conversation that didn’t involve a double angle? Surely if he was so fucking nervous about Mary, he’d have the decency to speak to her about it first. But even as Thomas watched Carlisle he noted that more than not the man’s eyes would travel just as much to Matthew as they did to Mary.

So that was it, then. Carlisle was jealous. He wanted to know if Matthew was competition.

But Thomas reasoned that Matthew wasn’t competition, even as he served a classic winter vegetable casserole of spinach, swiss chard, and kale. Matthew was the love of Mary’s life, and the father of George. Carlisle wasn’t in a competition, he was in the way and he needed to go promptly before this nonsense got any stickier. But Thomas knew when to be patient, when to wait and accept that the fates would be kind. Carlisle had left before, so he’d leave this time again. All he had to do was wait. And in the meantime… Thomas had plenty more to ponder.

The end of dinner signaled the clean up stage, with Anna, Jane, Thomas and Mrs. Hughes all helping to take dirty dishes downstairs while Carson attended to the family in the library. Dishes were washed, linens were swapped, flowers were thrown out, and by the end of it the dining room was cleared for breakfast the next morning. Slightly famished, Thomas returned downstairs eager to enjoy cheddar and herb potato pie. He dined, at ease with the world around him for the first time in months. Mrs. Patmore was in a good mood, glad to have her kitchen back in order. As a result, she offered everyone the surprise of apple pie. The smells were sumptuous, and seconds were had by all. Daisy got to leave the kitchen for her own slice, and sat next to Thomas with a dopey smile on her face as she sucked cream from the back of her spoon.

Feeling rather bloated, Thomas rested comfortably in his chair and let out a happy sigh.

Across the table from him, Bates teased, “Ready for bed?”

“Mmm.” Thomas said in reply with a grin. Laughter scattered through the hall.

“How does it feel to be back in livery?” Bates asked.

“Honestly? It does me good.” Thomas sat up a bit straighter lest he accidentally fall asleep in his chair, “I feel like I’m myself again.”

“I’m glad.” Bates said with a gentle smile.

“You certainly look like your old self.” O’Brien agreed. “But you’ll need a haircut. You let it grow out too long while you were convalescing.”

Thomas reached up to touch the feathered ends at the back of his neck.

“You can do that!” Anna offered. “I’m good at cutting hair. There’s no sense in having to go to the village only to pay.”

“I can do that!” Anna offered. “I’m good at cutting hair. There’s no sense in having to go to the village only to pay.”

“Quite right.” Thomas agreed, for if it was good enough for Lady Mary it was good enough for him. “I’ll take you up on that later tonight.”

“I missed having you downstairs.” Daisy sighed, “It’ll be nice to get things back to the way they were. Do you think Mr. Carson will take on any more footmen?”

God, Thomas didn’t know how to respond to that. After the war, Thomas had become a valet in lieu
of Bates’ temporary imprisonment. During that time… Alfred Nugent had come to the abbey. He’d been a right pain in the neck at first, and Thomas had been terrified with O’Brien’s insidious backing that Alfred was going to try and steal his job. In the end, Alfred had almost stollen his freedom by calling the damn police and trying to get him arrested. Had it not been for Lord Grantham’s undying love of cricket and Thomas’ mean right hook, he doubted he would have walked away unscathed.

“Why, so you can leave them at the altar too?” O’Brien muttered. Daisy bristled, but said nothing to her defense.

“It’s a lot of money to take on a footman,” Bates said, eyeing O’Brien with distaste. “It’ll be up to his lordship to decide what will be wise so quickly off after the war. Every house is cutting back now a days.”

“Will you mind it?” Anna asked Thomas, “The work load?”

But Thomas just smiled, thinking of the war and how he’d once had to navigate rats even in his sleep. Would he mind the workload in a beautiful clean house surrounded by the people he loved?

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else. This is my home and I’m proud to be here.” Thomas declared. Anna beamed with pride.

“But we’ll have to have a new butler.” Daisy said, “Y’can’t have a house like this without a butler, proper.”

“It won’t be the same without Mr. Carson.” Bates mused. But Thomas just shook his head. Carson wasn’t going anywhere…. but Sir Richard was.

“Oh.” Thomas sing sowned, “I don’t think we’re going to be saying goodbye just yet. I think the future holds lots of surprises”

O’Brien looked about at once, her eyes gleaming with interest. She always loved a good juicy scoop. Shuffling her chair a little bit closer to Thomas’, she leaned in and spoke in a delicate voice.

“What does that mean?” She asked.

“I means… what… it means…” Thomas spoke slowly, and would not meet O’Brien’s eyes. He couldn’t help being coy when he knew the future. It made him feel deliciously naughty at times.

“Oh that’s very clear, thank you Thomas.” O’Brien snapped, falling back in her chair and sulking. But it wasn’t just O’Brien’s attention that he’d caught. It was everyone’s. All the servants were leaning in, eager to hear what he had to say, and suddenly Thomas realized the pivotal gain of being popular in this house. When you had a dark upstairs secret under your cap, everyone wanted to know, and everyone trusted your word.

Thomas leaned in on an elbow. Others did the same, waiting to hear him clearly as he spoke in a whisper.

“It means Sir Richard Carlisle is a bastard, and I’m willing to bet money Lady Mary won’t go through with marrying him. So I don’t think Carson is going to go, because I don’t think Carlisle is going to last.”

He leaned back in his chair, his arms folded over his chest. Daisy was ready to drop her teapot, she was so entranced by the gossip.

“Why do you say that?” She wondered in awe.
"I have my reasons." Thomas said, "I don’t want to put my foot in something where I don’t belong, but suffice to say I do not like the man. Lady Mary deserves more."

"…I agree." Anna spoke up from across the table. Daisy did a double take, amazed.

"… And I think…” Thomas said, keeping eye contact with Anna the entire time, "Mr. Carson ought to know that too."

Anna blinked, rose from her chair, and walked out of the room. Several pairs of eyes followed her, including Bates who was quite worried.

“What on earth was that about?” O’Brien wondered aloud. But before they could debate on it further, the bell board rung for the blue room where Mr. Matthew was spending the night. Both Thomas and Bates rose, but Bates waved him off.

“Don’t worry about it,” He assured them, and then headed up the stairs. Thomas retook his seat, sighing, and was immediately confronted by O’Brien staring him down.

“… Well…?” O’Brien whispered when talk around them had continued on. Thomas cast a quick eye about to make sure Carson and Mrs. Hughes weren’t within earshot, then leaned in so that he could whisper in O’Brien’s ear unbothered.

“Sir Richard wanted Anna to spy on Lady Mary.”

O’Brien pulled back, agog, “He never!” She said with affront.

Thomas nodded, smug. “And I heard tell from the maids that he threatened Lady Mary the night before in the great hall. Tell me you think him a proper man now.”

“I never thought him a proper anything.” O’Brien scoffed, the last one to give her approval on anybody new, “Ought to be a way we can be shot of him, though. Her Ladyship won’t like it, knowing he’s a cad.”

But O’Brien had a way of getting everything blown out of proportion and the very last thing that Thomas wanted was for her to get involved with Lady Mary’s future. Her way to Matthew had to be natural and successful otherwise George wouldn’t be born.

“Keep it under your hat,” He urged her, “We’ll figure it out in the end, but I told Anna not to mention it to Lady Mary. You know how she’ll get.”

“No…” O’Brien muttered, “She’s much too proud, the silly girl.”

“We’re all silly when it comes to love,” Thomas surmised, for he’d been nothing but a plum raving lunatic when it came to Jimmy Kent.

Thomas returned to his teacup, which Daisy had refilled with hot brew. He got four good sips in before a sudden tap tap tap on the stairs announced the return of Bates. But instead of coming all the way downstairs and taking his place back at the table, Bates paused halfway down and called out.

“Thomas?”

Thomas looked about, having to turn in his chair to stair behind him. “Yes?”

“Come with me.” Bates said.

Curious, Thomas set his teacup down and pushed back from the table at once. He followed up after
Bates, wondering what was going on that needed his personal attention so late at night. He prayed that Mr. Matthew hadn’t had an accident in bed, given his weakened spine. He doubted the man’s pride would be able to survive it.

As they reached the gallery floor and headed for the blue room, Thomas caught Bates by the elbow and held him back for a moment, “What’s going on?” He asked. “Is it something bad?”

“There’s something I think you should see,” Bates said, but he spoke with a grin upon his lips and so Thomas’ fears were abated.

The blue room, so normally welcome to ample light from the eastern gardens during the day, was now shrouded in gloom save for a single candle behind a daintily painted hurricane glass. There was Matthew Crawley, sitting up in bed, looking fretful in his night thing with his covers cast off. His legs lay limply, like the limbs of a marionette cast from the security its strings.

When Matthew found Thomas in the doorway, his first words were, “You’re going to think me awfully foolish.”

“Why would I think that sir?” Thomas asked with a smile. Bates closed the door to give them privacy, and with it, Matthew seemed to grow slightly braver.

“It’s just… I think I feel a tingling in my legs.” Matthew admitted. Thomas could not help but grin like an idiot, knowing full well that Matthew’s legs were regaining their strength even now. He would surely begin to walk soon! “Dr. Clarkson says it’s just a memory but… I …” Matthew shook his head, reaffirming his faith in the notion, “I feel it. I know I do. And Bates says that you have great skill with medicine. How could you not when you were a head healer in the war?”

“I shan’t hide from you that I think it’s good news, Mr. Matthew.” Thomas praised. Matthew looked up at him amazed.

“Do you think so?” He wondered. He seemed scarcely able to believe it himself.

“I do.” Thomas nodded, before gesturing to the corner of Matthew’s shucked bed. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Not at all.” Matthew said. Thomas did so, and reached out for the sole of Matthew’s foot. He traced simple lines, making a circle with the tip of his fingernail.

“Tell me if you feel this?” Thomas asked.

Matthew closed his eyes, seeming to focus solely on the task at hand, “I do. Not strongly, but I do.”

“And this?” Thomas tried the other foot.

“Yes. It’s faint but it’s there.”

Thomas pulled back, quite satisfied with his results, “A man with a broken back couldn’t feel that.” He assured Matthew, who still seemed nervous.

“But what if it’s just… just…” Matthew fished for the right words, an intelligent man with a keen mind, “Me expecting it and seeing you do it.”

“A fine idea.” Thomas praised. “How about a little experiment then.”

“Is this the part where you stick me with pins?” Matthew said gloomily. “They already tried that in Leeds.”
“I shouldn’t dare do such a thing, Mr. Matthew.” Thomas teased, gesturing for Bates to help him lay Matthew’s blankets back atop him so that his feet were covered. “I should fear Lady Mary would be after me with a carving knife.”

That got Matthew laughing, a loving glimmer flickering through his beautiful blue eyes at the thought of Mary Crawley. Thomas would admit it only to himself, but Matthew was rather dashing. Then again, Maybe Thomas just had a thing for blondes with blue eyes.

“I hate to admit it, but you might be right.” Matthew said. “Lavinia was never much of a fighter.”

“We all have our strengths, sir.” Thomas reminded him, “Now, let’s have a bit of fun shall we?”

It was the first time he’d said such a thing to another man in a bedroom still wearing clothes.

“Bates, come here.” Thomas requested. At once, Bates stepped up to his side. Thomas leaned in to whisper in Bates’ ear so that Matthew could not overhear.

“I’m going to trace the letter ‘A’ into his foot.” Thomas said, before pulling back. Bates nodded, having understood.

Now Thomas turned to Matthew. “I’m going to trace a letter of the alphabet into your foot. I want you to tell me which one it is. Bates knows it already, and he’s going to watch me for proof. Ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Matthew shrugged.

Thomas squatted down by the footboard, untucked Matthew’s quilted coverlet, then reached his hand underneath in the gloom to fish for Matthew’s foot. When he found it, he immediately began to trace the letter ‘A’ into the sole. Bates watched him, nodding to Matthew.

Matthew closed his eyes concentrating hard. Over and over again, Thomas traced the letter. The slanted sides, the string bridge across….

“Can you tell which letter?” He finally asked after a moment.

“… A…?” Matthew finally guessed.

Thomas beamed. Matthew blushed in pleasant surprise.

~*~

Despite the fact that Matthew was starting to regain sensation in his feet, Thomas did not speak to Lord Grantham or Lady Mary on the subject. It was too little too soon, the sort of thing he didn’t want to allude to without total and absolute proof. He didn’t want to get Matthew up and moving before his body was ready. His spinal damage was intense, and any accidental spur of movement could result in absolute paralysis of the legs.

Instead, Thomas bided his time and kept up with his work. He was glad to be back to the normal routine of domestic service. It delighted him, to know the war was over. Now he could get back to living his life without fear of being shot by a German or left behind by the abbey.

…But there was one thread yet to be clipped and tucked. One war story still left unfinished.

Three days after discovering Matthew could feel his feet, Thomas sat at the servant’s table during tea
time. He was surrounded by his workmates and friends, sipping on a cup of hot tea laced with lemon and honey. Mrs. Patmore had made ginger biscuits, and Anna was humming a pleasant tune under her breath. O’Brien was darning a lace collar, Bates was sorting through his Lordship’s used collars, and Thomas was slowly sharpening one of Mrs. Patmore’s steak knives. Now that Carson had a footman back, Thomas was doing a hundred and ten jobs that had fallen slack in the past years. One involved sharpening the knives and fork tips of all the cutlery sets, including the servants. Thomas had already completed the task, but he was now sharpening Mrs. Patmore’s knives just for the hell of it. They’d grown dull, and the abbey couldn’t afford to replace them. One in particular looked capable of cleaving a man’s head from his shoulders; it was used to chop wild game into manageable chunks for roasting.

Lily came trotting up the hallway to the area yard, seemingly seeking someone. When she saw Thomas at the servant’s table, she made a bee line for him. Thomas paused mid-sweep of the wet stone, setting Mrs. Patmore’s knife down to give Lily his full attention.

“Thomas, Lieutenant Courtenay is outside.” Lily was unsure, chewing on her lip before finishing her message, “He says he’s come to take you home? I… didn’t know what to tell him.”

Oh goody.

Thomas swallowed around a knot in his throat, suddenly feeling a chill upon the air. He was not the only servant to express dismay. Bates set down his stack of collars with a grumpy sigh. Even O’Brien was irritated, narrowing her dark eyes and rubbing the tips of her sore fingers together as if plotting something diabolical.

“The war’s over now, Lily.” Thomas said, “It’s just Lord Courtenay now. Tell him I’m busy.”

“…He’s insistent.” Lily said, in a way that seemed to suggest she’d already begged Edward to budge off.

Anna, however, looked upon this challenge not with apprehension nor anger but with courage.

“Then let’s get this over with.” Anna decided, “Today. It’s gone on long enough, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re right,” O’Brien said, “We’ll go out together. He can’t bash your head in if there’s witnesses, can he?”

“How very reassuring.” Thomas groaned. Where was the Heichecera when he needed her the most?

But this had to happen either way, and even if the Heichecera were here, she couldn’t very well show herself, could she? No, this was on Thomas to fix. He’d made a mess, now it was time to clean up the loose ends. It wasn’t Edward’s fault that he’d become a nuisance. Thomas had given him the loaded gun and tempted him to shoot. Was it rightly fair that he should complain about having a target on his back now?

Out the area door they went, one after another with Thomas in the lead. O’Brien was next, with Bates and Anna bringing up the rear. Each of them squinted underneath the harsh blue light of a winter’s morn. The air was brisk, with O’Brien and Anna slightly chilled in their day dresses. Anna had not yet changed into her black and whites, and was still in a stained green dress that hardly offered her warmth. She breathed into her palms, rubbing them vigorously to give herself some warmth.

And there he was.

Standing in the middle of the area yard, with a queer expression as if he wasn’t quite sure how he’d
gotten there, was Edward Courtenay. The days had not been kind to him. He was unshaven, and his hair was not combed. He wore his uniform, and carried a valise with him. There were deep bags beneath his crystal blue eyes, and bit of dried drool at the corner of his mouth. He seemed positively mad, and on the verge of a breakdown.

Bates closed the area yard door, so that the five of them were neatly cut off from the rest of the house.

Edward was not impressed.

“Oh I see-“ Edward made a broad gesture at their group. It was very clear that the man had been drinking, “Y’can’t greet me by yourself? You need the whole sundry?”

“Maybe we wanted to see the circus.” O’Brien sneered.

“Oh shuttup you stupid old cow-!” Edward barked, furious at being barbed when he was in such an emotional state.

O’Brien looked ready to beat Edward to death with a candle holder. Thomas threw out both arms, in an attempt to equally block Edward from his coworkers and keep O’Brien from committing murder.

“It’s over.” Thomas said. His heart was racing so fast, he could hear it beating in his eardrum. He felt close to fainting from fear.

Was it over? Just like this?
Would this be enough?

Everyone went quiet, nervous to see what would happen next.

“It’s over, Edward,” Thomas repeated. “It’s done. I don’t love you anymore. I don’t want to be married to you anymore.”

With that, he reached down and took off his wedding ring. That terrible green stain was back. He held it out for Edward to take, but Edward seemed to have been rendered numb by Thomas’ terrible words. He stood there gaping, mouth open.

“Please, leave this town and…” And what? Die? Look for a Spanish sorceress and do whatever she says? By god he’d lost his mind. “And do what needs to be done to live your own life.”

At least, live it for as long as the Heichecera would allow.

For a moment, it seemed that Edward would fall over from the shock of it all. Instead, he just stumbled a bit and rubbed at his mouth. The stubble must have scratched at his fingertips.

“…So…” Edward sniffed, close to tears. He gestured to them all, as if hoping someone would leap out and say ‘April Fools!’.

No one did.

“So, this is how it ends?” Edward’s voice broke. Thomas couldn’t even meet his eyes, too ashamed at how this god awful affair had ended. God… would have been better to let Edward die in a hospital bed? “When I love you, and want you to be mine-“

“But he doesn’t love you.” Bates cut across.

Edward snapped, rage flying up seemingly out of nowhere.
“One more word out of your fucking pie hole-!” he roared. Anna jumped.

“Edward, you’ve changed!” Thomas cut across before yet another argument could start. “You’re not someone that I can love anymore, and I’m not interested in putting up with your abuse-“

“I… I don’t abuse you!” Edward begged, but when no one bought that he changed to another tune, “I can change. I swear I can change.”

Thomas didn’t believe him.

“I don’t want you to change, I want you to leave.” He said. Edward looked like he’d been punched in the stomach. Once more, Thomas had to look at the ground to keep from softening his approach, “I want you to go home to Oxford, make right with your family, and live your life.”

Tears were welling up in his eyes. “…You are my life.” He whispered.

But Thomas didn’t want the responsibility. He didn’t want to be someone’s reason for living. That wasn’t the point of living. If you weren’t enough without a person, you would never be enough with them.

“I’m a person,” Thomas corrected him, “A human being with my own desires. I’m not your reason for living. If you’re not enough without me you’ll never be enough with me. I meddled far too much with your life, and I realize I was wrong to do so now. I thought I could save you, but I shouldn’t have.”

It burned to admit it, but Thomas didn’t stop, “You’ve forgotten who you are, and how to stand on your own. How to live your own life. But you can do it. I know you can.”

Edward was shaking his head emphatically. He didn’t seem capable of speaking for the moment.

Thomas dropped his hand; it was clear Edward wasn’t going to take back the wedding ring. He pocketed it instead.

“Goodbye Edward.” Thomas said. He turned to go, and in unison the others made to follow. The wall of resistance seemed to terrify Edward. He abandoned his valise, dropping it with a clatter to run to Thomas and grab him tight by the arm. He pulled Thomas back, spinning him around to press him hard against one of the brick pillars that kept the wood shed dry.

“Hey-!” Bates barked, furious. He was half-way to the punch, cane abandoned-!

“Stop!” Thomas cried out. He spoke to Bates not Edward, and Bates halted in his tracks. A muscle was jumping in his jaw.

Up this close, Thomas had no ability to hide his eyes from Edward. They were baring their souls to one another, almost nose to nose with everyone watching. Edward’s eyes were glistening with unshed tears, the stink of whiskey heavy on his breath.

“Thomas…” He whispered, “Please, baby, please. Please don’t leave me. I’m scared to be without you.”

“…I’m sorry Edward,” and Thomas meant it, “But it’s out of my hands now.”

“I love you-“

“I know…” And suddenly Thomas realized how much more mature he was than Edward, for though
Edward did not know it Thomas was now technically in his forties. “Now let me go.”

Weak and dumbfounded, Edward freed Thomas from his iron grip. It resulted in Thomas being able to slink away, which made him feel terribly vile. He wished, more than anything, he could reveal to Edward the full truth. To simply explain that these events were not Edward’s nor Thomas’ fault. That there was a time to die, and nothing short of the will of God could change it.

Yet as Thomas watched Edward stumble away, nearly forgetting his valise in the process, he came under the impression that Edward would never be able to understand even if he could reveal the full truth. Edward had not been meant to live past that awful day in Downton Village Hospital, as ugly and as sick as it was. Edward had simply been meant to pass onto the next life, and to be freed from his shackles.

He prayed, in that moment, that Edward’s passing in this life would be gentle and swift. Let him go in his sleep. Let him be free of pain and turmoil.

_We knew love together_, Thomas thought as he watched Edward vanish up the alley. At this point, it was the only emotional truth left to them both.

A touch at his elbow made him jump. He looked around to see Anna, rubbing gently at the sore junction of his arm.

“There now, see?” She said sweetly, “It’s over.”
Nothing but a cold winter wind replied.

~*~

It was as if with Edward leaving, life finally began to spring forward. Of course, Anna told Mr. Carson about Sir Richard’s devious intents, and of course Carson backed out of becoming Sir Richard’s new butler. All of a sudden, Downton was back to it’s usual course, with Carson barking orders, Thomas jumping through hoops, and Mrs. Hughes chastising Mr. Carson for ‘pushing the young ones too hard’. Things upstairs were taking a wild turn, with Mary snapping at Anna for daring to speak to Carson about Carlisle’s nature and Matthew beginning to walk again.

Yes, by god, Matthew Crawley was slowly but surely regaining the full and solid use of his limbs. He could not stand up for long, nor could he make great strides across a room, but with each passing day he stood just a little bit longer and walked just a little bit farther. If that wasn’t the most joyous news in the world, Thomas didn’t know what was.

Of course, not everyone was overjoyed. Indeed, Lady Mary seemed to be slowly consumed alive by the reasoning that Matthew would soon marry Lavinia. She withdrew into herself, and Thomas found himself watching over her at dinner, wondering how on earth she was coping with such horrific pressure.

Even the Dowager Countess was starting to grow unnerved. Something would have to bend and soon, Thomas was sure.

About two weeks after Edward’s adieu, Thomas found himself soaking in the bathtub late at night. Servants were not allowed to bathe properly more than once a week, and so everyone had a
prescribed bath day. For Thomas, baths were held on Friday, and so he was able to pilfer the last of
the hot water for his own advantages. Steaming in a queer soup of soap and filth, Thomas allowed
each of his muscles to relax. Tomorrow, a luncheon would be held for the Bryants, who were
coming to visit Downton as a sort of refuge after the death of their son. Thomas didn’t know what
would come of the visit, or if there would be any way for him to help Ethel at all, but he prayed
something would come to him and soon.

It just so happened his prayer was answered, but not in the way that he expected.

A shadow flitted out of the corner of his eye, the smell of spices and incense sweet upon the air. It
was like a proverbial perfume that followed everywhere the Heichecera went.

“I generally don’t like women watching me bathe,” Thomas said, “But for you, I’ll make an
exception.”

“How lucky for me.” The Heichecera joked.

She walked about the bathroom, coming to sit upon the rim of the porcelain tub. She even trailed a
finger or two through the water, though Thomas noted that the touch of her skin did not cause a
ripple upon its glassy surface. It seemed she did not exist physically in this world unless she forced it.

Instinctively, he drew up his legs so that she could not see his flaccid penis or testicles. She seemed
to find this slightly funny.

“You did very well,” The Heichecera said, with a kind voice. “Edward has gone home to Oxford.”

“Is that the end of it?” Thomas asked, unsure.

“No, but it is the end of your role,” The Heichecera said. The steam from Thomas’ hot bathwater
was beginning to make her orange velvet collar stick to her neck. “Edward shall pass peacefully from
this life. Death tends to take what it wants. “

Once again, the Heichecera was speaking of Death like it were a human with a personality. Curious,
Thomas pressed her for more, “What’s Death like?”

“The act or the deity?” The Heichecera asked.

“The deity.” Thomas confirmed.

She tilted her head, pondering her answer for a moment. Sniffing, the Heichecera looked back
around at Thomas to finally reply, “It’s Rather to the point.”

Thomas could not help but scoff.

“Death does not suffer fools. It does not suffer anything.”

“Is it human?” Thomas asked.

“No.” She shook her head, “It never was. I was once human, as are most of my kind. My human
blood gives me a taste of agony and fear. It helps me to relate to those that I choose to care for, such
as yourself. Death has never known these sensations, so it doesn’t understand what all the fuss is
about.”

But that just made Thomas nervous. What if Death was so to the point that it was spiteful or cruel?

“Is it… mean?” Thomas asked. What a paltry word to use in explanation of Death.
The Heichecera hummed, neither confirming nor denying, “I suppose it could be perceived that way, but from my interactions with it, I don’t think so. Death is rather like a grumpy old friend, who at the end of a long and exhausting day takes you home. But of all the deities in this realm, great and small, Death is the one who is most complained of. Who is most feared and chided. So it tends to get a little irritated when people ask common questions like ‘why me’ or ‘why now’.”

Thomas winced, thinking of how he’d so longed to strike a bargain with Death, “So… it can’t be bargained with?”

The Heichecera paused, as if recalling a terrible memory. She turned on the rim of the porcelain tub, staring at Thomas plaintively. “It can… but the cost is too high for you to pay. Death does not bargain with anything tangible you can physically offer. Death takes in the only currency it knows. Life.”

“So… a life for a life?” Thomas supplied. “I’d have to murder someone?”

The Heichecera was getting annoyed. She reached out, a finger in Thomas’ face to stop him from continuing on.

“Let it go, Tommy.” She spoke to him as his mother might have when he was small. He wondered if she knew that Tommy had been his childhood nickname. “You’re back to being on the right path, now let it go. You’ll have your answers soon enough. You cannot save those destined for death. You can only prolong it. And now you know what happens when you do.”

But Thomas had a funny feeling (whether it was accurate or not) that the Heichecera wasn’t telling him everything. What if Death could be bargained with, but she was just too scared to? She spoke of Death as if they’d met before, and maybe that interaction hadn’t gone so well. What if Thomas tried, and spoke to Death plainly without hidden intentions?

Maybe… just maybe.

“Be aware, Thomas,” the Heichecera rose from the rim of the tub to stride about the room. She was running her hands over the walls, though once again her fingers did not actually touch the tile and wood. “Tomorrow your fate will be in motion again. Be attentive. Keep your eyes open.”

“What’s going to happen?” Thomas asked, thinking of the Bryants.

“You will be seen,” The Heichecera explained.

“By who?”

“Not who.” She shook her head, slowly beginning to vanish until Thomas was hearing a voice out of thin air. “How.”

~*~

He sat at a chessboard, staring at pieces made of diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. They were incredibly beautiful, far more rare and precious that he could ever be able to afford (nevertheless play with). Incredibly, Thomas seemed to be playing a game with these pieces, and across the board sat a figure cloaked in darkness. A light from behind their head illuminated a silhouette. Thomas couldn’t ascertain much… the figure seemed to be wearing a velvet smoking jacket of some type.

“You move,” his opponent declared.
Thomas looked back down noting that his knight was vulnerable. Unsure, he reached out to try and move it to a safer spot.

But even as Thomas touched the top of the knight’s ruby head, a skeletal hand shot out from the dark and grabbed Thomas tight by the wrist pinning him down. He gasped in fright!

A skull loomed out of the dark, right where his opponent’s head ought to rightfully be. He saw now that he played not against a man but a skeleton, with deep sunken eyes and clacking teeth.

“Don’t touch my pieces,” spat the skeleton, “They’re mine. Only I can touch them.”

And with that, Thomas jerked awake in a cold sweat.

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Luncheon for the Bryants was the first true statement of Downton’s return to glory since the end of the war, and Carson was thrilled. The resulting spree of a cold spread and the dining room back in its full splendor (without a ping pong table taking up half the space) was enough to put the butler back into a jolly step he hadn’t exhibited since 1914. Of course, the rest of the staff were less than pleased to try and host a family on a shoestring budget, but that was neither here nor there. The Bryant’s were grieving, and grieving people (as Mrs. Patmore so rightfully deduced) would eat anything you put in front of them.

Now, Lady Mary? That was another story.

Thomas took care to balance his trays, for today they were having a warm duck soup in a deep brown sauce. Sometimes if they served a dish with a chicken sauce, you could spill a bit and no one would notice because the broth was clear. But when you were working with a beef stock, any slip up was easy to see and Carson was having none of that, thank you very much. As a result, he hovered at Thomas’ elbow, watching him constantly as Thomas marched up stairs and through doorways.

“Careful now,” Carson would murmur under his breath, which was a tad more pleasant than his usually snapping of “Watch where you’re going!”

Never look a gift horse in the mouth, and all that.

The Bryants were a queer couple, and as Thomas served them he could not help but notice how strange they were. Daphne Bryant was a fretful whisp of a woman, the kind that looked like one foul wind would knock her over. She had iron gray hair with a smattering of downy brown, all of it piled at the back of her head in an intricate knot. Though her clothes were smart and her manners were fashionable, it was obvious she was grieving. Her eyes were swollen, her cheeks blotched, and the tips of her fingers were reddened as if she’d been fidgeting far too often. Major Bryant, on the other hand, was a portly man with hardly any neck and a walrus mustache. If he was grieving, it was impossible to see. Instead, you had to imagine what the man might be like at home with the doors locked and his white breast coat unbuttoned. Thomas, being an expert in sorrow, knew where to look for the right details. Bryant’s eyes might not be red, but there were deep purpling bags beneath them as if he hadn’t been getting enough sleep. His fingers weren’t shaking, nor were they red, but they were clenched into tight fists. He held his cutlery just a little too brusquely. His crystal goblet was beginning to turn underneath the massive pressure of his hand.

“You have such a lovely home,” Daphne Byrant spoke to Cora Crawley, both as a mother and as a fellow woman of the upper class, “ Truly lovely.”
Her voice was raw. She’d either been screaming or crying.

“You’re very kind,” Lady Grantham said. She was an expert at rubbing elbows, even under great strain. In particular, she seemed to be avoiding Major Bryant, but frankly all the family were. All three Crawley sisters were instead focused on Matthew and Lavinia, both of whom were still trying to arrange themselves with nuptial bliss. Thomas noticed that Lady Mary still looked thoroughly gobsmacked by the idea that she was about to lose the love of her life to another woman. Sir Richard, on the other hand, was watching Matthew warily as if he expected the man to leap out of his chair and proclaim his undying love for Mary in front of them all.

\textit{Christ, it's like a nickelodeon for free}, Thomas thought irritably. All he was missing was a bag of peanuts.

“It was so good of you to open your home to the men,” Mrs. Bryant as beginning to rub at her fingertips again in a nervous habit.

“We were glad to do it,” Lady Grantham assured her, “We all wanted to play our part. Sybil was a nurse as well, Edith helped to run the house. Even our own footman, Thomas, was the manager.”

Thomas might have felt a bead of pride to be called upon so favorably by Lady Grantham, but it was rightly tainted by Major Bryant saying, “A footman, running a house?” It seemed as believable to him as the notion of swines flying.

“He wasn’t a footman then,” Lady Mary interjected in that snood way which always seemed to insist she knew everything, “He was a doctor during the war. A head healer, actually.”

Bryant set down his spoon, mustache quivering and eyes narrowed in suspicion. “So you mean to tell me that you didn’t pursue a hospital career after the war, boy?”

Thomas automatically disliked \textit{anyone} who called him ‘boy’ like he was still in britches sewn by this mother. Unable to vent any of this, Thomas just kept his gaze dead ahead and never let his servants blank shift.

“That is correct, sir.” He said.

“Then you’re clearly dumber than you look.” Bryant grumbled, and went back to his duck soup.

\textit{Well, at least he thinks I look smart}, Thomas thought irritably.

“Working in a hospital isn’t as glamorous as you’d think,” Lady Sybil warned. Was it Thomas’ imagination or did she look like something was weighing upon her mind.

“I thought you said that you wanted to go back to it all?” Lady Edith wondered aloud.

“I want to go back to a full days work,” Lady Sybil corrected her sister, “But I wouldn’t mind taking up another career.”

“The only career a woman should have is that of a mother,” Bryant interjected.

Mrs. Bryant, sensing her husband was about to make an ass of himself, tried to steer the conversation back towards safer territory. “I’m afraid Downton will be a place of pilgrimage for a while.”

“We’re glad to be,” Lady Grantham assured her, “if we can help bring some peace of mind.”

“There’s no point in wallowing in it,” Bryant could not allow himself to even fathom the notion of
grief. It was too much, too painful, and it seemed to terrify the man, “What good does it do?”

But before Lady Grantham or Mrs. Bryant could try to force calm conversation along any further, something rather insane happened.

It happened in a split second, at first with the whole party carrying on in their traditional roles talking on mundane topics. Then, without warning, the door to the servery burst open with a horribly loud ‘bang’.

It was amazing how people’s personalities could change in the blink of an eye. The sudden shock of an unexpected intrusion on their party brought out the inner layers of every person at the table. Lady Grantham jumped, a hand leaping to her throat in surprise. Sir Richard looked like an idiot with his mouth open while Sybil completely dropped the act of being an upper class lady and whipped around in her chair to stare at the source of trouble. Mr. Carson went white, and Thomas (for all his pandering) sat down his tray upon the buffet table so that both hands were free in case he had to manhandle trouble out of the dining room.

Trouble, however, was refusing to be manhandled.

“Leave me alone!” Ethel Parks shrieked, fleeing into the dining room with Mrs. Hughes and Anna at her heels. In her arms she carried Charlie, who looked downright terrified at the commotion. At once, Thomas’ heart ached at the sight of the child. He longed to hold the babe, to comfort him in this moment of confusion. But what was Ethel doing here, and how had she be able to get up into the dining room? The answer, it seemed, lay with Mrs. Hughes who looked terribly guilty.

Why wasn’t I told, Thomas wondered,

“Ethel!” Mrs. Hughes tried to grab her by the elbow, but once again Ethel managed to slip through her fingers. Quick as a flash, Ethel hid behind Thomas, who seemed to be her barrier in this moment of trial. Thomas didn’t know whether to feel honored or unsure.

“Ethel, what on earth are you doing here?” Thomas wondered aloud, “What’s going on-?”

“I tried to stop her!” Anna begged Lord Grantham, who was still agog at the fact a tramp was in his dining room.

“What on earth?” Lord Grantham wondered aloud.

“Ethel—” Lady Grantham sat her napkin down, rising up from her chair. She turned to her party, assuring them all they weren’t going completely insane, “I know what this is— Mrs. Hughes, I don’t think it’s quite right—”

“I’m stopping!” Ethel shrieked.
The dining room went quiet, all eyes turning to stare at her to see what she’d say next.

“Until I’ve had my say,” She quivered, planting herself as firmly as a tree.

She took a deep breath, looked Mrs. Bryant dead in the face, and uttered the damning words.

“… This is Charlie,” Ethel said, nodding to the babe in her arms, “Your grandson. He’s almost a year old.”

Mrs. Bryant looked back at Mr. Bryant aghast, but Mr. Bryant was growing stiff in his chair. Where his wife was shocked, he was angry, and suddenly Thomas realized just why Ethel had hidden herself behind him.
He was her protector.

Mr. Bryant stood up, face purpling with fury. Thomas stepped in front of Ethel at once, shielding her and Charlie with both his arms.

Ethel hid behind him, pressing her face into the planes of his back. Thomas could feel Charlie grabbing onto his livery with a pudgy hand, curious at the starched texture.

“What proof have you?” Mr. Bryant demanded.

Thomas took over, far stronger than Ethel in the face of such adversity. “Letters!” Thomas declared, “She’s sent him dozens of letters. Mrs. Hughes had to deliver them, and she even had to speak to Lady Grantham on the subject.”

Lady Grantham went white, shocked that Thomas would draw her into the conversation. But damnit, she knew! They all knew! Someone had to tell the truth, and why not her? “M’lady, tell him!” Thomas implored her, gesturing to Mr. Bryant who looked ready to strangle Thomas with his necktie, “Tell him!”

“…I…” Lady Grantham didn’t know what to say, “… It’s…”

So clearly she couldn’t be counted on. Good to know.

“So what!” Mr. Bryant wouldn’t hear any of it, “Is there any signed statement?”

“M’lord,” Mrs. Hughes protested in lieu of Lady Grantham backing down, “She is telling the truth—“

“I’m not interested in what you think!” Mr. Bryant roared, furious at being spoken to in such a way by a housekeeper, “I want proof that my son acknowledged paternity of this boy!”

“He never acknowledged it because he ran from his own guilt!” Thomas shouted back, “He was a damned coward who left his son to starve!”

“Thomas!” Lady Grantham was horrified at his nerve. Admittedly, he was feeling a little nervous too, and knew that he was either for the sack or in for a serious punishment, but he refused to back down from Mr. Bryant in lieu of Ethel’s faith in him. The fact of the matter was, men like Mr. Bryant ruined the lives of anyone who went against their personal desires. Thomas’ father had been just the same, as had Carson a lifetime ago. If Ethel looked to him as her protector, and trusted him to do the right thing… then he simply had to do it.

For Charlie’s sake, if nothing else.

“Thank you!” Mr. Bryant declared, as if Thomas had done him a favor or something, “For the proof I was looking for. If Charles was the father, he would never have shirked his responsibilities. Never! He was a gentleman, an upstanding Englishman, and if he’d had a son with this urchin he wouldn’t have dared run away.”

“Well he did!” Ethel cried out, affronted at Bryant’s lack of clarity.

But Bryant had had enough. He drew himself up to full height, bristling as he shouted, “I WON’T LISTEN TO ANYMORE SLANDER!”

Ethel gasped, terrified at Bryant’s tone. Thomas braced himself, holding tight like a shelter against hurricane force winds.
“NOW PLEASE GO, AND TAKE THAT BOY WITH YOU, WHOEVER HE IS! YOU’RE UPSETTING MRS. BRYANT!”

“Well-“ Mrs. Bryant didn’t seem the least bit upset, instead, she was gesturing for Ethel and Charlie, clearly wanting a closer look, “I would like-“

“I SAY YOU ARE UPSETTING MRS. BRYANT!” Mr. Bryant howled, practically blue in the face.

Ethel, terrified at being shouted to and ripped forcibly away from her last lifeline, burst into hysterical tears. Everyone else at the table looked sickened, with Lord Grantham in particular clearly terribly sorry for her.

Thomas, unsure of what else to do, turned and held Ethel to his side. She buried his face in his chest, staining his white bib with her tears and dirty face.

“It’s alright, Ethel,” He said, “It’ll be alright, we’re not out for the count yet-!”

But weren’t they? Try as he might, Thomas was finding himself without a plan. What on earth could they do now?

“Lord Grantham, are you going to stand here while this wretch holds us for ransom?” Mr. Bryant demanded.

Lord Grantham rose out of his chair, clearly eager for all of this hostility to end.

“This isn’t doing much good,” Lord Grantham begged, though it was clear he wished he could find a solution.

“Ethel, you’d better come with me.” Mrs. Hughes urged, reaching out to help Ethel along. Now she was absolutely at her wits end, howling wildly as tears poured down her emaciated face. Charlie, frightened witless at the sight of his mother in tatters, promptly burst into tears to. The cacophony was like nails on a chalkboard, and Thomas could do little more than hold Ethel to his side.

“Come on,” Anna urged, and the four of them left the dining room.

“Anna, take him-“ Thomas protested, gesturing to the baby. At once, Anna plucked Charlie out of Ethel’s arms, soothing him as she bounced him upon her hip. Now able to hold Ethel better, Thomas walked her down the servant’s stairs, with Mrs. Hughes leading the way. It was less of an orderly file and more of Thomas having to pull Ethel bodily along. Her knees were weak, her legs giving out, and half way down Thomas just had to say ‘bugger it’ and pick Ethel right up off the floor lest she fall down the rest of the stairs. He carried her down the last two flights and right into the servants hall, which was suddenly full of fearful and confused voices as every servant under the roof turned to see Ethel close to fainting and a squalling unknown baby.

“What on earth is going on?” Bates demanded, rising out of his chair by the fire.

“Why is there a baby in here?” O’Brien demanded, gesturing angrily from Anna to the crying Charlie.

“Oh by ‘eck!’” Mrs. Patmore stormed out of the kitchen to see what was a matter, “What’s happened now?!”

“Mrs. Patmore, can you warm up some milk for the baby?” Mrs. Hughes requested, pulling out a chair for Ethel by the fire, “To sooth him?”
“Well, I mean—” Mrs. Patmore was flustered, “I can but— whose baby is he?”

“Does it matter?” Thomas demanded angrily, having to bend at the knees to put Ethel in the rocking chair, “He’s crying!”

“Oh, hush you!” Mrs. Patmore stormed back into the kitchen, cursing all the way. Daisy poked her head out, unsure, while Lily and Helen stared in shock from across the table. Jane was kind enough to lend Ethel her own handkerchief, while Thomas used his hand to fan her face. She’d faint if she wasn’t careful.

“I’m ruined!” Ethel sobbed into her hands as all the servants gathered round her, “God help me, I’m ruined! They were my last hope.”

“They hell they are!” Thomas cursed, furious at the thought of Ethel being so defeated.

“Who is this?” Jane wondered at Ethel.

“It’s Ethel, the maid you replaced.” Anna explained. Jane took one look from Ethel to Charlie, only to deduce what had happened in an instant.

“Oh, no.” She moaned sympathetically. The pity in her gaze was a terrible thing to behold.

“Here, coming through—!” Mrs. Patmore barked, wading through the growing crowd with a little cup full of steaming milk and a silver spoon. Anna took the lot of it, sitting down at the table to try and get Charlie interested.

“Try giving that to him,” Mrs. Patmore said, “It’s got a drop of brandy in it. That ought to quiet him down.”

Christ, Thomas could use a drop of brandy himself. He wondered if he could persuade Mrs. Patmore to give a sip to Ethel.

Charlie began to fuss over the spoon and cup, taking a few mouthfuls but clearly more interested in playing. It was funny to watch Anna with a baby; she jiggled Charlie carefully upon her knee, allowing him to bang Mrs. Patmore’s spoon against the table and her arm in ridiculous rhythm. Ethel was taking one shuddering breath after another, clutching Jane’s handkerchief to her mouth.

“Why…” She whispered. “Why did he have to be so … so…”

“Because he’s an arsehole!” Thomas snapped, now thoroughly hating Mr. Bryant and everything he stood for.

“Don’t curse around a baby, Thomas!” Anna chastised him, “They pick up on things!”

But Thomas didn’t care. Charlie was much too fussed about his spoon to care about anything else. Thomas cupped Ethel’s hands in his own, attempting to soothe her trembling. Her fingers were horribly cold amid his own. Was she ill, or did she just have poor circulation?

“Ethel, forget about him,” Thomas begged. “I’m telling you, forget about all of it! You don’t need the Bryants. We can find another way to remedy this situation.”

“If that’s what he’s like, I don’t want his help,” Ethel agreed. Thomas nodded, thoroughly in favor of Bryant sodding off. “I don’t want it.”

“I doubt you’ll have the option.” O’Brien said. It was odd, for as irritated as she’d been at Ethel
during her time of employment, she didn’t seem to be smug now. Indeed, she looked horribly morose as she stared from Ethel’s waning face to Charlie’s tear stained cheeks. “You’re a dark horse… how did you keep it a secret all this time?”

Ethel did not reply.

“Maybe when he’s thought about it, he’ll feel differently,” Anna urged. “You never know.”

But before anyone else could offer their two cents on Ethel’s horrid situation, Carson came storming down the stairs. Thomas could tell just by the sounds of the butler’s footfalls that he was furious, and indeed when he reached the bottom he was practically purple in the face. At once, everyone in their seats rose up. Even Anna and Ethel, though she was still slightly wobbly in the knees. Ethel averted her eyes, unwilling to meet Carson’s murderous gaze.

“Thomas, Anna,” Carson spoke in clipped tones, “Will you kindly go upstairs and help in the dining room? Ethel, please take the child and leave.”

Anna timidly handed Charlie back to Ethel, who was still chewing on Mrs. Patmore’s offered spoon.

“How did you get here?” Mr. Carson demanded, even as Anna went up the stairs. Thomas did not follow, wanting to stick to Ethel’s side for as long as possible.

“I caught a bus and walked up from the village,” Ethel sniffed, still not meeting Mr. Carson’s eyes.

“Then can you reverse the process as quickly as possible?” Mr. Carson demanded.

“She’s very badly shaken, Mr. Carson,” Bates said. “She’s lost everything.” Ethel did not make to contradict him.

“Mr. Carson, she’s living in hell!” Thomas begged, desperate for someone else to have compassion on this woman and her child, “The baby is freezing to death every night in a house without heat. You cannot condone it!”

“We cannot heal every misfortune, Thomas,” Mr. Carson warned him. His tones were firm, but oddly kind. “Particularly the ones we do not make.”

Those were wise words to live by. Carson regarded Ethel in a new light, seemingly put in his place.

“Yes, thank you.” Ethel was stiff in tone and gait, wrapping Charlie up tight in her arms and marching for the area door. As Thomas watched her go, he could not help but reach out to her one last time. There was a terrible burning need in his heart; it felt like a fire in his chest.

“Ethel!” He called out. She paused, then turned back so that they could face one another. In the gloom of the hallway, she looked like a corpse.

“I swear to you…” Thomas’ voice was shaky but strong. He clenched a fist visibly before them all in vindication of his feelings, “I swear to you, I will remedy this. I will figure out a solution and I will get you out of this mess. I promise you.”

“Thomas-“ Mr. Carson tried to cut in. Thomas overrode him, his voice louder than the butler’s.

“I promise you!” He cried out.

The room was quiet, several eyes burning as they locked upon Thomas. Everyone was waiting to see what else he said.
"I promise you, on my honor as a man." Thomas said, though he wondered if he’d truly ever had honor in his life.

"… You’re a good man, Thomas Barrow." Ethel replied. Her voice was soft, like a dove’s. "But you can’t save me."

She turned and left the servant’s hall. In her shadow, Thomas felt utterly miserable.

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The rest of the evening was spent avoiding glares sent by Lady Grantham and trying not to wonder why Lady Sybil didn’t come down for dinner. Maybe she was just tuckered out after a ridiculous luncheon with the Bryants, but Thomas had a suspicion it was something else. Sybil had this oddly glazed look on her angelic face, like she was deep in contemplation about something. Thomas had to wonder if Tom Branson had made his moves yet.

He wondered what it was like. To flirt and not be afraid.

That night, when the family was fed and put to bed, the servant’s gathered in their respective hall to await their own meal of mash and meat pie. Thomas was in a contemplative mood, and smoked a cigarette next to the fire as he considered all of Ethel’s options. They were so few and far between that Thomas found himself jiggling a leg in displaced nerves.

He was not alone in his concern. After his passionate words earlier that day, both Anna and O’Brien had come to him to converge with their own ideas.

Admittedly, they had none. But it was the thought that counted.

“So what will you do?” Anna asked. She was perched in her chair, with elbows upon her knees and laced hands, watching Thomas smoke by the fire. O’Brien could not smoke in public (Mrs. Hughes forbade women from smoking) but Thomas was almost certain she was inhaling his fumes.

“I’m thinking,” Thomas said. “It’s slowly coming to me… maybe I’ll have a vision in a dream.”

“Oh, color me mystical.” O’Brien sneered, taking a sip of her tea.

“I know you want to help,” Anna murmured, “But I don’t see how you can.”

“She’s put her foot in it right and proper.” O’Brien agreed.

“Let’s not be so quick to give up hope,” Thomas said.

“It’s just… she’s stuck isn’t she?” Anna said, looking to O’Brien for support. O’Brien nodded.

“With the Major dead, she can’t claim help from his family, and her own want nothin’ to do with her. All she has is a brother, and he’s in prison.” At this, she paused, looking slightly ashamed as if this had been a secret Ethel had forbade her from telling.


Thomas thumbed his cigarette, letting the tip of his tongue wet his lower lip in a methodical swipe back and forth.

“She can’t work with the baby,” Thomas mused, “She’d need somewhere she could lay him to rest and in trust. Not easy, in these times… and even then, she’d have to be able to juggle her schedule. Once again, not easy.” Thomas tilted his head to the left, giving a slight sniff as he tossed the butt of
his cigarette into the fire. It was engulfed at once, and vanished into the flames.

“If he were a little older, a school might take him, but even then she’d have to pay to get him in. Maybe that’s what we need to do,” Thomas paused in consideration, “Find a place to take the baby for the moment, then get her back to work.”

“But where could she work without a character?” O’Brien asked aloud.

“One problem at a time, Ms. O’Brien,” Thomas said. The ugly truth of the matter was, he still hadn’t come up with a solution for that yet.

It was difficult to consume food when Mr. Carson was still in an irritable mood. He seemed stuck between chewing Thomas out and begrudgingly giving him a pat on the back for being an honorable man. In the end, Carson simply decided to hide in his office and decant wine after dinner, finding himself soothed by the methodical trickle of port through cloth. Mrs. Hughes worked on account sums in her own office, and Mrs. Patmore baked an entire rack of cheese biscuits for the following day so that the whole house smelt like aged parmesan. With everyone putting off to their own self-centered tasks, Thomas was left to his own devices under minimal watch. The silver was polished, the china was washed and dried, and glassware was put away for the following day.

So he decided to talk a walk, first through the pantry, then out the area door, and finally all the way into town with a picnic in hand for a bus ride to the outskirts of Thirsk.

With luck, he’d be able to catch the bus back into town on its last shift, and no one would be the wiser.

Thomas was still in his livery as he caught the bus out of town, and garnered himself several curious looks with a potato sack sitting next to him full of hot cheddar biscuits and leftovers from that night’s dinner. Thomas didn’t quite know why he was visiting Ethel, save that he simply had to. He wanted to make sure that she was okay after her awful confrontation with the Bryant’s, and part of him was desperate to see Charlie again. Be it silly or wise, Thomas was smitten with the lad.

He found the outskirts just as dismal as usual, save that this time everything was overtaken by a seedy aura of darkness. Instead of children in the streets, there were grown men hovering around burning bins. They paused when Thomas passed, noting his dress and his belongings. One or two seemed interested in jumping him, but gave up half-way to the punch when they realized he wasn’t wearing an actual upper class suit. What was worse, there were women in the street. They flaunted their bodies, calling out to Thomas as he passed. One or two wore so few clothes, it was a miracle they were able to keep warm in the bitter cold.

“C’mere sweetheart,” murmured a faded beauty with ashen blonde hair. “I used to work in a house like you. I know what footmen want.” And with that she took her left hand and promptly put it up her shirt in front of Thomas to play seductively with her nipple.

“Eh- no thank you,” Thomas said, desperately avoiding the woman’s gaze.

“Maybe more to my style?” called another woman. She was older, with dark hair up in a bun and more weight on her hips. “Maybe you like a woman with a bit of substance to her?” She winked, crooking her finger to beckon him closer.

He passed by her too. “I’m sorry but I’m just here to visit a friend.”
Ethel’s doorstep was dark and cold, and for a moment Thomas thought she was asleep. But when he knocked, a tiny voice on the other side gave him pause.

“Go away Jack,” Ethel whispered. “I said no.”

“S’not Jack,” Thomas replied, wondering who the hell Jack was, “It’s Thomas. I brought you dinner.”

The door opened.

Ethel had been crying, that much was obvious. Her eyes were bloodshot, her lips pursed, and her cheeks were wet with tears. She slid out of the house, oddly not inviting Thomas in despite the night being cold.

“… Charlie’s asleep,” Ethel said by way of explanation. “I want to keep that way.”

“Fine enough for me,” Thomas said, and so the pair of them squatted down on Ethel’s stoop to allow Ethel a moment of pause.

She ate slowly, her dirty fingers trembling around her fork and spoon. She ate every morsel Thomas had brought, only to fold the potato sack when she was finished over her knees.

“Can I keep this?” She asked, gesturing to the sack, “I’ve heard you can eat them if you boil them.”

“Ethel you’re not eating that goddamn sack,” Thomas muttered. “I’ll bring you more food.”

But this just made Ethel laugh. It was a queer, breathless noise, and it did not suit her. It was laced with misery. She looked at Thomas, and so he turned to meet her gaze as she said, “… I wish you were normal.”

Thomas did not speak, allowing Ethel to say her piece. Her words put a terrible ache in his chest.

“You were so brave for me today,” Ethel said, “You defended me, you comforted me. You gave me hope. And it reminded me of how I was soft of you once. And I realized something… something silly.”

“What’s that?” Thomas asked, calmly.

“… I love you,” Ethel said. “And I wish you were the father of my baby.”

Thomas let out a long sigh through pursed lips, resulting in a rude fluttering sound. He looked away, leaning heavily into Ethel’s doorway.

“Well…” What could he say to that?

“It’s just… you’d be such a good father to Charlie,” Ethel explained, “And such a good husband to me. You’re a good man, Thomas. And I might have been saucy to you before but I realize I was a fool now. It comes too little too late though.”

“Ethel, it would have always been too little too late,” Thomas said, and though this wasn’t necessarily positive he was still trying to make her feel better. “I’ve never been that sort of man and I’m never going to be. I’ve always been different, believe me…” He paused, recalling how he’d
once even undergone electroshock therapy to attempt to change. “I’ve tried.”

Ethel gave him a pitying look he didn’t quite enjoy.

“T’m sorry to hear that,” She said, quite sincerely. “I always thought you were braver than that.”

“I’ve had my moments of weakness.”

Ethel looked out across her slum, regarding how a heavy November moon was beginning to rise. “Imagine it…” She huffed with heavy humor, “We could have been like Anna and Bates.”

Thomas tried to see himself in Bates’ shoes, but it was impossible. They were simply too different.

“I’ve not come up with any plan yet, but I will.” Thomas promised her. “Your situation is complicated, I’ll give it that, but it’s not unsolvable. Nothing is.”

“I’ve been thinking too,” Ethel said, and Thomas was momentarily heartened until Ethel revealed the rest.

“I can’t find work that’ll pay me anything worth spending time over, and no one will take Charlie. I’ve sold everything I have… all but one last thing. So maybe, it’s time to sell that too—”

So this was when Ethel had caved and been forced into prostitution. Thomas panicked, turning to take her hands in his own. She was shocked at his open display of affection, staring at him agog.

“No,” Thomas begged her, talking without thinking, “Let me give you half my wages each month—“

“Don’t be ridiculous—“Ethel complained, trying to pull her hands away. Thomas wouldn’t let her.

“I’m not!” He said, slightly angry, “Ethel… you can’t do that! Tell me, promise me, that you won’t sell yourself. Because even if there was a price, no one could ever pay it. You’re worth more than any man could put down.”

Ethel’s eyes were now glistening with tears at Thomas’ remark, perhaps taken by the emotion in Thomas’ voice.

Overcome with affection for him, Ethel leaned in and before Thomas could stop her she placed the tiniest kiss upon the corner of his mouth.

Thomas jumped, shocked. He’d never been kissed by a woman before.

He even let go of Ethel’s hands with one of his own, to reach up and touch the corner of his mouth where she’d kissed him. Had that just happened? And why?

Ethel seemed horribly embarrassed, she let go of his hands and hid her mouth, her cheeks reddening.

“… M’sorry.” She said “I don’t know what came over me. That’s just the kindest thing a man’s ever said to me.”

Well. That was a damn shame.

“…S’alright.” Thomas said, though in truth his heart was pounding in his chest, “You scared me a bit though.”

He checked his watch, noted the time, and cursed. He’d have to run to make it back to the bus on
time, “I need to go.”

And if he fled a little faster than normal from Ethel’s doorstep, she did not make to hold it against him.

Thomas’ luck solidly ran out when he made it back to the bus stop at the edge of Thirsk only to realize that the bus wasn’t running anymore. This meant that he had to now walk back to Downton Abbey, a trip which would surely take him the entire night to pursue. Furious at his lack of timing, and still a bundle of nerves from Ethel’s kiss, he began his trek praying that someone might pass along and offer him up a lift.

One hour passed, then two, with Thomas slowly making it over the borderline to Downton.

“I wish you were the father of my baby.”

That was one hell of a statement.

The fact of the matter was, Thomas had often wished in his life to be the father of a child. He’d have adored any child gifted to him, but homosexuals were considered a scourge upon society and there was a particular brand of bias that often labeled homosexuals as perverts. The fiendish title had followed Thomas around for years, shaming his doorstep until he’d all but given up on the idea of loving a child.

But then, George had come along.

Sweet George… even now, Thomas’ heart strings were tugged at the memory of a little boy who’d so lovingly looked up to him. He’d never felt more innocent, more carefree, than when he’d lifted George onto his shoulders and given him piggy backs around the house. He’d pretend to be an airplane, a train, anything that George wanted so long as they could play together. Tea parties, bedtime stories, cookies sneaked into the pockets of trousers, and monster checks before naps… all of it had become part of Thomas’ routine.

Over the past years, as he’d acclimated to life in his new universe, Thomas had grown to miss that little boy terribly.

He wanted to be a father, even though he knew deep down it could never feasibly happen. Ethel placing a tiny kiss upon the fringe of his mouth had terrified him. The idea of a woman taking off her clothes in front of him. Of him being forced to… to…

Thomas shuddered, feeling a cold chill go down his spine.

How did normal men do it? It was something that had baffled him since he’d first been crouched behind a schoolhouse listening to older boy gossip about touching girls after dark. He’d been disgusted to learn that there were parts of girl’s bodies that were “wet”. The word alone made him want to be sick. But other boys were downright delighted by this, all of them vying for position on who to touch and how. They’d begged and pleaded, pretended to be in love, anything to get their hand up under a skirt.

But Thomas had been different. To him, the one thing which turned him on more than any other was a well formed, beautifully positioned posterior. God have mercy, send down a flood of angels singing hallelujah— when Thomas had first caught a glimpse of Jimmy Kent’s arse mid-livery
change, Thomas had nearly had an aneurysm. It was the simple things that made life truly worth living, like the song of birds in the morning, or a cup of freshly brewed hot tea, or the way that Thomas imagined soap suds would trickle between Jimmy’s arse cheeks mid-bath.

Thomas blew out a long breath, tantalizing thoughts of golden skin and plump physiques taking up his mind. He was suddenly very glad he had a long way to walk home under cold weather conditions. It would help to quell the raging erection he was being forced to battle.

It was around midnight when Thomas made it to Buford Road, an outlying lane which would lead one straight through the heart of Downton and eventually on towards Ripon on the other side. He was now surrounded by farmland, most of which was owned by tenants underneath Lord Grantham. There was no hope of finding a wagonette to take him back into town now, but at least he was halfway home. Thomas yawned, rubbing tiredly at his eyes as he longingly envisioned his warm bed. He’d simply have to pretend to be sick tomorrow morning, but how on earth would he get into the house? God, if only Thomas had planned this out better!

Two lifetimes in, still an idiot, he heard an irritable voice in the back of his head.

But there was something else to it.

Thomas paused, needing a moment to breath and rest after walking all the way from the outskirts of Thirsk, but oddly enough the sound of footsteps did not stop. It was like an echo of his own walk.

Thomas looked over his shoulder but saw no one on the country lane behind him. The moonlight was his own beacon, however. Someone could be hiding in the dark.

Eyes narrowing, Thomas began to walk again.
He stopped, unexpectedly, and heard the crunching of leaves and gravel again.

The steps stuttered to a halt, as if their owner had panicked upon realizing that Thomas wasn’t walking anymore.

The confirmation that he was being stalked in the dark on a desolate road sent a chill up Thomas’ spine.

He sped up, determined to get to town as soon as possible.

He could see the lights of the town square up ahead, but they were twinkling pinpricks. He kept looking over his shoulder, desperately trying to see who was following him, yet kept coming up empty. There was something dark in the woods, a shadow shifting back and forth. Thomas could hear cursing, and the sound of a clinking bottle.

He broke into the run, and his quarry followed.

Panic fueled Thomas to greater speeds than normal, taking the town square by storm and heading for the police station. If he could just get inside, he’d be safe-!

But then he felt a sharp hand grab him tight around the upper arm, and he was suddenly thrown to the pavement.

He hit the dirt and the brick hard, blood bursting his mouth as his tongue and teeth collided. He was
wrenched over onto his back, fighting all the way, to be shown his attacker in the street lights above-

“You son of a bitch!” William Mason roared, drunk and foaming, “I’ll kill you!”

“Like hell you will!” Thomas shouted back, and the fight was on.

William did not fight like a gentleman. He fought like a raving lunatic desperate for the kill, and it showed. He raked his nails hard along Thomas’ face and neck, leaving horrible pink welts in his wake. He was trying to throttle Thomas, but Thomas wouldn’t let William get to his throat. He punched and kicked, trying to roll William over to gain the upper hand!

William staggered and Thomas landed a punch, socking him hard in the neck. William gasped for air, falling off to groan on the ground. Thomas staggered up, and ran as fast as he could for the police station.

But he wasn’t fast enough.

A sudden cracking pain exploded on the back of Thomas’ skull! William had thrown a beer bottle at him, resulting in it crashing against the side of his head and nearly rendering him unconscious. Thomas fell to the ground again, dizzy and disorientated.

William staggered over him, drunk and winded. With unbelievable strength, William grabbed Thomas up from the ground by the collar, choking him as he drug Thomas to the wall of the police station and slammed him against it. The brick bit into Thomas’ ears and neck. He could feel something warm and wet sliding down his left temple and knew that it was blood.

William was disheveled, his normally coifed hair now shaggy and in his face. He’d not shaved in several days, and his chin was covered in patchy brown hair. His shirt was littered with stains, his trousers were ripped and dirty; he stank of whisky and beer.

William had him pinned against the wall, refusing to let Thomas budge an inch either way. Both of them were sucking in breath, exhausted and wounded. William’s breath was sour with beer.

“You fucking prick!” William’s voice was strained with fury and grief, “I’ll kill you for what you’ve done to me!”

Furious, Thomas shoved William as hard as he possibly could, and though it only garnered him an inch it was an inch he would take.

They were in a face off now, fists up in case the other tried to swing. There were tears streaking down William’s face, wetting his stained collar.

“You, listen to me-!” Thomas roared, as if the strength of his voice might somehow break through William’s thick skull, “She didn’t love you! She liked you as a friend! A very close friend! But that was all-“

“Is she a good shag?!” William shouted back. “Eh? Tell me is she everything you could ever want? Do you even know what to do with a woman in bed?”

“Oh for god’s sake!” Thomas cried out, “I’ve never slept with Daisy! I never would!”

“Course you wouldn’t!” William spat back, “You’re not man enough to bugger a girl like her-! You’d rather take it up the-“
He never got to the word ‘arse’.

Thomas threw a punch, clocking William hard in the mouth. William staggered, clutching at the wall behind him to keep from toppling over, and managed to find a chunk of brick that was slightly loose. Scrabbling with fingers now caked in blood, William all but ripped a piece of brick out of the wall, and made to slam it against Thomas’ face.

Thomas caught Williams’ fist but only just. They were now in a life or death struggle, for where a broken bottle could give a man a concussion, a chunk of brick could knock a hole in his skull.

“I’ll have my revenge on you!” William howled, pushing as hard as he could against Thomas’ hands.

Back and forth they pushed, with Thomas’ strength waning. He’d been working all day, he’d been walking all night-!!

But just as the tip of the brick touched Thomas’ bloodied temple, a sudden shrill whistle cut the midnight air.

Torchlight was shown upon both their faces. Policemen had come out of the station, called by the scuffle they’d heard through the windows. William and Thomas were suddenly surrounded, but William refused to drop his brick. Indeed, he raised it higher, turning on the policemen with a murderous wrath!

“Get off him and put your hands in the air!” Barked a policeman. He had a hand on a baton, threatening William with it, “Drop your weapon!”

But William just seethed, ignorant to the wiser command.

“Drop it, I said!” The policeman shrieked.

“William, drop it-!” Thomas begged, fearing that William would get his head bashed in for sheer pride.

“If you don’t drop that brick, god so help me, I’ll beat your brains it!” The policemen raised his own baton, ready to bring it down in an instant if need be, “Don’t make me do it!”

But William just charged.

“William, no-!!” Thomas screamed, reaching out with a hand to try and grab William by the back of the neck.

The policeman didn’t hesitate. He brought the baton down hard upon William’s clavicle, surely breaking it in two. William screamed in agony, falling to the pavement. Thomas tried to reach down, tried to help him, but a police officer grabbed him from behind, locking his arms behind his back so that Thomas could not move.

“Let me go-!” Thomas cried out, even as William writhed on the ground like an insect. Another policeman was trying to get William to put his hands behind his back, but William was still struggling. As a resulted, William was still getting the hell beat out of him.

“William stop struggling!” Thomas cried out, begging. “William, please-!”

“Never!” William howled from the ground. “You might have escaped tonight, Barrow, but I’ll kill you in the end! You can’t escape me!”
“Shut the fuck up.” Snapped the policeman at William’s back, finally able to hoist William off the pavement with handcuffed wrists, “You’re in enough shit as it is, you little mongrel.”

~*~

The police had called Downton Abbey, despite Thomas begging them not to. As far as he was concerned, Carson getting dragged out of bed in the middle of the night with news one of his footmen was at the police station was tantamount to the apocalypse. Unfortunately for him, Carson did not come alone. After hearing the entire story of why Thomas was now at the station, Carson had decided it was best to bring Mrs. Hughes. Mr. Mason had likewise been called, and it was his request that Daisy likewise come along so as to ‘talk some sense’ into William.

So that was how Thomas, Mr. Carson, Mrs. Hughes, Mr. Mason, and Daisy were all stuck in a waiting room at the police station around three in the morning.

Poor Daisy was a damn wreck, with tousled hair and blood shot eyes. She looked horribly glum, holding her coat tight to her throat and sitting close to Mrs. Hughes. Thomas had had to stitch himself after being given a medical kit by a junior police officer. With a shaving mirror, Thomas regarded the side of his face, and had to pull out tiny shards of glass that dirtied his wounds.

“Why would he do a thing like this?” Daisy whispered. She’d cried a bit at the beginning when she’d heard William screaming from his jail cell. Mrs. Hughes had given her a flannel to wipe her tears, and she’d grown quiet after that. Mr. Mason was just gray and exhausted. He looked like the world had beaten the living hell out of him.

In a way, it had.

 “… He thinks I’ve taken you away from him.” Thomas mumbled from his chair. He was so tired, he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

At least, he thought, he wouldn’t have to walk all the way back to the abbey now. Mr. Carson had gotten Tom Branson to bring the car.

“I never wanted it to go this far,” Daisy sounded close to weeping again.

“I know you didn’t,” Thomas replied. God, how he wished he could sleep.

“I’m so sorry Thomas.” Now she was crying again.

“Don’t be,” Thomas said.

“Try to relax, Daisy,” Mrs. Hughes voice was gravely.

They all lapsed into silence, save for Daisy’s sniffling. Thomas thought he might actually get a few minutes sleep, but then an abrupt knock on the door of the waiting room caused everyone to stiffen in their chairs. Thomas opened one bleary, bloodshot eye to see the policeman that had hit William in the clavicle with his baton. He did not look amused.

“Well, I’ve finally managed to get that boy to quiet down,” The policeman said, “Though I can tell you he’s been indulging in a bit of drink.”

Mr. Mason groaned, laying his head in his hands.
“I’m keeping him,” The policeman said, “If he’s sober enough in the morning, I’ll let him go, but the fact of the matter is that he’s in a dangerous way and as his father you ought to be aware we’re officially considering him a menace to the county.”

Mr. Mason had no words.

“As for you, I’ll want a statement before I let you go,” the policeman pointed to Thomas.

“Fine,” Thomas mumbled, closing his eyes again. He was too tired to keep them open.

“How did this happen?” the policeman asked.

“I was walkin’ home to the abbey on Buford Road, and I realized I was being followed. I tried to outrun him and he grabbed him. We found and you found us.”

“Do you two have a quarrel?”

“We used to work together,” Thomas said. He made comment to nothing else.

After a long moment of waiting, the policemen added tediously, “And?”

“And that’s all.” Thomas declared.

The policeman looked ready to fire one of his bullets into Thomas’ left temple.

“Well, he threatened to kill you.” The policeman said.

“No, he didn’t.” Thomas lied. The policeman did a double take.

“I heard him say it.”

“Well if you take it any higher, I’ll deny it.” Thomas warned, thinking of how William might even be jailed for his transgressions. He would not allow it to happen. It was his fault that William had turned into such a little mongrel.

The policeman ground his jaw, silent for a moment as he considered his options.

“When I came upon you, he was trying to beat your brains in with a chunk of brick. How do you explain that if he weren’t trying to kill you?”

“He were drunk.”

“So you don’t deny that he was trying to beat your brain in with a brick?”

“He didn’t attack me.” Thomas stated, which was an outright lie. His stitched temple was living proof that an altercation had occurred. The police officer scoffed, outraged at Thomas’ ridiculous display.

“Why are you lying to me?” The policeman demanded, “I’m your friend. Do you want to see him walk? Knowing that he’ll likely try and attack you again?”

But Thomas had never had a policeman as a friend. Men like him were targeted and destroyed by policemen. Policemen liked to place little spies in convenient areas, luring the unsuspecting homosexual out before throwing them in Gaol or killing them outright.

Honor killings, it was called.
Thomas said nothing. The policeman let out a groan, throwing his head back to the ceiling.

“God help me,” The man muttered. “Never understood you lot. Scraping and bowing for toffs… Knew it addled your brains.”

Still, Thomas said nothing. Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes shifted in their seats, clearly uncomfortable.

“Fine.” The policeman had clearly given him up. Thomas did not make to comment either way, keeping his eyes closed, “But don’t say I didn’t warn you. All those days huffing shoe polish must have done your head in.”

He might have had a point about that.

To say that the car ride home from the police station was intense was a mild understatement. William would be spending the night in jail until he sobered up, resulting in Mr. Mason going home empty handed and broken hearted. Thomas, Daisy, Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson all rode home to Downton Abbey with Tom Branson riding shotgun. Thomas kept his eyes closed, so exhausted that he almost fell asleep halfway home. He knew that he was in for it now. Mr. Carson was going to ream his arse from top to bottom. If he was lucky, he might walk away with employment.

They found Downton Abbey dark upon return, and were dropped off in the area yard before the Branson pulled the car back into the garage. Daisy all but hobbled over the doorstep, looking ready to fall asleep into the first chair she passed.

“To bed, Daisy.” Mrs. Hughes commanded her at once. Daisy did not even deign it with a response, too busy yawning as she trudged up the servant’s stairwell. The hallway was dark, rather eerie at the early hour of the morning. The whole basement had an aura of otherworldly content, like Thomas had someone crossed realities again.

Thomas attempted to head up, only to be stopped by Mr. Carson.

“A word, Thomas.” Mr. Carson said, ordering Thomas and Mrs. Hughes into his office. Groaning from lack of sleep, Thomas acquiesced.

Carson did not bother shutting his office door, which was unusual until Thomas reasoned that there was no one else downstairs to eavesdrop on their conversation. He took his seat behind his desk, allowing Thomas and Mrs. Hughes to both take visitor’s chairs on the opposite side. They were each too tired to stand, in any event.

Carson took a long sigh, folding his hands over his rotund belly. “I find it interesting that you were walking down Buford Road when I thought you to be asleep in bed.”

“Why did you sneak out?” Mrs. Hughes asked, deeply irritated at her whole night being ruined “It’s not like you!”

He did not like lying to Mr. Carson nor Mrs. Hughes, so instead he told the truth.

“… I went to go see Ethel tonight, after all our chores were done.” Thomas admitted. Carson was agog at the newfound information. “I stayed too late and the bus stopped running back to Downton
so I had to walk.”

“You walked all the way from Thirsk?” Mrs. Hughes asked, shocked.

“It was nice to get a breath of fresh air,” Thomas said, recalling wistfully how he’d imagined soap suds sliding down the cleft of Jimmy Kent’s beautifully swollen—

“Thomas, I don’t like forcing you to do things,” Mr. Carson cut across his daydream, forcing Thomas back to the present moment. “Even if I am your butler. But from now on, I must insist that you stop visiting Ethel Parks. She is a bad influence on you, and she will only lead you to ruin.”

But Thomas wouldn’t hear of it. Why couldn’t anyone see, Ethel wasn’t a bad person! “I’m sorry Mr. Carson, but I won’t condone the starvation or frostbite of an infant. Ethel acted out of turn, I won’t try to deny that, but Charlie should not have to suffer for it.”

The reminder of an innocent infant stuck in the middle of a terrible situation was all it took for Mr. Carson to crumple. He stroked a bit at his temple, as if considering Ethel’s situation.

“You’re a good lad, with a warm heart,” Mr. Carson complimented him, “But I’m afraid this is far beyond us now. Regardless—Ah—!” Mr. Carson had to tut as Thomas tried to cut across him, a finger in the air to ask for silence.

Thomas pursed his lips, fuming.

“Regardless, you’re to be punished for sneaking out. Tomorrow you will clean the shoe brushes along with your regular work. And yes, I do expect you at the breakfast table in…” Mr. Carson checked his watch “…Two hours.”

“But Mr. Carson, I haven’t slept all night!” Thomas begged. “I’ll be a like a corpse!”

“And whose fault is that?” Mr. Carson reminded him tepidly. Now Thomas felt like a child, sulking in his visitor’s chair.

“What’s more, if I find out that you’ve been visiting Ethel again, I’ll have to punish you further.”

“Mr. Carson, someone has to do something-!” Thomas protested, thinking sourly of how Ethel had all but confessed to prostituting herself only a few hours ago.

“But that someone is not you-“ Mr. Carson said.

Perhaps it was the fact that Thomas had had no sleep. Perhaps it was because the fight with William had him on edge. Maybe it was just the fact that Thomas desperately wanted a child for his own, and Ethel had all but told him she’d rather he was the father of sweet little Charlie.

Either way, he snapped, exploding on Mr. Carson with the force of a small bomb.

“Then who is it?!” Thomas cried out, furious at everyone’s ignorance to Ethel’s pain and fear. Mr. Carson raised an eyebrow, shocked at Thomas’ tone. “Tell me who it is, so that I can put a fire to their feet!”

“Thomas.” Mrs. Hughes said, reproachful.

Bitter, Thomas reduced his voice, trying for some form of composure. “No one’s coming, Mr. Carson. Today, Ethel told me that she was on the verge of selling her body just to get food for Charlie-“
Mrs. Hughes sucked in a breath, horrified.

“Don’t make me watch her do that.” Thomas begged of the man, “I can’t do it. Not ag-“ But he caught himself before he could say the word ‘again’, instead reverting to, “Not while there’s a breath in my body.”

For a moment, Mr. Carson seemed to be considering it. At least, he certainly took his time to answer, contemplating over the many items scattered upon the surface of his desk. Finally, he addressed Thomas once again, this time diverting from the original subject.

“Thomas, why are you so obsessed with Ethel Parks?” Mr. Carson asked. Calm as could be, he added, “Are you in love with her?”

“I— No.” Thomas flushed, shaking his head, “Definitely not.”

Mr. Carson’s tone did not change. He seemed to be under the impression that calm questions was the way to squirrel Thomas out of a ‘shameful secret’.

“Is Charlie your child?” He asked.

Thomas felt all the blood leave his face at the thought of him being forced to sire a child with a woman. “No!” He cried out in alarm, “Mr. Carson, I… I couldn’t possibly do a thing like that!”

Next to him, Mrs. Hughes bowed her head in morbid prayer: “Jesus, preserve me.”

“I mean…” In an attempt to save face, Thomas added, “I’m not married to her.”

Mr. Carson nodded, looking slightly impressed. “Then why?”

He supposed the truth was a silly, simple thing. “… I know how she feels.” Thomas said. Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson listened intently. “I know how it feels to be outcasted, to have everyone think badly of you, to have no safety net. To be spiraling and screaming for help, but no one comes. And I… I just want to help her.”

In his prior reality, his foolish behavior had lead him to be utterly shunned by the downstair’s family, until he existed in a barren reality completely alone save for himself. All the screaming in the world couldn’t help you if no one else was there. Thomas had been spiraling for ages before meeting the Heichecera for the first time. No one had come. No one had cared.

Mr. Carson gave him a pitying look he did not appreciate.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know.
The Heart of a Lion

Chapter Summary

Thomas decides to take his fate into his own hands, but it comes with unexpected consequences.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the patience you have shown waiting for this chapter. Things will be getting slightly slower, as I am back in school and I have to focus heavily on my graduate work. Stay tuned to the Subrosa Writer if you want to know how I'm doing. I'll be posting blogs, original works, etc, and I look forward to seeing you over there.

Trigger warnings for this chapter include mentions of sexual violence, prostitution, physical violence, and possession

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The greatest of all pomp and circumstance that the upper class could muster came from their Victorian obsession with weddings. It was a jelly roll of all that they held dear. Piety, love, socializing, class ladders, and opulence.

Unfortunately for the lower class, weddings were generally the worst thing on earth.

The wedding of Matthew Crawley and Lavinia Swire was scheduled for the fifth of December, and as such was to be mainly held indoors. Everything had to be cleaned, from the doilies underneath ceramic flower pots to the far flung corners of cobwebbed chandeliers. The only footmen left to Downton Abbey, Thomas bore the brunt of the polishing pulling out the Queen Elizabeth set by request of Ms. Swire. Normally, it was not brought out for weddings and was instead for balls or royal visits. However, the Regina set (which was the typical wedding set) was also brought out for Christmas and apparently Lavinia just couldn’t stand the thought of her cutlery being upstaged by a looming holiday. In the past, Thomas might have grumbled and swore under his breath at being so taskled. Now, however, Thomas realized how damn lucky he was to have work and took it in his stride. He woke early, he fell asleep later, and he generally stank of VIM’s. That second tin Thomas had once purchased for Mr. Carson came in use, sparing him from having to pause his polishing and run an errand to the village just to keep up.

Carson was so happy he was practically doing a jig.

To take a break from polishing, every so often Thomas would stick his head above ground and assist Mrs. Hughes upstairs in the main hall. He would move heavy furniture for the maids, rather smug to impress the younger women with his ability to lift heavy chairs or large tables. He knew that as time wore on, his back would begin to hurt. In 1926, Thomas had already had a crick in his back that he’d often had to nurse with a cold compress. Mrs. Hughes would tut when she caught him flexing, and warn him not to be silly. He couldn’t help it though. He might not look to women, but there was
something terribly prideful and fun about wowing a group of young girls who aligned him to Hercules.

*You’re all idiots*, Thomas thought, even as he showed a maid his bicep by flexing his arm. *But god, do I love you.*

It was the second of December, and the wedding was three days away. As a result, the fluster of movement was starting to grind into the stage of fine details, with each piece of linen and crystal passing through the hands of Mrs. Hughes as she decided what would best show off the splendor of the house. Thomas was helping to hang long garlands of pine and white roses upon the ancient oak railings of the grand staircase. Anna and Jane fluttered about him as he held up long strands, using dyed twine to tie the garlands to the rails while he kept it still. Thomas was so taken by his work that he did not notice a shadow creeping up on them.

“Thomas-“

He looked about with a start, amazed to find that Matthew Crawley of all people was addressing him. Bemused, Thomas nodded his head in the dutiful way only a servant could possess with a smooth, “Mr. Crawley.”

“I wondered if I might borrow you for a minute?” Matthew asked. He didn’t seem troubled, which made Thomas curious as to what Matthew could possibly want with him.

“Certainly, sir,” Thomas said. He left Jane and Anna to the garland, following Matthew up to the gallery hall.

He did not live at Downton Abbey technically, but Matthew had a guest room on reserve just in case that Mrs. Hughes was instructed to keep fresh as if he was expected every night. Matthew would often come to dine, but leave just before it was time to turn in for the night so that he could sleep in town. It seemed that being around Lady Mary made Matthew feel a somber sort of lethargy, particularly what with Sir Richard popping in and out of the abbey with unexpected notice. Determined to avoid them both, Matthew would hide on the fringes until societal expectation forced him to appear. When he did, he was always in the company of Lavinia.

In Matthew’s guest room, the pair of them were semi-barricaded from the rest of the house. You could hear the chatter of maids outside, but no one dared interrupt them when Mathew closed one of the dividing doors. All men’s dressing rooms had two doors to keep the dignity of the lord within.

“I’m sorry to bring this trouble on your head when you’re the lone footman,” Matthew began, “But I’m rather in need of your help.”

“It doesn’t bother me sir,” Thomas assured him. “Work is a blessing, and I’m glad to help you in any way that I can.”

“Mosley is a wonderful butler to mother, but…” Matthew made a tiny noise of resentment, “I just…” He seemed to be struggling with what to say. Thomas wondered why.

“We don’t really catch on,” Matthew finally explained.

“Ah,” Thomas could understand easily. Moseley had never liked Thomas that much. Even now, what with the pair of them often colliding, Moseley had a way of thinking that Thomas was a ‘dark horse’. He was so damn stiff, even the tiniest wrinkle set him off. Compared to Moseley, Carson was practically swanky.
“I understand sir,” Thomas said. Matthew gave a sigh of relief. “Mr. Moseley can be a bit of a…”

Prude? Dried Corn Husk? Whiny Piss Baby?

“You see my problem them,” Matthew did away with the need for Thomas to elaborate further.

“You see Thomas, when I marry I’m going to need some help,” Matthew explained. “There are certain rules of upper class life I’m loath to accept, and having a valet is one of them, but I can’t do without a valet for the wedding. I need someone whose more lenient on me, and I think you might be my saving grace. Moseley wants to put me in a horrendous suit. It has more pieces than a chessboard. I’ll show you—"

Matthew reached out and pulled open the hanging wardrobe which revealed several well pressed suits by Moseley’s hand. Thomas pulled out one concealed in a beige carpet bag, laying it upon the bed to untie its many clasps. Inside, Thomas found a suit better suited to the age of the Dowager, and grimaced as he ran a hand along the elaborate folds.

It was a traditional wedding suit, the likes of which Lord Grantham might have worn on his wedding day. Certain aspects were timeless, like the satin lapels or the black satin puff tie with diamond stud, but there were certain things that frankly needed to go. The trousers weren’t a good cut for Matthew, too straight in the leg, too old fashioned to show off his form. The Lincoln top hat made him look like he was 6’8”. The white gloves were completely unnecessary, the middlethorpe vest made him look fat around the middle.

No, no, this would never do at all.

“What do you think?” Matthew asked. Thomas kept his opinion to the point, and tried not to sound too side.

“I think this would have been better suited to fifty years ago,” Thomas said. “The fashions have updated, and some of these pieces are out of touch with reality. The gloves, for example.”

“Oh thank goodness,” Matthew sighed, as if that in particular had been gnawing at him night and day. “It’s just… I’m so indebted to Moseley for being kind to mother that I can’t bear to tell him no, sometimes.”

“He’s doing his job, sir,” Thomas reminded Matthew.” If he’s not doing it to your standards or needs, you ought to tell him.”

For whatever reason, that just made Matthew smile. He looked oddly taken away by Thomas’ words, like he was being transported on a wave of nostalgia to some far off land.

“You remind me of someone I know,” Matthew admitted.

“I hope that’s a good thing sir,” Thomas said.

Matthew laughed, “A very good thing. Do we have a deal then? Will you be my valet for the wedding?”

“Of course sir,” Thomas said, though in truth he prayed night and day that there wouldn’t be a damn wedding, “But I ought to tell Mr. Carson if that’s the case.”

“Thank you, Thomas,” Matthew watched as Thomas replaced his now rejected wedding suit back in the closet. “I won’t forget this kindness.”
“You’ll forget it when I’m sticking pins in you, sir.” Thomas teased.
Still, he doubted Matthew would hold it against him.

~*~

It took Thomas quite some time, but he managed to find a few more pieces in the closets that would
serve to supplement in Matthew’s wardrobe. Thomas all but chucked the Lincoln top hat into the
attic, instead pulling out a Victorian one that had less of a length and would have to be brushed
rigorously to bring out its natural shine. The gloves were ditched for white satin spats, the
middlethorpe was completely abandoned for a white double breasted evening vest that could synch
in at the waist...

All in all, Thomas had been a very busy if enthusiastic boy.

He returned downstairs, intent on seeking out Mr. Carson with hands full of wedding garb that
needed to be washed, dried, pressed, and tailored before seventy-two hours was out. Thomas might
have just made horrendous work for himself but honestly, he couldn’t be bothered. The more he kept
his mind off Ethel Parks, the better.

But that, as he soon found out, would be incredibly hard to do.

He knocked on Mr. Carson’s door and opened it to find Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson bent over a
letter in Mrs. Hughes’ hands. Neither looked particularly happy, but instantly corrected their
expressions when Thomas walked into the room. This was his first indication that something was
amiss.

“Thomas,” Mr. Carson quirked a bushy eyebrow and Thomas’ bundle. “What are you doing with
those?”

“Is this about Mr. Matthew?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“He wants me to valet for him during the wedding,” Thomas explained, gesturing to the clothes in
his arms.

“But I thought he’d be using Moseley,” Mr. Carson grumbled. “The whole suit was tailored over a
week ago.”

“Well it’s just that,” Thomas admitted, “It seems Mr. Matthew was too kind to tell Moseley to his
face, but he’s terribly put out about the suit and doesn’t like it at all. He wants someone more
‘lenient’ as he put it. I think it helps that I’m nearer his age.”

Carson tutted, rolling his brown eyes, “You might be right. Mr. Matthew was never one to hold to
tradition, and Mr. Moseley is part of the dying crowd.”

“Is he?” Mrs. Hughes scoffed, “Well no one’s warned him. Shall I tell him to ring the undertakers?”

Thomas couldn’t help but smile at Mr. Carson’s sulky expression.

“Come with me,” Mrs. Hughes said, “And we’ll get all those things in the wash. There’s something I
want to talk to you about.”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes,” and so he followed her out of the room.

The copper washing tubs outside were kept in near constant rotation, with four upper class ladies in
the house constantly changing out their chemises. It was rare that fine items had to be washed, but
Mr. Matthews’ new wedding vest would have to be extensively cleaned and brushed before he could dare to wear it in public. As such, it would have to soak with washing soaps, where it would be beaten and stirred vigorously by Daisy until the clothes were clean enough to go to the drying rack. Mercifully, none of this was Thomas’ job, and he happily handed the vest over so that Daisy could start cleaning. The sooner it was done, the quicker Thomas could tailor it to Mr. Matthew’s lean form.

Mrs. Hughes pulled Thomas into a recess between the garage and the outer pantry wall, showing him the letter she’d been pouring over with Mr. Carson. Now allowing him to read it, Thomas took it from her to see that it was a letter from the Bryant’s stating that they wanted to see Charlie (not Ethel) with an ‘offer’… and Thomas already knew what it would be.

They’d try to take everything from her, and in the end, Ethel would cave.

“Christ,” Thomas muttered, refolding the Bryant’s letter and handing it back to Mrs. Hughes, “Don’t they ever get tired of being a bother?”

“Apparently not,” Mrs. Hughes muttered back. The pair of them kept their voices down lest they were overheard.

“I don’t want to tell Ethel and get her hopes up again, not after how dastardly that man was, but Mr. Carson says I ought to think of Charlie.” Mrs. Hughes explained.

“Why?” Thomas scoffed, “Bryant’s not going to father the lad. If anything he’d just give it to some nanny to do it.”

“Is it so wrong to have money?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“It’s wrong to use it as a solution in this case,” Thomas said, “Charlie doesn’t need money. He needs a father and a mother in a stable home. Wealth can’t get you that. But of course you can’t tell that to Bryant because if it hasn’t got a pound sign next to it, he isn’t interested.”

For some reason, Thomas’ anger seemed to have popped. He took a deep breath, trying to still himself even as Mrs. Hughes gave him a worried look that encroached oddly on tenderness.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Mrs. Hughes murmured, “I know you’re… fond of Ethel.”

Thomas did not make to contradict you, but dared not stray on the topic further. There was an ugly, painful knot in his throat at the thought of Charlie being fathered by someone who did not love him.

~*~

Dinner that night was, for whatever reason, tense.

Maybe it was just Thomas, constantly embroiled over the subject of Ethel and Charlie, but there was a weird air that permeated their meal. Lady Sybil looked ready to bite the head off her spoon, and she wasn’t the only one. Lady Edith and Lady Mary were likewise taking an abnormally long time to get through their courses. For whatever reason, however, they were drinking heavily.

What on earth is going on? Thomas wondered.

Oblivious to all of it, Lavinia, Matthew, and Mrs. Crawley all spoke of the upcoming wedding plans with pride.

“I’m not going to use Moseley anymore,” Matthew added, which made Mrs. Crawley nearly drop
her pudding spoon.

“But why?” She wondered, “You’re such good friends and he’s an excellent valet.”

“Has Moseley displeased you in some way?” Lord Grantham asked.

“I should hope not,” scoffed the Dowager, “It might give the poor man a heart attack.” And the table erupted into elegant titters.

“It’s not that he’s displeased me, per say,” Matthew explained, “But I didn’t feel the same kinship that you feel with Bates, and I wanted to try a new valet for a change. Someone younger, closer to my age, with more experience in modern fashion.”

“And who is this mystery man that shall so dominate your wedding attire?” The Dowager asked.

“Thomas,” Matthew said. At once, several elegant heads swiveled around. Lord Grantham, for whatever reason, looked oddly put out.

“Really?” Lord Grantham said in dismay, “Dear chap, you could have picked a better time. Poor Carson only has one footman to work with and you’re taking him away on a terribly busy day.”

“I know it sounds horribly selfish but Moseley was going to put me in gloves,” Matthew sighed, rather put out. He returned to his lemon pudding, gloomy. “I couldn’t take it anymore, I simply had to ask.” He looked up at Carson, “I pray this won’t be too much of a bother?”

“Certainly not, sir.” Carson replied at once. “We are quite well prepared.”

This was a bare shit lie. Carson was already screeching about the lack of staff to anyone that would listen, and threatening to have another heart attack if it made them all work faster.

Thomas did not meet Carson’s eyes when the man glared at him. He seemed to be warning ‘Say nothing of my trauma’.

“Still,” Lord Grantham said as he finished his second slice of lemon pudding. “If there’s anyone in this house who can help you, it’s Thomas. Before Bates arrived, Thomas was my saving grace. He kept me rather fashionable, I must say.”

“Then I’m in good hands,” Matthew agreed, and the regular table talk resumed after that.

After the final round of pudding and preserved fruit had been consumed, dinner was disbanded in lieu of coffee and tea in the parlor. Everyone went quietly, leaving Thomas, Anna, and Jane to clean up the dining room. Thomas made stacks out of the used dishes and silverware while Anna and Jane stripped the table. Lights were extinguished, chairs were re arranged, and dead flowers were removed from their vases. Back and forth Thomas went, depositing china, crystal, and silver until he was on his final trip up to the dining room intent on removing the last of the wine decanters. Mr. Carson would generally drink some wine over dinner, and the rest would be poured down the drain.

He found Anna, for whatever reason, still in the dining room. Technically there was nothing more for her to do, with all the linens and such now downstairs being washed. But here she stood, hiding in the dark by a crack in the door to the main floor. What was she watching for?

“Anna?” Thomas called out to her but she did not respond.
Curious, he walked up to her and tapped her politely on the shoulder. As a result, Anna let out a petrified, tiny shriek and spun on the spot. He’d clearly nearly given her a heart attack.

“Sorry, sorry-!” Thomas raised his hands in defense. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Oh, Thomas,” Anna gulped in lungfuls of air until her heart rate had returned to normal, “You frightened me.”

“What are you doing?” Thomas asked, for never in his life had he caught Anna spying through a crack in the door. He peered over the top of her head (an easy feat when he was taller than her), but found the main hall bare.

“Well it’s just…” Anna dithered on the spot, seemingly distressed about something. “I think Branson and Lady Sybil are about to do something rather insane.”

“Oh no…” Thomas groaned, internally measuring up what kind of timeline he was looking at. Sure enough, December of 1919 was about the time when Sybil and Branson decided to bugger off and be wed in Ireland. Did that mean they were trying to elope tonight?

“So you knew?" Anna asked.

“I knew,” Thomas said, though he kept the details to himself, “What’s happened?”

“They’re going to tell his Lordship tonight,” Anna said, “I just saw Branson walk into the drawing room. He must be completely mad! What if Lady Sybil changes her mind?”

“I don’t think she will,” Thomas said. Anna dithered for a moment or two at the door before looking away when nothing happened. She sighed, leaning exhaustedly against the frame.

“Just so we’re clear, Daisy heard you and Mrs. Hughes talking about Ethel,” Anna said, “She told me in confidence before dinner. I wanted to ask you, are you alright?”

“Fine,” Thomas bit out, still watching through the crack for any sign of disturbance, “I’m fine.”

Anna, for whatever reason, was wearing the same sympathetic expression that Mrs. Hughes had worn. She even reached out and took his arm in hand, giving him an affectionate squeeze of comfort.

“Hey, you can be honest with me,” She said in a soothing voice, “Are you in love with her? Really? I could understand if you were, you two are rather similar.”

“No, Anna,” Thomas groaned. She dropped her hand, reproachful.

“I don’t mean to give offense,” She said at once.

“I know it’s just…” He shook his head in dismay, leaning against the wall with her. “It’s hard for…” He checked over his shoulder in case Jane had come puttering up to the dining hall to see why Anna and Thomas weren’t downstairs. She hadn’t.

“It’s just hard for men like me,” Thomas whispered. Anna bent her head in low so that she could hear properly. “I can’t love women in that way. Believe me, if I could I would have done so by now and spared myself the grief. But I’m just not built that way, and when people try and ask me if I’m in love with a woman when they know I’m different it upsets me. It makes me feel like they think it’s a choice.”

“I don’t think that,” Anna assured him. “I just wondered if maybe something had… happened.
Maybe it would be the one in a million, or a wish made on a shooting star.”

“I could shove this wish up a fairy’s arse,” Thomas cursed under his breath, “It still wouldn’t come true.”

Anna scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“Honestly Thomas, the things you say some—“

“I won’t allow it!” came a thunderous roar from the drawing room. Anna jumped, taken aback. The pair of them were back at the door, one hunched over the other to get a good view of the main hall. No one had appeared yet, but you could hear his Lordship plain as day, trumpeting down at Lady Sybil and Branson. “I will not allow my daughter to throw away her life!”

And only a few short minutes later, Sybil stormed out the drawing room in an angry whirl of black and gold skirts, with Branson on her tail. The pair of them confronted one another in the entrance hall, with Branson pressing the chastest of kisses to Sybil’s cheek before slipping out the door and vanishing into the night.

Sybil went upstairs.

“…Fuck me,” Thomas wondered aloud.

Anna pinched him for cursing, and he winced.

~*~

Dinner downstairs that night was a morbidly silent event.

Carson told absolutely no one about what had occurred upstairs, not even Mrs. Hughes, but it was obvious in the way that the butler sat stiffed backed and murderous in his chair that someone was terribly amiss. Mrs. Hughes kept trying to catch Carson’s eye, but gave up trying after the fourth time and instead distracted them all in a round of wedding details that needed a final going over. With Thomas now the valet for Matthew, most of the work would fall squarely on the shoulders of Anna and Jane, neither of whom seemed to mind. Bates was certainly keen to thrown in his name for the sake of kindness, but O’Brien didn’t say a word. She was already having to dress Lavinia Swire, which she detested given that Lavinia wasn’t technically a woman of noble blood.

After dinner for the servants was finished and the final dishes were put away, a quiet calm broke out over the hall. Some sewed, some played cards, Jane read a magazine about winter birds and gardens… all in all yet another night of mulled normalcy easily repeated.

A slight change came when Thomas was interrupted mid card-shuffle by Mrs. Hughes.

“Thomas, come with me.”

He went without question.

He left his game with Mr. Bates to follow her into the boot room; she had a rather determined look upon her face that he assumed might have something to do about Branson.

“This is a secret to stay between you and me,” Mrs. Hughes murmured, passing him over an envelope. Thomas took it, unsure if he was allowed to look inside it or not.

“What’s this?” He asked.
“It’s the letter from the Bryants, and some money for the bus,” Mrs. Hughes said. “Tomorrow, I’m going to send you into town on an errand, but you’re not going to fetch me anything. You’re going to talk to Ethel, and tell her the news.”

“…I see.” Thomas pursed his lips, rubbing the letter with his fingertips.

“Your lack of sarcasm at my scandalous request is not reassuring,” Mrs. Hughes said, slightly concerned and Thomas’ pale expression.

“What do you want me to say?” He asked.

“I don’t want you to say anything,” Mrs. Hughes corrected him, “I want you to find out what she thinks and then report back to me. I can’t excuse you for long, but I can give you a few hours. Just let me know what she thinks so I can write a letter to the Bryant’s.”

“And can she not write a letter?” Thomas asked, for part of him was slightly sick at the thought of returning to Ethel and Charlie. There was something small and pitiful that was beginning to grow in his mind. Every time he dwelled on it too long, it made him want to scream.

“Not one they’ll read,” Mrs. Hughes said. He supposed there was ugly logic in that.

He pocketed Mrs. Hughes letter, but it weighed so heavily in his breast pocket that he had to take it out again and set it upon the table. Mrs. Hughes watched him all the while, unsure of what she was truly observing.

Even he was at a loss. He’d felt so sure, before now. He’d known for a fact that he could never be normal. But at the same time he could see something beautiful upon the horizon. Something that he desperately wanted.

You cannot have it, Thomas chastised himself. It’s not for men like you to be happy.

“Thomas, whatever’s the matter?” Mrs. Hughes wondered. “You look like you might weep.”

Thomas just shook his head, “I’m going out for a smoke.”

Mrs. Hughes was dismayed that he did not answer her question.

“Don’t let Mr. Carson lock me out,” He requested. He took Mrs. Hughes’ letter and left, wandering almost aimlessly down the hall to the area yard. The weight of the envelope was like a cement block about his ankles, killing him as he drug it along.

It was a quiet, frigid night out. Immediately, Thomas nose and fingertips began to burn at the chill, but still he squatted upon the area work table and pulled out his cigarette case.

He fingered his silver lighter, wondering.

What if he just… took the letter and lit it on fire?
Could he do that, and live with himself?
Could he not do that, and live with the consequences?

Could he throw his life away again, knowing full well that it was an opportunity he could not afford to pass up?
“S’not your opportunity,” Thomas whispered to himself. Somehow, if he said the words aloud, it was easier to believe them.

“Why?”

He groaned, palming his head as he exhaled a long plume of smoke. Why did she appear to him now when he was so conflicted.

“Because I am drawn to your conflicting thoughts,” She replied, though he did not even ask the question aloud.

“Are you in my head?” Thomas demanded, looking about to see the Heichecera pondering in the alcove which normally held nothing but the chopping block for firewood. She walked through the courtyard, taking her skirts in hand so that they twirled like the petals of a dying marigold in the night wind.

“Yes and no,” The Heichecera replied. “Your thoughts to me are so beautiful and strong that it were as if a symphony rang out into the void. They often call to me from where I wait.”

“You’re a goddamn mystery,” He said, looking the opposite way so that he would not have to take in the Heichecera anymore than necessary. He did not want her opinion on this subject. She was not solid enough, not real enough, to understand the burdens of his waking world.

“Oh Thomas…” She sighed, “We both know that’s not true. I am as real as you.”

And with that, she reached out and touched his cheek, forcing him to turn around and look at her.

By god, she was hauntingly beautiful up close. Maybe it was the way that starlight spilled upon her shoulders, illuminating her like she were a painting hung in a cathedral. Maybe it was in the way that she seemed to soak up all the colors in the world, like an artists pallet began and ended in the folds of her many skirts. Maybe it was the warmth of her skin, so damn different to that of any Englishman he’d ever known. Even her hand upon Thomas’ cheek was hot, and it soothed him against the sting of winter.

She gave him a beautiful smile.
He did not return it.

Sitting next to him, the Heichecera folded her skirts neatly upon her lap and stared up at the sky alongside him. The pair of them were quiet for a moment, each contemplating the other.

“It’s a beautiful evening,” She finally said.

“Maybe,” Thomas felt like even conceding one argument gave her ground on another.

And so, she turned back to the subject at hand.

“You know what you want to do,” She said. Thomas paused mid-smoke, the cherry from his cigarette burning painfully red in the dark. “It’s right there in your grasp. Why do you falter?”

“I can’t do it,” Thomas said.

“Why?”

“Because I’m not normal.”

“You’re confusing a sexual marriage with an agreement between friends,” The Heichecera said.
Thomas just shook his head.

“I couldn’t do that to her anyway,” Thomas said, “Trap her in a loveless union? It’d kill her.”

“There are different types of unions, Thomas.” The Heichecera said, “And yours could be just as unique.”

He looked away again. Once more the Heichecera pulled his chin back in her direction.

“Everything you have ever wanted is so close to being yours.”

“That’s not true,” Thomas said, for even if in his wildest fantasies he did become Charlie’s father he would still never have Jimmy Kent. No amount of universe swapping would change the fact that Jimmy was a lady’s man.

The Heichecera seemed to grow pensive, perhaps sensing how deep Thomas’ pain was on the subject of Jimmy. When she spoke next, she did so with clear caution.

“All I’m saying is that your happiness is only inches away,” The Heichecera whispered, “Do not let it slip by a second time by being a coward.”

When Thomas did not reply, burned by her words, she rose from her seat next to him on the work bench and walked back across the courtyard. Somehow, she was summoning little specks of light from the world around her. Like fireflies, they came to dance at her hips and breasts, twirling around her fingers just as they’d once done in the dark of the servant’s hall.

Thomas watched them, amazed.

“…What are those things?” He wondered aloud.

She did not reply to his question, instead changing the subject. Some things, it seemed would have to stay secret.

“He will return soon,” The Heichecera said. “His destiny is unfolding even now, bringing him back to you. What will you do when you meet again?”

God.

Thomas let out a sigh so ancient and hollow it seemed to wind him. Empty, he thumbed his cigarette till it fell from his fingers and dropped with a hiss onto the frigid cobblestone.

She was right. Jimmy Kent would surely be coming soon, and what would he do then?

“…What I always do,” the words seemed to come out of his mouth without his consent. It was as if they’d been plucked right from the root of his soul, and passed through his mouth filter before he could clamp down at the teeth.

And though he did not say the words ‘Love him’, aloud, it seemed the Heichecera understood.

Or rather, she would have if she hadn’t vanished into the darkness.

That night, it was almost impossible for Thomas to sleep. He lay sweating in bed, tossing and turning as he considered his options, or rather Ethel’s options. He kept trying to come up with solutions, each of them failing more miserably than the last. He could not continue to send food to Ethel with Carson
watching, he could not trust anyone else to do it either. The world was full of liars and cheats, and it was only a matter of time before someone took advantage of Thomas’ money or worse Ethel’s position. Hospitals were crowded with the soldiers recovering from war, and churches would not take in a fallen woman. If Charlie went to the Bryant’s, Ethel would never see him again. If Charlie stayed… he would surely die before January from cold or starvation.

And then, as beautifully as a sun crawling into the sky beyond a frozen mountain scape, it dawned on Thomas what he could do.

What he must do.

Maybe he’d known all along and he’d been unwilling to admit to himself, too afraid of what he could lose if he failed or what he could gain if he tried.

He would never be able to have children; this cruel and unchangeable fact of human biology had often burned Thomas to the point of callous numbness. The sight of George, sleeping fitfully in his cradle, had been able to bring him to his knees with awe and love. But he’d known, deep down, that he wasn’t George’s real father. That he could never be, despite how he may adore him.

He likewise knew that he’d never be able to marry a woman, which had been yet another scar upon his exhausted heart. He’d watched with bitter envy as the Bates’ had gone home to their cozy little cottage every night. Everyone so pleased to see them come and go. Everyone beaming and praising them, telling them they were saintly for their adoration. All the while, Thomas had clung to images of Jimmy Kent naked late at night, masturbating furiously all the while hating himself for being abnormal.

…but…

Charlie was never going to have a father, what with Bryant dead. Even if the man had still been alive, he wouldn’t have done right by Ethel or the boy.

And Ethel was living in squalor because she’d taken a lover above her station without a thought of marriage.

So what if…

Thomas’ heart beat faster in his chest, causing him to sit up in bed as he clutched his bedsheets tight in sweaty hands.

Could he? Should he? Dare he?

He thought of all he could gain if he only had the courage to ask. He thought of himself, a properly married man with a wife and son. He thought of watching Charlie growing up, all the while able to delude himself into thinking he was the boy’s father. Of Charlie looking up at him and saying ‘papa’, all the while content with the fact that Thomas would provide for him and keep him safe. He thought of having a cottage all his own. Of Ethel bringing him a cup of tea in his favorite chair while Charlie played by a warm hearth. Thomas would buy him a train set and a spinning wooden top.

He could be a properly married man with a wife and a child, in a cottage and respected in the community. No man could dare name him a lavender, not when he could say Charlie was his child and be protected by the ‘paternity’.
All it required was for him to have the courage to ask one simple question.

The next morning, Thomas felt slightly ill as he sat at the servant’s table nibbling on a bowl of porridge. Though the others did not know it, Thomas carried his wallet in his pocket, equipped with money he’d saved up just in case Ethel said yes. It wasn’t that the idea of asking Ethel Parks to marry him made him queasy, but Thomas was terribly nervous and could not deny it. He found himself wondering what Ethel would say, and walked slower than usual as he made his way into town and boarded the bus to Thirsk.

He supposed, if Ethel said no, he could ask her to keep his question a secret to spare himself the humiliation of others finding out. But what if she said yes? What then? How would he provide for her and their child?

“Thomas,” Mrs. Hughes interrupted him mid bite of porridge. He caught her eye across the servant’s table, to find she was giving him a rather pointed stare, “I need you to run an important errand for me this morning. I’ve a few things I need you to collect from town before the wedding gets underway. I’ve instructed Jane and Anna to iron and fold Mr. Matthew’s waistcoat, so we’ll have it put in his wardrobe for you.”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes,” He said, unsure was to why his voice was so monotone.

Don’t overthink it, a soft voice in his head murmured. It sounded almost like Baxter’s. Just ask, and then you can decide what to do. Think of the baby.

And Thomas did, all the way to his stop.

When he reached Ethel’s neighborhood he found it much the same as always. There were a few ratty children playing in the streets, seemingly captivated over a stray cat they’d found in an ally way. The cat was absolutely filthy but the children didn’t care. They’d somehow managed to scrounge up a dish of cream, perhaps by begging their mother or a passing vender, and the cat was laving in the attention as the children petted its matted fur.

One of the children spotted Thomas walking down the street and ran up to him. He was a boy perhaps no older than five, and wore nothing save for a t-shirt that looked like it could have belonged to his father. It absolutely swamped him, with only his thin arms and legs poking out. Thomas paused mid-stride, giving the child a polite smile.

“Yes?” He asked.

‘Scuse me sirs,” the boy’s accent was thick, a heavy Cockney. “Can I have a copper for my cat?”

“Course you can,” Thomas said at once, reaching into his pocket and fishing around for his wallet. He dare not bring it out in public, not without risking getting mugged, but he fingered the pouch until he found the right coin. Yet even as Thomas made to withdraw it, he considered being more generous. This child plainly had nothing, and Thomas knew he had a sixpence in his pocket. What was the saying? Two to spend, two to lend, and two to send home to the wife?

He made a prayer in that moment, withdrawing the sixpence and handing it over to the little boy. He oggled at the pence, amazed at Thomas’ generosity.

Thomas pressed a finger to his lips, smiling, and the boy jetted off without another word to show his
friends his prize. It was a show of their raising that they did not screech and carry about, instead coveting the sixpence with terror that someone else would take it away. As Thomas carried on walking, he noted the little boy then ran to a prostitute standing in the doorway of her home, tugging on her skirt until she bent down so that he could show her his coin. She looked left, she looked right, and then she took the coin from the boy to hide it in her own pocket. At first, Thomas was scandalized, wondering if the woman was actually about to do something sexual to a paying child. Instead, he was shamed when the little boy clung to the woman’s skirts, allowing her to love on him and rub at his hair.

She was his mother; of course. She would keep his sixpence safe from thieves.

“It’s still no’ comin’ in the ‘ouse,” He heard her warn even as he passed. The boy started whining, begging for her to consider again.

Thomas found Ethel’s doorway quiet, and unoccupied. He approached with care, knocking timidly only to find that the door was unlocked. It opened with a low creak to show him Ethel sitting upon an upturned washtub, crying silently into her hands. Charlie was on the floor, crawling about in the filth and playing with his rattle and smacking it upon the floor. He had rather good rhythm for a child only a year old. He looked up, saw Thomas in the doorway, and gave him a crooked grin.

Thomas thought he might weep himself, in that moment.

“… Ethel…” Thomas said. Ethel looked up, her bloodshot eyes blinking owlishly at him. Thomas was shocked to see that there were bruises upon her slender neck. What on earth-?!

“What happened to you?” He demanded, bending down before her so that they were eye level. On one knee, Thomas tried to reach out to get a better view at Ethel’s neck but she bristled and moved away from his hands.

He faltered, and decided not to press her further.

“Sorry— I just—“ She sniffed, her voice raspy. She was practically hoarse. “I’m just a little scared still.”

“Did someone attack you?” Thomas asked.

“I asked for it,” She said as a way of response. Thomas opened his mouth, adamant to warn her that no one asked for such things until she added, “No, don’t. Please don’t try to defend me. I’ve done something awful. I deserve to be punished for it.”

“…Ethel, you’ve done nothing to be ashamed of,” Thomas said, but Ethel cut him off again.

“I sold myself for a sixpence,” She said.

Thomas blood ran cold in horror. It seemed he’d come too late. Ethel had already been abused. He had not been able to save her from the horrors of prostitution.

“I…” Ethel broke down again, sobbing into her hands. “I was just— so— hungry-!” She could hardly get the words out, hysterical at her fate.

Thomas immediately tried to reach out again, offering her his arms so that he might hold her. She jerked back again, furious at herself.
“Don’t touch me!” She barked, tears and snot dribbling down her chin, “Don’ you see what I am? I’m filthy! I’m absolutely filthy! An’ if you touch me, you’ll be filthy too-!”

“Enough!” Thomas refused to hear another word of it, “I won’ t listen to this, you hear me? You’ve done what he had to do, Ethel, and there’s no shame in survival. Sod it— I can’t stand this anymore-!”

He felt so trapped, so broken and exposed. In that moment, he hated the Bryants. He hated their son. He hated their letter, still in his pocket. He hated their very name, and hoped to god he never heard it again.

“… There’s nothing to be done,” Ethel whispered. She wiped her face with her bare hands, leaving tracks of dirt upon her cheeks and chin, “My life is over now, Thomas.”

_Do it_, Baxter’s voice whispered in his head, _Ask her now. Save her._

“…Ethel…” How did one go about this? How when they were so goddamn petrified they could hardly get the words out? It was a miracle the human race had lasted as long as it had. Thomas didn’t even love Ethel in the manner of a true partner, and he was still frightened to ask her to marry him. It was a wonder their species even got a chance to mate at all.

She caught his eye, and nearly broke his gaze until she seemed to realize something heavy was on his mind. She stared, unsure.

“Yes?” She finally said when Thomas had not made to continue on.

He swallowed, took a steadying breath, and laid his heart bare at Ethel’s feet.

“… I have something I want to ask you,” Thomas said, “And I confess I’m asking for selfish reasons. I ask it for you and for Charlie, but most of all for me.” He shook his head, feeling rather guilty at the admission, “You know what I am, Ethel. I can’t sleep with a woman, I can’t have children or be a normal man with a normal wife. A normal Englishman living in a cottage with a happy ending.”

Ethel scoffed at the notion with a small smile, “Sounds like Anna and Mr. Bates if you ask me.”

“But I have an idea,” Thomas said. “And I can’t… I can’t go on anymore without begging you. Without asking, because… everyday I think about it. Everyday I think about you and Charlie, and I can’t… I just can’t.”

Ethel was taken aback.

“I think about you at night, in the day, at meal times, during work…” Thomas paused, pursing his lips. “I wonder if you’re alright. If Charlie’s alright. An’… I know you’re not. And you’re never going to be unless I sum up the courage and ask you what I’ve wanted to ask you since the luncheon.”

“… Then ask me,” Ethel said. She sounded rather breathless.

Thomas’ heart was pounding in his throat, when he spoke, it was in monotone. He was too afraid to have a voice.

“Marry me,” he said.

Ethel blinked, sniffed, and looked away.
“...I don’t think that would last, do you?” Ethel mumbled to her feet, “A whore for a wife, and a lavender for a husband?”

“But that’s just it, Ethel!” Thomas begged, seizing her hands in his own to squeeze them tightly. They were damp from her tears. “If you married me, you wouldn’t be forced to live like this, or sell yourself to cruel men! You’d live with me and you’d be comfortable! I’d see to that. We’d have a good cottage, somewhere cozy and safe for Charlie to grow up, and he’d never know that I’m not his father unless we decided to tell him. You’d be ‘respectable again’, and I’d find you a job! A good job! And even if you didn’t find work right away, it wouldn’t matter because I have some money now. I’ve saved up. I could provide for us! It’d be both our redemptions. It’d save me as much as it would save you, Ethel. How could I be a lavender when I’m married to a woman with a baby? I’d never have to fear the police again. And as for you, if you found a man you loved I’d never get in the way of that. We could make a nice arrangement between the three of us.”

“You mean...” Ethel could hardly believe his words, “You mean you’d actually be okay if I took a lover out of marriage? You’d turn a blind eye?”

“Christ, turn a blind eye, you could bring him to the house!” Thomas scoffed with glee. What would it matter to him if Ethel had a fancy man? He certainly wouldn’t be dallying with her! It wasn’t fair to ask her to be so lonely for his sake. It would be hard to keep it a secret from the neighbors, but if they were smart surely they could keep up a guise.

“...But...” Ethel couldn’t figure it out. She finally caught his eyes again, “Why on earth would you do that for me? Why, when I’m...”

She looked away again. She couldn’t say the words and face them, “I’m a whore, Thomas. I took a lover without the thought of marriage, high above my station, and... and last night I let a man use me for money. I’m not worthy of marriage.”

“Ethel...” He spoke as if to a child, reproachful and calm, “I need you to look at me.”

She did so, still slightly ashamed.

“...I’m a sodomite,” Thomas said. “And I like it.”

Ethel could not help herself. She burst out laughing, and even had to cover her mouth with a hand to hide her glee at Thomas’ raunchy words. He smiled, glad he’d brought her some joy.

“Thank you,” she managed to get out between hiccuping laughs. “I needed that.”

She sniffed adding, “You know... he did that to me last night.”

Thomas made a noise in his throat of clear sympathy. “Rough time of it?”

“I can’t see how you like it.”

“It’s an acquired taste.”

Ethel started giggling again, even Thomas could not help himself.

“Oh, we’re filthy people,” She sighed with a small smile. “But that’s why we’re good company I guess.”

A moment of silence passed between them, but Ethel wasn’t crying anymore.
“… Please, Ethel,” Thomas said, “I want a baby so badly I can’t stand it. I want to be a father, I’ve always wanted it. An’ he’s just a wee thing. He’ll never know if we don’t tell him. So please marry me and let me be happy. Let us all be happy.”

She sniffed again, looking him dead in the eye with an oddly quirky humor he hadn’t seen since she’d been caught by Mrs. Hughes.

“… Properly?” she added, just for clarification. “An’ you’ll let me take your name and Charlie too, and we’ll leave this place?”

“Yes.” Thomas said, at once. “Yes, to all of it. If you agree, I will take you from here this very day and we will go to the registrars office. We will take out a special license, we will ask for an opening to get married, and we will buy rings. To sod and heck if we can’t do it today, but you will be my wife, and I will have you respected.”

Ethel was starting to smile again.

“…. Alright.” She whispered, beaming from ear to ear.

“Yes?” Thomas asked just for clarification, his heart pounding wildly in his ears, “Yes, you’ll marry me?”

“Yes.” Ethel said, her voice breaking from joy, “Yes I’ll marry you.”

And they embraced at once, overjoyed.

~*~

It was, by far, one of the queerest afternoons of Thomas’ life, and that included traveling through time in a bathtub.

The pair of them traveled to Thirsk properly, with Ethel and Charlie wearing Thomas’ remaining coat so as to stay warm. They were the most bedraggled lot on the bus, but Thomas could not care. Thirsk was a bustling city, centered around Market Place; today was unseasonably warm in the high hour of noon, with many people milling about doing their shopping. Thomas and Ethel found themselves wandering about like idiots until Thomas spotted a Market Cross Jewelers. The pair of them went inside, slightly sheepish to be surrounded by wealth, and spoke with the attendant about buying second-hand wedding rings. Neither of them desired a high gold content, nor for the rings to be new. They simply needed to fit, and keep their shape. The shop keeper kept giving Thomas dirty looks as he sized Thomas’ finger for a ring, until Thomas finally had to lie just to get the man to stop sneering.

“I was away during the war,” Thomas explained, “I just got back. I’m doing right by her-“

“Should have done it before you did the deed,” Was all the man said, before saddling Thomas and Ethel up with pawned rings that had almost been turned into scrap. They were a low karat gold, and slightly thinner than normal, but they fit and were cheap. Ethel protested Thomas’ innocence until the shopkeeper finally laid off, giving them a discount for ‘the baby’s sake’. The pair of them left, red in the face, with their newly purchased rings in Thomas’ coat pocket.

“Oh I could have scolded him,” Ethel tutted, shifting Charlie to her other hip as they made their way across Market Place towards the business side of town. Thirsk was a small community, the registrar’s office practically a shoebox. There, the pair of them had to do battle with a little waif of a woman
behind the front desk, who kept giving Thomas another round of dirty looks like she wanted to set him on fire.

It turned out (though Thomas had never known this) that one needed to obtain a license 72 hours before one could technically get married. But there were special licenses, exceptions for those whose schedule was too tight and so on. It cost more, but Thomas didn’t care. He knew he wouldn’t be getting a chance to come back to Thirsk until after the wedding, and he knew that Spanish Flu was about to hit the house. It would be chaos for weeks; he had to do it today or he wouldn’t get a chance for ages. He couldn’t go back to Downton Abbey with Ethel and no license. They would throw her out the front door and lock Thomas in the basement to try and ‘save him’.

Of course, Thomas mentioned none of this to the woman behind the front desk. Instead, he pleaded their case, stating they were servants and he was newly back from war. He hadn’t had time, they hadn’t had money, couldn’t the lady be just a little bit lenient for their baby’s sake?

Once again, Charlie saved them from a pitfall, and the lady bitterly handed over a special license stamped by her wrinkled hands.

“Why not wait till he’s out of nappies?” he heard her mutter irritably as they passed, “Then you wouldn’t have to pay for them.”

Thomas bit down on his tongue, saying nothing as he and Ethel sat outside the registrar’s office, waiting for their time slot. There’d been a cancelation today; a groom had gotten cold feet. It would take them half an hour to wait, but they could be married today if they chose. In that time, Ethel was so exhausted that she took a nap with her head on Thomas’ shoulder. Thomas held Charlie in his arms, wondering at the boy’s beautiful green eyes. He’d clearly inherited them from Ethel… but he had dark hair, and with luck, he would look a bit like Thomas as he grew so that none would question his parentage.

To think… Charlie was to be his son.

His son!

And so, when it came time for Ethel and Thomas to stand before the registrar himself, Thomas felt no fear. Indeed, he was smiling (which came as a surprise after all his panic this morning). Their witnesses were an older couple who were next in line, a man and his dead brother’s wife. They held Charlie so that Thomas and Ethel could have their say, sliding on rings still oddly shaped from the jeweler’s hammer and reciting vows without a priest to bless them. Instead, they simply had one another, and though Thomas did not love Ethel as a man ought to properly love his wife, he found himself mystified by the sparkles in her green eyes. By the way she stared up at him like he was her savior.

Like he could do no wrong.

Thomas’ heart skipped a beat only once; when the registrar ordered that they kiss in order to solidify their union before God. Hands trembling in Ethel’s grasp, Thomas felt like a school boy once again, kissing his sister instead of a lover. Ethel’s lips were soft and cool upon his own; she did not make to press him further, nor did she seem resentful when they pulled back.

Instead, she wore a knowing (if rather cheeky) smirk. Perhaps she knew she was the first woman he’d ever kissed.

They left the office with their special license, two copies having been made by the registrar. Charlie
did not have a birth certificate, having been born on the couch of a whore near Ethel’s old apartment on the outskirts of Thirsk. The pair of them resolved, as they got back on the bus, to speak to Dr. Clarkson when they returned to Downton in order to get Charlie’s name properly changed to ‘Barrow’.

The wedding band on Thomas’ hand was solid and warm. He kept looking down at it, noting how it flashed in the sun. Charlie was curious about it, his pudgy little hands wrapped around Thomas’ finger attempting to pry the band off. It was amazing how small he was compared to Thomas. Thomas had taken off his scarf, wrapping Charlie up in it so that he could be safe from the cold. Charlie kept playing with his buttons and ties, curious at why it was that adults were so stiff and done up.

The pair of them returned to Ethel’s apartment, Ethel nervously looking over her shoulder every two minutes like she thought she might be jumped. Thomas, however, was proud and sure as he helped Ethel to pack up her entire apartment. She owned very little, and all of it could be put in two valises. Charlie’s things were likewise far and few between, but he did have two toys and extra nappies for Ethel to pack. When Thomas inquired as to her landlord, Ethel just shook her head and closed her valise with trembling hands.

“He’s the man who sells me,” Ethel explained, “We have to get out of here fast before he shows up—“

“If he does, I’ll take care of him.” Thomas assured her. She seemed slightly assuaged by this, but there was still fear in her eyes.

They left Ethel’s apartment without another word; Ethel did not even bother to lock the door. There was nothing inside worth stealing anyways.

The pair of them stood waiting for the bus on the side of the road, valises at their feet and Charlie in Ethel’s arms. They caught the attention of quite a few people, from the children still fawning over the now sleeping alley cat, to the prostitute lounging by her doorway who had been so kind as to hide her baby’s money from thieves. She ambled across the road, barefoot, and approached Thomas and Ethel with care.

“Ethel,” The woman greeted her, “Off somewhere?”

“I got married,” Ethel explained. “This is my ‘usband, Thomas Barrow.”

“How do you do,” Thomas said, offering his hand to the woman. She blinked, confused at his camaraderie, but slowly took it in a delicate shake. Thomas noted there were yellowing bruises on her slim wrists.

“This is Rose,” Ethel introduced the pair of them, “She’s the one what helped me give birth to Charlie. I’d’a died the first few days if it weren’t for her.”

“Birthed a few in my life,” Rose explained with a small sad smile.

“Your son’s quite the salesman,” Thomas complimented her, gesturing to the little boy who’d asked him for a pence, “He approached me with a business offer for his new cat.”

Rose scoffed with a tiny laugh. She gave her son an affectionate smile, shaking her head.

“I hate to tell you but your money won’t be spent on milk for the cat,” Rose said, “He’s got a cough and needs medicine… but I’ll see what I can pinch together for the rest.”
“Don’t worry, I think the cat is used to fending for itself,” Thomas said. Rose just laughed again.

But something changed in her expression; she paused, bristling as she looked over Ethel’s shoulder.

“He’s comin’,” Rose said.

Ethel gasped, looking about. Thomas spied an older man with grizzly gray hair and a face warped by sun storming up the main road towards Ethel. He had a bowler hat and a faded striped vest; he might have been a bookie once in life, with an albert chain swinging from his waistcoat. Now, however, the man was clearly nothing short of a bum and a bully. Ethel began to quake as the man approached, stuttering over an excuse before he’d even made it close enough to request one.

Something defiant swelled up inside Thomas. Something brave and bold that reminded him distinctly of the card the Heichecera had once given him of a woman reaching into the mouth of a lion. He stepped solidly in front of Ethel, blocking her and Charlie from the man’s bitter gaze.

They were nose to nose now, with the man reeking of gin. Ethel and Rose were silent in his presence, each of them fearing what he might do next. Thomas noted that even the children loving the cat had gone quiet. The man dictated life on this street; it was obvious. He was clearly Ethel’s landlord, the man who’d sold her like she were cattle.

“Got a problem, chum?” the man warned.

“No, but you’re about to,” Thomas said. Fiery defiance coursing through his vein’s, and Ethel’s ring upon his finger, Thomas reared back with his dominant arm, and punched the man square on the mouth.

Ethel let out a tiny shriek in surprised, holding Charlie tight to her chest to protect him as the man fell backward and toppled to the ground. He tried to scramble up at once, his bowler hat knocked off and falling into the road. Thomas wouldn’t let him; he fell atop the man, pinning him to the ground and straddling his waist so that he could rear back and punch the man again— again!

Over and over again, Thomas slammed his bruised and aching knuckles repeatedly into the man’s grizzled jaw. With his other hand, Thomas kept the man’s neck tight in his grip, nostrils flared and lips pressed tight in fury!

“Ey- enough!” Rose beseeched, reaching out and grabbing Thomas by the arm before he could punch the man yet again. “You’ll kill ‘im!”

Giving it up for good, Thomas staggered back to his feet and smoothed back his tousled hair with trembling hands. His right knuckles were swollen hot pink, tiny pin pricks of blood appearing near the torn skin.

The man groaned in the dirt, using both hands to clutch at his face.

Thomas turned to Ethel, trembling with rage. “Is he the man who bought you last night?”

“Yes,” Ethel quaked in a tiny voice.

Remembering how Ethel had spoken of her treatment at the man’s unfair hands, Thomas turned right back around and stamped as hard as he could upon the man’s genitals. The man screeched in pain, knees shooting up to his chest as he rolled to his side in the dirt.

“Bastard,” Thomas spat at the man. He showed no sign of contrition, instead sniffing daintily and re-fixing his tie where it had come slightly loose at his neck.
The children were now oggling him, amazed.

“…Are you our daddy now?” One little girl near the front called from across the road. She was shushed rapidly by the others, all of whom seemed terrified now that Thomas would turn around and come after them.

“Christ-“ Thomas raised his voice in the hope that the children would hear him better. “He’s… he’s just sleepin’! It’s alright!”

Rose rolled her eyes, “They’ve seen it all before, Thomas. You don’t have to be worried for them. S’not like he cares for any of them, anyways.”

“All are they all his?” Thomas wondered in awe. There were surely over ten of them!

“Oh yes,” Rose grumbled. “Jack here can’t keep it in his trousers.”

Thomas gave Jack a distasteful look from where he was still groaning on the ground. He felt absolutely no pity for him.

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Thomas and Ethel boarded the bus back to Downton with a lightened sensation on both their chests. Ethel seemed positively bouyant, beaming as she cradled Charlie against her chest. He was sleeping, seemingly tuckered out after having spent the whole day on the move. Ethel’s new wedding band twinkled upon her hands; they were dirty and needed to be washed. As a matter of fact, Ethel’s entire person needed to be scrubbed with a bar of lye soap but that could wait until tonight. The first thing that they needed to do was return home to Downton Abbey. Thomas had taken far too long on his errand and knew that Carson was going to lose his mind when he returned. Thomas would have to explain himself to several sets of people, and knew he would be exhausted by the end of it. The best thing to do, he decided, was to gather everyone together in one place and explain it to them then. He’d ask to speak to Lord Grantham with Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson present. Then, with all three of them in attendance, he would tell the entire tale and wait to hear their verdict.

What will we do if we get thrown out? Thomas wondered, a sudden sickening fear gripping his heart. What about Charlie?

But Thomas knew instinctively that he would not be thrown out of the abbey, though it was a ludicrous sensation after a lifetime of being terrified for his position. Carson needed a footman desperately and Mr. Matthew couldn’t dress himself for the ‘wedding’ (although Thomas knew it was a doomed scenario). No, they simply needed Thomas far too much to chuck him out the door. So that at least garnered him a few weeks of safety.

But then? The little voice wondered. What will we do if we get tossed?

Thomas had no answers, but he was resolved that no matter what occurred Charlie would never know that he was in danger of poverty. His son’s childhood would be a happy one. Thomas glanced at Charlie with a small smile, only to find Ethel watching him. Her eyes were still filled with sparkles.

Thank you, she mouthed. Thomas just shrugged with a blissful grin.
The stop to Downton was a short one, with very few disembarking. Most people were headed for Rippon on the other side, so Thomas and Ethel were in good company as they made their way back to the abbey. They managed to flag down a passing wagonette, owned by a vegetable farmer on his way home after dropping his wares at the local grocers. Thomas and Ethel sat in the back of his cart, Charlie still fast asleep between them, and watched the world slip by. He couldn’t stop from looking down at his wedding ring, marveling at its weight. Would he become used to it eventually? Would it leave a green mark like Edward’s had?

…Edward…

But there wasn’t time to dwell on difficult moments now. Charlie had to be looked to, before anything else. Thomas couldn’t help Edward; he was beyond his influence now, and hopefully at peace with the universe. Charlie, however, still needed a great deal of help if he were to have every opportunity in life that he deserved. Thomas could see to that, and if he played his cards right so could Lord Grantham. Perhaps between the pair of them, Charlie could go to a good school, and make something of himself.

But first, Thomas needed to tell Lord Grantham everything.

When Downton Abbey finally came into view, Thomas’ heart began to pound again in his chest. He was back to feeling anxious, but tried not to let it show as he helped Ethel off the wagonette. The pair of them thanked the farmer who’d been kind enough to lend them a ride, and started their walk up the front path with gravel crunching underfoot. Thomas could see the worry on Ethel’s face. The sight of the abbey was surely bringing up every bad memory from the past year.

Thomas put his hand on her back, lending her his support as they reached the area yard.

“Remember,” He urged as he approached the backdoor and rang the doorbell to be let in, “You’ve done absolutely nothing wrong. You don’t need to feel ashamed of anything, Ethel, and anyone who says otherwise is going to get an earful from me.”

“You’re too good to me,” Ethel mumbled. Before Thomas could answer, the door opened to reveal Jane, the maid.

“Thomas!” She said, agog, “Where on earth have you been, everyone was sick with worry you’d gotten hurt somewhere!”

“I got a bit sidetracked,” Thomas said. Jane’s blue eyes flickered from Thomas to Ethel to Charlie, wondering at the sleeping babe in Ethel’s arms.

“I see,” Jane said, cautiously allowing them entry.

Thomas helped Ethel to shed his coat, hanging it on the coat pegs just inside the door. The inside of the abbey was unbelievably cozy compared to the blistering winds of outside. At once, Thomas felt his fingers and toes begin to thaw. The hour for tea was upon them, so most of the servants were gathered in the hall where Mrs. Patmore had put out ginger biscuits to warm their bones.

“Thomas-“ Jane trotted up behind him, slightly nervous, “Are you sure that you’re alright? Should I get Mrs. Hughes-?”

Thomas stopped, considering his options, then turned to Jane as his inspiration.

“Actually, where’s his Lordship?” Thomas asked.
“Upstairs in the small library,” Jane said at once. “Mr. Carson and Mr. Matthew are talking to him about the upcoming wedding.”

“And where’s Mrs. Hughes?” Thomas asked.

“In her office,” Jane said.

“Would you please go fetch her, and tell her to meet me in the small library?” Thomas asked. “Tell her it’s urgent.”

“I have no doubt about that,” Jane scoffed, eyeing Ethel unsure. Ethel was too weak to offer retort, lips pursed and eyes low with shame. Determined, Thomas reached out and took Ethel’s shoulder in hand. He gave her a firm squeeze; she finally dared to meet his eye.

“Remember,” Thomas said, a reminder to his words only a few moments before. Ethel gave him a hesitant nod, but said no more. It would have to do for now.

Thomas could hear the pause in conversation as he passed by the servant’s hall with Ethel and Charlie. He heard Anna gasped. O’Brien’s voice carried over all of them, “What are you doing back here?” She demanded.

Neither Thomas nor Ethel stopped to give them an answer.

They reached the main floor, with Thomas holding the door open for Ethel, and the pair of them crossed the entrance hall to the library. Yet even as Thomas took the door in hand, Ethel paused him with a hand on his arm.

“Wait,” She begged, her voice small and pathetic. Thomas looked back around to find her shaking. Her green eyes were beginning to burn with tears, her lips trembling.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Ethel whimpered. “I don’t think I’m strong enough to endure their abuse.”

Thomas understood completely. He reached out, grasping her by both her shoulders. In that moment, he wished he could pour into her every bit of righteous strength he possessed.

“I understand,” Thomas said, completely serious, “And I don’t expect you to do anything but stand next to me. Behind me, even, if you can’t manage that. Alright?”

“But what if they tell you that you’re crazy and demand that I leave?” Ethel whispered. “What if they make me go? What if they say-“

“Ethel, you are my wife,” Thomas said, stopping her dead with his affirmation, “And as God as my witness, you will never have to suffer again.”

Ethel’s lips stopped trembling.

Her breathing evened out.

Thomas nodded, content with her calm, and turned to knock on the library door. He opened it without another word, stepping aside so that Ethel could enter first. The pair of them were thrown into the beautiful light of warm sun streaming in from the eastern gardens. It was frigidly cold outside, but you couldn’t tell from all the natural light they were bathed in. The library fire was warm, a merry flame crackling in the hearth. Isis was asleep by its foot, her barrel stomach rolling with deep breathes. Sure to Jane’s word, Lord Grantham was sitting in the small library, an offshoot wing of the greater section, with Carson serving him tea.
Carson looked about, irritation turning into shock at the sight of Ethel and Thomas. Lord Grantham shuffled his evening paper, setting it aside when he realized he had guests.

He rose from his red armchair, confused. “What on earth?” Lord Grantham wondered aloud.

Carson abandoned his post by Lord Grantham’s personal tea set, storming across the library floor. Ethel panicked, ducking behind Thomas at once. Thomas reached behind, allowing Ethel to take shelter in his shadow.

“I should hope you have a full and illustrious explanation for the meaning of all this,” Carson spoke as softly as he could, while simultaneously battling with a temper. “We were ready to phone the police with your absence, and now you’ve returned with a most unwelcome guest-!”

“Mr. Carson, Ethel and I would like to speak to his Lordship, please.” Thomas said.

“And why would Ethel like to speak to his Lordship?” Carson was clearly trying not to be sarcastic but failing miserably, “To throw her baby around like a football again?”

“…Mr. Carson,” Thomas said, “This is very important.”

But even as Carson opened his mouth to surely grind Thomas again, the door to the entrance hall opened, revealing Mrs. Hughes. Her face was white, her lips set into a thin line. She did not look happy to see Ethel, again.

“Ethel!” Mrs. Hughes hissed, skirting across the library floor to their side. Close enough to speak in a whisper and still be heard, she demanded, “What on earth are you doing back here?”

Ethel was struggling for an explanation. Thomas took the responsibility out of her hands.

“Thank you for coming, Mrs. Hughes,” He said. “I’d like to speak to all three of you at the same time… Please.”

Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson looked at each other, the pair of them waffling for what to say.

Lord Grantham, on the fringes of their peculiar conversation, was becoming petulant at being left out.

“What on earth is going on?” Lord Grantham asked. “Thomas, Carson was worried you’d fallen off the road somewhere, and now you’re back with Ethel?”

“M’lord, Ethel and I wish to speak to you, Mr. Carson, and Mrs. Hughes in privacy,” Thomas explained. “I’m sorry for causing a disturbance, but there was no adequate way to explain what was to occur. I too was in the dark.”

Lord Grantham did not look happy, setting his paper aside on the arm of his chair. “And what has occurred?”

“I fear it may take a moment of your time to explain, M’lord,” Thomas said. “If I may bother you for a moment, I’d be most grateful.”

“You’re certainly not a bother,” Lord Grantham tutted, but then gestured to Ethel, “But I don’t see what good it will do.”

So now it was down to the wire, and equally down to Thomas to explain what had to occurred to so shake up everyone’s world.
Behind him, still hiding in his shadow, Thomas could hear Ethel’s breathing becoming erratic again. She was afraid of what was to happen, afraid perhaps that Thomas would turn tail and run. He doubted anyone in the room would blame him, but Thomas refused point blank to be a coward when a child would suffer. Charlie deserved more, and so did Ethel (to say nothing of Thomas himself).

“M’lord, I am not a perfect man, and I acknowledge that gladly.” Thomas began, “I’ve made mistakes, and I have a temper. There have been times in the past when I have done things that I am not proud of, and I understand that I will never be able to truly make up for any of my wrongdoings. But in all my flaws and imperfections, I have never been so disgraced enough to be labeled a coward, particularly in regard to a child in need. I believe my courage comes from the fact that I am different. I understand better than most how cruel society can be when you fall outside the lines.”

He paused, noting that Ethel was still breathing erratically behind him.

“I have thought long and hard about today,” Thomas said. “And the decision that I made today, the decision I am about to reveal, came from a series of conclusions I was led to and want to share with you. So I hope you will listen and understand, M’lord.”

Lord Grantham flicked a hand, as if to politely yet silently say ‘carry on’.

So Thomas did.

“First, I am a man of a different sort, and that means I will never be able to wed a woman naturally, or have children of my own. That has always been one of my greatest burdens. It alienates me from society, and causes me to be seen in public light as loveless. It makes me look cold and cruel when I am not.”

“That is hardly your fault,” Lord Grantham consoled.

“Thank you, M’lord,” Thomas said, “But it is my fate. At the same time, I concluded that Ethel fell in love with a cruel and disgusting man, whom she thought wonderful because he in turn showed himself to be wonderful until he got what he wanted. So now Ethel was alienated from society for being foolish in the eyes of love. Likewise, Charlie was alienated from society for being fatherless. So you see… we were all missing something that the other had.”

Mrs. Hughes drew in the tiniest breath, a strange knowing flashing through her brown eyes. It was as if she was beginning to realize what Thomas had done, though she said nothing aloud for the moment.

“I needed a wife and child, a source and outlet for love and compassion. Ethel needed a husband to rebuild her life and support her. Charlie needed a father to show him how to be a man, and to give him security as he grew. So today, I went to where Ethel had been forced to reside for the past year, and I shared with her my thoughts and desires. And I asked her for her help, so that I might build a better world for the three of us.”

He paused, noting Carson was dripping with sweat. Why did the man look like he was about to have a second heart attack?

“…I asked her to marry me,” Thomas said. “Not out of an intimate love that men and women share, but out of companionship, and a desire to love a child that could be our own. She agreed, and so the reason for my tardiness today was because we went to the registrar and asked for a special license to wed this afternoon. We were given permission, and wed this afternoon. We returned after that.”
The silence in the room was so thick, it seemed like they were being forced to breathe through pudding. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were rendered absolutely speechless, each of them gaping at Thomas with slack mouths. Lord Grantham, on the other hand, was slightly more eloquent in his shock with an expression of betrayed surprise, but they still looked rather peculiar as a trio.

Behind him, Thomas could feel Ethel shaking in fear. Charlie gurgled, shifting a bit in his sleep but saying no more.

“I know that all of this may seem a shock,” Thomas said, “But it’s also sensible. It’s not an act born out of a wild desire, but out of human necessity, hope for the future, friendship, and a shared love for a baby. And I confess, selfishly, out of a desire that I might have a child of my own. So I ask your Lordship’s understanding, and blessing. I ask for all of your understandings and blessings. It may be hard after Ethel’s past and it may seem abnormal in lieu of my nature, but I ask you all to think of Charlie, who needs a father to show him how to be a proper man, and a stable home with a mother healthy enough to care for him.”

Still no one spoke.
So Thomas carried on, tentatively.

“I ask that I may be able to acquire a cottage through your estate, so that I can provide a home for my son, and my wife. And though it may be a terrible strain, I ask that Ethel be allowed to work here for a little while until she can find different work, so that both of us may be able to earn our keep and provide for Charlie. I ask this for my son, I ask this for my wife. I know you’re probably very upset with me… but I do not regret what I have done. I have acted today out of honor, and my calling as a man. I will provide for this woman, and I care for her. And I will make sure that the child who has taken my name will be raised in nothing but love and happiness.”

Still, there was silence.

“That’s all I have to say,” Thomas concluded, hoping this might spur someone else to talk (for God’s sake), “Thank you for listening.”

For about forty seconds, the only sound was the gentle ticking of a mantle clock. Lord Grantham was struggling for words adequate enough to express his emotions (whatever those were). Mr. Carson seemed to be struggling to remember how to breath. Mrs. Hughes was clutching at her throat, where a broach lay pinned to her lace collar. She teased it with shaking fingers, as if to soothe herself.

“…This is… very… sudden,” Lord Grantham said, rather lamely.

“I know, M’lord.” Thomas said, “And I apologize for not informing you first, but I wanted to speak with Ethel before anyone else, to save both myself and her embarrassment.”

“You…” Carson was re-gaining his voice, which wasn’t entirely a good thing. He looked utterly betrayed, which put a hot coal of shame in Thomas’ belly. “You’ve married her? I don’t believe it!”

So Thomas lifted his left hand to show them all his wedding ring. From behind him, Ethel did the same, her fingers trembling with terror. Mrs. Hughes let out another gasp at the flash of gold upon skin.

“I’ve moved Ethel out of the space where she’d been forced to reside for the past year. She’s brought her things with her, and at your command I am ready to go down to the Grantham Arms to book her a room until your lordship can grave us with a decision regarding our cottage.”

“Thomas, cottages are not like cotton gardens,” Lord Grantham warned him, “It will take me several
weeks to procure one for you, and several more after that to ready it for living. I cannot allow you to throw your money away on a room at the Grantham Arms. It would cost you a fortune, and if what you say is true, you now have a wife and baby to think about. You cannot afford to spend money in such a manner.”

“But-“ Mr. Carson almost seemed ready to cry out of frustration. The pained look of misgivings was one that Thomas did not enjoy seeing on his face. Why did this have to hurt Carson so? Why was he taking it so personally, “But why didn’t you come to me about all this, Thomas? Why didn’t you tell me what you were planning to do? Why didn’t you ask for help?”

“It’s as I said Mr. Carson,” Thomas explained, “I was embarrassed, and wanted to ask Ethel first in case she said no.”

“But she has gone beyond your help!” Mr. Carson snapped. Finally his anger was beginning to show, and he seemed ready to pile it on Thomas in droves, “She’s gone beyond anyone’s help! She’s aligned herself with the worst of society, and you cannot recover from that no matter who you marry! I cannot allow her in this house with Daisy and Anna! She could spread her sinful-“

“Mr. Carson, I hasten to remind you that you are speaking about my wife, so please don’t insult her in front of me,” Thomas snapped. Carson was taken aback.

It was the first time that he’d spoken brashly to Carson since coming back in time, and it sobered the pair of them up instantly. Thomas took no pleasure in talking to Carson with such a tone.

Thomas took a steadying breath, then continued.

“Ethel did nothing wrong, but love a man who lied and acted like a coward,” Thomas said. He felt oddly strong in that moment, like he could lift an armchair over his head and toss it right out the library window. “She was cast out of safety and security, pregnant, and forced to make her way in the wilderness lest her child die. She had nothing to eat, nothing to keep herself warm, nothing to give her child even meagre comfort. She couldn’t find work without a character, she couldn’t turn to her family or the family of her lover. She acted on the base instinct to provide food and shelter for her baby. For my son. And I will not allow her to be looked down on for that. She has acted with incredible courage, and a sense of compassion towards those who treated her poorly, which astounds me.”

Mrs. Hughes’ expression turned tender with Thomas’ words. The hand so normally at her throat was now upon her heart, as if moved.

“…So please, when you speak of her to me, remember she carries my name.” Thomas said. Mr. Carson closed his eyes, lips pursed with anger and bitterness.

“But… but what about the baby?” Mrs. Hughes protested, gesturing to where Charlie lay sleeping with his head on his mother’s shoulder. “She can’t work and have the baby-“

“I’ll find a way to provide for my son,” Thomas said. His mind was racing with possibilities. Perhaps the schoolhouse or the church provided an outlet for working mothers. “I’m certain I can find someone to babysit, maybe the schoolhouse or the church. I won’t make this anyone’s problem but my own.”

At this, Mr. Carson exploded, “But you’ve made it our problem now! By bringing sin into our house, and chaining it to your ankle!”

Ethel flinched, hiding her face in Thomas’ back. Thomas could feel the heat from her cheeks beneath
his shirtsleeves.

“…Mr. Carson, you are a man of honor,” Thomas said, deciding that the best way to go about this was not through anger but through reason. Everyone was already battered enough. “Would you willingly let a woman starve to death in the frigid cold, let her child go fatherless and hungry, all because she didn’t align personally with your beliefs? Do you really think what I’ve done is so despicable that you cannot understand the humanity and compassion in it?”

Mrs. Hughes turned to look at Mr. Carson, her eyes narrowing quizzically at how he bristled with distaste. It seemed she too was judging him in that moment. Even Lord Grantham was clearly waiting to hear what Carson said.

“It’s a fair question, Carson,” Lord Grantham added gently.

“…I believe Thomas has shown humanity and compassion to the wrong person, M’lord,” Carson finally answered.

“Well I regret nothing,” Thomas said, unable to keep a little heat out of his voice, “Ethel is my wife, now. In the eyes of an ignorant society, she’s the mother of my child. So she’ll always be worth compassion in my book.”

“Yes…but-” Carson waffled, gesturing aimlessly at Ethel, then at Lord Grantham, then back at Thomas and himself. It seemed he couldn’t figure out who to blame next.

“Mr. Carson, I’m not normal!” Thomas beseeched. Carson blushed at the insinuation. “You know what I am… You know I can’t be like a normal man with a wife and a baby. This is my chance to be happy! Please, let me be happy. Please.”

Carson let out a long, exasperated breath, rubbing his brow tenderly as if he was suffering from a migraine. Finally, after due pause he admitted, “She cannot work here forever,” with a shudder.

“That’s fine,” Thomas said, for he’d wholly expected to hear such a result. “I’ll help her find work elsewhere in town, but I ask that Mrs. Hughes give her a character so that she can find work with the reference she is due.”

“I—oh—“ Mrs. Hughes flustered, tutting under her breath with bitter resignation, “Yes alright, I cannot give her a glowing character but I’ll give her something. But-!” She added with a finger raised, “I agree with Mr. Carson, she cannot work here forever, not with Daisy and the younger maids in the house.”

“That’s fine,” Thomas said, eager to get off the subject of Daisy where Ethel was concerned, “Just so long as she can work.”

“Thomas…” Lord Grantham spoke up again, so that all other voices fell silent in lieu of his unspoken authority. “Are you sure you won’t regret this? You’ve done something unshakable today. Divorce is not common, even in modern times like these.”

“I don’t think it possible to regret doing the right thing, M’lord,” Thomas replied, “and I will never regret my son.”

Lord Grantham was oddly chuffed at that, a strange little smile on his face, “I don’t know what to say. You’ve astounded me today.”

“I hope in a good way, M’lord.” Thomas said.
“Only… if you’re sure.” Lord Grantham added, just for a wee bit more clarification.

“Quite sure, M’lord. And I hope that you, Mr. Carson, and Mrs. Hughes can respect my choice.” Thomas added, for Carson still looked a little green in the cheeks at the thought of Thomas being married to Ethel.

“Well I find it very telling of your character, and I confess I am impressed,” Lord Grantham praised. “Carson, how do you feel?”

Carson answered with clipped tones, “I do not view this as a shame on Thomas’ behalf, M’lord.”

“Mrs. Hughes?” Lord Grantham asked.

“I’m glad to know we have someone with such honor under our roof,” Mrs. Hughes praised. “You’ll help us keep the moral ground. And Ethel, I hope you know how lucky you are, hiding behind Thomas all this time. Would you like to step forward and show some courage yourself?”

Timidly, Ethel inched out from behind Thomas one toe at a time. Now, they were side by side, with Ethel so close to him he could touch her skirts with his fingertips. Charlie was drooling onto her blouse, causing a wet spot to appear near his pudgy mouth.

“Is there anything you’d like to say?” Lord Grantham asked Ethel. While he was not kind, he was not stern either. He kept his tone oddly neutral, as if waiting for Ethel’s response before deciding what he thought.

“Only that I’m grateful for everything I’ve been blessed with on this day, M’lord,” Ethel replied softly. She cupped Charlie’s head with one hand, supporting his bottom with another, “And I feel like I’ve saved by my own personal angel.”

“You have,” Mr. Carson grumbled.

Between them, Charlie slept on, completely unaware that his entire world had changed.

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The biggest purveyor of delight was, by far, Daisy. She could not for the life of her contain her excitement at the fact that Thomas was now married, practically bouncing on her heels as she pestered Thomas with question after question. Ethel had had to venture upstairs, far too dirty to frolic with the others, and was given leave to take a bath and redress in one of Anna’s offered uniforms.

Thomas got to hold Charlie, who slept peacefully upon his breastbone. Every so often, the tiniest snore would flutter past his lips.

Thomas told the story once to Anna, Bates, and Jane. Twice, to Mrs. Patmore, Daisy, the hall boy and the other maids, and finally three times to O’Brien who’d gone to fetch her button box and missed absolutely everything. She was damn near scandalized, gaping and waffling for words while Thomas kept Charlie safe in his arms. The gold of his wedding band was obvious upon his finger.

Now Ethel was back, freshly washed, and though her hair was a dark coppery red, still slightly wet, it was up in a tight bun. She looked like she’d turned ten years younger, and there was a sparkling smile upon her face. She couldn’t keep her eyes off Thomas holding Charlie, and leaned against Thomas’ chair as they sat side by side, so that she might tenderly stroke Charlie’s downy brown curls.
“I can’t believe it!” Daisy kept saying over and over again, absolutely mystified. Anna and Bates were across the table from them with Jane and Lily, each of whom were smiling blissfully. Today was a day of good news!

“When did you come up with the idea?” O’Brien demanded, agog.

“Well, I was just… thinking it all over the other night,” Thomas explained, “And it sort of came to me.”

“Did you wear a white dress?” Daisy demanded, her eyes sparkling at the notion of fine frocks.

Mrs. Patmore scoffed. She was next to Thomas, leaning aggressively on the back of a chair to smile down pleasantly at little Charlie. “She couldn’t rightly do that, could she.”

“Did you kiss?” Daisy pestered, “On the lips?”

“Of course we kissed,” Ethel laughed.

“What was it like?!” Daisy just couldn’t get enough details, a wicked smile spreading across her rosy cheeks, “Is Thomas a good kisser? Did you see stars?”

“Daisy!” Mrs. Patmore snapped, “Enough of that! What’s wrong with you?”

But everyone was laughing, with Anna and Jane nearly in tears for Daisy’s youthful adoration of love.

The sounds of feet upon the stairs heralded the arrival of Mrs. Hughes, who came around the bend with a queer look of befuddled kindness upon her face. She regarded Ethel, properly washed, and Charlie asleep on Thomas’ chest, before tutting softly under her breath and shaking her head.

“His Lordship is going to look into getting you two settled down,” Mrs. Hughes said, “But he wanted me to warn you, it might take some time. You’ll have to stay at the abbey until you’re squared away. Will you be content to wait?”

Thomas looked to Ethel, and found her smiling blissfully.

“I don’t think we’re fussed, to be honest,” Thomas admitted. Charlie was certainly offering no complaints.

“Are they going to have their own room here?!” Daisy demanded, agog. Her eyes were the size of saucers, “With one bed?!”

“Daisy!” Mrs. Patmore looked ready to smack her round the ears. Mrs. Hughes did a double take, shocked at Daisy’s forwardness. What on earth had gotten into that girl?

“But they’re married!” Daisy beseeched, “So doesn’t that mean they have to sleep-“

“It means you’re about to get your ears boxed if you don’t stop running your gob!” Mrs. Patmore warned, eyes flashing dangerously. Daisy all but swallowed her tongue in an attempt to avoid punishment.

“Thomas, you’ll stay in your room,” Mrs. Hughes ordered, “Ethel, I confess I don’t know where to put you.”

“She can sleep with me, Mrs. Hughes,” Anna offered helpfully.

“I shouldn’t,” Ethel fretted, glancing at Charlie who was still asleep on Thomas’ chest. “The baby
will keep you up and you need your sleep.”

“I’ll take him,” Thomas offered, for he on the other hand needed very little sleep and had absolutely no qualms about caring for his son, “He’ll sleep with me.”

At this, Ethel looked upon him with such misty eyed affection she seemed close to tears. Maybe Thomas verbally affirming that he would care for Charlie hadn’t been enough; maybe she’d been terrified even as she took his name that Charlie would still be her burden alone to bear.

She would learn.

“Really?” She asked, her voice like a croak.

“Really,” Thomas replied with a soft smile.

Mrs. Hughes was touched, and it showed in her voice. She even patted him gently on the shoulder in a show of solidarity, “Well then. If you’re to work here, Ethel, then you’ll have to be sorted out with your uniform again, but you can’t have the baby with you. I’m unsure who can take him during the day.”

Now that was a genuine problem. A quick glance around the table showed that no one was up for babysitting duty, and how could they be when they all had their own chores to attend to.

“We could…” Thomas was unsure, “Bounce him off between us?”

“I doubt that will work for long,” Mrs. Hughes said.

But even as Thomas worried that he would have to find a babysitter immediately, a savior swooped in from seemingly out of nowhere.

“I’ll take him,” Mrs. Patmore offered.

Mrs. Hughes looked about, quite shocked. “You would?” She wondered, amazed.

“I don’t mind,” Mrs. Patmore said. Both Ethel and Thomas looked around, amazed. “I raised two of my sister’s children the same way. We can set up a cot in the corner, and he can stay near the fire where it’s warm. He’d be out of the way; Daisy could help me take care of him as we need to.”

At this, Mrs. Patmore reached around Thomas’ shoulder to gently play at a tuft of dark brown hair atop Charlie’s head.

“I’ll drop in as often as I can,” Mrs. Hughes assured her.

“So will I,” Ethel said at once.

“As will I,” Thomas agreed.

“I’d say it’ll make a neat little package,” Mrs. Patmore declared, “So why don’t you hand him over to me.”

Thomas stuttered, oddly feeling rather protective of Mrs. Patmore.

“I- well-” Thomas held his son close to his chest, “Do you really need him right now?”

“Yes, and you’re to fetch me a cot,” Mrs. Patmore commanded. Before Thomas could interject, she swooped forward and gracefully plucked Charlie out of Thomas’ arms. Resting against her massive
chest, Charlie was well tended to. Mrs. Patmore patted him gently upon the bottom with a soothing rhythm and a steady hand, plucking a stray bit of lint out of his hair.

“Off with you!” Mrs. Patmore demanded when Thomas did not immediately leap out of his chair, “I can’t carry him all day, you know.”

“I’ll fetch a crate from the yard,” Mr. Bates offered, rising up with a scrape and tap of his trusty can, “Mr. Matthew ordered some new riding gear. They came in a sizable enough crate. If we put some straw and linen in the bottom of it, it should work well.”

“I’ll help,” Anna agreed, and at once the pair of them set off in their cause.

“I’ll fetch you your cap and aprons,” Mrs. Hughes told Ethel, “Thomas, go change into your livery, then take Ethel up to the attic to pull out the crib. We have one the Crawley children used. Lord Grantham said he wouldn’t mind if we used it for a while, so long as we don’t put on the fine linens.

“I’ll go warm up a bottle of milk,” Mrs. Patmore decided, “He’ll wake up soon enough, and he’ll be hungry when he does.”

“You’re all so kind to me,” Ethel wondered, and for a moment it seemed she might genuinely weep out of shock at the compassion she was shown. Instead, Mrs. Patmore just tutted at the tawdry display.

“Don’t thank me,” Mrs. Patmore scoffed, “I’m not the one who married you.”

But this just got Daisy started again: “Can you kiss for us—“

“Daisy!” Mrs. Patmore snapped. “That’s enough, for heaven’s sake!”

“But I’ve never seen anybody kiss before.”

“You’re about to see someone kiss the floor if you keep this up—“ Daisy blushed at that. In Mrs. Patmore’s arms, Charlie grunted, shifting upon her shoulder. Ethel made as if to take him, but Mrs. Patmore waved her off. Charlie was waking up, whimpering at the confusion which surrounded him.

“Now, now,” Mrs. Patmore said as Charlie began to whine. She walked into the kitchen with a steady stride, her free hand rubbing his little back, “Weepy eyes never saw the wonders of the lord.”

Yet even as Thomas and Ethel made to head for the stairs, they were cut off by someone coming down. Tom Branson was out of uniform, wearing a suit instead. He looked haggard, like he hadn’t slept in an age. There was a bitter expression upon his face. When he saw Thomas, however, he perked right up and came over to shake Thomas’ hand.

“Thomas,” Branson addressed him warmly, “Lady Sybil just told me your news. I wanted to give you my congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Thomas shook Branson’s hand gently, “And you have mine as well.”

Branson didn’t seem to be expecting this. He was pleasantly surprised, and gave Thomas an earnest smile.

“Thank you for that,” Branson murmured, “It means more to me than you know.”

“What’s his congratulations for?” Ethel asked, curious. Indeed, several people were looking about,
wondering what good fortune had befallen their friendly chauffeur.

“Oh, what the hey,” Branson tutted, shrugging it off, “You’re all going to find out anyway.”

He addressed the table at large, “Lady Sybil and I are to be married.”

What joy that had been placed in the room from Thomas and Ethel’s marriage was promptly evaporated. The temperature seemed to drop by ten degrees, with everyone gaping at Branson like he was mad. Even Ethel was shocked with a hand over her mouth. Thomas kept his face neutral, none of these events ruffling him when he considered all that was to follow. Soon, he reasoned, Branson would be a part of the family. It was best just to treat him like he already was. There had been a time when Thomas had been rightly jealous of Branson, wishing with deepest envy that he could have the man’s life. Now, however, Thomas knew that he was lucky to have his own and frankly did not want to straddle the burden of attempting to marry into the Crawley family. Branson was a braver man than Thomas, that was for sure.

“Have you no shame?!”
Carson had finally come downstairs, seething at the sight of Branson upon the stoop. Branson blinked, not even breaking a sweat as he turned to address a furious butler. Thomas, on the other hand, was already shaking in his boots and took a few hasty steps back lest he get caught in the cross fires of Carson and Branson’s argument. Thank god Charlie was out of the room!

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Mr. Carson,” Branson said, without heat, “You’re a good man. But no, I have no shame.”

Ah, there was the heat. “In fact, I have a great pride in the love of that young woman, and I will strive to be worthy of it.”

Carson stormed past, brushing rudely against Branson’s shoulder to slump into his seat with a glowering expression.

“I will not disgrace myself by discussing the topic, and nor will anyone else. Now, if you will go, Mr. Branson, we will continue with our day. Leave an address where we may forward what is owing to you.”

“No problem there, Mr. Carson,” Branson replied, his cool tone returning, “I’ll be at the Grantham Arms in the village until Lady Sybil is ready to make her departure. I bid you all good day.”

He glanced at Daisy and Thomas in turn, then left without another word. There was a sound of the backdoor opening, closing, and then silence overtook the halls. At Thomas’ side, Ethel had still not dropped the hand from her mouth.

Branson’s goodbye had left a bad taste in Mr. Carson’s mouth, and so he’d retired soon after to decant wine in his office. He was pale, shaking with rage at the thought that Lady Sybil had been so deceived by love. He wasn’t the only one to look out of sorts. Both Lily and Helen were fretful, dabbing at their brows and holding a hand over their chests. They spoke in hushed voices as they helped Ethel and Thomas to carry down a crib from the attics. Indeed, even Thomas was starting to feel out of sorts from the insanity of the day. Why on earth had Branson decided to be delightfully demanding on this day of all days? Why not tomorrow? Why not a week from now?

Don’t go getting yourself in a tizzy, a stern voice in his head warned. You have to be strong for Ethel and Charlie.
So Thomas put his dizziness aside, and continued to help Ethel beat out the mattress pad that would serve as Charlie’s bedding. It smelt of mothballs, and Thomas was determined to air it out with smelling salts before his son slept in it that night. They’d not had a baby in the house for 18 years.

Thomas fiddled with the bolts and locks of the crib while Ethel watched him proudly. He kept testing the sturdiness of the crib, pressing down hard with both hands atop the mattress pad and wire bottom so as to see if it would actually break and fall through. It squeaked once or twice, angry at being stressed, but never faltered from its course.

Satisfied, Thomas pulled back and took a slight break. He sat in his desk chair, taking out his handkerchief to dab at his brow and upper lip. He still felt out of breath; damned Branson!

“Did you know Branson was going to say that?” Ethel asked.

“I did,” Thomas said. He couldn’t tell Ethel the full truth but he could, at least, scoot by on a slight lie, “Lady Sybil and I were friends during the war. They were courting then.”

“Cor, and I thought I was bad,” Ethel scoffed. She perched herself on the edge of Thomas’ desk, folding her hands. “Makes you wonder what else they’ve gotten up to.”

“Dunno, but Branson loves her,” Thomas said. “So either way that’s her settled.”

Before they could gossip more on the subject of Branson and his tawdry affair, the door to Thomas’ room was opened by Mrs. Hughes who’d brought Ethel two fresh maid’s aprons and caps. Ethel took them gratefully.

“Here you are,” Mrs. Hughes said, handing them off and closing the door at the same time. She had an oddly determined look upon her face.

Already in her blacks, Ethel tied on her apron at once, using Thomas’ bureau mirror to put on her cap correctly. Mrs. Hughes waited until she’d turned back around to speak again; Thomas almost felt like he was being chastised.

“Do we have some smelling powders?” Thomas asked, gesturing to the mattress pad, “I don’t want Charlie sleeping on that mattress until it smells better.”

Mrs. Hughes took a whiff, recoiled, and then said, “I’ll see what I can find.”

Put right, Ethel turned back and showed off her black and whites. Thomas almost felt like applauding. It was an entire transformation from the wretch living in a shack that he’d been smuggling food to only a day prior.

“I wanted to talk to both of you while I had you alone,” Mrs. Hughes said, “About marriage, and the duties a wife must take for her husband.”

Ethel’s smile faltered. “I don’t like where this is going,” She muttered to Thomas.

“I’m already feeling off,” Thomas beseeched Mrs. Hughes, “Do we have to do this now?”

“Yes, we do,” Mrs. Hughes warned, “I won’t pretend I’m a woman of the world, but there are fundamental rules to a marriage that I think we’re all aware of.”

Thomas groaned, hanging his head.

“Couldn’t we just be best friends?” Thomas urged Mrs. Hughes, who gave him a petulant look like
he was the one being unreasonable. “Live like brother and sister?”

“Thomas, there are sacred obligations that a wife must take for her husband,” Mrs. Hughes urged, “It is a duty set forth by the Lord for a wife to bring her husband…. pleasure.” She said the word with care, and did not allude to more than that.

Thomas felt like he was going to be sick.

“Cigarettes and tea with honey and lemon bring me pleasure,” Thomas said at once. He wouldn’t even allow his mind to dabble on the rest, “Raspberry biscuits bring me pleasure. Clocks bring me pleasure.”

“I can do all of that,” Ethel assured him. “And I wouldn’t have a problem with the other but-“

“No.” Thomas held up a hand in a stopping motion. “No thank you, that will not be required.”

“Just so you know,” Ethel shrugged. She didn’t seem bothered.

“Are you sure you want to do that, Thomas?” Mrs. Hughes asked, as gently as she could muster on such a tense subject. “It might be that once you… experience-”

“I’m going to throw up,” Thomas groaned, nausea overwhelming him. Mrs. Hughes scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Thomas had to swallow down bile in his throat, taking several deep breaths before he felt steady enough to speak.

“Let me define pleasure in my own way,” Thomas said. “If I want something from Ethel that is within reason to ask, I will do so. But marriage is a partnership, not a command given by one and received by the other. I don’t plan to lord over Ethel just because I wear the trousers”

Ethel smiled, charmed. “Think I wear the trousers between us.”

“Oh you,” Thomas grumbled, waving her off with a flick of the hand.

God, was it hot in here or was it just him?

Indeed, Thomas wasn’t the only one feeling out of sorts that night. As dusk fell and the servant’s prepared for dinner, Mr. Moseley was forced to come up from the village to take over for Mr. Carson who had fallen ill. Normally, Thomas could keep a steady mind and recall events from the past. He knew Spanish Influenza was coming, but he couldn’t remember exactly when it had hit. Was it now? Or was it a few days after?

No, it had to be now because now was right before the wedding with Lavinia Swire. Which meant Carson had the flu. Joy.

What was worse, Moseley was looking sour and put out as Thomas helped him to set up the trays for dinner. He kept sulking, as if heavily put out that he had to work around Ethel, whom he’d never fully taken to. Ethel’s reputation in the house was thoroughly soiled, and Thomas noticed that no one seemed willing to talk to Ethel or even so much as acknowledge her presence save for a few. Bates and Anna were kind to her; Daisy kept trying to be polite but Mrs. Patmore wouldn’t let her be alone with Ethel for two seconds. It was as if she feared Daisy would come back from a private meeting
with rouge and rolled stockings.

The heat of the kitchen was horribly overwhelming to Thomas, who’d already had a hard enough day. He kept having to dab at his forehead while he arranged trays, and when he finally was able to escape the kitchen to head upstairs he did so with haste.

He felt dizzy as he climbed the stairs, having to pause every so often to grab the rail with his free hand. Tonight they were to serve venison with creamed vegetables and a summer pudding for dessert.

The smell was putting Thomas off; clearly venison did not sit well with him.

In the servery, Thomas felt as if he was pushing his movements through mud. For whatever reason, his heart was beginning to pound wildly in his chest. His palms were dripping with cold sweat; was it just his nerves catching up with him?

It had to be. Thomas hadn’t gotten Spanish Flue last time, so he couldn’t get it this time. He wasn’t sick.

Thomas took a steadying breath, closing his eyes for a moment to gather himself. When he opened them, it was to the sight of Ethel and Anna watching him worriedly. They both held vases of fresh flowers, which they were to set upon the serving table to frame the courses and decanted wine bottles.

Thomas flashed them both a gentle smile, then picked up two wine decanters to move them inside the dining hall; the family would be arriving shortly. Mrs. Hughes was watching over them in the parlor at the moment.

As Ethel and Anna framed the buffet table, Thomas double checked that the placement of silverware was correct.

It was.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes again, bracing himself on the back of a chair. Christ, was it hot in here or was it just him?

Moseley, across the table from him, paused in setting the crystal glasses. Though he’d never fully gotten along with Thomas in this universe, he didn’t seem to wish him ill like before.

“Are you alright, Thomas?” Moseley asked. “You look terrible.”

“Fine,” Thomas clipped out, sniffing irritably as he continued to set the table. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Hard not to when you’re paler than the tablecloth,” Moseley scoffed. “Maybe you’ve got what Mr. Carson’s got.”

“Can’t,” Thomas said, talking without thinking as he straightened an errant knife, “Didn’t get it last time so I can’t have it now. Would be impossible.”

Moseley stared, alarmed.

Thomas, completely unaware that he was rambling, just kept straightening silverware.

Moseley looked over his shoulder at Ethel and Anna, both of whom were staring at Thomas like he’d sprouted a second head.

“Thomas… are you sure you’re alright?” Ethel asked, abandoning her white roses and coming around the table so that she could place a hand gently upon Thomas’ shoulder. “You’re talking
strangely. Are… You’re not having second thoughts are you-?”

And suddenly there was terror in her voice; her green eyes were already filling with tears, she looked close to having a panic attack.

“No,” Thomas wouldn’t allow her to think it for a moment, and though it was improper to touch a woman in public he did so now. Placing his freezing hands upon Ethel’s flushed cheeks, Thomas tried to pour into her every last ounce of strength and resolve that he had. He did not want her to be afraid.

“I’m just a little out of sorts,” Thomas assured her, “I’ve had a long day, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ethel whispered, nodding. Still, she looked a little frightened.

Moseley was gaping at their interaction, shocked by Thomas’ forwardness. Perhaps he’d only just now noticed the gold wedding band upon his finger; it gleamed amid Ethel’s beautiful red curls.

“I’ll never have second thoughts,” Thomas promised her. “You’re safe now. We’re moving forward, not backward, Ethel. Both of us.”

Ethel nodded again, sniffing. Thomas embraced her, taking slight comfort in the clean smell of coconut soap that laced her hair.

“Hey, come on,” Anna murmured encouragingly. She retrieved Ethel from Thomas’ arms, rubbing her back warmly. “Help me lay these flowers. You’re alright now.”

“Right,” Ethel whispered, wiping her eyes, “Right, of course. I’m being silly.”

Thomas braced the back of a chair again, slightly dizzy.

Dinner began promptly at seven, with the family in a sour mood. The Dowager had come to dine, still shaken from the reveal that Sybil and Branson were to be wed. Sybil was quiet as she nibbled on her venison, rather stiff in her chair. She wasn’t the only one who looked uncomfortable. Both Lady Grantham and Lavinia were out of sorts. As a result, Mrs. Patmore’s beautiful feast was going unappreciated by all corners of the room.

Thomas, however, was oblivious to the entire interaction, from the table to the guests to the food. The only thing he was aware of was the he felt like he was absolutely on fire. He could not gather his mental bearings, shuddering constantly as he clutched the buffet table with his hands behind his back. It was not the normal posture for a footman to take, but instead of scowling at Thomas for his errant display, Moseley was wavering about. He looked oddly… punchdrunk. Christ, was the room about to burst into flames? Thomas swore he could see smoke rising from the carpet.

I can’t be sick, he kept thinking to himself, I didn’t get Spanish Flue before. I can’t have it now. What’s wrong with me?

But there were so many other things he hadn’t done before. So many things that he’d done now, trying to right the wrongs of his youth. What if, by visiting Ethel today and changing his past, he’d inadvertently come into contact with Spanish Flue? What if he actually did have it? Was that what he was feeling now, and was it going to claim him?

I can’t die, Thomas thought in hysteria, turning way from the family as they dined upon creamed vegetables to shakily take up the next platter with weak hands. I can’t leave my son and wife to fend
for themselves. They’ll die without me. Charlie won’t make it. I can’t leave them. I can’t.

“Thomas!!”

He jerked, head snapping up to stare at the long mirror which ran width wise along the span of the buffet table. In its reflection was the Heichecera, as if they were standing side by side. But there was no one on Thomas’ left, though the Heichecera’s reflection was right at his shoulder.

She looked panicked.

“Get the baby out of the house!” The Heichecera ordered.

Confused, Thomas couldn’t so much as speak for a moment. Was this real? Was he dreaming? Had he somehow-

“It’s the flue!” The Heichecera shouted. Her amber eyes were full of flame; they seemed to burn him from the inside out. “Get him out now or he’ll die from the flue!”

“Thomas, are you quite well?” The Dowager spoke up from the table.

But Thomas had forgotten about decorum. He’d forgotten that he was holding a silver platter. He’d forgotten that he was serving dinner, that he was a footman in an illustrious and noble house. That he had a reputation to uphold and that he could not act queerly before the family.

“Ethel,” Thomas bleated, turning to find Ethel hiding in the door to the servery; the family could not see her from their angle, but Thomas could at the buffet table.

She looked terrified.

“Ethel, get ‘im out,” Thomas bleated like a lost sheep, his Stockport accent slipping through in his panic. His heart was absolutely pounding in his chest. He could hardly manage the strength to stand. “Ethel, it’s the… it’s the…”

But the last vestiges of his strength had finally left him. Thomas collapsed to his knees, stars bursting before his eyes as he slumped against the buffet table.

There was a ringing sound in his ears, completely drowning out everything else as a white haze overtook his vision. He could feel someone taking him beneath the arm, attempting to get him back to his feet. He could feel a cold hand against his forehead; distantly he heard a voice cry “He’s burning up!”

There was another voice, very close to him. A strong pair of hands was hauling him along; he could see the dining room flying past in a blur of color; was he still awake or had he slipped into dreams.

“That’s it,” Matthew Crawley was the one leading him it seemed. Thomas felt like pudding in the man’s arms. “One foot in front of the other.”

But the Heichecera was floating before him, a determined look upon her bronze face. She reached out, and Matthew could not see her she gripped Thomas hard upon the chin so that Thomas was brought to a stand still.

“Matthew-?” Was that Lady Mary?
“It’s like he’s turned to stone-!”
Thomas could not see or hear Matthew Crawley anymore.

The Heichecera consumed his entire being, her black hair swarming around him like a sea. It rolled over him in waves, dragging him under until it was just the pair of them. Until they were completely surrounded by night, and Thomas was no longer standing in the dining hall of the abbey.

“Forgive me, Thomas,” The Heichecera said, “But I must act if I am to save you.”

“Do what you must,” Thomas replied. His thoughts were only for his wife and son.

The Heichecera was turning into liquid, a strange oozing gas that slipped between Thomas’ lips and up his nostrils. He sucked in breath, dazed at the foreign sensation of something completely overtaking his body.

He could see flashes of strange things beneath his eyelids, which were growing heavier by the moment. Beautiful auburn suns of a distant land whose name he did not know. The sands of a beach he’d never visited. A fireside that he’d never seen in his life. A silver dagger, carved with ancient runs, and a beautiful blue light so holy and sweet it seemed to come straight from God himself.

But he also saw himself. He saw his youth, in a tiny attic dwelling over a clockshop in Stockport. His mother, consume with chores, washing dishes with a rag full of holes. His father sweeping dust out of his shop stoop, checking his watch to see if it was time to close for the day with a benign expression. His first time arriving at Downton, the gothic pillars towering up like a mountain into the sky. John Bates, limping into the kitchen for the first time, giving them all a petulant glare. The biting dirt of the Somme, bruising his flesh and turning the world to brown.

Jimmy. Jimmy, beautiful and brilliant, a blazing white light emanating from behind him so that it seemed he had a halo.

“You are me, and I am you,” The Heichecera whispered in his ear, “My strength is your strength. Your body is my body. And now, until I can guarantee your survival, we shall never be parted. Give me total control, total surrender, and you shall know peace.”

“I trust you,” Thomas replied, for he did. Implicitly, he knew that she would save him. That she would do everything it took to keep him alive until he could protect Charlie and Ethel again.

And so when the Heichecera pushed him beneath warm velvet waves of darkness, Thomas went without a fight.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know. Once again, stay tuned to the Subrosa Writer if you want to hear from me sooner rather than later.
The Heichecera and Ethel team up to keep Thomas alive through the Spanish Influenza... but some calamities just can't be avoided.

I know, I know, it's been a month and I'm sorry.

A gramophone serenaded to an empty aching room, whose walls smoked with the fever in his brain.

A voice, so soft and sweet, warned him not to leave. It crooned to him, a piano being tickled and a bass being plucked alongside. The crackle of the vinyl... the white noise of waiting for a dance.

Thomas was in the servant's hall, walking through the passages and wondering if he might melt. He was sweating from every pore, with smoke wafting beneath his feet.

The brass of a trumpet; he was being called forth by a shrill singer's cry.

He found the servant's hall cleared of its normal table and chairs. Instead it was a dance floor with only one unoccupied partner in a sea of gray faces.

Jimmy Kent glowed with the light of the sun, shrouded in a halo of beautiful white light. His livery was undone, his hair in a perfect coif. He was just as beautiful as Thomas remembered, just as sweet and passionate.

He was waiting for Thomas, a hand outstretched to take him up in a dance. Thomas accepted at once, and suddenly they were swaying side by side. Jimmy's hand was cool in his own, soothing him even as the heat radiated from his own body.

“So what will you do?” Jimmy asked. His voice was like honey pouring over a rock, soothing and solid.

“What I’ve always done,” Thomas told him. Was there ever any question?

Jimmy's hands wandered up Thomas' arms, till they were entwined behind his neck with fingertips playing at the frayed edges of his hair. “And what's that?”

“Love you,” Thomas said.
In all universes, in all ways.

“Even now?” Jimmy asked.
He leaned in and pressed a chaste kiss to Jimmy’s forehead.

“How lucky we are,” Jimmy laid his head on Thomas’ forehead. He smelt of peppermint.

Were they lucky? Thomas was unsure.

“We get to meet again,” Jimmy explained. “We get to dance this dance again. How many lovers can say the same?”

“But we aren’t lovers,” Thomas said, always an ugly wound over his heart, “We’re friends.”

Jimmy perked up, nose to nose with Thomas. “But aren’t all lovers friends? And aren’t all friends lovers?”

Thomas breathed him in, his nose pressed to Jimmy’s soft cheek. He inhaled him, wishing he could suck Jimmy into his body and keep him there for all time. A layer of skin and flesh under a layer of skin and flesh. One day they’d be rotting inside one another, dead. Two skeletons so intertwined they could not be peeled apart.

“Tell me you love me, even though I’m a stubborn git?”

“Darlin’ that’s my favorite part about you,” Thomas said. His nose trailed upon Jimmy’s cheek until they were touching lips.

They kissed.
Thomas’ clothes began to smoke with flame.

~*~

He sucked in one rattling breath after the other, and Ethel was terrified each moment would be his last.

He’d been her pillar of strength for so long, holding her steady as life had forced her to her knees. Had it not been for Thomas Barrow, she felt certain she would have died by now. That her life would be meaningless and forgotten, left to freeze in some rubbish filled corner.

But now it was his turn under the knife, and Ethel was the one commanded to be strong. He lay in his bed in the attics, shaking violently from toe to head. He’d sweated through several pairs of pajamas now and was only in pants to spare the rest of his wardrobe. A silhouette was on the bed beneath him, an outline from where he’d been battling his fever. From time to time, he would mumble nonsensical things, not fully developed into true words. His fingertips would jump as if he was trying to reach something. His eyelids and lips would flutter as if forcibly wrestling themselves from the grip of his dazed delirium.

Dr. Clarkson was with him, taking his temperature and pursing his lips in worry.

“Ethel…” Thomas groaned her name, and her heart leapt into her throat. She was by his side in an instant, sitting on the edge of his pathetically small bed to dab at his forehead with a cool cloth. “Get him out-”

“You’re going to be alright, Thomas,” Dr. Clarkson assured him, though the look in his eyes betrayed his fear. “You’re in a safe space-“
“The baby—” Thomas wasn’t listening. “Get… our son… out of th’house. Get him to the Grantham Arms. Keep him away—”

“But I haven’t any money,” Ethel protested. Fear was slowly coiling around her heart, gripping it tight like a python as she considered Charlie asleep in his cot downstairs. Would he be safe in the basement from something as dangerous as Spanish Influenza? Somehow, Ethel doubted it.

It terrified her.

“Look—” Thomas swallowed around a dry throat, his left hand twitching in the direction of his bureau drawer, “Upper drawer. Tea tin.”

She climbed off the bed and went to look, opening Thomas’ drawers to pull out an old tin of Yorkshire Black Tea. Unsure, she opened it, and was taken aback at the pounds she found inside. This was surely all of Thomas’ savings—! Cor, it looked close to fifty pounds…!

“Go into town,” Thomas mumbled, eyes closed. A bead of sweat was trickling down his temple, “Stay there… stay away. Book a room for a week. Hell’s comin’ to this house—”

“I won’t abandon you,” Even with Charlie, even with death looming over her head, Ethel could not be budged for this man. He simply meant too much to her. Thomas Barrow could not die; she would not allow it!

“Our son comes first,” Thomas tried to argue.

“I’ll take care of Charlie,” Ethel agreed, for one way or another she would get her son out of the house, “But then I’m coming back for you.”

Thomas shook his head left and right upon the pillow in a slow beat. “You’ll get sick.”

“I’m not afraid,” Ethel said, and just to prove her point she bent forward and placed a chaste kiss upon Thomas’ forehead. He was either too weak or too tired to make a rebuttal.

~*~

It was a funny thing, to be aided after so much indifference.

Ethel had grown up in a difficult home, but not one too unfamiliar from another lower class family. Her mother and father had been farmers in Ripon, selling the meat and wool of sheep in order to make do. Her older brother, Henry, had always been a bit different as a lad. He’d been fourteen when the village policeman had caught him kissing a traveling salesmen behind their garden shed. Henry had been jailed for the act of sexual indecency, and though once or twice he’d been out of the system long enough to try and get his life back on track he eventually wound up in Gaol where, to Ethel’s knowledge, he still remained. In her loneliness, Ethel had found solace in London rags talking of fame and fortune. To see more of it, she’d become a servant. But she’d found the lifestyle of subservience horribly suppressing and had even tried to return home until her parents had forbade her entry. She was to work, they said, and make money for the family in her brother’s stead. When Ethel had fallen into a delicate condition… well…

Her mother had made it clear under no uncertain terms that she didn’t ever want to see Ethel again. Her children were sinners, she’d proclaimed, and it was God’s punishment for her lack of continuing faith.
So Ethel had floundered, just like Henry, until Thomas had come along. Now, Ethel was willing to fight tooth and nail to keep him alive in his hour of need. Ethel knew a good thing when she saw it.

Ethel didn’t feel right about taking Thomas’ money. They’d only been married twelve hours (if even that), and she was afraid of being looked at as vile. Instead, she begged Mrs. Patmore and Mrs. Hughes for help, and they’d found her a Mrs. Rumsey who lived only a street away. Mrs. Rumsey was a war widow, and a warm woman who was a good friend of the house. Ethel had never known about her, simply because she’d never been that close to Mrs. Hughes or Mrs. Patmore, but both had sworn on their honor that Mrs. Rumsey would take good care of Charlie for as long as needed. Ethel paid Mrs. Rumsey a pound of Thomas’ money, begging her to keep Charlie until it was safe to bring him back to the house. Mrs. Rumsey had been quick to show compassion to Charlie, rocking him to sleep against her massive bosom before leaving the house with a few of Charlie’s things in tow. She had twelve grandchildren, three of whom were still quite small. As a result, she had a plethora of baby paraphernalia and even a bit of company for Charlie to play with.

Relieved to know that her son would be safe, Ethel marched right back upstairs with a chunk of ice, and some milk mixed with cinnamon to try and save her husband’s life. She wasn’t a miracle worker, not by a long shot, but she was the best chance Thomas had to making it out alive. He didn’t have money or position; no one else in the village would care if he died. As a result, all the fuss was going to Lady Grantham and Lady Swire, both of whom were ill. What was worse, even Mr. Carson had fallen short, so Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore were distracted by him. Thomas was her charge, hers and no other.

She sat patiently at his side, tending to his fever. At times, he vomited. Other times he drifted dismally through a shallow sleep. The hour was young now, with a new day dawning; Ethel had not slept. Instead, she’d sat at Thomas’ side and allowed him to suck timidly on a piece of ice. His lips were gray with fever.

“Jimmy…” Thomas croaked. His eyes were fluttering, not quite awake, not quite asleep. He’d been mumbling that name for hours now off and on.

Jimmy must be his love, Ethel thought. His true love.

“Shh…” Ethel stroked his hair out of his face, putting a cool cloth upon his head to help bring his fever down.

“Jimmy… Jimmy…” It was like he was begging, calling out for Jimmy to return to him. Ethel had to wonder who Jimmy was, where he was.

Should she try and find out? Should she try and bring him here? What if Thomas…

No, don’t think about that, Ethel chastised herself. He can’t die. He can’t.

“Ethel…”

He was wake.

At once, Ethel sat up straighter in her chair, lovingly caressing his face. Thomas was shaking again, once more suffering from the violent throws of his fever. But amid the turbulent heat that rocked his body, Thomas was somehow strong enough to speak to Ethel, somehow able to recognize her amid the haze of pain and say his peace.

“…Ethel, the baby…” He whispered.
Ethel’s heart panged violently at the thought that Thomas was so fretful over the welfare of her son. Their son.

“He’s out of the house,” Ethel assured him at once. “A Mrs. Rumsey has taken him in. She’s a friend of Mrs. Patmore’s; she’ll take care of him until it’s safe—”

“Strudel—” Thomas babbled, completely confused, “I don’t know a Mrs. Strudel, what if she’s German—”

“Hush now,” Ethel wouldn’t hear a word of it. She wiped a bead of sweat from Thomas’ upper lip as she spoke, “She’s as English as Yorkshire Pudding. Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Patmore trust her—”

“Well I don’t trust her,” Thomas said.

“Well trust me,” Ethel replied. Thomas seemed sated by that, and for a moment he lulled off.

Ethel sighed, relaxing back in her chair. For a few moments Thomas was quiet, seemingly asleep. But then, just like before, he started up again croaking a miserable lullaby.

“Jimmy…” Thomas whimpered.

“I know…” Ethel petted his hair again, “I know, love.”

She broke off a small piece of ice again.

“I want you to put this in your mouth and suck on it,” Ethel offered the ice to Thomas, putting it between his lips. Thomas just quirked a grin, still dazed by his fever and dreams.

“Date first…” He mumbled.

“Oh—Ethel scoffed, still holding the ice to his lips. Thomas’ pert pink tongue lapped out after a moment, taking hold on the ice so that he could suck on it. It seemed to soothe him. Ethel prepared another piece in her lap. With luck it would bring down his fever.

A swift knock on Thomas’ door made Ethel look around. She found Mrs. Hughes in the doorway, fretful with graying hair falling in her face. The day had just begin, and she was already under great strain. She was worried about Thomas; he was the favorite of the upper staff, practically like a son to Mr. Carson. Ethel had to wonder how the butler was fairing down the hall. She hadn’t stopped in on him yet.

“How is he?” Mrs. Hughes asked, shutting Thomas’ door.

“Hot,” Ethel said, “Very hot. I have to get his temperature down.”

Mrs. Hughes surveyed her set up: a bowl of cold water and damp flannels, along with several chunks of ice. It wasn’t much, but it had nursed Thomas through a difficult night already.

“The ice should help,” Mrs. Hughes said, carefully sitting on the edge of Thomas’ bed to lay her hand upon his seating forehead. “Is there anything else I can bring?”

“No…” Ethel sighed, “No, I’m…”

But was she fine? In truth, Ethel was actually strained. She was terrified of losing Thomas, terrified of losing the security and kindness that he gave her. What if Thomas did not survive this sickness?
The thought made her stomach twist into painful knots.

“I don’t want to lose him.” Ethel finally said. “If I do I’ll-“

But she couldn’t finish the sentence.

Mrs. Hughes seemed to understand; she didn’t press Ethel either way.

“Ethel I hate to put you in this position, but I have no one else I can turn to,” Mrs. Hughes said. Ethel had a difficult time meeting the woman’s eyes, but listened intently. “The house is under attack, and we’re all hands to the pump. The trouble is, half our hands are down for the count.”

“I’ll do whatever you need of me, Mrs. Hughes.” Ethel said. “But I don’t want to leave him.”

Yet it was Thomas who once again provided the answer.

“Go,” Thomas croaked, listless in bed.

“Don’t talk,” Ethel warned, fetching him another chip of ice. She wondered if he was even fully awake, or was he talking to “Jimmy”?

“Go, and show ’em what you’re made of,” He said. Oddly enough, Thomas was beginning to smile, which was queer because Thomas rarely ever smiled. “I won’t let him die.”

“Who?” Ethel asked.

“Thomas,” Thomas said.

“…But… you’re Thomas,” To hear him talk like a lunatic was making Ethel’s heart flutter. What if the fever was addling his brain?

“Mmm,” Thomas smiled, turning his head a tiny bit on the pillow, “No, he’s not hear right now.”

“Then-“ Unsure of what else to do, Ethel asked the obvious question, “Then who are you?”

But Thomas was asleep again. Was it Ethel’s imagination, or did he have better color in his face?

~*~

Ethel did not have much time to change into her print dress and fresh apron, but she made do. Anna was kind enough to bring her a cup of warm gruel, which would serve as her only meal until luncheon. The only maids left to the house were Anna and Jane, and neither could run the house the male staff under threat. As a result, Anna took on the role of footman while Ethel became the full time maid and Jane hopped back and forth. Someone had to stand at the front door, while someone else had to do the main work, and a third had to serve the meals. They were all being run ragged, but at least they were making ends meet. Mrs. Hughes was the impromptu butler for the day, and kept having to pop upstairs to check on Thomas and Mr. Carson both. Daisy, as the scullery maid, was given the task of ensuring both men did not die while Ethel and Mrs. Hughes were preoccupied.

From what Ethel could glean, Daisy was doing a fine job and Thomas was resting comfortably. Thank god for it too. Ethel couldn’t afford to be distracted right now.

Breakfast was a subdued affair. Jane served, and Ethel cleaned. Half the family were ill, and the other half weren’t in the mood to dine lavishly so that solved one problem at least. After breakfast, Ethel was made to clean the upstairs and servant’s bedrooms while Jane prepared the cutlery and table for luncheon and Anna took door duty. Mrs. Hughes was kind enough to aid Ethel halfway
through, helping her to fold and remake the finer beds (all save for the Grantham chamber which was
left alone with Lady Grantham ill). Finally finished with only five minutes to twelve, Ethel all but
tripped downstairs in order to have her first real meal of the day. She’d missed eleven o’clock tea, far
too busy to stop her work in order to have a cuppa.

It was so strange, to sit at the table after months of living in squalor. So many things were sticking
out to Ethel, things that the others surely took for granted. The floors and walls were clean. The
fireplace was warm. The table wasn’t covered in rotting food or flies; the mere fact that they had a
table at all was a sign of wealth! Ethel could smell bangers and mash in the kitchen, and it was
making her salivate. She felt clean for the first time in months, despite the fact that she’d been
working like a dog all morning. She might be sweaty, but at least she had fresh clothes on. There
was no dirt in her hair or on her hands. It didn’t hurt to sit down.

God help her, she’d never tell a soul, but sodomy wasn’t a friendly affair if you were inexperienced.

Across the table from her sat the few workers still able to pull together a solid shift without keeling
over. Jane and Anna were ravenous after pulling bizarre jobs normally left to the men. O’Brien was
still upstairs with Lady Grantham, unwilling to leave her side. Mr. Bates sat next to Anna, which was
slightly odd. The pair of them were clearly wrapped up in their own concerns. This left Ethel with
the bitter conversation partner of Jane, who did not look happy to be sharing a table with a fallen
woman. Mrs. Hughes kept court over all of them, sorting through the day’s mail. Her eyes narrowed
as she observed the way Ethel sat and ate.

Mrs. Hughes had never liked her much.

“How are you settling in, Ethel?” Anna asked.

“Very well, thank you,” Ethel replied. The fact of the matter was, she wasn’t settled at all. But she
wouldn’t give these people the satisfaction of kicking her when she was down. The only true ally she
had in this house was upstairs suffering from Spanish Influenza; the rest, Ethel considered enemies
even if in the most mild of senses. She was certain that no one else wanted her here, even if they
pretended to be friendly. She was tainted to them, and could never regain her innocence in their eyes.
It made her feel like she was crawling in her skin, like she really was a whore.

“Have you checked on Thomas?” Jane asked. Her tone made it clear she wouldn’t believe Ethel
even if she said ‘yes’.

“She’s checked,” Mrs. Hughes would not let an argument form. “Ethel, I want a word in my office
before we return to work.”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes,” Ethel said. She wondered, bleakly, whether this simple little confrontation with
Jane would cost her what little security she already had. Until Thomas was better, she felt like she
had no protector at the table.

After a moment of continued silence over bubble and squeak, Jane spoke up again.

“I’ll check on Thomas,” she spoke to Mrs. Hughes rather than Ethel. “My Freddy once had a bit of
the flue, so I know what to look for.”

“Thank you, Jane, but Thomas is Ethel’s concern,” Mrs. Hughes warned, “She’s his wife, whether
we like it or not.”

It was clear that Jane did not like it at all. She pursed her lips, bowed her head, finished her meal, and
asked to be excused.
Mrs. Hughes let her go without fuss.

“How is he, really?” Anna asked when Jane was gone. Ethel could almost sense the tiniest bit of sympathy in Anna’s voice, but wondered if she was imagining it.

Ethel shook her head, “I won’t let him die, Anna.”

“I never said you would.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, please. He’s the only friend I’ve got.” Ethel felt nauseous at the mere thought of Thomas suffering. Anna seemed to understand, and let it go at once.

After lunch, Ethel wasted no time in heading to Mrs. Hughes’ office. She wanted to get their meeting over quick so that she could talk to Thomas before returning to work. Mrs. Hughes was quick on her feet too; there was no time to dawdle with so many hands down. In Mrs. Hughes’ office, there were given brief respite from the active house. Mrs. Hughes drug a hand over her face, and through her graying hair, looking ready to pull a few strands out if only to get a little peace.

“Well Jane’s certainly making her opinion known,” Mrs. Hughes muttered. Ethel offered no comment, still feeling quite unsafe without Thomas to back her up. There had been a time when she’d given sass… but that was before life had knocked her low.

“I’ve received a letter from the Bryant's,” Mrs. Hughes explained, “They wrote a few days ago to schedule a visit with you, and they’re near town today so they’re stopping by after lunch. They want to speak to you about Charlie’s future and what they can do for him.”

Ethel scoffed, rolling her eyes. What utter nonsense. She knew what help from a toff looked like, and it never boded well for a woman like her.

“What do you want to do?” Mrs. Hughes asked. “Now that you’re married?”

“…I need to talk to Thomas,” Ethel said. Mrs. Hughes seemed contented with that.

“They’ll be here soon,” Mrs. Hughes said. “I’ll have Anna serve and Jane stand by the door. Why don’t you go sit with Thomas for a moment. Maybe he’ll have a better idea what to do.”

Ethel nodded, sniffing.

“Try not to take it to heart, with Jane,” Mrs. Hughes added as Ethel made for the door. “She was a married woman once, and the subject’s a sore one for her.”

“That’s not why she doesn’t like me, Mrs. Hughes.” Ethel wouldn’t lie to herself, or to anyone else.

“Maybe not.”

Upstairs Ethel went, passing by Anna and Jane who were both heading to change into their black and whites. After lunch there would be a slight reprieve, with servant’s having a small break at four. But until then, it would be pertinent for everyone to keep on their toes; Ethel would have to be quick, after this, to change into black and whites so that she could be presentable for afternoon work and dinner.

But first: Thomas.

She found him in his room, quiet and pale. Daisy was downstairs cleaning up servant’s lunch, but
She’d left a bowl of cool water by Thomas’ bed, along with a wet flannel and a melting chunk of ice. At once, Ethel registered Thomas’ temperature and found it unchanged. She re-wet the flannel, wrung it out, and lay it upon Thomas’ forehead. Putting the bowl in her lap, she sat upon Thomas’ visitor chair and attempted to break off a small chunk of ice.

Thomas was awakened by the noise. He blinked at her, blearily; Ethel gave him a piece of ice to suck on, and he took it gratefully.

“How are we feeling?” Ethel asked. Thomas did not answer right way, as if having trouble exercising his mouth under a high fever.

“Ethel…” Her name dragged on unnaturally. There was a tiny smile upon his lips. “Darling Ethel.”

His voice sounded strange. Feminine and foreign. She gave him more ice, hoping it will help. He took it without fuss or fight.

“Cor we haven’t been married a week an you’re already sweet on me,” Ethel teased, trying to hide her nerves. But she kept chewing on her lip, wondering what Thomas would say if he knew the Bryant’s were on their way. Would he be angry? Would he be mentally able to carry on a conversation? It was hard to say with Thomas so ill.

“Oh he loves you,” Thomas murmured, “He loves you like a sister. You remind him of his sister Margret. He loved her.”

Ethel was confused, “Who are you talking about?”

“Ah…” Thomas smiled, closing his eyes again. “More ice?” Ethel gave it to him at once. “So cold. I forgot what ice felt like.”

“What do you mean?” Ethel asked. Once again, Thomas seemed reproachful.

“How are you?” Thomas asked. “Has your day been good?”

Ethel scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Runnin’ me ragged, but I don’t mind. I know what it is to starve now. I’ll never look down on good work again. Not when a meal’s involved, at any rate… But…” Ethel paused, slightly tense.

“But?” Thomas said.

“The Bryant’s are coming to visit me,” Ethel said, “This afternoon. Mrs. Hughes is letting me have a tiny break till they arrive, so I can care for you. Are you upset?”

Thomas just smiled a knowing smile, “Are you?”

“I am,” Ethel couldn’t stand the thought of the Bryant's. Not after all they’d put her through. “I don’t want you to leave me if they do something awful.”

“He won’t,” Thomas murmured.

“I dunno,” Ethel wasn’t sure, “Mr. Bryant was a real berk the last time I saw him.”

“Ah…” Thomas shook his head again, “Not him. Thomas won’t leave you either way.”

“Thomas you’re scarin’ me,” Ethel said, her heart banging about in her ribs. “You’re talkin’ like you’re possessed.”
Thomas just gave her a tiny smile, unafraid.

“You know what the marvel about you is, Ethel?” Thomas asked. Unsure if she had any marvel at all to speak of, Ethel shook her head. “You wouldn’t leave him even if he was possessed.”

There it was again, Thomas referring to himself in third person. But in a way, he did have an odd point. Ethel was so attached to Thomas by now that she couldn’t see herself leaving him no matter what happened.

“…He’ll be back soon, Ethel,” Thomas said, clearly referring to himself. “He’s sleeping.”

“…If he’s sleeping then who are you?” Ethel asked.

But before Thomas could answer, a harried knock on the door resounded about the cramped attic bedroom. Ethel looked over her shoulder to see Mrs. Hughes standing in the doorway, flustered from the strain of the overloaded schedule.

“They’re here,” Was all she said. “You better come with me.”

Ethel looked back to Thomas, and found that he was still staring at her. His eyes, queerly enough, were a strange amber color; had they always been that way? For some reason, Ethel thought Thomas had blue eyes. Why had she imagined that if they were brown instead?

She leaned forward and placed the chastest of kisses upon his forehead. “I’ll be back,” she assured him.

“I’ll be here,” Thomas assured her. Thank god, at least he was talking about himself in first person again.

Down the stairs Ethel went, following after Mrs. Hughes who seemed rather frumpy as if she’d been insulted by someone.

“Mrs. Hughes, Thomas is talking about himself in third person,” Ethel said. She didn’t know why she was telling the woman, save that she was fit for bursting and afraid of what it might mean.

“Don’t fret,” Mrs. Hughes assured her. “Fever makes the mouth say things the brain doesn’t remember.”

Well thank god for that.

They hit the main landing and took it into the grand entrance hall, which was disturbingly bare despite this golden hour. Ethel could easily remember how these halls had once been draped from ceiling to floor with sick men in cots playing cards and drinking plonk. Now all that remained was the echo of the past, with Bryant’s shadow hiding in every dark corner to remind her of what had once been.

Mrs. Hughes paused before the door of the pink salon, allowing Ethel a moment to collect herself and flatten her white apron so that it didn’t crease.

“…Remember, your married,” Mrs. Hughes said, “So whatever they say… it’s what your husband thinks that matters most.”

She opened the door without another word, giving Ethel view of Mr. and Mrs. Bryant sitting upon an ornate fainting couch. Mrs. Hughes closed the door after Ethel, sealing the four of them in, and
took a seat next to Ethel on the opposite couch. Mr. Bryant’s mustache was quivering furiously at the sight of Ethel in uniform as if he was personally offended by her black and whites.

"Why are you in a maid’s uniform?" Bryant demanded, disgusted, “I thought you were sacked from this house for debauching our son.”

"I was sacked for being sullied by your son," Ethel snapped, putting pink spots in Bryant’s cheeks, “But my husband’s gotten me a job here, again.”

"Husband?" Bryant squawked, “But who’d marry you?“

"You’re married?" Mrs. Bryant was dismayed where her husband was furious, looking oddly crestfallen. “But, I thought… Is Charlie here…?“

"Yes ma’am, I’m married,” Ethel spoke to Mrs. Bryant, finding she had far more patience for the woman than her husband. She didn’t so much deign to even look at Bryant as she instead focused on his wife, which she hoped would thoroughly annoy the man. “To a wonderful and kind man who is very ill at the moment. Charlie’s not here right now… I don’t want him in a house with sickness.”

"But who are you married to?" Mrs. Bryant asked.

"Thomas Barrow, Ma’am,” Ethel replied. “He’s the first footman that works here.”

"What, that idiot who rejected the opportunity to be a doctor?“ Bryant demanded, agog. “Well I guess beggars can’t be choosers can they?“

Mrs. Hughes bristled on the couch next to Ethel, clearly offended by Bryant’s dig at Thomas. She wasn’t the only one.

“My husband isn’t your punch line, sir,” Ethel warned. “So I’ll ask you not to refer to him as such in front of me.”

Bryant scoffed, shaking his head. His wife gently placed a hand upon his thigh, seeming to spark a sense of recognition that this was a battle he could not win. Giving up on the topic of Thomas, Bryant returned back to Ethel.

“Never mind that,” Bryant snapped, “Let’s get down to business.”

“What business do I have with you, sir?“ Ethel asked. The idea of having unsettled affairs with the Bryant’s was putting knots back in her stomach again.

“Well that’s what you wanted from us in the first place, wasn’t it?” Bryant demanded, “To find out what we meant to do for little Charlie?”

That was a fair point. Ethel had, admittedly, barged in on a very nice luncheon to beg help from the Bryant’s not even a few weeks ago. But now…?

“I suppose I did at one point, but that’s changed now,” Ethel said. “I’m married, and my husband and I will take care of Charlie.”

“So you won’t give him up?” Bryant demanded. He seemed bizarrely disappointed, as if he thought Ethel would just dump the baby on his lap without fuss. What did he know of a mother’s love?!

“Give him up?” Ethel demanded, affronted, “Are you out of your mind? I was never going to do that anyway!”
“Of course not.” Bryant had grown furious at a dream denied, and leapt from the couch to pace back and forth, “Because you are selfish and idiotic, just like your husband! We mean to bring him up as a gentleman! Send him to Harrow, say, and Oxford! We want to raise him as our grandson, and we could give him a much better life than that of a housemaid’s bastard.”

“Please do not use such language in this house, Mr. Bryant,” Mrs. Hughes demanded. Bryant bristled, but did not make to rebuke Mrs. Hughes’ request.

Ethel didn’t take it to heart; it wasn’t like she hadn’t heard it before. Maybe once, it might have burned her, but now she knew that Charlie wasn’t a bastard at all. He did have a father… and the Bryant’s couldn’t get away with saying such foul things.

“My son is not a bastard,” Ethel hissed with vindication, “He has a father that adores him. And I’ll have you know that my husband is not selfish or idiotic. He’s the kindest, bravest, smartest man that I know!”

She rose up from the couch, filled with a savage pride so that she and Bryant were squaring off. For the first time in her life, Ethel felt like she was fighting a bully she could win against. What a queer feeling, to have hope!

“I tell you what, he’s a lot more kind, brave, and smart that your son ever was!” Ethel added just for a barb. It felt good to get a dig in at Bryant after all he’d put her through, “Charlie may not grow up eating from a silver spoon, but he’ll still be a gentlemen. Thomas doesn’t need a title to have class, and he’ll show Charlie how to be a man, which is more than your shoddy son could have ever done alive or dead!”

“How dare you?” Bryant demanded, affronted.

“No, how dare you!” Ethel flung the words right back in his face, pointing at him with a cruel finger. “How dare you try and make me give up my child just to have your own way?”

“It’s what’s good for Charlie!” Bryant bellowed.

“No, it’s what’s good for you!” Ethel retorted. Mrs. Bryant looked close to tears, but Ethel could spare the woman no energy or time when her husband was ill upstairs. “And I’m not in the mood to oblige your pathetic whims. So if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be returning to my husband’s aid!”

“Say I don’t excuse you!” Bryant threatened, even as Ethel turned her back, “Say I call the police and claim Charlie for my own.”

But at this, Ethel just turned with a hand on her hip, a snide derision taking over her voice. “Where’s your proof?” She sneered; it was the same barb Bryant had thrown at her during the ruined luncheon. “Do you have any documented proof that your son claimed ownership over my ‘bastard’?” She made quotations with the words.

Bryant was speechless.

Ethel could not help but smile.

She left without another word, too infused with a strange sense of pride over a battle won to notice Mrs. Hughes looking at her amazed from the couch.

Though Ethel did not know it, she’d solidly won Mrs. Hughes over in her favor.

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He’d danced for days, surely, but it only felt like minutes. Jimmy was within him, around him, so far deep into his soul that the pair of them could not have been detached save by the power of God himself. The fire around them was raging so brilliantly that they seemed to be infused with flame. It was like the fever had accepted them, and was now sheltering them from reality.

If this was hell, it was quite nice.

Memories were spinning around Thomas like the reel of a nickelodeon.

So many moments ruined by pride, foolish ugly pride.
So many more, ruined by internal agony not voiced allowed.

“Be with me,” Jimmy whispered from within. His voice resonated out of Thomas’ chest. “Stay with me. Love me.”

“How can I not?” Thomas replied, but it was Jimmy’s voice that issued from his mouth. They were so in synch that they’d lost their ability to stand apart from the other.

Thomas breathed in the taste of peppermint and smoke. Jimmy exhaled cigarettes and tea with lemon.

But then, just like that, the fires began to die so that the whole room was clouded with cold, stale smoke.

Stars from a Spanish sky began to gleam overhead.

~*~

A day passed, and then another. Thomas’ skin took on a strange tan shade which did not befit his indoor occupation. Dr. Clarkson was mystified, saying it might be an off-shoot from the fever though he’d never seen such a symptom before. Ethel had no time to spare for Thomas as Lady Grantham fell deeper into illness and then Lavinia Swire. Jane was acting bizarrely; Ethel could have sworn she heard her voice resonating from Lord Grantham’s dressing room when she passed by carrying linens. But she didn’t dwell on it more than a moment at most. It didn’t matter if Jane was letting Lord Grantham plowed her like a farmer to a field. People were dropping like flies and someone had to do something.

It was two in the morning when Ethel crawled into Thomas’ bed, falling to her husband’s side and holding him tight. Lavinia Swire was dead, and Lady Grantham was nearly the same. The house was full of weeping and moaning; she felt like she was living in a tomb.

“Don’t die,” She whimpered into his collar, wetting it with her tears. “Please don’t leave me. I love you.”

Thomas’ voice was slurred and deep, “I won’t let him die.”
Ethel held him tighter, praying he would gain strength from her and persist through this awful illness.

“Lavinia Swire is dead,” Ethel whispered in his ear. “Whoever you are.”

Thomas’ mouth crooked into a tiny smile. Though Ethel did not know it, with her eyes closed falling into a deep fretful sleep, Thomas’ skin had taken on a deep earthen tint. The Heichecera and her protege were in synch, holding fast through the storm.
Deep within Thomas’ mind, a scene was unfurling.

~*~

Smoke slid back from his view to be replaced by a cool, calm quiet that soaked into him. It was as if he was being smothered by aloe, healed and yet uncomfortable at the same time. He lay upon a soft cot made of frayed rope and stiff fabric. There was a shallow pillow beneath his head, so sticky with feathered ends that Thomas wondered if the goose it came from was still inside. There was something in his left hand, round and small… His skin felt smothered, and he could hear the far off crackle of a campfire.

Well this is odd, Thomas thought. He opened his eyes to find himself in a tent, floored with bare earth and occupied by the trinkets of a nomad. He was naked, covered in red dried mud traced with strange sigils. In his left hand was, of all things, a black chicken egg. He did not know where he was, how he’d gotten there, or why he’d been left there naked and bathed in mud. He had a feeling the Heichecera was behind all of it, and wondered passingly if any of this was even real. Irritated, he rose out of bed, brushing the mud off of his skin and setting his chicken egg aside. There was nothing to cover his nakedness, but Thomas had a feeling it didn’t matter here. Beyond the shifting canvas flap of the tent, Thomas could see a darkened field stretching out over fresh green grass. It was snowing in England… so Thomas couldn’t be there now.

So where was he?

Naked, and holding a black chicken egg, Thomas stalked outside the tent naked as a jaybird to see the Heichecera bent over a campfire. She wasn’t warming herself by it. Instead, she seemed to be watching over the flame. It was bright blue but dwindling out. If she didn’t add fresh fuel to it soon, it would vanish into the ashen earth beneath it.

The Heichecera looked over her shoulder, noted that he was at the door of the tent, and gave him a broad smile: “Ah, you’re better.”

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Thomas demanded, irritable. “You possessed me, I was dancing in a fire, and now I’m here naked and covered in mud. What is this, chicken shit on me?” Thomas demanded, gesturing to the trace remnants of mud on his skin, “Are you trying to sauté me in my sleep or something?”

The Heichecera let out a tiny laugh, returning her attention to the fire: “That’s a poultice to draw out your illness. Remember, Penicillin hasn’t been invented yet.”

“And the egg?”

“That was just to fuck with you,” The Heichecera teased. Irritated, Thomas tossed the egg at the flame, but it was caught mid-air by some invisible force only to drift back down to the safety of the Heichecera’s lap.

In her hands, the egg began to glow with an internal light. So many mysteries surrounded this woman he could scarcely unravel one without stumbling upon another.

“Sit down,” The Heichecera offered. Thomas sat beside her on the bare earth, cross legged and his genitals displayed rather obscenely. He doubted the Heichecera cared either way. What was one man’s penis to a woman who held the universe in her hands?

“The fire needs more wood,” Thomas noted as the blaze popped and dwindled further.
“This is not a fire,” The Heichecera explained, “It is your fever, and my connection to your body. I’m watching over it until it goes out naturally. It’s almost done.”

“Why not douse it, then?” Thomas asked. Sure enough, he peered into the bright blue flame to see a smoldering image of a world beyond. He could see himself laying in his bed in the attics, Ethel tucked in tight to his side.

“The fever must go out naturally,” The Heichecera explained, “You have to give the connection time to dispel at its own pace. You know, that girl has stuck by your side through thick and thin. She’s been a right little nurse to you.”

“Clearly,” Thomas said with odd pride. He’d have to thank Ethel when he woke. He reached out, fingers touching the tips of the flame, but noted there was no heat to be found. The Heichecera took his hand and pulled it away with a look of warning.

“Do not dwell in magic,” she warned him. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Fine enough,” Thomas said, sitting back. After a moment of quiet reflection, noting the surrounding woods and rolling valleys, Thomas could not help but ask more questions.

“Where are we?” He wondered.

“A quiet corner,” the Heichecera said. She diverted the topic, “Lavinia Swire is dead. Lady Grantham was nearly so as well, until she was saved by O’Brien’s tender mercies. Now the real wheels are being put into motion. You are married and have a son… but something is coming.”

“What?” Thomas asked, slightly afraid for Charlie. Would the Bryant’s try and take him away?

“Look,” The Heichecera said, waving a hand over the flame. It suddenly turned a queer pink, the image within changing from Thomas’ bedroom to another chamber more opulent and intricate. There, squatting by a marble fireplace, was Jimmy Kent. He seemed to be filled with ennui, wrapped up in a duvet with gold and silver thread. He held, in his hands, an aged letter which he read by the fireside.

He looked terribly depressed. Thomas heart panged with a desire to reach out to him. To care for him.

“What’s that he’s holding, I wonder?” The Heichecera murmured. Her voice bordered on teasing. “I think you’ll soon find out.”

“Don’t,” He said, looking away. Even looking at Jimmy made him miserable. What would he do when Jimmy came to call on Downton Abbey for employment? How would he ever survive?

“I don’t have to do anything,” The Heichecera said, “You’ll do it all for me. I won’t allow you to squander your destiny twice.”

“Am I back in control of my body?” Thomas could not help but feel slightly irritable at the Heichecera’s meddling. For all her universal secrets, what did she know of Jimmy, or of the love that Thomas bore for him?

The Heichecera sighed, as if annoyed by him. “When the flames go out, yes.”

Eager to get it over with, Thomas stood up and gently stamped on what tiny little flames remained. It cast the pair of them into absolute darkness, so that everything slipped away… even the Heichecera. In the dark, floating upon air, Thomas heard her mutter in his ear:
Thomas awoke in his own bed for the first time in days, fully aware of his body and his senses. He was soaked in cold sweat, and something round was clutched in his left—

“Oh for god’s sake,” Thomas groaned, heavily unamused. There was a black chicken egg in his left hand.

It took a while for him to really get his bearings back together. Everyone was delighted to find him better, but none more so than Ethel who looked like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Thomas was amused to discover that Ethel had been scrupulous in their affairs, paying a staff friend a pound to take care of Charlie for a few days. Finally able to return to the house, Charlie all but flung himself into his mother’s arms. Mrs. Rumsey was kind, and Thomas paid her another pound for her pains though she swore Charlie hadn’t been any trouble. That night, Charlie slept in Thomas’ arms, quite content to be back around the people he knew and loved. The next morning, Ethel spoon fed Charlie porridge at the servant’s table, and passed him over to Mrs. Patmore who gave him a warm bottle of milk and allowed Daisy to dote on him.

Upstairs, the warm mood of a house revived was squashed flat by the awful death of Lavinia Swire. Thomas had known the woman was going to die, and in a way felt horribly sorry for her. She’d been young, and true, dying too early and too in love to ever know life fully. But maybe that was just the way that some things had to be.

He kept his opinions to himself, still slightly slow in his pace as he helped Ethel, Anna, and Jane to strip the flower garlands from the main stairwell. He felt exhausted at times, but tried not to let it show in front of Ethel who’d already had a horrible enough scare. Maybe, in a way, this was a tiny bit of the flame still inside of him that Thomas had stamped out too early. Maybe he was just damn tired.

“Go slow,” Ethel ordered as Thomas gathered unstrung garlands in his arms. “You’re not trying to win a race.”

“I’m fine,” Thomas assured her for what was possibly the tenth time that morning. He wondered how long he would have to repeat himself before she believed him. “I’ll stop if I need to sit down again. Jane—“ Thomas gestured to her up on the landing, “Can you get that upper ribbon? It should all fall right down—“

“What are you doing?”

Thomas looked about, startled by the voice of Matthew Crawley. Matthew looked like someone had run him over with a train, and Thomas felt horrifically sorry for the man in that moment.

In a spur of the moment decision, Thomas handed his enormous pile of garlands to Ethel who took them without question, and walked to Matthew’s side. So numb was Matthew that he didn’t seem capable of emotionally responding to someone acting out of order.

But Thomas simply had to say something; Matthew looked like a kicked puppy, and he couldn’t stand i.
“Mr. Crawley—” Thomas murmured, “Matthew- I’m so sorry—”

But even as Thomas made to further explain his empathy, he was cut off by Lord Grantham walking up.

“My dear chap—” Lord Grantham took Matthew by the elbow in a show of affection, “I cannot find words to say how sorry I am—”

“How is Cousin Cora?” Matthew asked, bleakly. His eyes were still on Thomas’ face, but he simply couldn’t spare Thomas the time of day in his dilapidated state.

“Much better—”

Thomas skulked back towards the main staircase, feeling like a fool. Why on earth had he imagined Matthew Crawley would give a damn what he thought?

But he found a receptive audience in the maid trio, who smiled as Thomas returned to holding the garlands. Ethel handed them back over with pride.

“I don’t know why I did that,” Thomas muttered, embarrassed, “I feel like a right fool.”

“Well I think it was very sweet,” Ethel praised, handing him more strings of garlands in a rotating spool.

“As do I,” Anna chimed in, trotting up and down the stairs to pick up fallen leaves and petals.

“It’s so sad,” Jane sighed. “She was so young, and so pure. She loved him from her soul, not for other means.”

Ethel bristled, as if that had been meant as a dig at her. Thomas caught her eye, and saw her hide her irritation behind a tight smile.

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Jane was an absolute prig, but at least Thomas was back on his feet.

It was such a relief, to have Thomas in working order once again after a week of having him out of commission. Ethel mentioned nothing to him of how he’d spoken in third person. Instead, she allowed Thomas to heal on his own time, and made note of the color returning to his face. As Thomas grew stronger, so did the house, until they were finally back up to speed again with only Mr. Carson and Lady Grantham still lingering in bed. Carson was to return the following morning, and so Mrs. Hughes had a bit more time to breath. As a result, she kept finding time to watch Ethel in her duties. Ethel tried to pay her no mind, laying the table and stripping beds with just as much speed as before. She cleaned the china, she dusted the halls, she brushed Lady Edith’s shoes till they shined and she mended holes in two of Daisy’s aprons.

Through it all, Mrs. Hughes scrutinized her, but kept silent.

It was nighttime, and the family had been put to bed. Now was when an hour of true quiet fell over the servant’s hall, with people finally able to tend to tiny jobs of their own that got pushed to the side during the working day. Thomas was in the silver pantry, cleaning pieces for the following day, Anna was out in the work yard with Mr. Bates, Jane was reading a book on English gardening, and Daisy was playing with Charlie. Ethel watched over her, proud of how her son babbled curiously at the wooden rattle Daisy offered.
“Shake, shake, shake!” Daisy teased, playing the rattle for Charlie. Charlie watched the noise, agog, making spluttering noises of indignation. “Shake, shake, shake!”

Jane paused mid-read, watching Charlie carefully. “Don’t over stimulate him, Daisy, or he won’t go to bed.”

Ethel clenched her fist upon the table. She was growing damn tired of Jane’s passive aggressive disapproval.

“I’m his mother, I’ll decide what’s best for him,” Ethel warned.

“I’ve been a mother longer than you,” Jane reminded her, “And my son’s turned out just fine.”

“Are you insisting my son will not?” Ethel retorted. Jane pursed her lips, turning a page in her book. She offered no reply, but her silence spoke a thousand vile words.

Daisy had stopped shaking the rattle. Charlie whined, reaching out with a pudgy hand to pick up the instrument himself.

Ethel took it from Daisy’s slackened grip, and handed it over to Charlie. He observed it closely, rolling the wooden rattle around to hear out the beans clacked and slid inside. He brought it up to his mouth, gumming at the top; it was too big to get his mouth around but he tried.

Mrs. Hughes walked into the servant’s hall, gesturing for Ethel: “Ethel, will you come with me?”

Ethel reached out, and took Charlie from Daisy’s arms. She didn’t feel comfortable leaving her son alone around Jane. She almost thought Jane would try to turn him against her, though that was a rather silly notion. Daisy was crestfallen to have her playmate taken away; she would simply have to deal with it.

They went to Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room, which was keeping company to a tea tray already half consumed. Mrs. Hughes shut the door behind them all, and offered Ethel a tea cup. Ethel turned it down, simply because she was already holding Charlie and wanted to have a hand free.

“I can’t drink tea and hold Charlie at the same time,” Ethel said.

“Then sit down,” Mrs. Hughes offered. Ethel sat in her visitor’s chair, and finally accepted the lukewarm cup of jasmine tea.

Charlie gurgled around his rattle while Ethel took a hasty sip of tea. A tiny drip fell on Charlie’s head, and she kissed it away at once. Mrs. Hughes’ thin lips twitched in the tiniest of smiles.

“I wanted to thank you for how hard you’ve worked over the past few days,” Mrs. Hughes said. “You’ve saved us with your hard work.”

Ethel nodded, already sensing where this conversation was going. Mrs. Hughes was about to kick her out the door, citing their past woes.

But then, Mrs. Hughes did something wholly unexpected.

“…It’s hard for me to do this, after our history together,” Mrs. Hughes let out a dramatic sigh, “But after what I’ve seen these past few days, I can’t in good conscience continue to berate you. I see your change of heart, Ethel. I know you made a mistake, but I believe you’ve thoroughly paid for it, and if Thomas is willing to give you a chance and a future, then so should I.”
Ethel waited, breathless.

“Jane’s decided to hand in her notice… and I have a spot of housemaid to fill. Someone who knows the house well, and can work with Anna while she cares for Lady Mary.” Mrs. Hughes sat up straight in her chair, folding her hands in her lap, “So, I’ve spoken with Mr. Carson, and we’ve decided to give you your job back. Permanently."

“…Really?” Ethel almost squeaked the word, too shocked to vocalize her thoughts properly.

“Really.” Mrs. Hughes said, “But mind you Mr. Carson was not happy about—“

Ethel didn’t allow her to finish. She surged forward, Charlie still on her hip, and embraced Mrs. Hughes like she might have her own mother. Charlie was squashed between them, and squawked irritably. Mrs. Hughes let out a shocked noise, nervously patting Ethel on the back after a moment.

“Thank you Mrs. Hughes!” There were tears in Ethel’s eyes and she would not deny them. They fell unimpeded down her face, “Oh, thank you! I have to go tell Thomas, he’ll be so thrilled!”

Mrs. Hughes was still flushed from their embrace, and hurriedly tidied the back of her hair. “Well, don’t over excite him,” she warned. “He still out to be in bed if you ask me.”

“You can’t keep a good man down, Mrs. Hughes!” Ethel was all but singing as she fled the room.

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One door and half a hallway over, Thomas Barrow stood finishing up the last round of polishing for tomorrow’s silver. He muttered under his breath, ticking off boxes on Mr. Carson’s ancient clipboard. Since Lavinia was now dead, the wedding was understandably off and all the silver they’d pulled out would have to be put back.

He was interrupted by a rather bizarre sequence of noises: the clatter of heels upon stone, the jiggling of a babbling baby, the rattle of beads against wood, and finally Ethel’s screech of delight as she burst into Carson’s office and threw herself upon Thomas.

There were tears on her cheeks, but they weren’t tears of sorrow. Instead, she was blissfully happy.

“What’s going on?” Thomas asked, rather confused.

“Oh Thomas, it’s incredible!” Ethel declared, “You’ll never belief it-!” Her green eyes were sparkling with happiness. “Mrs. Hughes gave me my job back! Forever an’ ever, she swears it! I can stay at Downton!”

And as if shocked by her own happiness Ethel began to cry again. With one hand, she held on tight to Thomas like he was her lifeline. “I’m- so- happy-!” She whimpered. Squashed between them, Charlie let out a whimper of distress.

Slightly amused, Thomas pulled back from Ethel and took Charlie from her arms. Now they could hug properly without suffocating their son.

“I knew you could do it!” Thomas praised; his heart felt incredibly light at that moment.

“Oh god,” Ethel was almost faint from shock, “I’ve never been so happy.” She rested her head upon his shoulder, sniffing obscenely. Charlie grabbed a chunk of her hair to hold onto it. “But… what will we do about livin’ in a cottage?”
“Don’t you worry about any of that,” Thomas said. He’d settle things just as soon as Carson was back on his feet. “I’m make sure we have our own place. And then, Charlie will never know a day of unhappiness.”

Ethel choked up, unwilling to part from Thomas. In his arms, Charlie banged his rattle delicately atop his mother’s crown of curly red hair.

“Our son is a musician,” Thomas teased.

“He can be whatever he wants, so long as he’s yours,” Ethel sniffed. “You’ve saved his life, Thomas. You’ve saved all our lives.”

And though it wasn’t initially what he’d come back in time for, in that moment Thomas felt like his mission was almost complete. Almost.

He petted her hair, pulling back a bit so that Ethel could wipe her face better. He offered her his handkerchief with his free hand, and she dabbed underneath her green eyes till they were dry.

A soft grumbling noise at the door heralded the arrival of Mr. Carson, still in his housecoat and slippers. He looked distinctly ruffled, with his hair askew and deep bangs beneath his eyes. He did not care for physical affection in the servant’s hall, but seemed to be biting his tongue. Noting that Mr. Carson was back, Ethel took Charlie from Thomas’ arms and held him tight to her breast.

“I’ll put him to bed,” She decided.

“G’night pet,” Thomas leaned forward, and placed the gentlest of kisses on Charlie’s forehead. He gurgled appreciatively, and was whisked away by his mother.

Now, Carson and Thomas were left alone with one another. Carson blinked, slightly bleary on the edges of sleep, and let out a soft tisk.

“I see you’ve put up the wedding set,” Mr. Carson muttered, taking a seat behind his desk with a light groan.

“Oh, the party’s over everyone-“ Thomas teased, setting his clipboard upon Carson’s desk so that Carson could double check his tally marks, “He’s back… and in pajamas too. What would Mr. Carson say, I wonder? Oh wait…” Thomas smirked. It felt good to get a tiny dig in at the man who’d essentially ironed over every wrinkle in his life.

Mr. Carson rolled his eyes.

“I’ll have you know, I only wanted to check on the silver before tomorrow,” Mr. Carson said, “And you have no room to talk. You ought to be in bed too.”

“I’m fine,” Thomas assured him, closing up the silver cabinet and locking it for the night, “I’ve cleaned all the pieces we’re going to need, so you might as well head back up to bed. Tomorrow, as soon as breakfast is over, I’ll get it all ready. Problem with a house in morning is you never know if they’re going to want to eat in style or take a tray.”

“We’ll be ready either way,” Was Mr. Carson’s wise response. Thomas handed him over the key to the silver cabinet, and he hung it up on a hook behind his desk. Relaxing in his chair, Carson seemed to get more color in his face.
“Mrs. Hughes has spoken with me about Ethel,” Mr. Carson said. “I’m loath to let standards drop but even I cannot deny that she has been of great aid to us in this time. I warn you though, any poor behavior on her behalf will result in her instant dismissal.”

“I doubt she’ll give you cause to worry,” Thomas said. Mr. Carson had been employed all his life, and didn’t understand the terror of being unemployed. After having the cloud hang over their heads, Thomas and Ethel were in a key position to recognize what it meant to tie the line. “I’m grateful, Mr. Carson, and so is she.”

“And you still want a cottage, even though…?” Mr. Carson wondered.

“For Charlie, Mr. Carson,” Thomas explained. “He needs stability.”

Mr. Carson gave him a tiny if weary smile, “You’re a good man, Thomas Barrow. And a much better father than your own.”

It was, perhaps, the greatest compliment he’d received to date.

~*~

Lavinia Swire’s funeral was a somber affair, with everyone dressing in black and keeping quiet. Matthew Crawley was distraught, his pallid cheeks lined with pink tear tracks. He wasn’t the only one fit to fall over at the first gust of wind. Lady Mary was never one to show emotion if she could allow it, but it seemed today she would make an exception. She wept openly though silently, and bitterly allowed Sir Richard to keep her company.

There was something awful about losing a life so young. You often felt cheated, like everything that ought to be was cut short. But after working side by side with the Heichecera, Thomas had a deeper understanding when it came to life and death. Things weren’t so cut and dry, even when you lost someone young. Something remained, each and every time; it just took a weathered eye to know how to see it.

Lavinia Swire’s passing would be the final pull to unite Matthew and Mary Crawley. It was as simple as that.

It was a gray, dismal day, with rain soon falling. Charlie was keeping company with Mrs. Rumsey for a few hours, with Lord Grantham having promised before the funeral he would be looking into finding a cottage for Thomas and Ethel. Ethel did not have a fancy black dress, so she’d worn her evening work dress with Thomas’ overcoat and one of Mrs. Hughes’ borrowed hats. She stuck to Thomas’ arm like glue, quiet in the face of the family’s grief.

After the funeral was concluded, the servants were the first to march back to the house. It was a mark of how much time had passed in his current life that Thomas couldn’t rightly remember what his prior life had been like. He supposed, given that he’d lost everything in the black market, he’d been smug to get his job back. But something was niggling in the back of Thomas’ mind, warning him to try and remember more.

What was he forgetting?

“You seem pensive,” Ethel said as she and Thomas walked back along the road. They were one of the last in the line of servants, with everyone trotting back to the house to get there before the family. There would be a small gathering tonight, mostly just mourners, and a feast had been prepared to sate their appetites.
“Not really,” Thomas said. “I’m just… I dunno- I suppose I’m somber that Lavinia had to die but I understand the reason for it.”

“What’s the reason?” Ethel asked. “Honestly, I can’t make sense of it. She was so young, an’ so beautiful too. An’ Mr. Crawley loved her so. Why couldn’t death have taken someone wicked like Mr. Bryant.”

“Well it comes for us all in the end,” Thomas chortled. “So don’t worry. He won’t get off scot free.”

Ethel laughed, but paused. Her slowed gate forced Thomas to hang back as well. She seemed to be captivated by the edge of the property just before Downton Abbey took over the wilds.

“What is it?” Thomas asked, scanning the horizon. What had she seen-?

But a sudden swooping cold came over Thomas as he saw a familiar blast of orange amid the dark green. But how could it be-?

The Heichecera stood on the outskirts of Downton Abbey, wrapped in her usual attire. She was beckoning to Thomas, curling her fingers enchantingly. But instead of seeing right through the Heichecera, Ethel was somehow able to view her. For the first time in his new reality, Thomas’ past was finally catching up to him in tangible ways.

Why was the Heichecera revealing herself to Ethel now, of all moments? What did she want? Was this part of her plan, or was it a queer accident?

“Can you see her?” Ethel asked. “The gypsy?”

“…Yes.” Thomas replied. The Heichecera was still beckoning for him. “Stay here I’ll go figure out what it is-’

He left Ethel’s side, crossing through the tall grass so that little briars tried to cling to his trouser legs. He reached the Heichecera who looked displeased.

“You left her behind,” The Heichecera sulked, “That wasn’t very nice.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Thomas demanded, “You can’t show yourself to people in this universe! They won’t know what to make of you!”

“Give your wife a bit more credit,” The Heichecera said. “I don’t reveal myself to fools who can’t suffer me.”

God, Thomas hoped she was right. He looked over his shoulder to see Ethel still waiting patiently (albeit nervously) for him.

“Feeling a bit better?” The Heichecera asked him. “You’ve got more color in your face.”

“Yeah, thanks for the egg by the way,” Thomas grumbled. “Real funny joke.”

The Heichecera gave him a tight smile, “If I were you, I’d hold onto that egg. You’re going to need it in the future.”

Confused, Thomas asked, “Why would I need an egg?”

“Because it’s not an egg.”
“But you just said it was an egg.”

“It is an egg, but it’s not an egg.”

Thomas blinked stupidly, shifting from foot to foot. It was an egg but it wasn’t an egg? What did that mean? “I don’t understand.”

“You will, in due time.” The Heichecera said, “Just keep it safe.”

Thomas was suddenly quite glad he hadn’t thrown the egg away. It remained in his top bureau drawer, next to the original tarot card for courage which had brought him back from the dead.

“Is that why you’ve come here today?” Thomas asked. “To tell me not to squash your egg?”

“Mmm…” The Heichecera looked up at the sky, noting the dismal clouds passing overhead. “Actually I came to stop you from doing something else.”

Thomas blinked, “and that would be?”

“Attempting to keep John Bates from being arrested,” The Heichecera explained. “Or did you forget that happened immediately after the funeral?”

“Fuck,” Thomas spluttered, panic kicking in. How could he have been so stupid? How could he forget such a pivotally important thing?

“I’m sorry Thomas, but there’s nothing you can-” Thomas didn’t let the Heichecera finish. He ran from the clearing, out of the grass and back to the road. Ethel was taken aback, hurrying after him as he barreled toward the house.

“Thomas, what’s happened?” Ethel cried out, running after him. She had to hold Mrs. Hughes’ borrowed hat in her hand so that it wouldn’t fly off as she ran. Thomas wished he could tell her, wished he could stop and explain, but he’d already wasted far too much time by walking slow and talking to the Heichecera. Why had she forced him to remain behind? Why, when she knew that Bates was innocent and was about to be framed for murder? I mean, yes, technically he had gotten off in the end, but surely it could all be avoided if Thomas just got to Bates in time and warned him that he was about to be arrested. Maybe he could go on the run-!

It doesn’t work like that, a gentle voice resonated in his head. You can’t save Bates from this.

Even as Thomas came upon the area yard, it was to the sight of a police wagonette being loaded by three men. Between two of them was Bates, handcuffed and looking bitterly defeated.

“Wait, wait, wait-!” Thomas cried out, skidding against the cobble stone to throw out both hands. At once, the third policeman stretched out an arm to keep him from protesting Bates’ arrest. “You’ve got the wrong man! He didn’t do anything!”

“What’s going on?” Ethel demanded, horrified to find Bates being arrested, “What are you doing? He hasn’t broken any laws!” She even reached out a hand to try and grab the man loading Bates into the back of the wagon. As a result, Ethel was pushed away and almost fell into Thomas.

“If you attempt to stop us, I will arrest you for impeding justice,” The man warned.

“There’s no justice in this!” Thomas barked back. The man paid him no mind, watching over his fellows as they closed the back of the wagonette and locked it with a heavy iron bolt and key. They were getting into the wagonette, preparing the horses to carry on up their path.
Thomas grabbed the bars of John’s cage, “Don’t be afraid!”

John would not look at him, head bowed in queer shame.

“Look after Anna, Thomas,” Bates said. “I married you when you were ill in bed. I’m sorry, but I can’t beat this—”

The wagonette was rolling away, one of the policemen slapping the reigns so that the horses skittered and marched.

“No, don’t give up.” Thomas slipped off the back of the wagonette, skidded on the stone, and was forced to watch Bates roll away, “Don’t give up!!”

But Bates could not hear him nor reply.
The wagonette was rounding the corner of the work area.
He was gone.

“…Oh my god…” Ethel whispered, clutching at her breast in shock. She could not speak louder, and seemed to be almost numb to the rest of the world. “Oh my god.”

Thomas could hear Anna crying inside the house.

~*~

It was a god awful affair, when Thomas and Ethel returned inside. They were met with the same mute shock they also felt, save for Anna who was in hysterics broken down at the servant’s hall table. At once, Mrs. Hughes and Ethel put Anna to bed, allowing her to lay down so that she could recover. But even as Thomas put his livery back on and attempted to keep the house going, he could still hear Anna crying. Her wails seemed to echo around a house already in mourning, soaking into the decrepit stone until the skies opened up and rain began to pour.

Everything felt weak and awful, like there was no joy left in the world.

Dinner that night was canceled. Mrs. Patmore’s feast was split onto a series of trays, each going up to the gallery floor where they comforted everyone from Matthew Crawley to Lord Grantham. Thomas collected trays from the hall, scuffed the tips of his shoes on the carpet in a methodical rhythm to try and find some comfort himself. Life was ugly, he told himself. Life was unfair, and ugly. That was why he’d come back in time, to try and make it a little better in any which way he could. But there were some ways he could not make life better; some ways, again and again, in which he would simply have to concede defeat.

After finishing the last of his chores, Thomas found himself at a loss for what to do next. Charlie slept quietly in his cot, slightly fitful. Ethel offered to get him a cup of tea, unwilling to return to her room. She was, at this moment, still rooming with Anna. Tonight, despite not having Mrs. Hughes or Mr. Carson’s permission, Ethel was going to hide in Thomas’ room until Anna passed out. It was impossible to get a good nights sleep when your bunk mate was in the fit of hysterics.

She brought two cups of tea to Thomas’ room, and the pair of them drank quietly. Anna’s whimper were slightly muted, but could still be heard every so often. Thomas wondered if there was a surplus
of tears one could shed in their life.

_That’s impossible_, he thought irritably, _Because if there was I’d be in debt._

“Anna just keeps cryin and cryin,” Ethel whispered. They sat side by side on Thomas’ bed, their knees touching. She wore her housecoat, a frayed pink thing borrowed from Mrs. Patmore. It practically swallowed her whole, meant for a woman three times her size. “I feel so awful for her. Is it true, though?” Anna asked, turning to Thomas, “What they’re whisperin’ in the halls. Did Bates really kill his wife?”

“No,” Thomas scowled, “Bates doesn’t fall in for all that an’ you know it. That wife of his was absolutely insane. She poisoned herself to make it seem like he wanted to kill her.”

“But why on earth would anyone do a thing like that?” Ethel demanded, horrified at the notion that someone would be so depraved.

“I guess cause she didn’t want him to be happy,” Thomas mused, “An’ if that meant she had to die, so be it.” He took a long sip of tea to avoid meeting Ethel’s eyes. She was gaping at him in horror.

“Christ, an’ I thought I was a dark horse,” Ethel said.

There was much to be done, on that final note, besides finish their tea and go to bed.

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Anna’s hysteria did not die until after midnight. To try and find some sleep, Ethel hid in Thomas’ room and slept in his bed instead. Thomas slept on the floor, staring up at the ceiling and listening for the tell tale sound of Anna finally falling off to sleep. When Anna was unconscious, Thomas would wake Ethel and she would be able to return to the woman’s side.

When silence took over, Thomas checked his pocket watch to note that it was 12:04. Careful not to wake Charlie, Thomas got up from the floor, popped a crick in his back, and helped Ethel back over to the women’s side. She yawned the entire time, a little too out of touch to bother with closing the door quietly. As a result, poor Charlie woke and began to wail from his cot even as Thomas returned to his room. Cor, would he get any sleep tonight?

“Ey… ey now…” Thomas plucked his son up, jiggling him gently upon his shoulder. Charlie fussed, whimpering and whining at his ruined sleep. He wasn’t the only one desperate to go back to bed.

Worrying that Charlie would wake the other servants, what with Anna’s hysteria already setting them back a few hours, Thomas decided the best thing to do would be to take Charlie downstairs. He put on his housecoat and shoes, wrapping Charlie securely in his blanket before setting off on a short walk around Downton Abbey. The amazing thing about the abbey at night was that the walls of servitude came crashing down. Rules were for the waking hours, when butlers and lords could demand things of you. At night, when everyone was asleep, Thomas was just another man walking through another house.

The main floor was quiet and dark. Outside, rain was turning into snow with the temperature dropping even further. As a result, normal sound was softened, and Charlie’s whimpers slowly returned to silence.

Thomas might have returned to bed, had it not been for the sight of someone sitting on the steps of the main stairwell.
Matthew Crawley was clearly unable to sleep as well. He might have had a coworker wailing in his ear till midnight, but he was just as troubled. There were deep bags beneath his blue eyes, and his posture was slouched. He rested his chin upon his knees, looking so thoroughly miserable that Thomas could not help but approach. God— what to even say to the man?

He paused in front of Matthew, sitting down at the man’s side when Matthew did not offer him a hello or demand he leave. Like Thomas, Matthew was likewise of the opinion that at night, the rules did not matter.

Charlie was back to sleep on his shoulder; Thomas prayed he remained that way.

“…I’m so bloomin’ sorry,” Thomas said as way of greeting.

“She saw me kissing Mary from these stairs, and it sucked out her will to live. I’ve killed a woman with my selfishness,” Was Matthew’s reply.

It was obvious, when you heard Matthew’s voice, that he’d been crying. Matthew’s eyes were raw, up close, and his tone had a throaty quality to it like he was suffering from a head cold. He noted that Thomas held a baby in his arms, and tried for a smile. It didn’t work.

“Is that the little chap Lord Grantham told me about?” He asked. “Your new son?”

Thomas nodded, smiling gently, “This is Charlie Barrow.”

Matthew opened his mouth as if to compliment Charlie. But instead, he just couldn’t manage it. He crumpled, putting his head in his hands, and emitting a long shuddering sigh. The weight of his self-imposed guilt seemed to be sucking him dry.

“…I killed her, Thomas,” Matthew whispered.

“No you didn’t,” Thomas wouldn’t hear of such things.

“If she hadn’t seen me-“

“She’d still have passed from Spanish Flue,” Thomas urged.

But Matthew was so overcome with guilt that he just couldn’t see it. “But don’t you understand, I took away her will to live-“

“Sir- Matthew-“ It was a ballsy move to call a lord by his first name but by god, Matthew needed the wake up call. “Far be it from me to deny that the will to live is a grand and glorious thing. But at some point you have to concede defeat. You can’t live on will alone. The flu doesn’t care how much you want to live; it’ll kill you just the same. It was awful rotten luck, and that’s all that can be said about it. I know that seems absolutely horrid… but sometimes life is unfair like that.”

Matthew blinked, seeming to need a moment to digest that a servant had just called him by his first name and given him a life lesson. But Matthew was not a normal toff; he was middle class by birth and understood what it meant to live in the real world.

“…Tell me, Thomas, have you ever broken someone’s heart?”

It was hard to say. “It’s possible,” Thomas mused, considering all the people that he’d wronged in his prior existence. In this reality, however, Thomas was certain the only person he could have rendered heart broken was Edward Courtenay. But their love was never to b wanted. He had to wonder if Edward was even still alive. The Heichecera seemed to imply that death would take what
it wanted either way.

“I’m pretty certain I’ve broken a heart, now that I think about it,” Thomas sighed, “But it just couldn’t be avoided. And I’ve had someone break my heart in return, so that’s just how it goes I suppose.”

“…Were you ever able to forgive the one that hurt you?” Matthew asked.

Thomas smiled, thinking of Jimmy’s beautiful eyes. How he’d smelt of peppermint early in the morning and had tried to make his life a living hell for over a year. Every day had been a struggle to survive underneath Jimmy’s blistering scorn, and yet…?

“Of course,” Thomas said, for he doubted a day would come when he’d ever dislike Jimmy. He was simply born to love the man, even if Jimmy did not love him back.

“How?” Matthew asked, his posture perking up a bit. “When they hurt you so badly? How could you ever look at them as human again?”

“Too err is human,” Thomas reminded him. “Who am I to judge another human being, like I’ve never done a wrong… Cor, I think I’ve done more wrong than most men.”

“… Lavinia never did a wrong,” Matthew said. Thomas doubted this was true.

“I think you're putting her on a pedestal,” Thomas reminded him, “And if she were still alive, I think she’d tell you to stop…. Sir.” He threw the word in there just for posterities sake. Lord, if Carson ever found out he’d talked to Matthew Crawley so impertinently, he’d be scrubbing floors for a month.

Matthew tried for one excuse, then another, but found them all lacking. Instead, he just repeated what was in his heart, as sad and depressing as it might be: “I can never be happy now.”

“Ah… happiness is relentless,” At least, that was what Thomas now believed. Life was shitty but happiness was relentless.

“You’d have to be a cold hearted bastard to get away from it,” Thomas said. “I should know, I was a bastard.”

“… I’ve never heard a word describe a man less,” Matthew said. “The other day when you said you were sorry for my loss, it was the first time that someone had spoken to me in days without sounding like a parrot.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say to that. It was hard to accept a compliment when it was wrapped in grief.

“…I know the wedding’s off but… will you still valet for me?” Matthew asked.

“Moseley’s going to kill me,” Thomas mused.

…But honestly, what kind of a threat was he?

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to comment.
A Christmas Carol

Chapter Summary

The first Christmas of the Barrow/Parks, Bates/Smith marriage is one fraught with confusion and fear, but even greater challenges lay ahead.

Meanwhile, the Heichecera begins a plan all her own to stay the course of Thomas' life.

Chapter Notes

Oh look! An update that didn't take a month to produce! Ain't that a goddamn treat?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This first Christmas of the Barrow-Parks marriage was spent in a house of contradictions. Golden light sprinkled upon freshly fallen snow, christening a morning with the sound of toasts being made and logs crackling on the hearth. But a gloom fell over every preceding, keeping Christmas at arm's length so that the holiday felt a mere shadow of its true self. Where there ought to be caroling and feasting, there was a pervading silence upon the servant's hall. Mrs. Patmore made a roast turkey for the staff to eat, and Lady Rosamund came up from London, but it still just wasn't the same. With Bates in prison and awaiting his sentencing, Anna was stiff with mourning; the rest of the staff were so tightly intertwined that the others could not help but feel the same. Lord Grantham looked to Bates as a companion in arms, and so the family was likewise dour even as they put on their holiday best and passed out presents to the staff.

It was Christmas morning, and everyone was lined up in the great hall. It was family tradition that presents were passed out to the staff after the family was fed their normal morning meal. From the hours of 10 to 1, a feast was held in the servant's hall that would serve as their sordid holiday time. There, presents from the staff would be opened and Mr. Carson would pass about mulled wine.

Ethel Barrow looked a hundred miles away from the wretch Thomas had married on December 3rd. She seemed to glow, holding Charlie in her arms and standing side by side with her husband. Thomas, for the most part, was completely back to normal despite his near-death experience twenty days ago. He'd not seen the Heichecera since and considered it a blessing given the fact that Ethel had seen her the last time she'd appeared. Could it be that from now on, Ethel would likewise be able to see her too? Why Ethel and no one else? Was it because they were married, or was there a deeper thread Thomas had still not uncovered? What was more, Thomas could not help but think of Bates who would be sentenced in three days time. Thomas knew for a fact what was about to befall Anna would shake her to her core, but Bates would be back by October. They just had to be strong and gather all the evidence necessary to set Bates free.

*How did I live through this the last time?* Thomas wondered. Now a days it felt like there was an anvil in his chest. How had he been so aloof and uncaring?

He was snapped out of his reverie by Lord Grantham beckoning him. It was his turn to receive his present. Thomas walked forward, head bowed demurely, and accepted a rather small box wrapped in
"I hope you like it," Lord Grantham said with a kind smile.

"Thank you M'lord," Thomas said, the age-old line of servitude, "You're very kind."

He headed back to the line, keeping place next to Ethel's spot as she walked up to Lady Grantham who handed her two gifts wrapped in brown paper. Ethel beamed, gave her thanks, and stepped back in line so that once more she and Thomas were side by side. Charlie was gurgling, tugging on a thread of Ethel's collar which was coming undone.

"What do you think it is?" Ethel asked, nodding to Thomas' little present.

"I'm going to shoot for five hundred pounds," Thomas teased with a grin.


"I jest," though that was already obvious, "Probably something like cufflinks." Little did Lord Grantham know that Thomas already possessed a set inlaid with mother of pearl from Philip Prevet.

"And you still don't want a present from me, after all you've done for me?" Ethel wondered, a little amazed. It was true that Thomas had forbade her from giving him a present and with good reason. Ethel had no money to her name, and no time to find a gift. Their money and their time were no longer their own; both belonged to Charlie until he was grown enough to care for himself.

"You sound like you didn't save me from death's embrace a few weeks ago," Thomas reminded her, which made Ethel smile. He continued on, "Our money goes to Charlie, Ethel. If we save enough, we can send him to a proper school, and he'll never have to work like us."

"From your lips to God's ears," Ethel muttered under her breath so that Carson could not hear.

When Daisy received her gift, as the last member of descending staff, everyone proceeded to open their gifts. Ethel sat Charlie on the floor at her feet, much to his delight as he began to crawl in the general direction of Anna so that he could play with her shoe buckle. Ethel was quick to open her gift, even as Thomas trotted after Charlie to make sure he didn't cause too much havoc while his mother opened her present. The first bundle was the obvious gift, two sets of fabric so that Ethel could play with her shoe buckle. Ethel was quick to open her gift, even as Thomas trotted after Charlie to make sure he didn't cause too much havoc while his mother opened her present. The first bundle was the obvious gift, two sets of fabric so that Ethel could make new dresses. One was a soft paisley green that would go well with Ethel's eyes, hinted with threads of gold that emblazoned little bundles of wheat. The second was a sleek black, hinted with linings of black lace. Both would do perfectly, and Ethel was clearly grateful to them as she bowed her head to Lady Grantham in thanks. The second gift, however, was much dearer to both of them: a doe skin jacket for Charlie that was just a little too big so that he could grow into it.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Ethel praised, delighted. She dropped to her knees, forcing Charlie to put on the jacket. He babbled all the while, unsure what the hubbub was over, but looked rather smart when it was over.

"Ma-!" Charlie wailed indignantly when Ethel gave him a wet kiss on the cheek.

"Oh hush, you'll live," Anna teased.

Thomas opened up his own gift as Ethel plucked Charlie up again, untying the red ribbon to find soft white tissue beneath. It unfolded to reveal a small golden tassel for his albert chain, inscribed with a smart font:

**Charlie Barrow**
"How sweet!" Ethel praised. Thomas looked up to Lord Grantham with a smile, who nodded to him in acknowledgement of his thanks. At once, Thomas plucked out his pocket watch so that he could fasten the tassel to the parrot clasp.

With presents out of the way, the servants descended the steps back to their communal dwelling ground; soon the whole hall was alive with the smell of turkey and cranberry dressing as everyone hurried upstairs to collect their own presents that they'd bought for others. Thomas, wary of spending money after adopting Charlie and taking Ethel as his wife, had told others in advance to expect very little from him this year. He wrote a letter of kindness to Anna for her trials ahead, bought Mr. Carson a new pen (his old one had run flat a few days ago), and had unbeknownst to Ethel got her a simple handkerchief embroidered with the initials "E.B."

And of course, she'd gotten him a gift too; damn her and her wily ways!

"I told you not to get me a gift!" Thomas groaned, even as accepted a flat parcel. Ethel just rolled her eyes and took his own gift to set it beside her plate.

"Pot and kettle," She chided. Before Thomas could argue the point further, Mrs. Patmore brought out their feast.

It was a sumptuous display, though it hardly held a candle to what the family would eat tonight. The servants ate turkey while the family received goose, with apple sauce and prunes, sweet potatoes, brussels sprouts with chestnuts, potted shrimp, and the piece de resistance of plum pudding. Mrs. Patmore hid a shilling inside; whoever got it received good luck for the following year.

All of this was mind boggling to Charlie who'd never seen such a feast in all his life. Just for him, Mrs. Patmore offered him a small Christmas pie made of shredded turkey, stuffing, and cranberry sauce layered beneath a thin hot water crust. It even had a spring of holly atop it, which made everyone titter as Charlie reached out to touch the thorny leaves with care.

"Oooch!" Charlie tutted, letting go of the holly with distaste. For whatever reason the 'ou' sound was replaced with an 'ooo'. A pile of crackers in the middle of the table, however, were much more interesting to him.

But first, the feast!

Thomas ate his turkey with gusto, eyes momentarily fluttering closed for how wonderful it tasted. The table momentarily fell silent as everyone stuffed their faces, save for Charlie who was still reaching in vain for a cracker and getting annoyed that he had to eat first.

Ethel tried to get him to eat his pie, then Thomas. Charlie wasn't having it.

"Oh come on, lamb!" Ethel tutted, using a tiny spoon to try and force Charlie to eat his pie, "You'd never had turkey before! You'll love it! It's a special day, you won't get it again for a while- why won't you eat it?"

"Because he wants a cracker Thomas said around a mouthful of mulled wine. Across the table from then, Anna gave them a tiny smile. In black, she looked like a widow compared to the others.
"Anna, do you mind terribly if we pull one for him?" Thomas asked. "I know we're a house in mourning."

"I don't mind, Thomas," Anna seemed to soften though, as if touched he would ask first.

"Alright, we're doing this just for you!" Thomas warned, plucking up a cracker from atop the pile and holding one end so that Ethel could take the other. Charlie was already squealing with delight, green eyes twinkling with mischief. "We're a house in mourning until Mr. Bates comes home. One, two-!" And on an unspoken three he and Ethel pulled the cracker with a sharp snap!

Charlie was babbling in his delight, banging pudgy fists upon the table as confetti poured down upon his head along with a folded paper crown, a tin horse, a joke, and a wrapped chocolate. Charlie didn't know which to grab first but decided that each was better to put in his mouth that food he could actually consume. Thomas had to be stern, making sharp sounds as he took the toys away before Charlie could eat them. To sate their son, Ethel unfolded the crown and placed it upon Charlie's head amid his black curls. Thomas sat the tin horse by Charlie's plate, and gave the chocolate to Ethel who put it in her pocket; Charlie was much too young for sweets.

"Is Mr. Bates the one Lady Rosamund told me about?" Shore spoke up, "The murderer?"

Shore was Lady Rosamund's personal maid, a shrewd woman with a sharp face and dark eyes. She was rather annoying, constantly poking her nose into the kitchen to note how Daisy was underpaid and overworked.

Anna bristled, but did not answer.

"Mr. Bates has been unjustly accused of murder," Mr. Carson replied with warning, "That is all."

"All?" Shore grumbled, "I should think that enough for most people."

"Well we're not interested in most people," Thomas snapped. Shore took a moment to digest that, noting how Charlie was fingering his new tin horse with amazement.

"Clearly," Shore finally said, "I've never been to a house with a baby before."

"We're waiting for our cottage to be settled," Ethel said.

"So..." Shore set down her fork, glaring at Thomas. "You got married and had a baby before you had a house? That's a bit unfair on your wife, don't you think?"

Thomas rolled his eyes; what business was it of Shore's anyways?

"My husband has never been unfair to me a day in his life," Ethel said. "An' I'll ask you to mind to your own business Miss Shore. You're just a visitor here, and you don't know the facts about our marriage."

"Amen," Thomas muttered, taking another sip of wine.

Shore fell quiet, looking uncomfortable. Thomas hoped she stayed that way for the remainder of the meal.

"Read the joke," Anna offered, to break the tense silence. "So that we can all hear?" And everyone turned to Thomas as he unfolded the crisp blue paper to see the printed text inside.

"Why is a Christmas pudding like the Atlantic Ocean?" Thomas asked the table.
There was momentary silence as everyone pondered the riddle.

But then, Mr. Carson groaned, as if coming to the conclusion, and gave Thomas an irritable stare. Thomas grinned, noting that the answer on the paper was "Because it is full of currants".

"It's got currants!" Daisy piped up from the end of the table.

"Brava!" Thomas applauded her. The others gave her a smattering of applause, and Daisy beamed from ear to ear.

"One day I will hear a Christmas cracker and it will not fill me with irritation," Carson promised himself.

"Oh, hush up and eat your turkey," Mrs. Hughes tittered with a gentle smile.

Thomas took his time to eat his lunch, one arm around the back of Charlie's table chair to keep him from tipping over. He ate with his hands, not a fork, and constantly had to be doted upon with a napkin to keep him clean. His favorite dish was, without surprise, the cranberry sauce although he did seem to like the stuffing too. He mostly just played with the hot water crust, and the turkey was a chore to consume. Still, Ethel and Thomas forced him to eat five pieces before Charlie started to get fussy and they gave up. Thomas, for his own part, ate two servings of turkey and was quite happy to do so.

Afterwards, everyone opened their gifts while enjoying a slice of Christmas pudding. Carson was kind enough to light it on fire right in front of Charlie, who gaped in shock at the display and was rendered silent as everyone blew it out. Everyone applauded, a few laughing at how Charlie continued to gape at the pudding. When pieces were passed about, Charlie got a tiny sliver. This only elicited more delighted applause when it was discovered that he held the shilling. Charlie poked a pudgy finger at it, confused as to why there was money in his desert.

"Ah, that's good luck!" Mrs. Hughes praised.

"And money for your education," Mr. Carson added with a smile. Ethel plucked it out, wiped it off with her napkin, and put it in her pocket.

"That's my boy!" Thomas teased, pressing a kiss atop Charlie's head. "Keep finding money, and we can retire to the Swiss Alps! I ought to take you to London for a gambling round. I could make a fortune."

Thomas had a rather large pile, which stood in sharp contrast to his true past. In his prior reality, Thomas had never received Christmas presents from anyone, not even O'Brien. He'd always felt a horrible stab of envy during Christmas when the others had passed about their gifts, basking in the love of their little downstairs family. Thomas had been on the fringes for all of it, even during Jimmy Kent's time of employment. Eventually, Thomas had just stopped looking for love during the holidays. He'd eaten his turkey and gone upstairs when the others had opened their present. Alone in his room, he'd smoked a cigarette and fantasized about what he might buy himself for Christmas if money weren't an object.

Now, however, Thomas received presents every Christmas. He'd now been in his new reality for seven years. Before the war, Thomas had been rebuilding his reputation, and during the war Thomas hadn't been able to enjoy the holidays. 1918 had offered him a smattering of gifts, and 1919 was just the same. His pile rivaled Anna's in size, though no one's piles were as big as Mrs. Hughes who won
the cake with presents from everyone.

They opened their gifts in unison, and suddenly the table vanished underneath a pile of wrapping paper and twine.

A lot of Thomas' gifts this year centered around Charlie (unsurprisingly). Anna had knitted Charlie a blanket with Daisy's help, and Mr. Carson had bought him his first pair of trousers. He received new shoes from Mrs. Hughes, and a cup from Mrs. Patmore to learn how to start drinking without a bottle.

Thomas opened Ethel's gift to find that it was a birth certificate and paused to read it with a smile.

![Birth Certificate]

It was as good a Christmas present as any he'd ever received.

~*~

Dinner that night for the family was an illustrious affair. Where the servants had dined on a lower-class budget, the family ate with clear opulence. The Regina set sparkled like polished diamonds beneath the light of thirty centerpiece candles, with red and white roses creating designs in the shape of the Grantham crest. Lady Sybil was not present, although Sir Richard had come up; he looked rather irritated, sitting next to Lady Mary even while she continued to try to Matthew on her other side. Thomas had dressed him and Sir Richard before dinner, with Carson consenting to dress Lord Grantham in lieu of Thomas' burdened workload. It would only get worse with Lord Hepworth visiting next week; Thomas had to pray the man would bring his own valet.

In the servery, Thomas was cramped between Anna and Ethel who were helping him to lay out the final course of Christmas pudding. It was a massive affair, three layers high, wreathed in holly and elderberries with a whole array of sauces and sides. It was traditional for Carson to carry it out to the family, but Thomas brought it up from the kitchens so that Carson could refill wine glasses.
"Coming through, coming through-" Thomas whispered, elbowing Anna out of the way so that he could set the pudding down. Cor, it must weigh thirty pounds!

Anna ferried through the pockets of her apron, searching for the long matches to light the pudding, but came up short, "Oh I forgot the matches-". There was a dazed expression upon her face. She often looked like the world were a blur before her with Bates' arrest fresh on her plate.

"Here-" It would be slightly dangerous, but Thomas was willing to sacrifice his fingers. He pulled out his silver lighter, which lacked the length necessary for a safe sendoff but would keep dinner rolling all the same.

"Are you still smoking?" Ethel scrutinized him with a wary eye.

"Y-" Thomas broke off when he noticed Ethel scowling, "I'm trying to quit."

"Think of Charlie, that ought to help," Ethel placed silver serving spatulas neatly beneath the weight of the pudding so that Carson could cut and serve. "You won't be around for your grandchildren if you smoke."

"Oh that's real nice, emotional blackmail at Christmas", Thomas began to tug off his white gloves; he didn't want to light the pudding while wearing them.

Carson entered the server, effectively squashing them further so that there was hardly any room to move. He found Thomas lighting the pudding with his personal lighter and stopped him at once.

"I require my footmen to have intact fingers," Mr. Carson tutted, pulling out long matches from his own pocket. He struck them upon the side board, lighting them in one go and setting the pudding ablaze. Ethel and Anna had to lean back lest the ends of their hair start to singe. Thomas put back on his white gloves with haste as Carson picked up the pudding and whisked it out into dining room. It was followed by a smattering of applause from the family and a chorus of 'oohs' and 'ahhs'.

After dinner, Carson served coffee, whiskey, and cigars in the parlor while Thomas, Ethel, and Anna stripped down the dining room. Even Mrs. Hughes had to come upstairs to help, simply because there was so much to take down that three people simply couldn't carry it all. Thomas bore the brunt of the heavier lifting, and when all was said and done he was sweating in his livery. Barely three minutes passed between Thomas finishing his final round of bringing down plates before the family went to bed and he was made to dress Matthew and Sir Richard for bed. Matthew was easy to please, and for that Thomas was grateful, but Sir Richard was finicky, and Thomas had to finish several errands for the man before he was settled and ready for bed. Carson once again took care of Lord Grantham, simply because Thomas needed a breather. He found a sympathetic ear in Ethel, who listened to his complaints over dinner and helped him to bring down the final glasses for the night. Every candle had to be doused, lest a fire start, which wasn't usually a large errand save for on special occasions. After Ethel was done, Mrs. Hughes personally walked from room to room, wary of one candle going unnoticed and chaos being the result.

"Carson can't keep workin' you like this," Ethel complained as they descended the servant's stairwell for the final time that night. Thomas' feet were aching, practically pounding in his worn leather shoes. "He needs to get another footman, at the very least."

"Careful what you ask for," Thomas muttered, thinking of Alfred and Jimmy had essentially knocked his world of its axis. Would they be returning in this universe? Would he be ready for them?
"Well I'm going to mention it to him, if he doesn't do something soon!" Ethel warned. Thomas wholly believed her, for his wife was nothing if persistent.

"Let's not badger Carson till after New Years," Thomas said, hoping that it would buy him some time to prepare for the onslaught of new footmen.

"Season of giving and all that?"

"Something like it."

They reached the bottom of the stairwell to find an odd gloom pervading the atmosphere. Someone had doused the lights in the servant's hall, resulting in candles being lit for the first time in six years. They shed light on a shocking scene.

There, sitting at the servant's table, as calm as you please, was the Heichecera. Across from her, completely unaware of her presence, sat O'Brien and Daisy playing planchette. They were far from alone; Anna and Shore sat at the other end of the table watching warily. Yet none of the women seemed to realize that a Spanish sorceress was in their midst. It was as if the Heichecera were but a screened image, not fully solid or worthy or recognition.

But an even greater shock was in store. Thomas turned to look to Ethel, hoping and praying that she would be just as oblivious.

She wasn't.

Ethel was gaping at the Heichecera, appalled to find that their humble abode was hosting a vagrant.

"What is she doing here?" Ethel demanded, pointing to where the Heichecera sat. Thomas tugged her hand down at once, his heart pounding in his throat. How could he keep Ethel from saying something damning?

"It's a game of planchette!" Daisy declared, rosy cheeked from working all day in a sweltering kitchen, "Come play!"

"I'm going to talk to spirits," O'Brien explained.

"But-" Ethel looked to Thomas, then to O'Brien, and finally to the Heichecera. "But what is-?"

"They can't see me, Ethel," The Heichecera said, calmly fingerling the edge of the board. "Only you and Thomas can see me. Sit down. Come play planchette."

She could have easier insisted that Ethel take off her head and hold it under her arm. Ethel's wide, green eyes found Thomas' face with an ugly paralyzed fear that made him sick to sea. She was no doubt contemplating her sanity, for she'd seen Thomas speak to this gypsy before right when Bates had been arrested for murder. If Thomas could see her, and Ethel could see her, why could the others not? When the rules of reality broke, the peace and calm that ran in tandem alongside it were also dry.

Thomas reached out, and took Ethel's hand in a firm squeeze. He pulled her towards the table, feeling that he must obey the Heichecera's commands no matter what they were. Thomas had always felt this way, that she controlled this universe and was, consequently, its goddess. The only reason Thomas had been able to come back in time and live again was through her grace and charity. He feared that to anger her would result in his abandonment, that he might even be forced back to his original universe. The idea of losing everything he'd gained now, particularly when he know how good life could be, made Thomas go cold all over.
They sat side by side next to O'Brien. Ethel looked ready to faint.

"…How is this possible?" Ethel asked, afraid. Her eyes were locked on the Heichecera.

"The spirits talk through the board," O'Brien explained. "I don't rightly know how they do it, but they'll move the planchette when they're ready to talk."

Across the table, the Heichecera grinned. "Is that right?" she wondered aloud. O'Brien, obviously to the Heichecera, did not hear the retort.

Anna, at the other end of the table, didn't look too keen for this to go much further: "My mother forbade it in the house," Anna said.

"So did mine," Lily added, eyes narrowed with distrust.

"Well they're not here now, are they," O'Brien grumbled. Determined to make some headway in her little game, O'Brien put her fingertips on the planchette and called out to a seemingly empty room: "Is anyone there?"

Silence.
The Heichecera smiled, pleasantly.

"I said is anyone there?" O'Brien repeated.

Ethel waited, breathless with anticipation.

"Oh I can't have this now," The Heichecera let out a huff, as if this was all very taxing on her, and placed a fingertip upon the planchette's opposite point. She pushed it, ever so calmly, to the word 'yes' on the board. O'Brien ogled at it, amazed.

"Yes..." O'Brien repeated, as if unsure her eyes weren't deceiving her.

"But-" Daisy didn't know what to believe, "Was that you-?"

"I-… No..." O'Brien shook her head; her forelock swayed with the motion. She was disturbed.

"Shall I scare them?" the Heichecera asked, looking to Thomas.

"Stop," Thomas growled, even as the Heichecera flicked at the planchette. It jerked, nearly flying off the board, and both Daisy and O'Brien pulled back in shock.

"But she's-" Ethel gestured to where the Heichecera sat. Thomas took her hand mid-air and forced it to the table, staring at her expectantly. Ethel stopped mid-sentence, pale and frightened at this sudden shift in reality. Their marriage was hardly a month old. Would they be able to survive this?

Before it could come to a head, either way, the lights to the servant's hall clicked on.

"What is going on?" Mrs. Hughes was in the doorway, heavily displeased to find the servants clustered around such an ominous game.

Everyone looked about, with O'Brien rather guilty. Mrs. Hughes, like Mr. Carson, had the ability to suck the fun out of a room if necessary. Carson did it instinctively, but Mrs. Hughes wielded the power with care and only became tart if the situation called for it.

"We were just playing a game," O'Brien said. Across the table, the Heichecera rolled her eyes.
"A very unsuitable game," Mrs. Hughes said, "Especially on Christmas night. Put it away at once."

O'Brien complied without retort. She still looked slightly unsure, perhaps having felt the way the planchette moved without reason beneath her fingers. Daisy was itching to ask questions, with more and more of her curious nature starting to come out as the years passed.

"Are you sure there's nothing in it?" Daisy asked Mrs. Hughes.

"Quite sure, thank you."

"Don't you believe in spirits, then?" Daisy asked, which was a fair enough question.

Mrs. Hughes had to think on that one for a moment, but finally digressed with a short, "Well, I don't believe they play board games." Whether or not she actually believed in spirits was still a mystery yet to be solved.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," The Heichecera drawled, now thoroughly bored with the proceedings. She rose from her chair, walking toward the wall, but stopped only to look over her shoulder directly at Ethel.

"Don't scream," The Heichecera said.
She walked through the wall like a ghost, vanishing into the stone.

Ethel balked, a hand shooting up to her throat. She was pale and clammy, green eyes wide with shock. No one else was perturbed, each servant carrying on their conversations and completely unaware a sorceress had just vanished from their midst.

"Ethel come with me-" Thomas knew he had to get her out of the hall as soon as possible. She was liable to faint!

"But- I- did you just- am I going-?!" Ethel spluttered, unable to finish one sentence without starting another.

"You're going with me, outside." Thomas took her by the hand and pulled her from her chair, forcing her to march down the hallway towards the work area. As they passed, Thomas heard Shore mutter, "What's wrong with her?" in a sly voice.

"Mind your own business," O'Brien snapped. She did not like it when strangers pried.

"I don't know whose weirder," Shore complained, her voice drifting down the hallway after Thomas and Ethel, "The husband or the wife."

They reached the backdoor, and Ethel sprinted through it. As soon as they were on the other side, Thomas shut the door behind them so that they could have some much needed privacy. Ethel was gasping, on the verge of a panic attack, and seemed to be pulling at the very top of where her corset lay beneath her clothes, so as to get a deeper breath.

"What was that-?!" Ethel spun on the spot, only to spin back around, a hand clutching at her fiery red hair, "What the bloody hell was that?! Oh god, I'm going insane-! Jesus help me-!" she collapsed against the work bench, sucking in wild breathes.

"Ethel, stop!" Thomas took her by the upper arms, holding her fast so that she couldn't continue to fall about the table like a marionette. "Just breath. Deep breaths, yes? In and out, all the way."

Ethel tried, but every so often she had to speak again. She had too many questions and not enough
answers: "Please god, tell me you saw that- I know you had to see that-! I saw your eyes-!"

"Yes, I saw her." Thomas assured her. "You're not insane, Ethel. I saw her too. It happened, it was real."

But this just led to a thousand other questions, all of them exploding in Ethel's mind like fireworks: "But- how is that even possible?! Has the world gone mad?!"

"No," Thomas tried to carry on, but Ethel cut across him.

"Then why did no one else see her!?"

"Because-" Thomas was grappling for answers that he himself found wanting. How could he explain any of this to Ethel when he too was confused? "I think she didn't want anyone else to see her."

"I don't understand," Ethel said. "What's going on, Thomas? Tell me what's going on."

So it had come to this.

The fact of the matter was, Thomas had been underneath the impression that he would live his second life without ever mentioning the first. Now that he'd been living another reality for over seven years, Thomas felt fully comfortable, like he could breath again. Yet no matter how much time passed, he could still remember how awful his prior life had been. How awful he had been.

How could he explain any of this to Ethel, who'd never known him from before? Why had the Heichecera revealed herself to Ethel? Why now? What was she trying to prove, or set in motion? Was it possible that Ethel could play a part in Thomas' redemption? Was there some higher tole to be paid that he didn't know about yet?

He suddenly felt very old and very tired; he sat down on the work bench next to Ethel and put his face in his hands.

"Ethel…I…” He felt like a fool, "I was never going to tell anyone about this… but apparently she wants you to find out."

"Who is she?" Ethel demanded, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Thomas took a deep breath, relaxing a bit against the edge of the table. He could remember sitting out here after the death of Pamuk and sharing an orange with his companions. Those had been brighter days.

"She's the Heichecera," Thomas explained, "A Spanish sorceress. We sort of… have a working relationship."

"You're in cahoots with a sorceress?!" Ethel demanded, appalled, but then balked at herself to stutter, "Wait, what am I saying- sorceresses don't exist."

"Suit yourself, but she did walk right through a wall in front of you," Thomas reminded her.

Outraged, Ethel leapt from the work bench, stumbling a bit on her shoe as she twirled around searching the shadows for a specter. "Prove it!" She cried out to the dark, demanding validation, "Prove you're out there! Right now!"

But nothing happened. For a moment, Ethel looked ready to scream in frustration, and rounded on
Thomas with a finger out, only to leap back and shriek in shock.

Thomas whipped around in his seat to find the Heichecera sitting right behind him on the other side of the work bench. She had her hands upon the table, fingers laced and expression calm.

"You expect a bang and a flash," The Heichecera addressed Ethel politely. "Something wild and raucous… I'm afraid that I do not endorse such frivolities."

"Frivolities, my pale English arse!" Thomas snarled, staggering up from the table. The Heichecera raised a thin black eyebrow, unamused. "Put her back! Put her right! Make her forget everything!"

"What?" Ethel looked to Thomas, slightly hurt.

"I cannot do that, Thomas," the Heichecera warned him. "You're going to need her help in the upcoming year. And she cannot help you if she doesn't know about me."

"Who are you?" Ethel asked at once.

"Who do you think I am?" The Heichecera replied.

"Some- some- some conjurer of cheap tricks!" Ethel goaded, hands on her hips.

But the Heichecera was not content to be labeled as a fraud. Without warning, night mist swirled and solidified next to Ethel, showing her the image of a young man whom Thomas did not recognize. He looked oddly like Ethel, save that his hair was a little less red and his eyes were not green. He was taller than her, with sloping shoulders, and his cheeks were sunken in.

Ethel staggered, and fell over onto the cobblestone. She held her mouth with her hand, holding back a petrified scream.

"Knock it off!" Thomas roared, rounding on the Heichecera. "You're terrifying her! Stop it!"

The Heichecera blinked, and the man was gone. Ethel was left alone on the pavement, too frightened to move lest another mirage appear.

The Heichecera's eyes bore into Thomas' own, and within them Thomas could see a ring of fire stronger than anything he'd ever witnessed before. There was no way of knowing how powerful the Heichecera truly was, or what she was capable of doing to him. He was at her mercy, a mouse in the mouth of a cat, and she knew it.

"Tell her the truth, Thomas." The Heichecera commanded, "Before he arrives."

Without alluding to who the 'he' was, the Heichecera vanished and was gone.

Thomas felt like a bastard, coming to Ethel's aid on the ground. He tried to help her up but she pulled herself out of his hands, shaking violently as if from a sudden cold. She was on the verge of tears, lips and chin quivering, and sniffed every so often.

"…Ethel…" Thomas didn't know what to say to her.

"I don't-" She shook her head back and forth, loosening her white cap so that it almost fell off from her head. "I need to lay down-"

"Right of course-" She'd just experienced one hell of a shock, of course she wanted to lay down. "I'll help you to bed."
"Thank you," She said, hoarse. Thomas took her by the arm, allowing her to lean on him, and walked her back inside.

With the disbanded party of the planchette game, the downstairs was quiet and calm. It was easy enough to walk Ethel right past the hall without anyone causing a ruckus, and together the pair of them ascended the stairs to head over to the woman's side. Thomas had never been on this end of the hall before; it was rather strange and yet still wholly similar. The doors were the same, so were the name tags and the lamps, but when they opened the door to Ethel and Anna's room, Thomas found it quite different to his own. Ethel and Anna shared a room with two iron beds and a long nightstand between them, but dried flowers stood in ceramic vases, and there were drawings of women in fine dresses on the walls. A cross stitch hung over the nightstand, proclaiming the phrase: "Thy word is a lamp under my feet and a light to my path".

Ethel fell onto her own bed, not even bothering to undress. For the sake of keeping her coverlet clean, Thomas took off her shoes and lay them beneath the edge of her bed. She had her back to him, sniffing every so often; he saw a tear run down to the tip of her nose.

"...I'm sorry." Thomas whispered. In that moment, he felt like an utter bastard.

"...Just promise me," Ethel's voice was thick, like she was suffering from a head cold, "Promise me that I'm not insane."

"You're not," Thomas petted her hair, his wedding band glinting in the light of her reading lamp. "You're not insane Ethel, what happened tonight was real... but you can't tell anyone else."

She let out a tiny scoff, closing her eyes, "Like they'd believe me," She whispered.

Not knowing what else to do, Thomas sat with her until an hour later Ethel finally drifted off to sleep. Thomas turned off the lamp and left her room, exiting the women's side to take refuge in his own room. As he reached his door, Anna rounded the corner of the hall, yawning and clearly ready for bed. Thomas watched her enter her room, closing the door and leaving him alone in the hall.

He did not sleep well that night.

~*~

For the next few days, neither Thomas nor Ethel spoke about the Heichecera. Thomas decided to leave it up to Ethel to 'pop the question' with him waiting on tenterhooks until she was ready to take the next step. As a result, a gloom had fallen over their young marriage, attracting the attention of quite a lot of people. It was a small mercy that Jane was out of the house, simply because she and Ethel had never hit it off and now Ethel was more vulnerable than ever. Anna was still weak from Bates' impending trial, and in short, the entire downstairs staff was on the verge of a mental collapse. If only the holidays could just be over-!

Thomas found himself downstairs on the evening of the 27th, exhausted and wishing that he could just get New Years over. Sir Richard was still in the house, making a fuss as always, and Lady Rosamund's maid, Miss Shore, was a downright nuisance causing Daisy to throw a hissy fit in the kitchen over her paycheck and workload. Why were guests always such a pain?

Ethel sat next to Thomas in his old rocking chair, staring into the fire. She was listless, no doubt pondering the wild turn in her universe.

Thomas watched her, wishing that he could speak to her and amend the ill between them. If only there were some simple way to catch her up on all that had occurred?
Anna, at the table and nursing a cup of coffee, was perhaps one of the few on staff who seemed to truly grasp how difficult the situation was. It must have had something to do with the fact that she and Ethel shared a room; Thomas couldn't fathom what their relationship was now like. He'd never shared a room with someone before and didn't like the idea of it now that he came to think about it. Privacy to him was akin to gold.

"Is everything alright, Ethel?" Anna asked. Ethel stirred in her chair, noticing that both Thomas and Anna were looking at her. She bristled, not meeting Thomas' eyes.

"I'm fine, thank you," Ethel said without tone. She turned back to the fire.

Anna got up from her place at the table and stepped in front of Ethel so that she would have no choice but to see her. "I know you don't want to believe it, but I am your friend. You can tell me if something's wrong."

Ethel was growing terribly uncomfortable. She turned a bit, her eyes glancing at Thomas surreptitiously. If only Anna knew that Ethel couldn't reveal anything. Ethel no doubt felt as trapped as Thomas had in the first few years back. He could remember wishing to god that he could tell someone, anyone, what had occurred.

Now the opportunity was presenting itself, and he was speechless.

"I'm sorry, I need some air-" Ethel blurted out, rising out of her rocking chair and pushing forcibly past Anna to hastle down the hall. She was bound for the area yard, and Thomas was determined to go after her.

He began to follow her out, only to be stopped by Anna tugging at his arm. He looked over his shoulder, and noticed her eyes were full of exhaustion and pain: "Tell her I'm her friend."

"She knows," Thomas assured her, and left without another word.

Outside, Ethel was smoking on a cigarette, which Thomas only distantly realized was one of his own. She must have snuck it out of his pack.

The area door closed forcibly behind him, so that the wound of wood and metal sliding into their place sounded like a racket. Ethel had her back to him, but Thomas had a feeling she knew who had entered the yard after her.

"...Won't be around for your grandchildren," he tried for a joke, gesturing to her lit cigarette. She didn't appreciate it.

"... Explain." Ethel said. She did not turn to face him.

"I-" Thomas flustered, thinking of all the tasks he still had left to do before dinner, "Ethel, I can't do that right now. There's too much to be done, and the story is to long. Tonight, after everyone goes to bed, let's meet out here. Then I'll tell you."

It would give him time to think through what he needed to say at least.

"Fine," Ethel was curt, rising up and stamping out a half-finished cigarette beneath her heel. She stormed past Thomas, brushing against his shoulder as she opened the door. "But you will tell me what's going on. As your wife, you owe me that much."
She left him there, on the stoop, feeling like a sodding shit.

But of course, he couldn't stay there for long.

With Bates in prison, Thomas had to now dress both Matthew and Lord Grantham. Mercifully, Sir Richard had his own valet (something he always liked to lord over other men). Due to rank, Thomas dressed Lord Grantham first and then moved onto Matthew. This worked out rather well, because Matthew didn't care much for protocol whereas Lord Grantham practically lived and breathed by the rule book.

Thomas straightened Lord Grantham's tie, making sure both leaves were pulled tight at a good angle.

"How is Anna fairing?" Lord Grantham asked.

"Well, it's her first Christmas married, and she's spending it with her husband wrongly in jail." Thomas grumbled, helping him into his dinner jacket. "It's hardly a merry affair."

"Quite right…" Lord Grantham pursed his lips, troubled. "I don't know how you're managing it, bouncing around as a valet for Matthew and me, and a footman for Carson."

"Well-" Thomas flustered, "It's nice to be needed."

In truth, Thomas was ready to have a mental breakdown.

"I fear the house would collapse without you," Lord Grantham said. "But don't fret, Thomas. I'm going to look into getting us some new footmen. Soon you'll be a valet to Matthew alone, and Bates will return."

But the fact of the matter was, Bates wouldn't return for quite some time… and as soon as Lord Grantham put an ad out for footmen, Jimmy and Alfred would appear.

Thomas didn't know how he'd be able to handle that.

Thomas began to brush Lord Grantham's shoulders, schooling his expression as best he could to hide his emotional distress. "Thank you, M'lord, but don't move so fast just to suit me. Do as you need to."

"And the cottage-!" Lord Grantham muttered tersely under his breath, rolling his eyes, "I keep forgetting about that-!"

"Let's not worry about it till after the new year, M'lord." Thomas urged, bracing the man's shoulders to make sure his jacket sit well upon his frame. "I can handle the rest, and Charlie's just a babe. He has no idea where he's sleeping, so it doesn't matter a nit."

He came around Lord Grantham's front, helping him with his silver cufflinks.

"I have to ask…" Lord Grantham paused, his tone quite careful, "Do you intend to… be intimate with your wife?"

Thomas bristled, stopping mid-cufflink. He swallowed, coughed to clear his throat, and resumed his work.

"I can't." Thomas finally said. "It's not… I can't do that, M'lord." He gave Lord Grantham an apologetic smile. To his credit, the man didn't look displeased.
"It's not necessary in every marriage of course," Lord Grantham said, posturing in his three-way mirror to see how Thomas had fitted him out. "Though I had wondered, perhaps. We'll keep it between you and me."

"I appreciate that, M'lord." Thomas said. He hoped, five sherries from now, Lord Grantham wouldn't forget his promise.

After that, Thomas headed down the hall to dress Matthew, who was determined to try out a new cut of suit. It looked rather fashionable upon him.

"How's Anna?" Matthew asked, rather mirroring Lord Grantham's concerns.

"Not well," Thomas admitted. "She's scared out of her mind."

"I can hardly imagine," Matthew sighed. Thomas helped him to pull up his braces, buttoning his white fronts. "Bates is a good man, but I can't pretend that being good will automatically save you from prison."

Matthew was dead on the money; he just didn't know it yet.

"Now." Matthew turned to Thomas as Thomas helped him into his jacket, "How are you?"

"Oh I'm… tired." Thomas grumbled, brushing at Matthew's shoulders. The cut suited him, oddly enough. Thomas might have to order more suits. "Tired from work, tired from people asking me about Ethel."

It was funny, he'd developed a rather gentle rapport with Matthew. He could talk without fear of protocol, and as a result, Matthew had begun to open up to him in a way that men rarely had. For some reason, once men knew that he was a lavender, they tended to avoid speaking to him in familiar terms. Thomas tried not to take it to heart… but it was hard.

"Who's talking to you about Ethel?" Matthew asked, slightly annoyed. "As if we haven't got anything else going on in the world right now."

"They all want to know if we're going to be like a normal married couple," Thomas helped Matthew to button his cufflinks, quite bitter, "I don't know how many times I have to say it before people believe me, but I don't want to … do that!"

He scoffed, turning away; Matthew had a loose thread at his right shoulder seam which needed to be trimmed. "Stay still, you have a thread loose."

"Be honest with me," Matthew said, watching as Thomas fetched his button box from the bottom of Matthew's wardrobe. "Have you ever done something like that with a woman?"

"No," Thomas said, "Thank god. You?" He cast a glance over his shoulder. Matthew gave him a small smile.

"I had an opportunity once but… I didn't do it." Thomas listened intently as he rifled through his button box for his scissors. "I got nervous at the last second and called it off. It was a Parisian woman during the war. A beauty but… I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

"What a coincidence," Thomas joked. "Neither could I."
Matthew laughed gaily, throwing his head back. "I'm not like you, not by a long shot, but I just can't see myself sleeping with someone I'm not married to."

"I understand sir," Thomas said, for he didn't like to sleep with strangers either, "The men I've been with... well... we haven't been strangers. I can't marry men, but I tend to be very intimate with them in other ways. Friendship, platonic love, the ways you might be with a beau."

"You'll just have to shake them off, Thomas," Matthew decided as Thomas finished tending to his shoulder seam. "They don't need to know anything about your marriage, and if they ask, you tell them straight out that it's none of their business."

"And what about Lord Grantham, hmm?" Thomas asked, putting up his button box. "Because he was one of the people who asked. Shall I tell him to toss off?"

"...Oh, for heaven's sake." He sighed, rolling his eyes, "Why on earth would cousin Robert care about all that."

"Curiosity I suppose."

"Well, curiosity killed the cat."

As soon as Matthew was dressed, Thomas had to run back downstairs and start helping Carson carry out dishes. He was assisted by Anna and Ethel, both of whom served as an impromptu second footman so that Thomas didn't have to wear himself out during courses. It was, of course, still Thomas' job to serve the dishes alongside Carson, but at least he didn't have to fetch them from the kitchen. Ethel had a fierce, determined look upon her face that Thomas oddly appreciated. She wasn't waning or faint, frightened of every shadow. Maybe the Heichecera had been right, to reveal herself to Ethel.

But why had she done it in the first place? How would Thomas end up needing Ethel's help in the coming year? Could it be that he'd need a partner in crime, so to speak? What dangers were coming his way that he couldn't topple by himself?

After dinner, Thomas had to huff and puff back upstairs, sweating in his spats as he dressed Lord Grantham for bed and then Matthew. In the moments before dressing his final man, Matthew received a telegram, so that Thomas walked in on the man reading with a gray face.

"I have bad news," Matthew sighed, rising up out of his chair and tossing the telegram onto his bed, "Lavinia's father's taken gravely ill. I'll be traveling up to London tomorrow to be with him."

Now that Thomas was Matthew's valet, any news that took him to London would mean Thomas had to go too: "Do you want me to come too?"

"Well, I do." Matthew admitted, "But... I don't think Carson would ever forgive me. We're doing a queer dance till your roles are settled. But I've spoken to Carson and Lord Grantham tonight after dinner, and we are going to be getting another footman."

So that would be Alfred on the way... Alfred came first.

Thomas coughed, trying to steady his breathing. Why was the thought of Alfred arriving making him nervous?

Because Jimmy came afterwards, a voice in his head warned him.
"Take your time sir," Thomas said. Each piece of Matthew's dinner dress would have to be washed and pressed. He folded the clothes with care, thinking of what Matthew might need for London, particularly with a man on his death bed.

"I'll get a valise ready for you," Thomas decided, "And I'll prepare some mourning clothes, just in case. It never hurts to have a black tie, either way."

"Thank you," Matthew was quite relieved, "Can you wake me early? I hate to ask it."

"That's perfectly fine sir," Thomas said. Would it matter if he rose an hour before? "Say… six? I can have Mrs. Patmore pack you a breakfast early so that you have something to eat on the train."

Matthew flopped onto bed, pajamas rolling up a bit so that Thomas could see the pink of his bellybutton. "I don't know how I'd manage without you," Matthew muttered to the ceiling.

"Buh-" Thomas scoffed, pulling out Matthew's valise and beginning to pack it, "You're about to find out in London!"

Matthew laughed at their little joke but offered no rebuttal.

After Thomas finished packing Matthew's valise, he returned downstairs and dropped Matthew's linens in the laundry hamper to be soaked by a maid overnight. He ate dinner with the rest of the staff, noting that Ethel was watching him cautiously across the table. She sat next to Anna, who was still nervous after Ethel's attitude earlier. As soon as the last of the mince pies were scarfed down, Thomas went to the kitchen and told Mrs. Patmore that Matthew would need something for breakfast the following morning. She prepared a little hamper, stuffing it into the ice larder to keep it cold overnight next to two fish heads and an enormous round of lamb.

As Thomas left the kitchen, he saw Ethel pointedly rise from the table, and walk out the back door towards the area yard. Before she closed the door, she looked over her shoulder at him, quite pointedly wanting him to follow.

So, there could be no delaying the inevitable, it seemed.

Steeling himself for what he must do, Thomas followed out after Ethel. He found her sitting on the work bench just like before, though this time she did not smoke a cigarette. Instead, she was looking up at the sky, which was overcast and gray, threatening to unleash a torrent of snow. Sometime between lunch and dinner, a flurry had fallen, so Thomas' feet crunched a path through pearly white as he came to stand side by side with Ethel. He sat down next to her, wiping some snow off the work bench so that he wouldn't wet his trousers.

For a moment, they were quiet as they settled themselves. Somewhere far off into the night, an owl hooted irritably.

"Are you cold?" Thomas asked, noting Ethel wore nothing save for her black and whites, "You can wear my jacket if you like."

"It's alright," Ethel said, "I like the chill. I get hot sometimes."

Satisfied, Thomas took out his packet of cigarettes and offered one to Ethel, who silently took it. He lit it with his silver lighter, then fetched his own to rise and pace before her. He found he wanted to stand as he spoke. It somehow made him feel more grounded. More in the moment.
"...I've had all day to contemplate whether or not I'm insane," Ethel said, her tone extraordinarily calm, "And this is what I've come to believe. Something... more than us... lives in this world. An' I saw a glimpse of it the other night. So I'll believe anything you tell me, cause I know you tell the truth. Just don't... don't let me down." Her green eyes were so open and frank, they seemed to burn Thomas. "Tell me the truth, an' nothin' but."

Thomas nodded, taking a long drag of his cigarette to keep from speaking. He exhaled, licked his two front teeth cautiously, then began by saying the only thing that made sense.

"...I'm not from this time." Thomas said.

"What do you mean?" Ethel replied. Their tones were so gentle and soft, they could have been whispering in the dark of a bedroom before sleep.

"I mean, this is not my original reality..." Thomas gestured at the work area around them. "This is my second chance."

Ethel waited patiently for more, so Thomas continued on. "I come from the very same time and place as you. Downton, 1900's... but the first time around I was a bastard. I bullied, I stole, I cheated, I laid ruin to everything I saw. I was a wretch in this house, if you can believe it."

"I can't," Ethel scoffed, and at first Thomas thought she was to pronounce him insane until she added, "You've never been anything but a saint to me."

"Well, that sainthood comes from a lifetime of sinning," Thomas warned. "I'm from... well- I'm not from the future or the past. Just imagine that there are two lines side by side, an' you're on one line an' I'm on the other. I sort of jumped lines, back at the beginning to relive a new line. Does that make sense?"

Ethel contemplated it before finally nodding.

"I guess," She said, "But... I still don't understand how you were able to 'jump lines'..." She made quotation marks with her fingers.

"Well, it was 1926, and I'd ruined everything in my life," Thomas pursed his lips, bitter memories returning unexpectedly. He could remember how acid-like Carson's tone had been. How Bates had sneered at him when he'd left for the fair with Andy, Daisy, and the hallboy Peter.

"I had nothing. No friends, no loves, no security, no job, no home... nothing. I was on the precipice of ruin. I found myself on the outskirts of a fair in Thirsk, an' I saw this little dingy orange tent belonging to the Heichecera. I went inside, and even though we'd never met she knew my name. She knew everything about me. She showed me my life in these magical cards of hers, an' then she told me that she could give me a second chance at life if I was brave enough to take her on. She said she'd send me back in time. Give me the opportunity to put everythin' right. Be the man I never thought I could be."

"...How'd she do it?" Ethel wondered. "Did you drink a potion? Like one from those boiling cauldrons?"

"No," Thomas said. To illustrate his point, he unlaced his simple cufflinks and rolled back his sleeves so that Ethel could see the thick scars upon his wrists. Even now, seven years later, you could still see the black and gold thread binding the cut tight. Ethel gasped at the sight, a hand leaping to her
"Oh my god-!" she made to touch Thomas' scars, but Thomas pulled way. It was too much, too soon. He felt over stimulated, and hastily re-buttoning his cufflinks. He took another drag of his cigarette, his fingers shaking.

"I swear to god, Ethel," Thomas promised her, "This is the damn truth."

"I'm listening," Ethel said, practically on the edge of her seat.

"She gave me this box, an' it had a cursed golden razor and a vial full of mud from the Orient." Thomas explained. "She told me to pour the vial into a tub full of water, and to get in, an' cut my wrists with the razor. There was all this stuff involved, I can hardly remember it now, but sure enough when I did as she suggested it sucked me under sort of like a portal… and I sank through the bottom of the tub, and somehow I wound up in my bed… on April 15th of 1912." Thomas shook his head, disturbed.

"I dunno how it worked," He admitted. "But it did, an' I'm the living proof."

"My god," Ethel whispered, amazed. "An'…. An' all this time, when things have been happening, you sort of knew they were going to happen, didn't you? The war, an' everything?"

"Oh yeah," Thomas nodded, bitterly.

"So, you know what happens next with Bates!" Ethel declared. "You have to!"

"Yep." Thomas enunciated the 'p' with a soft pop.

"Well-?" Ethel demanded, "What the hell are you waiting for? Tell me!"

"Ethel, you can't tell a single soul." Thomas warned, but she cut him off with an irritable huff.

"Oh honestly, who'd believe me at this point?"

"…Bates gets framed," Thomas said, and Ethel groaned aloud in clear distress. "I'm not finished."

She stopped groaning, though her mouth was still in an obvious frown.

"He'll lose the trial, but he won't be hanged," Thomas promised her, "And then, Anna's gonna find the evidence needed to release him. So, Bates will be back around October of next year, if I remember right." Thomas was having a hard time doing the maths inside his head at the moment. He knew it had been some time in the fall, though.

Because it had happened right before he'd kissed-

Thomas froze, forcing his mind to steer clear away from that awful night.

"….God…" Ethel collapsed against the edge of the work table again, blown away. "Poor Anna. But…" Ethel straightened up again, ever curious, "Why is the Heichecera comin' back to reveal herself to me? What can I do? She said I was going to help you next year, but how?"

"I dunno," Thomas admitted. "She works in mysterious ways. I never know when to expect her. She pretty much saved my life during the Spanish Flue though. She took over my body."

"…Wait…" a dawning comprehension colored Ethel's face flush pink, "Wait! When you were sick, you were talkin' in third person. It terrified me! I thought the fever was addling your brain. But it
really wasn't you, was it?" Ethel was starting to get excited now, delighted to be in on the secret, "It was her! She must have been inside your body, talkin' to me!"

"Maybe," Thomas admitted. He was clueless.

"Then, will I see her again?" Ethel wondered.

"I have no idea," Thomas said. "I don't know where she is right now, or how she gets here, or why she comes here, or what she wants. But I'm at her mercy. She's powerful, and she's damn smart. She's the whole reason I got this second chance, the whole reason I was able to marry you an' adopt Charlie. So for god's sake… if you ever do see her, an' I'm not there with you, don't upset her. Don't be rude to her. She's practically the embodiment of God, to me."

Ethel just smiled and shook her head, mystified, "Thank you for telling me all of this."

In a way, Thomas felt relieved. To think, Ethel now knew everything… everything!

He braced her upon the shoulders, casting his cigarette out into the snow where it sputtered cold with a small hiss.

"I love you, Ethel," He said. "As a sister, an' as a best friend. I'm trustin' you."

Ethel squeezed his hands where they lay upon her frame. "I know," She said with a smile. "An I love you too. You're everything to me. An' now it feels like the whole world's opened up. Like… the sky's full of new stars, burning bright. I can't help but wish I could see her again."

"Be careful," Thomas tutted. "You may just get what you ask for."

But Ethel just smiled, a strange quirk at the corner of her wry lips, "Maybe… she can teach me how to be a sorceress too?"

"Oh God help me!" Thomas scoffed, laughing and turning away. He was quite certain the day Ethel Barrow became a sorceress was the day all hell would break loose upon Downton Abbey.

Though neither of them noticed the shadows shifting, someone was watching them from beyond the veil of darkness. The Heichecera was proud of her charge, leaning against the woodshed with her arms crossed over her chest. Now, it was only a matter of the final pieces falling into place… and Ethel would be her way of ensuring that all was not lost a second time around.

Just then, a misty figure seemed to loom out of the dark. The Heichecera paused, noting the change in the atmosphere. Her company was a new arrival, not often seen in the world of the living. Indeed, the pair of them were veiled from humans, so that Thomas and Ethel spoke only yards away from them completely unaware that they were being watched.

It had no form, at least no true form that it took without the aid of another. To each man, it appeared different. To the Heichecera, it looked like the man who had condemned her to burn at the stake… a
member of the Spanish inquisition in tall red robes with a hooked nose.

"Is it time, yet?" The figure asked. It was growing impatient, knowing that something grand was soon to happen.

"...Not yet." The Heichecera replied, turning away from Thomas and Ethel. She waved a hand, and the darkness enshrouded both her and her guest so that the human world was completely erased from them. They now moved through a land of shadows, an area that could not be described nor contained. It was boundless, limitless, and in it all things were possible.

The figure tilted its head, shimmering the image of a man who had ruined her life.

"You're up to something," It mused.

The Heichecera flicked her fingers, irritated by her company. Lights from home began to swarm around her feet, warming her and keeping the ghost of her past at bay.

"I'm always up to something," She finally teased, before allowing the lights to swallow her up. As she left, so too did the figure's form.

It turned back into mist, which dissipated out into blackness.
And with that, both parties were gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any complaints or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know.

note: yes, I know on the birth certificate it says 'white rice' not 'white race'. Consider it a free joke at my expense.
Trials and Tribulations

Chapter Summary

Thomas nearly cracks beneath the mounting pressures of life... but a golden dawn is glimmering upon the horizon.

Chapter Notes

Congratulations folks, we are officially at the end of season 2. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS.

Actually, you don't, but you're going to find out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If there was one thing Thomas hated, it was the sight of jails and prisons.

Being a gay man in 1920’s England, Thomas understood intimately the price of living outside British society’s safety net. Every day brought trial and tribulation, with each rocky road ending in a rotting jail cell, cold and quiet. Though Thomas had never had many friends, he’d certainly known other men like him. There had been hedonistic nights in London while the family was asleep, and Carson was unawares; Thomas had snuck out to underground clubs to sit in the laps of older lords and spoon feed them caviar. He’d been a bright young thing then, certain of his good looks and his luck. But one by one, Thomas had watched men be arrested. Had watched lives crumble into ruin and jail cells fill up. By the time Thomas had finished his prior life in 1926, he’d been certain he would one day end up the same.

Now, with 1920 almost upon them and Bates’ trial set for January 3rd, Thomas had been called up to give a character for Bates in court and had decided in the spirit of comradeship to accompany Anna on one of her trips to York County Prison.

It was a tall, imposing place, with broken bottles fused by concrete to the tops of every wall so that a man could not climb over them without scooping out his kneecaps like oysters. He paused to take them in, noting how sparrows and finches perched atop the glass on fragile legs, completely unaware of how lucky they were. Anna, upon his arm, silently urged him along as they followed the cue into the reception.

It was not a warm, nor welcome place. The visitors were nearly all women, some old, some young, but each of them looked absolutely haggard as they were patted down by guards and taken one at a time through a heavily barred door across the courtyard. On the other side would be a visiting area, where chained inmates would receive their guests for about an hour before being led away. Everything was controlled, monitored, rigid to the point of ruthlessness. Thomas watched, sweaty and pale, as a young woman in a blue dress and tears was all but yanked away from the visiting chamber.

“HAROLD!” She screeched in vain, kicking and clawing at the officer who held her. “HAROLD, I
But it didn’t matter. She was thrown out all the same with the door slammed in her face. Anna bristled at the sight of the wretched woman wailing upon the stood and held onto Thomas’ arm a little bit tighter.

They were made to sit for thirty minutes before they were allowed into the visiting chamber. Even their short trip across the courtyard was done in the company of a guard with an orange walrus mustache and a bitter expression.

Every time a door slammed, Thomas jumped. He felt like any moment, a guard would grab him by the arm and yank him away from Anna to put him in his own cell.

But he was left mostly alone, save for a pat down to ensure he wasn’t bringing in contraband.

Bates looked absolutely wretched in a navy-blue jumpsuit. His jaw was grizzled with unshaved stubble, and his normally well smoothed hair now hung in front of his eyes. Every inch of him seemed to reek of defeat. Of sorrow and failure.

Anna tensed upon Thomas’ arm when she saw her husband. She sat down gingerly on a chair across from Bates. Only one chair had been drawn up for a visitor, so Thomas instead stood behind Anna with his hands gingerly upon the back of her chair. He felt, queerly enough, like some spinster aunt watching over intended lovers making sure they didn’t kiss or touch. Why had Bates asked him here, he wondered?

“You came.” Bates croaked. It was obvious from his voice that he’d either been crying or screaming. Either way, Thomas couldn’t blame him.

“Course I came,” Anna whispered back. Her fists were balled upon her lap, the knuckles white from constricted blood flow.

“And you—“Bates looked up at Thomas, his brown eyes slightly misty with affection. “You came too.”

“You sound surprised,” Thomas said. As if he could deny a man on death row any request.

“…Anna tells me you’re a valet now,” Bates said. “So that’s good. You can look after his lordship in my stead.”

“Don’t start that,” Thomas wouldn’t hear a word of it. Bates was going to be found guilty, certainly, but eventually Anna would get him out and he’d be back to reclaim his rightful Downton throne. Attempting to be Lord Grantham’s valet had resulted in Thomas essentially becoming useless in his prior reality. He was Matthew’s valet and nothing more, and even that was not certain in these trying times.

“I’m Mr. Matthew’s valet,” Thomas explained, “You’re his lordship’s valet, and don’t you go forgetting it just because you’re in here.”

Bates attempted to smile but it didn’t work. He was too frightened, too depressed to pull it off.

“Thank you for agreeing to give me a character during the trial,” Bates said. “Mr. Murray thinks a reference from an Earl will go in my favor, but I’m not sure such things matter when it comes to murder—”
“I think it’ll help,” Anna refused to accept the uphill battle they were facing, even now at the base of the mountain.

“Because you want to think so,” Bates whispered. Anna looked stricken.

Behind Anna, Thomas took her shoulder’s in hand and squeezed gently.

“Thomas, the reason I asked you here was for Anna’s sake,” Bates said. “Both of you must prepare for the worst. I’m not saying it’ll happen, but you must prepare for it. Thomas, if I’m found guilty—“

“John-“ Thomas didn’t know what to say. He suddenly realized the enormous pressure he would soon be under when Bates was found guilty of murder and left in prison until next October. Could he cope with this request?

“Take care of Anna,” Bates begged. “That’s all I ask. For all that we bore one another, take care of her in my stead.”

Ready to cry, Anna forgot herself and reached out across the table to take Bates’ hand in her own—

“NO TOUCHING PRISONERS!” The mustached guard barked. Anna jumped at his volume and sharp tone, jerking back from Bates instinctively to put her hand back in her lap where it remained albeit trembling wildly.

“…Please,” Bates whispered.

“… O’course.” Thomas’ voice was dry, his throat clenched tight from stress.

~*~

The encroaching New Year’s Eve meant a grand party for Downton Abbey, offering invitation to guests not usually seen. One in particular was Lord Hepworth, a squat if charismatic man with sandy brown hair and an aged appearance that spoke to a man three times as old as he actually was. He arrived the day before New Year’s Eve, rolling up from the station in a motorcar that had been fetched for him by the new chauffeur, Higgs. As was required until a new footman could be found, Thomas stood at the door with his back straight while Carson greeted their guest with smooth courtesy. Of course, when Hepworth’s valet did not automatically jump out of the car with him, Thomas was crestfallen. Could it be that he would have to dress Hepworth too before it was all said and done?

“Will your man be coming up from the station, M’lord?” Carson asked, the tiniest bit of hope in his voice.

“I haven’t got one, I’m so sorry—” Hepworth was positively bedraggled. “Is that a nuisance?”

“Not at all, M’lord,” Carson said, though it truth it was the absolute worst thing to happen to Thomas who was already under incredible strain. “Thomas will take care of you while you’re here.”

Thomas stepped forward and took Hepworth’s bags from him. He noted they were oddly light, as if the man didn’t own a lot of clothing.

“Splendid,” Hepworth was positively relieved, and beamed at Thomas. “We shall do very well together.”
“Do come in,” Lady Grantham swept down the steps of her home in all her glory, eager to show her guest inside and out of the cold. Snow was falling regularly now, and you couldn’t be out in it long without your feet getting stiff in your shoes.

As Hepworth left in the company of Lady Grantham, Carson caught Thomas’ eye with an apologetic glance.

“Sorry…” He whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “But I can’t hardly say no, can I?”

“I understand Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. All the while wishing he could nip around the corner and scream his head off in exhaustion and rage.

Matthew returned home from London on the same day, so that Thomas was now effectively valeting for three people while being a footman at the same time. His fingers were burning dully, tired of being abused from polishing, mending, sharpening, and straightening. He wished sorely that he could find some bed to crawl into so that he could sleep but knew that rest was still quite a long way’s off. He would not be able to sleep tonight until all three of his charges had been put to bed, the finery had been cleaned from dinner, and the new silver for tomorrow had been pulled and polished. He’d be lucky to get four hours of rest, in total.

“How was London?”

“How was Bates?”

They talked over one another, each smiling a bit as Thomas huffed and assumed rank. Matthew’s question came first, no matter how chummy they were.

“Not well, sir.” Thomas admitted as he straightened Matthew’s waistcoat. “He’s grim, and already suspecting the worst despite his innocence.”

“Keep this between us,” Matthew said, “And please don’t take this the wrong way, but are you absolutely certain he’s innocent?”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Thomas couldn’t begrudge the man. He didn’t know Bates that well, yet, and murder was a horrific thing to be convicted of. “It’s not like you know him like Lord Grantham does, and it’s a shocking crime to be labeled with… but trust me when I say that Vera Bates was absolutely gormy and killed herself out of spite.”

Matthew was unsurprised, but he was certainly disturbed as he allowed Thomas to help him shrug on a set of tails. “But why do an insane thing like that? Death by arsenic… it’s hardly quick and painless.”

“She wanted Bates to be unhappy because he married Anna,” Thomas explained. “Vera knew that Anna was the love of Bates’ life. It spurred her into insanity.”

Matthew shuddered. Thomas started to brush his shoulders free of dust and lint, “I can’t stand people like that,” Matthew admitted, irritable. “God, I wish I could help in some way, but Bates has a lawyer in Murray. I’ll go up for the trial, just to help back the corner though. Maybe two heads can trump one.”

“Well…” Thomas considered the past, and how he knew Bates would be convicted either way, “I think he’ll appreciate the help in any fashion sir. How was London, then?”
“Quiet, oddly enough.” Matthew admitted. “I was there when he died. He had a weak chest, and his lungs just gave out, I’m afraid… He wanted his ashes to be place with Lavinia’s grave. I’ve brought his urn back with me from London.”

Matthew pulled away from Thomas’ brush, examining himself with subdued pride in the mirror.

“I don’t know how you do it, Thomas.” Matthew praised. “You’re a miracle worker.”

“I’ve got good material,” Thomas shrugged. He dared not say it out loud, but Matthew was damn good looking. It wasn’t hard to polish something when it was already sparkling.

As Thomas began to unpack Matthew’s valise, he was taken aback by the sight of a strange light illuminating through the spine which hinged the two halves together. Unnerved, Thomas undid the copper locks and clasps of the luggage to let it fall open on the bed.

There, atop neatly folded shirts and trousers, was a fine Georgian urn made of black marble. About it were hundreds of tiny blue lights, much like the ones that the Heichecera invoked and dispelled. The seemed to dip and dive out of the urn, habituating around it like bees might flowers.

Unnerved but undeniably curious, Thomas reached out and lay his hand carefully amid the blue lights. They clustered around his fingers, greedy for his warmth and light; Thomas felt nothing upon his skin to give their presence away.

When they were sated, or perhaps bored, the lights drifted down back to Reginald Swire’s urn where they rested once more upon the black marble. Whatever they were, they had no quarrel with Thomas, it seemed.

“It makes you wonder, doesn’t it,” Matthew murmured, “If he can see us now.”

“…Something tells me he can.” Thomas replied.

~*~

New Year’s Eve found the servants of Downton Abbey flustered as they both helped the family to celebrate and prepared for their own celebration. There were only three times a year when the servants were allowed to have a break from their normal duties, and as a result they were regarded with utter delight when they came. The first was the servant’s ball, held on January 5th, that represented the coming of a new year and the bonds the held Downton Abbey strong. The second was Christmas Day, where the servants were allowed to feast during the hours of 10 to 1. The third, and final moment of reprieve was New Year’s Eve, around 11:30 at night, when all servants were allowed to head downstairs so that they might have a glass of wine poured by Mr. Carson while the family contended with themselves upstairs.

Unsurprisingly, Sir Richard grumbled constantly about this, and found it a crying shame that he should be left to pour his own drinks three times out of the year. What kind of savagery was this world delving into?

Of course, New Year’s Eve could not come soon enough for Thomas who was absolutely bedraggled. Being footman was tough enough but being the only footman and a valet for three men was absolutely insane. Thomas’ saving grace came in the form of Ethel and Anna, who took most of the weight apart from him. They served as impromptu second footmen and helped him to find a moment to breath whenever their own duties could allow it. Lord Grantham liked everything to be kept in absolute order, which was difficult to maintain when at a frantic pace. Lord Hepworth had
hardly any clothes, and the clothes he did possess were in need of several repairs. Matthew was, graciously, low maintenance, but Thomas still wanted to give him a good display considering he was (in fact) Thomas’ actual main concern.

And then there was Carson.
And his silver polishing.
And his door watching.
And his meal handling.
And his tea serving.
And his fetching, and carrying, and mending, and every other fucking thing someone could think up and throw at Thomas’ feet while he didn’t have a moment to piss let alone shove a meal in his mouth or sleep.

So, at 11:30 on New Year’s Eve, Thomas was hardly in the mood for a glass of wine. He was, instead, in the mood for an entire barrel.
And a bath.
And a bed.
And an orgasm.
And 1,000 £.

Charlie slept upon Thomas’ shoulder, and Thomas sat in Carson’s chair simply because it had a cushion on the bottom and the bottom of his spine hurt. The pair of them were on the verge of falling to the floor, with Charlie drooling upon Thomas’ bowtie. Thomas himself had his eye closed, and though he was not yet asleep he wasn’t focusing upon the conversation either.

A gentle hand upon his shoulder stirred him. He looked up to find Ethel smiling down upon him. Anna was at her side, and though she wasn’t as happy she still had that odd glimmer of kindness upon her. How did she manage it? How, when she was so tired?

So tired…
So very tired.

“Are you still awake?” Ethel teased softly.

“ Barely,” Thomas admitted. After this he had three men to dress for bed, and an entire house to lock down. Tomorrow would mean more silver. More bowties. More regiments that he had to follow, like the slamming doors of York County Prison. Empathy and Kindness only got an hour to flourish, and even then, you couldn’t touch.

No touching the prisoners.
No touching.

Ethel was rubbing her thumb upon his shoulder, a gentle back and forth that he greatly appreciated in his exhaustion.

“It’s almost time for the toast,” Ethel said. Sure enough, Carson was passing out glasses of wine for the servants to enjoy. When he rounded the table and found Thomas sitting in his chair, he gave him a glass while wearing a slightly dubious expression.

“I was unaware you are the butler now,” Carson grumbled. “ Sitting in my chair.”

“I’m a tired footman and valet, does that count?” Thomas muttered.

“Tonight, yes,” Mr. Carson decided, filling up Thomas’ glass with a deep red wine that smelt
distinctly of cherries and oak. “What a year it has been for you. A father and a husband, all in one bound. The future is bright for you, Thomas.”

Thomas rose from his chair with a groan, shifting Charlie a bit higher upon his hip.

“Thank you, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said.

“And I promise you that we will have a footman soon,” Carson said.

Knowing that it would undoubtedly be Alfred, Thomas just smiled and silently toasted Carson with his glass.

The clock struck midnight, and all the servant’s toasted one another. Thomas and Ethel instinctively turned to one another, with Thomas making the first toast.

“To our son,” Thomas praised her.

“To our son,” she echoed. They downed their drinks in several gulps, and in the spirit of New Years shared the gentlest of kisses upon the cheek. A few of the servant’s tittered, with Anna smiling mischievously.

It was officially 1920… and Thomas knew for a fact that come May, Jimmy Kent would be back in the house.

It terrified him.

~*~

Post New Years found Downton hosting a hunting party for several beloved guests. The dogs were eager, the horses were bright, and a large group set out from Downton’s eastern garden at a merry pace on January 1st, with the servants loading for their masters. With Bates in York County Prison awaiting trial in two days, Thomas was to load for Lord Grantham. He was good with a gun; his father had been a shooting man and Thomas had had to load for him in his youth. Being in the war had only strengthened Thomas’ shooting skills, and now that he’d gone and done the whole thing twice, he was now quite a successful shot. He walked a few paces behind Lord Grantham, carrying a rifle over each arm with a bag full of spare shots at his hip. Several blood hounds circled around Lord Grantham, knowing him to be a loving man quick to give a treat to a smart pooch. As a result, Thomas was constantly having to wade through a sea of wagging tails and lolling tongues.

Despite it being a pleasant morning with the prospect of a good shoot ahead, there was a queer atmosphere to contend with. Sir Richard had been making an ass of himself as of late, and as a result even Lord Grantham was now getting to the point where he could not deny the man was tiresome. With Lady Mary still refusing to admit that she and Matthew could ever be happy, the Crawley family was miserably saddled with a guest they desperately wanted gone.

Lord Grantham was slightly impetuous as he waded through the brush, Lady Grantham upon his arm to keep up his spirits.

“Is it foolish of me, to find Sir Richard a bit irritating?” Lord Grantham asked. For whatever reason, he looked over his shoulder at Thomas.

They were standing upon the hill, looking over the brush were hound dogs were sniffing and digging for prospective varmints. The eyes of the hunters, however, were upon the skies. Village men, hired
by Lord Grantham, were whacking the brush about a mile ahead, calling out birds in the hope that they would scatter and fly towards the waiting hunters.

“Me, M’lord?” Thomas wondered, a little confused as to why he of all people was being asked his opinion on Sir Richard.

Lord Grantham laughed, idly fingering the rifle Thomas had handed him. At the ready, Thomas had already prepared another shot on the second rifle and had his bullet bag open for the next reload.

“You seem surprised I’d ask your opinion, but surely you must know that I look to you like I look to Bates.” Lord Grantham paused, morbid at the thought of his companion in arms. “Well… not entirely. But the sentiment still sticks. You are a son of our staff.”

A bird flew overhead. Lord Grantham tried for a shot and missed. Thomas passed him the next rifle and began to reload the still smoking barrel of the first.

“Ah… I’m not a good shot.” Lord Grantham sighed, “I was always good at cricket and ballroom dancing, as a lad, but never shooting. My father was often quite displeased because of it.”

“Don’t worry, I’m the American between the two of us,” Lady Grantham teased. “I’ll handle the guns.”

“Now that scares me,” Lord Grantham teased back. Another flush of birds was coming. Aiming, Lord Grantham tried to shoot towards the center of the group, but it only caused the birds to scatter in all directions. Crestfallen, he dropped his rifle and gave Thomas a petulant look.

“The organizer of the shoot, and I can’t even land a bird,” Lord Grantham said in dismay. “How’s that going to look, back at the abbey?”

Knowing that he was bordering on being cheeky, Thomas spoke with care, “Shall I help you M’lord, and we’ll pretend that you shot it?”

Lord Grantham actually seemed relieved, “Why not. Give Richard something to whine over.”

“I’ll lie if asked,” Lady Grantham teased.

Thomas looked left and right, noting that the other lords were distracted by the chase. Taking careful aim, Thomas waited for Lady Grantham to put her fingers delicately in her ears before firing at the next flush. He was exceedingly lucky, bringing down two birds in one shot, which fell in a wild spiral to the grass before being captured by one of Lord Grantham’s hunting dogs.

“Bloody good shot!” Lord Grantham crowed in praise.

“Robert,” Lady Grantham chided his language.

Fiddling with the gun, Thomas discarded the used shots to reload before muttering, “Look at that, M’lord. You brought down two in one. How splendid.”

Lord Grantham laughed, delighted as the dog returned with two birds in its mouth. Thomas accepted both of them, tucked them into his saddle bag, and gave the dog a biscuit for its reward.

“Next time we go hunting, I’ll pretend you’re my distant cousin, and have you help the family name,” Lord Grantham decided.

“A toff for a day,” Now Thomas was being exceedingly cheeky, “How lucky am I.”
The next flush that came, Lord Grantham finally got a shot in. When the others later crowed that Lord Grantham got more birds than the rest, Thomas and Lady Grantham never told a soul the truth. Instead, Thomas served the shooting lunch with care, noting that there was a clear tension in the air between Sir Richard and Lady Mary. It was amazing, to see how two people could be side by side but clearly want to be elsewhere. Lady Mary was going to fall out of her chair if she leaned away from Sir Richard anymore. Meanwhile Sir Richard was stabbing every piece of cooked grouse like it had done him a personal wrong.

Afterwards, when the party returned home, Thomas had to be quick to dress Lord Grantham, Lord Hepworth, and Matthew so that they could join the others in the parlor.

Matthew was in a mood, bitter as Thomas brushed at his shoulders and fastidiously put on his cufflinks.

“…I never liked the man, but now?” Matthew shook his head, blue eyes taking on a steely disposition, “Now I confess I loathe him. I’ve never loathed a man before in my life. Have you?”

Matthew was unsure, nervous even. Thomas thought back to his life before, and how he’d absolutely despised Bates. Now, Thomas knew what it was to have Bates’ affection, and had seen the truth in the man with his ego set aside.

“…Once,” Thomas admitted, “An’ I was wrong for it.” Matthew looked stricken, so Thomas continued on. “But Carlisle is different.”

“Why’s that?” Matthew asked, admiring his reflection in the mirror.

“Because he’s a bastard,” Thomas said.

“Quite right,” Matthew took a deep breath, steadying himself. The look of steely anger vanished from Matthew’s eyes, to be replaced with something benign. Something normal.

Thomas did not wait for Matthew to leave first. Instead, he fled the dressing room to hurry downstairs so that he could help Carson serve dinner. He was absolutely exhausted by this point, having to pause momentarily once or twice in order to breath without gasping. Ethel and Anna saw all of this, and while Anna was a stoic helper who offered to be second footman for the night, Ethel was decidedly outspoken in her views.

“Mr. Carson, I hate to poke my nose where it doesn’t belong,” Ethel hissed in the server as Carson, Thomas, and Anna prepared the final course for dinner, “But my ‘usband’s being run into the dirt. Is he expected to be a valet for three men, and a footman for the rest of his days? Or can you be moved to sympathy long enough to find him a helper that doesn’t wear an apron?”

“It is horribly unfair,” Anna mumbled, not meeting Carson’s eyes.

“That is my affair, not yours,” Carson was growing flushed, clearly embarrassed at being called out on his slowness to interview footmen, “And I’ll remind you that your position in this house is still not a strong one.”

Ethel was not deterred, taking away Carson’s tray which held twenty glasses of Eton mess. “I only want my ‘usband to be able to work without tripping over his own laces. Forgive me if that’s a strong position for a wife to take.”

“Ethel-“ Thomas tried to take the tray back. Ethel wouldn’t let him.

“I mean it, Mr. Carson!” Ethel was close to speaking at normal volume, which was quite dangerous
in the servery only a door away from a dinner party waiting on their desert, “I want results.”

“And would you like to wear her ladyship’s crown as well?” Carson hissed, brown eyes blazing.

“I’ll stick to my wedding band, thanks!” Ethel shot back.

Carson opened his mouth for another barb, but Ethel shut him down, “An’ I pray if you were blessed enough t’be married, your wife would care for your health the same way.”

Carson shut his mouth, grimaced, then finally took the tray of Eton mess back from Ethel to hand it over to Thomas.

“I’m taking care of it, Ethel, so we’ll have no more talk.” Carson was the one looking exhausted now. “Let the hunting party disperse, and I’ll speak to his Lordship.”

Ethel stepped aside to let Carson pass. Thomas followed a hair behind, but not before Ethel whispered in his ear. “I’ll get you a footman if it’s the last thing I do.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Thomas muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Dinner was concluded after a round of Eton mess, with the ladies heading to the parlor for coffee and tea while the gentlemen stayed behind to smoke cigars. This, of course, would have been slightly easier had it not been for Sir Richard fighting with Lady Mary over the wedding date only to yank at her arm and growl: “I warn you… even my patience has limits.”

Thomas, holding a tray of cigars, was powerless to help her.

Matthew’s bad mood from before was only doubled when Thomas finally dressed him for bed. He paced in the dressing room as Thomas folded the pieces of his dinner tux over his arm.

“She says there’s a reason, but that if I knew I’d despise her—which is ludicrous!” Matthew added, pointing at Thomas as if he’d been the one to suggest it. “Absolutely ludicrous. There’s nothing that would make me despise her. What do you think she could mean?”

Lady Mary was still holding onto Carlisle despite how violent he appeared, and while Matthew was in the dark as to why, Thomas had a feeling it had to do with Pamuk being found dead. Somehow, Carlisle must have found out about it. Being the owner of several papers meant he could destroy Mary with the following scandal.

It was a horrific thing, to try and blackmail your fiancé.

Thomas sighed, recalling that queer morning, and how Anna had scared the life out of him by waking him in his bed.

But Matthew was watching him, eyes wide. Thomas noticed, and bristled, returning to a more stoic stance as he started to pick up his valeting tools.

Matthew watched him the whole time, grave. “You know what it is. Don’t you.”

Thomas could not lie to his employer: “Yes, I do.”

“Then you have to tell me.” Matthew beseeched. But Thomas had a horrible gnawing feeling in the
pit of his stomach that if he did tell Matthew Lady Mary’s secret, he would be altering the past more than was safe. He therefore flat out refused to do so.

“No.” Thomas was stern, even when Matthew was clearly taken aback. “She has to tell you. Give her time, and she’ll explain. But I cannot do that. Now if that’ll be all?”

Matthew said nothing, so Thomas took it for a silent ‘yes’. Heading for the door, Thomas was momentarily stopped by Matthew calling out to him in a weak voice.

“Just…” Matthew licked his lips, nervous again. “Just tell me it’s… tell me it’s not something incredibly horrible.”

“It’s like you said, sir, would it make you despise her?” Thomas refused to let his face flicker, wary that Matthew might take a grimace or a smile for something else.

“God help me,” Matthew sat on the edge of the bed, defeated. “I don’t think it would.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.” Thomas opened the door and stepped outside. “Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Thomas,” Matthew mumbled, his eyes on the floor.
Thomas shut the door and let the man be.

~*~

The next day, Thomas woke early.
He wasn’t the only one.

It was January 3rd, and today would be the day of Bates’ trial. Knowing that the man was about to be pronounced guilty and sentenced to death, Thomas was incredibly slow to put on his clothes. He felt like he might be sick, his nerves horribly jangled as he wrestled with his tie and jacket. When he finally headed downstairs, it was to the sight of Mrs. Hughes, O’Brien, and Anna likewise on edge. They would all be heading up to London today, and would be accompanied by several members of the family, all of whom were upstairs likewise getting ready. Sir Richard’s valet had been kind enough to offer to dress Mr. Matthew and Lord Grantham that morning, so as to give Thomas the time he needed to dress and prepare.

He was pale and listless at the back door, aided by Ethel who helped him to put on his coat and trilby hat.

In the area yard, waiting for the chauffeur to prepare two cars for their journey to the train station, everyone was quiet and somber. At a distance, Thomas was able to speak with Ethel in private as she tugged at the sleeves of his shirt and jacket to lay flat beneath his outer coat.

“…They’ll declare him guilty, won’t they?” Ethel whispered.

“Today, yes,” Thomas would not lie to her, “Unless I can change it.”

“Try,” Ethel implored him.

“But what if when I change it, it changes other things? This is the true horror of it, Ethel. Everything has an effect. What if, by helping Bates on this end, I doom him on the other?”

Ethel pursed her lips, buttoning up the front of Thomas’ travel coat. She thought for a moment, then
said, “You say Bates gets freed in the end?”

“Yes,” Thomas said, “But it’ll be in October.”

“Then I suppose we’ll just have to be patient,” Ethel said.

The cars were ready and rolled into the alley so that the servants could board in one with the family in the other. Anna, O’Brien, and Mrs. Hughes each got in, leaving room for Thomas to sit in the front seat next to the chauffeur. Thomas hugged Ethel, holding her close so that he might breath in the coconut scent amid her red curls.

She laced her arms around his neck. To an ignorant passerby, they were the typical married couple… in love and devoted.

“Don’t badger Carson today,” Thomas whispered in Ethel’s ear. “The other footman’s comin’.”

“I’ll try not to,” Ethel said. But Thomas could feel her crossing her fingers against the planes of his back.

He got into the front seat, and their car headed off for the station.

In the rear-view mirror, he noted Ethel stood in the alley until they’d rounded the corner.

It was a quiet trip up to York where the trial would be held. The entire way, Thomas was silent as he sat next to Anna. She was as pale as her white blouse, shaking ominously. Her fingertips trembled like she was suffering from a bout of hypothermia.

Normally, it would be quite unorthodox for a married man to hold another married woman’s hand when they weren’t related. But when Thomas took Anna’s hand in his own, no one made to comment on it. He squeezed her fingers tight, noting how cold they were.

He could not help but feel horribly, horribly sorry for her in that moment. Today would be hell on earth for her, and as a result absolute carnage for him. He didn’t want Anna to suffer like this… Not when he knew he couldn’t change it.

York Crown Court was a massive complex, laid out in 18th century Palladian style with yellowed brick and massive frontal pillars that looked queerly like cell bars to the passersby. Worst of all, on the green lawn out front, gallows had been set up to hang the doomed men. Two nooses were already swinging from the high beam, with a news board upon the steps declaring that at three in the afternoon, two men convicted of rape of another’s wife would be hung by the neck until dead.

Thomas could not help but wonder if the men were guilty or not. Blue lights were swirling around the noose. Clearly spirits were lingering in the area, ready for the action.

Inside the main annex, their group was made to be separated into those who would serve as witnesses for the crown and character references for the accused. Lord Grantham stood to one side, with Mrs. Hughes and O’Brien on the other, while Anna, Lady Mary, Matthew, Murray, and Mrs.
Crawley all went inside the court room to take their seats in the stand. Lady Mary had to hold Anna’s hand; she was ready to faint from fright.

“This way,” A policeman in full uniform took Lord Grantham and Thomas into an eastern wing, where a series of narrow passageways lead them into a side chamber directly outside the witnesses’ stand. Only a wall away, Mrs. Hughes and O’Brien were surely sitting in a similar room.

Witnesses of the defense and the crown were not allowed to interact during the trial.

When the policeman closed the door on Lord Grantham and Thomas, each man was left to his own devices. Somber, the pair of them took seats on the same bench, listening and waiting as both Mrs. Hughes and O’Brien were forced to testify. Every so often, you could hear the judge banging his gavel or the jurors murmuring.

Being in a room like this made Thomas sick to the point of nausea. To soothe his nerves, he pulled out a cigarette and began to smoke it with shaking hands.

When Thomas caught Lord Grantham looking at him, he offered the man a cigarette. Lord Grantham took it, and Thomas lit it for him so that the pair of them could smoke in silence. But then, Thomas noted that Lord Grantham’s tie wasn’t straight.

“Honestly, can’t the man do a tie—“Thomas grumbled, his cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. “Your tie is crooked.”

“Ah—”Lord Grantham allowed Thomas to fix the error, so that he looked smart. “Thank you, Thomas. Funny how we sit here, two men side by side. Completely different lives that we live. Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like, had I been born a man of another class.”

Thomas smiled, tapping the collected ashes of his cigarette in a communal tray. Lord Grantham did the same.

“…Dirtier,” Thomas admitted. Lord Grantham gave a weak laugh.

“Well you clean up nicely,” Lord Grantham said.

“I get paid to,” Thomas reminded him. Lord Grantham just smiled again. “But you’d have been alright. You’d have picked a profession and worked your way up in it. That’s what we all do. Look at me, I’m the disowned son of a clock maker, an’ I’m doin’ alright. Everyone finds their way in the world no matter who they are from birth.”

Lord Grantham nodded, taking another drag of his cigarette. Thomas noted the man held his cigarette differently than Thomas and did not exhale from his nose. “Thank you, Thomas. I needed cheering up.”

“So do I.” Thomas mumbled. Lord Grantham watched him expectantly, so Thomas continued on. “…Men like me, we don’t do well in courthouses. I’m terrified they’re going to say something and make me reveal what I really am. What if I go to jail today too?”

“I’d get you out,” Lord Grantham assured him. “I’d have Murray take on your case, and we’d bring Ethel to your aid. You wouldn’t be left to your own devices, Thomas.”

It was good to know. Thomas nodded, but said no more.

He finished his cigarette just as a curt knock rang out. Both men looked up as the door to the witness stand opened to reveal a policeman.
“It’s time, Lord Grantham,” the man said. Lord Grantham rose up, putting out his cigarette next to Thomas’, and left without another word. When the door closed again, and Thomas was left alone, he fetched another cigarette with trembling fingers.

He noticed they were glowing with light blue lights and pulled back disturbed. They spiraled, clinging to the tips of his fingers, before absorbing into the paper and tobacco of his cigarette so that it in turn began to emit a strange light.

Confused, Thomas lit the cigarette and took a deep inhale. The smoke tasted of honey, oranges, cloves, and cinnamon. It was a wholly unexpected if pleasant sensation.

And what was more, it relaxed him a bit.

“You’re welcome.”

Thomas smiled, looking to his left. Where Lord Grantham had once sat, there was now the Heichecera who smiled benignly at him.

“Drugging me?” Thomas joked.

“A bit,” The Heichecera said. “Your fear called out to me where I wait, so I decided to pay you a bit of a visit. Smoke,” she urged, and Thomas took another drag. When he exhaled, he noted that the normally gray smoke was now a deep orange. He tasted his lips, and found a citrus aftertaste lingering there.

“If I aid Bates, will I doom him?” Thomas asked.

“No,” The Heichecera said. “I’ll go with you to the stand and walk you through it… Your actions today will affect more fates, and I don’t feel comfortable leaving you on your own after William and Edward. But I should warn you, that no matter what you say today, Bates will go to jail. He must be condemned for Anna to rise up and find her own strength.”

Thomas felt oddly safer with the Heichecera at his side. She wouldn’t let him go to jail. She would protect him.

“The men who are going to swing today, at three.” Thomas said, recalling the glowing nooses outside, “Are they guilty?”

“Quite,” The Heichecera told him. So that was something, at least.

There was a murmur outside. Thomas looked to the door, afraid of what that might have been. He heard the judge slam on his gavel.

“Bates’ fate was sealed with Lord Grantham’s words,” The Heichecera told Thomas. So at least he knew now what ended up putting Bates in jail for ten months. God, if Lord Grantham ever knew the truth it would ruin him.

The door opened to reveal Lord Grantham. He was ashen, lips numb as he stumbled into the security of the waiting room. He staggered to the bench and took a seat into the Heichecera so that the she vanished like smoke only to re appear at Thomas’ other side.
“I…” Lord Grantham was weak, “I’ve condemned a man to die.”

“Comfort him,” The Heichecera advised. “He’s terrified.”

Thomas reached out, and though it was impertinent he took Lord Grantham’s shoulder in hand offering it a gentle squeeze.

His touch seemed to soothe Lord Grantham, but only a little bit.

“Let me try,” Thomas spoke to both the Heichecera and Lord Grantham in that moment. “Maybe I can dig us out of this hole.”

“What do I know? I’m only a sorceress with the power to travel time,” The Heichecera muttered, rolling her eyes.

There came another knock upon the door to the witness stand. It opened to reveal the police officer now beckoning to Thomas himself.

“Mr. Barrow,” The policemen said. “It’s time.”

He rose up, his hand slipping from Lord Grantham’s shoulder. The Heichecera followed him, the fog of her form sliding against Thomas’ flesh till two became one. For his eyes alone, a spectacle of blue lights clung to his clothes and skin. Thomas could feel something warm inside him, something vibrant and powerful that could not be mimicked. He could feel the Heichecera inside him, like some benevolent parasite that was living in his brain. As he walked, so did she; the two of them entered out into the courtroom to find it absolutely packed with people. The Judge was a withered man with a powdered white wig, observing a large stack of files before him.

The prosecution was headed by a shrewd man with a matching powdered wig and black robes. He gazed upon Thomas warily, but there was something sinister in his eyes that Thomas did not like to see.

“He’s aware of what you are,” The Heichecera murmured in his mind, “Bates mentioned in interviews that his relationship with you is complicated. The crown will try to add another layer of doubt by using your testimony against you. Ethel will be your salvation.”

An attendant of the court offered him a copy of the King James Bible, so worn that the gold paint had faded into tarnished black.

He laid his hand upon it, keeping his face as stoic as possible.

“How do you swear to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” the attendant asked.

“I do.” Thomas said. The attendant stepped away, allowing Thomas to view the court unimpeded. He found, in the stands, the rest of the Crawley clan and Anna.

She was terrified, her lips bloodless and her face white. She looked to him with such clear imploring that her pain and suffering could not be denied. She needed him to save her husband… but Thomas would inevitably fail her today.

And there, across the courtroom, was Bates. Flanked by two policemen on either side, Bates was sagging beneath the weight of his sentence. He’d already given up hope and was miserable as he gazed upon Thomas.
“Keep your expression neutral,” The Heichecera warned. “Let nothing show or the prosecution will take it as a sign of affection.”

Thomas decided to instead look at the prosecution, and found the man already waiting with an eyebrow raised. Clearly, he was ready to take Thomas apart piece by piece.

Oh, you have no idea who you’re messing with, Thomas thought irritably. He’d not been a fiend for nearly ten years now… but he was willing to put on the mask of a villain one more time to make this man’s time in court a living hell.

“State your full name for the court,” The prosecution said.

“Thomas Nathaniel Barrow,” Thomas replied.

“Mr. Barrow, how do you know Mr. Bates?”

“We work in the same house, Downton Abbey.” Thomas replied.

“What role do you hold there?” The prosecution asked.

“First Footman,” Thomas said.

“And how did you and Bates get on, in your mutual employment?” the prosecution asked. “Would you say that you were friendly with one another?”

“Mr. Bates showed me from the beginning that he was a man of exemplary character,” Thomas said. “And his moral fiber only increased when the late Vero Bates was brought into the picture.”

“I see.” The prosecution paced back and forth, slow but methodical. “So, Bates mentioned his wife to you? This awful woman who’d prevented all his dreams from coming true?”

“Bates is not like you,” Thomas replied irritably, “He doesn’t allow dramatics to stir his words. He explained the realities of the situation and kept a level head.”

The prosecution paused. Clearly, he did not like being called dramatic. The court stirred at Thomas’ words, with Murray and Matthew glancing at one another slightly alarmed.

Thomas was playing with fire, and both lawyers knew it.

“I see,” The prosecution did not allow his tone to be inflected with distaste, but one look at the man’s expression made it clear he’d already made his mind up that he didn’t like Thomas.

“And tell me, during your time of camaraderie and calm clarity, did Bates ever speak to you about how Mrs. Bates was treating him?”

“Yes,” Thomas said, “And he showed nothing but patience for her. She was the one who grew angry and impatient with him.”

“How so?” The prosecution crossed his arms, causing long folds to appear in the crooks of his robes.

“Vera Bates was a user,” Thomas declared to the court. “She used up all her money, and when she couldn’t have more she decided to take it by force from Bates. She knew he was in love with Anna. She knew Anna was the better woman between them… so she decided to take Bates away from her. But she could never have his heart, and that spurned her.”

The prosecution scoffed. “So, when Mrs. Bates prevented his divorce, Mr. Bates must have been terribly upset.”
“He was sad, nothing more,” Thomas replied.

“And when Mr. Bates left for London the final time, did he speak to you at all about his wife? And what he might do when he arrived there? In his…. Sadness?” The prosecution’s words were laced with icy disbelief.

“No,” Thomas snapped, growing right annoyed of the man’s tone. “He said goodbye to me, and he left.”

“Was he in a good mood?” the prosecution asked.

“Mrs. Bates is a man of controlled emotion,” Thomas refused to be backed into a corner. “And good is a matter opinion-“

“Just answer the question, Mr. Barrow,” the prosecution snapped, cutting Thomas off.

Lips pursed, Thomas controlled himself before saying, “He didn’t seem to care much either way. He was just running an errand.”

“Did you offer him any advice when it came to dealing with his wife?” The prosecution asked. “On that fateful day?”

“I didn’t have to,” Thomas snapped, “Bates does not need to be told to restrain himself. He is not an animal.”

“If he’s not an animal, then what is he doing here?” the prosecution countered.

“He’s here because his wife was a lunatic,” Thomas replied. “An’ his only mistake was not realizing how low she’d stoop to ruin him.”

“Are you insisting Vera Bates was insane?” the prosecution asked.

Shall I say it? Thomas wondered.

“It will not help, but you may try,” the Heichecera said.

“I am.” Thomas declared. “Vera Bates committed suicide by putting arsenic into her own food-“

The court erupted with shock, waves of conversation breaking out. Bates eyes were burning from the stand, with Anna clutching at her heart next to Lady Mary. Thomas met each of their eyes, carefully.

The judge banged his gavel. “Order!” Silence fell at once.

“Mr. Barrow, I must advise you not to make accusations without the backing of a lawyer,” The judge warned him. “You are a footman, not a detective.”

Thomas nodded, but did not meet the judge’s eyes nor reply.

“My, my,” the prosecution was beginning to smile in a wicked away that made Thomas’ stomach clench on himself.

He’s getting cocky, Thomas thought.

“You’ve played into the emotion,” The Heichecera whispered in his mind, “Get ready to use Ethel to your defense. He will accuse you and Bates of a relationship.”

“What a statement,” The prosecution said. “It sounds rather… planned.”
“Are facts planned?” Thomas countered, calmly. “Is reality a stage?”

“I’m the one asking the questions here, not you,” The prosecution snapped. Thomas mouth was growing dry from nerves. “The fact of the matter is that you have presented yourself today as Bates’ strongest witness, but why? Is this a sign of camaraderie or is it something self?”

Thomas kept his face controlled, but only just. “I don’t understand.”

“Bates has testified under oath that your relationship is complicated. Layered.” The prosecution paused, a sly smile upon his lips, “Yet here you are today, ready to make wild claims for the man’s sake and holding up a very good fight. Why is that? Why go to all this effort to help a man with whom you have a complicated relationship? What’s the complication that Bates referred to?”

The crowd was whispering, voices growing; Thomas noted one or two men looking to each other, pointing at Thomas if to say ‘He has that look about him’.

“Lie,” the Heichecera said in his ear, “Say you were both in love with Anna.”

“… We…” Thomas’ cheeks burned with shame as he spoke, his heart throbbing as if clenched like an iron vice.

“You seem frightened,” The prosecution couldn’t resist getting another dig in. “Is there something you’re scared to tell me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Thomas snapped, “I’m just worried about what my wife will say when she finds out I was in love with Anna first.”

“What?” Anna squawked from the seats, unable to stop herself.

The court burst out into another wave of titters, with the judge slamming his gavel again. “Order!” He crowed. The crowd fell silent.

“Mrs. Bates, I must ask you to remain silent,” the judge ordered. Anna actually had to clap a hand over her mouth.

The prosecution was dumbfounded. “You… what?”

“Bates and I were initially both after Anna,” Thomas explained, “But it all sorted itself out in the end. Bates and Anna were meant for each other, and I met my wife shortly afterward. But that’s the complication he probably meant. He knows I cared for Anna in the beginning.”

Thomas looked to Anna in the stands, who was gaping at him like he’d sprouted a second head.

“Sorry,” he admitted. Only Anna would know why he was truly apologizing. Her cheeks splotched pink with embarrassment.

The prosecution took a moment to pick up papers upon his desk, rifling through them carefully only to pause at the last page with a bitter expression. He looked up, irritated.

“… You’re married,” The prosecution said, as if only just now realizing it. Clearly, he’d over looked that detail when studying Thomas’ character statement.

“Yes.” Thomas replied.

“It says here your wife is Ethel Barrow,” the prosecution read from the paper, clearly grappling at straws as he tried to pull together another argument, “And yet you only married her a month ago?”
“That is correct,” Thomas grumbled.

“And you have a son with her, who is one and a half years old?” The prosecutor tutted, “Not very fair on your wife is it?”

The court was beginning to mutter again, with several older men glaring at Thomas like they wished they could set him on fire.

“I-“ Thomas spluttered, cheeks growing pink. “It was during the war, when Charlie was born. I couldn’t marry her while I was in Ypres. I know it wasn’t right, but… times were tough back then. I did what I thought was best.”

The prosecutor was uncomfortable but resigned.

“I see.” The man pursed his lips, “Thank you, Mr. Barrow. That will be all.”

The court broke out into a wide array of talking as Thomas left the stand. When he opened the door to the waiting room, he found Lord Grantham right at the crack of the door, clearly listening to everything. The Heichecera floated away from Thomas, separating the pair of them so that he suddenly felt terribly cold and tired without her strength.

“Good show,” Lord Grantham whispered. “I think they swallowed it.”

“Anna’s gonna kill me,” Thomas groaned. But that was the least of their problems.

In lieu of all testimonies for and against the defendant being heard, a break was taken to allow the jury to come to their decision. Thomas needed yet another smoke, still shaking from nerves, and hung near the outer rim of the main hall while the rest of their group clung about Anna who seemed on the verge from fainting from lack of oxygen. Frankly, Thomas couldn’t blame her.

He laid his head upon the cold smooth marble of an arch support, and briefly considered the plausibility of asking the Heichecera to make him vanish into the earth. A shadow appearing in his peripheral vision made him wonder if she was, in fact, about to grant his unspoken request. Instead it turned out to be only Matthew.

Thomas put out his cigarette before it burned his fingers and exhaled a long plume of normal colored smoke.

“How are you feeling?” Matthew asked.

“Bad,” Thomas admitted. He drew up yet another cigarette; it was his fifth one that day. Yet even as he made to smoke it, Matthew stopped him with a hand upon the shoulder.

“Don’t smoke any more, or you’ll numb yourself,” Matthew advised. Thomas knew there was sense in his words; he put the unsmoked cigarette back in his pack.

In the silence that followed, Matthew spoke up kindly, “You were very brave to stand up for Bates like that.”

“It wasn’t enough,” Thomas refused to delude himself anymore. Bates was going to prison and there was nothing he could do to stop it.
“We can’t know that for sure,” Matthew offered. Thomas just shook his head. “We can still appeal the decision either way, Thomas.”

“We’re going to have to,” Thomas said. Before Matthew could say anymore, a cluster of babbling commentary from the courtroom doors caught their attention. Murray was waving their party in; it seemed the jury had reached their decision.

“Well stand together, with Anna,” Matthew promised. “Let’s go.”

Following after Matthew, Thomas slowly enfolded himself in their group till his was side by side with Anna who was still holding painfully tight to Lady Mary. When she spotted Thomas, Anna’s bottom lip began to quiver wildly.

“I ought to slap you for what you said,” She choked out. But she let go of Lady Mary and latched onto him all the same.

They entered the courtroom in unison, each of them having to let go of the other so that they could march up the narrow gallery steps single file. They took up nearly half the row, with Anna in the middle between Lady Mary and Thomas. On Thomas’ other side sat Matthew, who queerly enough seemed to be trying to offer him mental support as if he was the one who needed it right now. Anna was sucking in one shallow breath after another as the last of the viewers took their seats. There was a moment of pause before the jury returned, and when they did so it was with somber expressions.

Bates was brought out and stood before his accusers. He was shaking. Thomas could see it even from the stands.

As the judge re-entered the courtroom, everyone rose up. Anna nearly fell over onto the row in front of them; Lady Mary and Thomas kept her straight until they were permitted to sit back down.

“Are you all agreed?” the judge asked the jury members. One, who had clearly been assigned to reveal their verdict, remained standing to face the judge head on.

“We are, My lord,” The jury member replied. He was white faced, his words clipped and sharp.

“The prisoner will now stand,” The judge commanded, and so Bates was forced to rise from his chair. Alongside him, two police officers likewise rose.

Anna was breathing shallowly, Thomas could see her pulse jumping in her neck.

“Do you find the prisoner to be guilty or not guilty, as charged?” The Judge asked the jury member. For a moment, there was silence as the member had to swallow an incredible amount of spit. Then?

“Guilty, My lord-“

Anna let out a scream of anguish, so loud that Thomas’ ears momentarily began to ring. The court had broken out into babbling, many men looking up to the stands to see where Anna was now heaving wildly. She rose, as if making to charge down from the gallery box so that she might free Bates herself. To keep her from harming her own fate, Thomas grabbed Anna about the waist and kept her still. He was not the only one. Both Lady Mary and Mrs. Crawley were likewise reaching out to Anna, trying to keep her from running to Bates’ side.

“No, no, no-!” Anna was wild in her desperation. She clawed at the air, reaching in vain for the man
that she loved. “No! NO!”

“John Bates,” The judge spoke loudly over all of it. At his side, invisible to the rest of the courtroom, stood The Heichecera. She looked up to Thomas with a doleful stare. “You have been found guilty of the charge of willful murder. You will be taken from here to a place of execution where you will be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul.”

Tears dropped from Bates’ eyes. “Anna-“ Bates breathed out her name, looking up to the court box even as the policemen on either side of him seized his arms.

“No, this is wrong!” Anna screamed at the judge, at the jury, at the prosecution, at Thomas, at anyone who might listen or care. “This is terribly, terribly wrong!”

“Take him down,” The judge commanded before slamming his gavel and likewise closing the case.

“Anna-“ Bates was being drug back, he would not last much longer. But then, his eyes found Thomas’ own. “REMEMBER THOMAS!”

He shouted after Thomas and Anna, even as he was drug down the hall towards the lower chambers of the court, “REMEMBER YOUR PROMISE!”

“Take care of Anna,” Bates had begged only days ago. “That’s all I ask. For all that we bore one another, take care of her in my stead.”

In his arms, Anna broke down, howling wildly against his chest as she beat against his arms. Thomas held onto her as tightly as he could, realizing in that moment that until Bates returned he would have to look after Anna as he’d promised he would.

“We will appeal it, Anna,” Matthew barked over the babbling crowd, reaching past Lady Mary and his mother to take Anna’s arm in a show of support. “We will appeal it this very day.”

“No-!!” Anna could not be soothed. With each gasp of air as she managed to get down, she just screamed all the louder. Thomas’ ears were ringing from the force of it.

“We will appeal it,” Thomas repeated Matthew’s words. He needed to say them aloud, needed to hear them again, to know that all would be well come October. In this moment, though Thomas knew how the future would unfold, he felt horribly sick to his stomach. Like Bates would swing either way.

Like he was being drug to the gallows outside.

~*~

In lieu of the horror of the trial, Anna was taken to a pub just beyond the border of the York Crown Court so that she might take a room above and lay down. Before she could do this, though Murray and Matthew both wanted to talk to her about the prospects of what must come next. Though it was slightly peculiar to drink openly in front of upper class ladies, Thomas ordered whiskies for himself and Anna both. Anna could barely sip her drink, though Thomas downed every bit of his glass and ordered a second.
Halfway through her glass, Anna sat shaking shoulder to shoulder with Thomas. Thomas was smoking his fifth cigarette of the day, a hand over his eyes so that a thin column of smoke drifted up through his slicked hairline.

The pair of them were silent, each of them mourning.

“You mustn’t think this is the end,” Mrs. Crawley urged, ever the optimist.

“For the judge to pronounce the death sentence is a matter of routine,” Murray explained.

“Routine,” the word was empty in Anna’s mouth. She drank more of her whiskey to keep from saying anymore.

“He means the judge had no choice,” Matthew explained, “If a man is found guilty of murder, he must be sentenced to death. But there are many reasons for it to be commuted. Many reasons.”

Anna’s bottom lip quivered. “Is being innocent one of them?”

“We have to work to change the sentence to life imprisonment.” Murray now spoke to Matthew more than anyone else.

“Life imprisonment?” Anna shook her head, the notion sickening her.

“Because it won’t demand a retrial or an overthrow of the Crown’s case,” Matthew added. “Once we have that, we can begin to build a challenge to the verdict.”

“Do you understand?” Lady Mary asked after a moment when Anna had not responded. She’d drunk the rest of her whiskey; her empty glass sat side by side with Thomas’.

“…Yes, M’lady,” Anna croaked, “I do."

“I still can’t believe it,” Lord Grantham was just as miserable as Anna.

“Well, I’m afraid you must,” Mrs. Crawley said.

“We’ll need you to write a letter to the Home Secretary, Mr. Short,” Matthew said to Murray.

“I’ll leave for London at once and put it into his hand myself.” Murray agreed, already taking up his briefcase so that it rested against his lap instead of on the floor.

The others began talking about Short, but Thomas had no concern for them. Instead, he looked to Anna, who was shrunken and miserable at his side. It seemed that in light of Bates begging Thomas to remember his promise, Anna had decided that Thomas was her sole protector. Thomas already had so much strain upon him that he thought he might crack from Anna’s added weight; but how could he deny her? How, when she needed him just as much as Ethel did, if not more?

He would simply have to cope.

“—And we’ll stress the circumstantial nature of the evidence,” Matthew was saying. Thomas had no idea what the group was talking about now. “There may still be elements that come to light—“

But that inspired Thomas. He realized now that Bates’ freedom lay in the hands of his wife. If she was shrunken into him, and unable to stand on her own two feet, she wouldn’t be able to save him.

So Thomas turned, taking Anna’s hands in his own. She could barely meet his eyes, and when she did they automatically began to fill with tears. Her bottom lip began to quiver again.
“Anna, listen to me,” Thomas implored her. “Your husband’s fate rests in your hands now. We can’t wait for these men to help us. You need to find out everything you can about Vera Bates, every scrap of evidence. You are his best hope, Anna. Your determination to set Bates free is going to be his saving grace, because you know what to look for. I’ll support you, we all will, but you must be the one to lead the charge. You’re the one who wants him home the most… you’re the one with the will power to do it.”

Anna nodded, then bowed her head. For a moment, Thomas hoped that she might draw strength. Instead, she just broke down quietly again, and fell into his arms. Thomas held her, wishing to god he could speed up time and bring Bates home that very hour… but now? Now it was up to Anna.

~*~

That night, Lady Mary and Anna remained in York so that Anna might be able to lay down and rest at the pub without having to face the others. Thomas returned home with O’Brien and Mrs. Hughes, both of whom were just as horrified as him.

Thomas said nothing, even when pressed. He was rendered muted by the force of the blow that Bates’ sentencing had left. He felt as if his ribs were broken in his chest. Like he were the one being swung by the neck, with all the air fleeing his body as his heart slowly stopped beating.

When they arrived home, Thomas was made to return to the attics so that he might put on his livery in order to serve dinner and dress his men. He walked right past Ethel even as she reached out for him, slipping through her fingers and saying nothing as he scaled the stairs. He kept his lights off in his room, dressing in soft gloom filtered through the red fabric of his solitary curtain.

He made it as far as his shirtsleeves before having to sit down on the bed. He was shaking, just like Anna had.

But he had to be strong, he had to endure this; he had to finish putting on his livery and… And…

A soft knock upon his door heralded the arrival of Carson, who let himself in without a word so that he could speak to Thomas in private.

Thomas took in one breath, then another. He could feel his throat beginning to clench up in panic.

“…Thomas, are you alright?” Carson asked, gently.

Thomas nodded.

Carson took another step forward, till he could reach out and touch Thomas’ shoulder. “Are you sure?” His tone was tentative.

Thomas almost made to nod a second time, but he simply couldn’t do it. He choked out an animalistic groan and fell over onto his bed so that he could bury his face in his pillows. There, he howled his rage at the world and his grief that he had to shoulder all the weight. He felt the warm, heavy pressure of Carson’s hand upon his arm.

“I can’t be everyone’s strength,” Thomas howled into his pillow, “there’s nothing left for me-“

But at once, he realized how selfish his stance was, and beat against his bed with balled fists. “Oh
god, what a selfish bastard I am.”

Carson had taken him by both the shoulders now, though he remained silent.

“What’s wrong with me?” Thomas howled at the man, “I’m not the one in jail. I’m not the one framed for murder that I didn’t commit. Why am I laying here shaken up? Why can’t I do this?”

“Because everything is resting upon your shoulders,” Carson supplied gently, “And you are only one man.”

Thomas sucked in one shaking breath after the other, shuddering in Carson’s grip. “…God, I hate to say this Mr. Carson, but I think you need t’get another man tonight because I can’t handle much more.”

“I will ask Mr. Moseley to come up and help me,” Mr. Carson didn’t seem bothered by the sudden request. “You may take an early night and recover. Gather your strength for your son, Thomas. He is the one who needs you most.”

Thomas sniffed, and nodded into the pillow. Mr. Carson patted him tenderly upon the shoulder before rising up. His bedsprings squeaked in protest at the sudden shifting weight.

“…Does Mrs. Hughes have something to calm nerves?” Thomas mumbled into his pillow. At the door, Carson paused with one hand upon the frame.

“I’ll have her fetch you a tonic,” Carson decided. “Now rest, Thomas. That’s all you have to do, tonight.”

He closed the door.

Shuddering, as if faced with a savage cold, Thomas drew his legs up on the bed despite the fact that he was still wearing his shoes. He held onto his pillow like a babe might to its mother and hid from the world.

From his many taxing responsibilities.

After a while, a maid brought up a tonic for Thomas to take, and though she left it sitting upon his bedside Thomas still did not make to sit up and drink his medicine. Instead, he lay there, still and silent, hoping if he was quiet for long enough everyone else would forget he’d ever existed.

That he would simply fade away from the world, maybe into that place where the Heichecera so often dwelled.

It’d be nice, he thought, to not exist anymore.

A gentle knock upon Thomas’ door was left un-greeted. When the door opened to reveal Charlie and Ethel, Thomas lay still upon his bed, pretending to be asleep. Ethel shut the door, garnering them some privacy, and turned on Thomas’ bedside light so that they weren’t all sitting in the dark.

“I can’t, tonight,” Thomas whispered.

Ethel nudged him anyway.

“Sit up,” She urged.
“M’too tired, Ethel,” Thomas beseeched.

“You need to take your tonic,” She told him. “Come on now, sit up.”

“Up,” Charlie babbled, repeating his mother’s words.

Unable to deny his wife or his son, Thomas sat up and groggily chugged the bitter tonic he’d been brought by the maid earlier. It tasted like chalk going down, but it made him feel sleepy.

“There,” Ethel was satisfied, taking the empty shot glass away. She then offered him a steaming tea cup, which it seemed she’d brought up with her. It already had a wedge of lemon and a dollop of honey in it. “Now drink your tea. It’ll help with the taste.”

Thomas took a few meagre sips before sitting his teacup aside and laying back down upon his pillow.

“I knew that you’d have a hard time of it, today,” Ethel said. “That’s why I put together a little something for you.”

“A loaded shotgun?” Thomas moaned into his pillow.

“Don’t be crass,” Ethel pulled him to sit up again. “Hold your son.”

Unwilling to put Charlie aside just because he’d had a horrid day, Thomas sat back up and pulled his son into his lap with a sigh. Charlie seemed to be adamantly aware that Thomas wasn’t feeling his best.

Charlie reached out with pudgy fingers, taking Thomas’ face in his hands.


Charlie stared at Thomas for a solid minute, concentrating intently on Thomas’ neck, which was normally hidden underneath his livery.

“…Da.” Charlie said.

Thomas’ brow furrowed. What had he said?

“What’s that?” Thomas repeated.

“Da!” Charlie urged, pointing at Thomas with a chubby finger. Ethel was beaming. Thomas didn’t understand.

“He’s calling you daddy,” Ethel laughed when it became clear Thomas was still oblivious. “I taught him to call you ‘Da’!”

“Daddy- ‘Charlie gummed around the word, delighted to add to his vocabulary, “Daddydaddydaddydaddy-“ And now he was just repeating it, growing more and more delighted with each phrase. “Daddy! Daddy!”

Thomas was about to burst into tears, and to keep Charlie from seeing him cry, he held his son tight to his chest. The joy of being called someone’s father was just about enough to rival the woe he’d felt all day in court.

Ethel rubbed his back, soothingly, even as Thomas silently wept into Charlie’s black curls.
He wiped his eyes before pulling back, forcing himself to wear a smile if only to keep Charlie from being aware that his father was upset.

“Ha-!” Thomas gave a weak laugh. “Is that who I am?”

“Da…” Charlie agreed.

“I love you,” Thomas said thickly, stroking Charlie’s curls. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, you know that?”

Charlie just grinned, laying his head against Thomas’ breast. Thomas placed his chin atop his son’s curls.

“…I’ll bring you two a tray,” Ethel whispered, “You can sleep in tonight. Try to teach him how to say ‘please’ and ‘thankyou’ if you can.”

“Thank you,” Thomas replied, just for a bit of cheek. Ethel gave him a gentle kiss upon the forehead in a show of solidarity, and then left the pair of them in peace.

Charlie shifted upon Thomas’ lap, looking up into his eyes. He touched Thomas’ chin, where a light sheen of stubble was beginning to form.

“…Da,” Charlie just mouthed the word. It was more than enough for Thomas.

~*~

After the awful turn out of Bates’ trial, Anna wasn’t the same. She’d lost the pep in her step; she rarely talked and certainly never smiled. Instead, she sat and watched the fire… or wrote letters she then threw away. Nothing had meaning to her anymore.

Nothing had a purpose.

The day after Bates’ trial was a gloomy, quiet affair, punctuated only by Sir Richard coming back down from London and Lady Mary taking a long walk with Matthew. When they returned, Matthew had a queer look on his face, and kept wanting to get Thomas in private. Fortunately, as the man’s valet, this was easy enough to do.

“…She’s told me her secret,” Matthew said. Thomas had been mid-way through tying Matthew’s bowtie, and paused as Matthew caught his eye. “…How did you know about it?”

Thomas gave him a helpless shrug and finished tying his double knot, “Because I helped to put him back in his own bed.”

“My god!” Matthew was aghast.

“I’m a servant, Matthew. I have to do what I can to help the family.” Thomas wouldn’t paint the picture any prettier than it was. Straightening his shirt sleeves, Thomas then fetched his white vest and helped him to shrug it on.

“You’re much more than a servant,” Matthew assured him, buttoning his vest while Thomas fetched his jacket. “I doubt this house would stand an hour if you left it.”

“You’d be surprised,” Thomas said dryly, thinking of his prior life and how inconsequential his
existence had ended up being.

“Well either way, Mary has agreed to throw Carlisle over and that’s all that matters to me,” Matthew
said. “She’s going to do it tonight, after dinner. In the library.”

“Shall I keep an eye out, sir?” Thomas asked.

“I’d appreciate it,” Matthew said. “I’ll be watching too but… I doubt it will come to anything.
Carlisle is a bastard, but I doubt he’d strike her.”

Thomas, on the other hand, wasn’t too sure.

Dinner that night was slightly subdued, given the somber news of Bates’ fate. Murray hadn’t heard
back from the Home Secretary yet, but it surely wouldn’t take too long. The family ate roast beef,
glazed with an apple and whiskey sauce, along with white potatoes doused in vinaigrette and an
asparagus salad. Ethel took over the duty of being the second footman that night, serving silently
alongside Thomas while Anna got to fold down the beds upstairs with Mrs. Hughes’ help. Carson
oversaw them all, calm and steady even as Thomas nearly tripped over his own shoes. He was still
feeling horribly tired and couldn’t wait for the day when Hepworth was at least gone.

The final round of dinner came in the form of a lemon pudding, which happened to be Lord
Grantham’s favorite. Everyone had a slice, save for Lady Mary who was clearly pondering
something unpleasant. Thomas, having had his own experiences of throwing over unwilling partners,
understood just how difficult getting rid of Carlisle would be. When he’d been forced to let go of
Edward, Thomas had felt shaky on his legs like a newborn colt.

When the cake had been consumed, their dinner party split into two with the women going for coffee
and tea in the parlor while the men stayed behind to smoke cigars and drink whiskey. Yet Lady
Mary beckoned Sir Richard into the library, causing them both to stray away from their respective
parties, and Thomas could not help but follow. He hung on the edge of the dining room door,
nervous as he saw Lady Mary slip into the library with Sir Richard leading the way.

How would she do it?
How would he take it?

Matthew was also worried. Stepping out of the billiard hall where Lord Grantham and Lord
Hepworth were having cigars, Matthew made a beeline for the library door only to stop when he saw
Thomas waiting in the eves.

The pair of them crossed the distance, meeting half-way in the entrance hall.

“What do we do now?” Thomas asked. “She’s just gone in.”

He ought to be cleaning up the dining room with Ethel and Mr. Carson but… he just didn’t feel right
about leaving Lady Mary alone. After watching the way that Sir Richard had grabbed at her arm the
other night, Thomas was certain he’d slap her given half the chance.

“You wait here,” Matthew urged him. “I’ll go see if she needs help.”

With that, Matthew disappeared into the library where Thomas could already hear shouting. So, it
seemed that Sir Richard was not taking the news well.

Wondering where his heir had gone, Lord Grantham had seemingly followed after Matthew only to
find his first footman waiting. Isis trotted after her master, tongue lolling gently.

“Thomas, what’s going on?” Lord Grantham asked, no doubt curious as to why Thomas wasn’t cleaning the dining hall. “Shouldn’t you be helping Carson and Ethel take care of the dining hall?”

“I should, M’lord, but Lady Mary is about to tell Sir Richard that their engagement is off, and Mr. Matthew just went in…” Thomas gestured to the library door. “I confess, I’m worried to leave them to it.”

“I see,” Lord Grantham tutted; he didn’t look surprised, “Well I suppose it’s no matter now. I shouldn’t worry about them, Thomas. Mr. Matthew and Sir Richard might be on opposing teams, but they are both gentlemen, so-“

A high-pitched shriek echoed from the library, along with the resounding crash of china!

Thomas bolted, thinking only of Lady Mary being in danger, and threw open the library door to instead find her completely unharmed while Matthew and Sir Richard rolled about the floor like animals.

Lord Grantham ran in after Thomas, shocked to find fighting in his house: “Stop this at once!” He thundered, furious.

They didn’t stop. Determined to get Matthew out of harm’s way, Thomas threw caution to the wind and jumped on the fight like a dog pile. He managed to get Matthew around the waist only to haul him away even as Sir Richard swung his fists in a wide arch. As a result, Thomas got punched right in the temple, momentarily making his vision go cock-eyed.

“Thomas-!” Lady Mary gasped, horrified at seeing one of her favorite servants take a hit.

It was with great self-restraint that Thomas kept from hauling back and punching Sir Richard in the eye. Instead, he fixed the man with an expression which he hoped suggested murder down a dark alley and rubbed at his temple to combat the horrible throbbing.

Matthew heaved breath after breath, furious but calming down.

“Are you alright?” Matthew asked Thomas. Thomas nodded but did not speak; he felt to do so would result in shouting and explicative laden insults. How he hated being attacked without the satisfaction of retaliation!

But it was Lord Grantham who saved the day, stepping forward with unnerving civility after witnessing such a brouhaha. “I presume you are leaving in the morning, Sir Richard? What time should I order your car?”

“How smooth you are.” Sir Richard hissed, eyes narrowed, and teeth barred as he approached Lord Grantham head on. “What a model of manners and elegance. I wonder if you will be quite so serene when the papers are full of your eldest daughter’s exploits.”

Lord Grantham didn’t even bat an eyelash, “…I shall do my best.”

The Dowager Countess, perhaps bidden by the silent call of chaos in her dead husband’s house, poked her head into the library only to realize danger was afoot.

“Oh, what on earth’s the matter?” She demanded, hurrying in to stand protectively at her granddaughter’s side.
Backing out of the way, Thomas quietly began to pick up the hundreds of broken pieces of china that had resulted from a Ming vase crashing to the ground. He wondered, distantly, how much this vase had been worth.

“I’m leaving in the morning, Lady Grantham,” Sir Richard explained. “I doubt we’ll meet again.”

“...Do you promise?” the Dowager quipped. Unable to stop himself, Thomas snorted, biting back a laugh even as he picked up pieces of broken china.

Furious, ashamed, and wholly embarrassed, Sir Richard left the library. Where he went to, Thomas did not care.

“Sorry about the vase,” Matthew grumbled as soon as Sir Richard was gone.

“Oh, don’t be,” The Dowager waved a hand, “Don’t be. It was a wedding present from a frightful aunt. I have hated it for half a century. Thomas.” She met his eyes. “Throw the baggage out and let us be done with it.”

Unable to resist getting his own dig in after having been punched, Thomas replied coolly, “Well, he’ll be gone in the morning either way, M’lady.”

The Dowager tittered.
She’d always like a black joke.

It was with great irritation that Thomas headed downstairs for the final time. After dressing Matthew, Lord Grantham, and Lord Hepworth for bed, he wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed himself. But there was still silver to polish and pieces to pull out for tomorrow... so sleep would simply have to wait a few more hours.

Oddly enough, however, when Thomas entered Carson's office to start unloading the silver cabinet, he found it already tackled by the man himself.

"Ah." Mr. Carson gave him a small smile, "No need to worry about the silver tonight, Thomas. I think you've exhausted yourself enough for one day."

"Thank you, Mr. Carson," Thomas said. He was quite relieved for the odd reprieve.

"I should remind you, not to mention anything of what occurred tonight," Mr. Carson said. "The younger staff with have questions, but you'll deflect them, I'm sure."

"I won't tell a soul, Mr. Carson," Thomas said, though he paused to add, "Save for Ethel."

"I can't begrudge you that," Mr. Carson waved a hand, dismissing him. "Go to bed."

"Goodnight, Mr. Carson."

"Goodnight, Thomas."

Outside Mr. Carson's office, Thomas contemplated his stroke of good fortune. His cheek was still hurting, to be fair, but at least he'd be able to rest it against his cool pillow. Yet even as Thomas made
for the stairs, already delighted by the prospect of taking off all his clothes and sleeping naked, he was brought to a pause by the sight of Anna slipping out the area door.

He weighed the prospects of slipping off to bed early, and simply pretending he hadn't seen Anna walk off on her own. But then, he recalled Bates' words after being condemned to die: Remember your promise.

Cursing his inability to turn a blind eye, Thomas slowly turned away from the stairs and trod glumly back down the hall towards the area door. He opened it, and found Anna sitting outside in the snow. She was crying.

The snow muffled the sound of Thomas closing the door, only betraying his presence by the gentle crunch underfoot as he crossed the courtyard.

Anna did not turn to greet him.

He sat down alongside her with a groan, quietly brushing off the seat so that freshly fallen snow fell like powder to the ground.

"... She finally threw him over," Anna said.

"Yep," Thomas enunciated the 'p' with a gentle pop.

"And he punched you in the face," Anna added dully.

"Well you win some, you lose some," Thomas shrugged.

Anna didn't reply.

Thomas sighed, leaning on his elbows against the table behind them. He wondered what he might say to Anna to make her feel some small amount of peace. But before he could offer silly advice, Anna said something rather disturbing.

"When he hangs, I'm going to kill myself."

Thomas blinked rapidly, feeling his throat clench up. He turned, looking at Anna, only to find that she was cold and withdrawn, simply staring off into space.

"... I'm sorry, at what point did we agree he was going to hang?" Thomas asked. "Because the last time I heard, we were appealing to the Home Office."

"It won't go through," Anna said.

"If you say so," Thomas relaxed back against the bench. He refused to pander to the idea of self-pity. When Anna was ready to be an adult, Thomas would be ready to listen.

Anna bristled. "Do you still hold out hope, even now?"

"Well I don't assume things I don't know," Thomas replied. "We're appealing, we don't have an
answer yet. When we do, we'll make our decisions then."

"But how can you imagine they'll give him a fair shot after telling him to hang?"

"Fair is nothing more than an opinion," Thomas explained. Anna listened, but her eyes were dead and Thomas doubted that she was truly hearing him. "What is fair to one man, is not fair to another. The trick to getting the ending you want is being willing to get your hands dirty. An' I realize that's not a bright prospect for you, but it's not about being clean, Anna. it's about Bates coming home."

She sniffed, her voice wet and thick. "If they turn down our request... I don't know what I'll do."

Thomas pursed his lips, considering what to say. "... S'like you said when you spoke to him before the trial. The time to face it is when it happens, not before."

Anna crumpled, letting out a low, keening sound that made his heart ache. "I can't lose him." It was like she'd cried so much as of lately that she simply had no more tears to give. Instead, she just wept silently and wrapped her arms about her chest.

When she leaned into him, Thomas allowed it. She rested her head upon his shoulder, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes.

"We'll get through this, Anna." He shifted to wrap an arm around her shoulder. "We'll get through this."

~*~

The next day, sure enough, Sir Richard left. Thomas was glad to see him go and felt that with his dwindling shadow a weight was lifted from the house. Thomas helped Matthew to dress, and even found himself smiling as Matthew cracked dark jokes.

"Well, now we're thicker than ever," Matthew decided. "We've both been punched by the same man."

"Least you got to punch back," Thomas grumbled.

"The look you gave could have sparked murder," Matthew said, catching Thomas’ eye in the mirror as Thomas brushed his shoulders. But then, Matthew was suddenly reproachful. "I'm sorry. That was a dreadful thing to say with Bates in prison."

"It's alright," Thomas said gently, "I know what you meant."

"But you are alright?" Matthew asked again. Indeed, Thomas had been asked by several people if he was alright, including Lady Mary, Lord Grantham, Mr. Carson, Mrs. Hughes, and Ethel.

"I'm fine!" Thomas urged, speaking louder than usual with a forceful smile in place. "Honestly! Do I look that done in?" Admittedly, he did have a bruise on his temple.

"We're just worried about you; he did punch you in the head, after all," Matthew said. Thomas just shook his head with a smile and set his brush aside.

He stepped back, quite proud of his work; he began to repack his valeting tools. A sharp knock on the door, however, brought his to a pause as Carson entered. There was a slight flush to his cheeks.
“Thomas—Mr. Matthew, come at once,” Carson demanded. “A telegram has come from the Home Office!”

“Finally!” Matthew charged out the door, leaving Carson and Thomas to hustle in his wake lest they be left behind.

The three of them descended the main stairs to find the library already full of people. Inside were Mrs. Hughes, Anna, Lady Mary, Lady Grantham and Lord Grantham. As Carson shut the door, Thomas joined ranks with Mrs. Hughes and Anna. Anna was pale and trembling again, looking ready to topple over should the news come back negative.

Lord Grantham looked at them all with stoic determination as they lined up. “Are we ready?” He asked.

“Let’s just get it over with,” Lady Mary beseeched. “For Anna’s sake.”

Lord Grantham nodded, plucked up a letter opener, and opened his telegram to examine it. For a moment there was only hushed silence as Lord Grantham read. Then, he broke into a relieved smile.

“The home office finds that many details call into question the case for premeditation—!” Lord Grantham sighed in relief, “The point being, he will not hang!”

An enormous sound of strain being lifted came in the chorus of sighs and smiles. Thomas felt a slight stitch in his chest heal, but not by much. Anna, on the other hand, was still gray faced.

“But it’s still life imprisonment,” Anna said.

“Don’t dwell on that!” Lady Mary beseeched, “Not now. It’s life, not death. That’s all we need to think about.”

“We’ve a task ahead of us, it’s true. But Bates will live, and he is innocent!” Lord Grantham was beaming from ear to ear. “In time, we’ll prove it, and he will be free.”

“I must go see him today,” Anna begged. “They’ll let me, won’t they?”

“I can’t believe they won’t,” Lord Grantham assured her. She seemed to be pepping up, and for the first time in days a tiny smile crept across her face. “I’ll get Higgs to run you into York.”

Anna was near tears as she addressed her fellows. First, she looked to Lady Mary who clasped her hands kindly. Then she turned and looked to Thomas himself, with tears in her eyes.

“Thank you for all the help you’ve given me over the past few days,” Anna said. “Even if you did lie about me on the stand.”

“Sorry about that,” Thomas said, causing a laugh to ripple through the group. “I didn’t know what else to do!”

But Anna just beamed and hugged him round the neck. Thomas allowed it, knowing the circumstances were unusual enough to warrant odd behavior in from of an Earl. “Oh Thomas, I couldn’t care less.”

And with that, Anna left the library, determined to see her husband before noon.

~*~
Though Thomas was still running on very little sleep, it did not bother him to go the extra mile to prepare the house for the servant’s ball. Bates’ near death had resulted in the ball being postponed until last minute, with neither Carson nor Lord Grantham wanting to celebrate until they knew for certain Bates would not hang. Mercifully, the put together for the servant’s ball wasn’t near as difficult as the updo for an actual soiree, but it still involved taking all the furniture out of the entrance hall, rolling back the carpet, and laying out folding tables so that people could have places to sit and enjoy snacks. Mrs. Patmore made a cold fruit punch spiked with wine, and several little dishes that would serve as finger food while the servants danced with the family. Then, it was a matter of everyone dressing up smartly. The family would dine as they normally did, with the ball held straight after. The servant’s dinner was therefore much smaller than it usually would have been, but no one complained. It was always a special night when servants could put on their fashionable clothes and step out of their liversies.

Thomas decided to wear his blue pinstripe suit, lacing up his albert chain and pocket watch before combing back his hair. Charlie was put to bed early and slept soundly in Thomas’ room as Thomas snuck out. He went downstairs to the entrance hall, only to find all of the servants milling about, eager for the festivities to begin. A string quartet had been called up from the village, hardly anything to write home over though they could keep up a merry tune.

They played the Merry Widow Waltz, a rather apt tune since Thomas was dancing with the Dowager Countess. Across the way, Mr. Carson was dancing with Lady Grantham, while Lord Grantham danced with Mrs. Hughes. Matthew was dancing with O’Brien… and didn’t look too chuffed about it.

“How is your cheek healing?” The Dowager had the queer ability to dance and talk at the same time. Thomas, on the other hand, had a difficult time concentrating on his steps when he was trying to be polite. “Are you feeling up to scruff?”

“I am, your ladyship-” Thomas had to glance down quick to make sure he wasn’t stepping on her foot. “Sir Richard might be good at selling papers, but he’s a horrible punch.”

“You know,” The Dowager went willing as Thomas turned her carefully to the step, “I once had the displeasure of watching four servants tear apart a duke and a marquess at Lady Huxtable’s Regency ball in 1863.”

Christ, how could she remember things like that after so many years?

“But you’re a much better fighter than they were,” She praised.

“But I didn’t even punch back,” Thomas had to glance down again, and winced to find he’d nearly trod on her toe.

“Yes, and therein is the lesson, Thomas.” The Dowager always had wit to reveal, “Restraint is the show of an admirable man. You’re also a rather excellent dancer.”

“Thank you, your ladyship,” Thomas said.

“But if you step on my toes one more time, I might just have to do to you what Matthew did to that poor vase,” She added icily. He’d trod on her foot. Twice.

They stopped dancing, and Thomas offered her his arm. Technically the music was still going, but he wasn’t about to make her suffer any longer on his arm.

“Would you like to stop now, your ladyship?” Thomas asked.
“Yes, please, and thank you.” She said in a clipped voice. Thomas lead her back to her table. Lady Mary had been keeping her company, yet she now seemed to be making her way to the front door. Thomas wondered if she’d go outside when she wasn’t even wearing a coat. Her red dancing dress and black elbow length gloves would hardly keep her warm in a snow storm.

“Honestly,” The Dowager sighed as Thomas helped her to sit back down. “Men like you are usually as spry as cats.”

“Men like me?” Thomas grumbled, hoping that she would be none the wiser to his nature.

“Well, Oscar Wilde was a lovely dancer,” The Dowager said. “Even if he was far too chatty.”

Thomas rolled his eyes and stepped away with a curt bow. He hated being compared to Oscar Wilde.

He watched, mildly pleased to simply sit on the side lines and observe. When he’d been young and foolish, he’d never realized the beauty of a moment like this. Now, older and wiser, Thomas could afford to enjoy such precious hours. Mrs. Patmore had done up her hair and was arguing with Daisy over the punch bowl. Mrs. Hughes was chatting with Lady Grantham, both women clearly pleased about something.

Matthew had left the dance floor. He was heading out the door after Lady Mary. Thomas knew from the past that Matthew was about to propose.

He beamed, delighted at the thought of the two finally being able to wed. With their union would come the birth of George, whom Thomas had so adored. The next obstacle would be somehow keeping Matthew alive without consequences. Could Thomas perhaps work with the Heichecera to save Matthew and avoid Death’s anger? Or would three strikes against Death’s roster be the final blow to send Thomas toppling? Thomas could not help but recall the lighting struck tower, a card that had once been in his very own tarot hand. It had shown a tower, with men falling from its fiery windows. Was that to be his fate, or Matthews?

“Mr. Barrow, may I have this dance?”

Thomas looked about with a start, taken from his reverie to see Ethel before him. She’d done something jolly with her hair, leaving it in a loose curling bun to show off two simple iron earrings she’d surely borrowed from Anna. She was wearing a day dress of Anna’s, made of green with a lace collar.

She looked, in a word, radiant.

“Mrs. Barrow, you may have every dance,” Thomas praised her. He took up her arm and swept her onto the dance floor so that they were suddenly enveloped in the middle of the crowd. Unlike before with the Dowager, where Thomas had been afraid of stepping on her toes, Thomas felt no such fear with Ethel.

He was content to dance with her, and unafraid of making mistakes in her arms.

“So…” Ethel smiled up at him, enchantingly, “Bates is in the clear, just like before?”

“Just like before,” Thomas said.

“So, what comes next?” Ethel asked, eager like a child who wanted to know the ending of a riveting fairy tale.
“New faces,” Thomas teased, “new trials…”

“Then we’ll face them together,” Ethel said.

As Thomas turned, taking her through the steps, he noted that Matthew and Mary were outside. He could just see them through the doorway; they were side by side, talking.

He gestured with his chin so that Ethel could see where he was looking. She glanced over her shoulder and noted Mary and Matthew outside.

“See them?” Thomas said. Ethel nodded. “He’s about to ask her to marry him.”

She looked back at him, delighted. “An’ what will she say?”

He leaned in, to whisper into her ear where a single orange curl tickled his cheek. “…Yes.”

Ethel threw her arms around his neck.
He pressed a kiss to her forehead and held her tight.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know.
The spring season of 1920 found Downton Abbey in a cheery mood.

Lady Mary and Mr. Matthew were to wed in April and would take a month-long vacation to the south of France where they would stay in a rented château with Thomas and Anna for company. As a result, every conversation being had in the abbey these days revolved around the wedding. Guests, food, table settings, dresses, flowers, wine selections, sermons, and everything else had to be ironed out in finite detail both the appeasement of the Dowager Countess and to Mr. Carson. It was difficult to say who was harder to please, but Thomas supposed he was biased on the subject since one of the two merely came for dinner and the other came for blood.

Thomas was still the only footman in the house, and the strain was beginning to show on him. For the first time since returning to his past, he had gray hairs. He was adamant about keeping in better shape, and as such hadn’t put on as much weight as before, but he was still a little softer in the hips than he’d like to be. He was starting to get lines around his eyes, and there were moments when his back gave him terrible pains. Thomas mourned his passing youth; come October 30th, he would be thirty years old. Ethel was already talking about having a grand party and inviting all their friends. She ideally wanted to have it at their cottage, a subject she never got tired of harping on about given half the chance.

It was March 19th, a Monday, and as a result the family was at the local church doing yet another walk through of the ceremony. With a lull in the action came time for lunch, so all the servants sat down to eat and relax until the family returned. The only two faces missing were Anna and Mrs. Hughes, both of whom had gone up to London to look over the properties Bates had held. They’d been transferred to Anna before the trial, and now in her possession they could be cleaned for tenancy.

The servant’s hall was quiet for the moment, with only Carson, O’Brien, Ethel, Thomas, and Charlie at the table. In the corner, the maids sat playing a small game of cards. The hall boy was outside chopping firewood (they were always running low in the colder months). Mrs. Patmore had come to collect the plates from their desert (treacle tart), while Daisy was chopping vegetables for the family’s
luncheon when they returned from practice.

“Thank you, Mrs. Patmore, that treacle hit the spot,” Mr. Carson praised as Mrs. Patmore picked up their plates.

“So, Mrs. Hughes and Anna are getting the place ready to let?” Mrs. Patmore inquired.

“That is the plan,” Mr. Carson said.

“I’m grateful that Anna was able to hold onto the house,” Thomas mused, recalling how last time he’d thought it sneer-worthy that the judge had been so ‘daft’ as to give her Bates’ property. Now, Thomas considered it nothing short of a blessing.

“Well, Mr. Bates had the wisdom to transfer it to her before the trial, for which we can all be grateful,” Mr. Carson explained, relaxing back in his chair with a slight groan.

Right on cue, Ethel piped up from Thomas’ right, rocking Charlie tenderly upon her breast. “I wonder what it’s like to own property,” Ethel drawled. “Oh well, I guess I’ll never know… My poor baby will be forced to grow up in a kitchen, never seeing the inside of a schoolhouse—“

“Ethel,” Thomas groaned, cutting her off. She gave him an irritable stare.

“How are you getting on?” O’Brien asked. There was something peculiar about the tone in her voice; it was almost as if she was forcing more sympathy into her words than she naturally felt, “Being the permanent valet for two men and the only footman? You must be terrible tired.”

“I’m not the permanent valet for Lord Grantham,” Thomas corrected her gently. She scoffed, rolling her eyes. “I’m just the valet for one, but I admit… I’m getting a wee bit… frustrated.”

But this was an outright lie. He’d passed frustrated four months ago. He was now crying himself to sleep over the strain.

“Not to worry, Thomas,” Carson assured him with a small smile. “We’ve got you a footman on the way. My adverts are in the papers, circling far and wide, and I’ve already had a few contenders.”

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Carson- “O’Brien butted in, quick as lightning, “Can I talk to you about that later?”

Carson blinked, bemused. “As you like.” He grumbled. To avoid any more conversation on the topic, he got up and left. O’Brien wore a rather smug expression that put Thomas’ teeth on edge.

She was vying for Alfred to be the new footman. Soon enough, the ginger bean pole would be back in the house.

That night, sure enough, Anna and Mrs. Hughes returned. It was direly late however, with the servant’s having already had their dinner and the family having been put to bed. As a result, Anna was all but dragging her feet, and Mrs. Hughes was ready to topple over. When they entered the servant’s hall, Thomas stood up at once and offered Mrs. Hughes his chair, who collapsed into it with a tumultuous sigh.

“Thank you, Thomas,” She groaned. “Oh- “she fretfully placed a hand upon his cheek, “You look as
peaky as I feel.”

“I’m working on that, Mrs. Hughes, not to worry.” Mr. Carson promised her. “How was London?”

“We got it all done,” Anna sighed, sitting across from Mrs. Hughes and next to O’Brien, “But I couldn’t have managed without my helper.”

“Have you eaten?” Mrs. Patmore asked, coming out of the kitchen to dust her hands upon her apron.

“We had a bite to eat on the train,” Mrs. Hughes said.

“Well, have a cup a ‘tea, anyway.” Mrs. Patmore urged, and she left at once to prepare two cups.

Mrs. Hughes stretched a bit in her chair. Thomas hear two of her neck vertebra pop. “I’ll start on the final lists for the wedding tomorrow morning.”

Thomas did not make to sit down again, instead leaning casually up alongside the china cupboard as he fiddled with his cigarette pack; he was running low, he’d have to go to town soon to pick up some more fags.

“I’ve got the last of the wine deliveries coming on Tuesday.” Carson said.

“How will you manage without a footman?” Mrs. Hughes wondered. “Thomas can’t be expected to serve as Lord Grantham’s valet, Mr. Matthew’s valet on the day of his wedding, and your footman too. It’ll kill him!”

“I agree,” Mr. Carson said. “But I’ve not yet found a footman to my liking—“

“I’ve had a letter from my sister, asking after a job for her son- “Mrs. O’Brien butted in at full speed, “And—“

“Ms. O’Brien, we are about to host a society wedding.” Mr. Carson snapped, in no mood to bandy words. “I have no time for training young hobbledehoys.”

At the word ‘hobbledehoy’, O’Brien visibly bristled. She turned pink in the face, clearly holding back her rage to some level. Thomas pursed his lips, looking down at the ground. Though he knew he ought to say something positive in this moment, he was finding it very hard to be supportive. Alfred had been a rather large pain in Thomas’ arse the last time around. How would he be able to change that now?

The bell board began to ring; it was coming from Lady Grantham’s dressing room.

“Her Ladyship is ringing.” Carson snapped when O’Brien did not automatically jump up and address the call.

Looking murderous, O’Brien finally pealed out of her seat and stormed up the stairs. Thomas finally dared to look up, and found Ethel watching him carefully.

‘Yikes’, Ethel mouthed silently.
As the details for the wedding began to finalize, Thomas was given an enormous pile of tasks to do. Being the only footman, his greatest concern was to have the Regina set sparkling before April 2nd, when the wedding would take place. Thomas polished till his fingers ached, smoking a cigarette out of the corner of his mouth just to soothe himself. Carson normally didn’t allow smoking in the silver pantry but given that Thomas was stressed out of his mind, he’d relaxed a bit on his stiffer rules.

That was how Anna found him, when she came to call, straddling the work bench and muttering a dull tune under his breath as he prepared his twelfth serving tray. She knocked, opening the door, and gave him a beaming smile. It was good to see her joyful now days.

“Hello there,” Thomas greeted her, exhaling a long plume of smoke and putting out his cigarette in the ashtray.

“I’ve got something for you,” Anna said, shutting the door behind them to garner some privacy.

“Is it a new footman?” Thomas asked, though he knew she’d say ‘no’.

“No,” Anna laughed, “But O’Brien will have Carson’s head on a platter before it’s all said an’ done, at that rate.”

“Pretty much,” Thomas said, for O’Brien had essentially hijacked the hiring process last time in order to get Alfred the job. “So, what is it, then?”

“Look at this!” Anna pulled out a rather tattered journal from within her apron pocket and offered it over to Thomas. It had a meagre floral design on the front, of red and green, and when he opened it to the front page, he found the signature ‘Vera Kathleen Bates’ in the top right corner.

“It’s Vera’s diary,” Anna explained in a whisper, as if she thought someone might be listening in the eves. “We found it behind the bureau when we were cleaning. What should I do with it?”

“Take it to Bates!” Thomas said at once. He had no idea how Anna had wrangled Bates’ freedom, so he was just as clueless as her on this position. “Look through the damn thing. Find out what she wrote!”

Anna took back the journal, thumbing through it. As she did so, she became slightly disheartened. “But… but what if-“

She let out a sigh, frustrated at her situation. “But what if it leads to nothin’?” She gestured with the diary in hand. “What if it’s all some fantasy and-“

“So what, it fails-!” Thomas refused to be put in a dour mood, not when he knew Bates would be free. “Look, the motto is ‘try, try, try’, not ‘quit, quit, quit’. Bates won’t be set free with you sittin’ here on your hands. So, send that book off to him first thing, and let’s get this ball rolling. I want the man home as soon as possible, god help me, I can’t keep being a valet for every man in this house!”

Anna could not help but laugh a bit. She even smiled, put at ease by Thomas’ good humor.

“I know it’s more than that,” she added softly.

“So maybe it is,” Thomas grinned. The fact of the matter was, he just wanted Anna’s trials to be over. He wanted things back to normal, damnit.

“Thomas…” Anna sat down beside him on the workbench, a little pensive. Folding her hands upon her lap, she seemed to contemplate her words, “About what I said before, when we didn’t know whether or not Mr. Bates would have a reduced sentence-“
Ah. She was referring to her suicidal moment. Thomas sat down his polishing rag to give her his full attention; little did she know that he too understood the feeling of wanting to die.

“Don’t worry, Anna,” Thomas assured her. “I haven’t told anymore. Nor will I.”

“Thank you,” Anna let out a tiny sigh of relief. “It’s just, I feel so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be.” What an odd thing to feel about suicide. Embarrassment had no place in death. “I think you’ll find you’re not the only person under this roof that’s had those thoughts.”

Anna blinked, puzzled, then caught his eye. “Surely not you?” She said, reproachfully.

Thomas gave her a bitter smile.

“You’d be surprised.”

~*~

It took five days for O’Brien to wheedle Mr. Carson down to the wire and have her way, but sure enough she won out in the end.

Thomas was in Matthew’s dressing room, ironing several pieces for the wedding that he’d previously lined with lavender scented wax sheets. It was the same suit as before when he was to marry Lavinia Swire, but now it was boasting light blue accents per Lady Mary’s request. As a result, Thomas had been forced to dye one of Matthew’s many pocket squares a soft shade of robin’s egg blue, and was now ironing it to get it into the perfect square shape.

A rap upon the door, however, took him off guard and caused him to nearly burn his left pinky finger. He looked up to find Carson, oddly smug with his chest puffed out.

“Thomas, I have done it,” He proclaimed with pride.

Thomas blinked, unsure what the man meant.

“I’m glad for you,” Thomas said. “But I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mr. Carson.”

“Come with me,” Mr. Carson gestured. Unable to put Mr. Carson’s request aside, Thomas set his iron to cool and tossed the rest of the glowing embers back into the fireplace so that an accident wouldn’t occur in his absence. He followed Mr. Carson to the servant’s stairwell, where they descended at a prompt pace.

“I told you I’d get you a footman, and a footman we now have,” Mr. Carson praised. “So, we’ll have no more of you serving at dinner.”

Oh, here we go, Thomas thought irritably as they rounded the corner of the servant’s hall.

There, sure enough, was Alfred Nugent.

He looked just the same as Thomas remembered, in his thin tweed suit and newscap. He was obscenely tall, with his socks showing at his ankles and his jacket sitting a little too tight upon his shoulders. Mrs. Hughes and O’Brien were observing him from the table, with O’Brien looking downright delighted to have her handiwork come up top. Mrs. Hughes, on the other hand, wasn’t too
sure. Daisy had clearly been serving them all tea. She still held the kettle in her hands and was blinking bemusedly at Alfred with the queerest expression… like she was enchanted.

Thomas came around the table to stand next to Mrs. Hughes, while Mr. Carson stopped short with an ugly frown.

“This is Alfred Nugent?” Carson demanded, gesturing to Alfred like this might be some kind of joke.

“It is,” O’Brien declared with pride. “My sister’s son. An’ he’s a mighty fine worker.”

Carson walked over and began to posture himself next to Alfred. Sure enough, Alfred towered over him by a good three inches.

“You’re too tall to be a footman!” Carson complained. “No footman should be over six foot one!”

That put Thomas right under the wire; he was certain he was about six feet.

“That can’t be, can it?” O’Brien wouldn’t allow for her nephew to receive any amount of criticism in her presence, “Since he’s already been taken on.”

“But what have you done?” Carson demanded.

“I was a hotel waiter after I was discharged from the army, but they’ve cut back.” Alfred explained.

“I think to get a job as a waiter shows real initiative,” O’Brien butted in before Carson could say anything.

“I suppose he can speak for himself?” Mrs. Hughes was hardly enthused to have O’Brien commandeering the hiring process.

“Why?” O’Brien demanded at once. “Is he on trial? This isn’t an interview is it? Not when he’s already got the job.”

“No, it is not an interview, Ms. O’Brien,” Carson was clearly unhappy on the subject, “But he is on trial, and if he cannot match our standards then he will be found guilty.”

Carson took a seat in his chair at the head of the table, lacing his hands over his stomach.

“I mean to try, Mr. Carson.” Alfred was earnest. In the end, Thomas knew that his puppy-dog loyalty would give him Carson’s full respect. He’d been jealous of Alfred beforehand. Now… Thomas felt threatened by him. What if Thomas ended up losing his job because of O’Brien’s scheming? How would he provide for Charlie or Ethel?

Don’t be ridiculous, a voice inside of him chided, Matthew won’t get rid of you. He likes you too much.

“As long as you do…” Carson grumbled, before finally conceding defeat. “Right, go upstairs and get settled in. Your aunt will hopefully be able to find you a livery that fits.”

Alfred left the hall at once, making a beeline for the servant’s stairwell. His legs were so long that he was able to cross the distance in a matter of seconds.

“Well, Thomas-“Carson groaned a bit, turning in his chair to face Thomas and Mrs. Hughes. “Are you satisfied now?”

“Mr. Carson, I’m not the one who matters.” Thomas reminded him gently. Carson gave him a tiny
smile.

“An’ why shouldn’t you be satisfied?” O’Brien demanded, giving Thomas a beady stare. “Why shouldn’t anyone be satisfied? He’s a good worker, and—”

“Ms. O’Brien that is enough!” Mrs. Hughes snapped, finally unable to take it any longer. “Honestly, you’re biting at the line.”

O’Brien shifted, seeming to recognize that she’d been a tad bit too hasty to jump up to bat.

“Well,” O’Brien tutted, sucking on her teeth for a moment before finally saying “So long as the line doesn’t bite back.”

With that she walked off in the direction of the livery cupboards, no doubt going to search through them for a size big enough to fit Alfred.

~*~

The more Thomas thought about it, as he went through the facets of his day, the more he realized that he’d never had a chance to properly get to know Alfred before being warped by O’Brien. She’d wanted the best for her nephew (and why not) but Thomas had been terrified for his job security which had already been on thin ice with Bates still slightly in the picture. He’d known back then, should Bates ever be released, he would lose his job. Of course, Thomas had deluded himself into thinking Bates wouldn’t be released, and therein had been his downfall. He’d gone from being a necessary valet to a burdening under butler, and everything had gone ape shit from there.

Now, in his new reality, Thomas was the valet to both Mr. Matthew and Lord Grantham. Even when Bates did come back, Thomas would still be valet to the heir of Downton. But even so… Matthew would soon die in a car crash unless Thomas could somehow change the mind of the Heichecera (or even Death itself). What would happen to his security then? How would he be able to provide for Charlie and Ethel?

His thoughts became darker as he went to valet for Lord Grantham, dressing him for dinner. Lord Grantham seemed in a peculiar mood too, unusually quiet and rather stiff as Thomas helped him shrug on a jacket. He’d been up to London earlier, rather promptly at that, and had returned home the same day. Thomas wondered why.

“Are you alright, M’lord?” Thomas wondered aloud as he helped Lord Grantham to tie his tie. He felt terribly impertinent at Lord Grantham’s sudden bizarre expression, and added, “Forgive me, I’ve over stepped.”

“…No, it’s nothing,” Lord Grantham assured him, waving it all off. “Just… thinking about things. How are things downstairs?” The change in conversation offered a lighter tone.

“Well, the new footman has arrived.” Thomas told Lord Grantham; no doubt he’d be pleased to learn his house was up to speed again.

“What?”

Instead of growing merry, Lord Grantham looked… frightened. It unnerved Thomas.
“…Lord Grantham, what’s wrong?” Thomas asked again, “You look terribly frightened.”

Lord Grantham coughed, swallowed, then schooled his expression into indifference. “Don’t worry a hair, Thomas. I’ve just had a tiring day. I think I’ll go down now.”

With that, he left. Thomas found himself clutching his brush, having been unable to tend to Lord Grantham’s suit before he left.

…. What on earth was going on?

Unable to offer much time over to Lord Grantham’s peculiar habits, Thomas packed up his tools and trotted down the gallery hall to where Matthew was waiting. As soon as Thomas crossed the threshold, Matthew greeted him with a beaming smile he was sorely relieved to see.

“You’re free and mine!” Matthew declared.

Thomas laughed, setting his case down on the bed and opening it to re-organize his tools. “I’m free from being a footman for the most part, but I will help out a bit with the wedding and larger parties. I can’t just let Carson fall over.”

Matthew stepped out of his day clothes, handing over each piece for Thomas to fold up. Matthew had gotten a stain on the hem of his trousers. Thomas tutted and set them aside; they would have to be mended.

“I should hardly think the man capable of shuddering-“ Matthew teased, standing only in his pants and sock garters. Thomas had to admit, when Matthew was undressed, he was god damn gorgeous.

He refused to look at Matthew unclothed, and instead silently handed piece after piece to Matthew so that he could redress in his dinner trousers. When he was adequately clothed, Thomas stepped back in to begin ‘pinning’ Matthew together.

“So, you’ll be living with us full time after the wedding?” Thomas wondered, for even now plans were slightly up in the air.

“We’ll stay until we decide where to go,” Matthew corrected him. “It’ll be on the estate, I should think, or in the village.”

“We’re not going to Mrs. Crawley’s house, are we?” Thomas grimaced, thinking of Mrs. Bird who had always rubbed him the wrong way.

“God no,” Matthew laughed.

Unable to resist, Thomas added, “And you’re sure you’re going to be needing a valet?”

“Admittedly, I want to live more simply after the wedding-“ Thomas’ heart leapt into his throat until Mathew said, “But I think you can help me with that. Maybe you can be a butler and a valet all in one… I’ll need someone to help me run the house.”

“Oh god help me,” Thomas laughed aloud, finishing buttoning Matthew’s waistcoat to check that his wraps were slackened enough for easy moving. “Please don’t say that. I couldn’t handle the
pressure. A butler to Lady Mary?"

“Oh man up, Thomas.” Matthew teased, laughing.

Thomas helped Matthew with his bow tie, making sure his wings were even on both sides. “Oh, I should tell you-” satisfied, Thomas fetched Matthew’s diner jacket and helped him into it. “Lord Grantham was terribly down just now, so try to buck him up at dinner.”

Curious, Matthew, situated himself in his jacket, before gazing at himself in the mirror. “I’ll do that… But I must say, you’ve done it again, Thomas,” Matthew praised. “I’m a human.”

“I’m not doing much,” Thomas scoffed, helping Matthew with his cufflinks.

“You say that, but you’ve seen me in the morning when I’m a sea monster. I’ve never been much of a looker.”

“Oh man up, Matthew,” Thomas parroted. “Take it from someone who knows what an attractive man looks like, you’re not bad off.”

At that, Matthew threw his head back and laughed to the ceiling.

“Now off you go,” Thomas said, letting Matthew leave after dusting his shoulders, “And try not to gawk at the new footman. He’s taller than Carson.”

Matthew trotted out of the room, flashing Thomas a charming smile: “Dinner and a show!”

Thomas couldn’t help but smile.

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When Thomas descended the stairs to the servant’s hall, he walked at a smooth pace instead of the hassled panic he’d been used to for the past months. No longer would he have to serve at dinner (at least, not on regular nights), and as a result he felt unbelievably free as he returned to the table to sit and take a cup of tea. He would have nothing to do until after brandy and cigars were served, and as a result he felt almost bored.

Alfred Nugent, on the other hand, was now fitted into a livery that just barely encompassed his limber frame and stood sweating in the hallway from sheer nerves. Thomas watched as O’Brien tended to Alfred’s buttons and bowtie, making sure that her nephew was smartly dressed.

“I feel quite nervous,” Alfred lamented, bristling at the sound of Mrs. Patmore snarling in the kitchen for Daisy to shake a leg.

“Don’t be,” O’Brien wouldn’t hear a word of it. “You’ve got the ambition and the willingness.”

As Thomas passed by, intent on taking up a cup of tea in the kitchen with Charlie, he was stopped by O’Brien who shot him an unnervingly bright smile.

“Oh, Thomas-“ he paused, looking round at the pair. “This is Alfred, our new footman and my nephew. Alfred, this is Mr. Thomas Barrow. He’s the valet to Lord Grantham and his heir Mr. Crawley.”
“How do you do,” Alfred said.

“How do you do,” Thomas replied. Lord, but it was strange to speak as if they were only first meeting!

“I’ve heard the baby in the kitchen is yours. Charlie, right?” Alfred asked.

“Yes, that’s my son,” Thomas said. “My wife is Ethel, the housemaid. Head housemaid now, I think—“ Mrs. Hughes was still in the process of hiring, but when she did, Anna would be promoted and so would Ethel.

“Since you’re a valet, why don’t you tell young Alfred here how he looks in his uniform?” O’Brien asked. “I want to put him at ease, but he won’t listen to a word from me.”

“Well—“ Thomas reached out, fingering the shoulder pads of Alfred’s cramped jacket. “You certainly look smart, and that’ll please Mr. Carson. But you’re so tall… We may need to take out your trousers a bit around the ankle… And your shoulders are very broad. You’d do well to have the back of your jacket lengthened as well.”

Alfred looked crestfallen, so to amend his statement Thomas added. “Don’t feel blue. It’s not your fault. William Mason, the footman before you, was hardly five foot eight.”

“I knew my height would be an issue,” Alfred said, bitterly. “It always is.”

“Don’t be down,” O’Brien wouldn’t hear a word of it.

“Tall footmen are better than short footmen,” Thomas reminded him. “And you can see over the tops of everyone’s heads, so we’ll always know where you are in the room!” He tried for a cheery smile, but O’Brien shot it down with a scowl.

“This isn’t the time for jokes,” She warned him.

Thomas raised his hands in slight defense. God only knows he didn’t want this encounter to go poorly after last time: “If you say so. Excuse me, I’m going to get a cup a’ tea.”

He headed off towards the kitchen.

Alfred had never liked him before, not even at the very end when they’d been able to play card games and relax at the end of the day. He’d always been distant, aloof, and Thomas had to wonder now how much of that had been O’Brien’s manipulation, and how much had been personality. God only knows, Alfred wasn’t what Thomas normally looked for in a friend. He was a plain-spoken country boy, and though he had grand ambitions in the kitchen, he was a damn nuisance in the rest of the house. He didn’t carry himself with grace, nor did he allow himself to broaden his horizons mentally. Where Daisy was an intellectual, Alfred was generally pleased to be ignorant on all subjects because it left him in a blissful state. He was, in short, almost like William save that Alfred lacked the golden-boy-wonder quality which had made William so fucking annoying.

There, alone, was his saving grace.

In the kitchen, Thomas found Charlie sitting in his upturned apple crate playing with building blocks. He was now too big for a bassinette but was still too little to be left running around the house. He could speak, though not in long illustrious sentences, and offered Thomas a bright smile when Thomas popped up from behind.

“There’s my boy,” Thomas praised, scooping Charlie up from his den. Charlie held on tight to his
neck, laying his head upon Thomas’ shoulder. “Did you have a good day today?”


“I know,” Thomas was hungry too, bless him. “We’re nearly ready for supper.” Charlie tutted, unappeased.

“You two go sit down at the table, an’ I’ll have Daisy bring you a plate of biscuits,” Mrs. Patmore said. But even as Mrs. Patmore pulled out a tin and began to set a small ceramic plate, Daisy started banging about around the isle, furious at having been tasked with an errand she clearly hated. Thomas was taken aback.

“What’s wrong with you?” Thomas demanded. “Bangin’ about like a tempest.”

“I’m fed up is what!” Daisy cried out, angrily. “They promised me promotion. Mrs. Hughes said they’d get a new kitchen maid and I’d be Mrs. Patmore’s assistant!”

“It’ll happen, Daisy—” Thomas tried to soothe, but Daisy wouldn’t hear a word about it.

“I’m about to go on strike if they don’t!” Daisy added, shooting a glare at Mrs. Patmore who was promptly acting like she couldn’t hear a damn thing. “I swear, I mean it! I read all about it in the papers!”

“Oh for god’s sake!” Thomas groaned. Here was the revolutionary Daisy that he’d so missed the past few years. Apparently she struck with a vengeance! “Don’t do that!”

“Don’t chastise me, like I’m a baby!” Daisy hated being talked down to. “You always act like you know better just because you’re seven years older than me!”

“Stop bein’ so hissy!” Thomas snapped right back, holding Charlie tight to his hip. “I didn’t ask for your attitude, an’ I don’t appreciate it neith—“

“Get out of the kitchen!” Mrs. Patmore barked, shoving a plate of biscuits at Thomas’ chest. “Now!”

“Daddy no shout!” Charlie added, just to make sure his stance was registered.

“Fine!” Thomas barked at all of them, before turning back towards the hall and carrying Charlie away in a huff. He passed by Alfred and O’Brien, both of whom were clearly listening in on the commotion in the kitchen.

“If Daisy mentions she’s going on strike, don’t let her!” Thomas snapped at O’Brien as he passed.

“Strike!” Charlie cried out enthusiastically, banging his fists against Thomas’ chest. “Strike, strike, strike!”

He giggled at Thomas’ irritable expression. Thomas sat down at the servant’s table, setting his plate of biscuits down with a clatter.

“Oh, hush up and have a biscuit,” He grumbled, popping one into his son’s mouth.
It was a wonderful feeling, to sit with his son for a moment and have an hour to breathe with peace. Until Matthew and Lord Grantham were ready to retire for bed, Thomas would be without his usual tasks. Neither had needs to be met wardrobe wise, and Thomas had already laid out their pajamas as soon as he’d finished dressing them. All he’d need to do now would be to head upstairs, help them to bed, and then return for his own supper. Until then, Thomas waited at the servant’s table with Charlie on his lap.

As the minutes ticked by, and other servants completed their errands, the table gained more occupants. O’Brien, Anna, and Ethel all came down eventually. Ethel and Anna had finished with the beds, and with dressing respective ladies. O’Brien, as a lady’s maid proper, had been the first to come down with no need for turning over bed linens. Yet halfway through the upstairs dinner, just as Alfred had made a run up from the kitchen with the fourth (and main) course of salmon meuniere, an unexpected visitor made his presence known in the servant’s hall. Moseley had, for whatever reason, decided to come up from Crawley house to sit a spell and talk.

Thomas wasn’t pleased about it.

Of all the people in his life that Thomas had found arguments with in his prior reality, there were a few he could stand to fight with once again. One of these men was Joseph Moseley, whom Thomas had always despised. He was horribly saintly, and Thomas had outright hated how Moseley had treated Branson, Ethel, and so many others in the past who went against ‘good English values’. When Phyllis Baxter had come to Downton Abbey, seeking refuge out of prison, Moseley had taken a fancy to her. Thomas had hoped that upon realizing Baxter was a reformed thief, Moseley would lose interest in her and leave her alone. Instead, Moseley had been forced to confront the fact that not everyone was perfect, and somehow he and Baxter had kept on courting right up to the day where Thomas had traveled through time. The thought of them together made Thomas nauseous. He knew almost implicitly that there would be a better man for Baxter out there, someone with a spine and a sense of moral fiber that went beyond his own fingertips. Someone who could look on the downtrodden and have a sense of compassion, not derision.

Either way, Thomas was still stuck with Moseley’s annoying presence. He refused to sink so low this time as to meddle with Moseley’s reputation, but he certainly wouldn’t make pleasantries with the man.

Why can’t you just go away, Thomas wondered irritably, holding Charlie in his lap as he spun a colored top upon the table for his son’s amusement.

“Please!” Charlie begged, hands outstretched for the top which was beyond his reach. Thomas offered it, and Charlie took it at once, dragging it back and forth upon its tip to try and make it spin.

“What do we say?” Ethel urged with a smile.

“Thank you!” Charlie parroted, a tad bit too late to be genuine. Still, he was getting the hang of it.

“Now, hand it back to Daddy,” Ethel cooed.

Thomas extended his hand, “Please?”

Charlie gave it up at once. Thomas said, “Thank you!” Just for emphasis.

“Spin, please!” Charlie said at once. “Daddy, spin! Spin!”

So, Thomas pinched the handle of the top between his thumb and forefinger, only to set the top off spinning again with a mighty snap. Charlie watched, entranced, as blue, yellow, and red turned into
an inverted pyramid of dancing colors.

Anna smiled absently, reading a book on new dress patterns. Next to her, O’Brien raised an eyebrow (albeit gently) but said nothing as she carefully darned a button onto one of Lady Grantham’s older collars.

Moseley watched, clearly displeased about something. What problem could a man take with a child enjoying his toy?

“…So, Thomas,” Moseley spoke up. “How is fatherhood suiting you?”

“Very well, thank you,” Thomas replied, keeping his tone calm. He did not meet Moseley’s eyes, instead spinning the top again when it finally wobbled from a lack of force and fell over on its side.

“… I can’t imagine how,” Moseley said, “Seeing as he’s not your-“

Thomas’ eyes snapped up, burning fierce with a sudden rage. Would the man dare?

Moseley stopped dead, seeming to realize what he’d nearly said in front of Charlie. Thomas’ look could surely inspire murder.

Ethel, beside Thomas, had gone ashen. She took Charlie from Thomas’ arms, plucking up his top as well.

“Come on Charlie, let’s go wash our hands for dinner,” Ethel said at once, putting the top into her apron pocket.

“No, please!” Charlie whined, even as Ethel walked away with him on her hip. “Please! No! Please, no!”

“Just because you say ‘please’ doesn’t automatically mean you’ll get what you want,” Ethel warned their son as she walked down the hall. Charlie’s whine grew quieter as it went further and further away.

“I didn’t mean to insult-“ Moseley started, but Thomas cut him off.

“Don’t ever do that again,” Thomas whispered, fierce with his anger. It showed in his voice, and Moseley was clearly taken aback. “He’s little but he’s learning, and he is my son. I won’t have him hearin’ otherwise from anyone’s lips.”

“But he’s not-“ Moseley urged. “And you need to see that-“

“Don’t. Test. Me.”, Thomas ground out, his teeth clenched tight. O’Brien was shocked at Thomas’ tone. Anna’s lips were pursed into a thin white line.

Their quiet argument was broken, however, by the introduction of a much louder argument coming down the stairs.

“-This is what I get!” Carson thundered, descending from the finished dinner. Everyone rose up to their feet as Carson entered the room, along with Alfred who looked horribly glum. “This is what happens when I take on country bumpkins!”

“What’s happened?” O’Brien asked. Alfred came to stand beside her, clearly seeking strength in the shadow of his aunt.
“Alfred was confused!” Carson said the word like it were a curse, “He thought he’d been transported to the Hotel Metropole!”

“Mr. Carson, it’s his first night,” Thomas urged. He was still aggravated from his argument with Moseley, and it showed in his voice. “He’s never served at a table outside a fancy hotel. It was a perfectly honest mistake to make.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have made it anyway!” Carson snapped back. “The last time I checked, I’m not running a bed and breakfast!” Carson sat down at the table. Everyone followed suit.

“Cheer up,” Anna took an optimistic approach with Alfred, “You’ll get the hang of it.”

“Will I?” Alfred wondered, glumly.

Mrs. Hughes entered, no doubt having heard the commotion, and nearly said something to Mr. Carson only to be taken aback by the site of Moseley still at the table.

“Oh! You’re still here, Mr. Moseley.” Mrs. Hughes wondered.

“I know! I only walked over for a cup of tea and a chat, and I’ve outstayed my welcome.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Hughes wouldn’t hear of it, even with Thomas glaring daggers at Moseley from across the table. “Why not have a bite with us? Mrs. Crawley won’t be leaving for a half-hour or more.”

Moseley seemed to consider it, but one look from Thomas was enough to send him scurrying.

“No, I better get back.” Moseley decided, re-buttoning his jacket with haste. “I wouldn’t want her to get home and me not be there to let her in.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” O’Brien said softly under her breath, “Not when you’re essential.” Clearly, she doubted he was.

Ethel re-entered the room with Charlie on her hip, freshly scrubbed for his dinner. As she passed, Moseley tried to strike up a goodbye with Charlie.

“Goodbye!” Moseley said playfully to the boy. He even tried to reach out and take Charlie’s hand, but Ethel pulled away before they could connect. She marched around the table and took her place at Thomas’ side. Charlie just waved, completely oblivious to the fact that his parents were angry.

Moseley coughed, embarrassed. “Goodbye,” He told them all. He left without another word.

Ethel watched him go with cold anger.

“Don’t worry,” Thomas grumbled, relaxing a bit in his chair as he looked to his wife, “I spoke with him.”

“Good,” Ethel said bitterly, adjusting Charlie on her lap, “Because if he does it again, I’m speaking to him next.”
A week after Moseley’s near slip, the Abbey received one very welcome (and one very unwelcome) guest.

Sybil Branson was now five months pregnant, and though she was not heavily showing there was obviously a bump beneath her frock and coat. She’d cut her hair short, resulting in a frizzy wave that floated on air as she walked; every corner of the house she visited seemed to spark with light. Lord and Lady Grantham were pleased to have their youngest daughter back in the house, delighted even. Lady Mary and Lady Edith, despite never being in agreement on purpose, were both glad to have their sister home and spent long hours catching each other up over gossip.

The most natural place for the upper place to catch up on gossip was over dinner, and normally that wouldn’t be much of a problem for the Crawley sisters. Tonight, however, Branson was irritated at the fact that Ireland was being presided over by the King of England. The ensuing chaos had Carson breaking a glass on accident, resulting in Thomas having to doctor Carson’s hand for a minor cut near the thumb.

After dinner at the servant’s table, Carson was murderous. Thomas sat next to Ethel, holding Charlie in his arms. His son was nearly asleep, drooling slightly on Thomas’ shoulder. Soon enough, Thomas would be rung by Lord Grantham and Matthew to dress them for bed. Tonight, however, he would also have to dress Branson.

He wasn’t looking forward to it.

“The nerve of him!” Carson’s eyes were blazing, his jowls quivering. Oh, how he hated things being out of order! “The absolute nerve!”

Anna and Ethel swapped glances, both with eyes lowered. They knew when to be quiet.

“Well, I thought they were very down on him,” Alfred said, which was a rather balsy thing to try in front of Carson when he was in a temper.

“And wasn’t he down on them?!” Carson demanded at once, smacking a hand against the table so that everyone’s teacups rattled a bit. “Insulting our country, insulting our king? I thought it was a miracle his Lordship held his temper.”

Mrs. Hughes tried for peace, “But it must be heard, Mr. Carson… to sit up there with people he used to drive around-“

“It is very hard, Mrs. Hughes.”

At once, everyone jerked out of their seats.

It was annoying, to once again have to stand up for someone who used to sit at their table. In the past, it had irked Thomas heavily. In the present, it was much the same. But he kept his irritations to himself, eyes straight ahead and calm as Tom Branson entered the servant’s hall. Thomas noted that Branson seemed to be looking at the arrangements longingly, as if he wished for nothing more than to sit down at the table with them once again.

“Please, sit down!” Branson begged, embarrassed at being treated like one of the family. But it was not Branson’s presence that had forced the servants to their feet this time. It was Carson, who was furious but still as demanding as ever.

No one dared sway from their spots. They would sit only when Carson sat.
“Is there something that we can do for you, sir?” Carson said the word with a scathing voice.

“I just wanted to come down and say hello,” Branson paused, reproachful. “I wouldn’t want you to think I’d got too big for my boots.”

While Thomas admittedly understood that Branson wasn’t gleeful about his newfound position, he still couldn’t deny he was envious.

Mrs. Hughes cracked a tiny smile, daring for pleasantries. “That’s nice,” She said. Mr. Carson was taken aback at her warm tone, as if she were the one being unreasonable.

“I hope you and Lady Sybil are well?” Anna asked, speaking up from Ethel’s other side.

“We are, thank you,” Branson said, “And actually seeing you all here has made me think of something. Thomas-“ Branson offered him a small smile which Thomas tried to reciprocate.

It was hard.

“That must be Charlie, your son,” Branson gestured. “He looks right smart.”

“Thank you,” Thomas murmured. In truth, Charlie was filthy and in need of a bath.

“I know that you’re being asked to valet for me. But I can’t allow it to continue any longer,” Branson said. Thomas opened his mouth to argue the point, but Branson cut him off. “No, I mean it, Thomas! It’s beneath you to dress a friend, and I don’t have any fancy clothes to wear, anyways.”

“But, the wedding-“ Thomas protested.

“I’ll figure that out,” Branson assured him. Thomas fell short, unsure about whether to be grateful he was being let off the hook or fight longer. He glanced at Carson and found him glowering in Branson’s direction.

“Oh- and Anna-“ Branson returned to her. “Before I forget, I should tell you, Sybil and I have been following the story of Mr. Bates. Mary keeps us informed-“

At the audible offence of Lady Mary being addressed without her proper title, Carson sucked in a breath through his teeth. Everyone heard it and looked to the head of the table to find Carson quivering with rage.

Branson, seeming to realize that he’d overstayed his icy welcome, backed up towards the stairwell. “Still… I mustn’t interrupt your dinner.”

“Thank you for coming down,” Mrs. Hughes called out after him, just as Branson hit the stairs. He did not reply, though Thomas caught him smiling as he ascended the stairs back to the gallery floor.

Carson all but fell into his seat, shaking with rage. Nervous, everyone else sat back down. Charlie was snoring softly upon his shoulder.

“If you’re going to be upset, do it quietly,” Thomas murmured softly. “The baby’s asleep.”

“I’ll take him,” Ethel whispered. She rose up again, scooped Charlie up from Thomas’ shoulder, and headed up the stairs after Branson to put Charlie to bed in the attics. As soon as the boy was out of earshot, Carson exploded like a bomb.
“Mary keeps us informed?!” Carson repeated the sentence in a blaze. “Mary-!!?”

“Well, he knows her now!” Mrs. Hughes protested. Carson would hear nothing of it.

“What’s that got to do with it? His Lordship would never call her ‘Mary’ when talking to me! Never! If he wants to play their game, he better learn their rules.”

Carson began to grumble bitterly, muttering underneath his breath and talking to no one in particular. Mrs. Hughes caught Thomas’ eyes; she looked absolutely exhausted.

“And you will continue to valet for him-!” Carson barked, making everyone jump in their seats at the sudden switch of volume. He pointed a finger at Thomas accusingly. “I won’t take no for an answer!”

Sheepish, Thomas took a small sip of cooling tea. “…I’m afraid neither will he, Mr. Carson.”

About half an hour later, Thomas was summoned upstairs to dress Matthew and Lord Grantham for bed. Despite having been urged by Mr. Carson to valet for Branson as well, Thomas merely checked in on Branson to see if he needed anything taken down to the washing before heading for the servant’s stairwell. Every time he was Lady Sybil, swollen with pregnancy, it made him feel horribly weak and ill. Now that he knew she was to die from eclampsia, he could not look at her condition with delight. Children were a soft spot… but birth? Birth was horrendous.

Even when everything went right, Thomas wasn’t a fan of the process.

As Thomas rounded the corner of the gallery hall, carrying two of Matthew’s shirts and one of Branson’s vests, he almost tripped over the unexpected shoe of someone in the shadows. He gasped, stumbling, and clutched at a stitch in his chest from fright-!

But it was only O’Brien, lurking in the eaves with a delighted expression. It was downright unnerving.

“OH-!” Thomas gasped, his heart still pounding in his chest. “God, I didn’t see you there. Why were you hiding in the shadows? I almost had a heart attack.”

“I wanted to have a word with you,” O’Brien explained. “Are you done for the night?”

“Just about,” Thomas said, gesturing to the load in his arms. “Walk with me.” They did so, side by side. “So what were you wanting to discuss?”

“I wondered if you might help young Alfred to find his way about,” O’Brien said.

Thomas stopped walking.
O’Brien stopped walking too.

This was where he’d made the terrible mistake of creating an enemy in O’Brien last time. This was
where his downfall with Jimmy had truly begun.

Thomas considered his options, but he had to be quick. He could not look insincere in front of O’Brien, or he would risk offending her the second time around.

“Well…” Thomas paused to allow himself time to think. “He certainly could learn how to be a valet. Most houses employ both a footman and a valet, and switch them up, like I’ve been doing… It’s just that, who would he valet for?”

“Why not Mr. Branson?” O’Brien offered, though it was obvious she was less than elated at the idea of Alfred being saddled with such a man. “Though I dare say a chauffeur can dress himself. But you could tell him what he needs to know. Give him an advantage—”

“I could,” Thomas agreed. The fact of the matter was, though, that Alfred Nugent had absolutely no skills when it came to being a domestic servant. He was meant for the kitchen, and time would prove him right on that matter.

O’Brien was staring to get a gleam in her eye. She looked downright delighted at the idea of Thomas helping her out.

“I don’t know how receptive Branson will be,” Thomas warned her. God forbid the man reject the idea completely and he get saddled with her wrath again. “He’s hardly the ideal target to try out your skills on. He doesn’t have a large wardrobe, and he’s not very open to the idea of having a valet.”

To make it seem like Thomas wasn’t nervous, he started walking again. O’Brien followed right beside him, completely at ease.

“Let’s play our cards gently, you and me, particularly until we get another footman. Then, when Alfred starts to valet, he won’t be so rushed about like I am.”

Thomas paused as they reached the green baize door, opening it so that O’Brien could walk through. “Then again…” Thomas just didn’t know which route to take. “The wedding could offer him a chance to try out something formal…something flashy.”

“But you’ll do it?” O’Brien reconfirmed. She was beaming now, from ear to ear. Thomas had never seen her so delighted. “You’ll help my nephew? My little Alfie?”

“Yes,” Thomas said, wishing to god he didn’t know that Alfred’s childhood nickname was ‘Alfie’. “I’ll do it.”

“I knew you wouldn’t fail me!” O’Brien even dared to clasp his arm in friendship. Her grip was tight, like a hawk’s. “I knew you were a proper friend.”

And with that she disappeared downstairs. Thomas watched her go, a terrible pit of dread in his stomach.

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Thomas wasn’t the only one feeling unsettled as the days passed. It was traditional before a wedding to host a large societal dinner, and usually it was at the house of the groom-to-be as a sign of prosperity to the bride’s family. It just so happened, however, that Matthew Crawley had very little
money compared to Lord Grantham… so any society dinner was going to naturally be held at Downton Abbey.

With Alfred as the only footman, Carson was sweating rivers, so Thomas was forced to once again step back in as an impromptu second footman so that Alfred and Carson both could receive a second hand. They were laid out with a lavish feast that night, with watercress soup, poached salmon with mousseline sauce, boeuf bourguignon, French green beans with candied almonds and peas, a foray of cheeses and jellies, and to finish it all off lemon icebox pudding (Lord Grantham’s favorite). Alfred’s eyes were practically bugging out of his head; he’d never seen so many dishes being served in all his life. But now was not the time to dawdle. Thomas tried to handle the sauces and peas with grace, eyeing the way that Alfred carried the watercress soup warily until Carson threw up a hand in the server and demanded at once that Alfred and Thomas switch places for the night.

“You can be first footman again when we’re not under so much pressure,” Carson decided. Alfred was decidedly crestfallen, but Thomas took it in his stride. He certainly knew how to handle soup better than Alfred did, and now was not the night to be spilling on the tablecloth. The dining room was packed, with everyone from Branson to Lord Merton present. They could not afford to slip up in their manners.

Unfortunately, not everything was in Thomas’ power to control.

Branson had clearly lost his mind as dinner progressed. Every serving that Thomas laid out with Alfred’s help only saw Branson getting more riled up. First the conversation dwelled close to money, then land, then territory, then nationality, and finally to Ireland where it stayed until Branson was spitting mad and Lord Grantham looked ready to swallow his tongue.

In the servery, Thomas and Carson were sweating in their spats, panicking at the ruined societal dinner.

“Christ,” Thomas moaned, dragging a hand through his dappered hair. “Someone get me a drink!”

“Just not whatever Mr. Branson has had,” Alfred muttered out the corner of his mouth.

“I’m going to strangle him-!” Carson hissed, a few gray bangs falling in front of his blazing brown eyes until he had the sense of mind to re-fix his hair.

In a rather awkward moment that showed just how stressed Carson was, Carson took the decanted wine yet to be brought out for dessert and poured himself a tiny glass in the server. He threw it back. Not willing to let a good thing pass by, Thomas poured himself a glass too, toasted Mr. Carson, and threw it back. By god, was desert wine sweet!

“It’s one sodding night,” Thomas hissed, picking up the plate of cheeses and jellies. “We can handle it.”

Together, Carson and Thomas walked out, only to stop dead when they were confronted with Branson arguing red faced with a visiting Earl: “Every last one of those bastard red coats has drenched Ireland in her children’s blood-!”

Carson returned to the servery to take another drink. Thomas stomped over to the serving board, setting down the cheese and jelly plate a little more forcefully than necessary. What would it take to get Branson to shut up? A muzzle?

“Look, old chap, of course this stuff matters a great deal to you-” Matthew was trying for peace, even as Thomas went around the table and offered everyone cheese and jellies. Unsurprisingly, the
appetite of the room was drying up.

“Yes, it does matter—” now Branson was getting emotional. By god, were there tears in the man’s eyes? “This ‘stuff’. It matters a very great deal.”

But no one else in the room gave a shit. Even as Thomas passed Larry Gray, the resident shit-eater of Merton Manner, he noticed a rather ugly chuckle upon the man’s breath. Far be it from him to condone Branson’s shenanigans, but this was hardly something to laugh over!

Mary seemed to be of much the same mindset.

“What’s so funny?” She demanded, setting down her fork even as she made to take a bite of orange pepper jelly.

“Nothing,” Gray mused, shrugging as he sliced a bit of his comté cheese. “I’m just enjoying this vivid display of Irish character.”

Thomas paused.

Something was stirring in the back of his memory, warning him that devilry was afoot. So many years had passed since, but Thomas was certain that Larry Gray had once done something awful to Branson as an ugly joke. Could it be that he’d done it tonight?

Though it was unbecoming of a footman, Thomas set his platter down upon the buffet table and carefully walked around the dining hall until he reached Branson’s chair. He noted the Branson seemed to be… swaying.

But he couldn’t have had that much to drink. He’d only had one cocktail before dinner, and hardly half a glass of wine since. Thomas had had meals with the man below stairs. He knew that Branson could put away his alcohol without a problem.

“Please Tom—“ Sybil murmured reproachfully from across the table, “We don’t need to wear everyone out.”

Branson shook his head, bitter, and made to take another sip of his cocktail. Thomas stopped him, a hand upon Branson’s arm so that he could not drink. Everyone stared, unnerved at Thomas’ actions.

Carson was sweating from the buffet table, glaring daggers at Thomas and Branson. Alfred, at Carson’s side, had absolutely no idea what to do.

Thomas looked up at Larry Gray, and noted that the man seemed oddly shifty.

Thomas didn’t like it one bit. He forced the drink out of Branson’s limp fingers.

“What, can’t even trust me to drink, Tommy?” Branson croaked, looking up at Thomas with tear filled eyes.

“Wait a minute-!” Anthony Stralland, however, seemed to be catching on. What was more, he was quite close to Larry Gray, so all his pointed anger could be easily directed over the table. “This is down to you, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. I saw you. You put something in his drink, didn’t you? Just before we came in?” Stralland demanded.
I knew it, Thomas thought vindictively. He held the glass up to light, remarking that at the very bottle of Tom’s cocktail was the residue of a few undissolved crystals. He swirled the drink, just to be sure, and saw the crystals move in the light.

“That’s not true-“ Sybil was horrified at the idea, “Larry, tell me you wouldn’t do such a thing!”

“No, there’s definitely something in the drink,” Thomas confirmed, setting the glass down.

“What?” Branson blurted out. His voice cracked with emotion, and Thomas was horribly embarrassed for the man to see a tear slip down his face. Branson tried to chase his tear away, but his fingers were so clumsy that he nearly upset his plate upon the table.

Everyone looked at Larry Gray with absolute disgust. Even his own father was horrified.

“What a beastly thing to do!” Edith cried out in disgust.

“Oh, come on, Edith-!” Larry complained loudly. “That’s not like you. You could always take a joke!”

“The bully’s defense!” Mary declared at once. She addressed the table, comfortable in her ability to command the attention of a room. “Listen, everyone, Mr. Gray has given my brother-in-law something to make him appear drunk.”

Branson sagged in his chair, his breathing labored. Thomas could tell the man was about to burst into tears, but he certainly couldn’t do it here. It was one thing for a man to appear drunk in front of people. To cry-? That was another thing entirely.

“Could it be drink?” The Dowager wondered, scandalized that something so awful should happen at her late husband’s table.

“No, not drink,” Mary corrected her grandmother, “Some horrible pill. Sybil, Thomas, take him upstairs.”

Sybil rose from her chair at once, and Thomas helped Branson to stand. He was wobbly upon his feet, barely able to keep upright without toppling over one way or another. Sybil took Branson underneath the other arm, the pair of them guiding him around the table past Mrs. Crawley who looked horrified and had a hand to her breast in shock.

“Tommy, I hate these people, make em’ go-“ Branson babbled, his face screwing up.

“Now don’t you start cryin’,” Thomas berated him, “You hold it in till we’re out of the Dining Hall. We’re men, by god.“

“Men can cry if they need to,” Sybil said reproachfully. Thomas didn’t know how much he agreed with that stance. Though he had a feeling she was right.

“He can’t cry in front of Larry Gray,” Thomas replied. “He’s already been embarrassed enough. We can’t let the bastard get another inch of.“

“BE SILENT THIS INSTANT, SIR-!”

Thomas jumped about a foot in the air, terrified that Lord Merton was shouting at him for calling his son a ‘bastard’. But as he looked around, white faced, he found that the man’s wrath was instead directed at his son who was looking decidedly sheepish now.
Branson, having been distracted by Sybil and Thomas, hadn’t heard whatever insult Larry Gray had flung at him. Thomas wondered if that was for the best, all things considered.

“… I apologize for my son, Mr. Branson. Unreservedly,” Lord Merton declared. Branson blinked tearily at the man, unable to reply. “I only hope that you can recover before the wedding.”

Matthew looked from Lord Merton to Thomas to Branson, only to stand up and declare: “I hope so too, since I want him to be my best man.”

An audible wave of shock swept the room, but it was Mrs. Crawley and Lady Mary who were most delighted of all.

“Bravo!” Mrs. Crawley cheered her son with gusto, even daring to clap in that moment. “Well said!”

“Do you really mean it?” Sybil wondered in awe. Thomas could not help but smile at Matthew’s good will. The man truly was an inspiration.

“Honestly?” Branson mumbled. His chin began to quiver, tears dangerously close to falling.

“I’ve told you before, if we’re mad enough to take on the Crawley girls, we have to stick together,” Matthew joked. Thomas could not help but laugh a bit. At the buffet bar, Carson rolled his eyes.

“Oh… thank you Matthew,” Lady Mary praised him. In her eyes, Thomas could see her adoration and love. “Thank you so much.”

So that was that.

Thomas and Sybil helped Branson upstairs, having to stop once or twice if only to help Branson dispel the nausea that threatened to overrun him. All the while, Branson complained about the idea of being Matthew’s best man, absolutely terrified of going up the aisle in Edwardian pomp.

“I don’t wanna wear a coat,” Branson sobbed into Sybil’s shoulder. Dignity forgotten, he was crying openly now. They’d reached the gallery floor and thank god for it. Thomas didn’t know how much longer Branson could hold out.

“It’s not so bad,” Sybil tried to console her husband. This only just made him cry harder. “Honestly Tom, you act like they’re going to force you with a hot iron.”

“Thomas will!” Branson let go of Thomas to lean on his wife completely so that she almost lost her balance. “He’s gonna pin me up like one of his pretty boys! I’ve seen what he does to Matthew!”

“Oh shuttup and get it bed!” Thomas snapped, finally losing his patience. Sybil was five months pregnant, and unable to contend with Branson leaning upon her. Thomas pealed him off Sybil, forcing him through the door into their bedroom, and all but hauling him onto the bed. Branson bounced upon the mattress, groaning upon the green coverlet, but lay still.

“No…” Branson cried into the coverlet. “No means no! No means no! No means no!”

His voice was muffled into the quilts, but it was still horribly annoying.

Thomas rolled his eyes and turned away, unwilling to put up with any more of the shenanigans.

“I’ll take it from here,” Sybil assured Thomas, showing him to the door with a gentle smile. “I think
all he needs now is water and bread. Anything to soak up that wretched pill. Do you think we should ring for Dr. Clarkson?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Thomas paused, looking at Tom over Sybil’s shoulder. Though he was admittedly crying into a quilt, he didn’t seem to be too worse for wear. “It’s not like he doesn’t know who or where he is. That’d be a real…”

Thomas paused, breaking off.
There was a peculiar shadow in the corner of the room.

For a moment, he almost thought it was the Heichecera, but something instinctively told him it was not. Thomas was taken aback, noting that even though there was nothing to cast a shadow in the corner of the room, there was obviously something there.

The shadow, for whatever reason, almost looked humanoid.
It unnerved him.

“Thomas?”
Thomas snapped out of his reverie, looking back down at Sybil. She was staring up at him, unsure.
“Are you alright?”

“Sorry.” Thomas lied, “I got distracted thinking about the effects of drugs. Branson’s fine. Ring if he starts acting like a nut.”

He paused at the door, glancing at the man. Branson was still talking into the mattress, though it was impossible to say what he was talking about “…well… even nuttier than that.”

He left Sybil at that, gently closing her bedroom door to stand out in the darkened hall.

Yet even as Thomas took a step away, wondering at what on earth he ought to do now, a whisper drifted past and stopped him dead.

“Sybil….”

Reasoning that it was just Branson’s voice muffled through the door, Thomas took another step towards the green baize door.

“Sybil…”

It didn’t matter how far down the hall he went.
The volume of the whispers stayed the same.
It wasn’t Branson.

Thomas stopped in the middle of the hallway and looked over his shoulder back at Sybil’s door.
Little blue lights were twirling around the air, just over the threshold. They darted in and out of the wood, as if collecting something from the room beyond.

“Sybil... Sybil...” They whispered.

And it was then that Thomas realized he was looking at the true calling of Death. But he’d been near it before and not seen these orbs, not heard these whispers… so why now? Why with Sybil?

_It’s a warning_, Thomas realized, a cold sweat picking up at the back of his neck. _And it’s directed at me._
The Wedding March

Chapter Summary

In lieu of Mary and Matthew's wedding, Thomas must come to grips with the fact that Downton Abbey will soon host two footmen.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, miss me?

So in lieu of the Internet possibly being shut down soon, I'm going to be corroborating a mailing list (like literally a snail mail list) for my fanfictions. For a price, I will physically mail you a copy of all my works, as well as mail you chapters as they come out.

Likewise, my works will still be online, but I have to reason with the fact that we soon not have internet for everyone. So if any of my fans are going to lose their internet soon, let me know and I'll get you set up for fanfiction express.

Note: Due to confusion, allow to say I am specifically referring to Net Neutrality going before the senate on June 11th. If it is repealed, we will lose free internet in America, and Americans will have to find room for the internet in their budgets or lose their online presence.

Yay, T-rump. :[

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There were officially five days to go until the wedding of Lady Mary and Matthew Crawley.

Despite having been drugged worse than a bull meant for the slaughterhouse, Branson was back on his feet and doing remarkably well. He still refused a valet, so Thomas and O’Brien had been crafting ideas on how to give Alfred experience without stepping on anyone’s toes. Their best results had been for Alfred to look in on Matthew while Thomas valeted for him (but only from time to time), and then to watch how Thomas tended to a garment while downstairs. Such was the case today, where Thomas sat in the silver pantry brushing Matthew’s top hat while Alfred polished tray after tray. Hat brushing was technically a job you could do any place, but traditionally was best kept away from polishing creams. But Thomas was an expert, and Alfred was sitting at the other end of the table. So long as Thomas was careful, there was no need to fear a stain on the hat.


“Because Mr. Carson will kill you if I don’t,” Thomas replied.
“I beg your pardon, Thomas?”

Thomas gave a slight start, looking around to find Mr. Carson in the door of the silver pantry. He had his arms folded over his barrel chest and seemed slightly miffed to hear Thomas insisting that he would ‘kill’ anyone.

But Thomas just smiled. “Alfred asked why we brush hats when it seems pointless.”

“Fear is not the teacher of great men, Thomas,” Carson reminded him gently. “We brush hats to keep the integrity of the silk.”

Thomas turned back to Alfred, who’d watched the whole display with a mixture of fear and amusement. He shrugged with a small smile. “There you go,” Thomas said, in reference to Alfred’s original question.

“Might I ask why you’re in here brushing Mr. Crawley’s top hat, Thomas?” Carson asked.

“Miss O’Brien wants Alfred to learn more about valeting,” Thomas explained. Carson paused, his brown eyes crinkling warily at the idea of O’Brien acting out of order.

“Is that alright, Mr. Carson?” Alfred asked, when Carson did not immediately reply.

“Every skill is a skill that deserves to be learned,” Was Carson’s final reply, though his tone boded ill. He turned his attention back to Thomas, re-focused. “Thomas, you have been requested by the Dowager Countess and Mrs. Crawley to come to Crawley House this afternoon at three.”

Well that was unexpected. “Whatever for?”

“The Dowager is wanting to speak with you regarding your valeting services, as we now need to fit Mr. Branson for a tux.” Mr. Carson replied. The way he said Branson’s name made it clear all was not forgiven.

“Oh!” Well, that at least made more sense. Thomas checked his pocket watch, noting that it was around 1:30. He’d need to change and head down the village if he wanted to be there on time.

“I’d better get changed if I’m to make it there on time,” Thomas rose up, taking Matthew’s hat with him. He noted Carson still looked sour in the doorway, no doubt mulling over Branson being obnoxious in church. But Thomas knew from the past that Branson would be the perfect best man for Matthew. He’d do absolutely nothing, besides stand, smile politely, and hand Matthew the ring.

Thomas leaned in, speaking softly so that Alfred could not hear: “…Mr. Carson don’t be so glum. He’s an Irishman, not a German.”

Mr. Carson smiled, but he clearly wasn’t happy.

~*~

Crawley House sat on the outskirts of Downton village, near the main road which took you either into Downton village proper or up the way to Downton Abbey. It sat apart from its comfortable neighbors, a stately home with brick and iron fencing off a cobblestone roundabout and a fountain that trickled gently in the spring air. In his prior life, Thomas had never visited Crawley House. Now, as Matthew’s valet, Thomas had more reason to visit but still had never crossed the threshold. He was unamused to be a guest, with Moseley as butler and Mrs. Bird as cook. Mrs. Bird had never liked him, and often gave him the impression that she was judging him and finding him wanting.
Thomas arrived around 2:30, and as such was slightly early for his meeting with Mrs. Crawley and
the Dowager Countess. He walked around back, finding a servant’s passageway, and took it to
knock upon the back door. It was opened by Moseley, who was pleasantly surprised to see him.
Thomas did not return his smile.

“I’ll come get you in a moment,” Mr. Moseley said. “They’re just taking tea at the mo’, I came down
to get a fresh pot.”

“Mm…” Thomas looked about, noting that on the wall were a series of biblical cross stiches.

Feeling rather bored, he sat down at the miniature servant’s table, taking off his hat and re-smoothing
the part in his hair.

Crawley House only offered Moseley, Mrs. Bird, and two maids. Everyone was engaged in other
activities, so Thomas was left to his own devices. The problem was, it was also horribly quiet.
Thomas was used to the chaos of Downton Abbey and didn’t like feeling isolated. Even when he’d
been young, he’d had six siblings (he’d been second oldest). Being alone was almost like a
punishment to him. It reminded him of his prior reality, and how horribly cast out he’d been.

He checked his watch and noted that fifteen minutes had passed since he’d arrived.

He drummed his fingers upon the servant’s table, making up a beat in his head. Christ, no wonder
Moseley came over so often for dinner. He’d only been here fifteen minutes and he was ready to
scream.

“So, Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas stiffened in his chair, slightly taken aback to be spoken to by Mrs. Bird of all people. He
looked around, blinking bemusedly. He found the woman scowling at him, with such obvious
loathing that it took him aback.

Then again, he didn’t much care what the woman thought about him.

“Mr. Moseley tells me that you’re married,” Mrs. Bird said.

“I am,” Thomas replied. He wasn’t in the mood for conversation, and it showed in his voice.

“A pity it’s to a whore,” Mrs. Bird sneered.

Thomas’ ears burned, turning bright pink as rage consumed him. He rose up from the servant’s table,
furious at being spoken to in such a way!

“My wife is not a whore,” He said at once. “I will not have her slandered by you!”

“By me?” Mrs. Bird scoffed. “As if the whole village isn’t talking about it. The lord knows her sins.
That babe may carry your last name, but it’ll always be her bastard.”

“You-!!” He couldn’t even come up with the words, momentarily flummoxed by all the emotion
desperately trying to burst out of him at the same time. His fingers started curling out of instinct, a
muscle in his jaw jumping as he clenched his back molars down.

But even as Thomas started coming up with every awful thing he could feasibly say to Mrs. Bird,
Moseley came back downstairs at a gentle trot. He stumbled upon a tense scene, with Thomas and
Mrs. Bird facing off in complete silence.
“Thomas?” Moseley was taken aback. “They’re ready for you upstairs.”

Thomas snatched up his hat, balling it tight in his hand.

But he couldn’t leave without having his say- he just couldn’t!

Thomas rounded on Mrs. Bird, his cerulean eyes blazing. She bristled, unused to being treated with such hostility.

“Stay away from my family,” Thomas threatened, “Or I’ll give you a real reason to go to church.”

With that, he brushed past Mr. Moseley, and headed upstairs fuming.

But Moseley was hot on his heels, shocked at Thomas’ sudden display of aggression.

“What on earth was that about?” Moseley demanded as they reached the top of the stairs.

“I should think you know,” Thomas refused to believe that Moseley was as innocent as he claimed. He doubted there was much to gossip about inside Crawley house besides Ethel. “I have a feeling you two are in cahoots.”

“Thomas, wait-!” Moseley reached out a hand, and before Thomas could open the door to the main hall, Moseley forced him to stay still. Thomas bristled at Moseley’s touch; he did not like being physically pressed upon by a man unless he felt a romantic pull to them. He jerked his hand away, but Moseley still kept his attention.

“Whatever she said, she only speaks out because she’s worried for you,” Moseley explained. “We both are.” His earnest expression only served to make Thomas angrier.

“Just stay out of my business!” Thomas snapped. Moseley turned a shade pale but did not make to rebuff him.

Thomas did not wait for Moseley to let him into the hall. He stormed past and stomped all the way to the salon where the Dowager and Mrs. Crawley were having tea. There in a tweed suit, looking completely befuddled, was Tom Branson. When he saw Thomas in the doorway, he only grew more incensed.

“Ah, there you are!” Mrs. Crawley smiled at Thomas. Thomas had to reign in his temper to remember his manners. He gave her a clipped if earnest smile back.

“What is he doing here?” Branson asked the Dowager.

“We’ve asked Thomas here to help you with Matthew’s old morning coat,” Mrs. Crawley said. “We’re confident he can make it fit.” And there, sure enough on the back of the couch, was one of Matthew Crawley’s older coats that had not yet made it over to the Downton Abbey collection. It needed to be mended at the hem.

“That’s very kind, ladies.” Branson paused, taking a stern tone. “But you see, I don’t approve of these costumes. I see them as the uniform of oppression, and I should be uncomfortable wearing them-“

“Are you quite finished?” The Dowager interrupted, leaning a bit on her cane to give Branson a wary glare.

“...I have.” Branson blinked, with an expression like someone had slapped him with a dead cold fish.
“Good.” The Dowager leaned back. “Please take off your coat.”

Branson did not move, stupefied. The Dowager nodded to Thomas. “Thomas, do help him.”

Realizing that his attempts to avoid being shoved into a morning coat were for naught, Branson gave an irritable huff and began to unbutton his coat. Thomas took it from his shoulders, folding it over his arm so that it wouldn’t crease.

“And your waistcoat-” Thomas added, for there was no point in being stuffed into a morning coat without putting on the waistcoat that went with it.

“Oh, why not have me naked and be done with it?” Branson scowled.

Thomas decided to not even justify that comment with a rebuttal, and instead all but yanked Branson’s waistcoat off of him. He began to help Branson into Matthew’s old morning coat, only to pause as Matthew himself walked in the room looking quite distressed.

“What’s going on?” Matthew demanded, gesturing from Branson to his mother.

“They’re forcing me into a morning coat.” Branson complained loudly.

“He has no say in it?” Matthew asked.

“No, he doesn’t,” The Dowager snapped, “And nor do you.”

Matthew was clearly displeased but rendered mute all the same as he watched Thomas help Branson button up the front of his new coat. Thomas stepped back to admire his handiwork, eyes narrowed as he mentally calibrated all the changes that would have to be made.

“Well Thomas, what do you think?” The Dowager asked.

“…The arms are slightly too long,” Thomas said, for Branson’s hands were all but hidden to the knuckle. “But Mr. Matthew’s frame is larger in the shoulders too.”

He repositioned the suit on Branson, deciding he would simply have to pull out the padding at the shoulders. “You look like you’re being swallowed-“

“I am!” Branson declared, pointedly furious at this subjugation.

“Oh, shuttup!” Thomas snapped. Honestly, he could be such a-

He’d said ‘shuttup’ in front of the Dowager.

Bristling, Thomas looked cautiously over his shoulder to note the Dowager was instead staring pointedly at the head of her ivory cane like she suddenly found it incredibly interesting. Mrs. Crawley was stifling a laugh.

Thomas looked back around at Branson, who was clearly quite glad a bomb hadn’t gone off as a result of Thomas’ slip up.

Thomas huffed, and took the morning coat off of Branson. The sooner he got out of here, the better. Lord, but he was in a mood!

“Thomas, don’t do this to him!” Matthew implored. Thomas handed Branson back his old coat, so
that he could yank it on. “We’re companions in arms— you know Tom! You worked together—”

“Sir, there are many things on this earth I feel capable of tackling and should face them for you proudly in the name of companionship.” Thomas cut him off, folding the morning coat over his arm. “But the Dowager Countess of Grantham is not one of them!”

At this, the Dowager gave the room a smug look.

“Thomas is a prudent soldier, Mathew,” She gloated. “He knows when to fight.”

“It’s either me or Moseley,” Thomas declared, well aware that Moseley was probably right outside and listening to every word that he said. “Which one do you want to ride you?”

Branson looked rather guilty in that moment, shuffling from foot to foot. “…You.”

“That’s what I thought. Excuse me.” Thomas bid the others good day, determined to get back to Downton Abbey before he lost his temper at anyone else.

For whatever reason, Branson decided to walk back with Thomas. Rather, Branson ran halfway up the road to catch up with Thomas after giving the man a five-minute start to cool down. Thomas didn’t know why he was starting to feel so shaky in his pins. It was like his psyche was warning him that something large was coming.

*I’m not getting ill, am I?* Thomas wondered as he walked. He certainly didn’t feel ill; why was he so anxious?

When Branson finally caught up to Thomas, they were out of the village proper and back on the country road to Downton Abbey. They passed cow pastures in complete silence, a warm spring wind suddenly blowing by so that their waistcoats rode up behind them. A pair of chiffchaffs danced in the breeze, shrieking at one another over some inane squabble.

“I won’t give in!” Branson suddenly burst out. It was like he’d been sitting on a hot cushion, clearly still fired up about the morning coat situation.

“Branson, you’re taking this the wrong way!” Thomas warned him.

“How?” Off and running, again. “When their kind are throwing my kind to the lions while wearing these very same jackets and—”

“Listen to me!” Thomas cried out, stopping dead in the road so that Branson was forced to do the same. The man suddenly looked slightly uncomfortable at Thomas’ earnest stare.

“It’s a wedding. Weddings call for traditions, and that has nothing to do with national outrages. It doesn’t matter if this wedding were held in Dublin or London! You have to wear a morning coat to a wedding! You dress up nice no matter who or where you are!”

“And don’t I have nice clothes?” Branson demanded. “Am I such a vagabond in my tweed?”

“Your clothes are fine!” Thomas wouldn’t even acknowledge that ‘vagabond’ statement. “But sometimes you need to up the game just a little bit more!” He pinched his fingers for emphasis, showing off the tiniest possible amount. “Mm?” Thomas gestured with the same hand. “Take it from me, I deal with wardrobes all the time. Lord Grantham has a red uniform that he only wears to soldier’s dinners. Now, could he go in a dinner jacket? Yes! But he goes in his uniform. Why? The
occasion calls for it. Now, we’re going to have a wedding, and that occasion calls for a morning coat, even if you’re wearing tweed!”

“I’m setting it on fire as soon as it’s done.” Branson decided. Honestly, Thomas could not give a tenth of a damn.

“Fine, but you’ll have to pry it from the Dowager’s talons.”

~*~

The closer Thomas got to Martha Levinson’s arrival, the more neurotic he felt. The whole house was spinning almost out of control, with each detail of the Crawley wedding bringing more chaos than Thomas could bear. The problem was, simply put, that as Matthew Crawley’s valet everything on the groom side relied upon him. He thought having Alfred around would make his job easier.

He’d been wrong.

But there was more to Thomas’ anxiety than met the eye. Something odd was beginning to stir within him, clenching at his heart. The more Thomas thought about it, the more he realized that it had to do with the future (or rather a particular person in the future). After the Crawley wedding, there would be a brief lull of activity… but then in June?

In June, Jimmy Kent would arrive.

Or maybe he wouldn’t, it was impossible to say. Thomas knew, technically, that Jimmy Kent would arrive simply because it had happened before. But at the same time, he didn’t know if the letter he’d sent before the war would cause Jimmy to perhaps lag or advance in his timeline. Carson had put out an advert for a second footman, but it wouldn’t be answered until after the wedding?

Or would it?

Chewing on his nail, Thomas contemplated his conundrum on the front gravel stretch.

It was a pristine day, on the cusp of April, and Martha Levinson was pulling into the drive. Her long stretch motorcar was gleaming like polished brass, and everyone in attendance was on pins and needles to behave lest Carson lose his mind. Even as Thomas stood straight backed and quiet at Mrs. Hughes’ side, he heard the aged butler whispering in his ear: “For god’s sake Thomas, pull yourself together, you look like you’re falling apart-“

“But harass him,” Mrs. Hughes whispered back. “You know he’s stressed.”

Carson began sucking on his teeth, clearly holding in a quip. Thomas tried to make his face relax and contemplated what would happen if he just let out an unholy shriek and ran sprinting into the lawn.

* I am calm, I am calm, Thomas repeated to himself over and over as Martha Levinson pulled up in the drive. * I am not thinking about Jimmy Kent, and I am calm. *

But he was thinking about Jimmy Kent, or rather he was thinking about the moment when he’d first clapped eyes on him. He’d returned from London, valet to Lord Grantham and following him on some errand. And there Jimmy had been, in a pressed suit and newsnap, beaming at the idea of being a footman. Not *second* footman, but *footman*. There had been an obvious difference; from the moment he’d crossed the threshold he’d wanted to excel, to be first.
Thomas’ heart was pounding in his throat. Martha Levinson was out of her motorcar, kissing her son-in-law on the cheek and clasping hands with her daughter.

*Stop thinking about it,* Thomas mentally berated himself as Martha Levinson approached, wearing an enormous mink stole and a hat adorned with a long quail feather. At her side was a mischievous looking young woman with a curling lip and pinned brown hair.

“Carson! Mrs. Hughes!” Martha Levinson’s American accent was downright disturbing to hear. “The world has moved on since we last met.”

“And we have moved on with it, Madam,” Carson replied. This of course, was a downright lie.

“Really?” Clearly Levinson wasn’t swallowing it. “It seems so strange to think of the English embracing change.” At this, she tittered and gestured to the woman by her side. “Mrs. Hughes, this is my maid, Reed.”

Mrs. Hughes offered Reed a place at her side, so that Thomas had to shuffle down two steps. Reed stepped smartly in line, valise in hand and a grin in place.

With her minor errand completed, Levinson then directed her attention to her three granddaughters. From Sybil’s pregnancy to Edith’s hopeless love life, nothing escaped her eye. She was like a bull in a china shop, smashing through English civilities till everyone was left gawping in her wake.

Levinson entered Downton Abbey like she owned the place, already talking about changing plans for Sybil’s upcoming birth. As she went, Alfred could not help but gossip, leaning in to whisper into Thomas’ ear.

“Who was that?” He wondered in awe.

“The goddess of war,” Thomas muttered out of the corner of his mouth. Given Lord Grantham’s flabbergasted expression, he wasn’t too far off the mark.

In lieu of Martha Levinson’s arrival, the servants of Downton Abbey were offered a brief moment of calm while the great lady settled into her living arrangements and requested tea. While Alfred served, Thomas and Ethel sat downstairs at the servant’s table with Anna and O’Brien. Reed was still unpacking, Carson was decanting wine, Mrs. Hughes was showing Reed around the house, and Mrs. Patmore was harping on at Daisy to “Do something, by God!”

Daisy’s strike was in full swing, and Mrs. Patmore would be lucky to get two words out of the kitchen maid until her demands were met.

Thomas was pallid and shaking with anxiety. His thoughts of Jimmy Kent would not subside, and as a result he was close to having heart palpitations. Ethel held his hand upon the table, a rather risqué move in plain sight of the servant’s hall. He’d of course told her everything regarding Mrs. Bird and Mr. Moseley.

“Don’t let her get you down,” Ethel soothed him, no doubt taking his pale complexion for a sign of anger over Bird’s rudeness.

“Well I’m sorry but I will not have you spoken about in such a way,” Thomas muttered. “I will not!”

“What’s this?” O’Brien spoke up. “Trouble in paradise?”
“That Bird woman’s asking for trouble,” Thomas explained. Anna was taken aback.

“Mrs. Bird, the cook for Mrs. Crawley?” Anna wondered. Thomas nodded. “But that can’t be, she’s always been nice to me.”

“Well there’s a difference between you and me, Anna,” Ethel reminded her. Anna made a silent ‘o’ of understanding and took another sip of tea.

“You can’t be surprised,” O’Brien said.

“I’m angry,” Thomas explained.

“You’re more than that,” Anna said, slightly reproachful. “You’ve been off all day. And you’re paler than normal.”

“Which is an astounding achievement,” O’Brien tutted. “Given you’re usually the color of milk.”

Thomas did not laugh.

Ethel leaned in, rubbing his hand some more. “Ey… What’s wrong? Is it the wedding? Carson’s been pushing you hard, I know. But you’ve been more stressed than usual.”

Thomas tried for words but could come up with nothing. He shook his head and looked away.

Ethel watched his facial expressions, wary of every move that he made. His lack of explanation made her more concerned. “… Is it something to do with… her?”

He assumed the ‘her’ was the Heichecera. Thomas gestured feebly, unsure of how to put it into words.

“...In a way.” Thomas mumbled.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Ethel offered.

Once again, Thomas couldn’t come up with words.

Did he want to talk about it? Not really. Did he need to talk about it? Probably.

“Let’s get you outside for a smoke,” Ethel decided, rising up from her chair to pull Thomas along by the elbow. “I normally don’t like it, but this time I’ll make an exception.”

“Go, you’ll feel better,” Anna assured him. “I’ll tell Mr. Carson if he comes looking for you.”

“I could use a smoke too, to be fair,” O’Brien sighed. “But I can’t risk it with that woman in the house. She has a nose like a bloodhound.”

“Come on,” Ethel refused to let him sit still. They left the servant’s hall with the sounds of Mrs. Patmore shouting echoing in their ears.

“Daisy, if all you’re going to do is stand there, then you can at least hold out your arms and let me hang an apron on you!”

Out Ethel and Thomas went, stepping into the light of the courtyard with a breath of relief at the fresh air. The heat of April was yet to come in full blast, so a cool spring wind could still be appreciated. Bees were beginning to buzz about, and two chased around one another as Ethel walked Thomas all the way to the edge of the area yard. Here, a tiny pool of cigarette butts marked
the spot where O’Brien usually took her breaks, a sort of calling card for her sinful habits.

“So,” Ethel planted herself squarely between Thomas and the yard, so that he’d have to force his way past her if he wanted to return to the house, “Let’s hear it. How bad is it?”

“…Pretty bad,” Thomas said. Jimmy Kent was far from an apocalypse to the rest of the community, but where Thomas was concerned he might as well be a signal for Armageddon.

“Well don’t keep me in suspense,” Ethel said. “Tell me so we can make a plan and tackle this thing.”

But they couldn’t tackle this thing. There was no plan that could prepare them for Jimmy Kent. He would come to Downton, and he would destroy Thomas with his beauty and charisma. He would slaughter every one of Thomas’ walls until he was left weak, with no resistance… and then Thomas would crumple just like he’d done last time.

Thomas’ lack of an immediate answer was giving Ethel cause for concern. “Thomas, you’re scaring me. What’s going on? Is some sort of calamity about to occur?”

“For the house, no. For me, yes.” Thomas said, just for the sake of sparing Ethel the idea of the house exploding in the middle of the night.

“Well, we can face it whatever it is, and-“

“Yes, but you see, we can’t.” Thomas cut her off, his tone growing rather sharp from stress. Ethel was taken aback. Thomas didn’t usually speak to her in such a way. “We really, really can’t Ethel. In fact, I’m frightened it will ruin our marriage.”

At this, Ethel went white.

Her marriage to Thomas had been her saving grace, the one thing to pluck her out of the gutter and give her a new life. The thought of losing her marriage was surely akin to the greatest of disasters, and the look she gave him was one of a kicked dog.

It broke his heart, to know he was inadvertently putting his wife through such pain all for his selfish, sinful-!!

Thomas could not bear it. He slumped down on the side of the fence, back sliding against the washed boards, till he sat upon the ground next to O’Brien’s cigarette pile. He buried his face in his hands, grasping at pomade slicked hair with anguish. He let out a pathetic noise.

“…Thomas…” Ethel was taken aback. She squatted down next to him, her skirts pooling about her ankles, and put her hand gently upon his back to comfort him. Thomas shrugged her off, spurned by her touch. If only he could be soothed by the embrace of a woman. But he couldn’t, and that was half the fucking problem, wasn’t it?

“Thomas, whatever it is, you’re stronger than it-“

“I’m not…” Oh, if only it were that simple. To just rise above his love for Jimmy, and keep going on like none of it mattered. If only he could shut off his heart like that.

“I wasn’t strong enough last time, an’ it ruined my life forever,” Thomas mumbled into his hands. “And I won’t be strong enough this time when he comes again. It’ll kill me. God, he nearly killed me then. I can’t-“

“Who are you talking about, Thomas?” Ethel begged. “Whose coming?”
“I can’t-“ Thomas didn’t want to talk about this. Not with Ethel, not with anyone. He rose up, waving Ethel off when she tried to pursue him. “Ethel!”

He pushed her away when she tried to tug him back. His eyes burned with unshed tears. “I can’t talk about this!”

“… Not even to me?” Ethel whispered. Once again, it spurned Thomas to know that he’d brought his wife pain.

“… I gotta talk a walk,” Thomas mumbled. He turned away and left Ethel at the gate to the area yard, kicking at the dirt beneath him as he stormed across the lawn.

Ethel watched him go, crestfallen.

~*~

It was impossible to have a good day after that.

Thomas spent the rest of it in a malaise, offered temporary shelter by the odd task of finishing up wedding preparations by packing both his and Matthew’s valise for France. Anna was given leave by Lady Mary to do the same, and so the pair of them were upstairs despite the afternoon hour, locked in their bedrooms as they ironed and folded everything they owned.

Sitting at his desk chair, Thomas contemplated his awful circumstances, unable to continue folding and ironing shirts.

The idea of Jimmy returning to Downton, of having to endure everything all over again, just made Thomas sick to his stomach. His love for Jimmy was so powerful, and the memory of Jimmy’s hatred so vicious, that it made him weak at the knees. He doubted he would ever forget the sight of Jimmy furiously pushing him out of his room… the roar of Jimmy shouting at him in his ears.

“I said nothing! Now go on, get out Thomas! Get out!”

But he had said things. So many wonderful things. Why, if he hadn’t meant them?

Because he’s a flirt, his brain warned. And you know it, so this time don’t get sucked into his games.

But it didn’t matter if Thomas knew Jimmy was playing a game or not. He’d still fall for him. He didn’t stand a chance against Jimmy, who was like a powerful sun sucking him out of his own orbit. Jimmy had crashed into him, a raging wave slamming into a battered shore, and Thomas had never been able to fully recover. He could remember sitting in a dingy London flat, with electrodes upon his naked body, being shocked to hell and back while likewise forced to stare at images of naked, aroused men.

The sheer fact that endured such horrors made him shake with an unseen cold.

A gentle knock came upon his door gave him a start. Thomas looked up to find Ethel, who’d brought him a cup of tea and some ginger biscuits. She set the peace offering upon his desk, shutting the door behind her so that the pair of them were given some amount of privacy.

After how Thomas had burst out at her, he felt sheepish at starting the conversation. He ignored her
cup of tea, and instead began to fold shirts again.

“Got everything you need?” Ethel asked, gesturing at his valise which lay open upon his bed.

“…Well, I’ll be gone for a month,” Thomas mumbled. “So, you have to prepare for anything.”

Ethel didn’t seem to care much either way. She perched herself upon the edge of Thomas’ desk, picking up one of his ties to begin wrapping it around her slender fingers.

“…When you were ill with fever, an’ I thought I might lose you… you said something. Or your mouth did. I think it might have been the Heichecera talkin’.”

Now that was a disturbing thought. “I shudder to think what,” Thomas muttered.

“A name,” Ethel explained, glancing at Thomas cautiously. “Over an’ over again. Like you were callin’ out to them in the dark. Prayin’.”

Ethel handed him his tie. He took it.

He didn’t have to ask what name it was. He already knew.

“You’re a strong man, Thomas,” Ethel praised. She was unable to meet his eyes now, and instead stared at the floor. “The strongest I’ve ever known. An’ nothing can shake you when you’re on a path. So today when I saw you break down, it scared me.”

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said, but Ethel cut him off.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “It helped me to remember that you’re human. And humans are fools for love.”

That was a fair statement. He relaxed in his desk chair and stared at Ethel until she met his eyes. She seemed to be mulling over what she wanted to say.

“…Jimmy.” Thomas said. Ethel was enraptured. “That’s the name I said, wasn’t it. Jimmy Kent?”

“…Yeah.” Ethel whispered.

Thomas let out an exhausted sigh, rising up and taking his tie with him so that he could tuck it into the corner of his valise. Ethel began to help him back, collecting his folded shirts in a neat little pile to put them in the corner.

“Is that what’s coming?” Ethel asked. “Is that why the Heichecera wanted me to know who she was? Who you were? To help you with Jimmy?”

It was a funny thought, but it couldn’t stand. Thomas shook his head. “Doubt it, because he’s not like me.” Thomas grumbled.

“But you love him.” Ethel said. It wasn’t an accusation. It was a fact.

“…Yes.”

It felt good to say it out loud for the first time in years. To know that it was the truth, no matter what universe he was in. “…I loved him in my first life. I love him this life. And if there’s another life after this, I’ll love him there too.”

Thomas wondered at the poetry of that. “I can’t do it again, Ethel. I might be strong in your eyes but
I’m not strong enough to endure him… I … I can’t."

He bowed his head in shame.

Ethel placed her hand tenderly upon his back, rubbing a soothing trail up and down his spine. “Hey, chin up. You have me now. An’ I’m on your side to the very end, through thick an’ thin. We may not be a traditional married couple, but we are married. And I’m not giving up on you. Your paycheck’s too nice.”

That made Thomas laugh, even if only a little. He smiled at Ethel, wondering at what a marvel she was.

“Oh Ethel,” he embraced her, holding her tightly. She made him feel warm again. He laid his chin atop her curly red hair. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You’re going to take it one day at a time,” Ethel assured him, pulling back so that they could look one another in the eye. “And we’ll look after each other. The sun will surely rise, Thomas Barow. I’ll make somethin’ of this Jimmy fellow, just you wait an’ see. Is he in the village? When’s coming?"

“He’s the next footman,” Thomas explained with a small smile. “An’ no. He’s not in the village yet.”

“Oh my god,” Ethel wondered, green eyes widening with knowing. “that’s why you didn’t want Carson to put out an advert, isn’t it? You knew he would come.”

Thomas nodded, and Ethel smiled. “We’ll prepare for him,” She decided. “You and me both. I promise you.”

For some reason, that made Thomas feel better.

He began to pack with renewed vigor, stuffing old newspaper in the bottom of his second pair of shoes so that they would hold their shape on the journey.

“What’s he like?” Ethel asked, even as she folded his trousers.

“…The sun,” Thomas said. For there were very few words to accurately describe Jimmy Kent. He was Thomas’ sunshine, just like that damned old song.

“Then let him shine,” Ethel praised, handing Thomas’ trousers over for him to pack.

He took them with a smile.

After telling Ethel the full truth about Jimmy, Thomas felt increasingly better. He put Matthew Crawley to bed that night with a smile on his face, finding Matthew looking slightly punch drunk as if he’d gotten a very good night kiss.

“Mary’s sated,” Matthew mused softly from bed, looking up at the velvet canopy which lined his ceiling. Thomas was putting away Matthew’s nightly toiletries, packing them for France so that tomorrow they could be loaded without a fumble. “She was nervous, but… Tom offered me sound advice and I took it. So, I think the wedding will go off without a hitch.”

“It better,” Thomas teased. “Because we’re spending a fortune on you lot.”

Matthew smiled, turning his head upon his pillow to watch Thomas work. “Thomas… can I ask you a personal question of a romantic nature.”
That was a loaded gun for most people, but Thomas trusted Matthew. He smiled, folding Matthew’s house coat over his arm and walking around the side of Matthew’s bed to stand beside him. “You can, so long as you keep it to yourself.”

“…Have you ever felt that the body of another person could encapsulate your whole universe? Like your soul could walk around outside your body?”

How funny that Matthew should ask such a question on the same night as Thomas’ revelation with Ethel regarding Jimmy.

A blissful smile crept across Thomas’ face as he considered his answer. It was a simple one, hardly worth a second thought: “…Yes…. Oh yes,”

“Tell me?” Matthew said, bringing his covers a little higher up his chest. It was like Thomas was telling him a bed time story to give him good dreams.

Thomas chuckled, turning away to lay Matthew’s housecoat inside his valise. He then walked around the room, considering a picture on the wall of a beach scene touched with images of the sun. Thomas reached up and gently stroked the dried oil paints. It reminded him of that day on the beach, when he’d sat and watched Jimmy play football with the other lads. He’d been beautiful then. Utterly beautiful.

“…He’s the sun of my world,” Thomas said. Matthew listened with rapt attention.

“I’d lived in darkness for so long, I’d forgotten what it was to know joy and warmth. But then I met him and…” He trailed off, his hand dropping back to his side. “I realized that for the rest of my life, I could never be happy without him. I tried, you know-“ Thomas added, glancing over his shoulder at Matthew. “I tried to find love in other men. I even tried to cure myself of loving men entirely. Anything to get rid of the grip his love had over me. But it never worked. He is my sunshine then, now, and forever. And he is also the reason I know that heaven exists. For how could such a beautiful, wonderful creature exist in this world without the hand of God intervening?”

Thomas looked back over his shoulder again with a smile. “Silly?”

“…No.” Matthew murmured. He seemed to be in awe of Thomas’ admission. “It’s beautiful. I completely understand. Mary is like the moon to me.”

He rotated his head on the pillow to look the opposite direction, out the window where a full moon was shining brilliantly in a clear sky. “Every time it shines, I think of her.”

But at once, Matthew added. “Not like that-!” Just to make sure Thomas didn’t get the wrong idea.

“Only that, sometimes life isn’t fair or fun. Sometimes the moon wanes, sometimes it’s hiding behind clouds. But it’s always there, you know? Always.”

Thomas let out a tiny hum of agreement, hands in his pockets.

“And the sun will always rise,” Thomas said.

Matthew rolled his head on his pillow again, looking to Thomas once more. “Do I know this chap of yours?”

“You might, one day.” Thomas replied.

“Will I know him when I see him?” Matthew asked.
“I don’t doubt it,” Thomas said. For how anyone on this earth could be ignorant to the marvel of Jimmy Kent. He smiled, turning off the final light in Matthew’s room so that the whole place was plunged into a soothing darkness.

“Goodnight sir, and dream of the moon.”

“Goodnight, Thomas.” Matthew replied, even as Thomas made to leave. “And… Dream of the sun.”

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That night, Thomas slept peacefully, and although he did not dream of Jimmy that night he still woke up refreshed the next morning.

Thomas sat up in bed, groaning a bit as he rubbed his eyes. Next to him, Charlie was asleep in his cot, his tiny snores the only true sound in the room.

Thomas looked up through the skylights of his room, musing on the sparkling sun that drifted down.

“… Right,” he whispered, careful not to wake his sun. “Onward, into the breach.”

Thomas washed, dressed, and trotted downstairs do fetch a simple breakfast while Ethel woke Charlie up and got him looking his best. Thomas crammed three pieces of toast in his mouth, laden with scrambled egg and raspberry preserves, before running right back upstairs and waking up Matthew.

Matthew blearily opened his eyes, took one look at Thomas and the sun streaming in through his window, before promptly saying “Bugger me”.

Thomas took this not as a direction, but as a sentiment over all, and carried on with his day.

Matthew was by far the easier of the couple to get dressed and to the church. Thomas finished before Anna, and then allowed Matthew to trot off with the rest of his family while he went downstairs and loaded up into the wagonette. Charlie was allowed to attend the ceremony, on the condition that he be on his best behavior. So it was that Thomas sat with Charlie on his lap while Ethel boarded the wagonette next to him, with Carson and Mrs. Hughes chattering away up front.

“Cake!” Charlie was delighted to get started on the after party. “Cake, cake, cake!”

“Now remember,” Thomas warned his son. “You’re to be on your best behavior. I won’t hesitate to take you outside if you act a fool and embarrass me and your mother.”

“You won’t spank me,” Charlie tried for coyness, with wide green eyes looking up at Thomas.

“Maybe not, but Mr. Carson will,” Thomas assured him. Charlie whipped his head around, looking to where Carson was grinning in the front seat. Carson waved a hand, his sausage like fingers a clear dominating force to be reckoned with.

Charlie didn’t squabble about cake after that, and instead hid his face in Thomas’ vest.
The church was absolutely packed, from the rafters to the eves, and as a result the servants of Downton Abbey had to force their way up front resulting in a whole line of villagers getting displaced. They weren’t too happy about it and grumbled all the way to the back.

“Uppity lot,” One man complained as he passed Mr. Carson. “Think they’re so special just because they work in the big ’ouse.”

“Forgive me if I want to see a woman I raised from birth married,” Carson sneered at the man’s retreating back. The man shuffled away, thoroughly embarrassed.

Thomas left Charlie with Ethel momentarily before heading up front to where Matthew was standing alongside Tom. Dressed in his new morning coat, Tom looked a hundred miles away from the bedraggled chauffeur who’d smelt of grease and left stains on everything he touched. Tom gave Thomas a tiny smile.

“See?” Thomas gestured to Tom. “Is it so awful to dress up?”

“I still feel like a monkey,” Tom grumbled.

“So do the rest of the us,” Thomas said. Ethel had practically had to shoe horn Charlie into his own miniature suit. “So man up.” But he said it with a smile, and Tom didn’t seem to take offense.

Thomas looked to Matthew, who was brimming with excitement. “I’m going to sit down now… if you need me, you know where I am.”

“Don’t worry Thomas,” Matthew beamed, “The moon is shining upon me.” Tom raised an eyebrow, confused.

Thomas just laughed it off, returning to his seat next to Mr. Carson who was eagerly awaiting the arrival of Lady Mary.

“Today is a good day for our family,” Carson praised. Mrs. Hughes hummed in pleasant agreement, beaming up at the altar where the Travis the local vicar was chastising a group of choir boys into behaving.

Thomas looked to Ethel, who held Charlie in her arms. Charlie was entranced by his mother’s hat pin, which had been a Christmas gift from Thomas.

“Are you feeling a bit better today?” Ethel asked.

“Oddly enough, yes.” Thomas said, “But I don’t know why. It doesn’t change anything, does it. He’ll still arrive, and he’ll still knock me down.”

“I think a positive attitude changes everything,” Ethel disagreed. “And don’t you worry. I’ll be right beside you every step of the way.”

The organs began to play.

It was time.

Thomas looked over his shoulder, listening to the wild cheers of the villagers outside waving their blue and red flags. Sure enough, the carriage pulled up amid a sea of fanfare, so that Alfred could open the door and let Lady Mary out. She looked just as beautiful as Thomas remembered last time. Before, he’d been the one to open the door and help her into the church. Now, he stood in the
audience, and watched as Lady Mary began to walk up the aisle with Lord Grantham upon her arm. Carson was on the verge of bursting into tears, positively enchanted by the vision of his favorite Crawley daughter on the happiest day of her life. Even Thomas couldn’t help but smile, though it was silly because he had of course seen all this before.

But love was a wonderful thing, and he knew that from this union only good things would come.

The wedding passed without a hitch, of course. When it concluded with Lady Mary and Matthew leaving the church arm in arm, Thomas loaded back up into the wagonette with everyone else from the abbey. They had to be quick, in order to get home before the family arrived. When they got back, it was to the sight of Mrs. Patmore rushing like a lunatic while Daisy bitterly helped out the bare minimum. Thomas ran upstairs and waited for Matthew in his dressing room while putting all the necessary valises out into the hall for Alfred to load into the motorcar.

When Matthew burst into his dressing room, giddy and bouncing upon the heels of his feet, Thomas had to rope him in like a delinquent calf in order to get him out of his wedding clothes.

“I’m married!” Matthew cried out, as if this was not perfectly obvious. “Married! To the most beautiful woman on the face on the earth! God, could this day get any better?”

“It could if you stayed still,” Thomas chastised. At once, Matthew ceased bouncing to allow Thomas to get him into his traveling suit. It was a simple three piece, made of soft tweed, durable enough to stand up to a voyage but pleasant enough to keep Matthew looking his best. As soon as Thomas gave him the all clear, Matthew was back out the door again, clearly intent on seeking Lady Mary out from the party. With Matthew out of his wedding garb and officially dressed for travel, it was finally time to load up the last of the man’s valises. Thomas stepped out the door, laden with two suitcases, only to pause at the sight of Ethel trotting through the hall clearly looking for him. She spotted him at once, and made a beeline with a distressed look upon her beautiful face.

“Thomas, you better come with me,” Ethel said.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“It’s Charlie,” Ethel said, which made Thomas’ heart skip a beat in terror until she quickly added, “He’s realized you’re leaving for a month and he’s in hysterics. We can’t get him to stop crying.”

Ah, the joys of parenthood.

Thomas followed Ethel at once, and from the moment he opened the green baize door for her he was besieged by the sound of Charlie howling in distress. It was coming from the kitchen, where it sounded like both Daisy and Alfred were begging for Charlie to calm down and stop crying. As the pair of them hit the bottom of the stairwell, Thomas was shocked by the sight of Charlie hiding underneath the china cabinet in the servant’s hall, curled up like a little mouse while Daisy and Alfred were squatted on their knees and elbows to try and fish him out.

At once, a defiant sense of authority swelled up inside of Thomas. What sort of nonsense was this? He’d never seen Charlie act so rudely!

“Charles!” Thomas snapped his son’s Christian name, and at once got a response. Realizing that his father was downstairs, Charlie crawled out from under the cabinet and at once ran over to Thomas with his pudgy arms outstretched. His little suit was now covered in dust and dirt from the underside of the pantry, and his face was a splotchy red with tears making prominent tracks down his chubby
cheeks.

“D-d-don’t go!” Charlie howled, flinging himself at Thomas’ legs were he then wrapped himself about Thomas’ ankle like a particularly soggy python.

Now this was just ridiculous.

“Daddy stay!” Charlie sobbed into his trousers. Thomas bent over, a little pinched at the waist while unable to move his feet, and scooped Charlie up from the floor to hoist him onto his hip. At once, Charlie buried his face into Thomas’ neck, wrapping his arms about Thomas to hold him as close as he could.

Daisy and Alfred were at their wits end. Ethel looked horribly embarrassed, her face as crimson as her hair.

“I’ll handle this,” Thomas told them all, and walked down the hall to Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room which was mercifully empty.

This was the real test of his limits as a parent, to have people waiting on him upstairs but to have his son howling for his downstairs. Time was ticking away; Thomas knew that he wouldn’t have long to deal with Charlie before he would have to get back up to the party and load Matthew’s valise into the motorcar. If they were late because of Charlie, they could miss their ability to get onto their train, and thus miss their ship which was destined to leave port this evening. The whole honeymoon could be thrown into a whirlwind by one temper tantrum.

Thomas’ own father wouldn’t have stood for such nonsense. If Thomas had flung himself on the floor and hidden beneath furniture crying for his father, his father would have shown up promptly and taken his off his belt. But Thomas did not believe in corporal punishment, having been the victim of a stinging hand or belt far too many times himself. Instead, he found himself growing terribly empathetic to poor Charlie, who’d been too little to remember his life before Thomas. Thomas, in his eyes, was his biological father. His protector in a large and scary house.

And now, Thomas was going very far away for a very long time. Even if Ethel was staying with him, it was still a disturbing notion for a child to come to terms with.

Thomas held Charlie, rubbing his back and rocking him back and forth in the quiet; slowly but surely he felt Charlie calming down. His seizing breathes were slowing, his wails were softening, until all that remained of his tantrum was a pathetic whimper and a trembling bottom lip.

Thomas pulled back, forcing Charlie to look up from his shoulder. He’d left a wet spot on Thomas’ shoulder from his tears and snot. His face was an absolute wreck, with swollen red eyes and a dazed listless expression.

Thomas whipped out his handkerchief and wiped Charlie’s face at once. Charlie sniffed, pulling back from the handkerchief with distaste.

“Ah-“Thomas warned. “You stay still.” He wiped Charlie’s nose repeatedly until he was satisfied. Charlie still looked a wreck but at least now he was a dry wreck.

“There now,” Thomas said, pocketing his now soaking handkerchief, “What on earth was that about? You were making a right scene in the servant’s hall. No one has time for that, son.”
“Don’t go, Daddy,” Charlie begged him, grabbing onto Thomas’ starched collar with both fists. “Stay.”

“Charlie, I’m not going away forever,” Thomas promised him. “I’m just going for a month. I have to—”

“You won’t come back.”

“I will,” Thomas assured him, even as Charlie shook his head back and forth. “I promise I will!”

“Nu-uh,” Charlie didn’t believe it. He sniffed, wiping his pudgy hand across his inflamed eyes. “You’ll never come back. You hate me—”

“Are you crazy?” Thomas said, and at this he could not help but laugh. Hate Charlie? Hate his son, whom he’d watched over since infancy? What a riot!

Thomas sat down in Mrs. Hughes’ visitor chair, balancing Charlie upon his knee.

“Charlie, I love you more than anything else in this whole world!” Thomas promised. Charlie listened, still slightly unsure. “I’d come back to you no matter what.”

Charlie sniffed again, wiping his eyes once more. He reached out and felt at Thomas’ Albert chain, which lay glittering upon his vest.

Suddenly struck with a moment of inspiration, Thomas unthreaded his chain to pull out his pocket watch. It was his grandfather’s, the one sole item Thomas had from his family. In his initial universe, he’d been forced to sell the watch after the war ended just to make ends meet. It had burned him deeply to part with his watch, and so when he’d been transported to this universe Thomas had been absolutely gob smacked to get his watch back. He’d treasured it daily since then.

But perhaps, just this once, he could part with it again… if only for a month.

“Charlie, this watch belonged to your great grandfather,” Thomas said, though in truth Charlie had no biological connection to the Barrow’s. Unaware of his true genealogy, Charlie listened with rapt attention.

“I wear it every day, to remind me of the past and what I can learn from it,” Thomas explained. “I want you to wear it while I’m away. An’ you can put it on your vest, see?” Thomas helped Charlie to thread the Albert chain upon his miniature vest, noting that the chain hung down nearly to Charlie’s groin. The watch itself was enormous, and could not fit into Charlie’s vest pocket securely.

Instead, Thomas opened the watch and sat it face up upon his palm so that Charlie could see the seconds tick by.

“How do you see those black hands?” Thomas watched with a smile as Charlie reached out with his tiny fingers to follow the movements of the watch face. “They’re showing time passing. Every time you miss me, you pull out this watch and you look at the time. You can watch the hands tick… and know that they’re counting down the minutes until I come home to you.”

Charlie took the watch with both hands, entranced by its golden luster and its glassy face. Thomas stroked Charlie’s brown curls with care, tucking one stray frond behind his right ear. Charlie sniffed, but did not make to rub his eyes. He was still too entranced by the watch to care much about crying.

After a moment of quiet, Thomas pressed a chaste kiss to Charlie’s head. He wrapped his arms around his son, feeling his heart ache at the thought of parting.
“You are the apple of my eye,” Thomas said, his voice gruff with emotion. “And the greatest gift I have ever received. And my love for you is greater than any amount of time this watch could tell.”

“I love you, daddy.” Charlie said into Thomas’ neck.

“I love you, my darling, darling boy.” Thomas’ eyes burned, but he held it in. It would not do for a son to see his father cry, particularly a young one who relied upon his father to keep him safe. Thomas had to be strong, and protect Charlie at all times… even from his own emotions.

A gentle knock upon the door heralded the arrival of Ethel. She gave Thomas a sad smile and leaned upon the doorframe; Charlie had not spotted his mother yet. He was too busy holding on his watch and his father.

“They’re ready to come out,” Ethel said, sadly. “Anna’s getting ready to get into the motorcar.”

There could be no lingering.

Thomas rose up with Charlie upon his hip. As he left Mrs. Hughes’ sitting room, Ethel took Charlie back. Charlie held onto his watch, but Thomas could see his expression growing distressed.

When Charlie made a tiny noise like he might start crying again, Thomas shushed him.

“None of that,” Thomas warned his son. “You hold onto your watch.”

Charlie clasped it tight to his chest, but did not cry again.

They took the servant’s exit, walking out through the area and around the side of the house where a gravel path cut through a bed of roses to give maids and footman a quick way to reach the front. Sure enough, all the other members of staff were clustered around a glistening motorcar which was laced with white ribbon at the back. Lady Mary and Matthew were climbing into back, waving to their friends and kissing their family members goodbye. Mrs. Crawley was sobbing into his gloved hands, blissfully happy for her son. Even Lady Grantham and the Dowager Countess were in tears, though they held it back as best they could. Lord Grantham was beaming from ear to ear, shaking Matthew’s hand with furious enthusiasm.

Anna was helping Alfred load the valises into the back of the car; Mrs. Hughes kept trying to get her into the front seat.

Thomas immediately interjected himself into the scene, shooing Anna to the front as he loaded the last two valises onto the back of the motorcar and buckled them down. Alfred was greatly relieved, and went to open the door to the backseat so that Lady Mary could be helped in by Anna. Thomas had never seen her so happy.

Anna got into the front seat of the motorcar, glancing out the window to see where Thomas was.

Matthew was speaking to Lord Grantham, softly. Thomas took the moment to look to Ethel, who was smiling up at him with an aching fondness. It seemed that Charlie would not be the only one to miss him.
Thomas could feel the eyes of the rest of the staff upon him, including Mrs. Bird and Mr. Moseley who had come up for the wedding. After their sharp words about Ethel’s character, Thomas refused to part from Ethel without giving her a gentle kiss. It wasn’t filled with passion, but it was a clear statement of his affection for his wife.

“Mrs. Bird and Mr. Moseley, standing with the rest of the servants in their day clothes, looked like they might be sick at the sight.”

“‘I’ll bring you back somethin’ nice,’ Thomas promised Ethel. Ethel just shrugged.

“I don’t care about that,” she said. “Just come home safe.”

“‘Right,’ Thomas said. With that, he slipped back from his son and wife, and walked over to Mr. Carson who was waiting by the motorcar with a fond expression. It still shocked him to know that Mr. Carson liked him in this universe. That they were on good terms and did not genuinely hate one another. The love and affection a wedding normally brought out was only expounded upon by Thomas’ good relations with everyone in the house. People were smiling, glad to be near him.

It was bizarre, but blissful.

“‘Thomas,’ Mr. Carson shook his hand with a steady but firm grip. ‘Have safe travels. Call us the moment the family reaches France. You’ll be in charge of establishing contact once you’re in the South of France.’

“I promise you,” Thomas said. “I’ll call you the moment we get to shore, and keep you updated every day if you wish.”

“I wish,” Carson replied. Where Lady Mary was concerned, Thomas could probably call him every hour and Carson wouldn’t mind. As Thomas began to get into the front seat, Carson surprised Thomas by slipping him five pounds. Thomas gawked at the money, confused.

“I would be grateful if you could get Mrs. Hughes something for Christmas,” Carson explained. “Something unique she wouldn’t be able to find here.”

Thomas pocketed the money, a smug expression upon his face. He wouldn’t say a word, of course… but it was obvious even now that Carson was gaga for the housekeeper.

“I don’t have a fiver in my pocket for you, but if you’d keep Moseley from letting it slip around my son that I’m not his true father… well…” Thomas paused, pensive. “I’d be grateful.”

“Consider it done,” Carson promised, opening the front door of the motorcar so that Thomas could slide in next to Anna.

As Carson shut the door, and gave the hood of the motorcar a gently whap with the hand to signify to the driver that he could pull off.

As they went, the crowd out front of the abbey cheered them on. Isis chased the car for a good three hundred yards before being called back by Carson and Lord Grantham. The sight of her in the rear view mirror, tongue lagging and eyes sparkling, was rather endearing.

“What happened to your watch?” Anna wondered at the sight of Thomas’ bare vest pocket.

Thomas gave her a small smile, fingering the hole where the Albert chain had once hung fast.
Cool fog rolled across the weather cobblestone streets of London, illuminated in a blue hue by the few gas lamps still alit from the night before. It was five o’clock in the morning, with none out save for chimney sweeps and trash collectors.

Warbled jazz could be heard drifting from the gutters, a clear indication of a dance hall hiding beneath the streets. Across the street, an enormous gated mansion was set back against the streets, covered with manicured hedges and sheltering trees. From their shadows, a figure emerged out the back of the house. They used the servant’s walkways to cut through the side of the mansion’s expansive lawn, making a bee line for the gates which kept commoners out of the Anstruther property.

A fair haired youth with eyes the color of an aubergine was clearly desperate to get away from the Anstruther house without being spotted. But even as he reached the side gate and threw his valise over the side to follow on foot, a woman in a tartan dressing gown came pelting out of the same door he’d exited from. She carried with her a lunch wrapping in a white handkerchief.

“Jimmy!” she hissed, waving him down even as Jimmy tried to hoist himself up over the fence to follow his luggage. “Jimmy, wait!”

“Don’t try an’ stop me,” Jimmy snapped. “I’ve got my reference. I’m leavin’ before that old bat wakes up and tries to imprison me again!”

“For god’s sake–the old woman came to a stop at the gate, gesturing up to him with her packed lunch. “I’m not trying to stop you, I’m trying to feed you!”

Taken aback, Jimmy took the packaged lunch. He wore a sheepish expression.

Though a passerby would not know it, the old woman was none other than Mrs. Pierce, the housekeeper for the Anstruther Manor. She had only known Jimmy was planning to leave because of her good relationship with the butler, Mr. Thornton… and even so she’d nearly missed Jimmy entirely because of his early escape.

“…god be with you, child,” Mrs. Pierce whispered softly. “Wherever you’re going.”

“I’m sorry I can’t tell you,” jimmy admitted. “If she asked you, I wouldn’t want to force you to lie. I know how you feel about that-“

“No, I quite agree,” Mrs. Pierce murmured, shifting her tartan dressing coat to better cover her nightgown beneath. “I only hope that wherever you go, you’re happier than you are here.”

“I intend to be,” Jimmy said. His destination was still a mystery even to him. All he knew came from the postage stamp upon a letter he’d received six years ago.

Jimmy hauled himself up over the fence, and fell to the other side with a wince. His ankles smarted from the collision but there would be no time to dilly dally. He would have to move fast if he wanted to get out of London before Anstruther woke.

He’d not told her he was leaving.
She wouldn’t have let him go, if she knew he was trying to run.

“Goodbye Jimmy,” Mrs. Pierce’s eyes were glistening with unshed tears. Jimmy tipped his hat to her, picked up his valise, and then vanished down the street.

The fog swallowed him up at once.

Chapter End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to let me know.
Cradle Will Rock

Chapter Summary

Thomas returns from France only to be confronted with the stark reality of Downton Abbey's future.
A new face arrives in the village pub.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone. I'm sorry that this update has taken so long to reach you. The fact of the matter is that I've been extremely swamped with graduate work. I've managed to push this chapter out in the past two days by putting off an assignment due on Tuesday, but now I have to return to school. I promise you that I will try to update at least once a month from now on, but I do ask for understanding if I'm late at times. If you want to hear more frequently from me, check out my website subrosawriter.com

No warnings for this chapter, save for a cowardly groom.

It wasn’t that France was boring, so to speak, but by the time a month had passed Thomas was simply itching to go home. France was just as he remembered from the war, save that everything wasn’t covered in shit and no one was screaming from embedded shrapnel. The markets were hot and crowded, full of local goat soaps, honey infused with lavender, and fresh fruits from nearby orchards. Lady Mary and Matthew were far too… busy… to be bothered by what was on sale, but Thomas and Anna strolled along the promenade arm in arm, enjoying the warm weather and watching dolphins swim offshore. Anna was, of course, bitterly disappointed to leave Bates behind in a damp English jail. Thomas was likewise unenthused about having his wife and son be so far away. Together, they made a motley pair, and contented themselves with buying unique trinkets for loved ones back home. Thomas made good on his promise to Mr. Carson and used Anna as a sordid honing beacon to find a suitable gift for Mrs. Hughes. Together, the pair of them settled on a mother of pearl broach, though Thomas had been highly amused at the idea of buying her a scarlet lace garter. Anna had whapped him upside the head for his salacious comments, but Thomas later spotted her trotting back into the store to buy the very same garter for herself.

So clearly, he’d been onto something.

Lady Mary and Matthew left France on May 1st and returned back to the good and green land of England on May 7th, docking in Liverpool around eight in the morning. From there, they took a sleeper train back to York, where Matthew had a brand-new motorcar waiting from them. It had been shipped in from Manchester… a Crossley Bugatti 3 seat. With a shining maroon coat and cream-colored leather, she was a sight to behold for the others.

Thomas, however, had already seen this car and looked upon it with dread. It was the same car that Matthew would die in, come next December… unless Thomas found a way to beg Death for mercy.

Given that it was a three-seat, Matthew and Mary took the car home while Anna and Thomas
remained aboard the train so that they could handle the luggage. Matthew and Mary would arrive about an hour behind them, but that was fine. It would allot them the time needed to unpack some of the valises for Matthew’s evening toilette. What was more, it would allow Thomas a moment to reconnect with Ethel and (more importantly) Charlie.

While in France, Thomas had bought Charlie a tricycle, painted a cheery shade of robin egg blue and complete with a white wicker basket on the front. He’d been carrying it under his arm since Marseille, and he was downright eager to show it off.

“You’re such a child!” Anna said, laughing at the sight of Thomas practically bouncing in his seat.

But Thomas didn’t care. Being away from Charlie had been downright dreadful, and now that he was within walking distance of his family, he couldn’t sit still. The sight of Downton Abbey on the horizon made Thomas’ heart skip a beat.

“Honestly, sit still in your seat!” Anna beseeched.

“I shall not!” Thomas replied.

The motorcar pulled around the side of Downton Abbey, dropping them off at the entrance to the servant’s area. Thomas could not keep from grinning at the sight of Charlie between Ethel’s legs, swaying with his mother’s weight as a counterbalance while Mrs. Hughes tried to smooth his curly brown hair straight. Charlie began to hop about when the motorcar stopped, and even before Thomas opened the door he could hear Charlie crying out:

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!”

Thomas threw open the door, clambering out with his tricycle under his arm. Charlie let out an undignified shriek of delight, running pell-mell towards Thomas. Thomas dropped to his knees and set the tricycle aside just in the nick of time as Charlie leapt into his arms. With Charlie’s arms around his neck, Thomas held his son close and pressed kisses into his curly brown hair.

“Ah-!!” Thomas could not keep his delight in. “My perfect- perfect-“ With each utterance he kissed Charlie again. “Perfect child!”

Anna got out of the carriage, careful not to trod on Thomas, and embraced Ethel in a fond welcome.

“I see it’s good to be home!” Mrs. Hughes laughed gayly, her hands upon her hips.

Thomas pulled back, holding Charlie beneath his rump as Charlie reached down between them and unlaced Thomas’ pocket watch from his own vest.

“For you.” Charlie said, offering Thomas back his watch. With one hand, Thomas laced its albert chain into his buttonhole, and tucked his watch carefully away into his pocket.

“See?” Thomas snapped his fingers with a grin. “It was over just like that.”

“Don’t go away again,” Charlie mumbled, toying with Thomas’ collar.

“Ey… I always come back,” Thomas assured his son.

“Don’t go far,” Charlie reiterated. Thomas nodded, and pressed a kiss to Charlie’s damp forehead. He smelt of coconut shampoo and sweat.

“I can do that,” Thomas promised. “But look what I brought for you!”
Charlie glanced down at the tricycle by Thomas’ knees, and gasped. He scrambled from Thomas’ arms, now latching onto his new bike instead with another shriek of joy.

“Thank you, daddy!” Charlie cried out, immediately thumbing the brass bell upon his handlebars and pushing the tricycle about.

Thomas rose up from his knees, dusting them of grime as Ethel stepped forward with a cheeky smile.

“Miss me?” Thomas teased. Ethel wrapped her arms around Thomas’ neck, and held him tight. It was good to hold her again… his dearest friend. His odd little wife.

“More than anythin’ in the world,” She declared in his ear.

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In the servant’s hall, everyone crowded around Thomas and Anna as they accepted a cup of tea. Thomas covertly slipped Mr. Carson the brooch he’d bought, along with the man’s change, and crammed his face full of raspberry biscuits. They were his favorite, and Mrs. Patmore had baked them specifically for his homecoming. Anna regaled with maids with tales of France while Thomas helped Charlie to sit upon his tricycle. Charlie scooted about, not really putting his feet on the peddles. He had a whale of a time riding back and forth, cutting sharp corners around the servant’s hall doorways.

“I ought to scold you,” Ethel teased, sitting next to Thomas. “ He’ll crack his head open on that thing.”

“Nonsense woman, I shan’t hear such blasphemy.” Thomas tittered. Charlie was much too smart a lad to crack his head on a tricycle. No, no, Thomas’ son was destined for greatness. For the likes of Eton and Oxford!

Charlie ran into the door and nearly fell off the back, balance upset by the sudden roadblock.

“I can’t believe you got me this,” Ethel added, though she fingered her new mother of pearl broach with pride. “This is meant for a proper lady, not for the likes of me.”

“Ah, but you are a proper lady,” Thomas teased. “So I’ll have none of them.”

Ethel flashed him a dazzling smile.

“What was it like?” Daisy asked, even as she poured Anna a cup of tea. “I’m ever so envious. I never get to travel. An’ Thomas has been abroad twice now!”

“Oh yeah, the first time was a real vacation,” Thomas said through a mouthful of raspberry biscuit, though it ended up coming out like ‘O ‘ah’ de birs tim as a weal bacashun’.

“What?” Daisy asked, completely befuddled.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Thomas,” Mrs. Hughes chastised him. “You’re a father, you ought to set a good example for your son.”

The son in question was too busy running into every door and wall he could manage, hardly aware his father was exhibiting bad table manners.”

Thomas swallowed painfully around a mouthful of biscuit before speaking up. “Daisy the last time I went over to France, there was a war on. It wasn’t exactly a vacation.”
“I know that, but it still counts doesn’t it?” She said. “I’ve never even been out of Yorkshire.

“Well I tell you what, the next time there’s a war on, I’ll put your name forward to be a traveling cook,” Thomas teased. “You can make plonk on the front lines.”

“Don’t you start teasing her,” Anna said, though there was a playful smile upon her lips. Thomas winked, causing Daisy to scoff and turn away.

“Boys are so ridiculous,” Daisy complained aloud.

“I quite agree,” said Ethel.

“Hey!” Thomas acted wounded, even going so far as to pout his lips.

“Daddy, daddy look at me!” Charlie cried out from the hallway. He was now sitting on the bottom step of the stairwell, clearly trying to do some sort of wild trick.

“Ay, you rascal–” Thomas jerked up from his chair, and made a beeline across the room for his son. He caught Charlie just in time, scooping him up from mid air to set him back on solid ground. Charlie was giggling, utterly oblivious to the danger he’d nearly put himself in.

“Y’stay on solid ground, you hear me? No riding down the stairs,” Thomas chastised his son. “Or I’ll take this bicycle and give it to someone else.”

“I won’t!” Charlie chirped at once, holding onto his bike for dear life like he thought Thomas might make good on his promise. “Push me daddy! Push me, push me!”

Now that, Thomas could do. He squared up behind Charlie, hands upon the small of his back, and began to rush down the hall so that Charlie scooted along at a wild pace. The boy cackled with glee, legs up so that his pedals whirled unapprehended beneath his feet.

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Charlie’s cheery air was unfortunately not shared by the rest of the house. Though Thomas had suspected that Matthew and Mary would still be in a honeymoon malaise, he entered the dressing room to find his charge looking oddly depressed.

“What a face, don’t tell me you’re already missing France,” Thomas tutted, shutting the door to Matthew’s dressing room. Over his arm lay Matthew’s dinner clothes, pressed and powdered for tonight’s welcome home supper.

“Not entirely,” Matthew said, shrugging off his traveling clothes and laying them across the bed. They would need to be soaked to get the sweat of the voyage out of them. “But…”

Thomas paused, even as he collected Matthew’s clothes into a rucksack for the washing. Matthew was not meeting Thomas’ eyes, at a loss for words.

“What is it?” Thomas asked, now slightly worried. “Is something wrong?”

Matthew pursed his lips, considering the implications of his confidence in Thomas. He seemed to be internally weighing the pros and cons of letting Thomas in on some great secret.

“…If I told you something, could you keep it under your hat?” Matthew asked.

“Certainly,” Thomas lied, for he had every intention of telling Ethel if it was juicy enough.
Matthew seemed to gather Thomas was being less than truthful. “I’m serious, Thomas. No one can know.”

Thomas set down the washing sack, and folded his arms over his chest. Clearly this was not the time for games.

Noting the change in Thomas’ composure, Matthew finally relented.

“Lord Grantham has lost his fortune. Downton will have to be sold.”

Thomas’ jaw dropped.

It could be. It simply could not be! Downton, sold? But how, and why, when last time around none of this had ever happened.

“... How?” Thomas had difficulty forming the rest of his sentence. His brain had been overtaken by white noise, causing his heart to pump faster. Ethel, Charlie...Jimmy! How would Thomas overcome this obstacle? How would he provide for his family without a stable job?

“Now, don’t panic,” Matthew urged, seeming to sense that Thomas was close to screeching. “I know that this must come as a shock, but I want you to know that you are safe with me. You and Anna both have employment under me and Lady Mary. It’ll simply be in another house.”

“An’ Ethel?” Thomas asked.

“When we move, Ethel will be our maid.” Matthew’s plan was a stable one, and at once Thomas let out a breath of relief. “I’m sorry to have frightened you.”

“My god,” Thomas groaned. He had no time to waste, he had to dress Matthew for dinner, but there was a new ache in his chest from where his heart had raced temporarily out of control. “Don’t scare me like that again, man! I have a child to provide for.”

“As if I’d allow you to sink,” Matthew said. “Now come help me dress, I’m chilly.”

Thomas refused to note Matthew’s erect nipples, and instead began to help Matthew dress for dinner.

“The problem is, Mary thinks that I can save Downton, but I can’t,” Matthew said. “Why does she think that?” Thomas wondered, brushing Matthew’s dinner jacket upon the clothes horse. “That’s too big a job for one man.”

“One man, yes. One fortune, no... and...” Thomas glanced over his shoulder to find Matthew looking terribly uncomfortable.

Matthew caught his eyes but quickly looked away, fiddling with the buttons of his shirtsleeves. “I might have one of those but it’s not mine to spend. Lavinia’s father made me a possible heir to his estate but...”

“Oh, Matthew!” Thomas groaned. So it seemed that Lavinia Swire was still not dead and buried, despite Matthew now being solidly married to Lady Mary.

Matthew still wouldn’t meet Thomas’ eyes. “How much longer must we remain shunning the ghost of a woman who wanted nothing but your happiness?”

Matthew rounded on him, a slight fire in his normally kind eyes. “Yes, but you see that’s precisely it,” he snapped. “I ruined her. I killed her-”
“I won’t listen to this,” If Matthew thought that he had some kind of godly influence over the Spanish Flu, he had another thing coming. Thomas helped Matthew to shrug on his dinner jacket, but when he brushed Matthew’s shoulders and back, he did it with unnecessary staccato movements.

“Give me a reason that doesn’t have to do with Lavinia Swire, and I’ll listen,” Thomas snapped. “But until then, you good sir are on their own.”

“Thomas, I want to help but I can’t!” Matthew begged. Thomas tossed his brush onto the bed, hiked the laundry sack over his shoulder, and headed for the door.

“If you say so, sir,” Thomas bit out the word. “Excuse me.”
He left without another word, closing the door on Matthew’s stricken face.

The next several days were spent in turmoil, with Matthew waiting to find out whether or not he was the heir of Reginald Swire’s estate, and Ethel pushing for Thomas to get a cottage from Lord Grantham. Thomas had no intention of fighting for a cottage on the Downton estate when Downton was going belly up, and spent the nights lying awake with anxiety wondering at what should be done for his family’s future. If they left Downton with Matthew and Lady Mary, where would they go? Would they stay in Yorkshire, or would they move back towards Manchester where Matthew’s practice was? If they did, what would happen to Jimmy-?

That’s not your problem, a nasty voice whispered in Thomas’ head. He doesn’t love you and he never will.

Knowing that Downton had lost its fortune made dressing Lord Grantham terribly difficult. Thomas desperately wanted to say something, even as he helped Lord Grantham to put on his cufflinks and straightened his bowtie. The night after Matthew’s awful reveal, Thomas was in the middle of helping put Lord Grantham to bed when it all came to a head.

Lord Grantham, in his housecoat and pajamas, watched as Thomas plucked up pieces for his morning suit. They would need to be ironed before Thomas could go to bed.

“... Is something wrong, Barrow?” Lord Grantham asked. You’ve been quieter than usual.

Thomas paused, his back to Lord Grantham.
Should he come clean?

“... It would break the code of a valet for me to say it,” Thomas admitted.

He turned around and found Lord Grantham dismayed, “Now you really have me worried.”

It was late, and the family was being put to bed. The rest of the staff were upstairs, save for Anna and O’Brien who were putting their mistresses to bed.

So perhaps now was the best time.

“...Mr. Matthew told me... about the money,” Thomas said. Lord Grantham did not seem shocked, merely exhausted and sad as he sat down on his dressing bed.

“...I see,” Lord Grantham murmured.

“I’ve not told anyone,” Thomas said at once, for he felt it vital that Lord Grantham know.
“I appreciate that. Please don’t tell anyone until it’s time,” Lord Grantham said. “We’ll give you good references, the lot of you… and I suppose that Matthew and Lady Mary will want you to go with them. And Anna.”

“Ethel too, M’lord,” Thomas said.

“Well then, that’s you squared away,” Lord Grantham managed a small smile, but it was terribly pained. “But I don’t want to frighten the maids.”

Thomas thought of Daisy, and his stomach twisted in sorrow.

“I understand,” He said, wondering where on earth Daisy would go. Perhaps Matthew might consent to take her on as a cook.

“You’re a good man, Thomas,” Lord Grantham praised him. Thomas wondered if it was a compliment he entirely deserved. “I just wish Bates were here.”

“He’ll be home soon,” Thomas promised. Come October, Bates would be freed from prison, though of course Thomas could never tell as much to Lord Grantham.

“He’ll return to an empty house,” Lord Grantham mumbled. Thomas didn’t know how to respond to that.

For a moment, a terrible silence consumed them both. Thomas could not help but feel that somehow, someway all of this must be his fault. This hadn’t happened last time, so how could it happen now unless it was Thomas’ doing?

But then again, Thomas had never been involved with the personal lives of others last time. He’d been hated, avoided, a paria in the house. What if this actually had happened last time, and Thomas just hadn’t known about it?

He made to leave, knowing that Lord Grantham surely wanted to go to bed. But he paused even as he reached the door, a hand on the sill as he contemplated saying more.

Really, he only had one more thing to say.
He turned, and found Lord Grantham watching him with bleary eyes.

“...If this really is the end,” Thomas said. “I wanted to say thank you.”

Lord Grantham seemed slightly surprised.

“Thank you for a life of servitude?” Lord Grantham wondered softly. “A life of shining my shoes and straightening my tie?”

Oh, if Lord Grantham only knew the half of it. But Thomas understood what it was to not have a home, to be without a safety net or a warm bed to sleep in.

“Downton Abbey has been the only home I’ve ever known,” Thomas admitted. “I won’t be happy to leave it.”

Lord Grantham was clearly touched.

He rose from bed, and reached out to shake Thomas’ hand. It was rare that the two of them should touch in such a way; Lord Grantham’s hand was soft from a life spent in luxury. Thomas wondered if his hand, in contrast, was hardened with calluses.
“Home is where your heart is, Thomas,” Lord Grantham said kindly. “You’ll find a new home soon enough; your heart is true.”

Well… that wasn’t entirely accurate, was it?

Two more days passed with Thomas considering the options of his future. Ethel was still none the wiser, Charlie was delighted with his bicycle, and Alfred was still making a tit of himself over dinner. Everyone just kept ticking, just kept going like the whole world hadn’t change at the drop of a dime. He kept wondering when on earth he should tell Ethel, or if he should even tell her at all. What if this whole thing resolved itself without Thomas’ aid? What if it had happened last time too, and he’d just been none the wiser?

On the third day of this inner turmoil, Thomas went to dress Matthew for dinner only to find Matthew rather shell shocked. He was sitting on the end of the bed, head hung low as Thomas shut the door to his dressing room.

“…Penny for your thoughts?” Thomas grumbled.

“I’m the heir,” Matthew sighed.

Thomas paused a the door, unsure of what to say or do.

“Well, they need a death certificate of the other chap, and that may take some time seeing as he was India when he passed. But… I’m definitely the heir.”

Well, while that was one small step towards a solution, it didn’t solve the problem of Downton going belly up. Thomas began to pull out Matthew’s pieces for dinner.

“Nice,” Thomas mused. He refused to say more than that.

“Thomas,” Matthew groaned, “Don’t make us quarrel on this.”

“Quarrel?” Thomas spoke in an airy voice, as if such a suggestion was even feasible. Thomas was a servant, no matter how well he and Matthew got along. Quarreling with his master, particularly when unemployment was a very real threat, was utter foolishness. “I think you forget what I am.”

“And what are you?” Matthew sighed, as if this was all very tiresome.

“I am your valet, a completely useless figure in all seriousness. And my place of employment is about to tank. So would quarreling with my master be a wise idea?” Thomas asked. Matthew looked wounded, like Thomas had smacked him in the face with a glove.

“I’m not your master,” Matthew said, still quite tentative. “I’m your friend.”

They stared at one another, two men similar in so many ways and yet different in so many others. It was as if they were standing upon separate but equal edges of a great crevice.

“…. So you’re the heir,” Thomas said. “What does this mean?”

“It means I’m about to get a great deal of money, not that I want it,” Matthew said.

Thomas shrugged, helping Matthew with his bowtie. Matthew was patient, holding still as Thomas worked. “Well give some to me, why don’t you.”
“I know it’s hard for you to understand.” Matthew said, but Thomas cut him off.

“Yes, it’s very hard for me to understand,” Thomas grumbled, “Mainly because you can’t give me a reason that doesn’t revolve around Lavinia, and we both know that Lavinia wanted nothing but your absolute happiness. She knew you loved Mary-- Lady Mary, excuse me-” Thomas recused himself quickly before carrying on. “Turn around so I can fix your shoulders.”

Matthew did as he was bade without fuss.

“The thing is, her father didn’t know about me and Mary. He didn’t know about any of it. He died thinking me devout to his daughter, and that’s where the trouble lays.”

“Matthew-” Thomas was close to being exasperated. “You’re comparing yourself to sainthood. Are you not allowed to be even a tiny bit human? Eh?”

Matthew shrugged away from Thomas’ brushing, and turned around with a wry smile upon his face. Thomas took a step back, folding his arms over his chest.

“Stop making sense, or I’ll clobber you,” Matthew warned. Still, there was a warmth in his voice Thomas was glad to hear.

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Of course, not everyone was ready to lay down and take it on the chin without a fight.

In lieu of losing Downton Abbey, Lady Mary and the Dowager had decided to pull out the big guns, or rather the big pocket books. Martha Levinson was still staying at Downton, and was loath to leave when there was free food to be eaten. As a result, the Dowager was determined to use Mrs. Levinson to her full and flagrant advantage. A massive soiree was thrown, under the flimsy guise of being a welcome home party for Lady Mary and Matthew. Carson was thrilled, ever the one to put on a show in the name of Downton. The problem was that the staff was still crippled, with only half the placements filled. Alfred was the only footman, and he couldn’t be expected to cater an entire party by himself. So it was with great trepidation that Thomas returned to the livery of footman, forced to attend to Matthew in his stripes and brass.

Still, even a stressful party would not put O’Brien off the chance of seeing Alfred progress. Thomas was essentially being strong armed for the sake of avoiding conflict, allowing Alfred to valet to Matthew while he in turn valeted for Lord Grantham. This allowed them to work faster, but it still made Thomas nervous as he returned to see how Alfred was carrying on.

Mercifully, it seemed that Alfred’s initial venture into valeting was without reproach… at least, up to a point.

“Ah, let me see-” Thomas popped into the dressing room, shutting the door quickly behind him. Alfred was beaming, pleased with his work as Matthew turned around to show Thomas how he was dressed. He was wearing his tails tonight, in a silk white tie and pressed breast plate. Thomas carefully straightened Matthew’s tie, noting that Alfred had brushed the tux rather well.

“Am I up to snuff?” Matthew teased.

“Mm,” Thomas nodded, only to pause as he noted Matthew’s cufflinks. They featured the Grantham emblem of a divided flag and a hunting dog on point towards an unseen prey.

“Alfred, these are actually for a ball,” Thomas said, plucking the cufflinks off of Matthew’s wrists.
“Can’t they work tonight?” Alfred asked, crestfallen at his faux paux.

“No, they cannot,” Thomas said. Carson would have a fit if he thought standards were falling slack, particularly on such an important night. He put the cufflinks back on their velvet plush, and instead plucked up a pair of pearl cufflinks for Alfred to see.

“At a ball or in London, you wear the crest of your family. At a party such as tonight, you wear pearl.” He laced them onto Matthew’s wrists to his satisfaction, then stepped back. Alfred surveyed all of this, still clearly morose that he hadn’t aced everything on the first try.

“Right, that’s you squared away,” Thomas said, content with Matthew’s dress. “Go on down and have fun.”

“I’ll see you after dinner,” Mathew replied with a smile, passing both Alfred and Thomas ohis way out the door. He left without another word, a spring in his step despite the difficult circumstances the house was facing.

Alfred, however, gazed at Thomas in wonder. “You're so forward with him.”

“We’re close,” Thomas said, thought that was hardly an adequate explanation of his relationship with Matthew Crawley.

“We better head back downstairs and make sure Mr. Carson’s ready,” Thomas said. He led the way to the green baize door, with Alfred trotting after him like a lost puppy. “Did you finish the silver before you came up?”

“And the crystal too,” Alfred chimed in. “We should be good to go.”

But as Thomas opened the green baize door, he was greeted not by the cheery sounds of a staff ready to receive twenty guests, but sudden choking smoke.

Fire!

“Oh my god, Charlie-!” Thomas gasped, his mind immediately flashing to Charlie who would be in the kitchen around this time. Panicking, Thomas fled down the stairs with such speed that he nearly tripped over the bottom step, coughing and waving a hand frantically in front of his face. The smoke was issuing from the kitchen, with the sounds of Mrs. Patmore bellowing through the grime.

Thomas burst through the kitchen only to find Ethel in the back corner, holding Charlie in her arms close to an open window where fresh air was coming through. He took her in his arms at once, feeling at his son’s cheeks to make sure they were adequately warm. Charlie didn’t seem the worse for wear, though his clothes would surely smell of cinders by the time it was all through.

“Where’s the fire?!?” Thomas demanded, waving a hand to combat the smoke.

“S’not a fire, it’s the oven!” Ethel cried out. That, at least, would explain why half the staff wasn’t running away in a blind panic. Instead, the panic was reserved for the top tier, as Mr. Carson came crashing over the threshold of the kitchen holding the sand buckets.

“Stop, stop-!” Thomas begged, even as Carson raised the bucket up high. “It’s not a fire! It’s the oven!”

“It’s broken!” Daisy wailed from the range, even as she desperately opened the grid and tried to fan more air inside. All she was actually doing was letting more smoke out. “I can’t get it to breathe!”
“Christ, we won’t be breathing in a bit!” Ethel swore loudly.

“We’ll have nothing to feed them at this rate!” Mrs. Patmore was in hystericis, and who could blame her? A party of twenty was upstairs, waiting to receive at least ten courses of her cooking. Now all of it was squandered, and soon there would be gaping mouths complaining a floor above.

“What do we do?!” Daisy begged. Alfred was hovering over Mr. Carson’s shoulder, looking at the oven in horror. Even as Carson blustered, unsure of what to do, Mrs. Hughes managed to inch her way through the door, coughing and waving a hand before her face.

“What is this?” Mrs. Hughes demanded. “What’s wrong with it now?”

“As if I could tell you!” Mrs. Patmore squawked. “Do I look like a mechanic to you?!”

“No, just like a cook with a party of twenty to feed and cold entrees,” Mrs. Hughes replied. Mrs. Patmore was near tears at this point.

“Mr. Carson-” Thomas nearly elbowed Mrs. Hughes in the ribs as he gestured to the man, “Tell us what to do and we’ll do it!”

Carson pursed his lips into a thin white line, eyes narrowing as he looked left and right at the ruined thirteen course meal that sat stacked upon the kitchen island. The circumstances were bleak, but even in these trying times, Charles Carson had an answer.

“Mrs. Hughes, open up the pantry and the ice box,” Mr. Carson said.

“Right away, Mr. Carson,” Mrs. Hughes marched off, chatelaine bouncing upon her hip.

“Ethel, fetch the fruit and arrange it on a tray,” Mr. Carson said. “Daisy, fetch the cheeses, Alfred you take the shaved ices. Thomas, Fetch the ham and chicken in the pantry for tomorrow’s dinner. Bring it here and slice it thin. We’ll have to make a cold buffet for them, there’s nothing else to be done.”

“Yes sir,” Thomas did not even bat an eyelash, turning on his heel and heading for the pantry. With some luck, this evening could be saved from the brink of disaster. Behind him, Alfred, Daisy, and Ethel all followed in haste. Charlie was deposited back in his play crib, watching the proceedings in awe as the kitchen was suddenly packed with people.

“A buffet?” Mrs. Patmore moaned in despair. “When I think of all the trouble I’ve gone to!”

“Well it’s either this or go to the trouble of getting a reference,” Mrs. Hughes called out from the back of the pantry where she was handing Daisy over a rind of cheese.

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Of course, the buffet worked, though Mrs. Patmore and Mr. Carson took a few days to get over the revolt and shock. The flash and bauble of a beautiful party had been rathering scarring in other ways, though they weren’t initially apparent. After years of standing silent, the party at the abbey had been a bit like a flash bulb going off before a beautiful picture. It had blinded the occupants of the abbey to the real problem, and now with the glitzy aura was gone to be replaced with a queer silence.

The money was gone, the staff was diminished, and soon enough Downton Abbey would have to be sold pack and parcel. Mrs. Levinson’s money would not be of use to the abbey, so now they were back to square one with Matthew still refusing Swire’s money.
Oh-! Sometimes Thomas wanted to strangle the man.

But all of this-- the lack of money, the dwindling of prospects for Downton’s future, Jimmy’s incoming return, and Thomas’ wondering about coming to clean to Ethel-- all of it were pushed aside when a delighted Edith Crawley came running through the library one fine May morning to announce she was marrying Anthony Strallen.

Well, how lovely was that?

Of course, Thomas knew fine and well what was about to happen and he wasn’t happy to watch it unfold again. The abbey was once more fighting for front place amongst the newspapers, raging with talk of flowers, tables, bridesmaids, and gifts. For whatever reason, Lady Mary wasn’t much too enthused about all of it, but then again she rarely was where her middle sister was concerned. Lady Edith was blissful, floating from one cloud to the next, even as Lady Sybil and Tom Branson returned from Ireland. Lady Sybil had only grown more large, her belly swollen and sticking out from beneath a soft blue gown.

Thomas didn’t know what was more disturbing to see: Sybil heavily pregnant, or Edith in a wedding dress.

A picnic was set up to observe a quiet Crawley property forgotten to the edge of the estate that would (in time) serve as the replacement for Downton Abbey. It had room for very little staff, perhaps a cook and a few maids, but if the family were to downsize they would simply have to make do. The night before the picnic, Downton Abbey was set to impress. Several relatives had come from out of town, eager to see the second daughter well settled in nuptial bliss, and the oven was mercifully fixed. As a result, Mrs. Patmore had laid out a delicious splendor of cakes, pies, ice boxes, and vegetable melodies (one in the shape of a swan). Upstairs, Thomas dressed Matthew, noting that he was rather somber.

“I got a call from Reggie Swire’s lawyer, Charkham…” Matthew said, even as Thomas fiddled with his cufflinks. “The certificate came in.”

So that was that then. “What now?” Thomas asked.

“Now, he comes here,” Matthew explained, “Except I was a clot and forgot that we’re going to the picnic tomorrow.”

That was hardly a reason to be called a ‘clot’. Thomas gave Matthew a gentle look of disapproval for his language.

“...Mary’s furious. Reggie Swire apparently sent me a letter on the eve of his death telling me that he knew I was unfaithful to Lavinia and that he understood… but…” Matthew trailed off, somber. Thomas waited patiently to hear the rest.

“That just can’t be true. Lavinia was on her death bed when she found out that I still loved Mary, so how could he know unless she’d somehow been able to send him a letter? It doesn’t make sense. Unless Mary wrote it to try and make me feel better about using the money to save Downton.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes, sensing foolishness in the air. “And did you accuse her of that?”

“...Maybe,” Matthew wouldn’t meet his eyes. “But I still maintain—”

“Matthew, may I be frank with you?” Thomas cut him off. Matthew looked slightly afraid of what Thomas might say. “That was perhaps the dumbest thing you could have possibly said to Lady Mary.”
“Possibly,” Matthew conceded. “She’s certainly not happy with me right now. But what other explanation is there?”

“Well how do you know that Lavinia didn’t send her father a letter?” Thomas asked.

Matthew shrugged, at a loss, “I guess I don’t.”

“Mary-- Lady Mary--” Thomas had to correct himself. “Loves this house. She’s sad, not angry. Well--” that might be a little ridiculous. Knowing Lady Mary she was probably furious. “A little angry. Have you lost weight?”

Matthew’s pants were looking oddly slack at the waist. Thomas took a finger through the belt loop, and pulled at it a bit to find a good inch in uptake at Matthew’s hem.

“By jove, you have lost weight!” Thomas said in dismay. “Oh, now look what you’ve done. I’ll have to mend everything. Now I’m angry!”

And he was, at least a little bit. As if he didn’t have enough work to do in the meantime!

“Eat tonight!” Thomas demanded. “Stuff your face before the oven chimney cocks it up again!”

A little laugh hiccuped past Matthew’s throat, forced out by the shock of Thomas’ words.

“Thank you Thomas…” It was good to see Matthew smile, even if only for a moment. “I needed that.”

Eager to give Matthew something else to laugh over, Thomas needled him one more time.

“Get out of my sight, you grubby little tapeworm.”

~*~

The morning of Lady Edith’s (doomed) wedding found the servants clustered in the hall scarfing down breakfast as quickly as they could. Charlie was once again wrangled into a suit, and had nearly had a tantrum on the subject until Thomas had snapped at him to behave. As a result, Charlie was cowed, quiet as Ethel ran a comb full of pomade through his curly black hair.

“Thank you for being good,” Ethel praised their son, and pressed a sweet kiss to his ear.

“Is Daddy angry at me?” Charlie mumbled back. Thomas rolled his eyes, slurping down the rest of his coffee before setting his cup aside so that he could scoop Charlie out of Ethel’s arms and sit him on his lap. Charlie’s green eyes were full of fear, a little boy desperate to be loved and have fun at the same time.

“I’m not angry at you,” Thomas said. “But you have to learn how to behave. I know you don’t like getting dressed up like a doll, but it’s for a wedding so we have to look nice.”

“But we just had a wedding!” Charlie complained. “And you left last time!”

“I’m not leaving anywhere this time,” Thomas promised his son. Charlie twiddled his thumbs, unsure.

“Promise?” Charlie asked. Thomas pressed a gentle kiss to Charlie’s temple and held him close. The smell of pomade stung Thomas’ nose.
“I promise,” Thomas said. That seemed to settle Charlie’s fears on the matter.

“Am I interrupting?”,

The voice of Lady Mary had the same result as a whip crack in the servant’s hall. Everyone clambered out of their seats, shocked to see the eldest Crawley daughter in their presence when it was hardly half past eight.

“No, please-!” Lady Mary raised her hands for peace, even as Carson and Anna looked stricken. “I just want to ask you all something.”

“M’lady, I’m sorry I’ve not been up-” Anna clearly thought this was some sort of intervention. Lady Mary shushed her maid with a small smile.

“Don’t worry, I’ll change properly after luncheon,” Lady Mary assured her. Anna was placated by that, a little bit of color returning to her ashen face. “But I had to catch you when you were all together.”

“How can we help, M’lady?” Carson asked.

“It’s a funny thing,” Lady Mary admitted, fingers laced before her and brown eyes frank with need. “Mr. Crawley has heard that Miss Swire sent a letter on the day she died. If so, someone must have posted it for her, and we wondered if it were any of you.”

The staff looked at one another, unsure. Thomas glanced at Anna, then Ethel, but found them both at a loss. Thomas, of course, wouldn’t have been able to send a damn thing given that he’d been on his death bed with Spanish Flu.

“Well, except you, Thomas-” Lady Mary added kindly.

“Admittedly I was preoccupied, M’lady.” Thomas replied.

“Ethel?” Anna asked. Ethel shook her head.

“I was trying to keep Thomas alive,” Ethel said.

“We all were,” Mrs. Hughes muttered.

“Wait, you had the flu?” Alfred wondered aloud. Now they were getting way off topic. Lady Mary waved her hands for order. Carson, of course, was quick to reign the staff in.

“That’s enough of that, quit wasting Lady Mary’s time.” Carson snapped. The staff fell silent, awaiting orders. Carson turned to Lady Mary, somber. “I’m afraid it couldn’t have been any of us, M’lady. Given that the poor lady passed away that same day, an incident of this sort would have been reported to me or Mrs. Hughes.”

“That’s right, M’lady,” Mrs. Hughes seconded. Lady Mary was clearly crestfallen.

“I see…” she murmured, before turning to go. “Well, thank you very much.”

Yet even as Lady Mary left, Daisy entered carrying a new kettle for hot tea. She paused, watching the eldest Crawley daughter begin her retreat up the stairs, still in her dressing gown.

“What were that about?” Daisy asked, replacing the cold kettle on the table with the hot one.

“Lady Mary wanted to know if anyone had posted a letter for Miss Swire,” Anna explained.
“Oh, I did that!” Daisy said.

Thomas did a double take, his chin nearly hitting the top of Charlie’s head. Daisy-?

“Daisy?” Carson was staggered, “What did you say?”

Lady Mary was back in an instant, rounding the door to the servant’s hall in a whirl of creamy silk robes. She was enraptured by Daisy, every fiber of her being clearly filling up with hope even as Daisy spoke with bewilderment.

“Poor Miss Swire’s letter,” Daisy explained. “She’d written it and she asked me to put it into the box in the hall. Why?” She was clearly confused as to what all the fuss was about.

Even so, Thomas couldn’t help but smile a bit. Things were starting to make sense now. Could it be this was what had saved Downton last time? The comment of one clueless kitchen maid?

“What were you doing in her room?” Mrs. Hughes demanded, affronted at the thought that Daisy had intruded upon the sanctuary of a terminally ill guest.

“Making up the fire,” Daisy said. “We started talking and she’d said she’d written a letter. She was ever so nice. I still get sad when I think about her.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to tell me?” Mrs. Hughes pointed to her own breast. Daisy blinked, baffled.

“Tell you what?” she asked. Ethel rolled her eyes, unable to keep a tiny laugh down. Daisy was a delight, if still a bit silly.

“Never mind!” Lady Mary cut across them all, even as Mrs. Hughes made to reprimand a clueless Daisy some more. Lady Mary was beaming, relieved. “I am grateful to you, Daisy. You cannot know how much. Excuse me.”

At this, Lady Mary all but ran up the stairs, leaving behind her one very confused kitchen maid and a throng of still-standing servants.

The rest of the morning went pleasantly enough, with the wedding scheduled for three in the afternoon. The women changed after luncheon, with Lady Edith borrowing O’Brien from Lady Grantham in order to fully prepare for her bridal gown. As a result, O’Brien was in a slightly foul mood, griping about frocks and flowers even as the others scurried after their own masters. Thomas had to dress both Lord Grantham, Matthew, and Tom Branson (though the last was not happy about it). When confronted by an irritated Irish mick, Thomas gave it up for lost and instead demanded that Branson not look like a fool when he appeared downstairs.

“They all think I dressed you, so if you look poorly it’ll reflect badly on me!” Thomas warned the man, even as he left for Matthew’s dressing room. He could hear Branson cursing all the way up the hall.

Matthew, of course, was still slightly somber as Thomas helped him to shave and dress. He was wearing his morning jacket today, with a steel gray top hat to match that Thomas had brushed the night before. Thomas had to step back several times to ensure that Matthew was looking his absolute best.

Matthew regarded his reflection in the standing mirror, pausing to tuck a tiny lock of blonde hair
behind his ear.

“There, you look smart,” Thomas was pleased with his work and began to put his valeting tools away.

“I’m as smart as you make me,” Matthew mumbled. Thomas gave him a tender look.

“Have you spoken to Lady Mary today?” Thomas asked. Matthew shook his head.

“I’ve been hiding from her in the garden,” Matthew said, “Like a coward.”

Thomas smiled, closing the doors of Matthew’s wardrobe. “I think you need to go talk to her.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Thomas turned around to put his hands on his hips. “Lady Mary came downstairs this morning to ask if anyone had posted a letter for Miss Swire on the day she died… and someone had.”

Matthew was shocked, his mouth falling slightly slack as he registered this sudden turn of events. Thomas cocked an eyebrow with a grin.

“Scoot, scoot,” Thomas said. He’d not even finished his sentence and Matthew was already halfway out the door.

So it seemed that the crisis of Downton’s near collapse had been saved By Daisy Robinson (of all people).

After the family was dressed, the entirety of the abbey began to file down to the village church which was wrapped in white ribbon and silver bells. Thomas, of course, knew that the whole village was about to go up in flames the minute that Strallen made it down the alter, so he kept his mouth shut and his head bowed as he headed to church with Charlie and Ethel. They filed into the pews near the front just like last time, with Ethel on one side and Mrs. Hughes on his other. A cheery babble had overtaken the crowd as the Travis (the local priest) made sure last minute details were crystal clear with the children’s choir. Charlie was busy playing with a pamphlet, tearing the edges into tiny sections in a methodical pattern.

When more room needed to be made for the adults, Charlie was ushered down the edge to sit on Daisy’s lap instead. She was overly sweet, sneaking him sweets from her pocket and showing off pictures in the communal bibles kept in the backs of pews.

Ethel watched their son play with a small smile.

“I wonder if we should tell Charlie that we had a wedding,” Ethel said, glancing at Thomas and Mrs. Hughes.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” Mrs. Hughes shrugged with a benign smile. “A lot of our kind don’t. It’s too much money to blow in one spot unless you have something to back it up. Just say you had a civil ceremony and a party at the abbey afterwards. We’ll back you on it.”

“That sounds more like us, doesn't it?” Ethel mused. Thomas could not help but smirk at the idea of sacrilege.
“Speak for yourself. I’m going to say we danced naked around a bonfire and roasted a goat on the front lawn.”

A sudden sharp noise caught Thomas’ attention, and he looked about to find Mr. Travis furious at his elbow. He’d not realized it, but the priest had been walking down the aisle in the direction of the bridal party only to overhear Thomas’ blasphemy.

Thomas instantly looked away, cheeks turning scarlet even as Mrs. Hughes pinched him hard on the arm.

“Thomas-!” She hissed, irritated at his display. “If you don’t get your act together and hold your tongue I’ll take you outside and give you a smack.”

Ethel was close to tears, having to hold her laughs in unless she was noticed. Thomas was glad someone appreciated his queer sense of humor.

Of course, all humor evaporated to be replaced by organ music when the wedding officially began. Thomas stood with Ethel on his arm, waiting with baited breath even as Edith Crawley slowly walked up the aisle in a blissful daze.

Christ, this was about to go horribly. He wished he could spare her from this.

“Dance naked around a bonfire and roast goat in the woods? Sounds like my kind of gathering.” Thomas was taken aback to hear the voice of the Heichecera. He looked to his left and found her standing on Ethel’s other side. Ethel, of course, had been taken completely unawares and had nearly jumped out of her skin. The Heichecera appeared like a ghostly apparition, semi-transparent as her image slid out of Anna. The rest of the crowd was completely unaware there was a sorceress in their presence, completely enraptured instead by the opulence of an upper class wedding.

Thomas tried to get his heart rate under control, fixing his expression into something neutral as the Heichecera looked on to the doomed wedding party.

“Actually I never danced naked round a bonfire, nor did I declare my love to Satan. I know-- it sounds rather cliche doesn’t it? Spanish Sorceress from the 1500’s dances around a bonfire in the middle of the woods naked while waving the corpse of a murdered goat. And to be fair, the Inquisition thought I had. But actually, I was quite innocent of all the charges that were laid against me. I’d merely saved the life of my grandmother from dying of cancer. She was like me too.” The Heichecera paused, glancing at Thomas who was still quite ashen. “Are you alright, Thomas? You look terribly pale.”

Thomas gave the Heichecera a beady stare, eyes flickering around the audience silently as Edith and Anthony Strallen took hands at the front of the alter. Any second now, everything was going to go to shite-

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered-”

“I can’t do this.”

Thomas hissed behind his teeth, grimacing and looking away. Ethel gasped, a hand flying to her throat in shock. She was not the only one to react in horror. Every member of the Downton party was horrified, with Lady Grantham ready to keel over and Lord Grantham going white from rage. Mrs. Hughes had a hand over her mouth, Anna looked like someone had slapped her in the face with a dead fish, and Mr. Carson…?
Well, it was a miracle he hadn’t had a second heart attack.

“Yikes,” The Heichecera said aloud, though of course no one heard her.

“What?” Lord Grantham demanded, horrified. Lady Edith was standing stock still, like a deer about to be shot, her wide hazel eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Travis was merely silent, grave in his understanding of what had just occurred. This probably wasn’t the first wedding he’d seen go up in flames.

“I can’t do it,” Anthony Strallen begged Lord Grantham. A wave of whispers broke out across the horrified congregation, with many of the women looking on the verge of tears in empathy for the bride. Thomas heard an upper class man on the other side of the pew whispering “Despicable!”

“I saw a wedding like this in Madrid, once,” the Heichecera said, completely at ease with the proceedings. “That was right on the eve of the Treaty of Fontainebleau. The groom was in love with another woman but was being forced to marry another for money. He walked up to the aisle, waited for the priest to ask for objections, then took the pistol out of his pocket and shot himself through the temple-”

Up at the front of the altar, Anthony Strallen was begging for mercy for the Crawley family.

“You know this is wrong!” Strallen begged Lord Grantham looked ready to strangle the man. “You’ve told me so yourself, several times!”

“My dear chap-“ Lord Grantham growled, “Now is a little late to back down-”

“No-” Strallen slipped back from Edith, who was still yet to speak. She was steamrolled by this sudden change in her happiness, so shaken that it seemed she’d forgotten how to breath. Tears were spilling from her beautiful eyes, creating tracks of makeup down her once youthful face. “No, I never should have let it get this far.”

“Of course, the groom didn’t mean to, but the bullet accidentally went straight through him and hit a member of the choir too. So I had to escort two souls that day instead of one. The groom wanted a chance to go back in time and change his fate. I gave him the opportunity, and he ran away with his original sweetheart. They ended up having ten children, if you can believe it. So all in all, a good ending… except for the dead choir boy.” The Heichecera shrugged.

“This isn’t the time,” Thomas hissed under his breath at the Heichecera. She stopped talking, raising her hands in understood submission.

Mrs. Hughes swayed, almost ready to topple over. “This can’t be happening,” she whispered. Thomas caught her by the elbow, holding her straight.

“Steady, Mrs. Hughes.” Thomas urged her. “Steady.”

“It’s like a nightmare,” Ethel choked out. A tear had slipped down Anna’s cheek, though she hid it with a hand over her mouth.

“I should have stopped it long ago,” Strallen said. “I tried to stop it.”

Honestly, Thomas had trouble believing him.

“W….What are you saying?” Edith choked out, her voice like a bullfrog from grief. “I don’t understand what you’re saying-”
“Edith,” Strallen begged her, “I can’t let you throw your life away like this.”

“What do you mean?” Edith began to blubber, unable to keep from crying. With each breath she seized, more tears fell. “We’re so happy, aren’t we? We’re going to be so terribly, terribly happy—”

At this, Thomas heard several women in the congregation begin to grow hysterical. Being jilted at the altar, in a day and age when a woman’s worth was based upon her husband, was the worst of circumstances. The lowest of low.

If only Thomas could have protected Lady Edith from this. He could not think of a single person who deserved it less.

Ethel took hold of Thomas’ arm, and buried her face in his side. She did not want to watch, anymore. Thomas wrapped an arm around his wife, allowing her to hide in his vest. He could not blame her, in her empathy.

“But you are going to be happy,” Strallen protested, clasping Edith’s hands in his own with contrition. “I pray that you are. But only if you don’t waste yourself on me.”

“Anthony,” Lord Grantham hissed, “It’s too late for this.”

Travis had had enough. He put up his hands, stepping away from the ruined bridal party. “Might I suggest we all take a step back.”

A sudden hero came in the form of the Dowager Countess, who despite being the stickler for tradition and the one most eager to keep away from scandal, was also the most protective of her family. She swept up the aisle, and took her granddaughter in her aged arms, pulling her away from Strallen even as Edith collapsed against her.

“No, let him go. Let him go,” The Dowager urged. “You know he’s right. Don’t stop him doing the only sensible things he’s come up with in months.”

“...Thank you, Lady Grantham,” Strallen mumbled, his cheeks burning with deepest embarrassment. Thomas doubted the man would ever live such a scandal down.

“But Granny-!” Edith wailed, trying to tear herself out of her grandmother’s arms. The Dowager was strong, however, and was even aided by Lord Grantham who put himself bodily in between Edith and Strallen. Strallen was beginning to backup, sensing the waves of revulsion pouring from the audience. Every face, be it male, female, young, or old, was glaring at Strallen like he were the very devil.

Thomas knew what it felt like to be hated by an entire room of people. He didn’t envy the man’s position.

“No, no, it’s over my dear,” The Dowager murmured soothingly in Edith’s ear. Edith was bent over, the weight of her grief nearly driving her to her knees. “Don’t drag it out. Wish him well and let him go.”

“I can’t-!” Edith gave a guttural sob, reaching out her arms for Strallen. He took another step back, his cowardice overwhelming him.

“Goodbye my dearest darling,” He whispered. “And my God bless you.”

He turned and fled, running out of the church.

“There he comes,” The Heichecera said as Strallen ran past Thomas’ aisle, “And there he goes. At
least he wasn’t armed.”

Thomas turned to glare at the woman, who was slightly taken aback. “Go away,” Thomas hissed beneath his breath so that the others could not hear him. The Heichecera rolled her amber eyes, and vanished.

By this point, the entire church was breaking out into a panic. Guests were trying to see where Strallen had run off to, were even making to aid the Crawley family. But this was tantamount to scandal, and Carson refused to let it happen.

“Everyone, surround the family!” Carson barked, “Don’t let the crowd get close.”

Thomas followed Carson and Mrs. Hughes out of the aisle, planting himself bodily in between Edith and the other members of the congregation. He spread his arms wide to block the sight of her, even as Lady Grantham, the Dowager, and Mrs. Levinson helped pick her up off the floor. Lady Mary and Lady Sybil were grabbing her flowers and train, trying to help their middle sister get out of the back of the church as quickly as possible.

“I’ll drive the car!” Thomas heard Branson say, running ahead of the party to get to the motorcar.

“We have to get back before the family,” Carson ordered his staff, even as they clustered around at the front of the altar. A few fallen rose petals were littered at their feet from Edith’s dropped bouquet. Use the wagonette and get to the entrance hall. Take away everything, the food, the drinks, the decorations. Move as fast as you can.”

“Cor, can we make it?” Alfred wondered aloud.

“We can if we run!” Thomas barked. He was not alone in his plight. Anna and Ethel were following him, with Ethel crying out over her shoulder to Daisy.

“Take Charlie back to the house!” Ethel yelled out. Charlie looked ready to cry, frightened at the chaos.

Matthew had broken away from the family, and was running after Thomas. As Thomas made his way out of the church, he looked left and right only to find the wagonette nowhere to be seen.

“Now what?” Alfred panted, “We’ll never make it back on foot. Mr. Branson’s got a car!”

“We can use mine,” Matthew assured them, “Follow me!”

“Your car only sits four people!” Thomas snapped, but still he did as Matthew bade.

“Then you’ll simply have to double up won’t you,” Matthew rounded the corner of the church, revealing his glistening motorcar. He entered the driver seat, with Thomas taking the passenger seat. Anna and Alfred climbed into the back, leaving Ethel with nowhere to sit. In the end, she had to end up sitting on Thomas’ lap though she wasn’t particularly careful when she sat down.

“Ay-!” Thomas yipped at the sudden sharp shock on his groin. Ethel gasped, seeming to realize what she’d done.

“Sorry, sorry-!” She begged. “I’m so sorry, Thomas.”

“What did you do?” Anna demanded.

“Nothing, just drive-!” Thomas gritted out between clenched teeth. Matthew didn’t need telling twice.
He threw the car into reverse and gunned it back to the abbey, with Ethel holding onto Thomas for dear life in lieu of a safety belt.

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They ended up making it back just in the nick of time, with Anna and Ethel hurriedly moving the celebratory food and decorations downstairs while Thomas and Alfred unrolled the carpet and put the furniture back. Matthew helped, despite not being a member of staff. Edith arrived not five minutes after the last sofa had been put in place. Lamps and ornaments were still sitting upon the carpeted floor as she ran through the entrance hall, sobbing with her head in her hands. She tripped on her way up the main stairs, making it to the top only to rip her veil off her head and chuck it over the banister. It drifted down to lay pitifully upon the floor until Anna had picked it up and tenderly folded it into a manageable square.

Matthew remained downstairs, speaking to Thomas in private as Alfred replaced the lamps upon the tables. They spoke in the shadows of a marble pillar, eager to keep out of sight as the rest of the family returned.

Matthew was shell shocked by the proceedings. Thomas could not blame him.

“Well, I can safely put my hand on my pale English arse and curse this day,” Thomas muttered under his breath, watching Carson return only to close and lock the front doors. The man looked like he’d been aged a year from the strain of the last day.

“Don’t curse it too much,” Matthew urged. “Some good has come of it.”

“What are you saying?!” Thomas demanded, shocked that Matthew could find any good at all in such an awful moment.

“Hear me out,” Matthew urged. Thomas pursed his lips. “I’m going to accept Swire’s money and give it to Robert. No one will have to leave Downton.”

Now that was good news, though it was difficult to smile when they could still hear Edith wailing from upstairs. She was inconsolable.

Both Thomas and Matthew looked up at the ceiling, wondering at the jilted bride above their heads.

“Poor thing,” Thomas whispered.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forgive Sir Anthony, as foolish as that sounds,” Matthew mused. “Leaving a woman at the altar is just unthinkable.”

“I agree, even as a man who doesn’t usually make it up there,” Thomas said. He suddenly found himself thinking of Ethel, and how his marriage to her had basically saved her life (even if it had accidentally given him Spanish Flu).

“What in the hell was he thinking?” Matthew cursed, bitter. “How could he have let it go on so far, just to run out in the end? What a coward… what a miserable coward.” He sighed, glancing at Thomas. “We’ll have to prove to Lady Edith that men can still be trusted.”

Thomas wasn’t so sure though. Was this really all Strallen’s fault? Had he been the entire problem, or just a small sliver of it?

“I don’t think it’s men she doubts,” Thomas said. “I think it’s herself.”
Of course, the irritations for the day did not stop with the ruined wedding. The decorations might have been removed and the furniture replaced, but there was still a massive amount of wedding food to consume. Still in his wedding attire, Charlie sat patiently upon Thomas’ lap, observing all the food in amazement as it lay in splendor across the servant’s hall table. Mrs. Patmore had joined them from the kitchen in a show of solidarity, though silence pervaded the hall and everyone sat in shock.

Even O’Brien didn’t know what to say.

Alfred’s stomach growled. He winced, patting his aching tummy. “Is this all we’re getting?” Alfred wondered somberly. “Just these pickety bits?”

“Hardly.” Thomas replied. Alfred caught his eye from across the table. “These are canapes, Alfred. For your first course, some truffled egg on toast, perhaps? Some oysters a la russe.”

“Then what?” Alfred asked, looking down the long table at all the rest.

“There’s a lobster rissoles in Mousseline sauce,” Mrs. Patmore spoke up, pointing to each gleaming plate in turn. “Or calvados-glazed duckling, or do you fancy a little asparagus salad with champagne-saffron vinaigrette?”

Alfred was silent in lieu of the mountain of food they had to consume. Why now, when they had a chance to eat upstairs food, did Thomas desperately want fish and chips?

“When I think of how you’ve gone to such pains…” Mrs. Hughes sighed, unable to finish her sentence. Mrs. Patmore gave her friend a small smile.

“Never mind me. What about that pain of that poor girl, upstairs?”

O’Brien shook her head, ashen with empathy. “Jilted at the altar,” She whispered it like it were a plague. “I don’t think I could stand the shame.”

Thomas could remember how last time he’d been rude to O’Brien, snapping at her that she’d never even been asked. Now, Thomas could not help but see the opportunity to be kind.

He gave O’Brien a smile from across the table, and toasted her with his teacup.


O’Brien scoffed, but smiled nonetheless. She wasn’t the only one. Anna was unable to keep from laughing a little bit as well, though neither of them was truly in the mood for humor.

“Chance would be a thing,” O’Brien replied. “I don’t think that union would last, do you?”

“Speak for yourself,” Thomas shrugged. “I think we could be running parliament in a year.”

Thomas and Sarah Barrow… cor, there was a wicked thought.

“Poor thing,” Anna wondered, “How will she ever find the strength to hold her head?”

Daisy was in the corner, holding a pot of lukewarm tea. “I swear I’d have to run away and hide in a place where no one knew me.”

Alfred regarded them all, from Mrs. Hughes on the verge of more tears to Daisy hiding in the corner, and gave a huff. “Well, I think she’s well out of it!”
“How can you say that?” Ethel demanded angrily.

“I mean it!” Alfred retorted before Ethel could bash him some more. “She’s young, she’s not bad looking. She could do much better than that broken down old crock.”

“Sir Anthony may have betrayed a daughter of this house, but he still does not deserve to be addressed in that manner by a footman,” Carson warned. Mrs. Hughes shook her head, far past the point of niceties.

“Oh, I think he does, Mr. Carson.” Mrs. Hughes warned. “Every bit of that, and worse.”

“I agree with Mrs. Hughes,” Thomas said at once, catching Mr. Carson’s eye. Carson was not amused, but allowed it anyways. “I say we make a mob and go find him. Let’s all gang up on him and beat him in his sleep with a sock full of bricks-”

“Thank you Thomas,” Carson cut him off with clipped tones. “If Sir Anthony is assaulted with a sock full of bricks, we’ll know to hide you from the police.”

“Daddy, don’t be bad.” Charlie complained. Thomas was taken aback, even as the others gave a tiny snort. Thomas touched his breast with feigned shock.

“I am never bad!” Thomas said, pretended to be wounded.


“Right!” Mrs. Patmore spoke up, clapping her hands and rubbing her palms together. “What’s it to be? Lobster, duck, or asparagus?”

Charlie stared at all of it, unsure.

“What’s that?” Charlie asked, pointing to the lobster in a curling red shell.


“Well fine, have the duck,” Thomas said, gesturing to the honey glazed breast next to Mrs. Hughes’ elbow.

“I don’t like duck,” Charlie whined.

“Did we say duck? We meant chicken!” Ethel corrected at once, “It’s chicken. Mmm! We love chicken!” She even rubbed her stomach for added effect.

Charlie blinked up at his mother owlishly. “Chicken please,” He said.

“Some chicken for my picky child, Mr. Carson?” Thomas requested. Mr. Carson took up the steak knife with care, and began to slice off thin slivers for Charlie’s plate.

“I do believe I can manage that,” Mr. Carson grumbled. He even added vegetables and mousseline sauce to the plate before passing it down to Charlie.

Soon, the air was filled with the sounds of clinking cutlery as everyone took up a slice of the exquisite spread. Even Daisy got to sit down at the main table, and ate delicately from the lobster before speaking up.
“Has it ever happened before?” Daisy wondered aloud. “Getting jilted, I mean.”

“Course it’s happened before,” O’Brien sneered. “This is hardly the first time.”

“Ever heard of Great Expectations?” Thomas asked. Daisy shook her head.

“What’s that?” She asked.

“It’s a book, Daisy,” Carson explained as he sliced his duck. “One of the characters is the subject of scorned love at the altar.”

“What happens to her?” Daisy asked.

Carson and Thomas shared a look, each of them well aware of what really happened and unwilling to say it.

“...She uh… she gets over it,” Thomas lied, putting on his best smile. He changed the subject at once. “Lady Edith is smart and young, she’s got her whole life ahead of her and she’s going to meet flocks of marvelous suitors who aren’t in their seventies.”

“Sir Anthony is not in his seventies, Thomas,” Carson grumbled around a mouthful of port.

“Excuse me,” Thomas said with an acidic smile. “Suitors who aren’t in their nineties.”

At Thomas’ jab, the entire table broke out into a wave of snickering. Carson gave Thomas a withering look.

“She’ll be fine, Daisy,” Thomas finished. “We’ll just take it one day at a time.”

Daisy nodded, and ate the rest of her lobster in silence. In between Ethel and Thomas, Charlie looked up from his plate of duck with dawning comprehension.

“Mommy did Daddy jilt you?” Charlie asked.

“No, he did not.” Ethel said. “Your father married me without complaint.”

But now Charlie was on a role, asking rounds of questions. “Where did you get married?”

“Thirsk,” Thomas said.

“When?” Charlie asked. Thomas took an unnecessary bite of food to keep from answering, catching eyes with the others at the table. They were watching him, absolutely silent and well aware that he was about to lie to his child.

“I married your mother during the war when I was home on leave,” Thomas explained.

“What’s war?”

“Christ,” Alfred muttered. “This could go on forever.”

“It’s when adults bicker over nonsense and get others involved,” Ethel explained. Charlie swallowed the lie without complaint only to launch into another round of questions.

“Did you wear a white dress?”

“Yes I did,” Ethel lied.
“Who was there?” Charlie asked.

“All of us,” Mrs. Hughes replied kindly. “Well, all except Alfred of course.”

“I bet it were a fun party,” Alfred grinned. “Where did you two honeymoon?”

“We didn’t,” Ethel said. “Thomas had to return to France.”

“Wait…” Alfred paused, slightly confused. “… How was Charlie born then, if it were during the war?”

Thomas glared at Alfred, slightly tasked with controlling his temper. The idiot was bordering on questions that were too difficult for Charlie to hear.

“Alfred, if you need help figuring that one out, I suggest you head down to the village and ply Dr. Clarkson with some scotch.”

The entire table burst into a round of snickering. Carson had to calm them: “Quiet now.”

Alfred blushed, returning to his asparagus and duck in silence.

Charlie watched the adults returning to their meal, his eyes on his father. Thomas smiled at his son and ruffled his hair affectionately.

“How was I born?” Charlie asked. Ethel choked on her glass of wine. Both Mrs. Hughes and O’Brien nearly fumbled with their teacups. Anna coughed around a bit of vinaigrette.

“A stork brought you,” Mr. Carson replied, “And that is all we will be saying about that.”

Charlie was placated, but only just. Thomas caught Ethel’s eyes, noting the shame that lay there. Their son was content in a cradle of lies, completely unaware of the truth of his life.

Thomas wondered if there would ever be a time when he could tell his son the truth.

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It was five days after the awful turnout of Lady Edith’s would-be wedding that things began to get interesting. It was the middle of May, and as such Thomas was on pins and needles every day with the thoughts of what was soon to come. Carson had been sending out adverts for another footman in the newspaper, though Thomas had often tried to tell him there was no point. Part of him was rejoicing at the prayer of being near to Jimmy Kent. Part of him was plum fuck terrified.

Both parts of him, however, were taken fully unawares by the proceedings of May 15th.

It was a calm, warm day, with clear blue skies to complement a southern breeze. Inside, Thomas had just gotten finished taking up the slack in Matthew’s tweed hunting trousers when a gentle rap came at the door. Glancing over his shoulder, Thomas saw Alfred enter the room. The top of his ginger head nearly touched the door frame.

“Thomas, Mr. Crawley and Lord Grantham want to see you in the library,” Alfred said.

That sounded rather ominous. Thomas sat his trousers aside, and rose from his place by the window to follow Alfred out of the boot room. They walked, side by side, down the servant’s hall and up the stairs with Alfred still sulking all the while.

“I still wish I could knock that Strallen fellow in the mouth. I don’t know if anyone deserved the title
of ‘sir’ less.” Alfred said.

“Let it go, Alfred,” Thomas advised. He held open the door on the main landing so that the pair of them could walk through together. “That man will get what’s coming to him.”

“But don’t you wish you could hit him with a brick like you said?” Alfred asked.

In truth, Thomas didn’t. Anthony Strallen mattered as much to him as what Mrs. Patmore decided to feed them for dessert that night. There was no point in keeping up the topic of conversation going when Lady Edith was forcing herself out of bed and Strallen had already skipped off to Sweden.

“Look, I don’t think it matters anymore,” Thomas advised. “Strallen’s gone off to Sweden and may he stay there for the rest of his days. If Lady Edith overhears you talking about him, it’ll only set her off again. So let’s drop it now while we can.”

They reached the library, and Thomas paused for a moment to straighten his tie before Alfred opened the door. Inside, he was surprised to find that no only was Matthew and Lord Grantham waiting for him, but Ethel and Mr. Carson as well. What was this?

“Sir?” Thomas wondered at the gathering. “Is something the matter-- has something happened to Charlie?” His heart began to beat faster.

Matthew looked around, teacup in hand. He sat it down on the side table, a wide smile in place.

“Don’t be silly, man,” Lord Grantham said bemusedly. “As far as I can tell, your son is happily at work on his tricycle down in the kitchens. This is a moment of good news.”

Thomas caught Ethel’s eyes, but she gave him a bemused stare in response. Clearly she was just as much in the dark as he was on the subject.

“I confess it sir, I’ve utterly no idea what’s going on,” Thomas admitted.

“Behold,” Lord Grantham pulled a brass key out of his pocket, and held it up in the air for all to see. It glinted in the summer sun drifting through the window panes. “I hold in my hand… your wife’s hard work.”

“…You’ve become a locksmith, and you didn’t tell me.” Thomas said, unable to keep the cheek out of his voice.

“Cheek, Thomas,” Carson muttered under his breath.

Lord Grantham grinned. “I shan’t bandy words, when you’re anxious. I have found a cottage ready for you and Ethel to move into, should you like the look of it.”

Ethel gasped, green eyes sparking with fire. Thomas was utterly taken aback; he’d not even been thinking of a cottage. And now they’d found one?! But by god, where?!

“I-” Thomas didn’t even know what to say, “I-- How-- but when--” He was smiling. His face ached beneath the strain.

“Can we see it, M’lord?” Ethel begged.

“Of course,” Lord Grantham assured her. “Should you like it you can do it today. Carson, can you spare them?”

“I can sir, but not for long,” Carson said. This was a bold faced lie. He couldn’t spare either Ethel
and Thomas, and would no doubt be panicking until they returned.

“Oh, Thomas-!” Ethel turned to him only to rejoice, flinging her arms about his neck. It was beyond reproach to show such affection in front of Lord Grantham, but it seemed that just for this one time, all parties were willing to let it slide. “Let’s! I can fetch my cap and caot!”

“Thank you, M’lord,” Thomas addressed Lord Grantham, “Mr. Carson if it’s alright, we’d like to do that promptly.”

Mr. Carson gave a haggard sigh, as if they’d asked to borrow five pounds instead. “Be off with you then, but return with haste! There’s work to be done!”

“Oh I can’t wait!” Ethel cried out, even as she ran for the door. “I just can’t wait! I knew my nagging would get us somewhere!”

She was already out of the library, her voice echoing from up the hall. Mr. Carson watched her go with narrowed eyes.

“It nearly got her into a grave,” He muttered beneath his breath.

Ethel was hot on her feet, snagging a coat for both herself and Thomas. They left Charlie in the care of Mrs. Patmore, who was in the middle of making lemon scones for afternoon tea. Matthew was happy to take them all out for a spin in his new motorcar, though Thomas of course was apprehensive about stepping inside. He sat in the front seat, even as Matthew drove to the outskirts of the village, and wondered at the prickling sensation spreading from the nape of his neck. He felt almost as if someone was watching him, and glanced at the rear view mirror to see if it was just Ethel. Instead, something odd flitted just out of view, as if someone else was in the backseat and ducking out of sight.

Don’t think on it, Thomas thought defensively. You’re just getting paranoid.

Thomas was surprised when Matthew pulled into the same neighborhood that would soon house Anna and John Bates. He was even more surprised when Matthew stopped outside of the Bates’ door, and gave him a smile.

“This is it,” Matthew said, gesturing to the Bates’ house.

Oh no, Thomas thought with dismay.

“I… Are you sure?” He asked, nervous at the idea of putting Bates and Anna out of their own home. Matthew was taken aback.

“Well it’s not that bad,” Matthew said defensively, “Though it does need a new coat of paint-”

“No, it’s just I thought that Mr. And Mrs. Bates were looking at this house.” Thomas explained. “Before… well…”

“That can’t be,” Matthew replied. “These houses have only just been reopened for living. It must be somewhere else.”

“Who cares if they were looking at it?!” Ethel demanded, overjoyed to see the products of her labor. She clambored out of the car, making a beeline for the faded front door. “It’s ours now! Finders keepers and all that.”
“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present my mild mannered wife,” Thomas muttered under his breath, causing Matthew to snort. They approached the front door, with Ethel having to step aside so that Matthew could unlock it and let them in.

Thomas coughed, slightly taken aback at the roll of dust and grime that greeted them.

The foyer was derelict, moth-eaten tarps covering old furniture and a solid inch of dust coating everything in sight. A mantle kept company to a cold hearth, with an open walkway into a simple kitchen that held little more than a stove, butler’s sink, and cupboard.

Ethel was slightly dismayed, her smile faltering as she realized that there was still a great deal more to be done.

“...I thought it was ready to move in,” Ethel mumbled. “Do we have to clean it?”

“Don’t be so saucy, love,” Thomas hugged her about the shoulders. “We know our way around a broom.”

“A bit too well,” Ethel added, stepping tentatively into the kitchen. “Not to mention a-- ew!!” She shrieked, leaping back. Thomas was startled.

“What is it?” Matthew demanded.

“It’s a dead rat!” Ethel complained. “Oh we’ll have to get a cat!”

Thomas was not eager to expand his family with any more hungry mouths.

“I’m sorry,” Matthew muttered, even as Ethel stormed upstairs only to start complaining about the wallpaper. “I thought she’d like it.”

“She likes it,” Thomas whispered back over the sound of Ethel shrieking in dismay at the smell of mold. “That’s why she’s putting up such a fuss.”

“And if you think I’m going to let my baby lay my head down in this house when it’s not fit for a dog—”

“Mrs. Barrow are you quite content?” Thomas shouted up the stairs after Ethel. “Mr. Carson needs us back at the house, and the neighbors are scared out of their pants.”

“You don’t have any neighbors,” Matthew said. “They’re coming though.”

Ethel hurried back down the stairs, a swipe of grime on her pink cheek.

“Thomas, we simply can’t let Charlie in this house until it’s spotless,” She declared. “I won’t have my baby around rats! I won’t!”

“I quite agree,” Thomas said, even as he offered Ethel her hat so that she could jam it back on her head. “And as soon as we’re finished preparing the house, Charlie will be more than ready to move in. We’re not doing it tomorrow.”

“Yes but…” Ethel looked almost ready to cry out of irritation. “I thought it would be easier!”

“Welcome to adulthood,” Thomas said, threading Ethel’s arm through his own. “Everything hurts and nothing’s free.”

Matthew made a noise of clear agreement.
It was a soft evening, the sort that boded pink skies and the muted bird calls. A recent rain had fallen, resulting in the streets of Downton growing muddy as travelers went back and forth. You could read stories in the dirt, such as a pair of tracks side by side that told of a man and his horse heading home. On the opposite side of the road, a fashionable ladies heel and toe spoke of a pair of fancy shoes that were probably now ruined. But between the horse and the lady there was a third set, completely new to Downton soil; they spoke of a young man with neither fortune nor fame, heading for the Dog and Duck Inn in the evening hour.

The rusted bell above the front door clinked with warm welcome as a young man walked in. He made a beeline for the barman, who was busy polishing a filthy glass with an equally filthy rag. As he reached the bar, the young man waved the barman down, and even pulled out a pence to get himself an ale. The barman filled the order at once and even offered it in the same filthy glass.

“Can I get you a bite, lad?” The barman asked. He stuffed his cleaning rag into the loop of a worn leather belt. If it was the belt’s intention to hold in the barman’s rotund belly, it was failing miserably.

“I’m here to get a room for a few days,” the young man explained, pausing to wipe foam from his acute upper lip. He had a pronounced cupid’s bow.

“Business in town?” the barman asked, flipping casually through a roster of available and booked rooms. He found a vacant bed underneath 3A and began to scribble down the date and time underneath the corresponding slots.

“I’ve an interview at the big house,” the young man explained.

“Ah!” The barman slid the roster back around so that the young man could sign his name. “What for?”

The young man did not answer directly, instead taking a moment to write down the name “Jimmy Kent”.

“I want to be first footman,” Jimmy Kent explained. He slid the roster back, and took his time finishing his ale. In his pocket, hidden from view of the barman, and the world, was a five year old letter.
Chapter Summary

Knowing the future, The Heichecera begins to set wheels in motion all her own. Meanwhile, a familiar face returns to the abbey.

Chapter Notes

I know what you're all thinking. "Wow, this is rather early, isn't it?" Yes, it is. I'm trying to update faster so I can get this story over with and move onto my next projects. It's not that I love Volver any less, but the more I take on for school and work, the less chances I'm going to get to update. Also the next week is the fourth of July and I didn't want to worry about it during all that hoopla.

No warnings for this chapter, save for Thomas acting like an idiot and everyone else having to deal with it.

It was plain unfair after all the nagging and bickering that Ethel had put forward to try and win them a cottage that she’d gotten the crummiest, ugliest cottage in existence.

Thomas and Ethel had to work in shifts, each heading out after the working day was done to try and clean their cottage at night. When the moon was high in the sky, Ethel was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floors or washing the walls. Thomas was able to get more work done than her, simply because he was stronger; it was Thomas who fixed the stovetop and hung the curtains. He likewise was the one that took out a loan with Mr. Crawley, using the money to buy furniture that they desperately needed. Ethel stuck to the things that she knew best: sweeping, mopping, and dusting.

And by god, there was a lot of it to do.

Three days after obtaining their cottage, Ethel found herself scrubbing the floor of the master bedroom. The entire room smelled like mold, an effect of the rubbish wallpaper that had eventually faded away. There was nothing she could do besides scrub the walls with white vinegar and baking powder though that didn’t help by much. However would she make this house safe for Charlie?

She sighed, sitting back upon her heels, and wiped a trail of sweat from her brow. She was getting gray hair; god why couldn’t she stay young forever.

Ethel re-wetted her scrubbing brush in a pot full of soap and hot water, only to pause as she noticed a peculiar shadow upon the length of the far wall. Though there was nothing to cast it, with Ethel working by the light of an oil lamp alone in the room, there was a shadow of a person clearly standing a few feet away from her.

Her heart caught in her chest, and though it was silly to call out she did so anyways.

“Is that you?” Ethel wondered. Her question was rewarding with the gliding image of the
Heichecera.

She slid neatly from the shadow, stepping right through the wall into Ethel’s bedroom. Ethel was at once captivated by her, amazed at the beautiful array of colors upon her skirts and how her hair hung in sily ringlets. She was incredibly beautiful to Ethel, and though she was surely centuries old, she did not look a day past twenty.

The Heichecera smiled. Ethel could not help but smile a bit back.

“Thomas isn’t here,” she said.

“I know,” the Heichecera said.
So it seemed that she’d come to talk to Ethel instead.

Ethel wondered at the woman, gawking as the Heichecera looked about the master bedroom. She ran her inked hands upon the walls, curious at molded texture of the faded wallpaper.

She glanced at Ethel, saying, “You’re not too happy with your arrangement, but you must remember that your family’s ancestral home was also part of a land package. Your great grandfather built the house you lived in as a child.”

“I just wish it was cleaner,” Ethel said wistfully. Unable to stop herself, she asked, “Can you help? Maybe snap your fingers and make it all better?”

The Heichecera laughed, though it was hardly in a condescending tone. “You like it when I do magic, don’t you?”

“It’s amazing,” Ethel agreed, breathless. The Heichecera took her skirts in hand, only to sit down across from Ethel on the floor. She ran a hand along the dust and grime that Ethel had been trying to scrub up, rubbing her thumb against her pointer finger to feel at the grit.

“You want to have power,” the Heichecera deduced. “You want to be able to live as you please, to explore the world, to know it’s delights. But there’s more to it, you know. There’s respect that must be earned and gained. There’s a balance that you must learn to appreciate before all else.”

Ethel grimaced, feeling rather foolish in that moment. Of course there were a hundred other things to know before magic came; she’d been a child to simplify it to the waving of a wand.

She began to scrub again in a circular motion, determined to make some headway on the floor.

“I must seem very foolish to you,” Ethel grumbled. The Heichecera watched her scrub a minute in silence before replying.

“You are human,” she corrected, “And I was human too once before I died.”

Ethel paused, looking back up at the Heichecera. Part of her wondered… part of her needed to know, though it was surely rude to ask.

“...How did you die?” she whispered. “Who were you, before you became… this?” She gestured up and down at the Heichecera.

The Heichecera pondered over her answer for a moment, eyes closed in relaxation as she no doubt relived the past.

“I was burned at the stake,” She said. “One of the many women to die at the hands of the Spanish
Inquisition. Unfortunately for me… they were right on the money when they declared me a witch. A Heichecera,” She grinned at the name. “So now, I call myself the Heichecera for all time. I am proud of my title. Proud of what I died for.”

Ethel could not be in awe of this woman, could not help but be amazed at her strength and courage. She wondered how much it must have hurt, to be burned alive. The thought terrified her, making her cringe though she was in no such danger.

“…I wish I were like you,” Ethel whispered. The lamplight cast deep shadows across their faces. “I wish I could have the power to change my fate. To give my family a better life.”

“What would you do, if you were like me?” The Heichecera asked. “What’s the first thing that you would do?”

“I’d clean this house properly,” Ethel declared. The Heichecera snorted, pleased at her answer.

When she’d settled down again, the Heichecera reached into her skirts to reveal a worn black leather book. It was no larger than a pamphlet, but was faded with clear signs of neglect at its edges.

The Heichecera offered it to her. Ethel took it, curious. She opened it up, only to find the pages blank. Why? What did all this mean?

“What is this?” Ethel asked, curious.

“I have great plans for you, Ethel Barrow,” The Heichecera declared. But what did ‘great plans’ mean, and why was she telling her now?

“Is this some sort of enchanted book?” Ethel asked. “Does it have powers?”

“The only power that book has is the power you put in it,” The Heichecera said. Even still, that created more questions than it answered.

“Hold tight to this book,” The Heichecera explained. “And wait for my instructions.”

Before Ethel could ask her another question, the Heichecera snapped her fingers. In an instant, all the grit and grime that had caked the room was gone. The dirt on the floors, the mold on the walls, the scourge on the windows, the filth upon the doors… gone.

Ethel looked around, bewildered and delighted. She rose to her feet, and immediately reached out to touch the walls. They were smooth now, and the room no longer smelled like mold. She turned back around to the Heichecera.

“That was ama-!” But the broke off, trailing into silence.
She was alone in the room again.
The Heichecera was gone.

~*~

Though there was no particular reason for it, Ethel returned from the cottage with a bubbly attitude that nothing could puncture. Thomas looked on, rather confused at his wife’s state but unwilling to complain about it. Perhaps she’d made more headway than she’d initially thought regarding the state of the cottage.

The Archbishop was coming to dinner, and as a result there was a clear flair of activity to prepare a
room for him and a meal that would suit his decadent tastes. Thomas, of course, despised anyone
associated with the Christian religion, given that they generally were the first to proclaim that
Thomas was going to burn in hell for all eternity. He couldn’t give a nit about the Archbishop, and
wondered how much trouble he’d get in if he put a snake in the man’s bed when Mrs. Hughes
wasn’t looking.

Of course, this wasn’t wise; one of the maids would take the fall for it and Thomas would end up
feeling terrible about it.

Lady Sybil and Tom Branson had returned for Ireland after Lady Edith’s failed wedding. Frankly,
Thomas could not blame them. In lieu of the departure of her youngest granddaughter, Mrs. Martha
Levinson likewise left taking her ridiculous maid Reed with her. Thomas was glad to see the back
of them; Reed had become a nuisance downstairs with all her stroppy demands for her mistress.
Honestly, claiming that she could only drink the freshest goat’s milk for breakfast.

If that was how she felt, she could go out to the barn, and squeeze on the goat’s teet all day.

Carson was determined to make headway now that the future of Downton was clear. He’d written
several ads in the paper, asking for everything from maids to footmen. Thomas was unenthused,
knowing full well that one of the people to answer the call would be Jimmy Kent. The more he
thought about it, the more paranoid he became. How on earth would he handle the return of the man
he loved the most? Even now, as Thomas sat waiting, the ache in his heart was almost unbearable.
How would he be able to live if Jimmy were to return? If Thomas had to sit down at the table with
him for every meal, watch him play cards by the fire at night… know that just down the hall Jimmy
was sleeping peacefully in his bed-

“Anna!” Mr. Carson’s call caused Thomas to jump in his seat. He was snapped out of his reverie,
back to the task at hand of mending a button Matthew’s riding vest. He resumed sowing at once.

Anna looked up from her tea, slightly gray. Mr. Bates’ arrest was starting to imprisonment on her.

“You’ll be happy to hear that as soon as we take on a new housemaid, you will be a lady’s maid to
Lady Mary, at last,” Mr. Carson declared.

“That’s nice, Mr. Carson,” Anna said, though she clearly wasn’t over the moon about it, “Thank
you.”

“And Ethel-” Carson looked to Ethel who sat next to Thomas drinking a cup of tea. “That will make
you Head Housemaid.”

“Fantastic,” Ethel said, but she quickly cut away from Mr. Carson to talk to Thomas in private
instead. “Thomas, I need to talk to you alone.”

“Fair enough, I need to get my button box from the boot room,” Thomas said. The pair of them rose
up as one and left the servant’s hall, where Mrs. Hughes was now questioning why Anna wasn’t as
excited as she surely ought to have been. They headed down the hall, and barricaded themselves in
the boot room which was mercifully deserted in the afternoon hour. Most of the servant’s were in the
hall taking their tea break instead.

Thomas sat Matthew’s vest upon the table and stood on tiptoe to fetch his button box from the top
shelf of the work cabinet.

“Everything alright?” Thomas asked as he set his button box down upon the table. He rifled through
it, looking for the spare button that had come off of Matthew’s vest to reattach it.
“More than alright,” Ethel said, green eyes sparkling. “Things are incredible.”
At this, Ethel drew out a black faded book from her pocket. It was about the width of a leaflet. She handed it over to Thomas who took it up at once, flipping through it to find the pages were blank.

“I don’t understand,” Thomas said, handing the book back to his wife. Why did a crummy little book matter so much?

“Last night, the Heichecera visited me at the cottage,” Ethel explained, talking rapidly in her excitement. “She told me she had great plans for me, and she gave me this book. I think it’s a spell book Thomas! I think she’s going to teach me how to be a witch!”

The Heichecera had done what? Thomas was disturbed at the notion of Ethel being taught witchcraft. It was already dangerous enough with one sorceress in his life. God forbid, if there were two he’d be liable to combust into flames.

“Ethel—” Thomas had to interject several times before he could get Ethel to pause so that he could cut her off. She was exuberant, eyes gleaming with thoughts of a future dripping in golden spells. “Ethel, listen to me!”

“But isn’t it wonderful, Thomas?” she asked. “Isn’t it amazing? Think of all I’ll be able to do for Charlie—”

“Ethel, you can’t do it!” Thomas snapped.
A sudden stony silence overtook their conversation. Ethel grew gray, withdrawing a bit with a wary expression.

“...Excuse me?” She asked, tone dangerous.

“Listen to me, please,” Thomas urged. “This is dangerous, extremely dangerous—”

“But she has plans for me!” Ethel protested, angry at Thomas’ lack of delight. “Great plans! I’m going to be a sorceress—”

“You don’t honestly want that,” Thomas scoffed.

“But I do!” Ethel cried out. “I could do great things! I could secure an incredible life for our family, a better one than you ever could.”

Thomas bristled, slightly stung by the insult. “Well I apologize if the life I’ve given you isn’t good enough—”

“I don’t mean it like that,” Ethel was now fully exasperated. “I meant that you’re a valet and I’m a housemaid! Domestic Service is no inheritance, Thomas! How can we give Charlie a life to be proud of, a life of his own, if we never try to rise above our station?”

“I’m all for rising!” Thomas snapped, “Just not flying on a broomstick! I’m the one that traveled through time, Ethel. I’m the one that’s messed with life an’ death, and trust me I was a fool to do so!”

Ethel shook her head, looking away. It was clear that she was bitterly disappointed in Thomas.

It was, admittedly, the sort of thing that Thomas knew would keep him awake at night and make him boil over with self-loathing, but he could not put this aside.

Not when he knew he was right.
“Ethel, I don’t say this to try and shake your confidence,” Thomas urged. “But this is a bad idea
that’ll lead us to ruin. You can’t control something this powerful—”

“Why, because I’m a woman?” Ethel snapped. Thomas was taken aback.

“I- no- that’s not what I’m trying to say—”

“You know, Thomas, I always knew you didn’t enjoy the company of women,” Ethel was speaking
with heat, her voice tumbling over in a rush. “But I never thought you’d consider women so beneath
you. Thanks for the vote of the confidence, husband.”

She elbowed past him, and left the boot room. Thomas gaped at her, flabbergasted.

“Ethel, that’s not what I meant!” Thomas rushed to the door, looking out it to find her storming up
the hall towards the staircase. “Ethel!!”

She didn’t look back at him.

~*~

Thomas wasn’t a stranger to marital irritations. He’d watched his mother and father bicker all the
time in his youth, and as far as he knew there wasn’t a single couple on earth that hadn’t fought at
some point. Having Ethel Barrow mad at him, however, was akin to having invoked the wrath of the
entire British Navy, and Thomas was securely in the dog house.

She wouldn’t look at him, wouldn’t talk to him, wouldn’t so much as acknowledge his presence.
When she did, it was with a stiff, cold demeanor that wholly unsuited her beautiful features.
Everyone had noticed, from Mr. Carson to Anna, but none of them said anything for fear of invoking
Ethel’s ire.

A week passed in this fashion, with Thomas and Ethel hardly speaking a word to each other lest it
was ‘good morning’ or ‘good night’. The only person in the house who was blissfully unaware of
their anger was Charlie, who remained tucked away safely in the kitchen being spoon fed pudding
and snuck biscuits by Mrs. Patmore and Daisy.

Thomas refused to back down from his stance; Ethel was likewise firm in her position.

The fact of the matter was that Thomas had seen all sorts of hell befall his circumstances because of
the Heichecera. It wasn’t that he was ungrateful (not by a long shot), it was just that he fully
understood what was at stake. Ethel thought it all some grand game, playing dress up with a spell
book and waving a magic wand. Thomas, on the other hand, had watched both Edward and William
Mason turn from sensible men into depraved monsters. Every time he looked at Matthew Crawley’s
automobile, he noticed the shadows slipping around the wheels and heard the guttural whispers
crawling in the air. Something was coming, something big, and though Thomas didn’t rightly know
what it was, he wasn’t stupid enough to think that he could challenge it. He was terrified to think that
Ethel might destroy their fragile circumstances, and wondered if (when that day came) Thomas
would be able to stop her.

Of course, as was so often with Downton Abbey, when it rained it poured. Quite literally actually,
because things got worse on a night as wet as the very ocean itself.

Rain was pounding upon the shutters and stoop, soaking the pavement outside till Downton had
turned into a little island instead of an abbey. Thomas was downstairs in the servant’s hall, sipping on
a cup of tea and waiting for dinner to end. Upstairs, Alfred was helping Carson serve the family a
round of oysters a la russe; in the kitchen Mrs. Patmore was busy with the final preparations for a
lemon icebox pie (Lord Grantham’s favorite). With Mrs. Crawley over for dinner, they were joined by Mr. Moseley who was happy to take a cup of tea and wait for his mistress below.

At the servant’s table, Thomas, Moseley, Ethel, O’Brien, and Anna sat together. O’Brien was watching Thomas carefully with a wary look upon her face.

Thomas caught her eye and gave her a small smile. She did not return it.

“Ethel’s been saying that you’ve got opinions on a woman’s worth,” O’Brien said. Thomas let out an exasperated sigh, resisting the urge to put his head in his hands.

“That’s really not what this is about,” Thomas grumbled.

“But do you?” O’Brien asked.

At the far end of the table, Ethel was busy reading a book. Thomas could feel the heat from her eyes as she glowered at him. Anna was watching Thomas and O’Brien, unsure. Moseley was silent, patiently waiting for Thomas’ answer.

“As Ethel is well aware, I owe everything that I am to a woman,” Thomas replied icily. Though the others would be unaware, Thomas spoke directly of the Heichecera.

“That still doesn’t answer the-”

“I don’t have a single opinion on women’s worth,” Thomas cut O’Brien off. He wasn’t interested in bandying words on this subject. “Because I’m not a woman, so what would I know?”

“What about you, Mr. Moseley?” O’Brien turned to their guest. “Do you have any opinions on women’s worth, since Thomas refuses to tell us the truth.”

“Well the bible instructs us that women are to be subservient to men,” Moseley offered. “But that’s really the only solid opinion I can think of.”

“What do you want me to say?” Thomas demanded, looking from O’Brien to Ethel. “Have you already decided that I think women are less than men, and so you’re refusing to listen when I say that I have honestly no opinion? Because I don’t.”

“That’s not what it sounded like the other day,” Ethel bit out. Thomas turned on his wife, furious.

“We both know the circumstances around that argument,” Thomas warned. “And now is not the time or place to bring it up.”

“Fine!” Ethel slammed her book down upon the table before hauling herself up out of her seat and storming out of the hall. “But just so you know, I think you’re a right prick!”

“Well bully for you!” Thomas shouted after his wife’s retreating back, “Because I’m still right!”

But Ethel was already gone, halfway up the stairs and audibly cursing Thomas’ name.

Thomas fell back into his seat with an exasperated sigh.

“Well I hope you can see now what you’re up against,” Moseley muttered. “I told you before she wasn’t right for you.”

Thomas slowly turned upon their guest, his temper boiling beneath his brain till he felt like a kettle ready to gush out steam.
“...Moseley…” Thomas spoke his name with an icy tone. “If you say one more word to me about my wife, God so help me, I’ll-”

But whatever threat Thomas had been about to produce was effectively cut off by Mrs. Hughes hurrying down the stairs. She was white in the face, looking left and right. When she spotted Thomas, she gestured for him hurriedly.

“Thomas come with me,” Mrs. Hughes begs, “It’s an emergency.”

“What’s wrong?” Thomas demanded at once, all his anger evaporating to be replaced by concern. He stood up from the table and joined Mrs. Hughes at the bottom of the stairs. Was he wrong, or was she trembling?

Mrs. Hughes bent in so that Thomas had to stoop over for her to whisper in his ear: “It’s Mr. Branson. He’s arrived in the rain alone, and says that he’s on the run from the police. They suspect him in a case of arson in Ireland. Lady Sybil is on her own, making her way home without him. God help me, I can’t get a lick of sense out of him- he’s hysterical- but I can hardly undress him. You’ll have to do it. He’s in the green room on the bachelor corridor.”

Thomas, of course, was ahead of the jump on the subject of Tom’s hedonistic tendencies. Due to the past, he already knew what was about to occur. While Lady Sybil would make it back to the house safely, Downton Abbey would become their sanctuary until her death. Tom would be forbidden from returning to Ireland, a wanted man by the police for his part in the burning of Peyton Manor.

“... Right,” Thomas said, “You leave it to me, I’ll handle it.”

“Thomas, you have to find out where Lady Sybil is,” Mrs. Hughes begged. “His Lordship is in a state!”

“I’ll do what I can,” Thomas assured her, heading up the stairs. Mrs. Hughes watched him go from the bottom step, her brown eyes full of fear and tears.

Thomas found the gallery floor unnervingly quiet, save for the echo of shouting coming from the library down below. Even through the door and up a flight of stairs, Thomas could still hear Lord Grantham raving to his wife and children.

“The nerve! The absolute nerve of the man! I’ll see him hanged for this!”

Thomas headed to the bachelor corridor, Lord Grantham’s shouts slowly diminishing to be replaced by a much meaker sound. The whimpers coming through the door to the green room were audible only when Thomas pressed his ear directly to the door. He knew that Tom was crying, and he wasn’t entirely thrilled about having to witness the man’s tears. They’d never been chums in Thomas’ previous reality, and even now he was unsure about where he stood with Branson.

Still, he had a job to do.

Thomas gave a curt knock before opening the door to the green room. He found Tom slouched upon the end of the bed, his clothes soaked and stained with ash. He was whimpering to himself, a hand over his mouth to keep as much noise in as possible.

“Mr. Branson,” Thomas addressed him. Branson did not reply.

“...Tom?” Thomas walked over with timid steps, unsure of how close he should get. Still, Tom did not reply.
Unsure of what else to do, Thomas sat down on the bed beside him and waited for Branson to speak, or at least acknowledge his presence. They were almost thigh to thigh, the pair of them in stark silence as Branson hiccuped through his tears.

“...I don’t know where she is, Thomas,” Branson choked out. “God what have I done?”

“She’s smart,” Thomas urged.

“She’s pregnant, and the police are after me. They could have captured her and how would we know?” Two more fat tears slipped down Branson’s cheeks. He chased them up with a shaking, sooty hand.

“... I have faith in Lady Sybil,” Thomas replied. “And so should you.” Branson sniffed, blinking owlishly at Thomas as another tear fell down his face.

“I’ve done something horrible,” Branson whispered. “Something you’d never forgive me for.”

But Thomas knew what it was to not be forgiven, to regret doing something with all your heart and to be terrified of tomorrow.

“I know what it is to regret something with all my heart,” Thomas replied. “And to be afraid of tomorrow… I don’t have it in me to hold another man to the same fate.”

Branson wiped at his face again, leaving streaks of black behind. He was utterly soaked, leaving a ring upon the green coverlet of the queen sized bed on which they sat.

“Ever set a house on fire?” Branson mumbled.

Thomas smirked, recalling his past escapades. “If you knew all the things I’d done, your little house fire would look like a campfire.” He rose from the bed, rolling up the sleeves of his suit. “Right, we need to get you washed. You’re soaked, and you’ll catch cold at this rate.”

“I have nothing on me but the clothes I’m wearing,” Branson admitted. “I don’t even have another suit to wear.”

“We’ll take care of that,” Thomas said, thinking of Matthew’s own wardrobe. “I’ll ask Mr. Crawley for some clothes for you to borrow, and I’ll send the suit you’re wearing now to be cleaned.”

Branson nodded. He seemed in that moment like a lost little boy, willing to take the hand of any adult who offered him a way forward.

“You,” Thomas ordered, gesturing to the bathroom. He would have to run Branson a hot bath to get the chill out of his bones. Branson followed like a dumb animal, all the fight having fled out of him.

When Thomas was finished attending to Branson, it was close to ten o’clock. He dressed Matthew and Lord Grantham for bed, ears scalding from the foul language both men used in regards to Branson. Matthew was heart broken that Branson would do something so shocking as to burn down a house. Lord Grantham was furious that Branson would leave Lady Sybil behind. If Thomas was in the dog house with Ethel, it was nothing compared to Branson’s position in the Crawley family. He’d be lucky if one of them didn’t try to poison his stirabout, come morning.

Thomas headed back downstairs, arms laden down with clothing from all three of this charges. Even from the green baize door, Thomas could hear the animated chatter coming from the hall. When he
reached the bottom steps, he was greeted by the sight of the entire Downton staff clustered around their table, each giving out theories as to why Branson would do such a heinous thing and to where Lady Sybil might be. Carson, upon seeing Thomas trot down the hall to the laundry room, followed after him at once.

“Thomas, I want a word,” Carson murmured, cutting in front of him only to hold open the door to the laundry room so that Thomas might enter unimpeded.

“Thank you, Mr. Carson,” Thomas scooted through and laid his clothes upon a folding table, beginning to sort through them by color and material. Branson’s clothes would have to soak overnight to get out the smell and stain of ash.

Carson shut the door, giving them a bit of privacy.

“What did he say?” Carson asked. “Does he know where Lady Sybil is?”

“As of this moment, no,” Thomas replied, “But I believe Lady Sybil is smart enough and discrete enough to avoid the police.”

Carson scoffed, furious. He paced the length of the laundry room, his hands behind his back.

“The sodding nerve of the man,” Carson said, “I can hardly believe it! Even for him!”

“He made a mistake, and he knows it, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. Carson overrode him.

“And so that automatically makes everything okay?”

“No, but it at least let’s us know that he’s contrite,” Thomas replied. He used the butler’s sink to fill a large tub with cold water, sprinkling in lye so that the water began to foam and turn a milky white.

“I want your word that you won’t spread gossip in the hall,” Carson said. “You’re not usually the type to spread gossip, I know, but this is serious and I need your help controlling the maids.”

“You have my word, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. The fact of the matter was in his previous reality he absolutely was the type to gossip. The years had taught him the value of discretion, however. The only person he usually gossiped to was Ethel… and she wasn’t exactly on speaking terms with him at the moment.

“Good,” Mr. Carson said, watching as Thomas lay Branson’s white clothes into the washing tub. He opened the door for Thomas as they left, and the pair of them returned to the hall.

Thomas entered the servant’s hall to find it babbling with activity. Charlie was upon Ethel’s lap, knocked out cold. Thomas silently gestured for Ethel to hand Charlie over; she did so begrudgingly. Thomas held his son close, sitting down next to Ethel though she bristled at the close proximity.

Thomas laid his cheek upon the top of Charlie’s head, breathing in the smell of coconut soap and sweat. It was a clean, sweet smell, and it reminded Thomas of youth and innocence.

“I always knew this would happen.” Moseley shook his head in disgust, “Of course, she married beneath her.”

“And who are you, a Hapsburg Archduke?” Mrs. Patmore demanded. She was draped over the back of Anna’s chair, her hamish arms resting upon the spine. Moseley bristled, about to say something, but Thomas cut across him.
“It doesn’t matter what you think,” Thomas replied. “It’s what Lady Sybil thinks that matters most of all, and she loves him.”

“Well sometimes the people we love are the people who hurt us the most,” Moseley said. His eyes flickered from Thomas to Ethel. Thomas did not appreciate the double meaning.

“But what if he has to go to prison?” O’Brien wondered. “What then?”

“That’s quite enough of that, thank you, Ms. O’Brien,” Mr. Carson detested the notion of scandal, even in passing. He looked upon his staff, from the scullery maids to the valets. “Bed time, I think?”

It was an order they could not refuse. Thomas rose up, taking Charlie with him, and began to head for the stairs. Ethel was at his elbow, itching to take their son back.

“Thomas-!” Moseley called out to him, even as he reached the stairs. Thomas looked over his shoulders to find the man quite concerned. “I was wondering if I could have a word with you before you retire for the night? It’s important.”

Thomas was not in the mood, “I have to put Charlie to bed.”

“I’ll do it,” Ethel grumbled, taking Charlie from Thomas’ arms. Thomas offered no resistance. Ethel headed upstairs, murmuring soft lullabies in their son’s perfect ear.

“Shh, my sweet babe. I’ll sing a spell to get you to sleep. A perfect potion to put you down-”

“Not funny,” Thomas called after her. Ethel didn’t make to reply.

The others left in a thin trickling line, till soon it was only Moseley and Thomas. Down the hall, Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were talking in her sitting room; they were no doubt gossiping over Branson.

“...It’s about Ethel,” Moseley said, pausing as Mrs. Patmore passed by them. She shut off the hall light, plunging them into semi-darkness. The shadows cast deep grooves over Moseley’s fine cheekbones and chin.

“What about her?” Thomas asked. His tones were unnaturally clipped.

“I know that you two are arguing, and I’m worried about you,” Moseley said. “I know that Mrs. Bird was sharp the other day, but she only meant what she said out of concern for you. She told me about what she said after she left, and while I admit that it was a little coarse, I know that her heart was in the right place. We’re both worried about you.”

“I can do without her concern, and yours,” Thomas warned. “My wife is an honest woman. That doesn’t change just because we’re arguing.”

“She’s not,” Moseley looked quite said in that moment. “There are rumors of her in the village. That she’s been unfaithful to you behind your back-”

“I won’t listen to this,” Thomas spat. He began to climb the stairs, but Moseley reached out to grab his arm to keep him from leaving.

Thomas looked around, ripping his arm from Moseley’s grip. He detested being touched by men when he did not want it.

“Thomas, please listen to me!” Moseley begged. “I saw her in the village with my own eyes! She
was kissing another man! You need to divorce her now and take her son away from her! He could end up just as loose as his mother if he’s left in her care- he could become a criminal! Ethel’s a dangerous woman, she doesn’t care about anyone but herself.”

Thomas could not take any more. He raised a finger in warning, wishing he could instead strike Moseley in the mouth.

Moseley fell silent, stricken.

“If I ever, ever, hear you speak of my wife in an uncivil tone again, to me or anyone else… as god as my witness, we will come to blows.”

“But Thomas-”

“Bugger off!” Thomas snarled. Moseley was taken aback; it was like Thomas had slapped him. Thomas did not care. He stormed up the stairs, fuming at the man’s meddling nature.

Though he did not know it, Ethel stood just out of earshot at the top of the stairs, listening to every word. By the time that Thomas reached the gallery landing, she was gone.

The next morning found Ethel’s attitude slightly subdued, though Thomas couldn’t say why. His morning routine was filled with caring for Branson’s clothes, which was lost their stains after soaking overnight. He scrubbed, dried, pressed, and folded; each methodical placement made Thomas feel more in control about his position.

He hadn’t meant to be sharp with Moseley, at least not too sharp, but somehow Moseley had struck a nerve with Thomas last night and it had stung. The more he thought about it, the more he reasoned that the real blow had come from Moseley insisting that Ethel might turn Charlie into a criminal. Something about that sentence had made Thomas blindingly mad, to the point where he’d been unwilling to reason with Moseley.

What really drove him mad was that he knew Moseley wasn’t inherently a bad person. Thomas sat in the boot room polishing Branson’s shoes (they were caked in mud and scuffed with cobblestone), and wondered at how Moseley had become so tainted in his eyes. Moseley had always been a do-gooder, someone whom Thomas had instantly hated in his prior reality. Moseley was a Christian man, and followed the bible religiously. He wasn’t nearly as radical as Mrs. Bird, but he wasn’t relaxed either. Thomas knew that, should Moseley ever learn that he was a homosexual, he would face stiff opposition. Moseley might not be so angry as to go to the police (that was more Mrs. Bird’s territory), but he still wouldn’t approve. It was difficult to treat Moseley with civility when Thomas knew that in the back of his mind.

There was also the fact that Moseley was the sort of person who might accidentally let it slip that Charlie was not his biological son. The thought turned Thomas’ blood cold.

A soft knock at the boot room door gave Thomas pause. He looked over his shoulder and was surprised to see Ethel staring at him from the doorway. She looked oddly… subdued.

He wondered why.
“... Busy?” She asked. Her tone was unnaturally soft.

“No,” Thomas shook his head. Ethel shut the boot room door, giving them a bit of privacy. She kept her hands in her lap, twiddling her fingers as she approached Thomas’ polishing station. She watched him buff away the scuffs of Branson’s boots, careful not to stain her apron.

“... So do you have opinions about women?” Ethel asked.

“Only that I don’t want to sleep with one,” Thomas grumbled. For some reason, that made Ethel smile.

“...I thought…” She paused, breaking off to play with a grain of wood in the polishing table. “I thought the reason you didn’t want me messin’ with the Heichecera was because of the fact I was a woman.”

“No,” Thomas replied. He did not add more onto that, and was content to let it drop until he noticed Ethel staring at him. She seemed heart broken, somehow.

“Then why?” she whispered.

“...D’you remember William Mason?” Thomas asked. Ethel nodded. “He was supposed to die from his wounds after the war. When I interjected and saved his life, I went against the grain of what should've happened naturally. It caused Williams’ soul to become tainted. He turned into a monster, Ethel. An absolute monster.”

Ethel nodded, taking the stool across from Thomas so that they were eye to eye. Thomas paused in his polishing so that he could give Ethel his undivided attention.

“I meddled with fate and it nearly cost me my second chance,” Thomas admitted, thinking of how William had nearly killed him with a brick one night. “I just don’t want you to do the same. Not when we have so much to lose.”

“Maybe it’ll be different,” Ethel offered. “Since I’m not resurrecting dead people.” There was logic in that, but Thomas wasn’t entirely sure.

“If you’re going to do this, you have to be absolutely careful,” Thomas urged. “Everything that you do, think it through twice, and ask the Heichecera if you’re unsure.”

“Sure,” Ethel agreed. Thomas gave her a small smile and resumed his work on the boots. After a moment of silence had passed, Ethel added, “I heard you last night with Moseley… what you said.”

Thomas paused mid-brush stroke, his knuckles slightly stained with dye. He glanced up and caught Ethel’s eyes again.

“You defended me even though you were angry at me,” Ethel said. “Why?”

“Your goodness doesn’t inherently depend upon how I feel at the moment,” Thomas replied. “You were being a twat, but you were still a good woman. That doesn’t change just because we bicker.”

Ethel smiled. She rose up from her seat and came around the table to take Thomas’ polishing brush away from him.

“Will you hold me?” She asked.
Admittedly, Thomas had missed his closest friend. Thomas rose up and took Ethel in his arms, allowing her to lay her head upon his shoulder. For a moment, he simply contented himself to wrap his arms around her, and to be still with her.

“...I love you,” Ethel mumbled into his neck. “Even if you’re an annoying pillock.”

Thomas could not help but laugh a bit at that.

They pulled back, and Thomas regarded his wife affectionately.

“Do you think I’m going to make Charlie a crim-” But Thomas wouldn’t even allow her to finish her question. He pressed a soft finger to her lips, shushing her, and just for good measure pressed the tiniest kiss to her forehead. She leaned into the touch, eyes closed in reverence.

“Thomas I’m sorry to- oh-!”

Thomas jerked back from Ethel, shocked to find Anna in the doorway. She was scarlet in the face, shocked to have found them in such an intimate position.

“Oh I’m ever so sorry-” Anna babbled, turning to go, “I can leave-”

“No, it’s alright-” Ethel called out after her, pausing her mid step. “Really, it’s fine.”

Thomas let go of Ethel and re-took his seat at the table. Anna cautiously returned, closing the boot room door behind her.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt an intimate moment,” Anna said, still quite pink in her cheeks.

“It’s fine,” Ethel said. “How can we help you?”

“Well actually, it’s Thomas that I’m concerned about,” Anna said. Thomas set down his brush again with a heavy sigh.

“Clearly I’m not having a lucky week with women,” Thomas muttered. He wiped his hands upon a damp cloth to try and get the brown stains out of his fingers and turned about on his stool so that he could face Anna. “Why are you worried about me?”

“...Well you were very rude to Mr. Moseley last night,” Anna said.

Thomas nodded, “I was.”

“Why?” Anna demanded. “Moseley is such a gentle man, it’s not like you to be so rude. That sounds more like the old Thomas from 1912 if you ask me-”

Ethel was slightly tense, her head bowed. Thomas set his damp rag aside, folding his hands upon his lap.

“Because he insisted that Ethel was going to turn Charlie into a criminal, and that I should divorce her,” Thomas replied. Anna was taken aback.

“...I’m sure he didn’t mean it like that,” Anna said. Ethel gave Anna a pained smile.

“Well... I am a whore, Anna,” Ethel cursed. “So maybe had a point.”

“No, he didn’t,” Thomas warned. He reached out across the table and took Ethel’s hand. “He was talking out of turn.”
Ethel still seemed slightly unsure.

Anna was silent for a moment, thinking it all over. “...Well I’m sure he’ll come around. Mr. Moseley is just a very devout man. It’s hard for him.”

“He’ll get over it,” Thomas replied, returning to his shoes. Anna gave him a tiny smile. “And if he doesn’t we’ll come to blows. I warned him as much.”

“Don’t fight Moseley,” Anna begged.

“You’d put him in a grave,” Ethel wondered. “He’s got the dexterity of a green bean.”

“Not my problem,” Thomas grumbled, setting Branson’s left shoe aside to start work on his right. He began to scrape out mud and tiny stones from the grooves of the soles. “I’m a simple man, if he wants to avoid an early death he’ll keep my wife’s name out of his mouth.”

“You keep talking like that, people will think you’re a normal couple,” Anna teased. Thomas grinned. “Hardly.”

“Oh I should add-” Anna said, teasingly, “Mr. Carson’s interviewing a candidate for the open footman position, he’s absolutely gorgeous.”

Thomas paused, a sudden seizing sensation in his throat. It was like his body had gone unnaturally numb.

“Really?” Ethel asked, completely unaware of Thomas’ inner turmoil. “What do you mean?”

“Golden hair, chiseled jaw, and eyes as purple as an aubergine. He’s an adonis. Of course, he doesn’t hold a candle to Mr.- oh-!”

Anna was taken aback as Thomas stumbled from his chair and brushed past her. He gave her no warning, no explanation, fleeing the boot room to run at a full sprint for Mr. Carson’s office. He reached the door in quick time and skittered to a halt, staring at the wooden barrier. His palms were sweating, his heart at a gallop in his throat.

“Golden hair, chiseled jaw-”

Thomas reached out with trembling fingers for the door, but paused.

What was he doing? It might not even be Jimmy-

But even as Thomas turned, feeling an absolute fool, a familiar voice drifted through the door: “Didn’t think I’d like the food…”

Thomas sucked in an involuntary breath, eyes falling closed.

Jimmy walking through the door of the servant’s hall, winding a clock with utmost care, Thomas’ hand upon his own, Jimmy asleep in bed, being threatened beneath a sodden and moldy bridge…

Jimmy saying goodbye.

Thomas swallowed, the stinging feeling behind his eyes bringing him humiliation. A million memories were slamming into him one after another like waves upon a rocky shore, leaving him completely unprepared for normal conversation. His breathes were coming faster, his fingers trembling as he recalled how Jimmy had looked so deeply into his eyes the last time they’d spoke.

How Thomas had forced himself through electrotherapy in the prayer of leaving Jimmy behind.
How Jimmy had haunted his dreams ever since.

“Thomas?”

Thomas almost did not hear Mrs. Hughes at first, though he could sense her standing next to him. She seemed quite concerned at first, even reaching out to take his arm.

“Thomas, are you alright? You’re as pale as a sheet-”

Thomas bristled, swallowing down the bile in the back of his throat.

He met Mrs. Hughes’ eyes, trying in vain to control his trembling. He nodded, in a silent cue to hear what she had to say.

“...His lordship needs you in London,” Mrs. Hughes said. “You’re to pack immediately and head out with him at once. He’s going to try and get the charges against Mr. Branson reduced, though I don’t know what it will come to.”

Though Thomas knew it was unwise not to answer Mrs. Hughes, he could not help but look back at Mr. Carson’s door.

One slim piece of wood away, the love of his life sat unknowingly in Mr. Carson’s guest chair. He touched the door, wishing his fingers could sink through it. Wishing he could transport himself to Jimmy’s side, and never leave it. That he might be able to stare at Jimmy forever, and that be enough.

Because it would be enough.

“Thomas, you’re frightening me-” Mrs. Hughes urged.

Thomas was burned by her words. He slowly dropped his hand from the door, feeling as if he might weep.

“...Yes Mrs. Hughes,” He whispered.

He walked away down the hall, his gate unnaturally slow. As he passed by the boot room door, he was unseeing to how Anna and Ethel both looked out at him. He felt like a ghost passing through the halls of the abbey, already dead.

Killed by a love he could never give.

~*~

Thomas left for London in a malaise, saying nothing to the others save for kissing Ethel and Charlie goodbye. He’d looked oddly detached, floating away in a somber slow way to climb into the front seat of Lord Grantham’s motorcar. Off they went, the pair of them bound for the London evening train.

They left behind a thoroughly confused staff, none of whom had answers for the other.

The next day, Ethel sat at the servant’s table, wondering what Thomas’ sudden attitude change had been inspired by. He’d seemed so normal, so totally calm, until Anna had mentioned the footman being interviewed. Could it be that the was one in the same with the footman Thomas had loved? Ethel knew the lad was coming, she just didn’t know when he’d arrive. Perhaps it would be sooner than she’d initially thought. It was tea time, and the others were taking a cuppa with warm biscuits upon the table. Anna and O’Brien sat across from her, both of them working on their sewing.
“I wonder what Thomas was so upset about the other day,” Anna spoke up. Ethel set down her teacup, licking her lips. “He ran like someone had shouted ‘Fire’.”

“I’m unsure,” Ethel admitted. O’Brien raised an eyebrow, but said nothing more.

“How are you feeling?” Anna asked. Ethel just smiled, silently dunking a biscuit into her tea until it was softened enough to eat.

“M’fine,” Ethel murmured. “Just thinking.”
As of late her thoughts had revolved around Moseley word’s, in particular how she might very well make Charlie into a criminal.

Could it be that she was dooming her son by being his mother? Had she been wrong to turn away help from the Bryant’s?

“I wanted to talk to you while Thomas was away,” Anna said, “About what Mrs. Bird and Mr. Moseley have said. I know you must think it’s terribly rude—”

“No,” Ethel shook her head, for though their words burned they still held to their mark. “I don’t deny what I am. What I did. I just want to give my son a chance to have Thomas be his father, an’ not hear different from someone else.”

“I don’t think Mr. Mosley would ever do that,” Anna said.

“Not on purpose, maybe,” Ethel replied, “But Bird? That’s a different story.”

O’Brien pulled her thread tight, only to snip it short with a pair of delicate sewing scissors. “Never mind Bird,” O’Brien warned, “She’s the least of your problems. What about when he grows older? He won’t look like Thomas. Bryant wasn’t exactly the spitting image of our favorite valet.”

“I know,” Ethel slumped in her seat, bitter at the thought of her dead lover. “But maybe we can say that he looks more like me than Thomas.”

“That’s the problem exactly,” O’Brien sat her sewing aside with a stern glare. “You need to conjure up a relative on Thomas’ side. Say he looks like… I don’t know… Thomas’ sister or something.”

“He has a sister?” Ethel wondered. O’Brien shrugged.

“Does it matter?” O’Brien asked. “Just come up with somebody and do it quick. The lad will start asking questions, and you better have your answers ready.”

“She’s got a point,” Anna said; she gave Ethel a somber smile. “Maybe you can say he looks like Thomas’ mother instead? Someone more direct.”

“Maybe,” Ethel mused.

Carson entered the hall, looking about with keen eyes to find his staff clustered around the hot kettle of fresh tea. Everyone stood, as was par the custom to the butler’s grandiose entrance.

“Ah, good!” Carson was pleased at their gathering, “Since you’re all gathered here, I’d like to introduce you to our newest member of staff.”

Carson stepped aside, waving for someone behind him to step forward into the light. “This is our new footman, James Kent.”

Ethel snapped her head up so quickly it made a twinge burn through the muscles in her neck.
Jimmy Kent, James Kent... were they the same person?

Yet there could be no denying as the young man stepped forward that this was the love of Thomas’ life. It was so obvious, so very clear, that Ethel could not help but drop her mouth. She was blown away.

He was slim and petite, with a square chiseled jaw and plump, full lips. His golden hair was put into an immaculate coif upon his forehead, and his suit while second rate was still finely kept. His eyes, however, were without a doubt his most compelling feature.

Beautiful, piercing and deep. Focused with unbelievable precision.

“I can’t do it again, Ethel. I might be strong in your eyes but I’m not strong enough to endure him...I ... I can’t.”

Thomas had been so shaken at the thought of his love returning, and now Ethel knew why. She could see in the way that Jimmy held himself, in the way that he stared at them all with mild disinterest... here was a man who would bring her husband’s downfall. He was the exact opposite of Thomas, save in those eyes. Both men shared that cunning, piercing glare.

“What’s he like?” she’d asked.
“*The sun,*” Thomas had replied.

She could see the resemblance.

Carson was taken aback at how captivated the women in the room were with Jimmy. He raised an eyebrow only to walk away, grumbling under his breath about the silliness of youth. In his shadow, he left Jimmy who stood with a valise in hand and a quirking smile upon his plush lips.

“Hello,” Anna wondered in amazement.
“Hello, indeed,” Ethel seconded.

Mrs. Hughes, having been watching the entire proceedings from the far end of the servant’s table, rose up and made her way around the room to greet Jimmy personally.

Anna turned to Ethel, and whispered in her ear, “Didn’t I tell you he was gorgeous?” She hadn’t been kidding.

“I’ll remind you two ladies that you are married,” Mrs. Hughes warned the pair of them, her eyes narrowing.

“I’m not,” O’Brien replied. Mrs. Hughes pursed her lips, highly irritated.

Jimmy smirked, clearly preening over the attention. Ethel was ready to bet money he’d heard it all before. How could he not, when he was an adonis?

“James, welcome to Downton,” Mrs. Hughes shook his hand. “I’ve already prepared a room for you upstairs. Ethel can sort you out with a livery. Lord Grantham and his valet Mr. Barrow should be back relatively soon, so that will wrap us up nice and tidy for dinner.”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes,” Ethel said. She stepped away from the table and walked down the hall to the linen cupboard. Jimmy followed after her, valise still in hand.

She let Jimmy into the linen cupboard and began to rifle through the cabinets, searching for a livery that would fit his slender frame. He was at least half a foot shorter than Alfred, which was a mercy anyhow because Alfred had had to take their tallest livery.
She glanced at Jimmy as she pulled out two pairs of black creased trousers, folding them up nicely and handing them over to Jimmy who took them at once to hold them against his chest. He was staring at her with that same piercing stare.

“My name’s Ethel,” Ethel said. “Ethel Barrow.” She offered her hand. Jimmy took it in a gentle shake. She noted that his skin was soft to the touch.

“Yes, to meet you,” Jimmy replied. His voice was sauv and dark, like honey poured over a rock.

Ethel smiled as she searched through the cupboards for shirtsleeves and vests.

“Are you from around here, James?”

“Call me Jimmy,” Jimmy replied. “I hate being called James, it’s so stuffy.”

“Jimmy then,” Ethel said, handing over Jimmy two vests.

“I’m from the coast,” Jimmy explained. “Not really a country lad.”

“No, you’re not,” Ethel could already tell that Jimmy was ten kinds of trouble wrapped in a delicious golden wrapper.

As Ethel handed over Jimmy two tuxes, she took the clipboard for signatures out from a drawer and offered it to Jimmy with a pencil. Jimmy had to scrawl his name at a slant, his writing cramped from the clothes tucked against his chest.

“My ‘usband is coming home tonight, Thomas Barrow,” Ethel said, as casually as she could. “Does the name ring a bell to you?”

Jimmy pondered over it, unsure. “… A bit, but I can’t think why.”

Ethel held back a smile, but it was hard. She wondered if Jimmy’s soul was what remembered, versus Jimmy’s brain.

“Well you two will get along smashingly,” Ethel replied. “He’s right up your alley, all cheek.”

“I like them cheeky,” Jimmy replied in a flirtatious tone. With that, he left Ethel in the linen cupboard, whistling softly as he headed for the stairs and his new room.

Ethel could not help but beam.

Thomas arrived home that night around six, just in time to get Matthew ready for dinner. Ethel had only just returned from laying out fresh linens in the hall, returning downstairs with dirty ones to run smack into her husband. Thomas still looked rather gray faced, if not weather beaten from the long travel to London and back.

“Thomas!” Ethel greeted him brightly. “You won’t believe what’s happened.”

“Not now, Ethel,” Thomas mumbled, terribly glum. “I gotta get Matthew changed-”

He passed by Ethel, heading for the stairs.

Ethel called out after him, “Jimmy’s arrived. He’s getting changed right now.”

Thomas stopped dead on the stairs, one foot higher than the other.
He looked terrified, face white and knuckles clenched tight around his valise.

For a moment he did nothing, with maids rushing around him to try and get upstairs to light the candles for dinner. Then, slowly, he looked over his shoulder back down at Ethel. There were tears sparkling in his crystal blue eyes.

Ethel nodded, knowing that any amount of words could not convey the sheer weight of the day’s activities. Thomas seemed on the verge of a panic attack.

“...I have to look in on Mr. Matthew,” Thomas croaked. He offered her his valise, “Will you please put my valise in Mr. Carson’s office?”

“Thomas, don’t be ridiculous, you can put it in your room and still make it in time to change-”

“No,” Thomas cut her off. “No I can’t go up there when he’s up there.”

Ethel was taken aback.

“What are you saying?” She demanded. “You’ve waited all this time, now he’s just a few floors above you and you’re stalling? What’s wrong with you?”

Thomas did not answer, save to set his valise down upon the stairs at Ethel’s feet. He then left for the main floor, exiting out the green baize door.

“What the hell is wrong with that man?” Ethel cursed. She begrudgingly plucked up the valise and headed down the hall for the laundry room.

~*~

The next two days passed in a dreary haze.

Though Thomas and Jimmy were in the same house, neither of them had officially met again face to face simply because every time Jimmy had approached Thomas had scampered out of the room. He’d started skipping breakfast, instead hiding in Matthew’s dressing room under the guise of preparing his morning toilette. He’d stopped taking tea in the servant’s hall during breaks, instead begging Ethel to bring him a cuppa upstairs which technically wasn't allowed. Carson, mercifully, hadn’t caught wind of Thomas’ faux pas yet. He even took dinner in his room, pretending to be slightly under the weather with ‘seasonal allergies’.

The fact of the matter was that Thomas’ bleary eyes and sniffly nose had nothing to do with pollen. He’d been weeping at night, unable to hold his grief in; with Charlie sleeping in his cradle next to Thomas’ bed, Thomas had had to keep his tears silent by biting his pillow or stuffing a fist into his mouth.

In short, he was utterly miserable.

When Thomas did consent to venture downstairs he did so under obvious threat. Any second, Jimmy might come walking around the corner and upset his whole world. How would he be able to control himself in front of Jimmy? How would he make a good first impression, if his eyes were bleary and bloodshot? How could he explain to Jimmy that to be in the same room as the man, to be within reaching distance, was akin to torture? That Thomas had loved him so much he simply did not know how to react normally around the man any longer.

It was with this notion in mind that Thomas cautiously went downstairs to fetch a new spool of black thread. He poked around each corner, unsure of whether or not Jimmy’s golden head might come
bobbing into view. It was close to dinner time, and Thomas had just finished dressing Matthew and Lord Grantham.

When he felt an angry tap upon his shoulder, Thomas nearly jumped out of his skin. He whipped around to see that it was only Ethel, and let out an enormous sigh of relief.

“Ethel, don’t do that!” Thomas beseeched, “I was terrified you were-”

“Yeah I know who you were terrified I was, honestly Thomas you’re such a child,” Ethel complained. “Everyone’s worried about you. You’re acting like a right tit.”

“Is he down here?” Thomas asked.

“No, you numpty! He’s upstairs with Mr. Carson getting dinner ready in the dining hall. Honestly, look at you, shaking in your boots-”

“Oh thank god,” Thomas sighed. He walked away at a more relaxed pace, and entered the boot room to find a spare spool of thread in the bottom drawer of the cupboard. Ethel followed, quite annoyed with him.

“So is this the new order of things?” she demanded. “You hiding like a roach from the lamplight while Jimmy walks around wondering where the hell his Lordship’s valet is? For someone who thinks he’s the sun, you sure are content to hide in the clouds.”

“Ethel, I’m really not in the mood right now,” Thomas pocketed the spool of thread. “This is harder for me than it is for you.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t!” Ethel exclaimed, “But it’s not going to get any easier with you hid-”

“I’ve never been James before in my life. I was Jimmy to Lady Anstruther-”

Jimmy was coming down the stairs, furious at Mr. Carson’s stuffy nature. Thomas froze, pressing himself flat against the wall, pressing a finger tightly over his lips while Ethel continued to glower at him from the door.

“I don’t care if you were Father Christmas to Lady Anstruther. You are James now, and you will stay James while you are at Downton.”

“Thomas you’re being a child,” Ethel complained at full volume. Thomas reached forward and clapped a hand over his wife’s mouth. Ethel pulled back, affronted.

“Don’t you shush me!” She hissed, “I’m not a child you can-”

“Shutup!” Thomas wheezed, eyes bugging out of his head. “If you have any love for me, in the name of God, shutup!”

Ethel ground down on her lower jaw, green eyes narrowing murderously. She folded her arms over her chest, waiting impatiently for Thomas to stop panicking against the wall.

“Right, back upstairs with you,” Carson ordered. “Alfred, see that you don’t allow the peas to roll about-”

“But it’s not fair!” Alfred complained, even as he and Jimmy mounted the stairs. “Why am I carrying the veg and Jimmy the meat? I’m taller, and I’ve been here longer-”

“But you’re not better than me,” Jimmy singsonged, his voice fading away as he went upstairs.
Thomas let out a sigh of relief as soon as the coast was clear.

“God that was close,” He muttered, glancing out the door to the servant’s hall. He could see the back of O’Brien’s head, bent over as she worked on something or another. “Too close.”

“You can’t keep this up forever,” Ethel warned.

“Watch me,” Thomas muttered. He left at that, heading for the stairs before Jimmy and Alfred could return for the second course.

Once again, he took supper in his room that night. He dressed Matthew and Lord Grantham for bed, only to be shocked by the news that Lady Sybil had arrived back at Downton while the others had been at dinner. Branson was apparently inconsolable, unwilling to move from his wife’s side. Thomas, on the other hand, was just glad that Lady Sybil was back in Downton, despite knowing that she would remain here until her death. She was in the final months of pregnancy now, her belly enormous beneath her simple frocks.

As Thomas returned to his room and relaxed in his desk chair, he could not help but wonder at Sybbie Branson soon to arrive…

Sweet Sybbie.

She’d been a beauty in her infancy, inheriting her late mother’s good looks. Thomas, of course, had been enraptured with the child from the moment she had appeared. While his relationships downstairs had disintegrated into nothing, he’d built a whole new friendship with the toddler. Before George had arrived, Sybbie and Jimmy had been the center of his world.

Sybil’s death would be heartbreaking to endure twice… but at least Thomas would get to see Sybbie again soon. It would be wonderful, to hold her in his arms again. To coo down to her while she babbled at his silly faces.

A gentle knock at his door heralded the arrival of his dinner, bore on a tray by Ethel who still looked quite grumpy.

“It seems I am the mother of two now,” Ethel snapped, sitting Thomas’ tray down upon his desk with slightly more force than was necessary. “Would you like me to give you a bottle and sing you to sleep as well?”

“No thanks,” Thomas quipped. “Me an’ Charlie think your singing is rather atrocious.”

Ethel scoffed, and perched herself on the corner of his desk.

“Honestly,” She muttered, pulling at a loose thread in her apron. “You’re as bad as a toddler.”

“At least you don’t have to change my nappies,” Thomas sneered. “What’s for dinner tonight?”

“Boiled ox tongue, kedgeree, and treacle tart,” Ethel said. “Nabbed you a roll of bread too before Alfred stole them all.”

Thomas ate with gusto even as Ethel kept him company. The boiled ox tongue was scrumptious, and soothed the gnawing hunger in his stomach. As he finished, Thomas wiped his mouth and set his tray aside with a contented sigh.
“I suppose you’d want to ferry your tray down as well—”

“If you don’t mind.”

“I do mind, and I’ll have you know I’m getting tired of this. There is absolutely no way that you can avoid Jimmy forever. You sleep, bathe, eat, work, and relax in the same house. You’d have just as much avoiding Mr. Carson.”

Thomas groaned, rubbing a knot that was growing at his temple. He could feel the onset of a headache coming.

“I’m not saying that I think I can do this forever, but honestly Ethel I cannot face Jimmy until I’m ready.” He fished around in the drawers of his desk for a cigarette, his age old vice. “You don’t know what it’s like, to be haunted by the shadow of things that you’ve done.”

He paused when he could not find a cigarette and closed his desk drawer shut with a huff. Ethel wasn’t looking at him.

“...Ethel?” Thomas called out to her.

She still wouldn’t address him, instead staring off at the hallway with strict attention.

Thomas poked his head around Ethel, curious, only to see something rather… unexpected.

There, drifting through the air like it had always been there and always would be, was a small blue light. A strange, whispering aura seemed to encapsulate it, so that it drifted through a smog of its own making towards the gallery hall.

“.... Can you see that?” Ethel whispered.

Thomas wondered momentarily if he was going insane… but if Ethel could see it too at least he was in good company.

“...What on earth?” Thomas wondered. The light puffed through the air, rounding the corner of the stairs and vanishing out of sight.

Unable to resist temptation, Thomas followed it. Ethel was at his back at once; Thomas turned to confront her, opening his mouth, but she shut him down at once.

“If you dare tell me I can’t come because I’m your wife or some dribble, I’ll sock you in the jaw,” She warned.

So that settled that.

During this time of night, the gallery hall was dark. All the upper class occupants of Downton Abbey were asleep, safely dreaming of counting money or whatever it was that toff’s dreamed of. In the gloom, Thomas was able to see the little blue lights with ease. Thomas and Ethel followed them down the stairs to the gallery floor, and then through the green baize door. There wasn’t just one; instead there was a string of at least twenty. All of them were flitting, one after the other, down the hall in neat little lines.

They were heading towards Sybil Crawley’s door.

Thomas followed at a slow gait, one step at a time lest the lights turn around and attack him. He didn’t know why he felt so cautious but something told him to stay back. These lights… there was
something terribly… odd…

He reached out with a hand, unsure if he should touch them or not—
Only to have the living shite scared out of him when someone touched him on the shoulder.

Thomas jumped, nearly shrieking out loud until another hand grabbed him by the mouth and kept him quiet. He clawed at both the hands, trying to rip them off, only to be shocked when they turned out to be nothing more than smoke.

“Shh…” The voice of the Heichecera filled his ears. Thomas paused, his heart rate slowing as he realized he wasn’t being attacked. He looked around to see the Heichecera just behind him, standing next to Ethel who was likewise pale with fright. Her amber eyes were sharp, focused on the blue lights with such vigor that Thomas was taken aback.

“Can you see them?” She whispered. Thomas and Ethel nodded. “Don’t follow them.”

They were clustering about the doorknob, flitting to and fro as if they were trying to get in.

“What are they?” Thomas wondered. Instead of answering him, the Heichecera beckoned for him to follow in the opposite direction.

“Come with me, the pair of you,” she said, and led them downstairs to the entrance hall. Thomas briefly wondered where on earth they were going, but found his answer in the door to the pink sitting room. Yet when the Heichecera opened the door, it was not onto a scene of red plush cushions and embroidered tapestries. Instead, Thomas and Ethel were greeted by the perturbing site of pitch black, as if the whole sitting room had been ripped away from the rest of the house to be filled with a void.

The Heichecera walked into the gloom. Slightly nervous, Thomas followed her. Ethel was at his elbow, holding tight to him.

The door closed on its own without a hand to guide it, resulting in Thomas and Ethel being plunged into absolute darkness. For a moment, they were kept company only by the sound of their breathing. But then, soft blue lights began to pop up in front of their faces, dazzling their eyes. They were soon surrounded by a fleet of lights, perhaps a hundred or more. They swirled and spiralled through the air, dancing to a beat with rhythm; at their center was the Heichecera who seemed quite at ease in the darkness. She gave Thomas and Ethel a tiny smile, even as Thomas looked about bewildered.

“Where on earth are we?” Thomas wondered, amazed.

“We’re not on earth at all,” The Heichecera replied. “We’re where I wait.”

This, of course, merely created more answers than it gave. But Thomas knew they’d be here all night if he kept pestering the Heichecera. Her powers were so complex and spellbinding that he, a mere mortal, could not profess to understand them. If this was where she waited, then he would simply have to be content with that explanation.

“Only a door away, how convenient,” Thomas muttered. The Heichecera let out a tiny huff of a laugh.

“The things you saw tonight,” She said. “Could you hear them too?”

“Yeah, I could,” Thomas admitted. “It sounded like whispering, but what are they?”

“I could almost make out a voice, but not much more,” Ethel agreed.
“They don’t have a name,” The Heichecera explained, “I suppose the closest thing in your world would be something like fishing lures. They are attracted to death.”

As if beckoned by the Heichecera’s words, the whispers began to return. Quite suddenly, a few prominent blue balls of light jetted past Thomas and Ethel, heading back in the direction of where the parlor door had once been. Thomas watched it go, unnerved. Ethel hid in his shadow, frightened.

“Why are they here, if they’re attracted to death?” Ethel asked. “Is someone going to die?”

The Heichecera gave Ethel a small smile. “Yes. As Thomas well knows.”

Ethel looked to Thomas expectantly. Thomas shook his head.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” Thomas replied. “It’ll only make things worse.”

“Some voice of confidence you are!” Ethel retorted. “I want to know who’s going to cash in the chips!”

“... Well whose door were they in front of?” The Heichecera asked Ethel gently.
Ethel thought for a moment, only to go stiff with realization. She looked to Thomas, horrified.

“.... No…” She whispered. “...Surely not.”

“I’m afraid the Lord doesn’t have much to do with it, Ethel,” The Heichecera replied, gently. “Sybil Crawley must die. It is the way that things are, as Thomas well knows. Of course, I’m half wondering if he might try to save her.”

Thomas shook his head. “I know what happens when you try and cheat death. I won’t act out.”

“Well thank the lord,” The Heichecera scolded. “I wondered when it was going to get through your damned head.”

“Why couldn’t I see and hear them before, if they’re to do with death?” Thomas asked. “Why couldn’t I see them with Edward, or with William? Surely I’d have been coated with them during the war-”

“That would be my doing,” The Heichecera explained. “I thought if you were more in tune with the lures, you’d be less inclined to try and fight fate. Also I was testing my new protege” At this, she flashed Ethel a gentle smile. “After all... I was wondering if you might be blessed with the site. And it seems you are.”

Ethel was trying to smile, but it was hard. It seemed that the knowledge of Sybil’s soon-to-happen death was making her joy fall short.

Thomas had to admit, it was a rather crafty plan. By forcing him to constantly confront the upcoming death, he was growing desensitized to it.

“Technically, I shouldn’t have done it,” The Heichecera looked slightly guilty at this,” Humans aren’t supposed to see death, or its lures. It goes against the natural order of things. You’re only supposed to see death when it’s your time, and even then you never really see death. You just see what your mind interprets death to be. It’s much too confusing and grand for the human brain to understand without exploding.”

But that got Thomas thinking about all the other ways that the Heichecera had been interjecting into fate. Forget Thomas and the lures, what about Ethel and the spell book?
“Speaking of that,” Thomas was starting to get thoroughly annoyed. “What about Ethel and that damned spell book you gave her? What do you mean by telling her that you have ‘great plans’ for her? You’re building her up to something, and I don’t know if I like it.”

“He’s been acting like a pillock!” Ethel complained.

“Don’t worry, I saw,” The Heichecera said. “I assure you I’m well aware of how grumpy our favorite Barrow has been. But I have my reasons, Thomas. You’ll just have to trust me-”

“Well tell me what your reasons are,” Thomas demanded. “Why Ethel, and why now?”

Instead of offering a hot quip, or shooting down Thomas’ worries, the Heichecera grew pensive. Her quiet unnerved him far more than any explanation she could have given him.

Lacing her fingers together, the Heichecera fixed him with a calm if petulant stare.

“I’m afraid that something is coming, Thomas,” The Heichecera murmured. “Something that I may not be able to protect you from. I’m making a plan ‘b’, if you will.”

Thomas wasn’t too sure what to say to that. Ethel listened with rapt attention.

The Heichecera smiled, saying, “A time will come in the near future when you ask me for something that I cannot give. Something that will result in chaos unless I can manage to save you from yourself.”

The lights around Thomas were dimming, casting deep shadows over the Heichecera’s beautiful face. Soon, all that Thomas and Ethel could see were her amber eyes, glowing in the dark like hot coals.

“I think that’s what I love most about you, though,” The Heichecera’s voice echoed, without source save for her eyes. “Your courage is without flaw.”

For a moment, there was only pitch black, warm and soft.

Then, Thomas woke with a start.

Somehow, despite not having gone upstairs or changed his clothes, Thomas was in bed in his pajamas. There was a light speckling of sweat upon his chest, misting between his bulging pectorals. He took in one shuddering breath, then another, wondering how the Heichecera had managed to transport him from where she waited, back to earth (in his pajamas no less). He wondered if Ethel was back in her bed, sound asleep as well. But even as Thomas lay back upon his pillows, pondering it all, a soft rattling noise caught his attention.

Thomas rolled his head upon his pillow, staring at his bureau. A soft blue light was emitting from the edges of his topmost drawer.

Curious, Thomas rose from bed, shucking his covers aside, and crossed the room to open his top drawer. He was dazzled by a brilliant blue light, which was bizarrely enough emitting from the black chicken egg the Heichecera had given to him during his fever.

“What on earth?” Thomas wondered, reaching down to pluck up the chicken egg. But even as Thomas’ fingers touched the chicken egg, they glided through and touched the wooden bottom of the drawer instead. He tried to grab the chicken egg again, but once more failed.
Then, like an oil lamp burning out, the egg vanished along with the blue light. Wherever it went, God only knows.

“...Weird.” Thomas whispered and shut the drawer.  
He returned to bed, and lay there for another hour before sleep finally took him.

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Thomas did not come down to breakfast the next morning, which was hardly a surprise. Mrs. Hughes was in a fit over it, wondering up at the ceiling even as she sipped a cup of black coffee.

“I wonder why he hasn’t come down,” Mrs. Hughes mused, glancing to Mr. Carson. Ethel watched them cautiously, noting that Jimmy was likewise preoccupied. He was staring into his stirabout with a glum expression, captivated by something or the other.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Mr. Carson said in a soothing voice. Mrs. Hughes still looked unsure.

It was a normal scene, with servants dining on their oatmeal and taking coffee before their master’s rose. Anna was officially a Lady’s Maid, Ethel was Head Housemaid, and frankly all was as it should be save for the fact that Ethel felt like she was being watched. A soft whisper tickled at the hair behind Ethel’s ears; she almost scratched at the itch until it came back, stronger.

“Ethel...”

She froze, spoon full of porridge hanging in mid-air with an open mouth. She looked over her shoulder, amazed to find an image of the Heichecera in the mirror lining of the cupboard. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Meet me upstairs on the gallery floor,” The Heichecera said. “We’re going to play a trick on Thomas.”

Ethel quirked an eyebrow, curious. She then turned back around in her seat, eating her bite of porridge before putting her spoon down.

“Mrs. Hughes, may I take a piece of toast to Thomas for his breakfast?” Ethel asked. “He’s upstairs on the gallery floor.”

“You may, but I want you in the nursery today,” Mrs. Hughes said. “It’s time to start clearing it out for the baby.”

“Yes Mrs. Hughes,” Ethel rose up, plucking up a few pieces of buttered toast to stuff into her pocket. She left, heading upstairs and dusting the crumbs off her fingertips onto her starched apron. She passed the main landing, finding it quiet, and headed up to the gallery floor only to find it equally still. Ethel stuck her head out of the green baize door, looking left and right, and found the floor relatively bare. She could hear murmured voices coming from the Mr. Crawley’s dressing room; Thomas was no doubt dressing his master for the morning.

“Ethel.”

Ethel jumped, taken aback to find the Heichecera relaxing upon the gallery wall. She’d completely blended into a tapestry of a phoenix, her amber skirts the exact same shade of the cloth behind her.

“Cor, you scared me,” Ethel wondered, shutting the green baize door to garner them some privacy. “What are you trying to do with Thomas.”
“I’ve had enough of him panicking over meeting Jimmy,” The Heichecera said. “But before we get to that… I have something to give you.”

“You do?” Ethel perked up at once, images dancing in her head of broomsticks and wands. “Is it a broomstick? Will I get to fly?”

The Heichecera blinked, taken aback. “... Why would you want to do that?” She asked. “It’s rather frigid up high. You’d catch your death of cold.”

Ethel was crestfallen, slightly disappointed at missing out on a broomstick.

“I thought I were a witch now,” Ethel said. “I thought that’s what you were training me for.”

“Well I can hardly train you to be a witch when I’m not a witch,” The Heichecera explained, folding her arms over her chest so that her golden bangles clinked about. “I’m a sorceress, Ethel… but I’m not training you to be that, either. I’m coaching you to perform one very specific ritual, which will with luck save Thomas’ life.”

“Oh,” Ethel mumbled. A beat of silence passed before she added. “Will you train me to be a sorceress too?”

“That depends,” The Heichecera said.

“On what?”

“On how well you perform the ritual,” The Heichecera said. Ethel was a little confused until she added. “If Thomas lives, then I will make you a sorceress.”

Sudden visions of power and fancy popped into Ethel’s head, of her son being able to go to the finest schools and her wardrobe glittering with diamonds. If she was smart, she might even be able to make herself a lady of the nobility; imagine! A life where servants waited on her hand and foot, instead of her doing the waiting--

But the Heichecera seemed to know what she was thinking. She shook her head, and Ethel felt a strange shame creep up inside of her. Was that really what she wanted? Power?

“Power is a drug, Ethel Barrow,” The Heichecera warned. “Beware of its effects.”

“Sorry,” Ethel said, eyes to the floor. “I’ll try to remember that in future.”

“See that you do,” The Heichecera reached into the pocket of her many vivid skirts, only to pull of what appeared to be a black chicken egg. She gave it to Ethel, who took it uncertain.

“What’s this?” Ethel asked.

“It’s the first ingredient of your ritual,” the Heichecera explained. Ethel looked down at the egg rolling in her palm, bemused. A chicken egg? Whatever happened to bowl of bat or tongue of dog?

“Allow me to explain,” the Heichecera offered. Ethel listened with rapt attention, soaking in each detail like a sponge. “When Thomas was ill with Spanish Flu, I momentarily took over his body to ensure that he lived. While he was under my possession, I transported his soul to a dimension where I wait. He recovered there, but unbeknownst to him he also helped me to create a bond for his soul. That egg.” The Heichecera pointed to it.
“Feel how hot it is?” Ethel cupped her hands, and was amazed to note that the egg was as warm and as soft as a living person.

“That egg is directly linked to Thomas,” The Heichecera explained. “When he suffers, it suffers. When he thrives, it thrives. There will come a time when Thomas’ soul will be at stake, when his very life will be on the line. When that happens, you will use this egg as a decoy to distract death from its real target, and save Thomas’ life.”

“But if it’s connected to him, won’t he die too then?” Ethel asked.

“No,” The Heichecera shook her head, “Thomas’ life affects the life of the egg, but the life of the egg doesn’t affect the life of Thomas.”

Ethel blinked, confused. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to at this moment,” The Heichecera explained. “All you have to do is keep that egg safe until I tell you. Put it somewhere bullet proof. Somewhere that only you will have access to. When the time comes, you’ll use it. Until then, just keep it out of sight.”

Ethel nodded, and let the egg drop into her pocket. There it rested, next to a spool of black sewing thread and a pair of Mrs. Hughes’ spare scissors.

The Heichecera was pleased, and gave Ethel a tender smile: “Now to the business of uniting our star-crossed lovers. Thomas has decided to be a petulant little child, which is hardly surprising, but I have ideas of my own.”

“I’m all ears,” Ethel said with avid interest. She was practically bouncing upon her heels, delighted to give her husband a chance to be as happy as he had made her.

“Mr. Carson is going to tell Jimmy to wind the clocks today,” The Heichecera explained. “Jimmy doesn’t have a clue how to do that. He’ll come up here to try and sort it out. You’re going to catch Thomas in Matthew Crawley’s dressing room, and then you’re going to tell him that Mr. Carson is looking for him and is waiting at the clock. Understand?” she asked.

“Right!” Ethel said. She paused at the sound of a door opening, and looked over her shoulder to see Matthew Crawley coming out of his dressing room looking smart as always. He smiled to Ethel as he passed.

“Ethel,” Mr. Crawley said in greeting, heading down the stairs.

“Mr. Crawley,” Ethel dipped in a curtsey. When Matthew was out of sight, she turned back to the Heichecera to ask her what to do next.…

But she was alone in the hallway.

For a beat, Ethel merely stood there on her own, unsure of how to enact their plan. But even as she waited, unsure of how to proceed, she was suddenly intruded upon by Jimmy walking out of the green baize door. He gave her a short, small, smile, heading for the clock at the top of the gallery stairs.

Ethel waited until Jimmy was at the clock, poking and prodding warily at the massive brass hands, before she turned on her heel and trotted up the hall to Matthew’s dressing room. She opened the door, and found Thomas putting away Matthew’s morning toilette. He looked around, noticed Ethel in the doorway, and gave her a gentle smile.
“Brought you some toast,” Ethel said as a way of greeting. The egg was hot in her pocket, clearly reacting to being so close to its master. Thomas took the toast at once, eating it with ghusto. “You know, if you came down to the table you might be able to eat on a regular schedule.”

“Don’t tease,” Thomas grumbled.

“Fine, I won’t,” Ethel shrugged. She was well past teasing. She was now fully into scheming. “Mr. Carson is looking for you, by the way. The clock at the top of the gallery stairs is giving him trouble.”

Thomas rolled his eyes, brushing crumbs from his fingers as he tucked Matthew’s toiletries into a lower cabinet of his wardrobe. “That damned clock,” Thomas cursed under his breath, rising up to tug at the bottom of his vest so that it lay flat. “It’s always being a pain.”

“As I said, he can’t get it to work,” Ethel shrugged. “So you’d best go make it behave.”

Thomas left the dressing room, heading up the hall towards the bend in the corner which would take him to the top of the gallery stairs. For a moment, Ethel waited in the dressing room, not wanting to tip Thomas off that something might be askew. When she poked her head out the door, she found Thomas near the end of the hallway and hurried after him.

She wanted to see the moment that they reunited.

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The soft trickle of the morning sun was causing shafts of light to fall through the upper windows of the stairwell. They illuminated bits of dust, which swirled through the air with each passing of wind.

And there he was.

So many years had passed since Thomas had seen Jimmy Kent, but not once (not even for one day) had Thomas forgotten exactly what Jimmy looked like. Jimmy had become to him like a painting hung in a famous gallery, an image that people would come from far and wide to see. Since the day Jimmy had left in 1925, Thomas had mourned his existence. The coif in his beautiful golden hair. The twinkle in his aubergine eyes. The pout of his cupid’s bow, and the way that his brow furrowed when he was thinking too hard.

His spirit, his charisma.
His heart.

Jimmy stood at the top of the gallery stairs, pondering over the grandfather clock that kept time near the railing. Jimmy was so lost in thought that he did not notice Thomas right away. Instead, he played with the hands of the clock.

Now it seemed they’d both turned back time.

Thomas looked over his shoulder, his heart pounding in his throat and tears stinging at the corners of his eyes. Sure enough, he found Ethel hiding behind a column. Though it seemed that at first she’d been delighted by her devious plan, now she seemed to realize just how heavy Thomas’ heart was at seeing his love again.
She was taken aback, ashamed even to have tricked him in such a way.

Thomas turned back to Jimmy, still wondering over the clock. He wondered how feasible it would be to simply stand her and look forever.

To know that that was all he would ever be able to do, but that that would be enough.

Jimmy gave an irritated sigh, and straightened up. He looked wistfully over his shoulder, only to pause as his eyes met Thomas’.

His legs were moving against his own volition. He was walking towards Jimmy without even realizing it, drawn by the energy between them like a moth to a flame. He could no more stay away from Jimmy than he could detach his head from his spine.

But Jimmy was walking towards him too. There was an oddly hopeful look upon his face. He seemed… entranced.

“...Hello,” Jimmy greeted him. His voice was melodic, soft and sweet. Just as beautiful as Thomas remembered.

Thomas gave him a small, pained smile.

“Hello, Jimmy,” He replied.

Jimmy was slightly taken aback. “How do you know my name?”

Of course, Thomas could not tell him the truth… but that wasn’t a new sensation. He was used to lying to Jimmy by now. Used to hiding his true feelings.

“*Well when I get back, I want to find you happy, healthy, and courting a girl from the village.*”

“...I’ve seen you before,” Thomas said. For whatever reason, Jimmy was starting to look hopeful again.

“Where?” he asked at once. “Have we met face to face?”

“...Yes,” Thomas said. “It was at a party long ago, but you probably don’t remember me.”

Jimmy was searching his face, scanning it with obvious pain to try and find some trace of a memory long since passed.

“It’s funny,” Jimmy admitted, ”You seem somewhat familiar… but I can’t place it. I could swear I’d seen your face before. Like maybe in a dream or something."

Thomas wondered if it were possible for Jimmy to dream of him in this reality when they hadn't met yet. He doubted it though.

“I swear… I know your name,” Jimmy’s face was screwed up in concentration. Thomas gave a tiny laugh.

“Guess,” Thomas offered. God only knows what Jimmy would come up with. He wondered what people thought his name was when they didn’t know it. Did he look like a ‘Thomas’ or did he look like something else?

But Jimmy’s face had relaxed. He looked up at Thomas, aubergine eyes calm and wide. They were soaking him in, every feature, every crevice. Thomas felt like Jimmy was retracing him, as if bidden
to memorize him.

“...Thomas,” Jimmy said. “You’re name is Thomas, isn’t it?”

It was a lucky guess, nothing more. Thomas refused to look into it.

“That’s right,” Thomas said. “Thomas Barrow… and you’re Jimmy Kent.”

Jimmy smiled; beamed rather. He offered his hand for Thomas to shake. Thomas looked down at it wistfully,

He could not touch Jimmy, not when he knew that Jimmy was not meant for him. To touch Jimmy would be too much pain to bear. Too much for him to take.

“...Forgive me,” Thomas whispered, unable to reach out to shake Jimmy’s hand. “Never doubt that I am your friend, Jimmy. Should you need anything from me, do not hesitate to ask.”

Jimmy dropped his hand, taken aback. There was hurt in his beautiful eyes, and Thomas was disgusted to know he’d put it there.

“Thomas-” Jimmy tried to speak but Thomas raised a hand.

It was too much to bear, he needed air to recompose himself. He needed space.


“Why?” Jimmy asked, confused. “What have you done?”

But that was a question Thomas could not answer without sounding like a lunatic.

“I best get back to work,” Thomas mumbled. He turned away, heading for the green baize door. As he passed by Ethel, he registered the shock and shame in her eyes.

Whatever scheme she’d been hoping to play out, she’d acted without the full understanding of the pain in Thomas’ past.

Thomas left, closing the green baize door behind him.
Dear Readers,

I've been battling with this story for a while now. Volver was started nearly two years ago, and has been one of my largest works by far. I've poured my heart and soul into each chapter, and as a result it's drained me dry. Now, coming to the climax of the story, I find that it's almost impossible for me to keep going. It's stressing me out, to the point where I'm getting heart palpitations and find that I'm losing faith in it. Now, normally, this is when a writer would walk away and give it up. However, I do feel determined to see this story through. Therefore, I've decided to offer up an opportunity to my readers which I hope will prove to be my saving grace. This is my official "Hail Mary".

I've decided to offer up this story to another author. If you are passionate about this story and feel that you can help contribute to finishing it, email me at liladostal@gmail.com. Essentially, I will give the co-author all the plot points, as well as the dialogue skeleton, and help walk you through the process. In return you can offer me any types of changes or comments, be it on plot or dialogue, that you desire.

This decision comes from my devotion to my readers, whom I feel responsible for. I know it may seem odd, but I hope that it will help offer an up and coming writer the chance to really set their heels in and make progress on their own writing careers.

When I started writing Volver, I was living in Washington state and unsure if I would get into graduate school. Now, I'm living in Atlanta and I'm half-way through with my graduate program. I've changed, and my devotion to this story is fading. I need someone to help lighten this load so that way I can get started on other Downton stories that I really want to pursue. Two stories in particular are looming hard in my mind. I want to tackle the topic of Thomas being Mary's twin, and likewise show the other side of Spare the Rod, in which we see what would have happened had Thomas ended up with Robert Crawley.

So, in order to get moving on both these plots (which I'm excited for), I want to move Volver into the capable hands of someone else.

I look forward to hearing from anyone whose curious.

I remain as ever your devoted author,

Dementian
End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!