The Boys In Navy Blue

by Marblez

Summary

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Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

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THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER ONE

Ripon, Yorkshire
Tuesday 4th February 1919

Despite spending most of his wartime career operating out of either Rosyth, Scotland, or Scapa Flow, a body of water in the Orkney Islands, Thomas had ended his Naval Career in the home of the Royal Navy; Portsmouth. He had been transferred to HMS Excellent, the latest of the shore establishments located in the nautical town, in the days following the internment of the German Navy’s High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow on the orders of his Captain who had also received a transfer to the shores base and wanted to take his best steward with him. Thomas had been both flattered and annoyed; flattered to know that he had made such an impression on the man that he would help to further his career in order to keep him close by and annoyed that the decision to transfer had been taken completely out his hands.

He had waited only four weeks before putting in his request to leave the Naval Service.

Shipboard life, surprisingly, had suited him but life on a shore establishment was startlingly different. It didn’t help that Thomas had gone from being the Chief Officers Steward, firstly on board the cruiser HMS Warrior and then on the battleship HMS Warspite, to one of the Junior Officer Stewards in the bases Wardroom. Nor did it help that he knew there was a much more preferable job waiting for him at Downton Abbey should his time at sea be over.

Once his request had been authorised and the frustratingly complicated process of leaving the Royal Navy had officially begun Thomas had sent a telegram to his future employer at Downton Abbey, letting them know to expect him sometime in the next couple of weeks.

And that was how he came to be alighting from the last stage of the somewhat complicated train journey from the South Coast, a journey that had required one twenty minute stop to allow another train to pass them by and two separate changes, at Ripon’s familiar station.
No one was there to greet him, not that he had been expecting anyone as he hadn’t been able to
confirm his date and time of arrival in advance, and so he shouldered his canvas kit bag with
practiced ease and made his way along the station towards the exit. He still wore his uniform, not
having had enough time between the final paperwork being sorted and the departure time of his
first train, and so drew rather more attention than he would have liked.

Despite having been travelling for most of the day his uniform was still presentable enough that he
could have walked straight into the Wardroom and not received a reprimand; his “white front” was
crisp and clean underneath his navy blue jumper, the twin creases running down the sleeves almost
as sharp as those forming the required “W” on his blue collar. His silk, a square of material folded
seven times and sewn at one end to form a loop, was pressed and the bow securing it to his jumper
perfectly formed. His white lanyard had been starched the day before and so all but shone where it
was looped around the bottom of the silk, passing through the centre of the bow before
disappearing inside of his jumper.

His bell-bottomed trousers were the only part of his uniform that had really suffered from the
journey, tiny creases having formed on the backs of his knees and thighs between the seven
required horizontal creases which were designed so that the trousers could be folded up like a
concertina when not being worn. Thomas, with his training as a footman and the occasional stand-
in valet, had never had a problem getting these creases, which alternated between pointing inwards
and out, perfectly placed but several of his fellow stewards had made a complete hash of it until
Thomas had instructed them on the proper way to do it.

Pausing to allow a mother with a young child on her hip to pass through the gate which separated
the station from the road he just happened to glance down at his feet and noted, to his annoyance
that one of his boots had been scuffed, a dull line slashing through the gleaming polish along the
outside of the toe. The boots themselves were made of black leather which, once properly softened,
made for a relatively comfortable fit and were toe-cap-less and un-hobnailed. As a steward he had
been required to polish them until the toes were such that he could have used them as a mirror,
catching the sun and literally glinting.

Finishing off his uniform was the white-topped peak-less cap which sat at a jaunty angle on top of
his head, his ink black hair swept back underneath it. He’d received a new cap tally, black with a
gold HMS stitched into it, upon transferring to Portsmouth as his old one was looking a little bit
worse for wear and so the complicated bow above his right ear was nice and crisp, not a single
thread hanging loose and not even a trace of a curl at the end points.

His lone medal ribbon, the distinctive red, white and blue of the 1914-1915 Star which he had been
issued with following its establishment in December 1918, stood out on his left breast as did the
fouled anchor, made with gold thread embroidered onto a navy blue patch which he had sewn onto
his uniform with pride, denoting his rank of Leading Seaman on his left arm. Below his badge of
rank sat a single gold “good-conduct stripe” which was a simple way of recognising that he had
served for sat least three years without a single reprimand.

*They were probably more used to seeing khaki uniforms,* Thomas thought to himself as he headed
for the bus stop, *rather than navy blue so he couldn’t really blame them for staring.*

Joining the line of people at the bus stop, a haggard looking mother and her two children, a young
man with one of his trouser legs pinned up around all that was left of the limb who use a pair of
wooden crutches to get around, a couple of young women carrying a collection of shopping
packages, a teenage boy who was obviously in need of a good meal and, of all people, Anna Smith,
Head Housemaid of Downton Abbey and Thomas’ former colleague.
“…Thomas?”

“Hello, Anna,” he responded, coming to a halt next to her and dropping his kit bag down to the ground, resting it expertly against his leg to keep it from tipping over. “You look well.”

“…thank you…” she murmured at last, her words coming out on autopilot. “I didn’t know you were coming back to Downton…I assume that’s where you’re headed? The Abbey?”

“That is my intended destination, yes,” Thomas confirmed, reaching into his pocket for his cigarettes and lighter. Anna refused the pack when he offered it to her. “I’m on my way to speak to Lieutenant…Mr Crawley about a job. That’s going to take some getting used to.”

If Anna thought that the leather gloves he wore were out of place with his uniform she didn’t say so, focused as she was on his explanation. The gloves were, in fact, against the dress regulations but Thomas had been granted leave to wear them to hide the ugly scars which were constant reminders of the injuries he had suffered during the Battle of Jutland.

“A job?” Anna repeated, sounding puzzled. “Are you coming back as a footman?”

“Not as a footman, no,” he countered with a shake of his head, calmly holding his cigarette between the first two fingers on his right hand. Anna frowned. “As Mr Crawley’s new valet.”

“But Mr Crawley has refused to hire a valet since returning from the war…”

Thomas chuckled.

“Might have something to do with him having already offered me the position after I saved his life at the Battle of Jutland,” he offered lightly, turning as he heard the rattle of the open topped bus as it approached the stop. It looked exactly the same as it had before the war, from the gleaming red paint to the advert for “Pears Soap – The King of Soaps – The Soap of Kings” along the sides enclosing the top deck to the freshly polished brass lamps, which left him to assume that it probably hadn’t been pressed into military service like many of them had been. Once it had come to a stop the two children at the front of the queue hurried on, climbing up the winding steps to get to the exposed upper level whilst their mother showed their ticket stubs to the female conductor. Thomas was the only one not to produce a ticket stub, instead fishing out a handful of coins as he followed Anna onto the public vehicle. “I’m surprised Miss O’Brien never mentioned it. We’ve discussed my return to the Abbey often.”

*Often* was perhaps stretching the truth a little bit...

“Single to Downton, please.”

“No charge,” the young conductress responding calmly, refusing the money he had been offering her in favour of ringing the bell that would signal to the driver that everyone was aboard. Thomas frowned at her in confusion. “My brother, Harry, was on HMS Invincible.”

Thomas couldn’t stop himself from flinching as the mention of the battlecruiser brought back a vivid memory of the moment he had heard the horrific explosion, unlike anything he had ever heard before that day, which had sent 1,020 men to meet their maker, the ship all but vanishing in a plume of smoke between one glance and the next. Sadly *HMS Invincible* hadn’t been the only battlecruiser to meet such an unexpectedly sudden end; in fact it was the last of the three which had been taken out during the course of the naval battle, *HMS Indefatigable* and *HMS Queen Mary* having both been destroyed a couple of hours earlier.

“I haven’t charged a single sailor for a ticket since.”
He was grateful to the fact that the vehicle began to move then, prompting him to hurry up the winding steps to the top deck to find a seat which meant he could get away with just offering the young woman a nod of thanks, not knowing what he could have possible said.

Years spent aboard ship meant that he was perfectly steady on his feet despite the fact that the bus was winding its way along the narrow roads, allowing him to make his way across to one of the empty seats. Sitting down he moved his kit bag so that it was resting between his legs, holding it in place with his knees, and then removed his cap long enough to apply the chin stay, a strip of fabric which looped underneath his chin and would keep it on his head.

Anna, it appeared, had chosen to sit in the sheltered area downstairs.

The journey passed by in series of a familiar sights, not much having changed since he last caught the bus from Ripon to Downton. He was certain that things must have looked a bit different during the war what with all the young men in uniform but now, three months after the armistice had been signed, it seemed that everything had returned to normal.

Well, so long as you ignored empty spaces which had been left behind by the number of young men who had gone to fight for their country, never to return to their loved ones.

“Are you in the Navy?”

“Patrick, hush,” the harassed mother scolded the child who had turned around to stare up at Thomas with a pair of enormous blue eyes. She turned to Thomas, “I’m sorry, he’s just…”

“It’s all right,” Thomas assured her, smiling down at the young boy who could be no older the four. And wasn’t that a sad thought, that this child had only known a life at war. “I was in the Navy, yes, but I’ve just been discharged and am on my way to take up my new post.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m returning to service,” he explained, offering the boys older brother a smile as he turned around as well. He’d always had a soft spot for children, for their innocence and total lack of prejudice. “I was a footman before the war, in service at Downton Abbey, and now I shall be working as valet to Mr Matthew Crawley who I served alongside on board HMS Warrior.”

“Our daddy was a soldier,” the older of the two brothers announced. “He was in France.”

“He never came home…”

Thomas was unsurprised to see tears well up in their mother’s eyes.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he murmured. “I’m sure your father was a very brave man.”

“He was.”

Their conversation was brought to a close by the bus arriving at their stop, halfway between Ripon and Downton, and the mother thanked him in passing as she nudged her children off of the bus. Thomas was then left alone for the remainder of his journey, leaving him to think about the sheer number of children that must have been left fatherless by the terrible war.

Arriving in Downton a short while later Thomas slung his kit bag over his shoulder once more, bounced down the winding stairs and stepped down onto the road, nodding to the conductress as he passed her. Anna, having been on the lower deck, had alighted some time before him and was already hurrying through the village towards the path that would take them through the woods to
the Abbey. Pausing for a moment so as to light himself a fresh cigarette Thomas then allowed his feet to take him along the path he’d trod countless times.

As he emerged from the woods at the edge of the grounds he could see Anna ahead of him, ducking into the servant’s courtyard, and he knew that by the time he reached the servant’s door news of his arrival would have spread throughout the entire house, upstairs and down.

_I suppose that saves me from having to announce myself_, he chuckled silently to himself as he made his way across the pristine lawn, coming to an unexpected stop halfway between the woods and the house as his mind transported him back to the last time that he had been stood on that particular spot. It had been the day of the garden party. He had been trying to find a way to leave the Abbey after his schemes had left him on the wrong side of both Lord Grantham and Mr Carson. It had also been the day that war had been declared…

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**Downton Abbey, Yorkshire**

**4th August 1914**

Thomas would never admit it but his face hurt; William threw a surprisingly strong punch.

He would also never admit that, yes, he probably had deserved it. He _had_ been being even more unpleasant than usual but he just couldn’t help it. He knew that they all despised him, not only for his actions but for what he was. Oh, they might claim ignorance but he could feel their judgmental looks upon his back just as he had felt them from his father as a child.

“What a long-faced lot…”

“Kindly show some respect.”

“Come on, Mr Carson, she’ll get over it. They’re no bigger than a hamster at that stage.”

“Will you shut up?”

Of course, Mr Bates’ interjection had just served to rile him up even further.

How he envied the other man, to be so loved that everyone would overlook his inability to do his job and allow him to hold such an important position within the household. To be thought well of no matter what he did, no matter if he deserved it or not. To be so _normal_.

“I agree. What is the matter with you, Thomas?”

“I don’t know. I suppose all this makes me feel claustrophobic,” he had defended himself to Mrs Hughes who he respected above everyone else. “I mean I’m sorry, ’course I am, but why must we live through them? They’re just our employers; they’re not our flesh and blood.”

“Thomas, don’t be so unkind.”

“Is there nothing left on earth that you respect?”

William. His gaze snapped across to his fellow footman who, just like him, was sporting a nasty bruise on his face only unlike him everyone kept asking him if he was feeling alright.

No one cared it Thomas was feeling alright.
"Hark at him," Thomas had laughed cruelly, needing to hurt the younger man who didn’t realise how lucky he was to come from a family that loved him, that actually gave two shits about him. Unlike Thomas who had been unwanted, unloved; his parents hadn’t wanted another boy after his brother Charlie. They’d wanted a girl. What they’d got was a boy who sometimes wished he’d been born a girl simply because it would have meant that his soul wouldn’t be doomed to hell for daring to love and lust after people of his own sex. After his sister, Violet, had finally come along he’d been ignored whenever he wasn’t being scolded, beaten or purposefully starved. It had almost been a relief to be thrown out onto the street on his fourteenth birthday. "Blimey, if he carries on like this for the unborn baby of a woman who scarcely knows his name, no wonder he fell to pieces when his old mum snuffed it."

Yes, looking back he had definitely deserved the punch that he been thrown his way.

"William!"

Deserving the punch didn’t mean he hadn’t been right to fight back, however; that was just instinct born of spending two years living on the streets begging for food and work. It was his second biggest secret and the only one that no one at Downton Abbey had managed to discover by themselves, the fact that before he’d found work as a Hall Boy at Brompton Manor he’d lived in the gutter and if he had his way none of them would ever find out.

They all looked down their noses at him enough as it was.

"Thomas! William! Stop that! That is enough!"

Branson had separated them as soon as Thomas had gotten the upper hand, pulling William away from him whilst Carson had taken it upon himself to shove Thomas out of the room.

Being outside of the room didn’t mean he hadn’t heard Branson’s declaration, however,

"He had that coming."

"Thomas?" Daisy called out to him, drawing him back to the present moment. He found her holding a fresh tray of delicious looking pastries out to him. "Are you going to apologise?"

"Have I done something to you that I need to apologise for?"

"Not to me," she muttered as he took hold of the tray. "William."

Thomas let out a sigh, shaking his head, before heading back out towards the guests.

He had been hoping to speak to Dr Clarkson about the prospect of joining the Royal Army Medical Corps as war now seemed inevitable, hoping that such a position would keep him away from the worst of the fighting, but he couldn’t see the older man amongst the guests.

"Anna?" he called out to the Housemaid as he passed her. "Have you seen Dr Clarkson?"

"He was called back into the village with an emergency," she explained quickly as she hurried back towards the tent with a tray of empty glasses. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"No."

Damn.

He would have to head into the village to speak with the Doctor at the earliest opportunity.
Returning to his duties he caught sight of Branson running up to Lady Sybil whilst she was talking with two of her friends, leaning in to whisper something into her ear in a manner most unbefitting a servant, and he’d be lucky to keep his job if Mr Carson saw him like that.

And then they ran off together, Lady Sybil leading the way towards where Gwen was stood.

Darling little Gwen who wasn’t happy with a life in service.

“Mr Bromidge has rung!” he heard Lady Sybil exclaim even from the distance he was at, offering the tray to yet another ungrateful guest. “You’ve done it, Gwen! You got the job!”

Of course, she got the job, Thomas thought to himself bitterly as the Gwen handed off her tray so that the three of them could celebrate, clutching at each other’s arms and bouncing in place, why wouldn’t they hire her? What with Lady Sybil Crawley herself vouching for her?

He was pleased when he saw Mrs Hughes break up their happy moment.

Circulating with the trays he collected at sporadic intervals from Daisy, who kept stealing a few words with William every time he refreshed his own trays, Thomas watched the notable events of the extravagant garden party as they played out; Lady Mary sabotaging her sister’s chances with Sir Anthony Strallen, Anna and Mr Bates having a “tête-à-tête” in the catering tent, Lady Mary trying and failing to patch things up with Matthew Crawley, the Dowager Countess scolding her only daughter, Lady Rosamund, Mr Carson comforting Lady Mary…

Sometimes people watching was the only thing that could keep him going as he carried out the monotonous work that was required of a first footman at something like a garden party.

And then Mr Carson delivered an urgent telegram to His Lordship.

Thomas watched as his employers expression dropped as he read the words printed upon the small piece of yellow paper, his previous smile vanishing completely as he hurried out of the tent which had been erected to protect Lady Cora from the sun, calling out to everyone,

“Please, will you stop, please!”

The string quartet, hired for the event, stopped halfway through a bar.

“My lords, ladies and gentlemen. Can I ask for silence?”

One by one every single guest and servant on the well-maintained lawn fell silent.

Thomas frowned.

What news could Lord Grantham have received that was so important?

Unless…

“Because I very much regret to announce that we are at war with Germany.”

War.

There was no saving the jovial mood of the garden party after that, several of the guests choosing to leave straight away in order to return to their own families, particularly those with sons of fighting age, and those that did stay talked of nothing but the oncoming war.

Lady Cora excused herself from the remaining guests, disappearing inside with Miss O’Brien,
whilst Mrs Crawley hurried across the lawn to her son, resting her shaking hand on his arm and gazing up at him fearfully whilst he attempted to remain stoic. Lady Sybil, continuing to do her duty of circulating amongst the guests, kept glancing across at where Branson was helping with the heavy lifting in the catering tent whilst Lady Edith had taken it upon herself to look after the Dowager Countess who looked more than a little bit shaken. Lady Mary, on the other hand, showed no emotion whatsoever as she moved to stand beside her father.

Thomas thought personally that His Lordship was about to be sick.

Eventually only the family were left, heading inside together, which left the servants to clear up. Thomas lost track of time, busy as he was carrying heavy trays back into the house, and by the time everything was cleared away it was time for the servants to have their dinners.

“I meant to ask, Thomas, what did you need to speak to Dr Clarkson about?”

Anna’s sudden enquiry brought complete silence as everyone turned to stare at him, some from out of confusion, others gazing with open curiosity. As for Thomas he paused, his fork halfway to his mouth, as he silently debated whether or not he should tell them the truth.

Eventually he cleared his throat, returning his fork to his plate as he answered,

“I wished to enquire about joining the Medical Corps should there be a war.”

His announcement was met with even more confusion.

Well, apart from Mr Carson who looked rather pleased with his announcement, no doubt looking forward to getting rid of him without having to go through the motions of firing him.

“…you want to join the Army?”

“The Medical Corps,” Thomas corrected Gwen’s statement. “I wish to join as a Medic.”

“I would have thought someone such as you might prefer the Royal Navy than the British Army,” Mr Bates announced, calmly piercing a piece of pork on his fork and scooping some of the rich gravy onto it with his knife. “I don’t know if Army life will suit you quite so well.”

The silence at the table took on an entirely different edge following the valet’s statement.

“I don’t know if I like what you’re implying, Mr Bates…”

“Only that your…skills as a footman would be much more appreciated on board ship,” Bates supplied his explanation calmly, his hesitation deliberate. Thomas bristled. Around the table gazes flickered back and forth between the two men. “Rather than on a violent battlefield.”

“That is quite enough,” Mr Carson interrupted before anything further could be said and for once Thomas was quite grateful for the butler’s interruption. His stomach felt like it was made of lead, turning him off of his food completely as he contemplated the fact that everyone was well aware of what Mr Bates had been implying; his sinful nature would be more at home at sea. “I will have no more talk of war at my dinner table. Everyone, finish your meals and then get on with your duties. It will be time for the family’s dinner shortly.”

“Yes, Mr Carson.”

Thomas couldn’t get Bates’ comments out of his head for the rest of the evening.
The words played over and over in the back of his mind, as did everyone’s reactions, the way they had stared at him and continued to stare at him. He’d known that they all knew or at least suspected his…perversion…but to have it brought up in such a…a public fashion…

When, at long last, he was lying in his bed attempting to drift off to sleep Thomas couldn’t help but wonder if Mr Bates might actually be correct; would the Royal Navy be a better place for him? He didn’t possess a violent nature, had only ever fought to defend himself as per the situation with William, so the idea of being sent into battle genuinely worried him.

Perhaps…

Perhaps joining the Royal Navy wasn’t such a bad idea after all…

And so, ignoring Mr Bates’ smirk, that was exactly what he did.

~ * * ~

_A/N_ Ok, so I know I should be writing my other stories rather than starting a new one but I couldn’t stop myself. Let me know what you think. Comments & Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Two

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A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

WARNING – this chapter starts with a sex scene (Thomas/OC) but it’s nothing too graphic.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER TWO

HMS Warrior
March 1916

“I’ve never done anything like this before…”

Thomas grunted in response, unable to respond with actual words given that his talented lips were currently wrapped around a certain part of the breathless young officers anatomy.

This was probably a good thing, however, given that his immediate thought following the soft admission was a rather derogatory assessment of the Sub Lieutenants non-existent skills. It was painfully obvious to Thomas that the boy, who didn’t look old enough to drink alcohol, was a complete and utter novice when it came to the so called “sins of the flesh.”

He doubted that the young officer had even lain with a woman before now, let alone a man.

Never mind.
Thomas was an excellent instructor.

It didn’t take him long to bring the boy to his peak, smirking up at him as the young officer bit down on his knuckles to stop himself from crying out. His other hand had instinctively grabbed hold of Thomas by his hair not long after their “fun” had begun and on the heat of the moment his grip had tightened, keeping the older man’s head in place between his legs.

Not that Thomas had had any intention of pulling away from the feast that was offered up to him; he was on his knees for a reason, after all, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

“…oh…oh my goodness…”

Thomas smirked, pulling back and wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

“I take it you liked that, then?”

A pair of grey eyes, dilated with arousal, met a pair of equally dilated green eyes although the cause of the latter’s response was the orgasm that their owner had just experienced.

“Liked it?” Sub Lieutenant Horace Greenaway repeated hoarsely. “Barrow, it was amazing…”

“I think given the circumstances you should probably call me Thomas, don’t you?”

“Thomas,” the young officer murmured bashfully, trailing his trembling hand over the older man’s shoulder as Thomas rose up to his full height, eventually allowing it to come to rest over his heart. “I’ve never felt so…that was…it was unlike anything I’ve ever…I don’t know…”

Thomas, in a rare moment of sympathy, pressed a single finger to the younger man’s lips to silence him, putting an end to his flustered babbling before tucking a wayward lock of wheat coloured hair behind the Sub Lieutenants ear. His smooth cheeks flushed a deep red colour.

“Am I to assume that you’d be open to doing this again sometime?”

Eyes wide, heated, young Greenaway nodded without hesitation.

“And what about returning the favour?”

To make sure that his point didn’t get lost in translation Thomas took hold of Greenaway’s hand and brought it down to the bulge in his trousers, smirking as the young man gasped.

“I’ve never…”

“I know,” Thomas assured him. “But we all have to learn sometime. I myself learned from Michael Friars, the publican of my father’s favourite watering hole, when I was fourteen.”

“…you’ve known you were…like this…since you were fourteen?”

“I’ve known since I was eleven and realised that the thought of kissing Mary Stewart turned my stomach but the thought of kissing her brother, Fred, made my lips tingle,” he chuckled, noticing that even though he was blushing worse than ever the younger man hadn’t moved his hand away. In fact he appeared to be absentmindedly pressing against the hardness that Thomas had drawn his attention to. “What about you? When did you realise you were…?”

“I…” Greenaway hesitated for a moment before confessing. “I suppose I’ve always been this way but…but I thought nothing could come of it. I was raised to believe it was a sin against God. That it was wrong. And then I saw you in the Wardroom and I just needed to kiss you.”
Well, if that didn’t flatter Thomas’ ego he didn’t know what else would.

“…just kiss?”

“Well, now that I know better, no not just kiss,” the young officer admitted, huffing out an embarrassed breath as he blinked up at Thomas. “And I suppose…yes, I’ll return the favour.”

Thomas was embarrassed himself by how little time it took for him to reach his own climax once he’d instructed the naïve young man on precisely what he needed to do but he quickly reminded himself that it had been a while since he’d had anything more than his own hand.

He wasn’t at all surprised when the young officer gagged at the taste, spitting the mouthful he’d been given into the palm of his hand as he rocked back onto his heels, still kneeling.

“How could you swallow that?” he demanded softly, looking a little green. “Ugh! It’s foul!”

Thomas chuckled, handing the officer the hand towel which was hung from a hook on the wall beside the tiny mirror and over the equally tiny basin that Greenaway had been given to complete his daily ablutions at in his private, although it was admittedly tiny, cabin. Some of the officers truly didn’t realise how lucky they were; Thomas had to make do with the heads closest to where he and the other stewards strung their hammocks up every night.

It had taken him months to get used to sleeping in a hammocks rather than a bed but, given the motion of the ship, he had eventually realised that he had never had such a good nights sleep as when he was being gently rocked from side to side in his hammock. His things, such as his wash kit, his personal correspondence and the various articles of uniform he had been issued with, were kept in simple wooden lockers in the small room between the wardroom and the galley, a preparation room of sorts which only the stewards were permitted to use.

“You get used to it,” he reassured the younger man, glancing out of the porthole on the wall above the narrow bed. Another luxury not afforded to Thomas and his fellow stewards. He could see that the sun was beginning to set behind what he knew to be HMS Defence, the ship that was anchored on their starboard side. HMS Duke of Edinburgh was anchored on their port side and then HMS Black Prince on the other side of them, putting the 1st Cruiser Squadron of the British Grand Fleet in a neat little row. “What watch are you on today?”

Before Greenaway could answer the ships bell sounded, filtering through the ship thanks to the open hatches, portholes and the ventilation grates; eight clear bells in four sets of two.

An actual whimper escaped the officer as the colour completely drained out of his face,

“This one!”

Thomas cursed, reaching out to help the young man fix his uniform. If Greenaway failed to report for his watch someone would be sent to fetch him and Thomas was not in the mood to be exposed as a homosexual to his superior officers; he’d kept his secret for far too long to risk going to prison now. Working together they quickly got his trousers buttoned up, his shirt tucked in and his jacket and tie back on; thankfully he hadn’t removed his shoes during their encounter and, after pressing a quick kiss to Thomas’ lips he hurried out, grabbing his peaked officers cap on his way out. His footsteps thundered away from the cramped cabin, stumbling noticeably when they reached the ladder, and Thomas couldn’t help but chuckle.

He set about tidying up the cabin, putting everything back to rights whilst also sorting out his own uniform. Greenaway had made a complete mess of his hair and so he was forced to utilise the
young man’s comb to smooth the ink black locks back into order; he had been given a regulation haircut when he’d enlisted but it had since grown back into something akin to his favoured style, shorter on the sides and longer on top which allowed him to either smooth it all back or give himself an off-centre parting depending on his preference.

As long as the longer sections were hidden underneath his cap no one cared.

Once both the cabin and his appearance had been returned to normal he poked his head out of the cabin, checked that the coast was clear and hurried his way through the ship to the wardroom, pausing to tug any creases out of his tight jacket before entering the room.

Thomas and his fellow stewards weren’t included in the watch system, much to some of their fellow ratings annoyance, as their duties took place on their own schedule. They did, however, use the bells to help them tell the time and this helped them know when it was time to prepare the wardroom for the officers meals or to be on hand to serve drinks, such as now. One duty which was less ordered was preparing teas and coffees for the officers of the watch; those orders could come at any time, day or night, and they had to be prepared.

“Ah, Barrow, perfect timing as ever,” Commander St John Collins, the second highest ranking offer on the ship, murmured cheerfully as he caught sight of Thomas. He was sat at the table which had hosted their evening meal a couple of hours previously, a letter open before him as he composed his response on a half-filled sheet of paper. “A sherry, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Following his basic training, during which he was initially chosen to become a stoker before his experiences as a footman had come to light and had thankfully seen him transferred to the stewarding branch, Thomas had joined the ships crew on Monday 4th January 1915 less than a month after the ship had joined the Grand Fleet. He had begun as just an ordinary steward, looking after the senior rates, but when Commander Collins had heard of his “prior training” in service he had quickly found himself promoted to the role of officers steward.

This move had suited Thomas perfectly and, despite being the most junior steward in terms of length of service, he had quickly become the first steward that the officers turned to. Of course, this had led to some resentment amongst his fellow stewards but Thomas had learned from his experiences in service and, rather than let that resentment fester as it had within him, turning him into a liar and a thief, he had done everything he could to befriend his colleagues. He had offered to teach them the little tricks he had learned as a footman which made certain tasks much easier, had helped them to complete tasks that they were struggling with such as when the Captain had needed his best uniform for an admiralty visit and the thing hadn’t been used in months leaving it in a terrible state. And it had worked.

“Here you go, Thomas,” Jenkins, the only other steward currently present in the wardroom murmured, handing him the bottle of sherry from the cabinet. Thomas nodded his thanks, retrieving a sherry glass from the top section of the cabinet which had been designed to store the delicate glassware they used, each glass held in place by a velvet covered strip of wood. “Go ahead and use the last of it. I’ll go fetch a fresh bottle from the quartermaster.”

Thomas snorted softly,

“Good luck with that.”
Their quartermaster, the person in charge of issuing out the ships supplies from the stores, was a notoriously “stingy bastard” and it was always a struggle to get anything from him. He took particular delight in torturing the youngest members of the crew, the boy sailors, and was known to make them all but beg for what they needed and would take his time getting the item just so that they would be punished for taking so long to complete their errands.

*HMS Warrior*, and indeed the entire *Grand Fleet*, had been anchored at *Scapa Flow*, in the *Orkney Islands*, for the majority of the war. They were acting as a “distant blockade” or so the Admiralty called it, closing the narrows of the English Channel with torpedo boats whilst keeping the *Grant Fleet* ready to put to sea from the north should the Germans threaten to break out. This meant that the ship was kept at a constant state of readiness and the crew were drilled regularly in their battle stations; all of the ships stewards were assigned to the Sick Berth in the event of the ship seeing action to act as orderlies and stretcher bearers.

If the papers were to be believed the blockade was working.

They had essentially placed the *German High Seas Fleet* under house arrest, able to venture into the *North Sea* but unable to make any meaningful input of the war. Vital supplies were kept from their enemy by their blockade, such as food and raw materials which included nitrates from South America which were essential for producing fertilisers and explosives.

This was, according to the newspapers, excellent news as, simply put, the fewer explosives they could make the fewer shells could be used against the brave men fighting in France.

“Here you are, sir,” Thomas murmured, carefully placing the glass of sherry on the table beside Commander Collins’ right hand. He had been careful not to overfill the glass lest it slosh over the rim as the ship was rocked by the ever active water upon which she sat. If the dark clouds were anything to go by they were in for a rough night. “Will that be all, sir?”

“For now, thank you, Barrow.”

Just as he was retreating to his usual spot where he could watch the entire room the door was flung open with enough force to sent it slamming into the wall, admitted one of the youngest Lieutenants who hurriedly removed his cap from his head; to be caught wearing ones cap in the wardroom resulted in the officer in question buying a bottle of port for the rooms occupants. Moray, the Lieutenant, was one of the Greenaway’s friends and had obviously just come off of watch, his cheeks bright red from the wind and his lips chapped.

“Barrow, thank goodness,” the young man sighed upon seeing him. “Cocoa, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hot drinks, such as cocoa, had to be prepared in the officers galley, located on the other side of the preparation room where Thomas’ locker was, and so he quickly left the room and made his way through to the almost deserted galley, the officers cooks having finished for the evening once the evening meal had been cleared away, leaving only one of the cooks mates at the sink scrubbing everything that he been used clean. Thomas, as an officers steward, had seniority and so ignored the other sailor as he moved to the small range to prepare the request cup of cocoa, warming the milk in a pan and adding the correct amount of cocoa powder. Once it was ready and he’d transferred the sweet smelling liquid into a mug he carried the pan over to the sink, finally acknowledging the cooks mate who nodded to him as he accepted the pan without question, adding it to his pile of things to wash up.

Although *HMS Warrior* hadn’t participated in any there had been some skirmishes during the past
two years, some further afield where the Admiralty had ordered them to round up and destroy Germany’s commerce raiders whilst others had taken place in the North Sea. The German Navy had attempted to isolate and destroy smaller British forces, a tactic which had been proven ill-advised and had effectively ceased following the Battle of Dogger Bank on the 24th January 1915. According to the sailors that Thomas had spoken to who had been there the battle had been “clumsy” and “badly fought” with mistakes happening on both sides although, ultimately, the British Battle Cruiser Fleet had emerged triumphant. They had managed to sink the Blücher, one of the smaller enemy ships, and HMS Lion had almost succeeded in destroying the SMS Seydlitz, Vice Admiral von Hippers flagship, but she had been allowed to escape due to a signalling mistake on board the crippled HMS Lion.

“Your cocoa, sir,” Thomas announced as he slipped back into the wardroom, carrying the mug over to the young man who had placed himself in one of the two armchairs which were located by the small stove. Despite it being May it could still get bitterly cold most evenings, the weather in the Orkney Islands not being known for its pleasant sunshine, and so the stove was kept lit almost as constantly as the ranges in the two galleys. “Anything else, sir?”

“No, thank you, Barrow,” Moray sighed, blowing on his cocoa before taking a sip. “Perfect.”

Thomas had just settled into his usual spot once more when they heard the distinct sound of the pipe announcing that their Captain had returned from his most recent run ashore, the duty signalman cutting the “pipe the side” off two seconds too early which would no doubt land him in trouble with the Officer of the Watch. A moment later the wardroom door swung open to admit the Captain himself, prompting the officers relaxing in the privacy of the room to rise to their feet and Thomas to snap to attention. Jenkins had yet to return.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Captain Maurice Elliott addressed the room, tucking his own cap under his arm as he moved out of the way for the figure that followed him inside. Thomas felt his mouth drop open ever so slightly as he took in the familiar figure before him. “May I introduce our newest addition to our ranks, Lieutenant Crawley, recently of HMS Caroline.”

Matthew bloody Crawley.

What in heavens name was Lord Grantham’s heir doing here, of all places? Hadn’t he been all set to take a commission in the British Army, or so Miss O’Brien’s last letter had claimed?

“I trust that you’ll get him well aquatinted with the old girl, gentlemen,” Elliott continued jovially, patting Matthew on the shoulder as the young man stepped forwards to shake the hand that Commander Collins offered to him, along with a soft introduction including his name and rank. “Barrow? Pot of tea to my cabin, please. I have some orders to go over.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Barrow?” Lieutenant Crawley sputtered with surprise, turning to face the steward with his own expression of shock. “Good God, Thomas. This is the last place I expected to see you.”

“Nor I, you, sir,” Thomas admitted, aware that the rest of the officers were staring at him in confusion. “I was under the impression that you had intended to join the British Army, sir.”

“Yes, well…”

“…I wasn’t aware that the two of you had served together.”

“Oh, we haven’t, sir,” Matthew responded before Thomas could open his mouth, turning to smile
somewhat sheepishly at Captain Elliott. “Thomas was a footman at my cousins house.”

“Before the war, sir,” Thomas added, just to make things perfectly clear. “I was first footman at Downton Abbey for the Earl of Grantham. Lieutenant Crawley is the heir to the title, sir.”

“Ah, I see,” Elliott murmured, nodding. “Well, Crawley, I’m sure you’ll fit in well with our crew. Barrow. If you could rustle up some biscuits as well that would much appreciated.”

“Of course, sir.”

The atmosphere relaxed as the much respected Captain left the room, all of the officers present moving forwards to introduce themselves to the newest member of their crew.

Thomas followed the older man out of the room, nodding to Jenkins as they crossed paths, and ducked into the galley where the cooks mate was still hard at work. He had just put the battered old kettle on to boil when, much to his surprise, Matthew ducked into the room.

“Sir?” he enquired softly as he retrieved the Captain’s tea things from the cupboard; he had brought his own teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl, cup and saucer with him from his families estate in Hampshire. “Was there something you needed? A tea, perhaps? If so I can bring…”

“Actually Thomas, sorry, Barrow, I was hoping to catch up with you a little.”

He made it sound as though they’d been friends before the war rather than one of the family and one of the servants, separated by more than just their wealth and positions.

“Catch up, sir?” he responded, taking down the Captain’s tray and setting things up the way that his Commanding Officer liked, aware of the way the cooks mate was staring. “How so?”

“Well, for starters, you’ll never guess where I’ve just been,” the newly promoted Lieutenant sighed, turning his cap over and over in his hands as he leaned back against the clean work top beside where Thomas was working. “I was given a spot of leave before joining the ship.”

Downton.

Home.

“I suppose it is much changed by the war,” Thomas murmured politely. “Is everyone well?”

“Actually, it was like stepping into an idyllic painting,” Matthew admitted softly, stealing a biscuit from the tin that Thomas had just retrieved from the cupboard. He grinned like a guilty school both when the steward shop him a well-practiced scowl. “Nothing much has changed. Yes, there’s more uniforms around the village and Robert has become attached to his old regiment again, in name only. They won’t be sending him off to war any time soon.”

“And Her Ladyship?” Thomas enquired. “Lady Mary and the others?”

“Lady Edith is learning to drive!” the Crawley heir burst out jovially, spraying a few biscuit crumbs out of his mouth as he did so. His cheeks flushed. “Apologies. But, yes, Edith is driving now and Lady Sybil has plans to take up nursing once she gets past her parents objections. Mothers on her side, of course, as is the Dowager Countess, most surprisingly.”

Thomas nodded in response, unsure of how he should respond verbally to that.

“Lady Mary is…unchanged,” Matthew continued, his voice becoming tight for the first time.
Thomas couldn’t blame him. First the eldest Crawley sister had outright laughed about the prospect of marrying him, calling him a sea monster if Thomas recalled correctly. Then she’d all but thrown herself at him, motivated at least partially by her desire to secure her title and position, something that she stood to lose otherwise. Next she’d played him for a fool, flirting with him before turning her attention on other men right in front of him. And then finally she’d acted the jilted party when he’d refused to even consider marrying her. “As is the Dowager Countess, still strong as ever. Lady Cora seemed a little bit fatigued, though.”

“Miss O’Brien wrote that she has been concerned for your safety, sir,” Thomas murmured, wishing that the water would hurry up and boil. Why was it that whenever he needed it to boil quickly it seemed to take an age and yet when he had all the time in the world it seemed to reach its boiling point in a matter of seconds. Drying off the last of the pots and pans he’d been scrubbing the cooks mate nodded respectfully towards first Matthew, then Thomas, before ducking out of the galley. “I haven’t heard from her in a while, though.”

“Have you managed to stay in contact with man of the servants?”

“Only Miss O’Brien,” Thomas admitted. “I was never very close to the others.”

“Ahh.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, sir, how did you come to end up in the navy?” he enquired, deciding to steer the conversation away from his former colleagues before he was forced to admit precisely why he was never very close to them; his jealous nature, his rash decisions, his stealing, his lying, and most importantly his sexual orientation. Oh, none of them had ever outright said it, of course, but he’d been fully away of how much they disapproved of his inverted desires. “Because Miss O’Brien informed me that it was the Army for you, sir.”

Matthew coughed, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, “…I may or may not have joined the wrong queue at the recruiting office in Ripon and by the time I realised it was too late.”

“…you’re joking,” Thomas snorted, unable to stop himself. The way Matthew shifted his feet, rocking back and forth on his heels whilst flushing a red so deep it could have been purple was answer enough. He wasn’t joking. Thomas let out a deep chuckle, the kettle finally beginning to whistle, signifying that it had finally boiled. Taking the rag he lifted it off of the hob, took the lid off of the teapot and poured the hot water into the china receptacle. “I bet that caused some interesting conversations back at the Abbey when you told them…”

If anything Matthews flush deepened.

“…except you haven’t told them, have you?”

A shake of his head was the heir to the Crawley Estates answer.

“Well, I can’t blame you there, sir,” Thomas muttered, spooning a decent amount of the Captains tea leaves into the teapot, giving them a stir to get them diffusing nicely. “It might be best to keep it to yourself on-board ship as well, sir, at least until they’ve gotten to know you. Most of the officers are career chaps, grandparents served with Nelson and all that.”

“Did they really? Serve with Nelson, I mean.”

“Commander Collins’ great-grandfather was at the Battle of Trafalgar, apparently, although he wasn’t aboard HMS Victory,” Thomas responding as he fetched a strainer, complete with its own miniature saucer, and added them to the tray. “Captain Elliott’s grandfather served with Nelson at
the *Battle of the Nile* but was invalided out of the Navy before *Trafalgar.*”

Matthew appeared to be genuinely impressed.

“Is this your first posting to a ship?”

“No. I joined up not too long after you did and until recently I was serving under Captain Browne aboard *HMS Caroline* as a Sub Lieutenant,” Matthew cheerfully supplied, watching as Thomas filled the Captain's milk jug up from the glass bottle kept in the cold storage box in the corner of the galley. “However upon receiving my promotion to Lieutenant I was awarded a transfer to *HMS Warrior* which was only ship with a spot open, apparently...”

“So you’ve gone from one of the newest ships in the fleet to the oldest?” Thomas chuckled, artfully placing some of the biscuits on a small plate before returned the tin to its home. He then bent his knees and picked up the laden tray with practiced ease, keeping his back ram-rod straight to minimise his discomfort. “I’m not entirely sure if that’s a step-up or not, Sir.”

“If I’m honest, neither do I,” Matthew chuckled deeply. “Let me get the door for you.”

“You don’t have to do that, sir,” Thomas protested even as the Lieutenant moved to hold open the door for him, contorting his slim body so as to allow the steward to exit the galley without displacing anything he carried on the tray. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, I should let you get on with your duties.”

They parted ways, Thomas delivering the tea tray to Captain Elliott’s cabin whilst Matthew returned to the wardroom to get to know his fellow officers by swapping stories with them about his time on board *HMS Caroline.* By the time Thomas returned to the wardroom the ship’s newest officer was ensconced in the other armchair in front of the stove, sipping from what appeared to be a glass of port and laughing raucously as something Moray was saying.

“Did you really work for the new Lieutenant before the war?”

“I worked for his relations, the Earl of Grantham and his family,” Thomas murmured softly, not wanting to draw any unwanted attention to him and Jenkins. “But, yes, I know him.”

“Small world.”

“Indeed.”

~ * ~ * ~

A/N I had quite a lot of fun working some Naval History into this chapter so I hope it wasn’t too boring and factual in places for you. Now, I can’t decide who I want Thomas to end up with in this Alternate Universe I’ve created so I thought that, whilst I’m still in the early stages of planning/writing, I’d ask for people’s opinions on the matter. The options I’ve come up with are Thomas/Matthew, Thomas/Jimmy (although I’m not a personal fan of this pairing if people want it I’ll write it), Thomas/Andy or Thomas/OC. Sadly putting Thomas in the Navy means that I can’t use my favourite pairing (Thomas/Edward) as I can’t figure out how they would meet. So, comments and suggestions are genuinely encouraged this time. X

¹ - toilets
Chapter Three

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER THREE

HMS Warrior
May 1916

“Something’s up,”

Thomas, perched on one of the ships bollards with half a cigarette between his lips as he read the latest letter he’d received from Miss O’Brien, glanced up at Jenkins with a frown.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” Jenkins grumbled, nodding discretely to where a few of the ships younger officers were gathered further along the deck. “But whatever it is has got them all het up.”

A quick glance along the deck confirmed that he was right; each one of the officers wore expressions of barely contained excitement. Greenaway, he noticed, was all but vibrating.

“Huh. You know what, I think you might be right,” Thomas murmured, folding his letter back up and tucking it into his trouser pocket as he rose to his feet. “Something’s definitely up.”
It was then that they caught sight of the supply boat, a little tug which was also used to help the larger ships manoeuvre when needed, approaching the ship, heavily laden with crates.

Thomas paused, cigarette held an inch from his lips, smoke waiting to be exhaled.

They weren’t due to be resolved for another week.

“That’ll be the food and fresh water supply,” Lieutenant Commander Rivers announced, his voice getting carried by the ever present wind so that both stewards could hear him. “Good. Get that lot unloaded and stowed away before the ammunition supply arrives in an hour.”

**Ammunition.**

“That’ll be the food and fresh water supply,” Lieutenant Commander Rivers announced, his voice getting carried by the ever present wind so that both stewards could hear him. “Good. Get that lot unloaded and stowed away before the ammunition supply arrives in an hour.”

“Ammunition.

“Shit,” Thomas cursed, exhaling heavily as the junior officers responded appropriately to the order. Food, water and ammunition meant only one thing. “We’ve been ordered to sea...”

“Not just us,” Jenkins pointed out. “Look.”

He was right; several other supply ships were making their way out to the rest of the fleet.

“Shit,” Thomas cursed for a second time as realisation dawned, his cigarette dropping from his fingers and falling into the sea. They had all been hearing rumours for the last week or so that the Admiralty were planning something, the Naval equivalent of a ‘Big Push’, in order to stop the German High Seas Fleet breaking free of the blockade and making it out to the North Sea. Such an engagement would require not only the ships of the British Grand Fleet, HMS Warrior included amongst them, but also the ships of the Battle Cruiser Fleet which were moored at Rosyth. His stomach clenched. “It’s happening. Fuck. It’s *really* happening.”

“About time too,” Jenkins crowed loudly, his face split by an enormous grin as he turned away from the sight and headed towards the nearest hatch. “I’m going to tell the others.”

Thomas was in a minority for the next couple of days, wary of the oncoming engagement rather than excited to “finally getting to have a go at the stinking Huns” and his years of keeping his thoughts to himself as a servant came in handy once more; should the rest of the ships company learn of his reservations he would be labelled as “yellow” and Thomas Barrow was many things but one thing that he refused to be seen as was a damned coward.

In the days following the arrival of the supplies letter writing became the most popular past time with every man on the ship sending letters to their loved ones. Some were happy to read them aloud to their friends before sending them, particularly those who were writing to their sweethearts, whilst others like Thomas chose to keep their correspondence private.

His letter to his family was brief, almost a formality as they hadn’t spoken in years,

*Dear Miss O’Brien,*

*I hope this letter finds you all as well as can be in these difficult times. I am currently serving aboard HMS Warrior within the British Grand Fleet as an Officers Steward. We expect to put to sea soon to face our enemy in glorious battle. I hope that if I should die in the oncoming engagement that you will finally be able to think well of me. Your son, Thomas Barrow.*

He knew that the censors would probably take exception to him revealing his ship but if they wanted to remove it then they could do so; he was going to write what could possibly be his last correspondence precisely how he wanted to. His next letter was for Miss O’Brien,
This may very well be my last letter to you for quite some time.

Due to some recent supply deliveries, specifically a lot of ammunition, and some overheard conversations amongst the ships officers we believe that the fleet shall soon be putting to sea to finally face off against our enemy. There is no telling when we shall actually set sail, it could be in a few hours or a couple of days, but I feel that it shall be sooner rather than later.

I have never seen battle, therefore I only have what some of the others have told me to go on, and if what they say is even half true I wanted you to know that I always valued your friendship even though sometimes we ended up at odds. Whilst I hope for the best possible outcome of the oncoming battle I am not naïve enough to believe that if my time is up I shall be spared. I am not afraid of dying, rather of being forgotten, and so I have enclosed my best cap tally for you to keep as a memento of me and of our time together at Downton Abbey.

Have a cigarette for me, if I don’t come back, and look after the clocks.

Look after yourself, too; no scheming and making trouble just for the fun of it, you hear?

Your Friend,

Thomas Barrow
HMS Warrior

His letters finished he folded the thin sheets of paper carefully in half, slipped them into two identical envelopes, carefully addressed them, sealed them and then made his way through the ship to the small post box located at the quartermasters store. There he joined the short queue of other sailors and was eventually able to purchase two stamps and post his letters.

That done he turned to return to his duties only to halt at the sound of his name, “Barrow!”

Turning he found himself facing Lieutenant Crawley, carrying half-a-dozen crisp envelopes, approaching from the opposite direction and obediently waited for the officer to reach him.

“Sir,” Thomas greeted him politely. “Was there something you needed?”

“I just wanted make sure that you and the other stewards are aware that today’s post shall be leaving the ship at 1500 instead of 1800,” the handsome young officer murmured softly. “It’s not supposed to be common knowledge yet but the fleet will be leaving port tonight.”

“Thank you for the forewarning, sir,” Thomas responded sincerely. “I've just posted my own letters home but shall endeavour to make sure the others get theirs in before the post goes.”

“Good. That’s good.”

He looked concerned, possibly even a little frightened, and Thomas couldn’t blame him.

“And you, sir?” he enquired, nodding down to the letters. “Do you need any stamps?”

“No, thank you, I have some,” Matthew responded softly, tapping his letters against the knuckles of his left hand. A quick glance confirmed that, yes, they already bore the required postage stamps. “I’ve included a Will, or what will serve as a Will, in my letter to Cousin Robert just in case. And I’ve sent a snapshot of myself and the other officers to my mother and one of just myself to Lavinia. She’s a...friend. We, um, we met before the war, before I moved to Downton, and I
bumped into her a few months ago when I had a weeks leave.”

It was amusing to see the future Earl of Grantham getting so flustered about a girl.

“I sent my best cap tally to Miss O’Brien,” Thomas admitted so as to spare the young officer any further embarrassment should he worry about revealing too much. “I don’t have any photographs of me so that was the next best thing. She was my only friend at Downton.”

“Surely not. You seem like a pleasant enough chap. Why only the one friend?”

“*His Majesties Royal Navy* is responsible for a great many changes in my behaviour and attitude, although some things are altogether incurable,” Thomas chuckled, puzzled by how natural the conversation was flowing between the two of them; and officer and a rating, a member of the family and a servant. “I’m afraid I was an altogether unpleasant fellow below stairs, jealous and scheming. I wanted what I believed I was owed or deserved and took it rather poorly when others were elevated above me for no reason that I could see…”

“You mean Mr Bates,” Matthew concluded correctly. “You wanted to be Roberts valet.”

“I did. And at the time I hated the fact that I’d been passed over for an outsider,” Thomas admitted, rubbing the back of his neck as his cheeks burned with shame. “Having been away long enough to be blessed with hindsight I can see now that I wasn’t anywhere near ready.”

“Ah. I see,” Lieutenant Crawley hummed. “Hindsight. It’s a cruel thing, isn’t it?”

“It can be,” Thomas agreed. “But it can lead to some important lessons being learnt.”

“Indeed.”

After a long moment Matthew turned, posting his letters into the grey metal box mounted to the wall with a rectangular slit near the top, the word ‘*POST*’ stamped below the hole.

Thomas assumed that was his cue to leave but had only gotten a few paces away before the officer caught up with him, following him through the maze of corridors that made up their ship, down a couple of decks via the vertical ladders upon which the black paint had been worn away by the men’s boots before finally speaking as they approached the wardroom.

“Do you know what I fear the most about the oncoming days?” he enquired softly, slowing to a halt, his words forcing Thomas to slow down with him. He couldn’t ignore a superior officer, could he? “Submarines. How can we be expected to fight what we cannot see?”

Submarines, like that which had sunk the *RMS Lusitania* back in 1915, terrified most sailors.

It was said that at the outbreak of war Germany had only had twenty submarines available for combat whilst the *Royal Navy* had possessed seventy four. The difference, sadly, was that whilst the German *U-Boats*, as they were called, possessed the range and speed needed to operate effectively around the entire British coast the *Royal Navy’s* ships possessed what could only be described as ‘mixed effectiveness’ in terms of range, speed and effectiveness.

“They’re visible when they’re on the surface,” Thomas pointed out, rather unnecessarily. “We shall just hope that when we come across one they aren’t below the waves, that’s all.”

He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

Submarines, with their open, underhanded warfare, scared him just as much as anyone else.
They had appeared in the Atlantic first, attacking *HMS Monarch* only four days after the declaration of war whilst she had been on manoeuvres with *HMS Ajax* and *HMS Orion*. It hadn’t been an overly successful first attack, or so the stories told, with the *U-Boats* torpedo failing to hit the battleship and had succeeded only in putting the three ships on their guard.

At dawn the next morning, or so a rather drunken sailor had once told Thomas whilst on shore leave, *HMS Birmingham* of the *1st Light Cruiser Squadron* had sighted a *U-Boat* sitting idle and unprotected on the surface. According to the sailor the *U-Boat* hadn’t even had any lookouts posted, allowing them to approach unchallenged, and then they’d been able to hear the sounds of hammering leading them to believe that the crew were making repairs.

*HMS Birmingham* had rammed the *U-Boat*, cutting it in half, and had sunk it with all hands.

The, albeit unsuccessful, attack had caused the *Royal Navy* an understandable amount of uneasiness as it disproved all of the earlier estimates as to *U-boats’* radius of action and left the security of the *Grand Fleet’s* unprotected anchorage at *Scapa Flow* open to question.

*HMS Pathfinder* had eventually been the first ship to be sunk by a *U-Boat* on 5th September 1914, her magazine apparently exploding after being struck by a torpedo. She sank in only four minutes, a terrifyingly quick time, and of the crew 259 souls went down with her. Less than a month later three of the oldest armoured cruisers in the fleet, *HMS Aboukir*, *HMS Cressy*, and *HMS Hogue*, had been sunk by a single submarine with a loss of 1,460 sailors.

*HMS Hawke*, an old cruiser, had been sunk three weeks later.

Thomas could recall the wave of alarm that had swept over everyone as he worked to complete the basic training required of him before he could take up his first posting.

The sinking’s had caused alarm within the *Admiralty*, which had been becoming increasingly nervous about the security of the *Scapa Flow* anchorage according to the ever present rumour mill, and the fleet was sent to ports in Ireland and the west coast of Scotland until adequate defences were installed at *Scapa Flow*. Their concerns had, almost inevitably, been proven well founded when, on 23rd November 1914, a *U-Boat* had penetrated *Scapa Flow* via *Hoxa Sound*, following a steamer through the boom and entering the anchorage with little difficulty. Thomas and his fellow recruits had spoken at length about how the Germans must have reacted when they found the fleet to be absent. The *U-Boat* was spotted whilst it was attempting to make it back out to open sea, or rather their periscope was spotted by a guard boat, the *Dorothy Gray*, who proceeded to ram it, rendering the periscope unserviceable. The *U-Boat* then suffered some mechanical issues, or so it was assumed, and the ships captain had been forced to surface and scuttle his command.

There had been much celebrating after that.

Of course the celebrating had ended when *HMS Formidable* was sunk on 31st December.

“I can only hope that, if we do get targeted by a submarine, they manage a clean hit and were killed before we can realise what’s happened,” Matthew uttered, his voice sincere as his gaze became distant. “At least we can fight back against other ships if we’re attacked.”

Thomas could only grunt in agreement.

“Would you mind making me a strong cup of tea, Barrow?”

“Of course not, sir,” Thomas agreed. “I’ll bring it through to you.”

“Thank you, Barrow.”
The *U-Boats* didn’t just attack ships of the *Royal Navy* of course.

As an island they relied on imports and exports to survive and so, in retaliation to the *Royal Navy’s* blockade of German held ports, they had begun to attack unarmed merchant ships.

And it wasn’t just merchant ships, Thomas thought to himself as he stepped into the galley to prepare Lieutenant Crawley, thinking back to the day he’d heard that a hospital ship, the *Asturias*, had been torpedoed despite being clearly marked. Thankfully the torpedo missed.

And, of course, the *RMS Lusitania*.

The Germans had had the audacity to publish a written warning to the passengers of the ocean liner, a ship which should never have been considered a target in the first place, in fifty American newspapers. A copy of the warning had been published in English papers too.

**NOTICE!**

**TRAVELLERS** intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on the ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

**IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY**

*Washington, D.C., 22 April 1915.*

No one, not even Thomas, had believed they would actually go through with their threat.

But they had and 1,198 innocent people had lost their lives.

“Is that tea your making, Thomas?”

“Yes, for Lieutenant Crawley.”

“Any chance you could make two more?” Hudson, one of the youngest officers stewards who tended to get flustered about the simplest thing. “Greenaway and Barrett asked for some but I’m absolutely desperate for the toilet. Not too strong and one sugar for Barrett?”

Thomas huffed as the boy as he bounced on the spot like a child who needed the loo.

“Go on,” he muttered. “But make sure you hurry back. And tell the others that the post is going at 1500 today as there’s a good chance we’ll be putting out to sea sometime tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

“Oh. I’d better write a letter to my mum…”

“I thought you needed to use the head*…” Thomas pointed out whilst reaching into the cupboard to retrieve three cups and saucers instead of just the one he had been intending to grab, frowning across at the silent young steward. “Otherwise you can do this yourself.”

“No, no, I do…” Hudson mumbled, flustered. “I just…I’ll…”
Trailing off he turned and hurried out of the busy galley, causing the cooks who were busy preparing the officers lunch on the other side of the room to snort loudly to each other.

Thomas couldn’t help but wonder, not for the first time, how the other man had become an officers steward when he couldn’t even act his own age half the time, always needing help.

Going through the motions of making the three requested cups of tea Thomas’ mind strayed back to the subject of submarines, or more specifically the German *U-Boats*. As far as he was aware there wasn’t currently any way of detecting the ships once they’d dived and surface detection was the same as with all other ships; it was up to the ships lookouts to spot them.

And in terms of countermeasures should they be attacked by a submarine, well, if it was on the surface they could shoot at it. That was fine. If it was underwater but they could see its parachute then they could either use the periscope to target their guns or ram the ship. If it was completely submerged, however, their best countermeasure was to plot a sharp, erratic course so that they couldn’t target them with their torpedoes and attempt to outrun them.

Unarmed merchant ships, of course, only had two options; ram or run.

Placing the three steaming cups of tea on one of the circular trays with a prominent edge he made his way into the wardroom, moving carefully around the room to deliver each tea to the correct individual as the three teas were rather different from one another. He had just placed the last cup and saucer down on the table in front of Greenaway when the Captain stepped into the wardroom and everyone sprang to attention, either standing or sitting.

“At ease, gentlemen,” he murmured, glancing around the room. “Barrow. A coffee, please.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

As he was stepping out of the wardroom, carrying the empty tray at his side he heard the beginnings of what evidently a rehearsed speech from his Captain to the ships officers,

“Gentlemen, I have just received confirmation that the rumours were true. It is time for us to go hunting. We shall be catching the late tide and leaving *Scapa Flow* along with the rest of the *Grand Fleet* under the command of Admiral Jellicoe and heading for the *North Sea*.”

He later learned that it wasn’t just the *British Grand Fleet* that set sail that evening, *HMS Warrior* hauling up her anchor and starting up her engines at the designated time so that they could take their place in the formation of the *1st Cruiser Squadron* and leave the safety of *Scapa Flow*. The *Battle Cruiser Fleet*, under Admiral Beatty, left *Rosyth* at the same time.

Would they ever return?

He honestly didn’t know.

And as he stood watching the familiar landscape disappear behind them as the powered on towards the open waters of the *North Sea* he couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease as darkness descended, the ships lights having been doused so that they wouldn’t be spotted by the enemy leaving only the moonlight to guide them. He could hear the other ships, the sound of their engines filtering over the sound of their own to create and constant rumble.

Thomas had no way of knowing as he stood smoking his cigarette that life as he had known it would be irrevocably changed by the events which would take place the following day. He had no idea of knowing that the 31st May 1916 would change the course of the entire war.
A/N I apologise that this was pretty much a filler chapter with a tiny bit of interaction between Thomas and Matthew and an essay on early submarine warfare slipped in. It was necessary to bridge from the last chapter to the beginning of the battle which takes place in the next chapter. I would like to thank everyone who responded to my last chapter with their pairing requests; thanks to you I now know where to take this story. So, with the most amount of requests, Matthew/Thomas is the endgame but we’re going to have some fun before we get there. I am also planning to include Matthew/Lavinia as I liked her way more than Mary. Don’t worry, it will all make sense when I reach that particular point. Comments and suggests are more than welcome. Until next time my lovely readers. Marblez. X

* head/heads = toilets/lavatories in the Royal Navy
Chapter Four

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Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

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THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE

CHAPTER FOUR

HMS Warrior
31st May 1916

It was a sight to behold, of that he was sure, Thomas thought to himself as he carefully made his way up to the bridge with a tray of steaming hot tea for the Officers on duty.

There were ships as far as the eye could see, the Grand Fleet displayed in all its glory, all of them steaming in perfect formation, their funnels belching columns of black smoke as they pushed their engines as hard as they dared in order to meet up with the Battlecruiser Fleet.

He, just like every inexperienced new seaman on board one of these impressive creations, had once envied the stokers who had seemed to be paid more than the rest for doing what appeared to be a simple job; delivering coal from the stokehold to the boilers. Now, two years later, he didn’t envy them one bit, particularly not with such a difficult day ahead of them. They weren’t unskilled labourers, quite the opposite in fact. Unlike their merchant counterparts who could bank their boilers just as one would a fire, building up the steam over time and keeping it going at a steady pace, the stokers of a ship such as Warrior had to be able to get up steam rapidly and then vary the amount of steam as they changed speed in order to allow the ship to manoeuvre. This meant that
the coal had to spread carefully across the bed of the boiler and the steam pressure had to be continuously monitored.

Stokers, he now informed anyone who asked, were just as skilled as he, a steward was.

“Ah, good,” Captain Elliott sighed with obvious relief, straightening up from where he had been bent over the chart table as he caught sight of Thomas. Around him his senior officers, who had also been studying the charts, copied his actions. “Gentlemen, Barrow brings tea.”

“Indeed I do, sir,” Thomas confirmed, stepping onto the bridge and moving across to the gaggle of officers. “Yours is the mug nearest my right hand, sir. Just a hint of milk and two sugars. Then, Commander Collins, that one is yours. No milk, not too strong, slice of lemon.”

He proceeded to distribute the teas, each one made to the officers specific tastes, finishing with Lieutenants Greenaway and Crawley, the most junior officers currently on the bridge.

“Milk with one for Lieutenant Greenaway. Milk with none for Lieutenant Crawley.”

“Are you sure you don’t have our orders written down somewhere, Barrow?” Commander Collins chuckled as he blew lightly on his tea. “None of the others can remember all of that.”

“Years of practice, sir,” Thomas responded with a smile, tucking the tray into his chest as he made his way back towards the door, or rather the hatch. “This is nothing compared to–”

“Flags, sir!” the young voice of one of the men on watch cut him off. “On Defence, sir.”

“Crawley?” Captain Elliot hummed, gesturing for the Lieutenant to investigate. “Well?”

“Message from Admiral Jellicoe,” Matthew translated the flags which had been hoisted as was his job as a signals specialist. “Assume complete readiness for action in every aspect.”

A hush fell upon the bridge following his announcement.

Thomas froze, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the tray much too tightly.

“The day has finally come, gentlemen,” Captain Elliot finally broke the silence, turning to address the entire room, small as it was. “Finally we shall be given the chance to give the Hun a damned good thrashing as only the Royal Navy can. Gentlemen, drink up your tea and prepare the ship for battle readiness. Just as we’ve practiced, no need to panic the men.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

As one the officer gulped down their tea, only a couple of them struggling with the heat of the liquid, and Thomas stumbled forwards, his movements uncharacteristically stilted, to collect the empty mugs on his tray. It was 1500, he noticed out of the corner of his eye as he waited for the last of the mugs; what would the next six, twelve, twenty-four hours hold?

“Thank you, Barrow,” Matthew murmured, placing his mug on the tray. He was the last despite not having had any trouble gulping it down. No, he’d waited purposefully so that he would be the last. “Best get to your station now. And Barrow, look after yourself, alright?”

“Yes, sir,” Thomas responded. “And, sir? You’d best look after yourself too.”

Matthew offered him a tight smile and an equally tight nod in return before they went their separate ways, Thomas hurrying back through the ship to the galley where he dumped the entire tray in the
sink, heedless of whether or not any of the mugs were damaged. What did a couple of mugs matter when there was a good chance they’d all end up on the bottom of the sea before the day ended? They didn’t, that’s what, and if by some minor miracle they managed to survive the battle unscathed he’d worry about what state they were in later.

Much later.

As a steward his battle station, or action station as it was sometimes called, was in the ships sick berth where he would work either as an attendant or as a stretcher bearer, whichever he was assigned to given the situation. It had made him smile back during basic training when they’d been informed of this particular fact; it seemed that even though he hadn’t been able to join the Royal Army Medical Corps he would still be doing the job he’d wanted.

Admittedly he’d wanted to join the RAMC in order to stay away from the fighting but still…

“Ah, Barrow, good,” Crabb, the senior of the three surgeons aboard Warrior rumbled when he stumbled into the room to join his fellow stewards. “That’s everyone. Foster and Moore. Jenkins and Barrow. You’ll be our stretcher bearers for today’s action. Roper, you’ll be my attendant. Whiting, you’ll be Budge’s attendant and Kettle, you’ll be Wright’s. Everyone else will operate as general attendants once the wounded start coming in. Right, get this place battle ready, gentlemen. I want everything cleared or secured, prepared and ready to use.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

They worked together with practiced ease, completing the tasks which they had trained for, and in less than half-an-hour the sick berth was as ready as it could possibly be. There were four permanent beds, set up as two pairs of bunks, with an open metal frame for ease of access although Thomas didn’t look forward to lifting someone into the top bunk given how high up it was. Added to this there were a dozen temporary beds which they had built all around the room and, should the need arise, hammocks. The stretchers were collapsible and were stood up just outside the door leading into the sick berth. Despite having three surgeons on boards there was only one operating table, if it could be called that, which could be hidden behind a curtain if the need arose. A tin bath, sink and toilet were all crammed into one corner of the room, again with a curtain for modesty, and the walls were lined with cupboards of equipment and supplies which were normally locked to prevent theft but had now been secured on the latch, keeping the items safe but readily available.

A mop and bucket, along with a stack of empty bucket, sat in the corner of the room.

These, Thomas knew, would be used to clean up the blood, to collect the soiled bandages or, as they had been warned was an unfortunate likelihood, to hold the limbs which had to be removed. It would no doubt fall to young Keene, the so called ‘boy servant’ and youngest amongst the stewards at just sixteen-years-old, to man the mop and the buckets. Poor sod.

Warrior, as part of the 1st Cruiser Squadron, was under the command of Rear-Admiral Sir Robert K. Arbuthnot who had chosen HMS Defence as his Flagship many years ago. It was Defence, therefore, that headed their line of ships as the journeyed slightly ahead of the main bulk of the fleet, holding a screening position. Warrior was second in the line of ships and behind her was HMS Duke of Edinburgh. Bringing up the rear was HMS Black Prince.

“Thomas,” Jenkins muttered, moving to join Thomas at the railing on the walkway outside of the external door to the sickbay where he and several of the others had been watching the fleet. This door was to be kept clear during the battle; the stretchers therefore were leant outside the internal door. Not that they’d be there during the battle. “Cigarette? Thomas?”
“Thanks,” Thomas muttered, drawing his gaze away from the ship five miles or so behind them which he believed to be HMS Iron Duke, Admiral Jellicoe’s Flagship. She was a beast of a ship, a dreadnought battleship only four years old and named for the Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, with an armament and armour to match. Unlike Warrior she had only one watch tower and two funnels, Warrior herself possessing four funnels and both a fore and aft watchtower, and her overall design was more sleek, less block like. And yet, if Thomas had to choose he’d probably still prefer to be aboard Warrior. The old girl had character, a charm that some of the newer ships were lacking. Of course, if they could take Iron Duke’s engines and transplant them into Warrior that would be fantastic. “Might be our last ones.”

“Bit negative,” Jenkins muttered, using his lighter to get both his and Thomas’ cigarettes going, rubbing his thumb over the engraving on the metal case before pocketing it again. A particularly deep swell caused them to plant their feet as the ship rocked. “We could be fine.”

“Could be,” Thomas agreed, mimicking a ship’s funnel as he calmly blew out a long plume of smoke, tilting his face up towards the sky. Beside him Jenkins, a bit of a show off, blew his out in rings. “Either way, I think these will have to tide us over for the immediate future. I don’t know about you but they frowned upon taking a fag break when I went through my battle simulations during basic, said something about it being an inopportune moment.”

Several of their group snorted loudly, most of them also smoking one last cigarette.

Even the surgeons, also getting a breath of fresh air before the chaos, chuckled softly.

“Can’t think why…”

It was just then that they heard the unmistakable sounds of a gun being fired, somewhere not too far from them although because it was coming from somewhere on the starboard side of their ship they on the port side couldn’t see the owner of the gun, and a moment later heard the corresponding awesome thunder of an explosion as the shell hit its target.

Or what they presumed had been its target.

“This is it, then,” someone muttered seriously. “The battles begun.”

Truthfully the battle had been going on for some time, the focus had simply been on the Battlecruiser Fleet which had only now reached the Grand Fleet, bringing with them the Germans. What they were witnessing, albeit by hearing alone, was a portion of the battle which would one day be referred to as the ‘run to the North’ and eventually when the ships finally came into sight of their small group they witnessed Rear-Admiral Hood, commanding the 3rd Battlecruiser Squadron from his flagship, HMS Invincible, doing considerable damage to the light cruisers of the German 2nd Scouting Group. It was a terrifying thing to witness.

It would be even more terrifying thing to be a part of.

“We’re turning.” Thomas realised suddenly, and indeed the ship gave a corresponding lurch as its helm was swung hard to port, following an almost identical path to that of Defence. A cry escaped someone as their new direction of travel cut directly across the path of HMS Lion, Admiral Beatty’s Flagship, at the head of the 1st Battlecruiser Squadron. The larger ship, who had obviously already been in action with her German counterparts, was forced to alter her course lest she ram into them, passing within 200 yards of Warrior stern in a move which saved the cruisers but sacrificed her own ability to fire with the rest of her squadron as her vision of the enemy fleet, her target, was suddenly blocked by the smoke from the cruisers smoke. “Bloody Hell! What was that? Where’s that blasted fool taking us?”
“Careful,” Crabb muttered. “That’s no way to speak of your commanding officer.”

“I didn’t mean Captain Elliot,” Thomas responded. “I mean Arbuthnot.”

“Still…”

“We’ve lost Duke of Edinburgh and Black Prince!” Keene cried out in his as-yet-unbroken voice, sounding almost like a screech as he pointed back at where the other two ships of their squadron should be. “They can’t mean for the two of us to take them on alone?!”

Shells were flying overhead in both directions, the battle cruisers of each fleet attempting to inflict serious damage upon the other. And now, thanks to what felt like pure recklessness on behalf of the man running their squadron, they were stuck in the middle of it all with no where to go but towards their enemy. If Thomas had doubted their chances of surviving the battle before those doubts tripled, no, increased tenfold now that they were sitting ducks.

“This is insane…”

“Pipe down, now,” Crabb ordered, silencing the group of stewards with the command. “I’m sure Admiral Arbuthnot knows precisely what he’s doing. I’m sure he has a plan laid out.”

Thomas snorted, shaking his head as he muttered under his breath,

“Sure, like a puppy has a plan when it chases a squirrel up a tree…”

Shells were falling all around them, each one having fallen short of their intended target and splashing into the sea, some missing them only by the narrowest of margins. One landed so close that they had to move back to avoid the spray of icy water caused by the explosion.

Thomas wasn’t the only one to let out a few choice swear words.

Every other ship they could see was doing everything they could to stay out of the area they were steaming into, seemingly at full speed, and Thomas couldn’t blame them; he imagined this was what the poor goldfish at a county fair felt like when people threw rings at them.

They were by far the easiest target for any of the Germans to aim for and they were only getting closer, putting them all the more in range of even the smaller enemy vessels guns.

“We’re slowing,” someone announced, stating the obvious before leaning as far as he could over the railing to peer around the Defence ahead of them. “I think there’s another ship…”

It was a little after 1800 when time seemed to stop if only for a moment.

There had indeed been a ship ahead, Thomas would later learn that it was the crippled SMS Wiesbaden, and Defence engaged with the hopes of sending her and her crew to the depths.

Instead they watched, slack-jawed and utterly helpless, as three shells struck the water on either side of the Defence before inevitably two found their mark, striking her amidships.

And then she was gone, her magazines going up with a massive explosion.

Water and debris rained down on the wreckage of the ship, bits of men and ship alike, and then between one stunned breath and the next the wreckage had slipped below the waves.

HMS Defence was no more.
She had gone down with all hands, 903 men and officers gone in the blink of an eye.

Keene whimpered loudly.

“That’s…that’s not possible…”

It was.

It was entirely too possible.

They’d just watched it happen.

And, Thomas realised with growing dread as he watched the small pieces of wreckage floating in the water, there was only one possible outcome for their immediate future.

_Warrior_, now a lone ship trapped between the two fleets, was next.

“Bloody hell…”

The tell-tale sound of a shell being fired filled the air and, without even being able to see which ship it had come from though the thickening smoke, he knew where it was headed.

Everyone around him froze, waiting, and then…

~ * ~

_A/N_ Sorry. I’m sorry for the nasty ending and the slightly shorter chapter but it just played out that way. And for the delay getting this chapter out. Been doing so research into Jutland and the Navy in World War One as a whole. It’s a fascinating and highly underrated piece of history. Hopefully the next chapter shouldn’t take quite so long to get out. Marblez x
Chapter Five

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Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

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THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER FIVE

HMS Warrior
31st May 1916

Lurching to one side as the entire ship shuddered as another shell breached the damaged armour plating, exploding somewhere along the port side, Thomas grunted in pain as his shoulder slammed into the bulkhead but managed to keep a hold of the stretchers handles.

They’d been taking heavy fire for almost fifteen minutes, ever since they’d watched Defence vanish before their eyes, and the stretcher bearers hadn’t had a moments pause since. Nor had anyone else, for that matter, as the crew desperately tried to save Warrior from sharing their lead ships fate. Her wooden deck was aflame, spreading rapidly despite the sailors best efforts, and below decks there were more fires, most worryingly in engineering where they were just coming from with a badly burned casualty, and heavy flooding towards the bow.

“You alright?” Jenkins called out over the noise of one of Warriors guns firing. “Thomas?”

Thomas nodded, grunting once more as he nodded for Jenkins to keep moving.
They needed to get their casualty to the surgeons before it was too late…

Strangled cries of pain sounded as another shell struck the ship, this one landing between the two 7.5 guns amidships on the starboard side, the deadly projectile ripping away the gun shield of the aft gun. Bodies were thrown into the air, two almost going overboard, but even as they glanced back at them some began to stir, pulling themselves back to the guns.

Thomas’ shoulders were killing him, from both the strain of carrying the stretcher and the knock he’d just taken, but he ignored it. He’d worry about his pain later if they managed to survive to see another day. Hurrying into the sick berth Jenkins barked for them to clear the operating table which currently held a sailor who was in process of being sewn up following an amputation of his arm. The surgeon went to protest until they saw their latest patient.

“Move him!”

Once the swap had been made and two of the surgeons were focused on the burned sailor, the third continuing to stitch up the man who was now lying on one of the temporary beds, Thomas and Jenkins had enough time to grab a drink of water from the cup that Keene held out to them before heading out once more to face whatever was in store for them. The boy was weeping silently, tears making tracks through the blood and soot which had made its way onto his cheeks as he cleaned up after the men that had been brought in and treated, but his hands were steady. He’d grown up, Thomas realised sadly, had lost his innocence.

They all had.

None of them would emerge from this day as they had entered it.

Injured or not every man would be changed, should they survive.

It was a sobering thought even amidst the heat of battle.

He would never look upon the world the same way.

Every smell would be compared to the scent of cordite or burning tar or sweat or blood or…

Every colour would be brighter or duller than the sky, the sea, the sparks of an explosion…

Every man would be taller than the burned casualty, thinner than Jenkins, younger than Keene…

Every sound would be quieter than an explosion, louder than metal tearing, softer than…

“Thomas!” Jenkins barked at him. “Get it together! There’s men that need us!”

He hadn’t even realised that he’d stopped moving, staring out towards the German fleet through the thick cloud of smoke, a mixture of engine smoke and that which was being given off by the fires. Snapping his head around he nodded, once, to reassure his friend.

A horrific explosion came from the back of the boat, rocking the entire vessel so much that the two of them bounced off of the metal railings with twin grunts of pain. They were in the process of getting their feet back under them when a harried messenger ran passed them.

“The aft dressing stations been hit!”

Wright, the most junior of the surgeons, had been sent to man the aft dressing station along with Kettle, his attendant after the Defence had been hit when they realised how bad it was going to be,
taking with them a couple of stewards to help. It was intended to be a place for the walking-wounded to be treated and returned to duty, leaving the sick berth free to tend to the more serious casualties. And if it had just been hit then things just a whole lot worse.

“They’re dead! They’re all dead! They have to be! No one could survive that!”

Jenkins, who was good friends with Archibald “Archie” Kettle, looked particularly horrified.

At one point Thomas had suspected that the two were in a romantic relationship, spending almost all of their off-duty time together, but it had turned out that both from Portsmouth, had been married for a number of years and had been “blessed” with a gaggle of children each. It turned out that their free time was spent sharing stories of their families back home.

“Do you think we should…?”

“Keep to your duties,” a panicked looking Budge ordered before Thomas could even think of some kind of a response, shouldeing his way past them with Jeffrey Whiting following close behind. “We’re going to check on the dressing-station. Keep helping the men; both of you.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

They passed Lieutenant Greenaway on their way to the guns which had been hit.

Thomas’ young lover was manning one of the larger 9.2 guns. His cap was missing, a cut on his temple disappearing into his hairline was bleeding profusely, and yet he continued to work, mucking in with the men in his gun crew to replace those that had been injured. He was another soul who had been forced to grow up since this battle for their lives had begun.

Both of the guns had been taken out of action, one having been literally ripped apart at the same it had lost its gun shield, and the crew members who had been able to had gone to assist the crews of the other guns which were still firing. Working as quickly as they could Thomas and Jenkins transferred the injured to the sick berth, retracing their footsteps as best they could, until it seemed that they had cleared everyone from the area apart from those who had already succumbed to their injuries. It wasn’t until they turned to leave that they noticed the legs protruding from underneath the gun shield, the large piece of metal obviously having landed on someone after it had been blown out of its intended position.

A fire was already spreading towards the figure, spreading across the deck like a menacing snake. Dropping their stretcher onto the deck the two stewards hurried to the poor soul, intent on checking to see if they had survived the initial hit before attempting to free them.

Thomas wasn’t conscious of the strangled sound that escaped him when he caught sight of the sailors face, nor of the fact that he dropped down to his knees as he called out sharply,

“Mr Crawley!”

Matthew’s eyes fluttered, more than enough to confirm that a rescue was required.

His hands moved without conscious thought, taking hold of the metal and tugging.

It shifted, the weight unevenly distributed as it was, but Thomas reared back with a sharp hiss, blowing on his hands to cool them; the metal was dangerously hot already thanks to the fire which had engulfed the end of the shield which wasn’t crushing the Crawley heir.

“Thomas?”
“It’s nothing,” he reassured Jenkins quickly, glancing away from the blood he could see on Matthew’s lips, splattered as though he’d coughed it up. “I’m fine. Let’s get this off of him.”

“Can you lift it by yourself?”

“Yes, I should be able to,” Thomas confirmed. “I just need to…”

Glancing around them his eyes fell on the bodies of two sailors who hadn’t been lucky enough survive the shell which had landed between the guns. Hurrying over he set about pulling at their tunics, exposing where the lines from their blue collars were tied around their waists to hold the collars onto their tunics. Releasing the knots he then wound the starched blue fabric around his hands, securing them with the lines as best as he could.

“Once I get it off of him you need to pull him out of the way.”

“…Thomas?” Matthew’s voice called out weakly. His dazed eyes somehow found his. “I…”

“We’ll have you free in no time at all, Lieutenant,” Thomas reassured him whilst bending his knees, keeping his back straight just as he’d been taught to by Mr Carson when picking up a heavy trunk. He ignored the fact that his left foot was dangerously close to the flames, that the heat was already bordering on unbearable, and instead found suitable handholds on the torn piece of metal, wide enough apart to give him the best possible chance. “Here goes…”

It was heavy but, just as before, the angle it had landed at was on his side.

Rather than lifting the whole thing he was just lifting up one end, the end that Matthew was pinned beneath. His aching shoulders were screaming at him within seconds, his fingers and forearms joining in moments later, and his trouser leg began to smoke rather worryingly.

“Nearly there,” Jenkins called out from where he was crouched with his arms looped under Matthew’s shoulders, his gaze fixed on the bottom of the piece of metal. “Little bit more…”

Sadly it was at that moment that the next shell struck the ship.

Thomas cried out first, losing his grip as the explosion rocked the entire ship. He fell into the flames, pushing himself out of them as quickly as possible and patting out the parts of his uniform which had caught fire. This, unfortunately, included the collars covering his hands.

Matthew cried out next as the piece of metal dropped down onto him once again.

Jenkins cried out, the last of the three was one of alarm rather than pain,

“Thomas!”

“I’m fine!” the steward in question responded, heart beating wildly as he returned to his previous position sans any protection for his hands. “Get ready to pull. We need to move.”

Taking hold of the metal he could feel his skin beginning to burn from the heat, blisters appearing as he pulled at the metal which by now was as hot as one of the irons he had wielded whilst in service. The flames from the wooden deck boards were growing, the tips of the deadly tendrils catching the backs of his vulnerable hands, more so on the left hand.

He ignored it all.

It wasn’t important.
What was important was getting Matthew to safety.

Letting out a shout of determination he pulled as hard as he could on the piece of metal…

“Pull!” he called out to Jenkins as soon as he’d gotten it high enough. ‘Pull!’

He watched, tears squeezing out of the corners of his eyes, as the legs he’d been standing over disappeared, pulled free of the wreckage from the other side, and as soon as he heard Jenkins call out that they were clear he pulled his hands off of the metal and let it drop back down, jumping back to avoid it landing on his feet. Stumbling around to the other side he cradled his hands into his stomach, suddenly very much aware of the pain as a good portion of his skin had become fused to the metal and had remained behind when he’d dropped it.

“Thomas…”

“Your hands,” Jenkins cry of alarm drowned out Matthew’s whimper. ‘Fuck…’

“Sick berth,” Thomas gasped, the pain receding at a somewhat alarming rate. In a matter of seconds it had faded almost entirely, the worst of the pain now coming from his shoulders. “We need to get him to the sick berth. Get the stretcher. Jenkins! Go and get the stretcher!”

“Thank you…” Matthew whimpered, reaching out to paw weakly at Thomas’ arm until the former footman shuffled closer on his knees whilst Jenkins hurried to bring the stretcher across to them. A sharp yelp escaped him when the young officer grabbed hold of his hand, squeezing it tightly. The pain was intense, so intense that his vision whitened out briefly, but then the blissful and ever so slightly worrying numbness returned. “Thomas…thank you…”

Jenkins returned, laying the stretcher down beside Matthew.

They get him onto the canvas, Thomas gritting his teeth as the pain came and went in his hands, and all the while Matthew clutched at him, moving his hand to Thomas’ wrist. And, despite how awkward it made things he didn’t have the heart to force him to remove it.

If he needed to hold onto him after everything he’d been through so be it.

Meeting his fellow stewards eyes Thomas nodded, counting them into lifting the stretcher,

“Two, six; heave.”

There was nothing he could do to stop his vision from whitening out as the pain flared once more, his left hand spasming so badly that he almost lost hold of the stretcher. Jenkins shot him a look of concern, one which Thomas shrugged off, and they began to make their way back towards the sick berth. Because of the damage that the latest explosion had caused they couldn’t go around the side of the ship as they had been; instead they had to navigate their way through the passageways which were filled with sailors hurrying back and forth in as controlled a manner as they could whilst they completed their duties. Not a single man that they passed was panicking, however, each of them too well trained to falter like that.

“Thomas…” Matthew gasped fearfully as they accidentally jostled him whilst turning a rather tight corner, rocking him from side to side on the stretcher. “Thomas, I can’t feel my legs…”

It felt as though the bottom had dropped out of Thomas’ stomach.

He’d been worried about what damage had been done to the wounded officers back given the way that he’d been pinned by what had once been his guns protective shield. Of course it would’ve been
a miracle for him to have escaped unscathed but to have no feeling at all…

That wasn’t good.

“I’m…” he cleared his throat, if for no other reason than to give him time to cultivate a reassuring smile to go along with the lie. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Shock. You’ll be alright.”

It wasn’t nothing.

It couldn’t possibly be nothing.

The look that Jenkins shot back at him from his point at the front of the stretcher told him that the other man agreed with him. And yet neither of them said anything, they couldn’t.

Chaos reigned supreme in the sick berth but it was an organised chaos.

There were two men per bed, three in the upper bunks but there were ‘walking wounded’ cases who had been able to make their own way into the bunks, and more sat around the edges of the room leaning against the bulkheads. A queue of patients waiting to be seen by the surgeons began at the door, laid out on the floor, and unlike earlier all three surgeons were seeing to different men, one using the operating table whilst the others treated them as they found them, be it on a floor or a bed. Their fellow stewards were moving around the room, checking on the men, applying bandages, giving them water or simply holding their hand. And there was Keene, mopping up the endless amount of blood covering the floor.

Budge and Whiting had returned and were busy working alongside the others.

“They got the aft dressing station,” the teenager mumbled as they passed him. “Upwards of forty dead in the initial blast. Archie lost his hand. They said he’ll be alright but I don’t kno…”

“What have you got there?” Crabb called out from where he was bent over a man who was missing one eye, a deep gouge having replaced it. “Barrow? Does he need immediate care?”

“Some burns,” Thomas managed to get out as they lowered the stretcher down to the deck, offering Matthew as reassuring a smile as he could muster as they carefully lifted him off of the canvas and added him to the queue. “Nothing too major, I don’t think. Damaged spine.”

Crabb nodded, returning his attention to his current patient.

“Barrow, what happened to your hands?” Budge called out, gesturing that he was done with his patient, a middle-aged sailor with his arm nearly shredded to pieces. His question, filled with concern, prompted Thomas to look down at his hands for the first time since he’d hurt them. All it took was one glance and Thomas was gone, his eyes rolling back into his head as he crumpled first to his knees, then down onto his front with a thud. “Bloody hell, Barrow!”

Thomas came round to hands carefully rolling him onto his back, his own hands being held away from his body so that they could be examined. They were horrifically blistered, his left hand was worse on the palm, his right hand more so on the back but both were ultimately burned all over. The blisters on his palms had burst sending rivulet of blood running down his forearms, disappearing underneath the cuffs of his uniform. It was enough to make him gag, his stomach churning, attempting to bring up what little he had eaten during the day.

“Right, Jenkins, take one of the other men and get back to work,” Budge ordered, clicking his fingers his a tray of surgical equipment until it was passed across to him. A whimper escaped Thomas as he began treating the wounds on his left hand, cutting away the dead flesh before
cleaning what remained. “Barrow’s not in any condition to be going anywhere.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

His wounds were treated with a kind of precision that Thomas envied, each movement as precise as could be expected when the movement of ship was so sharp and unpredictable.

The dressing which were applied to his hands were different, given that each hand had been burned in a different place, but he still wound up looking as though he were wearing a pair of oversized mittens. His leg was checked over, the slight burns cleaned and then left alone.

“A bit of air won’t hurt those ones, not like your hands,” Budge explained as he and Whiting, his attendant, moved him across to sit with his back to the bulkhead with his hands pillowed on his thighs. The numbness had returned now that no one was touching them. “I’ll be ba–”

When they heard the explosion they feared, quite rightly, that their end had come.

But it wasn’t them.

“…where’s the Invincible gone?”

Those that could hurried to look out of the open hatch or the portholes, trying to catch a glimpse of the battlecruiser. It was like the Defence all over again but worse; the enormous ship had been rent in two leaving both the bow and stern bobbing like corks in the water.

Of the battleships compliment of 1,032 only six would be plucked from the water.

Thomas saw none of this.

He wished he could, the descriptions flying around the room so varied and embellished that he couldn’t be certain what was true and what wasn’t, but when he tried he was overcome with dizziness and was unable to raise himself more than a couple of inches from the deck.

No, he would have to stay where he’d been put for the time being.

“If they can take out the Invincible what hope do we have…”

Thomas sighed, tilting his head back to rest against the cold metal behind him.

What hope indeed?

They were going to need a miracle if they were going to make it out of this alive.

Unable to watch the battle going on as some of the wounded men continued to do, trying to figure out what was going on in the mixture of mist and smoke surrounding them, Thomas instead watched as Matthew was finally lifted up onto the operating table for Crabb to see to. They checked his spine, muttering worriedly amongst themselves, but focused more on the few burns he had received and the fact that he was coughing up blood. It turned out to be from his tongue which he had accidently taken a chunk out of with his teeth when he’d hit the deck rather than anything more serious such as a pierced lung. Once his injuries had been seen to, at least for the moment, the officer was carefully carried across the room and laid out on the floor beneath one of the sets of bunk beds, a blanket being spread over the floor first, but they purposely didn’t give him a pillow; they wanted him as flat as possible.

“…what are they doing?”
The startled question drew his attention away from Matthew and over to where one of the ships cooks was stood with his face all but pressed against the glass covering the porthole.

“Who is that? Can anyone make it out?”

“It’s a super-dreadnought…”

“What is? What’s going on?”

Thomas wasn’t alone in making his confusion known; almost every other patient that was unable to see for whatever reason shared his sentiment in one way or another, even those who were incapable of speaking for whatever reason, grunting out their own questions. A hush fell over the room as they waited for one of the sailors with a view to answer them.

“There’s a ship making her way between us and the German Fleet…”

“I can’t tell who she is…”

“I don’t care who she is so long as she keeps drawing their fire like that!”

The familiar whine of an incoming shell had them all tensing in anticipation of the hit…

Only it never came.

Or rather, it did; the heard the screams and the explosions to confirm it.

It was just that for the first time in what felt an eternity it wasn’t their ship that was hit.

It was…

“It’s Warspite!”

Thomas frowned.

That didn’t make any sense.

Why would the Warspite, of all ships, intentionally put herself in harms way to save them?

She was part of the Battlecruiser Fleet, the 5th Battle Squadron, and so had had nothing to do with Warrior before now. There were no loyalties between the two crews, not unless the Captains knew each other. And no one in their right mind would have ordered them into danger like that just to save Warrior, the oldest ship in the Fleet. It didn’t make any sense.

“She’s…is she circling us?”

“I don’t understand…”

“Who cares what she’s doing so long as it stops the Germans from shelling us,” a gruff old stoker who’s left arm was splinted from shoulder to wrist announced from where he was stood leaning against the bulkhead, looking out of the porthole. “The lads downstairs need time to get our engines running, time when they’re not dealing with new fires and flooding.”

“I didn’t realise our engines weren’t working…”

“What, you thought we were sitting here for the sheer hell of it? Engineering took an almost direct hit, lots of bodies down there and a lot of damage,” the stoker responded, a haunted look appearing
in his hardened gaze. He had a point. Even Thomas, a steward without any sort of tactical training, would have given the order to take them out of the danger zone by now so why hadn’t the Captain given the order to leave? A lack of engines would certainly explain it. “They were nearly there when I passed through on my way up here so we’ll see.”

A shell exploded in the water, the spray it caused bursting in through the open door.

“Ugh!” a sailor who had been watching what was going on cried out. “I’m soaked!”

“Keene!” Crabb barked sharply. “Get that deck mopped!”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

Seeing the puddle of water moving towards him Thomas pulled his feet towards his rear, bending his knees as much as he could so as to avoid getting his feet or injured leg wet.

Keene working almost frantically, wringing out the bloodstained mop with his hands after a couple of strokes across the floor to soak up the water, emptying the bucket over the side of the ship once it had filled up sufficiently, and within a couple of minutes the deck was left only slightly damp rather than flooded. Sweat poured down the teenagers face but he didn’t stop, moving on to cleaning up the latest pool of blood with his newly acquired efficiency.

“She’s coming around again.”

“What?”

“Warspite. She’s coming around again.”

It was just then, with the other ship drawing the enemy’s fire once more, that they all felt Warrior give a familiar and much more welcome lurch beneath them; they were moving.

“Well done, lads,” the stoker sighed, looking down at the deck as though he could see through it to the engine room many floors below. His sentiment was echoed by several other patients, one even patting the deck as though it were a dog. “Now to get us home.”

Thomas had a feeling that that would be easier said than done.

“Three cheers for HMS Warspite!” someone called out confidently. “Hip, hip!”

“Huzzah!”

“Hip, hip!”

“Huzzah!”

“Hip, hip!”

“Huzzah!”

Even Thomas had found himself joining in with the responses for the ship high had just saved all of their lives. They had no way of knowing, not until much later, that the move hadn’t been at all intentional on Warspite’s part; their port-wing engine room had been damaged, causing their steering to jam as she attempted to avoid her sister-ships, Valiant and Malaya. They had then decided to maintain course, effectively circling, rather than come to a complete halt and then reverse. Of course this decision made her a tempting target, her path easy to predict, and she was hit thirteen times whilst circling Warrior. In the time that it took her to correct the problem with her
steering *Warrior* had been able to see to her own engineering issues and begin to make her way home, limping away to the West.

*Warspite* herself would eventually be ordered home after her steering jammed again.

“Thomas?” Matthew’s weak voice drew his attention away from the group of sailors that he’d been watching clustered at the open hatchway and back across to the Officer who appeared to be trying to get up. Moving before he could think it through Thomas walked across on his knees, the dizziness too severe to get up properly, until he could press his bandaged hands down on Matthews chest. “What’s happened? I don’t…I can’t feel my…”

“You need to stay still, Mr Crawley,” Thomas murmured, sitting as best he could beside the bunk that Matthew had been placed underneath. “You’ve hurt your back, sir, remember?”

“…my back…” Matthew murmured thickly around his injured tongue. “…yes…Goode!”

“Whoa!” Thomas cried out, gritting his teeth against the pain flaring up from his hands as he was forced to apply a great deal of pressure to keep Matthew lying down. “Sir! Your back!”

“Goode! Where’s Goode?” Matthew gasped, slumping back on the ground, his wide eyes locking onto Thomas’. “He was right beside me when…when…where is he? He’s only a boy!”

A boy who, in all likelihood given the state of the guns, was most probably dead.

“I’ll find out what happened to him.” Thomas assured him, keeping up the pressure on his hands until Matthew had returned to his previous position. “You just…stay still, alright?”

Matthew nodded weakly, the fight seeming to drain out of him.

It took Thomas a couple of minutes to work up the energy to move again, shuffling over to Whiting who was going around the room with a canteen of black tea, serving some to each of the patients with a ladle rather than a mug. He looked concerned to see Thomas moving.

“Do you know if Goode has been brought in?”

“No, he hasn’t or at least I haven’t seen him. I’ll keep an eye out for him, though,” Whiting promised, putting the ladle back into the canteen and then placing that down on the deck.

“Thomas, you really shouldn’t be moving around. You’re in shock, you know? I don’t think there’s any blood left in your cheeks. You’re pale as a ghost! Let’s get you sat back down.”

Thomas grunted in approval of this plan, his head swimming all of a sudden.

His place by the bulkhead had been given to another man in his absence and so, at Thomas’ suggestion, he was returned to Matthew’s side, leaning with his back against the bunk bed.

“He’s not here,” he informed the Officer. “But they’ll keep an eye out for him.”

“If he’s not here already then you know what that means, Barrow.”

He did.

It meant that he’d probably been killed outright in the blast which had wounded Matthew.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Not your fault. Not anybody’s fault. Not really,” Matthew sighed, draping one of his arms over his
eyes in order to hide the way they glistened. “It’s…it’s just this stupid, bloody war.”

“Try and get some rest, sir,” Thomas sighed, resting his hand on top of Matthew’s other hand, the one still resting at his side. “We’re on our way home now. The worst is over.”

Wasn’t it?

~ * ~

A/N When I promised less of a wait for the next chapter I wasn’t expecting it to come quite so quickly but the battle wouldn’t leave me alone until I reached it conclusion. Cue some double checking into what happened next and here we go. Now I’m neither a historian, just an amateur enthusiast, or a doctor so please excuse any mistakes. Comments welcome. X
Chapter Six

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER SIX

HMS Warrior
31st May 1916

“I swear this ship is cursed or something…”

“What do you mean?”

Thomas glanced over at where Keene was talking to the wounded sailor who had just come in to have his left hand bandaged, his injury painful but not crippling. He was an old sailor, grey sprinkled through his dark hair, and his skin was weather-beaten, tanned and wrinkled.

“Haven’t you noticed? We’re running in circles.”

“…I don’t understand…”

Keene was near breaking point.

His eyes were wide, haunted, his limbs obviously heavy and his voice slightly slurred.
He needed a break.

He needed sleep.

They all did.

“Rudders jammed. Full over. Nothing we can do about it; have the injury to prove it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to be stuck going round in circles until we sink instead of trying to get ourselves home,” someone else sneered at Keene, his harsh voice and unkind words proving to be the breaking point as the boy let out a sob, his eyes welling with tears. “Bloody hell…”

“Hey!” Thomas snapped. “Pipe down, would you? Keene, come over here.”

He patted the floor beside where he was sat, indicating for the boy to join him which he did, hurrying to tuck himself into Thomas’ side, his grisly cleaning duties temporarily abandoned.

“Don’t listen to them.”

“…are we really going to sink?”

Thomas sighed deeply,

“I don’t know. Maybe. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Honestly Thomas was surprised that they hadn’t already sunk after the number of times they’d been hit during the battle, a couple of them definitely striking below the waterline.

“What on Earth is that?”

“It’s a ship.”

“I can see it’s a ship but I’ve never seen a ship like that before…”

“Yes, you have.”

“No, I think I’d remember.”

Almost everyone’s gaze had shifted to the pair arguing like an old married couple by the exterior hatch, their gazes fixed on something outside that Thomas couldn’t possibly see.

“Looks more like a blinking building than a ship…”

“It’s the Engadine!” a third sailor piped up beside the couple, his excitement clear to all. “You know, one of the air craft carriers? Look! She’s changed course to come over to us.”

_HMS Engadine_, formerly the cross-channel packet ship _SS Engadine_, had been converted at the start of the war into a seaplane tender. This accounted for her unusual shape; they had literally put a building on her, calling it a hangar, and had filled it with three seaplanes to be used for aerial reconnaissance and bombing missions in the North Sea. She had no need of a flight deck, such as the kind that _HMS Campania_ had been fitted with, as her seaplanes were designed to take off from the water. This process, lowering the planes from the hangar into the water by crane, could take anything up to thirty minutes which wasn’t ideal. Despite what the other sailors had claimed it was possible that the first had never seen her before as she sailed with the _Battlecruiser Fleet._ _HMS_
*Campania* was the air craft carrier assigned to the *Grand Fleet* but for due to a signalling error had failed to sail with the rest of the fleet.

“She’s signalling.”

“Semaphore?”

“Aye. She’s…she’s offering us assistance!”

An audible sigh spread throughout the sick berth.

“Now she’s acknowledging our reply…”

“What reply? What did we send?”

No one had seen, their own signalmen up by the bridge being just out of their line of sight, but a long moment later a bellowed order reached their ears through the open hatchway,

“Prepare to be taken in tow!”

Sadly the manoeuvre wasn’t quite as simple as it should have been.

As well as the rudder having become jammed the boilers were now inaccessible due to fire, flooding and a combination of the two in some places and so before *Engadine* could even think of trying approach them they had let *Warrior* work off her current burst of steam, the ship turning in a series of tight circles until with a final splutter the engines fell silent at last.

Thomas listened as a motor-boat brought a light wire over to the ship from *Engadine* which was attached to the heavier cable *Warrior* had access to. There was a brief debate then about where the bollards the wire had been lashed to would hold amidst the amount of damage which had been done to her, most of the concern coming from the sailors aboard the motor-boat. Finally it was agreed that anything was worth a shot at this point and the lighter wire was pulled back to *Engadine*, taking the loose end of the heavier wire with it.

“…what’s going on?” Matthew murmured, groggy from the morphia he’d been given. “Ba…”

“*Engadine* is going to take us in tow.”

Matthew frowned.

“…she’s too small,” he protested softly. “She’ll never…she’ll never manage to move us…”

He was right, to a degree.

*Engadine* was much too small, only 1,800 tons, and under normal circumstances wouldn’t have even attempted to tow a ship such a *Warrior*, 13,500 tons on a good day let alone with the amount of water they’d taken on. But these were anything but normal circumstances.

After they’d got the heavier line secured at the other end, *Engadine*’s crew lashing it to every bollard and projection they could find, they made the first attempt to pull *Warrior*.

The line went taught, the sailors on deck urging it to work, but *Warrior* didn’t move an inch.

*Engadine*, who had allowed some slack in the line to give them time to build up momentum, was brought to a shockingly abrupt halt, complete with a shower of sparks from a bollard as the wire pulled taut. A murmur of concern swept throughout the entire ship as they waited.
“…told you…” Matthew sighed. “We’re too…heavy…for her…”

Thomas hoped that that wasn’t the case.

That there was some other reason for the *Engadine* to be having so much trouble.

A sharp cry came from just outside the open hatchway,

“It’s the bloomin’ rudder! Still jammed full over, ‘int it? That’s what’s stoppin’ us!”

“He’s right,” a second voiced piped up. “They need to cut the cable. Cut the rudder cable!”

“What?”

The third voice came from amidships, thick with confusion.

“Cut the damned rudder cable so they’ll have a chance at moving the ship!”

The message must have finally reached the correct person because the next time that *HMS Engadine* attempted to get her moving the *Warrior* moved. Not a lot, of course, but enough to reassure them all that it would eventually be possible. Each further attempt saw *Warrior* moving more and more until finally, as though the sea had finally decided to allow them to leave, they were under way. It was hard work for poor *Engadine*, the two ships only moving at a speed of eight knots whilst her turbines made revolutions enough for nineteen knots.

It was only then, as the two crews breathed a deep sigh of relief, that they realised just how dark it had gotten. Night had well and truly fallen. A quick check of the time revealed that it was already 2130. *Engadine* had first attempted to tow them at 1945, an hour after *Warrior* had come across the seaplane carrier. Along with the darkness came an eerie silence, all sounds of battle fading behind them. In fact the final shots had been fired between the two fleets at 2032 although, sadly, this didn’t bring an end to the battle; more deaths were yet to come as the *German High Seas Fleet* attempted to slip past the British, heading for home.

“Huh,” Matthew huffed, offering Thomas a drowsy smile. “I guess anything’s possible.”

“Indeed, sir,” Thomas murmured in response, offering a tired smile of his own in response. “Why don’t you get some sleep? You need to rest. There’s nothing more we can do now.”

Matthew hummed thoughtfully,

“A nap does sound rather…appealing…”

He was out cold in seconds, as though his body had been awaiting his minds permission, and joined the majority of the other patients who had been dropping off to sleep, some aided by the morphia they’d been given, most out of sheer exhaustion. Keene had given in to sleeps siren call a little while ago, curling up on his side his head pillowed heavily on Thomas’ thigh, and was now snoring softly. Crabb had come over shortly after the boys snores had begun, had taken one look at Keene’s peaceful expression and had assigned some else to clean up.

Thomas must have dosed a little bit, waking every now and then to the sounds that the rest of the crew were making as they attempted to keep *Warrior* from taking on more water as they were literally dragged through the rolling waves of the North Sea. It was, sadly, a losing battle and by the time that the sun began to rise the list was painfully obvious. *Warrior* was going down by her bows, port side, and there was nothing any of them could do to stop it.
“I think we should begin preparing the patients to abandon ship,” Wright advised as he came back from getting a moment of fresh air, his expression worried. Crabb, frowning, crossed to stand directly in front of him whilst Budge moved to hover at his side, a hand resting on Wright’s arm. “She’s going down. It’s only a matter of time now; the waves are sweeping across the decks amidships, we’re so low in the water. We need to get the walking wounded ready to go and find stretchers and stretcher bearers for those who can’t walk.”

All three officers shared the same grave expression before Crabb finally nodded,

“Very well. Rouse the Stewards and begin making the necessary preparations.”

Thomas, with his injured hands and leg, could have been counted as a stretcher case but insisted that he could walk, not wanting to take up a valuable stretcher when it wasn’t necessary. So what if every step was painful, the burn on his leg throbbing in time with his heartbeat even as his hands remained numb most of the time? He could handle the pain.

They were just getting Matthew, awake but still mostly out of it thanks to a fresh dose of morphia, transferred onto a stretcher when the word reached them the order had been given; all hands were to fall in by divisions on the deck once Engadine was alongside, ready to abandon ship. Warrior, their trustworthy ship, was to be left to meet her watery grave.

“That’s the signal given,” someone near the hatch muttered, stopping to draw his friends arm over his shoulder to help him. “Come along side, am sinking. Short, but to the point.”

“Semaphore has to be short, and to the point, as you put it,” his mate chuckle through the bandages wrapped around his head, completely covering his face. “That’s how it works.”

Watching Engadine attempt to come alongside Warrior was a somewhat worrying affair.

By that point Thomas was down on the deck, his feet soaked by the water which appeared and disappeared with every movement of the ship, stood beside Matthew as the officer lay on his stretcher which had been propped up on top of the large box that the signal flags were kept in so as to keep him from getting soaked. Each of the other stretchers, eight in total, were similarly placed on any available surface in order to keep their occupants dry.

The other men labelled as “seriously wounded” but able to walk like Thomas stood nearby.

This positioning meant that he had a front row seat for everything that came to pass.

Engadine’s first attempt to come alongside resulted in a horrid sound, metal grating upon metal, as the seaplane carriers thinner plating was literally torn open when one of Warriors guns punctured it below the waterline as the damaged ship rolled upon the moderate seas.

For a brief moment everyone feared that this accident had doomed them all.

Would Engadine flounder alongside the ship she was trying to help?

But, no, her crew responded spectacularly and in no time at all the damage was patched, a cheer rising from both ships when the announcement was made that Engadine was safe.

It was then time for a second attempt to come alongside to take place.

Thomas found himself holding his breath as he watched the smaller ship manoeuvring into place, this time being especially careful to avoid Warriors remaining guns, and only refilled his lungs when the two ships had been successfully linked by a series of lines thrown across.
“Well, that’s a relief,” he muttered, turning to smile reassuringly down at Matthew who had also been watching the action taking place with a concerned expression. He was shivering under the thin blanket which had been tucked in around him, the early morning air cold to the point that Thomas was reminded of winter morning in the attics of Downton Abbey, ice on his window, his breath fogging in front of him as he washed and dressed. “Don’t worry, sir, we’ll have you across in no time. And then it’ll be next stop, England, full speed ahead.”

For a few moments after the two ships were linked the sailors of Warrior scurried around the ship, gathering supplies they would need and any souvenirs that they wanted to keep.

Thomas had only what he’d had on him when the battle had commenced.

It would be impossible for him to reach his things in time, even if the way was clear which he very much doubted, and any souvenirs he would’ve liked to have acquired were probably already in someone else’s possession. Plus his bandaged hands would have been a problem.

However, if he was honest, leaving with his life was souvenir enough at this point.

Within one deep breath and the next the crew began to form up into their divisions, Thomas being ordered to leave Matthew’s side for the first time since they’d come upon the officer pinned under the gun shield so as to join his own division, taking his place in the rear rank.

It was at this point, whilst they were waiting for the command to abandon ship to be given, that panic almost overcame the crew of the Warrior, Thomas included when the sinking ship gave a violent shudder which told them all that her end was fast approaching. The panic was soon quelled, however, when the ships bugler, a young Marine called Hastings, sounded the “Still!” and every single man, officer and seaman alike, sprang into the position of attention.

“Men, you have all done exceedingly well this day,” Captain Elliott announced clearly, his voice carrying over the noises being made by the ship dying beneath their feet. “You have done your duty, held your posts at all cost, and I am proud to call you my crew. The time has come for us to leave Warrior to meet her end, a fitting burial for such a ship, sent down to Davy Jones Locker like the warriors of old. But we shall not join her. Men, abandon ship.”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

Following his command the able-bodied, weary and battle grimed “Warriors” leapt over the gap between the ships, some of the walking wounded requiring more than just a guiding hand, and were quickly distributed throughout Engadine so as to keep her from capsizing.

Thomas was amongst them, glancing back over his shoulder as he was helped across.

Wounded as he was he wasn’t sent off to some distant part of the ship as most had been, instead he was simply taken one side and instructed to keep out of the way for the moment.

Then it was the turn of the stretcher cases.

Thomas could only watch, horrified, as tragedy struck.

As one of the stretchers was being passed across Warrior gave another sudden lurch, the movement causing those handling the stretcher to lose their hold on it which sent its poor occupant down into the seething water below the two ships. Voices were raised, in horror and despair, Thomas’ amongst them as he prayed that it hadn’t been Matthew that had just fallen to his death. He couldn’t…he couldn’t return to the Abbey with such horrific news…
He just couldn’t…

Thankfully, he wouldn’t have to.

One of Engadine’s crew, Flight Lieutenant Frederick Rutland, seized hold of a rope, tied a bowline around his body, and after ordering the men to hang on to the other end made his way forwards a little to the bows and swung himself over the bulwarks, quickly lowering himself down between the two ships in order to rescue the poor soul trapped between them. He was too late to save the sailors life, sadly, but was able to retrieve his limp body.

A feeling akin to being punched in the stomach had Thomas gasping for breath.

It wasn’t Matthew.

It was some other poor soul whose luck had run out that day.

For his actions Rutland would eventually be awarded the Albert Medal First Class.

As it stood then, however, he received many a commiserating pat on the back as he knelt over the body he had pulled up, stricken with grief at having been too late to save his life.

“Send over the next stretcher.”

It was this next stretcher that contain the Crawley’s heir.

Thomas watched, once again holding his breath, as the stretcher was passed from one ship to another without a single problem, Matthew’s hands emerging get from underneath the blanket in order to grip hold of the stretchers sides so firmly that his knuckles turned white.

All of the stretchers were being taken to the foredeck, Thomas had noticed, and so without being bidden to he made his way forward, following after the stretcher holding Matthew.

“Barrow,” the wounded officer called out as he caught sight of him, the two men carrying his stretcher frowning for a moment until Thomas stepped forward. “Did you see…I was…”

“We’re safe now, Mr Crawley,” Thomas sighed, sitting down on the deck beside the officer once his stretcher had been lowered ever so carefully. He barely held back a flinch of pain when Matthew reached out to clutch one of his heavily bandaged hands with both of his. “Look, the Captains making his way across. That’s everyone, everyone left alive, anyway.”

Captain Elliott had purposefully made sure that he was the last one to abandon his ship.

Once aboard the Engadine he was met by her own Captain, a younger man who offered him polite condolences over the loss of his ship and enquired if he would like to say a prayer or something akin to one before they left the Warrior and her dead to sink to her resting place.

“Yes, Captain Waverley, I would very much like to offer a prayer for the men of my ship who paid the ultimate price today,” Elliott responded. “So long as you don’t mind the delay…?”

“Not at all,” Waverley responded. “I’d like to give that patch job a once over before we go.”

The two Captains parted ways, Waverly heading below decks whilst Elliott gathered what remained of his crew who hadn’t been sent below decks to balance the ship out, Thomas amongst them. He found himself stood beside Greenaway, his young lover shivering from either the cold or the shock, and he placed a bandaged hand on his shoulder as a comfort.
“Thank you, Thomas,” Greenaway whispered. “I’m…I’m relieved to see you here.”

“You as well, Lieutenant.”

“Men, it is time for us to say goodbye to our comrades and our ship,” Captain Elliott called out, turning to face the battered ship that they were drifting away from now that the lines had been released. Warrior was going to down fast now and it wouldn’t be long, Thomas realised, before she disappeared from sight for good. “We therefore commit the earthly remains of our brothers to the deep, looking for the general Resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose second coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the sea shall give up her dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed, and made like unto his glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself.”

As one, Thomas included, the men added their voices to their Captains,

“Amen.”

It had been many years since he’d last attended a church service, given what the Church, be it Protestant or Catholic, said about people like him and it had been even longer since he’d last offered up a sincere prayer. And yet today his prayers, as numerous as they had been spontaneous, were as sincere as could be. He’d prayed for the safety his friends and the rest of the crew as he’d traversed the ship carrying his stretcher, for Matthew to make it across safely and now he prayed for those that they’d lost to find the peace that they so deserved.

He only hoped that God would listen to someone like him.

And then, their prayer said and their crew safe, HMS Engadine began to steam for home.

~ * ~

A/N I honestly tried to get a chapter out of one of my other stories but this one wouldn’t leave me alone until I finished writing the Battle of Jutland scenes. As before I’ve done my best to be as historically accurate as possible but with a work of fiction a little bit of artistic licence is often required. A lot of this chapter was taken from accounts of men who were there, either aboard Warrior or Engadine, and the tragic incident with the man falling from the stretcher between the two ships really did happen. Comments/Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Seven

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rosyth
2nd June 1916

With Engadine as loaded down as she was it took them longer than it normally would have to reach the distinct landmark that was the Forth Bridge, passing under it in relieved silence.

The bridge made for a truly impressive sight, linking the villages of South Queensferry and North Queensferry, that many a sailor used as a sign that they were nearly back in Rosyth.

It was one of the many “Victorian marvels” that the Earl of Grantham had been obsessed with, delighting in explaining everything about the bridge to his less than thrilled wife and daughters over the years. Thomas and his fellow servants had heard all about it too, given that they were always present and yet we’re all but invisible until the family required them.

Because of this Thomas knew that the bridge consisted of two main spans of 1,700 feet, two side spans of 680 feet, and fifteen approach spans of 168 feet meaning that the bridge itself was an impressive 8,094 feet long. Each main span consisted of two 680 feet cantilever arms supporting a central 350 feet span truss and the double track for the trains was elevated 150 feet above the water.
level at high tide. He even knew how much the bridge structure weighed, 50,513 long tons, and that the bridge had also used 640,000 cubic feet of granite.

One thing that he couldn’t remember off the top of his head was the height of the three four-tower cantilever structures which were responsible for keeping the bridge in place.

“…I’ve never seen anything like it…”

Both crews aboard Engadine were newcomers to the area, the Grand Fleet having been moored at Scapa Flow before this, and as such most of them had never seen the bridge before. Not in person, at least; some of them, like Thomas, had seen it in the newspapers.

Of course, given that the pictures had been in black-and-White even Thomas was somewhat taken aback by the bridges vivid red colour, every inch having been painted that very colour.

“…no wonder my brothers use it as a landmark when they’re heading back into port…”

“Not long now, then,” Matthew murmured from where he was laid out on his stretcher on the foredeck. They’d moved the most serious casualties out there when they’d sighted land so that once they docked they could be taken ashore as quickly as possible. Thomas, as one of the “walking wounded” cases had been informed that if he could find a space it was his for the duration of the voyage and so he had opted to stay beside Matthew. “That’s good.”

Around them Engadine’s crew were a hive of activity as was to be expected with those not preparing their ship for the process of passing through the lock to the enclosed basin caring for the wounded, tending to their injuries or simply bringing them steaming hot cups of tea.

Thomas had never been to the Naval Base at Rosyth before, simply because he’d only ever served on Warrior as part of the British Grand Fleet which was based out of Scapa Flow, so was unsure what to expect. He soon realised, however, as they navigated through the lock dock that it was true what they said; once you’ve seen one Naval Base you’ve seen them all.

He did notice that several of the buildings appeared to be relatively new as they emerged from the lock into the enclosed basin where those ships that were in need of repairs had been ordered to dock, those that had escaped undamaged having dropped anchor in the open water of the Firth of Forth, with a couple of them still surrounded by scaffolding. One of the Battlecruisers, he suspected it was HMS Lion but it could have been one of the others that had also been hit such as HMS Tiger, was in the process of entering the dry-dock on the land side of the basin and looked to be a sorry state even from the distance they were at.

“All hands, prepare to come alongside on the port side!”

A flurry of activity followed the command which had been broadcast through the ships simple tannoy system, men preparing the ropes and fenders which would be required.

It appeared that they were to come alongside one of the Battleships, HMS Barham, which was already moored up alongside the single pier protruding into the basin. Signallers were busy on both ships, transmitting a flurry of orders, requests and responses as both crews prepared for the manoeuvre. Coming alongside another ship wasn’t all that complicated, at least not when the other ship is docked in a harbour, but the Barham had obviously suffered a fair bit of damage during the battle which could potentially make things a bit challenging.

Not to mention the damage Engadine had suffered whilst rescuing Thomas and his fellow shipmates or the temporary patches literally holding her hull together above the water line.
Thomas was certain that he wasn’t the only one holding his breath as the gap between the two ships grew smaller and smaller until, suddenly and with a distinct thud, they collided.

Or rather, the fenders both ships had lowered collided.

No metal made contact from either ship and in minutes the ropes had been flung back and forth and secured to the relevant bollards keeping the smaller ship alongside HMS Barham.

The next challenge came in the form of getting the wounded from Engadine to Barham and then from Barham onto the pier which would then take them to the shore. After a rather extensive discussion between the two ships Captains it was decided to haul the stretchers up themselves rather than transferring the men on and off of one stretcher being lifted and lowered. This meant that a two lengths of rope were lowered from HMS Barham using the shackles at the end of two of the ships wooden beams, a bowline-on-a-bite being fashioned at the end each rope so that the poles of the stretchers could be fed through them. Once that was done two shorter lengths of rope were used to put stopper knots on the ends of the poles to ensure that the bowlines couldn’t slip off as the patients was being lifted.

“I’m glad I’m not going first,” Matthew confessed as they watched the first of Engadines patients, mercifully unconscious, being carefully lifted through the air. Once the stretcher was in line with Barhams deck a pair of boat hooks were used to pull it towards the ship, the sailors manning the ropes working hard to give enough but not too much slack. A sigh of relief spread throughout the ship when the patient was safely on board the taller ship and the ropes, with the two smaller lengths of ropes tied simply through the bowlines, were lowered back down to collect the next stretcher. Now that they knew the method worked the transfer time grew shorter and short, both crews adjusting well to the task at hand, and in no time at all it was lieutenant Crawleys turn to be lifted. “I’ll see you ashore, Barrow.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The next challenge to arise were Thomas and his fellow walking wounded.

It would be impossible for them to climb the rope ladder which had been lowered amidships as the able bodied survivors of HMS Warrior had been instructed to. They, just like the more severe cases, would need to be lifted, and so the crew of the Engadine set about fashioning a makeshift bosuns chair out of the lengths of rope, a plank of wood and several smaller pieces of rope. It didn’t look at all safe, more like something you’d see a child playing on, so it was with great reluctance that when he was called forwards as the first of the walking wounded to use it that Thomas took a seat on the plank of wood and allowed them to tie him in place. He couldn’t hold on properly thanks to the thick bandages covering his burned hands so instead he wrapped his arms around the two ropes connecting the bosuns chair to HMS Barham until they were nestled into the crook of his elbows. That would have to do.

The bosuns chair gave an unpleasant lurch after the command had been given to begin lifting him up to the other ship, rising only a couple of feet before pausing as the sailors hauling on the ropes shifted their hands along. It then lurched once more, rising another couple of feet before once again coming to a stop. This unpleasantly jerky motion was repeated over and over again until Thomas had been lifted high enough for the two boat hooks to grab hold of him, by which point his stomach was churning unpleasantly. He’d never had a problem with heights before but being suspended on a plank high above the ship below him had been enough to trigger the unpleasant reaction, causing him to be eternally grateful to the men who quickly pulled the bosuns chair across and down onto a strategically placed wooden crate. Unwrapping his arms from the ropes he held them aloft as they released him from the chair, stumbling to his feet as soon as he was instructed to.
“There we go, nothing to it,” a handsome officer murmured, gesturing for a boy sailor to come forwards. “Saunders, help this man down onto the pier and then return for another.”

“Yes, Sir.”

A hand took hold of his elbow, steadying him until he’d got his legs under him properly once more, and Thomas allowed himself to be lead around to the gangplank connecting the ship to the pier below. Reassuring the young sailor that he could make the rest of his way on his own Thomas edged his way down the steep gangway, spotting the rows of stretchers at the secured end of the pier and made his way towards them, searching out for Matthews face.

“Are you the first of Warriors waking wounded?”

Turning to face the source of the unfamiliar voice Thomas found himself before a doctor holding a clipboard and pencil, his expression serious as he looked Thomas up and down.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good,” the doctor hummed before ordering, “Name, Rank and Injury, please.”


“Burns, you say?”

Nodding Thomas extended his hands for the officer to see.

“My hands are…quite bad. Blistered,” he explained. “And there’s a slight burn on my leg.”

“I see,” the doctor hummed once more, making a series of notations on his clipboard. “Burns are tricky things. I think I’ll send you to the ‘Edinburgh Royal Infirmary’ with the stretcher cases. Don’t wander off; there’ll be transport arriving shortly for all of you.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Dismissed with a simple nod, the officer turning his attention to the next walking wounded patient who was being assisted down the gangway due to the fact that his injuries were to his face so the bandages had ended up covering his eyes, Thomas returned to searching for Lieutenant Crawley amongst the stretcher cases. There were fourteen in total, he counted, and at last he was able to identify Matthew as the occupant of stretcher number thirteen.

“Well,” Thomas exhaled loudly as he knelt down beside Matthew. “That was interesting.”

Matthew chuckled,

“Indeed.”

A steady stream of walking wounded patients began to make their way off of the ship, most being sent on with the uninjured as they were only minor cases and would be being sent to a different hospital, and then a stream of unfamiliar faces appeared as the Engadine crew began to come ashore leaving behind only a skeleton crew to look after the maintenance.

The transport that had been promised arrived in due course, a converted bus which could take only six stretchers at a time along with a couple of the walking patients so they were split into three groups. As luck would have it Thomas and Matthew were put into the same group, it was just somewhat unfortunate that they were in the last group so they had to wait on the pier for a further
hour after the first patients had been whisked away. In the end, however, they ended up the lucky ones as once they reached the train station they only had a five minute wait on the unpleasantly draughty platform before being carefully loaded into the converted goods van of an ordinary passenger train bound for Edinburgh.

The journey itself didn’t take much more than an hour, travelling across the same Forth Bridge that they had passed under only a few hours earlier, which was lucky as the chair that Thomas had been given was quite possibly the most uncomfortable he’d ever sat on.

More importantly no patients required anything more than a dressing change.

“There will be ambulances waiting at the station,” the officer with the clipboard who had accompanied them on the train announced as they slowed upon approaching the station. “They will transport us to the hospital whereupon I will hand you over to the doctors there.”

There were, indeed, ambulances waiting for them.

There was also, Thomas was surprised to note, a large crowd of people.

And they weren’t happy to see them.

“What the…?”

He was shocked when, just as the uniformed orderlies from the ambulance were unloading Matthew’s stretcher from the train, an overweight man with a red face let out an angry cry, “Cowards!”

It was so unexpected that it took them all by surprise.

They…

“Cowards!”

Anger rose within Thomas, like a tidal wave, and before he could stop himself he was across the platform and standing in front of the man, his handsome face twisted into an ugly glare.

“How dare you…?!"

A finger was suddenly in his face, the digit full of accusation and anger.

“You let the Germans walk all over you!”

“We…we didn’t let them do anything!” Thomas sputtered, filled with righteous anger as he confronted him. “We went through hell on earth for you, for all of you and this is how you repay us?! Do you know how many of us died for you?! And you dare to call us cowards?”

“We wouldn’t have to if you’d done your jobs!”

Thomas couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“…done our jobs?” Thomas repeated, his voice rising to an even higher pitch as he felt incredulousness taking over. “…done our jobs?! We did our jobs! We…we did more?”

“More, you say?” a woman scoffed. “More?! Then why did the Germans win?!”"
“…what?” Thomas all but screamed. “They didn’t win!”

Was that…was that really what the people of Great Britain thought?

That the Germans had won?

“We sent them scuttling back to their home ports without a chance of breaking free of our blockades!” he shouted over the noise of the crowd, gesturing with his bandaged hands. A couple of voices fell silence, stunned by his words. “If the Germans had won they’d have gained access to the sea! They’d have gotten access to America and their resources. But they didn’t. And they haven’t. And they won’t. So don’t you dare call those men cowards!”

With that final word, all but spat in the man’s stunned face, Thomas turned and stormed towards the ambulance. A couple of people who were still angry with them tried to get in his way but his glare, intense as it was, was enough to send them scuttling out of his way.

“What ship were you on?”

This voice was much younger, calling out to him just as he was about to climb aboard the last ambulance, and unlike the other it’s wasn’t filled with hate. It was filled with respect.

“Warrior,” he answered, looking back over his shoulder. “We were aboard HMS Warrior.”

As the last patient to board the ambulance Thomas was left sitting on the very edge of one of the small seats at the end of the metal structures holding the stretchers, his legs hanging out of the back of the ambulance. It was precarious, to say the least, and he was grateful when the man taking up the rest of the seat he was perched upon took hold of his jacket.

“Thanks,” he muttered, instantly feeling more stable as they bounced over the cobbles, shooting the other man a grateful smile. “I can’t really hold onto anything with these.”

He held up his bandaged hands to demonstrate precisely what he was referring to.

“Had a feeling you might need a hand, pardon the pun,” the sailor helping him out snorted. Opposite them the occupants of the seat had gone down a much simpler route; the ships boy with his lower left arm missing, a dressing and tourniquet applied to his upper arm, was sat upon the lap of the fatherly stoker who had suffered burns to his faces, neck and hands. “I heard what you said, back on the platform. Wish I’d had the guts confront them like that.”

“Wasn’t so much guts as a short fuse,” Thomas confessed. “Is Lieutenant Crawley with us?”

“I don’t think so,” the other man answered. “They put the officers all in one ambulance.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Thomas sighed, frustrated that he’d allowed himself to be separated from the other man although it was pretty much inevitable that they would have ended up separated at one point or another; there was no way that an officer with a back injury would be treated in the same ward as a steward with burns. He just hadn’t meant for it to happen so soon. “I don’t know about you but I could do with a cup of tea after all that.”

“I’d prefer a tot of rum,” the other sailor responded dryly. “But to each their own.”

A chuckle spread throughout the ambulance in response to his cheerful statement.

Even Thomas, who was being mocked playfully, couldn’t help but laugh.
Yeah, if given the choice between tea and rum he’d probably choose the latter as well.

When Thomas had first joined the Navy the daily rum ration, or “tot” as it was known, had taken him by surprise. He’d honestly thought that such a practice was something that had only existed in the world of fiction in this day and age but, no, each and every sailor was entitled to a tot of rum, measuring one-eighth of an imperial pint, at midday when possible.

Officers, much to Thomas’ surprise, were the only sailors aboard ship not entitled to a “tot.”

The Senior Rates, from the lowest Petty Officer to the most senior Chief, received their rum neat whilst the rest of the ship received theirs diluted with two parts water to make three-eighths of an imperial pint. Even then it was some of the strongest alcohol he’d ever had.

Getting used to drinking a “tot” a day had been an interesting struggle.

There were some sailors who didn’t partake in the tradition, of course, those who followed the Temperance Movement for example although there had only been two of them aboard Warrior. They received three pence a day instead of the rum. Others chose not to have their rum ration because they needed the money, usually to send home. By the time Thomas had found out that he could opt out if he wanted to he’d already grown too used to the practice.

Out of curiosity he’d spoken to members of Warriors crew over the years, hoping to learn as much as he could about the unusual tradition, and through this research he knew that the original ration had been one gallon, as in eight pints, of beer. Eight pints of beer per day.

He could only ever manage three before the world began to spin unpleasantly.

How had those sailors managed to perform their duties in such a state?

He honestly had no idea.

Beer had been the daily allowance until after the Napoleonic Wars although due to the fact that it spoiled easily there had been alternative substitutes available; a pint of wine or half a pint of spirits, depending on what was available locally. It had, in fact, been politics that had resulted in rum replacing all of the other options, influence from the West Indian planters.

Over the years the ration was diluted, taken at two different times a day and cut in half then half again by the Victorians, eventually bringing them to the practice that they now enjoyed.

There were some odd traditions regarding the rum ration as well, he had learned during the last couple of years; “tot” glasses were kept separate from any other glasses and were only ever to be washed on the outside. The belief was that by not washing the inside of the glass the residue of past “tots” would stick to the glass and make the fresh “tot” even stronger. And the only way to “prove” that the rum was of proper strength was to douse some gunpowder in it and set it alight. If the rum still burned that meant that it was at least 57% ABV (alcohol by volume) and therefore suitable for their consumption. Thankfully Thomas had never seen this done, gunpowder and flames being somewhat dangerous aboard ship.

This was definitely a tradition left in the past.

“I’ve never tried rum,” the ships boy murmured drowsily from where he was curled up on the stokers lap, looking even younger than his tender years. “They said I wasn’t old enough.”

“Quite right, too,” the Stoker murmured in a fatherly manner, rubbing his back. “You’ve got plenty of time to try it once you’ve finished growing, young man. There’s no need to rush.”
A chorus of agreement came from the occupants of the stretchers.

They were met at the hospital by a somewhat harried looking doctor who was definitely past the age of retirement, no doubt brought back to the hospital after they’d lost most if not all of their doctors of enlistment age, trained physicians and surgeons being very much needed at the front. He was accompanied by a nursing Sister who held the clipboard that the officer had handed over to the senior ambulance orderly after officially signing over his charges to their care and a gaggle of pretty young VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurses.

“Barrow, Thomas?”

Looking up as the Sister read his name from the clipboard it took him a moment to respond,

“That’s me.”

“And Noakes, John?”

It was the burned stoker who responded this time,

“I go by Jack but, yeah, that’s me.”

“Jones, Patrick?”

A stretcher case this time, a single hand being raised weakly in response.

“And finally Atkinson, Kenneth?”

“That’s me,” the stretcher case underneath the first responded. “And I prefer Ken.”

“Burns ward please, nurses,” the Sister announced, addressing the gaggle of VAD’s who stepped forwards to assist the ambulance men in helping those whose names had been called to descend from the back of the ambulance. “Get them ready for doctors inspection.”

“Yes, Sister.”

Thomas found himself being helped to his feet by the smallest of the nurses, the top of her head not even reaching his shoulder, and was surprised by her strength as she wrapped one arm around his waist to keep him steady. Looking back over his shoulder he nodded a quick thank you and farewell to the sailor who had been helping him, catching sight of the other man taking the boy sailor from the stoker so that the other man could exit the ambulance.

“Come on then. Mr Barrow,” the VAD smiled up at him as she began leading him inside the surprising building, surprising in that it didn’t look anything like what Thomas had expected. The hospital was quite possibly one of the grandest building Thomas had seen outside of London, Downton Abbey included. It was a pinnacle of what he’d call delicate architecture and if someone had told him that a member of the Aristocracy lived inside he wouldn’t have been surprised. The fact that it was a hospital actually seemed wrong. “Let’s get you inside.”

Thomas was the first of the burns patients to make it inside, the stretchers being carried in behind him. The stoker, blinded by his dressings, brought up the rear at a bit of a distance.

It took them fifteen minutes to make it to the ward that was to become their home for the foreseeable future, traversing a couple of flights of stairs and a veritable maze of identical corridors. The ward itself was a long rectangular room and contained two rows of hospital beds, each one placed underneath a window and posing its own chair for visitors and a tall cabinet for
the patients things to be kept in. In terms of patients only half of the beds were currently occupied, all of them along the same wall, and so Thomas and his fellow *Warriors* were given the first four beds on the left side of the room, Thomas furthest from the door.

“Right,” the nurse who Thomas was beginning to think of as *his* VAD announced brightly as she hurried to erect the screens around his bed. “Let’s get you out of that dirty uniform.”

A flush appeared on her cheeks even before she’d finished speaking.

Stripping him of his uniform was easier said than done, however, due to her unfamiliarity with how it worked and his bandaged and therefore useless hands. In the end he had to give her very precise instructions regarding the best way to remove his collar, jacket and white front. Normally he’d have insisted that she fold his trousers properly but they were pretty much ruined, particularly the leg which had been burned as there was a hole in the fabric.

Eventually, after a fight with the laces of his boots which they’d both forgotten about until she shed attempted to remove his trousers, he stood before her in nothing but his underwear.

The flush on her cheeks spread rapidly down the sides of her neck as she folded his uniform into manageable bundles, placing them all in a paper bag before turning to him and nodding to his underwear, biting her lip before finally reaching forwards to pull them down his legs.

These were then added to the paper bag which was placed at the foot of the bed.

“We’ll have those cleaned for you, should they prove salvageable,” she explained, looking at the wall behind his shoulder. Thomas found it rather adorable that she, a nurse, was so very embarrassed by his naked body. Especially as he was one of the least likely patients she would ever have to care for in such an intimate way that would *react* in any way to her attentions. Now, were she one of the handsome orderlies it would be a different matter entirely… “For now though let’s get you scrubbed clean and into a set of hospital pyjamas.”

*Getting scrubbed clean* was an interesting experience, Thomas chuckled silently to himself, the young VAD fetching a bowl of warm, soapy water and a sponge which she used to wipe the sweat, dried sea salt, muck, soot and blood off of Thomas’ skin. He was more filthy than he’d realised, the water having to be changed twice, and could do nothing to help but stand perfectly still and completely silent, lest the blood vessels burst in her cheeks from blushing.

Getting him dressed in the unpleasantly starched hospital pyjamas took significantly less time than stripping him had, her hands much more familiar with these items of clothing.

Then he was helped into bed, tucked in and the screens were removed.

“Doctor will be here to have a look at your injuries shortly,” his VAD announced as she bent to pick up the bag containing his uniform. “Can I get you anything in the meantime? Tea?”

Thomas nodded.

“I’ll be right back.”

He’d just finished his tea by the time the Doctor arrived, starting his assessments with the patient nearest the door. Thomas hadn’t had any trouble holding the cup and saucer despite his bandaged hands, resting both in his lap when not physically taking a sip. The problems occurred, however, when he attempted to place them on his bedside cabinet. Even empty of liquid they were too heavy for his injured hands, the burns throbbing more and more as he struggled to reach the cabinet that was *just* out of his reach and then, suddenly, he lost control of his fingers, the digits spasmed
wildly due to the pain, and both the cup and its saucer plummeted to the ground, shattering into pieces upon impact with a loud smash.

“Oh, Mr Barrow!” his VAD exclaimed with dismay as she rushed over to him from where she’d been gathered with her fellow nurses. “I’m so sorry! You should’ve asked for help.”

“I thought I could reach,” Thomas explained as she first got him settled back against his pillows and then began cleaning up the mess, picking out the bigger pieces. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you worry,” she reassured him. “I’ll be back with a dustpan and brush.”

In the end she’d only just finished clearing away the last of the mess, the small amount of liquid which needed to be mopped up with a cloth, by the time the Doctor reached Thomas.

“Sorry to make you wait so long, Mr Barrow,” the man whose grey hair was speckled with patches of pure white murmured upon arriving beside his bed. “Let’s start with your leg.”

Working together two of the VADs had his bed sheets and pyjama bottoms off in now time, revealing the open wound to his leg. It was poked, prodded, and pulled about unpleasantly, the doctor humming thoughtfully all the while, before he finally announced that the burn would heal well enough with only a simple course of treatment; keeping it clean and dry.

“Now; I’d like to see your right hand first, if I may.”

This wound, when it was carefully revealed, was given a much more delicate treatment.

“That’s a nasty burn, Mr Barrow. I’m afraid there’ll be quite a bit of scarring,” the doctor apologised as he pressed gently at the burns edges, his actions sending shards of pain lancing up Thomas’ arm. He hissed loudly, trying to pull his hand away, as the doctor continued to probe around the edge of the largest blister. “Let’s this blister drained first, then I want the wound to be cleaned and dressed. We’ll need to monitor for infection.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Now, let’s get a look at your other hand.”

None of the medical staff could conceal their surprise once the dressing had been removed, revealing the fact that whilst his right hand was burned on the back of his hand the left hand had been burned on the palm. The wound itself looked different, too, given that it was from touching the heated metal rather than the flames themselves. There was only one blister on his right hand, the rest of the burn seeming to have eaten away at his skin, whilst the burn covering his left palm was made up almost entirely of blisters in various shapes and sizes.

Thomas didn’t know which was worse.

“…were you in two fires, Mr Barrow?”

“No,” Thomas countered the genuine inquiry from the doctor as the elderly man began an even gentler examination than before, barely touching his skin at all. It still hurt. “I burned my left hand lifting a piece of hot metal whilst my other hand was touched by the flames.”

“I see,” the grey haired man hummed thoughtfully before leaning back. “Well, these blisters will need draining and cleaning too, I’m afraid. Sister, I advise a regimen of morphine for the time being. I’ll be back to check on all the new patients this afternoon but for now carry on.”
“Yes, Doctor.”

The morphine wasn’t enough to stop Thomas from passing out into blissful nothingness as his hands were treated, the blisters being carefully popped and then drained of the fluid they contained. He was unconscious before they even began to clean the three burn sites.

~ * ~

“On the afternoon of Wednesday, 31 May, a naval engagement took place off the coast of Jutland.

The British ships on which the brunt of the fighting fell were the Battlecruiser Fleet and some cruisers and light cruisers, supported by four fast battleships.

Among these the losses are heavy…

The battle cruisers Queen Mary, Indefatigable, Invincible, and the cruisers Defence and Black Prince were sunk.

The Warrior was disabled, and after being towed for some time had to be abandoned by her crew.

It is also known that the destroyers Tipperary, Turbulent, Fortune, Sparrowhawk and Ardent were lost and six others are not yet accounted for…

The enemy’s losses were serious…”

– official statement published by the Admiralty on 3rd June 1916

~ * ~

Thomas couldn’t believe what he was reading.

Why…

Why would the Admiralty publish such a statement in response to the Germans declarations of victory? It made them sound…well…it made them sound as though they’d lost after all…

Which they hadn’t, not by his reckoning.

The Germans had wanted to break free of the blockade.

Instead, they’d been sent scurrying home.

How was that a victory?

“So much for the Navy…” one of the civilian patients on the other side of the ward muttered loudly, obviously reading the same thing as he was. “There goes our naval supremacy, lads.”

And, having read the same publication as him, Thomas couldn’t blame him.

Who thought it was a good idea to publish a list of British losses in all its horrifying detail whilst at the same time only referring to the fact that the Germans had also suffered losses, effectively making it appear that this might not be the case when the lists finally arrived.

And to not explain how the battle played out, only giving the location and date?

Well, that was just…
“What a piece of utter shit,” one of the other sailors cursed loudly. “Damned Admiralty…”

“…what ship were you lot on?”

It was a different civilian patient that softly enquired this of the four sailors.

“Warrior,” Thomas answered. “We’re from HMS Warrior.”

“Oh.”

Silence fell upon the ward.

The losses at Jutland, Thomas would later find out through a series of much more detailed publications, were horrific to say the least with a total of 6,094 men killed, 674 injured and 177 taken prisoner over the course of the battle which had lasted a mere thirty-six hours.

First to be lost was HMS Indefatigable, part of the 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron of the Battle Cruiser Fleet, within the first ten minutes of the battle. She was hit was hit around the rear turret by two or three shells from SMS Von der Tann and had fallen out of formation, sinking towards the stern and listing to port. It took only a couple more hits from Von der Tann, one towards the forecastle and another one to the forward turret, for her magazines to explode.

Of her crew of 1,019, only three survived.

HMS Queen Mary was the next Royal Navy ship to be sunk at the Battle of Jutland. She was part of the 1st Battle Cruiser Squadron of the Battle Cruiser and was in something that could be called a duel, of sorts, with the SMS Seydlitz, the two ships exchanging fire and causing each other damage when the Queen Mary had strayed into the sights of SMS Derfflinger.

She was struck twice before 1630, one of the shells hitting forward and detonating one or both of the forward magazines which broke the ship in two near the foremast. It was still unsure where the second shell hit the Queen Mary although damage to the ‘Q’ turret, reported by a survivor, suggested that it had struck the ship there. A further explosion, possibly from shells breaking loose, shook the aft end of the ship as it began to roll and sink.

1,266 crewmen were lost.

Only twenty survived, two ending up as prisoners of war.

HMS Nomad was part of the 13th Destroyer Flotilla of the Battle Cruiser Fleet, tasked with launching a torpedo attack against the German battlecruisers who were in turn launching their own torpedo attack on the British battlecruisers. The two destroyer forces became involved in an intense engagement, during which Nomad was disabled by a shell hit in her engine room. She wasn’t sunk until later, though, when she and her sister ship, HMS Nestor, who had also been immobilised during the battle were engaged by enemy battleships. She went down fighting, launching all of her torpedoes before being so badly damaged by the combined fire from the German battleships SMS Friedrich der Grosse, SMS Prinzregent Luitpold, SMS Kaiser and SMS Kaiserin that her crew had been forced to abandon ship.

A final hit had eventually caused her forward magazine to explode at around 1730.

Of her crew only eight were killed, the remaining seventy-two ending up prisoners of war.

Thomas hadn’t realised any of this had been going on, so focused on his duties aboard HMS Warrior, and would end up being both fascinated and horrified by what had been going on.
HMS Nestor, also of the 13th Destroyer Flotilla, engaged in the same torpedo attack as her sister ship, HMS Nomad, and was hit by enemy fire, disabling her. This forced HMS Nicator, one of the other two ships in their squadron, to veer off course at the last minute so as to avoid a collision. Just like her sister ship Nestor went down fighting, firing her remaining torpedoes at the rapidly approaching enemy. Nomad was sunk first having been closer to the German Fleet which left Nestor alone in the face of the entire German Fleet. The crew were ordered to destroy all charts and confidential books before launching the ships boats, loaded with water and biscuits ready for the crew to use. It was reported that Commander Bingham then ordered the crew to lay out cables as though they were anticipating a tow as an exercise so as to keep them occupied. Inevitably the Germans opened fire, Nestor fired her last torpedo and then, with the ship sinking underneath them, they abandoned ship.

Six of her crew were killed, the remaining eighty-eight joining their colleagues as prisoners.

Thomas learned of the fate of the HMS Shark through the London Gazette who, on the 6th March 1917, published the citation for Commander Jones’ posthumous Victoria Cross;

“On the afternoon of the 31st May, 1916, during the action, Commander Jones in H.M.S. "Shark", Torpedo Boat Destroyer, led a division of Destroyers to attack the enemy Battle Cruiser Squadron.

In the course of this attack a shell hit the "Shark's" bridge, putting the steering gear out of order, and very shortly afterwards another shell disabled the main engines, leaving the vessel helpless.

The Commanding Officer of another Destroyer, seeing the "Shark's“ plight, came between her and the enemy and offered assistance, but was warned by Commander Jones not to run the risk of being almost certainly sunk in trying to help him.

Commander Jones, though wounded in the leg, went aft to help connect and man the after wheel. Meanwhile the forecastle gun with its crew had been blown away, and the same fate soon afterwards befell the after gun and crew.

Commander Jones then went to the midship and the only remaining gun, and personally assisted in keeping it in action.

All this time the "Shark" was subjected to very heavy fire from enemy light cruisers and destroyers at short range.

The gun's crew of the midship gun was reduced to three, of whom an Able Seaman was soon badly wounded in the leg.

A few minutes later Commander Jones was hit by a shell, which took off his leg above the knee, but he continued to give orders to his gun's crew, while a Chief Stoker improvised a tourniquet round his thigh.

Noticing that the Ensign was not properly hoisted, he gave orders for another to be hoisted.

Soon afterwards, seeing that the ship could not survive much longer, and as a German Destroyer was closing, he gave orders for the surviving members of the crew to put on lifebelts.

Almost immediately after this order had been given, the "Shark" was struck by a torpedo and sank.

Commander Jones was unfortunately not amongst the few survivors from the "Shark" who were picked up by a neutral vessel in the night.”
Thomas had, sadly, witnessed the fate of *HMS Defence* and not one single report about the loss of the ship contained a piece of information that he didn’t already know or suspect.

He had also witness, in a roundabout way, the loss of *HMS Invincible*.

She had been lost at 1830, less than three hours since the first shell of the battle had been fired, after accidentally becoming a clear target for *SMS Lützow* and *SMS Derfflinger*. They fired three salvoes each at the *Invincible* and sank her in just ninety seconds. At least one shell penetrated the front of ‘Q’ turret, blowing off the roof and detonating the midships magazines which blew the ship in half. It was possible that the initial explosion ignited ‘A’ and ‘X’ magazines, adding to the chaotic, destructive power which had torn the ship apart.

Of her complement, 1,026 officers and men were killed, including Rear-Admiral Hood.

There were only six survivors who were picked up by *HMS Badger*, one of ten ships in the *First Destroyer Flotilla* of the *Battle Cruiser* Fleet, and of these survivors all except one of them were stationed in the fire control top located at the top of the tripod foremast. The last survivor was stationed in ‘Q’ turret itself and had, by some miracle, been thrown clear.

Focused as they were on trying keep their own ship afloat whilst under tow Thomas and his fellow *Warriors* hadn’t even been aware of the night action that had taken place once the sun had set, plunging the tumultuous sea into darkness. *HMS Tipperary* was probably the first ship to be lost that night after flashing the recognition signal to what she had thought to be her allies but had in fact been her enemy. In response to her signal she was lit up by the searchlights of three battleships and three light cruisers, including *SMS Westfalen* and *SMS Nassau* who proceeded to fire 150 rounds of 5.9in shells at her in just five minutes.

*Tipperary* was badly hit and most of her crew were killed or wounded, including her Captain.

The remaining crew clung on as long as they could before eventually abandoning ship at about 0200 the following morning, the burning ship finally sinking beneath the waves.

150 officers and sailors were lost, either during the battle or from their wounds.

Only forty-seven men survived the night.

No one knew precisely what had happened to *HMS Black Prince*, the fourth ship in *Warriors* own squadron. She had lost contact with the rest of the *1st Cruiser Squadron* when they had made their ill-fated attempt to defeat their enemy, the action which had resulted in the loss of both the *Defence* and *Warrior*. That was the last time that anyone saw the *Black Prince*.

One theory eventually emerged regarding the disappearance of the ship.

It supposed that the possible sighting of a German battlecruiser by *HMS Spitfire*, herself badly damaged after colliding with *SMS Nassau*, with two widely spaced funnels which was described as being “...a mass of fire from foremast to mainmast, on deck and between decks. Flames were issuing out of her from every corner...” could, in fact, have been the *Black Prince*, with her two midships funnels having collapsed or been entirely shot away.

This mysterious ship had exploded sometime close to midnight.

The loss of the *Black Prince* meant that the *1st Cruiser Squadron* could boast the unfortunate title of being the most decimated individual squadron to fight at the Battle of Jutland, losing three out of its four ships. Only *HMS Duke of Edinburgh* survived, miraculously undamaged.
Thomas did, in fact, end up using this particularly morbid boast on a couple of occasions.

Mostly when he a little bit drunk and wanted to remind people that the officers and men of the Royal Navy had fought and died for their country just the same as those in France had.

Both *HMS Fortune* and *HMS Ardent* were lost in the night action.

They had escaped the attack which had resulted in the loss of the *Tipperary*, becoming separated from the rest of the 4th Destroyer flotilla, and had begun to look for any German ships which had disengaged after sinking the leader of their flotilla. At about 2330 they had eventually found their quarry, four large ships by all accounts, and had engaged all of them.

Both *Ardent* and *Fortune* were sunk in the ensuing firefight.

Of their two crews 145 men lost their lives whilst three survived, two from *Ardent* and only a single man from *Fortune*. According to the newspaper reports, which included statements from men who were there, the last anyone saw of *HMS Fortune* the ship was on fire but still firing shells at the enemy even as she began to sink into the dark waters of the North Sea.

The loss of *HMS Sparrowhawk* was particularly distressing, not because of the loss of life but because of the circumstances behind her demise. At around 2340 some of the ships of the 4th Destroyer Flotilla formed up under Commander Walter Allen of *HMS Broke*, who was the half-flotilla leader, with the aim of continuing the attack against the nearby German ships.

*HMS Broke* was caught in the searchlights coming from *SMS Westfalen*. She attempted to fire her torpedoes but the range was much too short and the German ship opened fire first.

Within a couple of minutes *HMS Broke* had lost eighty of her crew, fifty being killed outright while a further thirty were injured. Her guns had been disabled, the decks so badly damaged that they were unsurpassable and the helmsman had been killed at the wheel. It was this last fact, of all things, that had done for *HMS Sparrowhawk* for as he had died his body had turned the wheel, turning the ship to port which caused her to ram into poor *Sparrowhawk*.

Thankfully Sub-Lieutenant Percy Wood saw *HMS Broke* coming towards them at 28 knots, almost top speed, and realised that she was heading directly for *Sparrowhawk’s* bridge. He shouted for the crew on the fo’c’sle to get clear, and then was knocked over by the impact.

He awoke to find himself lying on the deck of *HMS Broke*.

In the chaos that followed Wood reported to Commander Allen, who told him to return to his own ship and make preparations there to take on board the crew of *HMS Broke*. Upon returning to the *Sparrowhawk*, Wood was told by his own captain, Lieutenant-Commander Sydney Hopkins, that he had just sent exactly the same message across to *Broke* and before anyone realised what had happened approximately twenty men from *Sparrowhawk* had evacuated onto *HMS Broke* while fifteen of *Broke’s* crew crossed to *HMS Sparrowhawk*.

To make matters worse a third destroyer, *HMS Contest*, then steamed into *Sparrowhawk*.

Thankfully *Contest* emerged relatively unharmed but *Broke* and *Sparrowhawk* remained wedged together for about half an hour before they could be separated and Broke got underway. At this point, the reports informed the nation, *Sparrowhawk* had still possessed engine power but the rudder was jammed to one side so she could do nothing except steam in circles, near the burning destroyer *HMS Tipperary*. At around 0200 a German torpedo boat approached, coming within 100 yards of them, but then turned away. Only one gun was still functional, the others too badly
damaged, and this gun had reportedly been manned by the captain and his officers as the gun crews had all been killed or injured.

They had held their fire, however, in the hope the German would not initiate an attack. *Sparrowhawk* could not hope to survive and mercifully their prayers had been answered.

A little while later *HMS Tipperary* had finally sunk, putting out the fire which was attracting attention to the area, but this had not brought about an end to the *Sparrowhawks* plight.

At around 0330 they had sighted a German cruiser, causing considerable alarm, but shortly afterwards the ship was seen to list sideways and then sink, her bow disappearing first. This, the papers reliably informed Thomas and the millions of other readers desperate for any information at all, had been the *SMS Elbing*, which had been successfully sunk by torpedo.

Still the night wasn’t over for the remaining crew of the *Sparrowhawk* as at 0610 a small raft approached carrying twenty-three men from *HMS Tipperary*. Sadly three were found to be already dead while five more died after being taken on board the badly damaged destroyer.

As a testament to how badly damaged *HMS Sparrowhawk* was and how rough the seas had become *HMS Marksman* was unable to attach two hawsers to the damaged ship almost an hour after they’d picked up the survivors from *Tipperary*. With reports of submarines still active nearby it was decided that *Sparrowhawk* must be abandoned, and *Marksman* fired eighteen shells into her to ensure that she sank. Miraculously after everything she had been through *Sparrowhawk* only suffered the loss of six men, killed during the actual collision.

*HMS Turbulent*, of the 10th Destroyer Flotillam was the last ship to be lost that night.

She was lost whilst attempting to follow the ships in front of her as she had been instructed to do as they crossed in front of what turned out to be the German battle line shortly after midnight. *HMS Petard*, the ship directly in front of her, was caught out first and with none of her torpedoes left her only option was to run. She was hit, thankfully not badly, and was able to escape with the Germans suddenly turned their attention solely on *HMS Turbulent*.

She was left in a truly hopeless position; unable to run, unable to fight back.

In an act of what Thomas surmised to be utter desperation she had apparently turned to starboard in order to avoid being rammed head on, thus placing her all but alongside *SMS Westfalen* where she could do nothing to save herself. *Turbulent* had, by all accounts, been literally blown out of the water when her boilers exploded after being struck by enemy fire.

Of her crew ninety were killed and the surviving thirteen had become prisoners of war.

Thomas knew none of this when he was sat in his hospital bed, however, nor did any of the civilian patients glaring at the four wounded *Warriors* across from them. It would be months before the men would read the truth, would regret their harsh words. Just then, instead, a truce was brokered between the two sides of the ward; don’t mention the battle of Jutland.

“Right, well, now that that’s settled…” Thomas muttered to himself following the cessation of hostilities on the ward, kicking his bed sheets off of his legs before climbing out of bed. It was a good thing it was relatively warm at the moment, he realised, otherwise his bare feet might have frozen to the floor if it were any colder. “Anyone know where back injuries go?”

“You’re not allowed out of bed let alone out of the ward,” one of the civilians hissed, alarmed, leaning forwards to check that the ward nurse was still busy behind the screen of one of the civilian
patients whose dressing had needed changing. “They’ll skin you alive.”

Pausing only for a moment Thomas finally shrugged, thinking about all of the stupid things he’d done whilst in service at Downton Abbey when he’d been told not to. This was no more risky than pinching a bottle of Lord Grantham’s favourite wine out of the locked cupboard in Carson pantry, he reasoned, and he needed to reassure himself that Matthew was alright.

“Never mind,” he sighed, referring to his earlier query. “I’ll figure it out myself.”

And with that said he was off, tiptoeing past the screened off bed before slipping out of the ward and into the generic corridor. He stuck out like a saw thumb in his pyjamas but walked with purpose, blending in by making it seem as though he was meant to be there, and none of the doctors, nurses or orderlies that he passed gave him a second glance as he began the mind-numbing task of checking each and every ward until he found his missing Lieutenant.

Eventually, after going down a floor and all the way across to the other side of the building, he spotted a familiar head of blond hair upon a pillow at the far end of the ward. Letting out a sigh of relief, his feet aching after walking around the hospital for over an hour, he pushed open the door and slipped into the ward. Offering the nurse on duty a smile and nod, acting for all the world as though he was meant to be there, he made his way across to Matthew.

“Sir?”

A familiar pair of blue eyes snapped open.

“Thomas?” he gasped, surprise heavy in his voice as his gaze tracked the former footman as Thomas moved to sit in the chair beside Matthews bed. “What…what are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d come and see how you were doing, sir.”

Matthew seemed genuinely surprised and more than a little bit touched by this.

“So, what did the doctor say?” Thomas enquired after a pause. “About your back?”

Matthews’s expression fell.

“Permanent, or so they think.” he announced morosely, his hands clenching where they rest on top of his bedsheets. “So once my spine had stabilised and my burns have healed, which are minimal, by the way, I am to be sent home to convalesce and adapt to my limitations.”

Thomas couldn’t help but wince.

“I asked about…about whether or not I shall be able to father a child, given that I am the current heir to the Earl of Grantham and any son of mine shall be the next heir,” Matthew continued, his voice become more and more bitter with every word he spoke. “They said it would be highly unlikely that a man in my condition would ever be able to father a child.”

Oh.

No wonder he seemed so depressed.

“I shall have to write to Lavinia,” Matthew sighed, his voice suddenly filled with pain and regret. “I had been planning to propose but that will be impossible now. She deserves…”

“Someone who loves her,” Thomas interrupted him quickly, speaking up for the young woman
he’d never even met. “Someone who trusts her to make her own decisions.”

“I…”

“You should write to her, yes, but don’t end things before they’ve truly begun,” Thomas found himself advising the future Earl of Grantham. “Let her decide if her feelings for you are real enough to keep her by your side. You never know, she might surprise you. Sir.”

The honorific was tagged on at the last minute as he finally remembered himself.

“But… a marriage without even the possibility of children…”

“That’s just the opinion of one doctor,” Thomas interrupted him once more. “Once they send you back to Downton get Clarkson to give you a second opinion. Or send for one of Lord Grantham’s specialists from Harley Street. Don’t just… lay there and give up on life.”

“Well said,” the patient in the next bed over called out. “Listen to your friend. I thought my Dora would leave me after I fell from my crane and broke my back but she didn’t. I’m sure there are some women that would have but my Dora is made of stronger stuff than that. And you won’t know if your lady friend is too unless you give her the chance to prove it.”

“… you really think so?”

Both Thomas and the other patient confirmed their agreement quickly.

“Then I will,” Matthew sighed, hope finally appearing in his voice. “Thank you.”

“Might want to write to your family as well,” Thomas suggested. “That way they can get things ready for you and get Clarkson to start looking into alternative treatments and such.”

At the same time that Matthew was discharging his letters to a helpful VAD nurse, not one of the gaggle that had helped them the day before, the occupants of Downton Abbey, both upstairs and down, were left reeling by the news that HMS Warrior had been abandoned by her crew after doing disabled during the battle. There were no lists of the dead, not yet, and so the household could only pray that they hadn’t lost a second heir to the seas icy waters.

~ * ~

A/N1 - An extra-long chapter to apologise for the delay in updating any of my other stories whilst I completed a writing challenge on ‘Rough Trade.’ I hope it wasn’t too much like a history book but I’m afraid I got a bit carried away in a couple of places, particularly regarding the fates of the various British ships that were lost at Jutland. Information for these parts was gathered from several books I own and, for my sins, Wikipedia although all of these facts were double checked. In regards to the medical portions of this chapter I am first aid trained but that’s it so please excuse any glaring mistakes. Comments welcome. X

A/N2 (a.k.a a couple of fun naval facts I couldn’t work into the story but wanted to share)

It sounds strange but the loss of Defence and Warrior actually ended up playing a part in World War Two. During the Battle of Jutland the destroyer HMS Onslow had been badly damaged whilst engaging in a torpedo attack of the German fleet, most critically in that her speed had been reduced to only ten knots. She was trying to get away from the German fleet when the more interesting targets Defence, Warrior and then Warspite drew their fire away from her, allowing her to escape. How this ended up playing a part in the outcome of World War Two was relatively simple; her commander at the time, John Tovey, went on to play a part in the sinking of the infamous German
battleship, *Bismarck*, on 26th May 1941.

And regarding the rum ration it might surprise some people to learn that the Royal Navy only abolished this tradition in 1970 due to a concern about sailors failing a breathalyser test and therefore being “less capable” to manage complex machinery. The last rum ration was issued on 31st July 1970 and became known as “*Black Tot Day*” as sailors were unhappy about the loss of the rum ration. There were reports that the day involved sailors throwing their tots into the sea and even the staging of a mock funeral for the lost Naval tradition.

While the rum ration was abolished, the order to "*splice the mainbrace*" which is a way of awarding sailors an extra tot of rum for good service, has remained a command which could only be given by the Monarch and is still used to recognise good service. Rum rations are also given out on special occasions such as after the *Queen's Diamond Jubilee* celebrations.
Chapter Eight

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER EIGHT

Rosyth
November 1916

It felt somewhat strange to dress himself in uniform after the months he’d spent living in hospital pyjamas as his wounds were treated and then, once they had healed to a suitable level, been given a series of exercises to complete in the hopes that they would return some of the mobility he had lost due to the burns he’d sustained. Thus far they’d been working, his fingers slowly becoming easier to move, although he’d been warned by several nurses not to expect a miracle; his hands would never return to how they had been before Jutland.

Despite his lack of recent practice applying each piece was second-nature and in no time at all he stood beside his hospital bed in his brand new uniform, the fabric unpleasantly stiff and itchy in a couple of places as it hadn’t been broken in, and was therefore ready to go.

His kitbag lay upon his bed already packed, filled not only with the replacement wash kit and spare pieces of uniform he’d been issued with but also a number of gifts that he’d received from his fellow patients and the nurses at the hospital, most notably a pair of soft brown leather gloves he could wear to hide the scars on his hands should he ever feel the need to.
The scars were pretty horrific, unfortunately, with the palm on his left hand being the worst, twisted into something wholly unrecognisable. It was due to the tightness of the scar tissue that he’d been given the exercises as without them his fingers would have eventually lost the ability to straighten out at all. As it was they were still permanently bent. On his right hand the scar was smaller and on the back of his hand, covering his thumb and forefinger and extending down to his wrist, and he struggled to bend all but his ring and little finger.

As much as he’d love to wear those gloves now, the sight upsetting him almost as much as it had upset some of the hospital visitors that he had met over the last few months, they were sadly in breach of the strict regulations that he’d sworn to obey when he’d joined the Navy.

Picking up his cap he paused, gazing down at the ships name embroidered on the tally.

He’d still been expecting, if only in the back of his mind, to see HMS Warrior and was taken by surprise to see HMS Warspite there instead. His assignment to the ship who was partially responsible for the fact that he was still alive had come through a couple of weeks earlier, when his discharge from hospital had been confirmed, and had made him smile at the time.

Now it made him pause.

It felt wrong to be joining a ship that wasn’t the Warrior, his first ship, the only ship that he had ever served on and had ever thought that he would serve on, in the same way that it would have felt wrong to leave Downton Abbey in favour of one of its closest neighbours.

Everything would be familiar and yet different all at the same time.

Warspite was actually in Rosyth for repairs, according to the Officer who had brought his assignment paperwork to him the day before, after a collision with HMS Valiant during a night-shooting exercise not long after the ship has re-joined the Grand Fleet following the extensive repairs that she had needed after the Battle of Jutland which, he’d learned, was why the date of his hospital discharge had been unexpectedly brought forwards by a week.

It made sense to send him to join the ship now, he supposed, whilst she was already in port rather than waiting another couple of weeks so that he could be discharged on the date that they’d originally decided upon by which time he would have had to wait, idling his time away in Rosyth until the next time that Warspite returned to the Naval Base for supplies.

No, discharging him early was the right choice even it was at short notice.

“Good luck, Tommy.”

Offering his fellow patients a smile and a nod, ignoring the fact that they’d all insisted on calling him Tommy since he’d arrived, he wished them all the best with their continued recoveries, kissed the nurses on duty on the cheek, picked up his kit bag and left the ward.

He didn’t head down to the transport that he had been told was waiting to take him to the station by one of the hospital orderlies, however, as he had one more farewell to make first.

Lieutenant Matthew Crawley.

He had been refused his transfer to the hospital in Downton, under the care of Major Clarkson, on the grounds that it was for officers of the British Army not the Royal Navy.

Lady Cora had not been impressed.
He was due to return to the Abbey once he was discharged from both the hospital and the Royal Navy but given the nature of his injuries that could take some time, unfortunately.

Due to the fact that he had snuck out to visit Lieutenant Crawley every single day, so much so that the nurses and orderlies had eventually given up trying to stop him, the journey he took was as familiar to him as the servants corridors of the Abbey had been and as such he was entering the other ward in a matter of minutes. His kitbag he abandoned by the door, leaving it against the wall so that it was out of the way as he moved to Matthews bedside.

“Looking very smart, Thomas. Come to bid me farewell?”

“That’s right, sir,” Thomas murmured, standing at ease beside the bed. Unlike some of the patients in the spinal injury ward Matthew could still move and use the top half of his body and so was propped up by several pillows, allowing him as much independence as he could manage. Some of the others had no use of their limbs at all. “I’m joining Warspite today.”

“Well, you make sure to thank her for saving our necks,” Matthew instructed him, only half joking. Those who hadn’t served, they’d both noticed since arriving in the hospital, couldn’t seem to understand why they referred to their ships as though they were living beings with feelings and personalities. “But before you go I have an important question to ask you…”

“Sir?”

“After I get out of here I’m going to need help,” Matthew admitted, reluctantly. His hands fluttered briefly before settling on his thighs. “Cousin Robert has suggested that I take on a suitable valet to see to my needs and look after me. I know he will have some candidates lined up but I would like to offer the position to you as thanks for saving my life at Jutland.”

Him?

A valet?

It was…it was something he’d always wanted...

“I understand that currently the Royal Navy is in charge of your immediate future but once this war has come to an end the position shall be yours,” Matthew continued, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs in an unusual show of nerves. “That is, if you’re interested…”

“Want it?” Thomas repeated. “Of course I want it!”

He’d been trying not to think about what would become of him once the war finally reached its conclusion and he returned to civilian life. With scars like he had it would be very difficult to find a position in service without having some sort of a connection with either the family or the staff below stairs and, given the way that he’d left things at the Abbey following the actions he had taken against Mr Bates, or “Long John Silver” as he’d referred to him back then, in an effort to get the other man fired, actions which had included framing him for a theft he himself had committed after framing him for one that he’d faked, with the help of Miss O’Brien, hadn’t worked and convincing Daisy, their naïve young kitchen maid, to lie for him he’d already written off returning to his previous place of employment as a lost cause.

But now...

“Good. That’s good,” Matthew sighed with relief. “I’ll put Cousin Robert off, then, and just use one of the footmen or something until you are able to come and take up your position.”
“Thank you, sir.”

“Thomas, this is my way of thanking you,” the future Earl of Grantham murmured sincerely, grabbing hold of Thomas’ hand with both of his. “Some men would have left me to my fate, duty be damned, but you stayed. You stayed even after you were injured and got me out.”

“Well, I couldn’t leave you to just...burn...”

“You could have, actually, and the fact that you didn’t is why I want you to be my valet.”

It hadn’t once crossed his mind to leave the Lieutenant to his fate that day, Thomas recalled, and even if it hadn’t been Matthew he would still have stayed to help whoever it had been.

As a stretcher bearer it had been his job.

“Thank you,” he murmured once more, using his free hand to pull one of Matthew’s hands out of the way so that he could give the remaining hand a firm shake. “And, should I survive this war and the Royal Navy has no more use for me I shall present myself at the Abbey to take up my position as your valet, sir, so long as you haven’t change your mind by then...”

“I won’t,” Matthew reiterated firmly. “The jobs yours, Thomas, and that’s the end of it.”

And that was the end of it, mostly because Thomas feared he’d miss his train if he put off leaving the hospital any longer. Saying his goodbyes to his future employer he hurried out to the transport, an ambulance that was going to pick up some men from the train station, and jumped into the back of it. The journey was pretty much a reverse of the journey that had brought him to the hospital, Thomas even sitting in the same seat, although it wasn’t as cramped so he was more comfortable and was able to take up the entire seat by himself.

The station was busy, a train having just pulled in filled with soldiers, sailors and civilians.

He thanked the ambulance driver and made his way into the platform, stopping at the ticket office to get his railway warrant stamped and find out which train he needed to catch and then once he knew where he needed to be he found somewhere to sit until his train arrived.

No one was sneering at him this time.

In fact in the time that it took for his train to arrive he was thanked three times and an old soldier, his medal ribbons sewn into his dark grey jacket, bought him a steaming cup of tea.

The difference was palpable.

Boarding his train he eventually found an empty compartment and took one of the window seats, putting his kitbag in the luggage rack above his seat, and then settled in with a book.

He’d never been a big reader before ending up stuck in hospital. Since then he’d discovered a love of fiction, of immersing himself in the different stories and worlds and adventures.

The compartment filled up quickly, a young woman with three children, an elderly couple and a military chaplain, complete with dog collar, who seemed to love the sound of his own voice as he regaled them all with the tale of his volunteering to join the troops in France.

Thomas ignored the chaplain in favour of finding out whether or not Dorothy managed to defeat the Wicked Witch of the West. It was a children’s book, written by an American, but one of the nurses had recommended it and he’d thoroughly enjoyed every single page of it.
Alighting at the correct station, stowing his book back inside his kitbag, he hefted the canvas bag over his shoulder and followed the flow of sailors returning to their ships after a spot of leave along a series of back roads until they reached the large main gate of the Naval Base.

“What ship are you joining?”

The question came from the armed guard on the gate who was checking all of their passes and paperwork before letting them enter. His own paperwork had already been passed over, scrutinised approved and were in the process of being return as Thomas answered,

“Warspite.”

“She’s still in dry dock. You can’t miss her.”

“Thanks.”

Spotting HMS Warspite was every bit as easy as the guard had said it would be as she was the only ship currently being repaired; the others were docked alongside the pier so that they could be resupplied. Thomas wasn’t the only sailor to veer off towards the dry dock, making his way along to the gangplank which had been erected to allow men to move on and off of the ship. Usually Thomas had no problem crossing the gangplank but usually it was over water, admittedly dangerous water between their ship and whatever they were docked against, but with it suspended over a drop of ten metres he found himself holding his breath as he made his way across. The dry-dock was a clever piece of engineering, he supposed once he’d safety reached the ship, saluting the white ensign as he stepped on board, as it allowed work to be done on a ship’s hull once the water had been drained out.

And whilst falling into the water between the ship and the side would probably killed you there was still a small chance of survival if you were very lucky there was no way a person would survive falling into a dry dock, not with the deep steps made of stone that lined the sides creating sharp angles and corners that would break a sailors spine in two on impact.

Thomas reported in with the quartermaster, gladly giving his new rank which had come with the transfer to HMS Warspite; he was now a Leading Seaman and would be taking over the position of Chief Officers Steward thanks to the recommendation of his former Captain, the former Chief Officers Steward sadly having been struck down by pneumonia. He was now in hospital, or rather the sick bay of the Naval Base, recovering and Thomas found it somewhat amusing, as inappropriate as that was, that the two of them had effectively swapped places.

“Mason, here, will get you situated.”

“Mason?” Thomas reared back from the quartermaster, turning to face the young man the officer had indicated, half-expecting to find a familiar face. He was relieved, and there was no other word for it, to find himself facing a complete stranger. “Get Barrow sorted out.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Mason, who appeared to be one of the stewards who Thomas would be in charge of, would have been considered handsome if it weren’t for his prominent ears and his thick eyebrows.

“What’s your name, Mason?”

If the other steward was surprised to be ask he didn’t show it.

“Brynn,” he answered, his thick Welsh accent surprising Thomas. “My names Brynn Mason.”
Unlike the Mason that Thomas had known back in service the young man that stood before him didn’t smile at all as he spoke, even though he seemed happy enough, and his tone of voice, despite the natural lyrical nature of his accent, was about as serious as he could get.

In short he was nothing like William, as far as first impressions went, which was a relief.

He didn’t fancy serving alongside a reminder of one of the things he’d grown to be ashamed of in the two years since he’d joined the Royal Navy, the war having forced him to grow up in a way that he hadn’t realised that he needed to at the time. One thing he had promised himself he’d do after the war would be find William and offer him the apology he deserved.

“Right,” Thomas murmured, hefting his kitbag up onto his shoulder with practiced ease. “Let’s get my kit stowed away and then I want you to introduce me to this beautiful lady.”

Mason nodded.

 Warspite, as a Queen Elizabeth class Battleship or a Super-Dreadnought as they were also known, was a larger ship than Thomas was used to. She had a displacement of 29,700 tons, more than double the weight of HMS Warrior, and despite this was still able to match his previous ships top speed of 23 knots. He learned all of this from Mason who turned out to be a wealth of knowledge as they traversed the entire length and breadth of the ship once Thomas had been relieved of his kit, his guide for the morning obediently taking him from the tip of her bow to the screws at her stern and everywhere in between, paying particular attention to the parts of the ship where he would spend most of his time. And then there was her armament; eight 15-inch guns, fourteen 6-inch guns and two 4-inch anti-aircraft guns. There was talk of two 3-inch anti-aircraft guns being added sometime in the future.

It made HMS Warriors six 9.2-inch Mk X guns, four 7.5-inch Mk II or Mk V guns, twenty-six 3-pounder guns and three submerged 18-inch torpedo tubes seem more than a little inferior.

As planned they ended the tour of the ship in the Wardroom.

“…it can’t be…”

The cultured voice was so familiar that it literally stopped Thomas in his tracks.

No…

It couldn’t be…

Turning so as to face the owner of the voice he found none other than Philip Villiars, the Duke of Crowborough himself, stood in the corner of the room holding a cup and saucer.

“Thomas,” he chuckled, setting the cup and saucer down on the nearest table to him before hurrying forwards to grab hold of Thomas’ right hand, shaking it with a smile only to pause, his smile dropping into a deep frown as he glanced down. “…what happened to your hand?”

 “…Your Grace…” Thomas murmured, falling back on his training as a footmen even as his mind spun in response to meeting his former lover. “And I was wounded at Jutland, sir.”

Coffee coloured eyes snapped up to meet his, filled with a surprising amount of worry,

“What ship were you on?”

“HMS Warrior, sir,” Thomas answered, turning his left hand over to show off his other scars whilst
pulling his right hand free of the Dukes loosening grip. He became aware of the fact that everyone else in the room, not just Philip, reacted to his announcement with a look of surprise and respect. “And, actually, I have you and your fellow crew members to thank for the fact that I’m standing here. If you hadn’t circled us when you did we’d have been sunk.”

“Well, I wish we could take the credit for that but we had no control of our steering at the time,” Philip admitted, offering Thomas a painfully handsome smile as his fellow officers chuckled in agreement. “We took a hit to the port-wing engine room whilst performing a manoeuvre to avoid hitting Valiant and Malaya. It was an accident, a fortunate accident for you, that we ended up circling you whilst we worked to restore our ability to steer the ship.”

“Less fortunate for us, of course,” one of the other officers announced, prompting Philip to shoot him a smile. They were both Lieutenant’s, Thomas noticed although his former lovers uniform was of a much higher quality. “We were hit thirteen times whilst circling you guys.”

“Well, accident or not you saved our lives, sir, we were very grateful for the time you gave us to get our engines working again or else we’d never have made it out of there,” Thomas announced, offering every sailor in the room a grateful smile. “We were in bad shape...”

“We could tell,” another officer announced with a booming laugh. “I for one wasn’t at all surprised to hear you’d floundered on the way back to port. Lucky Engadine found you.”

“Very lucky,” Thomas agreed without censure. “We owe them even more than you.”

“How many did you lose?”

This question came from a serious looking man nursing a whiskey over by the stove.


“We lost fourteen men,” the officer replied, knocking back his drink. “Thirty-two wounded.”

“By the time we managed to sort out our steering problems we were on a direct course with the German Fleet,” Philip explained, his own voice taking on a more serious tone. “We’d lost our rangefinders, and the transmission station, and by then only ‘A’ turret could fire so our aim was a little bit off so we stopped firing for ten minutes to make the necessary repairs.”

Thomas nodded in understanding.

“We were too damaged to have much to do with the night action,” Philip continued, his words bringing forth a grunt of agreement from some of his fellow officers. “As we could still travel under our own steam we were ordered to head for home which wasn’t quite as easy as we would have perhaps liked; we came across not one but two German U-boats on our way home. The first had terrible aim, missed us with three torpedoes, and the second was just sitting there on the surface but the damned thing dived before we could ram her.”

“Very unsporting of them,” another officer snorted. “So you’re Keller’s replacement, then?”

“I am, sir,” Thomas answered, supposing that Keller must be the name of the former Chief Officer’s Steward. He stood to his full height, cap tucked under his arm where he’d placed it upon entering the Wardroom, shoulders pulled back smartly. “Leading Seaman Barrow, sir.”

“And you know Barrow how?”

This question was addressed to Philip who smirked across at Thomas as he answered,
“I was a guest at Downton Abbey, home of the Earl of Grantham, before the war where Thomas, my apologies, Barrow was employed as a footman. First footman, if I recall?”

Thomas nodded in answer to his query.

“As my own valet had fallen ill prior to my visit Barrow was promoted temporarily to care for me for the duration of my stay at the family and he made a rather good impression on me so I can reassure you that we’re in good hands, gentlemen,” Philip continued, choosing his words very carefully as he could hardly say that he and Thomas had shared a summer dalliance together before his visit to Downton. “And on that note I would love a cup of tea.”

“Certainly, sir,” Thomas agreed, offering the Duke a respectful nod. “If you’ll excuse me.”

It was a relief to slip out of the Wardroom, so much so that as he followed the route Mason had shown him to the galley he couldn’t stop the long exhalation of air that escaped his lips.

Was he cursed?

Not one but two faces from his past of the two ships he’d been assigned to?

And one of them his ex-lover whom he had attempted to blackmail?

He’d been looking forward to getting to sea again but now?

Now he was dreading what the future would hold.

And not because of the Germans, as most people would expect upon hearing such a statement. No, it was because of his ex-lover, Philip Villiers, the Duke of Crowborough.

Why did this have to happen to him?

~ * ~

A/N I can’t decide yet whether the Duke is going to have gotten over the blackmail attempt or not so we shall have to wait and see what happens when I start work on the next chapter. As it is I’ve finally figured out how my pairings are going to work out so shall be editing the tags accordingly. Comments and Suggestions are always welcome. Until next time. Marblez.
Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

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THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE

CHAPTER NINE

Rosyth
July 1917

Miss Sarah O’Brien
C/O Downton Abbey
Downton
Yorkshire

Dear Miss O’Brien,

I apologise for the delay in responding to your last letter but this is the first time that we have returned to port since your last letter arrived. Thank you for your news of what has been happening at the Abbey; it feels like an entire lifetime has passed since I was last able to join you in the servants courtyard for a cigarette and a gossip as we avoided Mr Carson.

I often find myself thinking of our time together when I am catching a quick smoke up on deck. It’s
not the same, of course, and not just because the company here is different. No, one of the things that I have found myself missing is the sound of the wind moving through the trees. That and the smell of the rain which is even more ridiculous as its not as though we don’t get rain when we’re out at sea, quite the opposite, but there’s just something so different about it. Probably has something to do with the ever present smell of salt water.

Life aboard my new ship is pretty much the same as it was on my last one although the men under my command needed a bit of sorting out to begin with, their performance not quite what it should have been, but with some training and leadership on my part we are now a perfect example of what a team of Officers Stewards should be aboard a ship such as this.

We have been patrolling in the North Sea recently, keeping a watchful eye out just in case the Germans decide to try and make another break for it, but so far everything has been quiet. In fact the most exciting moment from our last trip came from an incident with one of our own ships in the form of an unexpected collision. There is still much debate about which ship was at fault but thankfully neither was damaged enough to require that we put into port, rather all repairs were made whilst we were still underway. Miraculously there were only a few minor injuries, such as a sprained ankle and a broken wrist, which was very lucky.

I don’t know if you remember from my earlier letters but this is actually the second time that this particular ship has suffered an unexpected collision with one of our own ships although last time the collision took place during a night exercise; this time it was in broad daylight.

Some of the men are beginning to wonder if she’s cursed.

I myself don’t believe in curses, just that we could probably do with a new navigator.

How are things at the Abbey since your last letter?

Has Lieutenant Crawley been discharged from the hospital? He was most anxious to return home when I saw him last but the Doctors were still concerned about the state of his spine.

And what of those who are serving in France?

Has there been any word from William and the others? We’ve been getting mixed reports about what it’s really like over there, with the newspapers saying one things and military reports and gossip saying another. One of the men I spoke to referred to it as hell on earth.

Is Lady Sybil still nursing?

Since having been a patient myself my admiration for her chosen path during this war has increased for the young women that cared for me were some of the toughest and strongest I’ve ever met. I’m not sure I could manage to remain as bright and cheerful as they always were should I ever be called upon to clean out wounds as grisly as mine were at the time.

And is Lady Edith still driving?

I still find it hard to picture her behind the wheel of a motorised vehic---

The hand moving the pen across the page skidded uncontrollably, creating a thick line that crossed through most of his letter, as the entire ship rocked from the force of an explosion.

What had happened?

They were anchored in Scapa Flow along with most of the fleet waiting for their turn to be
resupplied and had spent the day improving their response times to various drills, such as going to battle stations or abandoning ship. It was now fast approaching midnight, most of the crew already asleep and Thomas had decided to pen a letter to Miss O’Brien before he followed his colleagues into the land of dreams. None of the crew had been expecting this.

Had a German U-boat managed to breach the defences surrounding the anchorage site?

Had they been hit?

Abandoning his letter, heedless of the ink dripping from his pen onto the floor as this too was dropped carelessly in his haste to make his way up on deck, he followed the flow of barely dressed men else who were as desperate to find out what was going on as he was.

Spilling out onto the deck he couldn’t help but feel relieved to see the familiar orange glow of a ship on fire in the distance, reassuring all of them that they weren’t the one in trouble.

But then, who was it?

Who had been hit?

It wasn’t until the morning that they learned that no one had been hit, that the explosion had come from within the poor unfortunate ship that had met its untimely end that night.

**HMS Vanguard** had only anchored in the northern part **Scapa Flow** a few hours before it exploded with no warning at all at 2320. Of their crew three survived but one, sadly, died shortly afterwards bringing the total of men lost up to 843. It was reported at a much later date that this number also included two Australian stokers from the light cruiser **HMAS Sydney** who had had the misfortune to be serving time in the battleships brig when the explosion tore through the ship and a military observer from the **Imperial Japanese Navy**.

A **Board of Inquiry** was held some time later and, after hearing the accounts of the many witnesses from the ships surrounding **HMS Vanguard**, accepted that there had been an explosion, small and with a white glare, between the foremast and ‘A’ turret, followed by two much larger explosions shortly thereafter. Given the evidence that was provided the board decided that the main detonations came from either ‘P’ magazine, ‘Q’ magazine, or both of them. Given the damage done to the ship it was relatively easy to pinpoint the fact that the explosions were in fact a detonation of the cordite charges in a main magazine it was significantly more challenging for them to deduce the exact cause of the explosions.

One of the theories that came up during the inquiry was that some of the cordite on board, which had been temporarily offloaded in December of the previous year and catalogued, was past its stated “safe life” and therefore could have suffered a case of spontaneous combust ions, resulting in the devastating detonation. There was no way to prove this, however, and so the board moved onto the other theories such as the fact that a number of the ships boilers were still in use and that some of the water tights doors, which should have been closed as per the wartime regulations, had been left open whilst the ship was in port.

It was suggested that this could have contributed to a dangerously high temperature in the magazines which could have easily started a fire in a four-inch magazine. This would have been the first, smaller, explosion and Thomas knew just how quickly flames could spread on board a ship so it made sense that the main magazines would have exploded soon after.

It was this run of events that the board eventually settled upon for their final verdict.
Several ships were hit by debris from the explosion, *Warspite* included, but it was the battleship *Bellerophon* that collected an important piece of debris from their own deck.

It was a section of plating, measuring approximately six by four feet, that was found to be from No. 2 Hydraulic Room abaft 'A' barbet and was presented to the *Board of Inquiry* as a piece of evidence as it showed no signs of a blast from 'A' magazine, reinforcing the many witness statements which suggested the explosion took place in the central part of the ship.

On *Warspite* the biggest piece of shrapnel they found was no bigger than a cricket ball.

As there had been nothing any of them could do to help the crew of *Warspite* were sent back to their hammocks or, if they were on duty, back to work. The letter was waiting for him when he returned to his hammock, a small pool of ink surrounding the tip of his pen.

Cursing he mopped up the ink with his handkerchief, already dreading getting it clean again, and hurriedly set about finishing off his letter so that he could get some much needed sleep.

*Apologies for the mess; a ship exploded nearby which caused our ship to rock unexpectedly.*

*I’m fine, before you worry, and our ship was undamaged.*

*I’ll close now as I need to get some shuteye before reporting for duty in the morning.*

*Take care.*

*All the best,*

*Chief Officers Steward*

*Leading Seaman Thomas Barrow*

*HMS Warspite*

He had no doubt that the censors would probably cut out certain parts of his letter, most probably the end of his signature just in case his letter somehow fell into enemy hands, but he still included all of the details he always had when writing letters to his closest friend.

If they wanted to censor his mail then they could but he wouldn’t do their jobs for them.

Sealing the letter inside an envelope he quickly added her address to the front, his current address on board ship to the back, and applied his last stamp. He would need to get more.

That done he tucked it inside one of his boots so that he would remember to post it in the morning, carefully climbed into his hammock and was sound asleep in a matter of seconds.

~ * ~

When Thomas had first joined *Warspite* eight months ago and had discovered that Philip was an officer on board he’d been worried about the way things had ended between them.

It’d taken less than a week for him to realise that he needn’t have given it a passing thought.

“We both behaved badly the last time we saw each other, Thomas,” Philip had opened with after managing to convince Thomas to join him in his cabin. “I should never had stolen my letters to you, nor burnt them so callously in front of you but I was under a lot of pressure.”
Thomas, still bitter about their last meeting, had scoffed.

“Pressure?”

“My mother found one of your letters that I had been reading. She…” Philip had broken off, a look of fear flashing across his face. It had stunned Thomas for he’d never seen his former lover appear anything other than calm and collected, even during their final confrontation he’d been completely in control of himself. “She threatened to track you down and report you to the police if I did not end things between us and turn my attention towards doing my duty to the family. They’d have sent you to prison and I couldn’t…that’s why I accepted your invitation to come to Downton to try for Lady Mary when we still believed she would inherit the Estate. I had to protect you, to protect us from my mother. I had already destroyed your letters to me but couldn’t risk mine to you ever being discovered by the wrong individual.”

“…why didn’t you just tell me that was the reason behind it?” Thomas had demanded, a lump forming unexpectedly in his throat as he remembered the shame he had felt, the anger and the bitterness of betrayal. “I loved you, truly I did, and I would have understood.”

“But I didn’t love you, Thomas, not the way you loved me,” Philip had confessed on a rush, his words entering Thomas’ heart like the stab of a knife. “I cared for you, of course I did or I wouldn’t have behaved as I did, but it was love for a kindred spirit than that of a soulmate.”

His words had shocked Thomas into silence.

“I’m married now,” Philip had continued, his cheeks flushing slightly as Thomas had stared at him, his face blank with shock. “We were married shortly before the war. She’s American, from new money but money is money in the eyes of my family, and we have a two-year-old son. I haven’t…I haven’t been intimate with a man since the last time we were together…”

“I did love you,” Thomas had reiterated, clenching his hands as much as he could with the relatively fresh scar tissue that covered them. “And I wish that you’d told me how you truly felt. It would’ve saved me suffering in silence after you were gone. But I suppose…I suppose I can understand why you did what you did and, perhaps, I could forgive you, if that’s what you want? Forgiveness? It seems foolish to hold onto such an old grudge when we could be blown to kingdom come any day now, don’t you think? So long as you’ll forgive my trying…”

“…to blackmail me?” Philip had chuckled sadly. “Thomas, I’d forgiven you before you’d even left the room, despite my words to you. I could see how much I had hurt you, just as I could recognise the signs of desperation. Wicked as our kind are supposed to be, according to some, I don’t think either one of us would have been able to go through with our threats.”

“So…we’re going to let bygones be bygones?”

“Yes,” Philip had agreed, extending his hand. After a long moment Thomas had nodded once, somewhat sharply, and shook his ex-lovers hand. “Now, I think we should catch up.”

Thereafter had followed a conversation about their experiences over the last few years.

It had been a week later that Philip had approached him with the suggestion that they enter into something akin to a relationship with an understanding that nothing would come of it once the war had ended and they returned to their former lives. Thomas had needed a day or two to think it over; on the one hand he was worried that his heart and his mind wouldn’t be on the same page and he’d end up falling into the same trap as before, loving Philip in spite of everything, whilst on the other hand he was a different man now, older and he liked to think wiser. That and he was lonely, not
having found any other kindred spirits on board his second ship unlike back on Warrior where he’d had a few lovers on the go from the start.

He’d agreed, at length, after being plagued by memories of their past lovemaking.

Now that they had cleared the air he had allowed himself to look back upon their time together without anger and bitterness clouding his memories, meaning that he could remember precisely how talented and dedicated the Duke had been to their pleasure.

He’d reiterated the fact that they’d be together only for mutual comfort and nothing more when he’d snuck into Philips cabin to give the Duke his answer, finding him already dressed in his thin pyjamas and ready for bed, and they’d become lovers once more that very night.

\[\sim \ast \sim\]

Thomas never saw another German ship for the remainder of the war.

It wasn’t for lack of trying, either; their enemy just…wasn’t there.

In April 1918 HMS Warspite was ordered to join the Grand Fleet in what turned out to be a fruitless pursuit of the German High Seas Fleet which had reportedly been sighted hunting for a convoy near Norway. They had all been prepared for another battle such as they had experienced at Jutland and were understandably upset when yet again nothing came of it.

“I suppose there is one thing to be taken from this,” Philip sighed, stretched out on his bunk alongside Thomas, the two of them sharing a cigarette in the aftermath of their lovemaking.
Thomas arched an eyebrow at him. “We must have done more damage to the German fleet than we originally thought if they’re not trying to break the blockade now that their people are starving. You never know, could be that this is finally the beginning of the end for them.”

An end to the war…

“Well that’s a thought…”

Months passed with rumours of an Armistice growing, the reports from France claiming that the stalemate continued but that the German side was visibly weakening, mostly due to the lack of supplies both to the front line and their families back home causing a drop in moral.

The German soldiers didn’t want to fight anymore, not if their loved ones were starving.

It was a fire in the boiler room that eventually did for Warspite in the first week of August, sending her back to Rosyth for emergency repairs which would end up taking four months.

Leave was granted to her crew, a rota being drawn up so only a certain number of men were absent from the ship at any one time, whilst those that remained helped with the repairs and kept the ship running, completing drills until they could do them blindfolded.

Thomas was eventually granted leave and departed the ship on Saturday 9th November.

Rather than spend his leave with his family who he hadn’t seen in person since he was fourteen, instead exchanging letters every now and then, or at Downton where only a couple of people would be pleased to see him, his future position as Mr Crawleys valet remaining a secret as far as he knew, he spent the entire day travelling by rail to London.

He would take a room for a week in a hotel that rounding ask any questions and would enjoy a
“fun-filled week of sin” in the clubs that he knew about thanks to Philip. Or that was the plan, at least, but by the time he stepped off of the train, stretching out his stiff legs, the entire city was abuzz with the news that the long speculated Armistice was soon to happen.

On Sunday 10th November the news spread that the Kaiser had abdicated.

And then, on Monday 11th November 1918 as 11 o’clock in the morning, the guns fell silent.

The war was over.

~ * ~

A/N I’m sorry that this chapter was a bit bitty but I couldn’t get into a good storyline for Thomas and Philip no matter how hard I tried and so this is what I eventually settled on. Thanks for all of the comments about how they should react to each other; I hope you approve of the conversation I finally had them having. There will be a little bit more of Thomas and his Duke in the next chapter but then we’ll be back on track for the endgame. Also apologies that this chapter is a little short than the previous chapters but the final two years of the war from a Naval point of view were tame after Jutland. There were skirmishes but nothing as large as Jutland and unfortunately Warspite didn’t see any more action so there was nothing for me to draw on. Comments and Suggestions welcome as always. X

A/N2 Thank you to knullabulla who pointed out a continuity error that I was able to correct.
Chapter Ten

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER TEN

London
November 1918

Thomas had lost count of the number of times his hand had been shaken since the Armistice bringing the war to an end had been announced in the morning papers, of the number of times he’d been hugged and kissed by women of all ages, of the number of drinks that had been passed to him throughout the day simply because he was a young man in a uniform.

The world had gone still, the giddy celebrations coming to an eerie halt around him when the clocks had begun to chime the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the time that the Prime Minister had assured them would bring an end to the terrible hostilities.

No more fighting.

No more killing.

No more war.
It seemed unfathomable and yet, at the same time, obvious.

They had done it.

They had prevailed.

They had won the war.

Someday soon Thomas and those celebrating with him would begin to wonder if the cost was worth it, if the loss of a generation of young men was worth the peace that followed.

But that was a headache for another day.

For now Thomas and his fellow servicemen, all of them receiving the same treatment as he as they were easily identifiable in their uniforms, were content to celebrate that they’d lived through it. He had no doubt that similar celebrations were taking place wherever there had been hostilities, be that on land or at sea, and that there would be a lot of sore heads come the following morning.

Accepting another hug and a kiss from a young woman dressed all in black who wore a shiny new wedding ring on her finger, prompting him to identify her as a war widow, he tossed back the glass he’d been hand by an old soldier, choking as the gin hit the back of his throat before descending to join the mixture of beer and spirits already in his stomach. It was a good thing he was used to strong drinks or he’d be on the floor already.

Passing the glass back to the man who he was sure was its owner Thomas ducked around a young soldier, so young and with a uniform still crisp and clean that he had probably never even made it over to the France before the war had ended, who was being hugged so tightly by a large woman that his face was smushed into the valley between her massive breasts.

Not that the lad was complaining, Thomas noticed with a smirk.

It took him almost three times as long as it normally would have to traverse the crowded streets to his destination, the pub he had discovered as a young footman that catered to men with his particular inclinations, and entered to find it just as busy as the streets were.

His arrival was greeted with a rousing cheer, “Three cheers for the Navy! Hip, hip?”

There was a mixture of “hoorays” and “huzzahs” in response depending on whether or not the owner of each voice was in uniform. A quick glance informed him that he was the only sailor present in the room, explaining the vocal greeting which was repeated twice more.

“And what can I get you to celebrate with?”

This was the barman, a handsome older man with an abundance of grey in his dark hair, and in response Thomas wormed his way through the crowd to reach the polished wooden bar.

“I’ll take whatever’s good but affordable,” he answered, digging into his pocket for his loose change. He didn’t have much on him, unfortunately, as he hadn’t been expecting a day like this when he’d left the hotel he’d checked into for the duration of his leave. “I’ve only got…”

“Get him a pint of your best bitter,” an affected voice to his left ordered, reminding him of the prim way that Philip had spoken before the Navy had got their hands on him. “On me.”

It came as no surprise to Thomas that the owner of the clipped voice was an officer.
British Army, not Royal Navy, and with a chest full of medals that spoke of a career in the military rather than simply stepping up to do his bit for King and Country in a time of war.

“Thanks.”

“No one in uniform should be settling for a cheap drink on a day like today,” the officer responded, his tone sincere, as he tipped his own pint towards Thomas. “Your health.”

“Cheers,” Thomas responded with, picking up his freshly pulled pint and carefully tapping the rim against the side of the officer’s glass before taking a deep drink. “Ah, that’s good.”

A smirk, which could be described as devilishly handsome, was directed at him next.

“Captain Eddington,” the officer introduced himself, offering his hand which Thomas automatically reached out to shake, his own covered by his glove. “Charles. Charlie.”

If Charlie minded the social faux pas of shaking hands whilst wearing gloves he said nothing.

“Leading Seaman Barrow,” he offered up his own name and rank. “Thomas.”

Silence fell between the two of them for a long moment as they both sipped at their drinks, enjoying the richness of the hops in the pale ale, even as the celebrations continued around them with one chap even getting his up on the table to lead his friends in a rousing rendition of When This Lousy War Is Over, a parody of What A Friend We Have In Jesus which had come out of the trenches sometime during the war, before following it up with a less than perfect rendition of Rule Britannia before ending their sing-a-long with God Save The King.

Their final song choice had the entire pub standing perfectly still as they joined in.

“I wonder if his nose is itching,” Charlie murmured once the singing had come to an end, breaking the silence between them. Thomas couldn’t help but frown at him in confusion. “You know, the old saying that if your nose itches it’s because someone is thinking of you?”

“Can’t say I’ve heard that one myself,” Thomas answered honestly. “But if it’s true I imagine his nose must be driving him barmy what with the amount of times that’ll be sung today.”

“Quite!” Charlie chuckled. Along the bar from them a couple of soldiers were kissing, drawing the attention of those around them as their passion increased to the point that someone eventually had to pull them apart to tell them to take it somewhere a little more private. Blushing the two young men followed the advice they’d been given. “Oh, to be young and free on a day like today. No inhibitions. No regrets. Just relief and passion…”

A glance downward confirmed Thomas’ suspicion following that statement.

Charlie was married.

“Does your wife know you frequent places such as this?”

“No,” Charlie confessed, a hint of regret in his voice. “And as propriety demands she never will. She’s a good wife, my Jilly-Bean. Gillian, that is. Her names Gillian. We’ve been friends since before we could walk, hence the childish nickname. Married when we were nineteen.”

“Children?”

“Three,” Charlie answered, the regret shifting into obvious pride. “Three boys, no less.”
“But you don’t love her?”

“Not in the way most men love their wives,” he confessed, pausing to down the rest of his drink before continuing. “Jilly-Bean is my dearest friend and shall be my companion for life but I feel none of the passion that I do when I come to a place such as this to find a man…”

“Is that why you’re here today?”

Charlie nodded, chuckling,

“I wanted to celebrate the end of the war with men of my own kind. And you?”

“I felt the same,” Thomas answered honestly, taking another drink from his glass before setting it down on the bar in front of him. “The celebrations are all well and good but if I’m going to end up hugging and kissing someone I’d rather we both got something out of it.”

“Quite,” Charlie chuckled once more, nodding his head. “So, what do you say?”

Thomas arched an eyebrow in his direction.

The handsome officer continued undeterred,

“Care to join me in my rooms to celebrate the end of the war? No string attached.”

It amused Thomas to no end that he had been intimate with more men in the last four years than the decade previous, the war seeming to have lowered the entire countries inhibitions.

Why cling to convention when every day could be your last?

But now it was over, people would return to their old lives and would allow themselves to be constrained by what society demanded of them, and so this was possibly his last chance to find comfort and pleasure and passion with another human being for quite some time…

“Let me finish my beer first.”

Charlie’s smile was as devilishly handsome as his smirk had been.

Once the last of his pale ale had been drained from his glass Thomas found himself hurried out of the door by a hand on the small of his back, both appropriate and inappropriate at the same time. The hand remained in place for the entire length of time it took them the work their way through the crowded streets to the hotel that Charlie was staying, a much smarter establishment as befitting an officer than the one that Thomas had checked into.

His rooms were on the fourth floor, a sitting room that Thomas barely saw in their haste to reach the bedroom and his own private bathroom, an unparalleled luxury that not many could afford. Briefly, between arriving in the room and finding himself naked upon the bed, Thomas found himself wondering just how wealthy Charlie was to afford such a nice suite.

Within moment of posing the question to himself he found that he didn’t care about the answer. No, all he cared about what getting his hands on the body standing before him.

Charlie was a glorious specimen of masculine beauty.

He was muscular but not overly so, indicative of an active lifestyle rather than something cultivated to impress those who saw his naked form, and had broad shoulders and narrow hips, a combination that automatically drew Thomas’ attention down to the prominent grooves on his pleasantly flat
abdomen, creating a deep ‘V’ which drew his gaze further still.

“Do I pass muster, Thomas?”

“One might think you were fishing for compliments,” Thomas responded, reclining back against the comfortable pillows so as to make it obvious that he was appreciating the sight before him, folding his arms behind his head. The grin he received in response to his light comment was pure mirth, prompting a smile of his own to settle upon his face. “But, yes, you do. Unless, of course, you intend to stay all the way over there in which case you are…”

His words were cut off when he suddenly found himself covered by the warm, heavy body of another, his lips seized in a kiss by a pair of lips that were a little too plump for his liking.

In the scheme of things, however, finding his lips too plump was hardly important at all.

“What were you saying, Thomas?”

“I was about to say you would be a tease to stay so far away but you have already rectified that problem,” Thomas chuckled, their breath mingled as they parted only a couple of inches so as to speak to one another following their first kiss. Almost subconsciously he spread his legs apart so that the body above him settled down between them. “Charlie…”

Their lovemaking that afternoon was slow and sweet, filled with languid kisses and gentle touches, something Thomas hadn’t experienced many times in his life and ended up lasting into the early evening, the sun setting outside without them noticing it as they swapped positions for the third, no, the fourth round of lovemaking as they dedicated all of the attention to bringing each other as much pleasure as their bodies could possibly handle.

“Enough,” Thomas was finally forced to cry out as the clock in the sitting room chimed the hour, informing the exhausted pair of lovers that it was eight o’clock. “I can take no more.”

Rather than protest at him ending their fun Charlie hummed in understanding, shifting their bodies so that they lay side by side on the bed, the sweat cooling on their glistening bodies.

His next move was something of a cliché but Thomas offered no protest, merely accepting the cigarette that Charlie had lit for the two of them to share when it was passed to him.

“How long are you in London for?”

“Till the end of the week,” Thomas answered, blowing out a plume of smoke whilst handing the cigarette back to Charlie. “Unless I get called back early although that seems unlikely given the fact that war has finally come to an end. Then I shall see what the future holds.”

“What ship are you on?”

They’d been warned about sharing such information with strangers but that was before.

“HMS Warspite.”

Charlie nodded, blowing out his own plume of smoke.

“You?” Thomas enquired. “Not what ship, obviously, what…actually I don’t know what…”

“Regiment. The word you’re looking for is Regiment,” Charlie supplied with a grin, passing the cigarette back to the sailor. “And I’m in the Coldstream Guards. Wounded at Ypres.”
His hand fell to the scars on his thigh Thomas had explored with his tongue hours earlier.

“Shrapnel got lodged in the bone,” he explained further. “Spent six months in Blighty recovering before they’d send me back by high time most of my regiment were gone.”

“Jutland,” Thomas announced, holding up his ungloved hands. He’d removed them with the rest of his uniform but Charlie somehow hadn’t noticed the prominent scars until the brief lull between their first coupling and their second. The officer hadn’t commented at the time, merely copied Thomas in kissing them when they started up again. “I was on Warrior then.”

“She sank, didn’t she?”

“On the way home,” Thomas confirmed, taking another hit from the cigarette before placing it between Charlie’s waiting lips. “We evacuated to HMS Engadine before she went down.”

“I can’t even imagine what that was like…”

“Well, I can’t imagine what being in France was like so I think we’re even…”

They spoke of the war for a little longer, the time it took them to smoke their cigarette down to the last little stub, and then Charlie insisted that Thomas join him for dinner.

“I can’t imagine you’re any less hungry than I am after all of our exercise this afternoon,” he chuckled as the two of them donned their uniforms, smoothing out the creases that had settled into them after they’d been abandoned on the floor for so long. “And I know just the place for us to visit. It’s a restaurant which is primarily aimed at those with our inclinations.”

“Sounds intriguing,” Thomas conceded, smoothing his hair down. “What kind of food is it?”

“French,” Charlie answered, tightening the knot of his tie with practiced ease before tucking it inside his jacket, smoothing both down one more time. “But don’t worry, the food’s good.”

He was right, of course, the food was good.

Thomas might even have gone so far as to say it was excellent.

“I’m in London for three more days,” the officer announced suddenly at the end of their desert course, raising his left hand to discretely call for the bill. “Perhaps we could…?”

There were much worse ways to spend his leave, Thomas decided, so he agreed.

For those three days they hardly left Charlie’s rooms, emerging only to get food when the rumbling of their stomachs grew too distracting, and at the end of their time together they wished each other well, shared one final intimate kiss before going their separate ways.

The rest of his leave passed by quietly from that point on.

~ * ~

Thomas ended up only going to sea once more during the remainder of his Naval career.

On the 21st November 1918 HMS Warspite was one of the ships that escorted the German High Seas Fleet into internment at Scapa Flow. It was a sight that would remain with him for the rest of his life; the 5th Battle Squadron, of which they were a part, was in the order of HMS Barham, HMS Malaya, HMS Warspite and HMS Valiant. In front of them was the 6th Battle Squadron and behind them the 1st Cruiser Squadron. This put them towards the back of the starboard line and
allowed him to see almost every ship that they were escorting.

“The last time I saw most of these ships they were firing at us,” Philip muttered from where he was leaning over the railing beside him, the two of them blending in amongst the dozens of men also watching the surrendering fleet heading towards its final destination. “Strange to think that this is all over, that soon these ships will be at the bottom of the sea and we…”

“…return to our former lives.”

Only that wasn’t how things ended up playing out.

After they’d watched every ship of the German High Seas Fleet meet their watery grave, scuttled by their own crews so that they could never be used against Great Britain again, Thomas received orders that he was to transfer to HMS Excellent, one of the largest shore establishments of the a Royal Navy in Portsmouth, on the recommendation of both of the Captains he’d served under to become the new Chief Officers Steward on the huge base.

Philip, on the other hand, was to leave the Navy as soon as he was legally able to.

“I’ll be back home by the time you finish getting settled into your new post,” he murmured as Thomas helped him to pack up his things on the night before they and numerous other members of the crew would be departing for their new postings or their civilian lives. Only two thirds of the crew would be remaining on Warspite. It was the same all across the fleet now that the war was over as those who had joined up to defend their country were free to return home. “It seems almost unreal, like a dream after so long away from the old place.”

“I’m sure it will be as though you never left within a couple of weeks,” Thomas assured him, adding a carefully folding shirt to the Duke’s baggage. He had significantly more to pack up that Thomas himself had, his belongings all fitting in one canvass bag whilst Philip’s were spread throughout two large cases. “Your wife must be glad that you’re coming home…”

“I haven’t told her, actually,” Philip confessed. “I want it to be a surprise.”

In their months together on board HMS Warspite they had become closer than before their falling out, a truer friendship blossoming between them since they had cleared the air. They had both put the past behind them, just as they had agreed to, and were therefore free to be intimate without the danger of feelings growing between them and twisting their reality.

Their physical intimacies, which took place as often as they could get away with, had only improved with age. Thomas had been open about all of his lovers at Philip’s request, his experiences in the years since they were last together allowing them to experiment with their lovemaking, and he had even shared his escapades in London with his current lover.

“What do you say, Thomas?” Philip enquired once everything but the things he would need that night and the following morning were packed away ready to go, leaving them stood in his now bare cabin. “One last time together for old time’s sake? Unless you’ve been spoiled by your virile Army officer and no longer desire to sleep with a lowly sailor such as myself?”

Rolling his eyes at his lover’s playful tone Thomas moved to crowd him against the back of the cabin door, Philip’s head thudding against it as the taller man sealed their lips together.

He proceeded to prove to his social superior that he was still very much interested in sailors, or rather one sailor in particular, joining the two of them together in unbridled passion for one last time. They ended up on the cabin bed, naked together, basking in their afterglow.
“I shall miss our time together, Thomas,” Philip sighed, pushing himself up from where he’d collapsed so that he could pull his uniform back on. “Perhaps we might stay in contact?”

“Letters?” Thomas chuckled. “After the trouble they caused last time?”

“Not love letters,” Philip pointed out. “Correspondence between two friends, that’s all.”

“Very well,” Thomas eventually agreed, rising from the bed so as to get dressed himself. “If you’re sure then I don’t see how a quick letter now and then will do either of us any harm.”

“You’ll have to write first once you settle in,” Philip instructed, checking out his appearance in the small mirror on the wall of his cabin. “So you can let me know your address, Thomas.”

“Very well,” he agreed, somewhat reluctantly. “I’ll write once I’ve settled into my new post.”

That agreed they parted for the night, Thomas returning to his duties, and in the morning they nodded to each other as they disembarked the ship for the last time, each of them saying goodbye to the friends they had made during their time aboard *HMS Warspite*. He had written to Mr Crawley after finishing his duties the night before informing him of his orders and the fact that he wouldn’t be taking up the offered position as his valet just yet.

He intended to see if the Navy would suit him for a while longer.

Sadly it did not.

Life on a shore establishment was vastly different to life aboard ship and, much to his surprise, Thomas found himself longing for the endless horizon or the rolling hills of Yorkshire rather than the identical buildings and cobbled streets that he saw every day.

He grew bored of the same thing happening day in, day out.

He longed for something different.

And so, after only four weeks at *HMS Excellent*, he put in the paperwork required for him to leave His Majesties service and return to his civilian life. His request was reluctantly granted, resulting in his first letter to Philip including the news that he was returning to Downton Abbey to become valet to the future Earl of Grantham, and then once the paperwork had come through he purchased a ticket north, said goodbye to the Navy and set out for home.

~ * ~

*Due to popular demand this will not be the last we see of Philip although it may only be in fond memories or possibly flashbacks. Comments & Suggestions are welcome as always. X*
Chapter Eleven

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

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THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Downton Abbey
February 1919

Stepping into the servants courtyard he half expected to find Miss O’Brien waiting for him, forewarned by Anna of his impending arrival, but there was no one and the door was shut.

As he wanted to make a good first impression the second time around he paused to get rid of what remained of his cigarette, stubbing it out on the discoloured brick that he’d always used for just such a purpose before dropping it into the rusted tin beside the step which had been placed there for this very purpose, and lowered his kit bag from his shoulder to rest on the ground beside him, leaning it against his leg. His hands then made quick work of tugging out any creases in his jacket, removing the fluff and twigs he’d picked up in the woods from the bottoms of his trouser legs.

Lastly he checked that his cap was tilted at the angle that he had discovered suited him best, a little less than some of his fellow sailors had worn theirs, straightened the bow of his tapes and that his lanyard was straight before ringing the bell.

It took slightly longer than he expected for someone to answer the door.
“Yes?” the unfamiliar maid enquired upon seeing him. “Can I help you?”

_Obviously Anna had failed to spread the word to this particular member of the household,_ Thomas thought to himself as she looked him up and down, her confusion rather evident.

“The leading Seaman Barrow,” he introduced himself. “I’m here to see Mr Matthew Crawley.”

“…and is Mr Crawley expecting you?”

“In a roundabout way, yes,” Thomas answered with a wry smile. “I was instructed to present myself to him once the Royal Navy had no further use of me and so here I am…?”

He trailed off, raising an eyebrow towards her as he hinted that he’d like to know her name.

“Jane,” she automatically supplied her name for him. “Jane Moorsum.”

She must have been considered pretty once, Thomas mused as she stepped aside to allow him to enter the familiar building, his feet automatically taking him towards the servants hall, but life had obviously been unkind to her and now she just looked tired and worn, her thick dark hair lacking the shine that it must have once had and lines surrounded her eyes.

As he stepped into the usually busy servant’s hall he was met with stunned silence.

There was Anna, still in her coat and hat, beside Mr Bates who looked at Thomas as though he were something unpleasant on the bottom of his shoe. Lily was there too, the painfully shy housemaid who had always done her work without complaint, staring at him in shock.

“Thomas?”

The startled voice drew his attention over to the chair in front of the fire where the one person he was sure would be pleased to see him downstairs was sat, mending in her lap.

“Miss O’Brien,” he greeted her warmly, releasing his hold on his kit bag in order to catch his oldest friend as she threw herself at him in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, the heavy bag slipping off his shoulder to thud against the floor behind him. “It’s so good to see you…”

If the room was quiet before it was silent like a graveyard now, everyone gaping at the two of them as they hugged each other as closely as they dared before reluctantly pulling apart.

“Why didn’t you let us know you were coming?”

“My discharge from the Navy came through quite suddenly,” Thomas explained, aware of everyone listening in. Footsteps alerted him to the fact that more of his former colleagues had arrived, prompting him to turn and offer them a smile. It was Madge, the other young housemaid who was only a fraction more outspoken than Lily, and Branson, the chauffeur. “If I had sent word it would probably have arrived only a few minutes before I did myself.”

“You look well, Thomas,” Mr Bates announced suddenly, breaking the silence that the rest of the room had been under and drawing all of their eyes on him. “Life at sea suited you.”

“Indeed it did, Mr Bates,” Thomas confirmed with none of his usual venom or sarcasm towards the older man. If Bates noticed the change in his tone of voice he managed not to react. Anna, on the other hand, wore a slight frown of confusion. “And sadly that is the very reason that I am no longer a serving member of His Majesties Royal Navy; I was transferred to a shore establishment after the Armistice and found it too restrictive after so much time spent at sea. To be honest I’d probably
still be aboard Warspite if they had let me remain where I was but never mind. It left me able to take up a favourable offer of employment…”

“Oh?” Anna mumbled. “And what’s that, Thomas?”

“Valet to Mr Matthew Crawley,” Thomas announced, letting himself enjoy the way their mouth literally dropped open in shock before the regained control of themselves. He was not the same petty creature he had once been but upsetting those who had looked down their noses at him in the past still felt good. “Formerly Lieutenant Crawley of HMS Warrior.”

“…you are to be Mr Crawley’s Valet?”

The disbelief was painfully evident in Mr Bates’ normally warm voice.

Thomas nodded, aware of Miss O’Briens smug look beside him, before confirming,

“Yes. He offered me the position whilst we were in hospital together recovering from the wounds we had suffered at the Battle of Jutland. I’d like to speak to him, if that is possible.”

“Madge,” Anna called out, every bit the Head Housemaid in that moment which prompted the housemaid in question to look away from Thomas. “Fetch Mr Carson and Mrs Hughes.”

Nodding her head the young woman turned and scurried away in search of the Butler and Housekeeper, brushing past Daisy who entered the room carrying a heavily laden tray. She didn’t so much as glance in Thomas’ direction before getting to work laying the table ready for the servants evening meal, setting out the plates and other utensils with swift efficiency.

It wasn’t until she looked up at Anna that she realised something was going on.

“What’s wrong, Anna?” she enquired, frowning deeply. “Has something happened?”

“Hello, Daisy,” Thomas murmured before Anna could speak up, chuckling deeply at the sharp yelp that escaped the kitchen maid as she spun to face him. “How have you been?”

“Thomas? I…I’m fi…” she broke off her answer with a frown. “What are you doing here?”

“A question I would dearly like the answer to.”

There was no denying who the owner of the booming voice was, the demand pre-empting Mr Carson’s arrival into the room by a few seconds in which time everyone straightened up.

Thomas found himself coming to the position of attention out of habit.

“I’m here to see Lieutenant, sorry, Mr Crawley about the position he offered me during the war,” Thomas explained, his voice as clipped as when he would report to a senior officer. Carson, he noticed, hadn’t changed at all although he did look tired, as though he’d been suffering from a string of sleepless nights. Beside him Mrs Hughes stood equally unchanged. “I apologise for the lack of warning as to my arrival, Mr Carson, Mrs Hughes. As I have just explained to everyone my discharge from the Royal Navy has come about quite suddenly.”

“Position, Thomas?”

“As Mr Crawley’s Valet, Mrs Hughes.”

“You?” Mr Carson all but choked on his disbelief. “As Mr Crawley’s Valet?”
Thomas felt his cheeks flush with shame and embarrassment.

Obviously he was still to be judged on his past actions, not on his wartime service.

Never mind, he reassured himself, that will change just as I have changed.

They shall see.

“Yes, Mr Carson,” he confirmed, keeping his voice perfectly controlled as he explained once again, “Lieutenant Crawley offered me the position whilst we were both recovering from the wounds we had sustained at the Battle of Jutland. I accepted, pending my discharge.”

“Miss O’Brien said you’d been wounded, Thomas,” Mrs Hughes murmured in what he had often though of as her ‘concerned mother’ tone. “I hope it wasn’t anything too serious?”

“A few burns, that’s all,” Thomas assured her, glossing over the subject for the moment. He was pleased no one had question his gloves. “May I be permitted to speak to Mr Crawley?”

“I shall inform him that you are here,” Mr Carson announced tersely, his eyes blazing with indignation. “However, rest assured, Thomas, that should he deny knowledge of this offer of employment you shall be removed immediately upon my return. Is that perfectly clear?”

“As crystal, Mr Carson.”

Huffing loudly Mr Carson turned and headed up the stairs to the families part of the house, leaving the gathered servants in silence that seemed to stretch awkwardly until Daisy spoke,

“You look ever so smart in your uniform, Thomas.”

“Thank you, Daisy,” he responded amidst the scoffs of his former colleagues, each of them reacting with a different level of annoyance to her flattery. “Is that a wedding ring I spy?”

“Oh!” she gasped, her right hand moving to cover the ring on her left hand. “Um, yes…”

“And who’s the lucky fellow?”

“It was William.”

Thomas smile was one of genuine delight, pleased that the young man he had envied and bullied so badly had managed to win the hand of the woman he loved. His smiled faded rapidly, however, when his brain processed the way that her response had been phrased.

“…what do you mean, was?”

“He died,” Daisy mumbled tearfully. “A couple of hours after we were married.”

His disbelief must have shown on his face as Mrs Hughes explained further,

“He was badly wounded during the Battle of Amiens last August. The Dowager Countess arranged for him to be brought back to the Abbey when it became clear that nothing could be done for him. It was far too expensive for Mr Mason to keep going to visit him in York.”

William…

William was dead?
The thought pained him more than it should have.

He had intended to apologise to the younger man at the earliest opportunity following his return; for his behaviour towards him, for the things that had been said between them, for the way he had treated him for so long, but it seemed that he’d left it too late. Regret filled his gut, stabbing at him like the punch William had once delivered him; hindsight was cruel.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he murmured, his sincere tone surprising them all. “Truly.”

Mrs Hughes seemed almost relieved to hear those words pass is lips.

“But at least he was able to marry you before he…” Thomas trailed off, seeing the pain and something that he suspected might be guilt in Daisy’s eyes. “At least he had that happiness.”

They were spared further conversation on the difficult subject by Mr Carson’s return.

“The family will see you now, Thomas.”

Nodding in response Thomas reached down to grab hold of his kit bag, placing it against the wall so that it was out of the way of everyone, and followed Mr Carson up the narrow stairs.

There were no signs of the hospital that he knew had taken over the house, none that he could see by any means as everything had been returned to its proper place once the Army had left the previous month. Only a couple of ornaments seemed to have been rearranged.

“Thomas, Milord.”

Following Mr Carson into the Morning Room the former footman found himself facing the entire Crawley family, from the Dowager Countess right down to Mrs Crawley, his future employers mother. Removing his cap he placed it under his left arm and bowed politely.

“Barrow!” Matthew cried out cheerfully, drawing his attention to where the former officer sat in a wheelchair beside an elegant young woman who was perched on a chair. “At last!”

“I came as soon as the Navy had no more need of me,” Thomas responded with a slight smirk, taking in his future employers appearance. He looked good. Healthy. And, rather more importantly if he was honest, happy. “To see if you still had need of my services.”

“Of course I still have need of your services!” Matthew exclaimed with a laugh, slapping his hands against his thighs before reaching out to take hold of his companions hand. “Barrow, this is my fiancé Miss Lavinia Swire. Dearest, this is the chap I told you about. From Jutland.”

“The steward that saved your life?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” Matthew confirmed. “Isn’t that right, Barrow?”

If the silence downstairs had been like a graveyard then this second silence was like a storm, churning the air around him. The hairs on the back of his neck reacted unpleasantly as he felt everyone’s gaze fall upon him, their expressions various stages of shock and disbelief.

“I think saving your life might be a little dramatic, don’t you think, sir?”

“Well, what else would you call it, Barrow?” Matthew countered with a broad grin. “You lifted a piece of metal the size of that pianoforte off of me at great risk to yourself, injuring yourself in the process all so that I wouldn’t be burnt to death after the deck caught alight.”
The Dowager Countess tutted sharply,

“Really, Matthew, please remember that there are ladies present.”

“Oh, Granny, I heard much worse in the hospital,” Sybil announced, shifting on the sofa in such a way as to draw Thomas’ attention to her. “I hope you weren’t badly hurt, Thomas?”

“Just a couple of burns, Milady,” he answered honestly, flexing his hands at his sides. Her eyes dropped knowingly to the gloves although no one else had made the connection yet. “They’re fully healed now, of course, and the scarring hasn’t troubled me in almost a year.”

“That’s good,” the former nurse murmured, offering him a genuine smile even as her sisters continued to frown at him beside her. “Burns can be tricky to heal, as I’m sure you know.”

“How was Warpite?” Matthew enquired, drawing Thomas’ attention back to where he was sat with his fiancée, their hands still linked together. “How did she compare to the old girl?”

The Earl of Grantham guffawed loudly as he repeated questioningly,

“*The old girl*? Who is the *old girl*?”

“HMS Warrior,” Matthew answered, rubbing the back of his neck with his other hand in an unusual display of self-consciousness. “She was the oldest ship to take part in the battle…”

“And she was somewhat stuck in her ways,” Thomas found himself adding with a chuckle, thinking back fondly on his time aboard *Warrior*. “No more than fifteen knots in rough seas or the starboard screw would start to shake. No more than four hours at twenty knots or the port engine would overheat.” As he spoke Matthew let out a bright laugh, nodding vigorously before joining in with his final statement. “And no more than five piece of coal in the wardroom stove at a time or the flames would be sucked up out of the top of the flue.”

Lady Edith frowned, enquiring softly,

“…why are ships always referred to as she?”

“Some people suggest it's because the Latin word for ship, *navis*, is feminine, but I’m not convinced by that particular theory,” Matthew answered, sounding more and more like the man he had once been before the Navy had changed him. “After all we get the word table from the Latin word *tabula*, also feminine, yet we don't think of a table as a *she*, do we?”

This got a collection of titters from the female occupants in the room.

“I always thought that it was because they care and protect us, like mothers do,” Thomas offered up his own theory without thinking it through. “Or like mothers are supposed to.”

“I much prefer that reasoning,” Lady Cora murmured with a smile, firstly aimed at Matthew and the rest of her family but then solely at Thomas. “It’s good to see you again, Thomas.”

“It’s good to be back, Your Ladyship.”

Thomas got the distinct impression that whilst His Lordship was obviously aware of what had happened prior to his leaving back in 1914 with the wine and Mr Bates, if the looks being passed between Mr Carson and his employer were anything to go by, his wife and daughters, not to mention his mother, knew nothing of the fact that he had been caught stealing. No doubt they would be informed as soon as he left the room, Matthew as well, so it was a good thing that he had
already mentioned the “cloud” that he had left under to his new employer back when they’d been serving together and the regrets he now had about it.

The door opened, admitting a young woman wearing a rather stylish black dress, her dark brown hair cut in a surprisingly modern style so that with it clipped back from her face the lightly curled ends barely touched her shoulders. She brought with her a pale blue wrap which she carried across to Lavinia, passing it over to the beautiful redhead with a smile.

“Thank you, Miss Featherstone.”

“Can I get you anything else, Miss Swire?”

“No, thank you,” Lavinia responded brightly, draping the wrap around her. “That’s all.”

“Barrow, why don’t you take the rest of the day to get settled in?” Matthew suggested, offering his new Valet a broad smile. “I can survive one more day looking after myself.”

Thomas felt compelled to reassure the wheelchair bound young man,

“I don’t mind beginning my duties this evening, sir.”

“I know you don’t but I think you’ve earned a night off after the journey you must have just had,” Matthew insisted, rolling himself forward with practiced ease so that he could offer his hand to Thomas, holding it in place until it was taken and given a light shake by his new Valet under the watchful eye of his family and fiancé. “I’m so glad you’ve come, Barrow.”

“And I’m glad to be here, sir.”

He was.

He truly was.

He knew, however, that it would take a long while for those he had wronged in the house to realise that his years away had changed him. That his time in the Royal Navy had helped him to grow up at long last, to be able to understand the good points of his nature and the bad.

Leaving the room behind Miss Featherstone and before Mr Carson he found himself being herded expertly back down towards the servant’s hall where everyone was still gathered.

“Well?”

This question came from Mrs Hughes and was directed at both Thomas and Mr Carson.

“Thomas is indeed to join us as Mr Crawley’s new Valet,” the Butler confirmed, addressing the room in his usual manner. Madge let out a surprised gasp. “Therefore he is now to be addressed as Mr Barrow and shall be offered the same respect as Mr Bates, understood?”

“Yes, Mr Carson.”

Thomas ended up in his old room, finding it as unchanged as the rest of the house as no one had used it since he was left, or so he was told. It didn’t take him more than half-an-hour to unpack his things and realise that he had neglected one important thing; his old suits wouldn’t fit him anymore, not with the weight he had lost and the muscle he’d gained.

They would do temporarily but he would have to invest in a couple of new suits soon.
Keeping his uniform on for the time being Thomas returned to the Servant’s Hall in time to sit down for dinner, finding it somewhat strange not have been involved with the upstairs dinner first. He ended up sat between Miss O’Brien and Miss Featherstone at the long table.

It was Lily who turned in her seat further down the table to ask him,

“Did you really save Mr Crawleys life, Mr Barrow?”

Thomas froze, hand outstretched to accept the plate that Miss O’Brien was handing him.

“Technically, yes,” he admitted, passing the plate on to Miss Featherstone so that it could continue on down to the intended recipient. It was the same old system they’d always used, Mr Carson doling out the portions at the head of the table. “As a Steward my post during battle was in the sick berth, acting as either an attendant or as a stretcher bearer. At Jutland they designated me to be a stretcher bearer so I spent the battle bringing in the wounded.”

Their hands were still moving, passing around the plates, but their attention was on him.

“Mr Crawley, then Lieutenant Crawley, had been pinned by a piece of metal which had once been one of our gun shields in an area that was quickly being consumed by fire,” he went on even as he carefully placed his own plate down before him. Someone, possibly Lily, gasped. “As was my duty I got him free and back to the sick berth where the surgeons looked after him. I wasn’t alone in my actions, however, Jenkins was with me. Another Officers Steward.”

“…and what exactly is a Steward?”

“It’s basically the Navy’s version of a Footman,” Thomas answered Miss Featherstone’s soft question with a smile. “Particularly if you manage to become an Officers Steward like I did.”

“And I suppose that is why Mr Crawley offered you the position as his Valet?”

“Yes, Mr Bates, that is why,” Thomas confirmed, meeting the eyes of the man sat directly opposite him. “Just as your service with His Lordship earned you the position you hold.”

A somewhat tense silence followed.

“Mr Barrow, I hope you have not forgotten everything about life in service in your years at sea,” Mr Carson finally broke it tersely, prompting a confused frown. “Remove your gloves.”

His gaze fell down upon the brown leather covering his hands.

“Mr Carson, I wouldn’t want to spoil anyone’s dinner…”

Another tense silence fell, this time out of shock for him talking back to the Butler.

Mr Carson all but glowered as he snapped across at Thomas,

“Mr Barrow, gloves shall not be worn at my table. Remove them at once.”

A beat passed.

“Very well,” Thomas finally muttered, undoing the two buttons on each glove that held it tight at the wrist and beginning to tug each of the fingers. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you…”

Poor Miss Featherstone was the first to get a good look at his hands, letting out a shrill cry of alarm as he dropped the right glove onto the table by his plate, her wide eyes fixated on the scarring
covering the back of his right hand. Other sounds of distress followed from the various occupants
of the table as he then removed the left glove, displaying his ruined palm.

“Thomas…” Mrs Hughes gasped, her voice thick with alarm. “…are you in pain?”

“No, Mrs Hughes, they’re fully healed, I assure you,” Thomas murmured, turning his hands over
again and again so that everyone could get a good look at the raised scars. “But they are still rather
unsightly, hence the gloves which I took to wearing after leaving hospital.”


“Lily!” Mrs Hughes snapped. “You shouldn’t ask such a…”

“That’s because they’re different kinds of burns,” Thomas answered, shooting Mrs Hughes a look
of reassurance as he lifted his right hand up. “This was caused by a piece of fabric that I had
wrapped around it catching fire.” Next he held his left hand up. “And this was caused by the metal
I was lifting after the fabric fell off of this hand. It had become quite hot, thanks to fire and there’s
another burn on my left leg which is similar to the one on my right hand…”

“They must have been very painful.”

It was Mr Bates who voice the thought everyone was having.

“They were and they weren’t,” Thomas confessed, running the fingertips of his right hand over the
twisted palm of his left. “At the time they were numb, believe it or not, or I’d never have been able
to carry the stretcher containing Lieutenant Crawley to the sick berth. It wasn’t until later that they
started to hurt but by then we were home and there was morphine.”

Mrs Hughes glared at Mr Carson until he cleared his throat.

“I apologise, Mr Barrow,” he muttered, sounding not quite sincere enough for Thomas’ liking but
he’d take what he could get just then. “Of course you may keep your gloves on.”

“Thank you, Mr Carson.”

Pulling his gloves back on with practiced ease he picked up his knife and fork and, after a beat
where he waited for everyone else to copy him, began to tuck into the cottage pie.

It was every bit as delicious as he remembered.

~ * ~

A/N I’ve had this chapter planned since the very beginning although I ended up adding a couple of
characters in that weren’t in my original draft (Miss Featherstone, for example) so I hope it didn’t
disappoint. I’m really enjoying all the comments people are leaving as they keep giving me
fantastic bursts of inspiration for things to include in later chapters so please feel free to keep them
coming – inspiration is always welcome on a long fic like this. Marblez x
Chapter Twelve

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

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THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER TWELVE

Downton Abbey
February 1919

Thomas was a little surprised by how easily he settled back into life at the Abbey, despite his new role, and after a week it almost felt as though he’d never left. It was only the presence of his gloves and the scars they concealed that reassured him that he had served in the war.

On the morning that the Army were due to collect the last of the equipment they had left carefully stored out of the way, or rather out of the way of the family but completely in the way of the busy servants, Thomas was up with the dawn so that he has plenty of time to go through his personal ablutions before heading down to the servants hall for his breakfast.

“Good morning, Mr. Barrow.”

“Good morning, Mr Bates.”

The friendship born of mutual respect and understanding between Thomas and his former rival had taken him by surprise every bit as much as it had everyone else. His time in the Royal Navy had
matured him, at long last as some of his old colleagues were prone to muttering under their breath when they though he couldn’t hear them, and with that newfound maturity came an understanding of what the bond between Mr Bates and his Lordship must be like after serving together for so long. He could still understand why he, then a jealous young man who was desperate to better himself so as to prove to the world that he wasn’t the complete waste of space his father had once branded him to be, had reacted poorly to the other man’s arrival but now, what with his own situation being so similar, he could understand why His Lordship has chosen to hire his old batman instead one of the other possible candidates that he had been presented with at the time. There was a trust born of serving in the military together, of being in brutal combat together, of staring into the face of death together and emerging victorious, that simply couldn’t be replicated.

And so the two valets were now, for lack of a better word, friends.

“Good morning, Anna,” Thomas addressed the young woman sat, as ever, beside his fellow valet as he helped himself to a couple of slices of freshly made toast, covering each with a liberal quantity of butter and a healthy serving of Mrs Patmore’s homemade marmalade. It was a simple breakfast but delicious all the same. “You’re looking particularly perky today.”

“Longest nights sleep I’ve had in weeks, if not months,” the pretty young woman responded with a light chuckle, her own relationship with Thomas having improved alongside that of Mr Bates. Thomas was beginning to wonder if either of them would ever admit the feelings they had for each other, the feelings that were obviously mutual. He knew there was a wife, had been filled in on the gossip by one of the hall boys before Mr Bates himself had shared his own wartime saga with him, but surely once the divorce was finalised they would have to put an end to the ridiculous pining and longing that he’d witnessed. “All the young ladies retired early last night so I was able to head to bed early as well, what with there being no mending to be done and their outfits already sorted for today. It felt quite naughty heading upstairs at such an early hour but I must confess I needed the extra couple of hours sleep.”

Thomas nodded his thanks, his mouth full of toast, when she poured him a cup of tea whilst finishing off her explanation and carefully slid it across the table to him. Such an action would never have happened before the war no matter how generous of a soul Anna was.

A bell rang on the board, drawing all of their eyes up to it to discover who was the first to be called for. It was His Lordships room and so, with a murmur of farewell to those seated around the long table hurriedly eating their morning meals, Mr Bates began his journey upstairs. Watching him go, his limp noticeably bad that morning, Thomas was grateful that whilst his injuries were unpleasant to look at they only restricted the extreme movements of his fingers. He wasn’t sure that he had the fortitude of spirit to survive an injury such as the ones Mr Bates and Thomas’ employer, Mr Crawley, had and so it was a blessing that his leg, despite being burned, had suffered no lasting damage apart from a rather unpleasant scar.

He was just washing his toast down with the last of his cup of tea and contemplating another slice when a second bell rang on the board, prompting them to look up at it.

This time it was Her Ladyship, prompting the unusually silent Miss O’Brien to rise smoothly from her seat and make her way upstairs without offering a single one of them a goodbye.

Whilst Thomas relationships with the rest of the staff had improved since his return his relationship with Miss O’Brien has become somewhat strained as he had refused to fall back into his old ways. It had been his petty behaviour, brought about by the jealousy he had always suffered from, that had brought the two of them together shortly after he’d arrived at the Abbey as a young footman. It was painfully evident that Miss O’Brien wanted things to return to how they were before the war
but they were both too changed by their own experiences for that to happen. Unfortunately she had yet to realise this fact and so saw his pulling away as an act of betrayal rather than a chance for her to enter into a new type of friendship with him, one born of respect and not a need to control him and cause trouble.

His time in the Royal Navy had taught him many things, one of them being patience, and so he was content to wait and see what happened. It wasn’t his place to pressure his former conspirator into changing her ways. To do so would have the opposite effect, he knew, thinking back on all the people who had tried to force him to change his ways over the years and how he’d responded. It was only when he had decided to change himself, under the guidance of the Royal Navy, that things had begun to change. The same would be true of Miss O’Brien. One day something would happen to change his friend’s outlook on her life.

He just had to wait.

At the head of the table Mr Carson began issuing instructions to the gaggle of housemaids and hall boys, setting them their tasks for the morning. Thomas knew that the Butler was still wary of him, waiting for him to slip up and to return to his old ways, but that was understandable all things considered and so Thomas had resolved to simply ignore the watchful gaze until he had earned the older man’s trust. The same could be said of Mrs Hughes, to a degree, although the kindly housekeeper was already treating him better than she ever had before. His attentive care of Mr Crawley had served to endear him to her, it seemed, and she was far more observant than most people gave her credit for. He believed that she saw him for exactly what he was; a changed man trying to make a life for himself.

Two bells rang almost simultaneously.

Lady Mary and Mr Crawley.

“Shall we?” Thomas murmured, offering his arm to Anna as the two of them rose from their seats and made their way towards the stairs. Chuckling brightly she slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her up the narrow winding staircase that the servants used, the two of them conversing cheerfully about nothing of consequence until they parted on the landing; Anna heading towards the wing that housed the three Crawley daughters whilst Thomas headed for the guest rooms which were known as the bachelors wing. It wasn’t a wing, not really, but who was he to correct the family? Arriving at the largest of the guest rooms, the only one with a private bathroom and dressing room attached to it, he knocked on the door and entered when bid to. “Good morning, Mr Crawley. I hope you slept well.”

“Like a log,” Matthew responded from where he had pulled himself up to rest against the padded headboard of the elaborate bed. His blonde hair was as messy as it always was in the morning. “I dreamt I was back aboard the Caroline in my cabin and the rocking motion, even though it was only in my head, was just what I needed to get a good night’s sleep.”

“I know what you mean,” Thomas responded with a smile as he set about getting things ready in the bathroom for his employee to have his morning wash. The family had spared no expense, bringing in someone to lower the sink and mirror so that he could use them from his wheelchair. “Sometimes when I close my eyes I can feel Warrior’s engines thrumming.”

“I’m glad it’s not just me that misses life at sea,” Matthew sighed, shifting himself towards the edge of the bed once Thomas had brought his wheelchair across, bracing it so that the former officer could manoeuvre himself off of the bed and into the cushioned seat. They had agreed on his first day that Matthew should do as much as he possibly could, Thomas assisting only when it was necessary or if his duties as a valet insisted. As such he wheeled his employee up the sink and then
left him to it, instead collecting Matthews clothes for the day from the dressing room and bringing them through to the bedroom, laying them out on the bed ready to go. “I suppose it must be worse for you, Barrow, given that you only left the service a week or so ago. I, at least, have had time to acclimatise to life on land again.”

“Don’t forget it was on a shore base that I served on last and that doing so drove me out of the Royal Navy, sir,” Thomas chuckled, peering closely at the right cuff of the jacket they’d selected the night before. It was starting to look a little worn due to rubbing against the wheelchair when the occupant tried to move himself around in it. Thomas would have to look that over to see what could be done for it. “I don’t miss trying to serve drinks during rough weather, nor do I miss carrying that tea tray up to the bridge multiple times a day.”

“God, I remember one time on the Caroline when the weather was particularly bad and our poor steward ended up wearing my cup of tea,” Matthew laughed, pausing with his safety razor blade an inch away from his cheek so as not to cut himself as he shared his tale. A grin settled on Thomas’ face; it was very easy to picture such a scenario as he had come worryingly close to doing something similar on more than one occasion. “His white front had a tea stain on it for weeks before he finally managed to get it out. He was mortified.”

“I would’ve been, too,” Thomas announced. “You wouldn’t believe how long it took me to adjust to sleeping in a proper bed, be it a simple bunk bed in the stewards mess deck, after four years of sleeping in a hammock. To be honest, sir, I’m still not entirely use it it now.”

“Good lord, I’d forgotten that you slept in a hammock,” Matthew gasped cheerfully, his hands carefully completing his morning shave before wiping away the left over soap with a towel. He then moved onto sorting out his hair. “That must have been difficult to get use to, both going from a bed to a hammock, then back from a hammock to a bed. They’re so...”

“You would not believe the amount of times I fell out of my hammock during my first month at sea,” Thomas confessed, shaking his head in fond recollection. It had been a bonding experience with his fellow stewards, all of them offering him advice on ow to get into his hammock, which way was best to lie in his hammock, how to sleep on his side if he wanted to, how to get out of his hammock. “I’ll say this for hammocks, though; once I’d got used to it I’ve never slept better than I did being rocked by the motion of the ship in my hammock.”

He paused, jamming thoughtfully before concluding softly,

“It was oddly comforting, almost like a hug.”

Thomas frowned at himself.

Why on earth had he said that?

“Sounds nice,” Matthew sighed, putting his comb down with a flourish. “Alright, I’m done.”

Making his way into the bathroom Thomas took hold of the wheelchairs handles and pulled his employer backwards out of the small room, unable to turn him round in the space that was available to them. That done they set about what could only be described as the “team effort” of getting Matthew out of his striped pyjamas and into the charcoal suit he’d picked.

His top half wasn’t a problem, other than the chair making it a little awkward at times, resulting in the occasional knocked elbow as he worked his way in an out of his shirts.

No, it was his bottom half that was the challenge.
Matthew had perfected the art of lifting himself up using the flimsy arms of his wheelchair, holding himself a couple of inches off of the seat of the chair. This allowed Thomas to strip him down with quick, practiced motions with a cloth draped across his lap to preserve his dignity. So as not to strain himself Matthew would then rest for a couple of minutes before lifting himself up again so that Thomas could quickly dress him in his fresh underwear and trousers, his touches entirely professional despite how easy it would be to “accidentally” allow his fingers to brush against Matthew’s member. Pre-war Thomas wouldn’t have hesitated to cop as many feels as he could; post-war Thomas respected the man that he was dressing too much to take advantage of his employer in such a devious and despicable way.

Soon Thomas was slipping the Crawley heirs socks and shoes on to his surprisingly ticklish feet, straightening his tie, smoothing out his lapels and then he was ready to head down to join everyone for breakfast, every bit the image of the smart, capable young man he was.

“Thank you, Thomas.”

There were two possible methods for getting Matthew up and down the grand staircase, dependent on how many people were available to help at the time. If there were enough physically capable servants to hand then he would simply be carried down seated in his wheelchair. As it was that morning they had to go with the alternative method; Thomas carrying his employee down on his back in a strange sort of piggy-back, carefully depositing him on the bench which was conveniently located just to the left of the bottom of the stairs before retrieving his wheelchair. It wasn’t Matthews favourite mode of travel but it was better than being carried like a babe in someone’s arms as had happened the first few times. It was also better than being trapped on one floor until enough servants became available to help him; at least this way he could move about as and when he wanted to.

Positioning the wheelchair in the correct place Thomas offered his employer his left arm to use for leverage as he transferred himself from the padded bench to his mode of transport.

“Thank you, Barrow.”

Wheeling his employer into the dining room Thomas placed the wheelchair at the table where a place had been laid out but the chair had been taken away. It was between Lady Edith and Miss Swire, the two women greeting Matthew warmly even as Thomas waited patiently for the former officer to inform him what he would like for breakfast. Everyone else would serve themselves from the buffet style breakfast the family tended to favour.

“Just some scrambled egg on toast this morning, please, Barrow.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“And a strong cup of tea.”

Nodding to Mr Carson who was stood at the end of the buffet table nearest the door, on hand in case the family needed anything, Thomas set about preparing Matthew’s breakfast, setting the plate down before his employer before returning to collect his cup of tea. It was strong, as requested, but nowhere near as strong as some of the cups of tea he’d had to prepare during his time as a steward; some of the officers had preferred their tea so strong it was almost thick enough to stand a spoon up in, or at least that how it looked to Thomas.

“Can I get you anything else, sir?”

“Not for the moment, Barrow, thank you.”
Nodding respectfully Thomas retreated to stand beside Mr Carson, waiting for when he was next needed. This was how he spent most of his days, waiting to be called upon, but this was nothing new; both as a steward and as a footman he’d forever been stood waiting for someone to call on him. As it was Matthew had no need of him until they’d all finished his breakfast, bidding Thomas to take him through to the library so that Lavinia didn’t have to.

“I don’t mind, you know?”

“I know, my dear,” Matthew chuckled, reaching out to take his pouting fiancé’s hand as she walked beside his chair. “I just don’t want to be too much of a burden for you, that’s all.”

“Matthew Crawley, if you call yourself a burden once more I swear I shall scream,” Lavinia huffed, opening the door to the library before Thomas could move to do so and allowing the valet to pushed the occupied wheelchair inside without pausing for a moment. “You are no more a burden than I am. Now, I believe we have to settle on the flowers for the wedding.”

She retrieved a large book from one of the bookshelves, opening it to the first of many pages that had been bookmarked as she sat in the chair besides where Thomas had just parked the wheelchair, leaning across to place the book in Matthew’s lap so that he could see it.

“What do you think of freesias? They’re in season and would add a lovely bit of colour,” she murmured, gesturing to the hand-drawn image of the flower in question before quickly turning to one of the other pages she had previously book marked. “Or some peonies?”

“What of their meanings?” Matthew enquired. “Isn’t that important at a wedding?”

“Well, yes, it is but I didn’t realise you’d be interested in their meanings,” Lavinia confessed. “All of my ideas have suitable meanings. Freesias represent innocence and thoughtfulness.”

Matthew hummed in approval upon hearing that.

“Whilst peonies stand for bashfulness and compassion.”

“I see,” he returned. “I like both, honestly. What colour were you thinking?”

“If you’ll excuse me, sir?” Thomas interjected politely before the blissfully happy young woman could answer her fiancé. “I should be getting on if you have no need of me?”

“Of course, Barrow,” Matthew responded warmly. “We shall ring if we have need of you.”

Nodding his head Thomas slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him, and just had time to dodge out of the way of a couple of men in military green carrying a wooden crate between them. Huffing at their lack of apology for almost running him down in their haste he tugged on the bottom of his jacket, purchased in York the day after he’d arrived to accept his position with Mr Crawley, using some of his wartime pay along with an advance from his new employer to purchase two suitable black suits for work and one charcoal grey suit in a more casual style for him to where out and about. He’d also purchased a new pair of shoes, seven crisp white shirts, some new underwear, socks and three ties; one black, one charcoal grey and one light grey. His last purchase that day had been a suitable hat.

Of all the things he’d bought his hat and shoes had been the most expensive.

Due to the continued lack of footmen both Thomas and Mr Bates had agreed to assist Mr Carson in completing the duties usually done by the junior members of staff and so, with none of his own duties in need of completion just then, Thomas headed downstairs with the intention of making a
start on polishing the dining service ready for dinner that evening.

He was making good progress when a telegram arrived.

“Mr Barrow,” Daisy called out from the doorway of the Butlers Pantry, disturbing him as he was just finishing off one of the serving trays. “This telegram has arrived for Mr Crawley.”

“Very well, I shall take it up to him.”

Removing the gloves and apron he had donned to protect his skin and clothes, taking the time to slip his own everyday gloves back on to conceal his scars whilst his back was turned to the young kitchen maid, Thomas took the distinctive envelope from her and made his way back up to the library. Nodding to Mr Carson as they passed each other just outside the door to Thomas’ destination he slipped inside and cleared his throat to draw Matthew’s attention.

“Telegram for you, sir.”

“Thank you, Barrow,” Matthew murmured, accepting the envelope and opening it without hesitation so that he could read the message it contained. They had finished selecting their flowers, it seemed, and were settling in for a cup of tea. That must be what Mr Carson had been doing in the library, he surmised, as the tea had yet to be poured indicating that the tray had only just arrived. “It’s from my old firm,” he explained as his eyes scanned the slip of paper. “Enquiring as to whether or not I intend on returning to my previous occupation.”

“That’s nice of them,” Lavinia murmured. “To remember you after four years.”

“I shall have to inform them of my current difficulties,” Matthew sighed regretfully, rapping the knuckles of his empty hand against the arm of the wheelchair. “I can hardly work out of a first floor office where the stairs were almost too narrow and twisting for me when I had the full use of my legs, let alone now that I’m stuck in a wheelchair. I don’t think my chair would even fit in the staircase, it was so narrow. They shall find a replacement, I’m sure.”

Lavinia reached out to give his hand a comforting squeeze.

“Can I bring you anything, sir?”

“No, Barrow, thank you,” Matthew responded, obviously upset by the decision he had been forced to make despite the logical reasoning behind it. “I shall write my reply this evening.”

“If that’s all then, sir?”

Exiting the library once permission had been given by way of a gentle smile and a nod from his employer Thomas found himself faced with the arrival of Sir Richard Carlisle, following the Earl of Grantham inside with Branson carrying his luggage behind the two gentlemen.

Mr Carson appeared out of nowhere to greet them.

“Carson, please have tea brought up to the library for Sir Richard and I.”

“Begging your pardon, milord, but I have just served tea for Mr Crawley and Miss Swire in the library. Will you be joining them or would you prefer a separate tray be brought up?”

“Why don’t we join them, Sir Richard?”

“Why not?”
Thomas nodded respectfully to the two men as they passed him on their way to the library. He had heard of Lady Mary’s fiancé from the rest of the servants although this was his first time seeing him in the flesh. Personally he couldn’t help but think that she could do better. Then again she’d lost Mr Crawley for reasons that weren’t entirely clear. Perhaps she really couldn’t do better than the owner of a newspaper, or was it a magazine? Thomas wasn’t entirely sure.

“Mr Barrow,” Carson let out a relieved sigh upon seeing him, gesturing towards the luggage Branson was setting down just inside the building. They were new, Thomas noticed, and an obvious display of his wealth, all three cases embossed with his initials in gold lettering. “I hate to ask this of you but would you be able to see to Sir Richards things? He doesn’t have a man himself, you see, and during his last stay I myself saw to him but as you can see I’m…”

“Of course, Mr Carson,” Thomas interrupted the strained explanation of the situation. “If need be I’d be happy to serve as Sir Richards valet for the duration of his stay, so long as neither he nor Mr Crawley find the idea of sharing a valet impossible, given that they have both at one point or another been invested in Lady Mary’s future. I imagine that must be…”

It was Mr Carson’s turn to interrupt him this time, “Quite. Thank you, Mr Barrow; I shall broach the subject with the two gentlemen presently.”

“Want me to help you cart these things up to his room?” Branson enquired once the butler had slipped away. “I don’t know how long he’s planning on staying for but I swear he’s packed everything including the kitchen sink, if the weight of his cases is any indication.”

“That would be greatly appreciated, thank you,” Thomas agreed, grunting as he picked the largest of the three cases; it truly did weigh an absolute ton. “…what has he got in here?”

“Bricks, I shouldn’t wonder,” Branson snorted, his bright eyes sparkling with merriment as he picked up the smaller cases and followed Thomas up the main staircase to the bedroom that Thomas had heard Mrs Hughes order the housemaids to prepare for Sir Richards arrival soon after he’d hidden himself away in the pantry. “I don’t envy you unpacking these if they really are just filled with his clothes. I knew he was a bit of a peacock but this is ridiculous.”

All too soon Thomas was alone with was, in fact, three cases packed to the seams with more clothes than he’d ever seen one man possess let alone travel with and that included both of the Crawley he had served over the years. Everything was just as new as the cases were, he noticed as he set to work putting everything away; another display of his wealth, no doubt intended to make himself appear to be the best possible candidate for Lady Mary. Thomas felt certain that whilst such a blatant display of his wealth would have worked on men and women of his class, the nouveau riche, it would have the opposite effect with a family like the Crawleys. They came from old money, despite a lack of funds resulting in His Lordship opting for an American heiress when he was searching for a bride, and therefore had firm beliefs on when they should and shouldn’t display their wealth. Sir Richard would have to learn how such things worked if he wanted to elevate his social standing through marriage.

It took Thomas twice as long as it should have done to get everything unpacked, given the sheer amount of clothes and the fact that it was necessary to get a bit creative with their storage in order to get everything to fit, and it was a relief when he was finally able to take the cases up to the attics...
where they would live until they were needed. He’d been forced to concede that for all his showiness Sir Richard had excellent taste in suitcases as the three were designed to be stored like a Russian doll, one inside another, which meant that he was able to carry them up to the attics in one trip and that they took up significantly less space.

“Will you miss the extra staff, Mrs Patmore?”

“Not really,” Mrs Patmore responded to Anna’s question just as Thomas reached the bottom of the stairs, their voices carrying out the kitchen. His stomach rumbled loudly in response to the delicious smells in the air. “When push comes to shove, I’d rather do it myself. Though God knows what I’m to feed them. There’s nothing out there to be had.”

Slipping into the kitchen Thomas spied a cooling tray overloaded with fingers of homemade shortbread just waiting to be pinched and so, smirking to himself he carefully reached out…

Only to let out a sharp hiss when a wooden spoon rapped against his knuckles.

“Oh, no you don’t, Thomas Barrow,” Mrs Patmore scolded him, still brandishing to spoon like a weapon. His knuckles throbbed, particularly where the spoon had caught part of his scar tissue, and he couldn’t stop himself from cradling the injured limb to his chest. “I wouldn’t stand for that when you were footman, I won’t stand for it now you’re a valet.”

Anna cleared her throat, mercifully changing the subject when she spoke,

“I suppose the hospital will revert to the way it was before the war.”

“I should think so…”

Before any of them can say anything more the dressing gong is heard, prompting both Anna and Thomas to leap into action. Whilst Anna went straight to Lady Mary’s room to meet her there Thomas made his way to the floor of the stairs where Matthew and Miss Swire were speaking softly together. Clearing his throat so as to announce his presence Thomas inclined his head towards them when they turned their faces towards him, both of them still smiling.


Carrying his employer up the stairs was significantly more challenging than carrying him down, gravity no longer on his side, and he was puffing lightly by the time they reached the top. He was therefore relieved to find that Miss Swire had somehow found the strength to carry her fiancé's wheelchair up the stairs by herself. Murmuring a sincere thank you to the thoughtful young woman Thomas lowered his employer down into the wheelchair, his hand throbbing even worse than it had been before warning him that the blow, however light as been, had done some sort of damage to the scar tissue. Flexing his hand a couple of times to see if that helped Thomas then set about manoeuvring the wheelchair into Matthews room.

Changing him into something suitable for dinner utilised the same methods as getting him dressed in the morning, minus the cloth they used to preserve his modesty as there was no need for Matthew to change his underwear and therefore he wouldn’t be stripped naked.

This fact didn’t stop Thomas’ mind from conjuring up ideas that were far from proper.

It wasn’t just about his proximity to another man in a state of undress, although that had been a part of it to begin with as it had been so long since he had been able to be with one of his lovers; being on a shore establishment had made things entirely more dangerous. No, it was the young man in question. He’d always considered Matthew to be something of a handsome specimen of the human
race, ever since he had first stepped foot in the Abbey, to the point where he had been disappointed not to be given the opportunity to serve as his valet at the time. The arrival of his then lover, the Duke, had appeased him, of course, not that anything more than his dismissal would have come out of him trying to seduce the new Crawley heir back then. Now that he knew the measure of the man it was even worse, if he was being honest, for as well as being physically attracted to his employer he couldn’t help but admire his strong convictions, his intelligence, his work ethic, his compassion, his dry wit and his kindness. A lot of this pre-dated his time in the a Royal Navy, Thomas knew, but it was only on board *HMS Warrior* and in the hospital afterwards that he had come to see it.

His engagement to Miss Swire made perfect sense, given how similar they were, but that didn’t mean that there wasn’t a very good chance that Thomas might end up falling in love with his employer. As he brushed the lint off of Matthews shoulders he conceded, if only to himself, that there were worse things that could happen than him loving Matthew Crawley.

It didn’t mean it wasn’t going to be painful for him at times.

“There, sir,” Thomas sighed, setting the brush back where it lived on top of the dresser. “If you’re happy I’ll get you downstairs but then I must assist Sir Richard as he’s without a man.”

“Excellent work as ever, Barrow,” Matthew complimented him sincerely, nodding to show his acceptance of the plan that had been laid down for him. “I believe I shall pass muster.”

Carrying Matthew down the stairs as carefully as he could so as not to ruin all the hard work he’d put into his employers outfit Thomas then left him sitting in his wheelchair at the foot of the stairs so that he could wait for Miss Swire, as per Matthews request, and headed up to the guest room he had spent so much time in earlier. Knocking on the door he waited to be admitted, slipping into the room with a mask of indifference on his face as he enquired,

“How may I be of assistance, Sir Richard?”

Lady Mary’s fiancé had already changed into the crisp white shirt and inky black trousers that he intended to wear to dinner, the matching jacket hanging up on the outside of the wardrobe door, but had made no attempt to dress himself any further. Instead he stood in the centre of the room glaring at the door, his glare only intensifying when Thomas entered.

“About time you got here. I can’t find where you put my cufflinks. Fetch them for me.”

Moving swiftly and silently Thomas retrieved the traveling box containing the unpleasant mans cufflinks from where he had stored it, the same place everyone always stored their cufflinks he wanted to point out, and presented it to Sir Richard so he could select a pair.

“I’ll wear the malachite ones.”

Thomas nodded, placing the box on the top of the dresser so that he could retrieve the vivid green cufflinks and it wasn’t until he was preparing to secure Sir Richards left cuff that he realised that the design of the cufflinks was that of two gold claws clutching the egg shaped stones, as though they were being stolen by a bird. He found them rather unpleasant to look at but said nothing as he got to work, securing Sir Richards cuffs in no time at all.

“Is it suitable for a valet to wear gloves such as those?”

“I am permitted to do so, Sir Richard,” Thomas explained, his voice somewhat tighter than was appropriate for a member of the household staff, as he helped the taller man to slip into his equally
crisp white waistcoat which had been abandoned on the bed until then. “My hands were badly
burned during the Battle of Jutland and the scars are rather unpleasant.”

“And the family still hired you?”

“Mr Crawley hired me himself, sir,” he responded, his even more clipped than it had been before
as he forced himself to get to work tying Sir Richards bow tie. “We served aboard HMS Warrior
together. I received my injuries whilst helping to free him from beneath The piece of wreckage that
damaged his spine. He offered me my position by way of thanks.”

“Ah, I see,” Sir Richard murmured, turning to admire himself in the rooms mirror even as Thomas
fetched his shoes and knelt to slip them onto his feet, tying the laces. “Very nice.”

What an unpleasant man, Thomas couldn’t help but think to himself as he rose to his feet.

He wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the newspaper owner had managed to avoid being
conscripted somehow and had spent his war making money off of the suffering of others.

What did Lady Mary see in him?

“Will that be all, sir?”

Carlisle dismissed him with a wave of his hand, still focused on his own reflection, and it was a
good thing Thomas could turn his back to him or else he might have seen the scowl that such an
action brought out on the valets face. He wouldn’t have stood for that when he was only a footman
let alone now that he was the personal valet to the future Earl of Grantham.

He had just stepped out of the room when he heard Sir Richard call out suddenly, halting his
motions as he went to pull the door shut behind him, only it wasn’t his name that he heard,

“Anna?”

The young ladies maid who had been walking past the guest bedroom looked equally as perplexed
as Thomas to why Sir Richard was calling out for her, even more so when Thomas was forced to
step aside so that the gentleman in question could step out of his bedroom.

“It is Anna, isn't it?”

A quick glance at Thomas, her confusion evident, pre-empted her polite response,

“Yes, sir.”

“I want to ask a favour of you.”

Thomas did not like the sound of that.

Not at all.

Evidently neither did Anna.

“Of me, Sir Richard?”

“Yes, you. I was hoping to catch you at some point,” he confirmed with a rather unnerving smile,
gesturing towards his room. “I wonder if you could step into my room for a moment.”

Anna hesitated, understandably so, and met Thomas’ concerned gaze before ducking her head and
slipping into the room, glancing back wards Thomas once more as the door shut.

Thomas stared at the door for a long moment before moving forwards to press his ear against the wood, determined to be there for Anna should he try anything untoward.

“You attend Lady Mary and her sisters, don't you? In addition to your other duties.”

“I do, sir, yes.”

“You must be kept very busy. I hope it's worth your while.”

Thomas’ opinion of the man dropped even further when Sir Richard went on to say,

“Because I would be very willing to increase your stipend.”

Something about the way the offer was phrased didn’t sit well with him.

“If this is about coming with Lady Mary when you marry, it's very good of you, sir,” Anna responded softly. “But you see, my fiancé, Mr Bates, works here and I don't think that I…”

Thomas didn’t have time to process the fact that Mr Bates and Anna were apparently engaged without any of them knowing a thing about it due to Carlisle interrupting her,

“No, it's…it's not that. Although, it's a pity. Lady Mary's very fond of you.”

“That's kind.”

“You see, I'm anxious to make Lady Mary happy.”

An unpleasant shiver ran down Thomas’ spine.

“Of course you are, sir.”

“And to that end, I feel I need to know a great deal more about her than I do,” Sir Richard continued, seemingly unaware of the fact that Anna’s voice had taken on a disapproving tone in response to what he was suggesting. “Our customs are so strange in this country. A couple is hardly allowed a moment alone together before they walk down the aisle.”

“I'm not sure I understand, sir.”

“I'd like to know more about her interests.”

That wasn’t overly bad, Thomas supposed…

“Where she goes, whom she sees, what she says to them.”

Thomas couldn’t help but rear back in disgust.

To propose such a thing…

He almost forgot that he wouldn’t hear a thing without his ear pressed to the wood.

As it was he almost missed Anna’s response,

“…use me, sir, do you mean you want me to give you a report of Lady Mary's actions?”

“It'll be extra work, but I'm happy to pay.”
“I’m sure.”

Thomas didn’t think he’d ever heard Anna sound so disgusted before.

And quite rightly so…

“But I’m afraid I wouldn’t have the time. Thank you, sir.”

“Well, it’s your choice, of course. I’d be grateful if you didn’t mention this to Lady Mary.”

Thomas snorted.

“I wouldn’t want her to think I was checking up on her.”

Hearing footsteps he had just enough time to duck around the corner so that Sir Richard wouldn’t catch sight of him as Anna all but stormed out of the room, her face twisted in disgust. She let out a yelp upon seeing him but silenced herself quickly when he placed a finger to his lips, nodding towards the still open door of the bedroom. They waited, both of them all but holding their breath so he wouldn’t notice them, until the bedroom door shut.

“Did you…?”

“I heard,” Thomas informed her calmly, both of them keeping their voices low. “I didn’t like the idea of you being alone with him. He could have done anything. And to ask you to spy…”

“I wish I could say I’m surprised but I’m not,” Anna muttered, shaking her head before setting out towards the servants stairs. Thomas easily kept pace with her. “He’s always struck me as a bit too controlling, a bit too insistent on always being the one in charge.”

“Lady Mary won’t like that…”

“No, she won’t,” Anna agreed, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. “And that’s what worries me. I hate the idea of not going with her after they’re married but I can’t leave…”

“Mr Bates. Your fiancé.”

He wasn’t surprised when the colour drained out of her face.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to,” he reassured her with a smile, his words obviously easing the worry that had just overtaken her. “I assume you not wanting anyone to know has more to do with everything that happened with his first wife and not…”

“Yes,” she hurriedly agreed, cutting him off. “Some people might think it’d too soon.”

“Quite,” Thomas agreed. “Are you going to tell Lady Mary about this?”

“I don’t know if I should.”

“Perhaps you should start by informing Mr Carson? He’ll know what to do.”

Anna blinked up at him for a moment before nodding.

“Would you…would you come with me?”

“Of course.”
They had to wait until after dinner, both the families and the servants, as there was simply too much for the, to do. It was as he was taking a five minute break that he noticed Lady Sybil, of all people, sneaking out to the garage. Curiosity peaked he couldn’t help but watch as she she, in her evening gown, met and talked with Branson, covered in various motor oils.

“Well, well, well…”

He almost dropped his cigarette when he spotted Sybil reach out to touch his face.

Now, wouldn’t that put the can amongst the pigeons if her family found out?

Friends with the chauffeur?

More that friends with the chauffeur?

This was the juicy piece of gossip he would have once used to blackmail Branson or would have shared with Miss O’Brien to use in some scheme. As it was he decided to keep their illicit rendezvous to himself for the time being, to wait and see what happened in the future.

“Mr Barrow,” Anna greeted him as he returned to the servant’s hall. “Are you busy?”

“No, I’m not busy,” he responded warmly, glancing towards Mrs Hughes’ sitting room where the Butler and Housekeeper had retired after dinner. She nodded. Beside her Mr Bates wore an expression of barely concealed anger so Thomas assumed Anna had told him everything, as was her nature, and his opinion of Carlisle was the same as theirs. “Shall we then, Anna?”

Anna rose from her seat, discretely giving Mr Bates’ hand a squeeze as she used the table to push herself up, and allowed Thomas to escort her to Mrs Hughes’ sitting room. As they approached the cosy room they could hear their superiors muffled voice through the door,

“I wish I could understand,” Mrs Hughes was saying, regret filling her lilting voice as she continued. “To me, Lady Mary is an upity minx who's the author of her own misfortunes.”

“You didn't know her when she was a child, Mrs Hughes.”

“We should wait,” Anna suggested. “I wouldn’t want to interrupt their conversation.”

“I remember once she came in here, can't have been more than four or five years old, she said, Mr Carson, I've decided to run away and I wonder if I might take some of the silver to sell,” Mr Carson announced, his deep voice rumbling as he shared his fond memory. It took Thomas by surprise, both the story and the tone of his voice. He nodded his agreement to Anna; it wouldn’t do to interrupt them just then. Mrs Hughes bright chuckle brought a smile to his face. He’d always been fond of the housekeeper, ever since she had been kind to him on his arrival as a young second footman, and his opinion had only grown as the years past. “Well, I said, that could be awkward for His Lordship. I suppose I'll give you a sixpence to spend in the village instead. Very well, said she, but you must be sure to charge me interest.”

“And did you?”

“She gave me a kiss in full payment.”

“Then she had the better bargain.”

“I wouldn't say that.”
“Perhaps now would be a good moment to interrupt,” Anna murmured, reaching out to knock on the door when Thomas murmured his agreement. It took only a moment for a voice to call out for them to enter. “I’m sorry to interrupt but I’m afraid we need a word.”

“Mr Barrow? Anna?” Mrs Hughes murmured. “Is there something wrong?”

“Not wrong, but certainly worrying,” Anna explained as Thomas shut the door behind them so as to give them as much privacy as possible. “I’ve had a request from Sir Richard that you really ought to know about; before dinner he asked me to join him in his room so that…”

“He asked you to what?”

Mr Carson looked almost as though he was about to explode, his mind having come to a much more sinister conclusion than was the truth. With that in mind Thomas spoke up,

“I had just finished dressing Sir Richard when he made his request and, concerned about Anna being alone with him in his room, I made the decision to listen at the door so that I would be able to interrupt if something were to happen. As it was he only wished to talk.”

“Thank you, Mr Barrow,” Carson murmured, his anger deflating temporarily. “You did the right thing. No male guest should ever order one of the female staff into his bedroom…”

“What did he want to talk to you about, Anna?”

“He wanted me to spy on Lady Mary for him,” Anna answered Mrs Hughes question simply, her words obviously shocking both of their superiors. “To report what she did, who she saw, what they talked about. I refused, of course, but Thomas agreed that you should be made aware. You see, I’m not sure what, if anything, I should tell Lady Mary about the request…”

“…and you heard him make this request, Mr Barrow?”

“I did, Mr Carson,” Thomas confirmed. “It left me feeling very uneasy.”

“As such a request should.”

Mrs Hughes nodded to show her agreement with the butlers statement.

“I would expect any loyal member of staff to behave just as you have done, Anna,” Mr Carson continued, nodding to the young woman who offered him a bashful smile. “Now regarding the matter of whether or not to inform Lady Mary. I believe she has a right to know what occurred this evening however I think it best that I be the one to speak to her.”

It was agreed, Anna looking visibly relieved that the decision was no longer hers.

Thomas returned to his duties for the evening, cleaning the shoes that Matthew would be wearing the following day until word reached him that his employer was ready to head up to bed. Meeting him at the foot of the stairs they went through the routine of getting first Matthew and then his chair up to the first floor, Lavinia having gone to bed almost an hour earlier meaning that she wasn’t around help out this time, and then once they were finally in Matthew’s room the two of them went through the reverse of the morning routine to get him stripped, washed and into his pyjamas. Once he was changed Thomas braced the chair so that Matthew could lift himself out and all but fling himself onto the bed, pulling himself around until he was suitably tucked under the covers that Thomas had pulled down earlier.

“Barrow, can I ask you something?”
“Of course, sir. Anything.”

“If I started to feel a…a tingling in my legs, what do you think that might mean?”

Of all the things that he had been expecting Matthew to ask this hadn’t been one of them.

Could that mean…?

“Have you told Dr Clarkson?”

“Yes,” Matthew sighed deeply, annoyance flooding onto his face. “He says it's an illusion.”

An illusion?

What sort of a Doctor dismisses his patients concerns so casually?

“A memory of a tingling, or something,” Matthew continued. “But, I mean, I do know my back is broken, I understand that I won't recover, but…I do keep feeling it, or I think I do.”

“I should wait and see,” Thomas answered at length, his hands automatically gathering up Matthews dirty clothes. “I think if something is changing, it will make itself known. Now, will that be all, sir? Or would you like me to fetch you anything before I turn in for the night?”

“No, that’s all, thank you.”

He hesitated, clearly uncertain about something.

“Sir, are you sure…?”

“…please don't tell anyone about this, Barrow,” Matthew blurted out, gesturing towards his legs. “I couldn't bear it if…Miss Swire or…Mother or…or anyone started to hope and then…”

“I won't say a thing,” Thomas reassured him. “Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, Barrow.”

~ * ~

A/N Apologies for how long this took to get out – have been suffering with a nasty bout of writers block on all of my stories but I think I’m finally past it. As you might have noticed we’re getting into the original storyline but there are a few twists to come. Some things will stay the same; others are going to change quite dramatically. Comments welcome. Marblez
Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Downton Abbey
February 1919

Thomas was making his way to the servants staircase when he passed the parlour, stepping out of the way of Mr Carson who was just exiting the room. There was something about the butler’s expression that made him pause, frowning softly, but before he could enquire as to whether or not something had upset his superior he heard Lady Mary announce callously,

“Butlers will be two a penny now they're all back from the war.”

Thomas could clearly see how much the statement hurt Mr Carson.

There were those who had disapproved of the way Carson had always seemed to favour Mary over her sisters but given that Thomas himself had always favoured Sybil and Mrs Hughes, Edith, it made perfect sense to the Valet. No matter how hard you tried there would always be a favourite, whether it was consciously decided upon or not, and so he could well imagine the pain the butler must be feeling in that moment following her words.
“…Mr Carson?”

Thomas met the butler’s startled gaze evenly.

“Is everything alright?” he enquired, softer than he would usually speak to the older man. Mr Carson seemed both surprised and relieved by the query. “Can I help with anything?”

“No, thank you, Mr Barrow,” Caron eventually replied, pulling his shoulders back and regaining some of the composure he was known for. “I’m afraid that Lady Mary took my decision to remain at the Abbey somewhat badly despite the reasons behind my decision.”

Thomas frown deepens, prompting Carson to explain further,

“After I informed her that I could not work for anyone who would expect his servants to report their employers movements back to him she claimed to see no problem with that.”

“…I beg your pardon? She sided with him?”

A sharp nod was his only reply.

“Well, then, I’m sorry Mr Carson, I know she’s your favourite but it has to be said,” Thomas muttered sharply, his ire burning within his chest. He hadn’t always seen eye to eye with his superior, rather the opposite, but he had always respected the older man. To treat him so poorly was the behaviour of…of… “If she wants to behave like such a spoilt brat to you, of all people, then I think she deserves a man that would spy on her, that will never trust her and will only seek to control her. After everything you have done for her over the years…”

“As much as I appreciate your support, Mr Barrow, I feel I must remind you that Lady Mary is still a daughter of this house and must be treated with the respect her station demands.”

“Yes, Mr Carson,” Thomas responded automatically. “I apologise for speaking out of turn.”

“Now, I’m sure you have duties to attend to as do I…”

Taking the opportunity presented to him Thomas excused himself, making his way upstairs via the servant’s staircase. Matthew had retired to his room earlier that afternoon, desiring solitude to go through some of his correspondence, and so was ready to dress for dinner.

“You seem a little out sorts, Barrow.”

“Just something that happened earlier today, that’s all, sir,” Thomas replied, crouching down to help his employer put his shoes on. “I’m just worried about what was said.”

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“No, just…unnecessarily hurtful,” Thomas responded honestly as he finished tying his employers laces and rose to his feet, automatically smoothing his hands down his legs; vanity prevented him from allowing any creases to remain. “I’m sure it’ll be sorted out.”

Matthew seemed less than convinced but let the subject drop.

They got him downstairs and situated in the library, Matthew content to sit with a book until Lavinia came down, and Thomas made his way to the hidden door which led to the servant’s staircase. He had only just slipped into the starkly different area of the house when Anna came all but tumbling down the stairs above him, her eyes glistening with the tears she was obviously
fighting to hold back. Reacting instinctively he caught her before she could either crash into him or swerve so as to avoid him and put herself in danger of falling.

“Anna?” he gasped, genuinely concerned; there wasn’t much that could upset the congenial young woman enough that she was reduced to tears. “What’s wrong? Has Sir Richard sai…”

“No, he hasn’t spoken to me again,” Anna interrupted him softly, a tear spilling over despite her best efforts. Reaching up she brushed it away almost angrily. “It…it was Lady Mary…”

_Lady Mary._

Thomas felt his expression fall from one of concern to anger as red flooded his vision.

So not only had she insulted and upset Mr Carson she had gone after her maid as well?

That…that…

“…if she wasn’t a Lady of this house I’d go up there and give her a piece of my mind…”

His statement received a tearful smile in response.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean to upset me,” she eventually spoke up, defending her Mistress in spite of everything. Thomas wondered if he’d do the same thing if Matthew turned on him one day after years of loyal service. Would he be so understanding? So forgiving? “I think she’s a little nervous, if I’m honest, and is lashing out at anyone and everyone in her way…”

“That doesn’t excuse her behaviour,” Thomas countered, his body still thrumming with indignation on behalf of his colleagues. Surely their loyalty over the years should have earned them some in return? “She’s made her bed; now she’s going to have to lie in it.”

It certainly wasn’t Anna’s fault that she had turned down Matthew when she had the chance, nor was it her fault that the replacement shed found was far from perfect.

“I’m sure she’ll apologise for her words when I go up later…”

Thomas wasn’t so sure.

He wasn’t given the opportunity point this out, however, as a voice called up the stairs,

“Anna, is that you?”

Mrs Hughes appeared, her concerned gaze taking in the two of them.

“Is everything alright? Anna?”

When no answer was forthcoming from the tearful young woman she turned to Thomas.

“Mr Barrow?”

“Lady Mary has made her disapproval of our interference in the matters regarding her fiancé known in a manner which has upset both Mr Carson and Anna,” he explained, ignoring Anna and her look of disapproval. “I believe Anna could use a few minutes to recompose herself. Might I be of assistance? I assume you were seeking Anna out for a reason, Mrs Hughes?”

Mrs Hughes looked visibly upset by his explanation.
“Thank you, Mr Barrow,” she murmured at length, glancing back and forth between her two colleagues. “If you wouldn’t mind collecting the tea tray from the library I’d be very grateful. Anna, take as long as you need to compose yourself; I’m going to go and find Mr Carson.”

“Of course, Mrs Hughes.”

In the past he might have argued that such a task was beneath him now that he was a Valet but his time in the Royal Navy had taught him many things, compassion for his fellow sailors and now his fellow servants being one of them, and Anna was in no fit state to complete the simple task herself so what was the harm of him lowering himself just this once? After all he would have had no issue with collecting the tray had it been in Matthew’s bedroom as such a task was within a Valets job description. With that in mind he gave the housemaids arm a gentle squeeze before turning on the spot and making his way back upstairs, straightening his jacket before slipping through the hidden door and out onto the Abbeys ground floor.

He could hear voices as he approached the library’s open door,

“Nobody's down yet.”

“They won't be long.”

Lavinia, it seemed, had joined Matthew just as she had promised to.

“Oh, look, they’ve cleared the tea but forgotten to take that tray.”

“Ring the bell.”

“I'll do it,” Lavinia announced calmly just as Thomas reached the door, confirming the fact that she wasn’t used to being waited on by servants. “They'll be busy getting dinner ready.”

“It's too heavy for you.”

“No, it's not.”

It happened that Thomas had just stepped into the library when the young woman, dressed in a floor length black gown with a gold slip visible underneath due to the cut of her gowns neckline and matching gold elbow length gloves and stylish heels, tripped over a footstool.

“Look out!”

Thomas reached out to help her but was too late to do anything more than watch as the tray crashed to the floor, her hands coming up to catch herself on the fireplace mantel.

But this wasn’t the only thing that happened, nor was it the most shocking.

No, that title went to the fact that Matthew had also tried to stop her from falling.

He had pushed himself up and out of his wheelchair in order to reach out for her.

“Heavens,” Lavinia breathed, unaware of the remarkable thing that had happened, her back to her fiancé. Thomas, on the other hand, could only stare in shock. “That was a near thing.”

A step, two steps, and Matthew placed his hand on her arm.

Lavinia turned, frowning understandably.
“My God…”

Her hands clung to his arms, helping to steady him as he gazed down at her with wide eyes. Thomas could contain himself no longer, gasping out loudly,

“…bloody hell!”

The couple turned their heads towards him, both smiling in an understandably stunned way.

“I don’t approve of the language but…” Matthew commented, chuckling softly, “…quite…”

“Should I…” Thomas paused, clearing his throat. “Should I fetch His Lordship?”

“I’ll go, Barrow,” Lavinia announced quickly, absently rubbing the palm of her hands which must have been aching given the force with which they connected with the mantelpiece. A broad smile lit up her pretty face. “You stay here with Matthew in case…well, just in case…”

“Perhaps you should sit down until she returns,” Thomas suggested after she’d gone. “Sir.”

“Might be wise,” Matthew agreed with a pained grunt as his legs began to tremble rather alarmingly, prompting Thomas to hurry over to him and loop an arm around his employers waist, pressing their bodies together as he all but dragged him back to the chair. “Thanks.”

Once his employer was resting in the wheelchair once more Thomas moved to clear up the tray and it’s ruined contents as best he could, picking up the pieces of broken porcelain and as many of the biscuit crumbs as he could. There was nothing he could do for the liquid that had soaked into the carpet; that would have to be given a proper once over once it was dry.

“Everyone come at once!”

“What is it?” they heard Mary demand of her father as footsteps approached the library. Matthew met his gaze, smiling wondrously as he stroked his thighs. “What’s happened?”

“Come and see this!”

The Earl of Grantham tumbled into the room alongside Lavinia, his eyes seeking out his Heir as the rest of his family followed behind them, all of them wearing expressions of confusion.


The hope shining in his eyes was almost painful to behold.

Lavinia moved to her fiancé’s side, beckoning for Thomas to help her and between the two of them they carefully helped the supposedly crippled man to rise to his feet once more.

To say the gaggle of Crawleys were stunned beyond belief was an understatement.

“I can't believe it!”

The tears in Lady Mary’s eyes were matched by those in her mothers,

“It's so wonderful!”

“It is, but don't tire yourself out,” Lady Sybil, her voice steady thanks to the knowledge that her years as a nurse had given her, spoke up. “Sit down now and we'll send for Dr Clarkson.”
“She's right,” Robert agreed, his voice trembling with emotion as he reached out to take one of Matthews hands in both of his own. “Edith, go with Branson. Get...get Clarkson, but fetch Mama and Cousin Isobel as well. I don't care what they're doing. Tell them to come now...”

Edith, looking every bit as emotional as her father, nodded and hurried out of the room.

“My dear chap, I cannot begin to tell you what this means to me.”

A somewhat wry smile flashed across Matthew face as he responded,

“Well, it's pretty good news for me, too.”

Robert wasn’t the only one to let out a laugh filled with pure relief.

As the family watched Thomas and Lavinia carefully got Matthew settled back into his chair, his fiancé fussing whilst Thomas ensured that he had everything he needed and wasn’t very surprised when Matthew asked for a glass of water. Agreeing to fetch one for him Thomas collected the tray he’d originally been sent up to collect and made his way out of the room.

“We really must think about hiring some Footmen now that the war is over,” he heard Cora murmur as he made his way to the servants door. “I’ll have Carson begin looking into it...”

If nothing more than the arrival of a couple of Footmen ready and willing to do the tasks required of them came out of this evenings miraculous turn of events he’d still be pleased.

By the time re returned with the requested glass of water Edith had returned, bringing with her a stunned Dr Clarkson, an amazed Dowager Countess and an emotional Mrs Crawley.

“There is only one possible explanation,” Clarkson was explaining as Thomas entered, taking the glass of water across to his employer. “I must confess it starts with my own mistake. Every indication told me that the spine was transected, which would have been incurable.”

Accepting the glass of water Matthew offered him a smile and a murmur of thanks.

“But when Sir John Coats came to see Matthew, he agreed with you.”

“Well, he didn't, not entirely,” Clarkson confessed in response to the Earl of Grantham’s confused statement, obviously reluctant to share the information that he had previously decided to keep a secret. “He thought that it could conceivably be a case of spinal shock. That is, um, intense bruising, which was sufficiently severe to impede the leg mechanism.”

Lady Mary visibly bristled,

“But which would heal...”

Lavinia, clutching Matthews free hand, looked more than a little distressed as she asked,

“Why didn't you tell us?”

“Because I didn't agree with him,” Clarkson confessed honestly, offering Matthew an apologetic look. “And I didn't want to raise Captain Crawley's hopes to no purpose.”

“I understand,” Matthew responded. “And I don't blame you.”

It should have surprised him and yet it didn’t; Matthew had always been rational, willing and able to see both sides of an argument so that he could make an informed decision.
“You must take it slowly,” Clarkson warned him. “Rome wasn't built in a day.”

“I know.”

“And I'm afraid you will carry a bruise on your spine for the rest of your life.”

Matthews smile as he spoke next could only be described as blindingly with hope,

“But I will have a life.”

“Yes,” Clarkson confirmed with his own smile, the Scottish lilt of his voice thickening as he spoke. “I think we can say that you will have a normal life, and it won't be long in coming.”

“My darling boy,” Mrs Crawley cried out tearfully, leaping to her feet in order to rush across the room and press kiss after after kiss to to his forehead and cheeks. “My darling boy…”

A throat cleared in the doorway, drawing their attention to Mr Carson.

“Excuse me, my lord, but Mrs Hughes was wondering what she should do about dinner.”

If the looks on their faces were anything to go by every member of the Crawley had completely forgotten about the fact that they had yet to eat anything that evening.

“Er, you'll all stay for dinner,” Robert murmured, turning to Clarkson. “Won’t you?”

“I'm afraid I'm not dressed.”

“Oh, never mind that,” the Earl of Grantham shrugged off his worries, obviously determined for the man to stay and dine with them. “Who cares about that? What about you, Mama?”

“Oh, certainly,” the Dowager Countess agreed in her usually dry way, hands clenching on the top of her cane as she smiled. “All this unbridled joy has given me quite an appetite.”

~ * ~

“Tell me,” the Dowager Countess spoke up whilst Mr Carson, Thomas and Anna were serving the first course of that evenings dinner, her attention fixated on Sir Richard who seemed to be the only one not in a good mood. “How are things progressing at Hacksby?”

“Quite well,” Carlisle responded, using a noticeably heavy handed technique to transfer his portion of food from the serving dish Anna offered him to the plate resting on the table in front of him. “I've put in a condition so the builders are fined for every day they go over.”

“Does that make for a happy atmosphere?”

“I want it done,” Carlisle responded with a shrug. “They can be happy in their own time.”

“Why the rush?”

“I like everything I own to be finished and ready to sell.”

This seemed to be news to everyone, Lady Mary included.

“You're not thinking of selling Hacksby, surely?”

“Depends,” Carlisle continued, undisturbed by the looks being sent his way by his dinner
companions, his fiancé included. “We'll have to see if it suits us to be so close to Downton.”

“Thomas, excuse me, Mr Barrow,” Carlisle spoke up suddenly, his voice disrupting the uncomfortable silence that had followed the explanation. All eyes turned to where he’d been refreshing the Doctors glass of wine. “I was wondering about the gloves you wear.”

“I was wounded during the war, Sir,” Thomas explained. “And the gloves are to conceal the scars left behind. They are unpleasant to look upon and I wouldn’t wish to upset anyone.”

A frown marred the Doctors face for the first time that evening.

“What sort of injuries? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I was burned,” Thomas murmured, refusing to go into too much detail lest he upset anyone’s stomach before they had a chance to eat. “At the Battle of Jutland in 1916.”

“Might I take a look at them after dinner?” the older man enquired, glancing down at the brown leather covering the hand closest to him. “I’m not doubting that you received the best care possible during the war but there have been some recent advancements in the treatment of scar tissue which are aimed at reducing both pain and discomfort as well as their appearance. It may be that some of the methods open to us now could be applicable.”

“If my services aren’t required elsewhere then I don’t see why not, Sir.”

He hadn’t thought to get them checked out since leaving the Royal Navy.

He’d just accepted the fact that this was how his hands would always be now.

But if Clarkson could do something for the scarring, even if it just eased the tightness…

“I want to tell you all something,” Matthew spoke up suddenly. “As you know, during this, well, I think I can say horrible time, Lavinia has proved to be the most marvellous person.”

A murmur of agreement sounded as Thomas took the opportunity to return to his proper place in the room, poised ready to top up any of the other glasses should the need arise.

“I never thought we would marry, for all sorts of reasons, but she wouldn't accept that,” he continued, reaching out to take her hand on top of the table. Sybil and surprisingly Sir Richard glanced down, both of them seeming a little distressed by either the action of his words as he continued. “And so, now I'm very pleased to say that she's been proved right.”

A pause, during which several people took a noticeably deep breath and then,

“Lavinia and I will get married.”

Now his employers statement was met with a round of congratulations, some significantly more sincere than others. Lady Mary looked as though she’d swallowed a lemon her smile was so insincere, her eyes flashing between their joined hands and Matthews brilliant grin.

“How soon as I'm well enough to walk down the aisle. Dr Clarkson can help us with when.”

Clarkson looked immeasurably pleased to be able to reassure the young couple,

“Not long now.”

“And she feels we ought to marry here, at Downton,” Matthew went on to explain softly. “To bury
forever the memories of what, I hope, has been the darkest period of my life.”

Robert was quick enough to agree with a smile,

“Of course.”

“Are you sure?” Lavinia enquired, a frown of concern marring her forehead as she turned to them.
“I know it should be at my home in London, but we've been through so much here…”

Robert shook his head, reiterating clearly,

“We'd be delighted.”

Conversation throughout dinner that evening centred around the impending nuptials, both in regards to Matthew and Lavinia who couldn’t be happier now that his injuries had finally begun to improve and Lady Mary and Sir Richard who both appeared to have swallowed a lemon. Edith, for once, didn’t seem jealous of her older sister whilst Sybil seemed conflicted.

Given that Thomas had seen her sneaking off to the garage he could guess why…

After the ladies had retired to the other room, still discussing the wedding in terms of where Lavinia was planning to have her dress made, and the men had settled in at one end of the table with a drink of their choice Clarkson beckoned Thomas over so that he could enquire,

“Would now be a suitable time to examine your hands?”

“Mr Carson?” Thomas called out to the butler who was waiting with Anna and Thomas to clear the table once the gentlemen led the room. A curt nod was his answer. “Thank you.”

“You may use my pantry if you wish, Mr Barrow.”

The offer was unexpected, given the history between them, and a testament to how much their relationship had changed for the better since the war. Offering the Butler a murmur of thanks for his generous offer Thomas led the Doctor down the servants staircase, pausing in the servants hall to explain to Mrs Hughes what was going on, and then into the small room.

“Off with those gloves then, Tho – Mr Barrow.”

Nodding in agreement Thomas set about freeing the small buttons on the inside of his wrists before pulling the soft leather off of his scarred hands. Clarkson let out a noise of concern as he caught sight of the twisted flesh, carefully reaching out to take hold of Thomas’ left wrist so that he could examine his palm more closely, probing the scar with the tips of his fingers.

“What caused this?”

“Lifting a piece of hot metal off of Mr Crawley,” Thomas answered, flexing his fingers as best he could when the doctor motioned for him to do so, all the hilts still running the tips of his fingers over the tight scar tissue. The older man was noticeably concerned by the fact that he couldn’t straighten his fingers fully. “The burn on my other hand is from the fire itself.”

A second examination followed of the hand Thomas offered over to the doctor.

“Which gives you more trouble?”

“The right,” Thomas answered immediately. “I can get by without being able to straighten my fingers properly but being unable to bend them and therefore unable to properly grip anything
makes some of my duties more than a little bit challenging. I’ve tried using some cream to soften the skin but nothing has worked. I’ve a burn scar on my leg too but that is nothing compared to the ones on my hands. They’re worse, or so my doctor said, because of the fact that I carried Mr Crawley on a stretcher after I’d burned them and let him hold onto my hand after we’d both been treated as best they could do back on HMS Warrior."

Clarkson nodded as he spoke, showing that he understood what Thomas meant as he examined his right hand just as thoroughly as he had his left hand, before stepping back.

“I don’t think anything more can be done to improve the state of your hands, Mr Barrow, as the treatment you received was, I think, precisely what I would have done if you had been brought to me for treatment,” Clarkson announced, his approval evident. “But I’ve got some cream which should help to soften the scar tissue better than whatever you’ve been using until now. That will hopefully restore some of the flexibility you’ve lost the fingers of your right hand. I’ll bring some with me when I next visit to check up on your employer’s spine.”

“Thank you, Dr Clarkson.”

By the time he and the doctor emerged from the pantry the men had gone through to join the women, allowing Carson, Anna and the other maids to clear the table so with nothing else to do Thomas joined the others in the servant’s hall. Daisy was busy ferrying things back and forth from the kitchen to the hall, laying the table in anticipation of their own dinner.

“You’re not ill are you, Mr Barrow?”

“No, Dr Clarkson just wanted to have a look at my hands,” Thomas explained, flashing a reassuring smile around the table at those already gathered there, retrieving a cigarette from his packet. “He’s going to give me some cream that should help to soften the scars.”

A murmur of understanding swept around the table whilst Thomas searched through his pockets for his lighter, frowning as he tried to remember where he’d last put it, and he’d just found it in his inside jacket pocket when one of the hall boys spoke up excitedly,

“…is it true Mr Crawley can walk again?”

Thomas couldn’t stop himself from offering the boy a genuine smile.

“Yes, although it’s still early so the doctor doesn’t want him to push himself too much in case he hurts himself without meaning to,” he answered carefully, lighting his cigarette amidst the excited chatter that followed his words. “But he should make a full recovery.”

It was astonishing what genuine good news could do to brighten even the longest of days.

~ * ~

A/N I’m not a doctor so I’m relying on what the show used as Matthews storyline with only a slightly longer gap between initial injury and recovery. Comments/Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Fourteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called ‘36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.’ Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Downton Abbey
February 1919

Perched on the end on the bench in the servant courtyard Thomas took out his trusty packet of cigarettes, knocking one out and placing it between his lips. His hands were trembling as he returned the pack to his pocket and instead pulled out his trusty lighter.

Not that he was very surprised.

His mind was still struggling to process the events which had occurred earlier that evening.

He, along with everyone else, had accepted the fact that Matthew was crippled for life.

It had been two years since his injury, for crying out loud.

Surely if there was going to be any improvement in his condition it would have happened months if not a year ago. Then again Thomas knew nothing of how these sorts of injuries worked; he knew burns, knew how long they took to heal and how difficult they could be.
Lighting his cigarette he took a deep drag, holding the smoke in his lungs for a long moment as his body finally began to relax before tilting his head back and exhaling it in a long stream.

It was a miracle.

Yes, a miracle; that was the only word they could possibly use to describe had happened.

Hurried footsteps across the gravel alerted him to the fact that someone else was there and he turned his head just in time to spot Lady Sybil making her way around the side of the house, taking the path usually used only by servants, and continued on towards the garage.

Frowning Thomas pushed himself up off of the bench and followed her.

What on earth was she doing out so late, still dressed in all her finery from dinner, no less?

“You're very late,” he heard Branson murmur with as much familiarity as if it were Anna or Daisy who had approached the garage. Thomas halted just out of sight. “Won't they worry?”

“They're all so excited, they won't care where I am.”

She was probably right, Thomas reflected, as everyone had been discussing the oncoming wedding when he’d returned after having his own dinner to see if they needed anything.

They hadn’t, hence his quick smoke break.

“I'm pleased. I like Mr Matthew.”

“He announced at dinner that he wants to get married at Downton,” Lady Sybil shared the wondrous news, stepping far closer to the families chauffeur than was proper. Branson was down to his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, partially rolled up, Thomas noted although and his tie was completely missing. It made for an interesting contrast to her black and gold evening gown, her entire appearance perfect. They smile they shared confirmed what Thomas had long suspected; that the Irishman harboured inappropriate feelings for the youngest Lady of the house. What he hadn’t realised, however, was that they were reciprocated. “Somehow it made me feel more than ever that the war is really over and it's time to move forward.”

Branson’s smile vanished, replaced with a look of hopeful longing.

“Do you mean you've made your decision?”

“Yes.”

Decision?

Thomas, cigarette forgotten in his hand for the moment, barely remembered to breath.

That couldn’t mean what he thought it did, could it?

“And my answer is that I'm ready to travel and you are my ticket,” Sybil explained after a lengthy pause, during which time Branson appeared to be one second away from self-combusting. She, on the other hand, was smiling as vividly as Thomas had ever seen, her whole face lighting up with pure joy. “To get away from this house, away from this life…”

“Me?”

“No, Uncle Tom Cobley.”
Her deadpan delivery was offset by the giggle that followed.

Even from the distance he was at Thomas could clearly hear the deep sigh of relief that Branson let out, his entire demeanour changing as the tenseness bled out of his body.

“I'm sorry, but I've waited so long for those words,” the Irishman finally gasped out, his own smile of delight blossoming across his handsome face. “...I can't believe I'm hearing them...”

He paused, visibly searching out her eyes with his own.

“You won't mind burning your bridges?”

“Mind?” Lady Sybil responded, laughing excitedly. “Fetch me the matches!”

By then both of them were positively vibrating with contained excitement, their hands fluttering at their sides as though they were quite sure what to do with them until after another sigh of relief Branson moved, his right hand rising up to cradle her jawline whilst his left wound around her waist, pulling her body closer to his. She went all too willingly, tilting her head up for the kiss which was obviously about to happen but froze at the last second,

“Yes, you can kiss me, but that is all until everything is settled.”

“For now, God knows, it's enough that I can kiss you.”

Thomas felt bad for intruding on such a private moment, the couples first intimate act together, but he couldn’t in good conscience leave them to it; he knew all too well the dangerous risks people were willing to take whilst they were caught up in the heat of the moment. It would do nothing to help them if Lady Sybil was forced to get married for less than honourable reasons like so many young women had before her. Nor would it help if someone else were to come upon them as they currently were, particularly if that someone was a member of her family. No, as bad as he felt for spying on them it was for the best.

He let them kiss, finding himself struck by what an attractive couple they made, until he spotted Branson’s hand giving into the temptation to move lower towards Lady Sybil’s...

Hurriedly backing up a couple of metres he began to whistle ‘Heart of Oak’, the march past and official song of the Royal Navy, as he walked heavily towards the garage so as to crunch the gravel as loudly as he could, starting partway through the first verse so as to give the appearance that he had been approaching the garage for some time. He ignored the sharp gasp he heard from within the structure as well as the hurried footsteps that followed.

“Is there something I can do for you, Mr Barrow?”

Branson was trying to act as though all of his dreams hadn’t just come true.

His kiss swollen lips gave him away more than anything else.

Thomas couldn’t resist arching an eyebrow towards the chauffeur before allowing his eyes to dart across to where he was pretty sure Sybil was hiding behind one of the families cars.

The wide-eyed look of terror confirmed his suspicions.

“I remembered you saying you were out of cigarettes,” Thomas announced, coming up with the lie on the spot, bringing out his pack. “So I wondered if you’d care to join me for one?”
“That’s very kind of you, Mr Barrow,” Branson managed to all but croak out, his body trembling for an entirely different reason than earlier. “But I’m thinking of giving up.”

“Ah, I see,” Thomas responded dryly, tucking the pack away once more. “Well, it’s not for everyone. Well, I hope you don’t mind the interruption. I’ll leave you to your newspaper.”

“You didn’t interrupt anything,” Branson hurriedly gasped out. “It’s fine.”

“That’s alright then, isn’t it?” Thomas all but chuckled. “Goodnight, Mr Branson.”

“Goodnight, Mr Barrow.”

Thomas didn’t go far when he left the garage, simply crushed his cigarette under his foot so that when he ducked into the shadows he became all but invisible. From his simple hiding spot he witnessed the couples parting kiss before Lady Sybil all but ran back towards the house. Only once she was gone did he step out of the shadows and reenter the garage.

“A word of advice, Mr Branson?” he said by way of announcing his presence, his words causing the Irishman to jump and spin around to face him. “Discretion would be wise.”

“…not going to tell me to keep away from her?” Branson eventually managed to get out, squaring his shoulders in readiness for the lecture he was expecting to receive. Thomas simply shook his head. “Going to leave that to Mr Carson, are you? Or…or his Lordship?”

“No,” Thomas answered shortly, keeping his posture purposefully relaxed. “I should’ve gone for them the moment I saw Lady Sybil standing so close to you.”

“…then why didn’t you?”

“Because I know what it’s like to suffer from a forbidden love. I followed her out here to make sure that she wasn’t being forced into anything or being strung along by a fortune hunter,” he explained, smirking with amusement when Branson let out an insulted growl. “Of course, I should’ve known better than to think that Lady Sybil would need my help in such a way. No, she’s far too strong willed to be taken in by a scoundrel like that. Your conversation confirmed that neither of you are acting on false hopes or blind optimism.”

“…you were spying on us?”

“As I said, I was looking out for Lady Sybil,” Thomas chuckled. “Good thing I interrupted when I did too; don’t think I didn’t see your hand making its way do towards her botto…”

“Oi!”

“Passion can lead to poor choices and you know it,” Thomas snorted in response to Branson’s loud protest, amused by the redness growing on his cheeks. “So be careful.”

“…you’re not going to tell me to stop dreaming?”

“Everyone should be allowed to dream, don’t you think?”

After a long moment of silence Branson eventually nodded.

“Just remember that if you want to stand any chance of convincing them to let you marry her you have to do things the right way,” Thomas found himself reiterating the point he was trying to get across as firmly as he could. “So no babies on the wrong side of the blanket.”
“I would never!”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

There was lengthy pause, so long that Thomas began to debate whether it was time to leave the Irishman to go about his business, and then Branson stunned him by enquiring suddenly,

“Have you ever fallen for one of them?”

Thomas blinked, his mind flooded with images of the men he had been intimate with.

“Been in love with someone so far above your station, I mean?”

Clearing his throat he answered truthfully,

“Yes.”

Phillip, who had taught him so much about love, heartbreak and eventually forgiveness.

“Did you act on it?”

“Yes.”

Lieutenant Greenaway, the innocent who had blossomed so beautifully beneath him.

Or above him, depending on what took that fancy.

“Is that why…?”

“Lady Sybil deserves happiness as much as anyone,” Thomas answered truthfully. He’d always had a soft spot for the youngest Crawley, so spirited and different to the rest of her family. She’d never flaunted her wealth or position. His admiration for her had only grown since hearing of her exploits during the war, or her determination to become a VAD, of how she had convinced her parents to turn Downton itself into a convalescent hospital after one of her patients had tragically committed suicide at the thought of being sent away from the village hospital to recuperate. Given her track record of going against convention it was hardly surprising that she’d fall for someone so different. “If you make her happy so be it.”

Branson seemed both pleased and reassured by his answer.

“…did they make you happy?”

“For a time,” Thomas answered softly, remembering the time he had spent with Phillip during that wonderful summer in London, of the nights spent sneaking in and out of the Crawley’s townhouse so that he could meet up with him, of the time they had snuck away from a ball to be together in a darkened corner of the host’s library, of days off spent walking along the river, before his thoughts turned to what had followed. “It soured at the end…”

“Why?”

Thomas sighed heavily,

“What’s the worst that could happen if your relationship is found out?”

“Well, I’d be sent packing without a reference, I suppose,” Branson answered thoughtfully, looking understandable distressed at the thought. “Sybil might be disowned or something.”
“Yes, well, I would go to jail.”

His simple statement stunned the younger man into silence.

“Quite,” he murmured. “That puts a strain on a relationship. Particularly when one half is expected to marry a wealthy heiress and produce an heir or two to secure the bloodline.”

“I’d never thought about it like that…”

“Why would you?” Thomas chuckled bitterly. “You’re not an immoral degenerate…”

After another long moment of silence Branson surprised him by enquiring softly,

“Do you mind my asking who?”

“A secret for a secret, is that it?” Thomas chuckled, nodding his head in understanding. The younger man went to protest otherwise but he cut him off, “No, don’t be embarrassed. I’d probably do the same if our roles were reversed. It was Phillip Villiers, actually, the Duke of Crowborough. It began at Lady Sybil’s coming out ball, actually, and lasted throughout that season in London. In fact it only ended when he came to propose to Lady Mary, hoping to secure her fortune, only to learn that the entire estate was entailed away to Mr Crawley.”

He sighed, remembering their row all too vividly.

“We did not part on good terms.”

Seemingly at a loss of what to say Branson merely hummed sympathetically.

“I have, however, made peace with him, as it were,” Thomas found himself explaining, the unpleasant memory replaced by an image of Phillip looking unfairly handsome in his naval uniform. “We met again during the war, ended up serving on the same ship for two years.”

“Warrior?”

“No, Warspite,” Thomas corrected him. “This was after Jutland.”

“Did you…?”

“Recommence our immoral relationship?” Thomas finished the Irishman’s question with a somewhat teasing smile. “Yes, in a way: this time we both entered into it knowing that nothing permanent would come from it. It was for comfort and pleasures sake, not love.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed,” Thomas murmured with a smile, enjoying the shocked expression Branson was sporting following his confirmation. “I should be getting back now, I think. Goodnight.”

“Yes, goodnight, Mr Barrow,” Branson murmured in response, his voice a fraction softer than usual. Smirking to himself Thomas turned to go only to be called back, “Mr Barrow?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Nodding silently in response Thomas turned his back on the chauffeur and made his way back across the servants courtyard and into the house, the continued hustle and bustle of life below stairs
washing over him like a wave. He was greeted with smiles and polite nods as his position required, only a couple of the more senior servants greeting him verbally.

He was just about to join Anna at the table when Mr Carson appeared.

“Mr Barrow; just the man I needed to see. Mr Crawley would like to retire for the night.”

“Thank you, Mr Carson,” Thomas responded dutifully. “I’ll head up now.”

It was different that evening, getting his employer ready for bed.

He’d still had to be carried up the stairs, his body definitely not recovered enough for such a challenge, but once they had reached his bedroom the former officer insisted on standing as much as possible, making Thomas’ task easier in one respect but notably harder in another.

“I just can’t believe it,” Matthew murmured, his voice heavy with exhaustion but still as bright as a schoolboy on the first day of the summer holidays. His eyes never left his legs even as he adjusted his grip on the bedpost. Thomas, in the process of pulling his pyjama bottoms up the trembling limbs, met his smile with one of his own. “I’d given up all hope.”

“Understandably,” Thomas murmured, securing the striped trousers around his employers waist with the ties built into the waistband. “But don’t forget what Mr Clarkson said about taking things slowly; I know you want to get back on your feet as soon as possible but you could do more harm than good if you push yourself too quickly. So, on that note, into bed.”

Even with him finally tucked beneath the bedsheets it didn’t stop his employer from marvelling at the state of his injury, flexing his feet back and forth under the covers.

“Don’t think I won’t tell Dr Clarkson you’ve been disobeying his orders to rest,” Thomas warned his employer whilst gathering up his dirty clothes. “Or, better yet, Miss Swire.”

“You wouldn’t…”

“If it aids in your eventual recovery?” Thomas responded cheekily. “You bet I would.”

Glaring petulantly up at him like a child who’d just been told they couldn’t have any more biscuits for a long moment Matthew eventually nodded, his legs stilling beneath the covers.

“Good. Is there anything else you need before I retire, Sir?”

“No,” Matthew responded, reaching out to pick up his current book from the bedside table. Book in hand he pulled himself up to lean against the padded headboard. “I’ll be just fine.”

Returning to the basement Thomas spent the next half-an-hour relaxing in his favourite chair in front of the fire, reading through the days newspaper now that His Lordship had finished with it whilst chatting with his fellow servants about the days remarkable events.

He slept better that night than he had since leaving HMS Warspite.

The following morning the joyous atmosphere permeating throughout the house was spoiled by an unexpected visit on top of the difficult one they were expecting. Thomas, along with almost everyone else it seemed be they a servant, a member of the family or a guest, disliked Mr Bryant on site. He was domineering and looked about him with an air of disdain. It was painfully obvious that were it not for the fact that his wife wanted to thank the Crawleys for caring for their son before his untimely death in France he would never have set foot inside the building. His wife was
painfully subservient and clearly grieving.

Things were tense bordering on unpleasant to begin with but that all changed at lunch.

“I'm afraid Downton will be a place of pilgrimage for a while.”

“We're glad to be,” Lady Cora murmured. “If we can help to bring some peace of mind.”

“There's no point in wallowing in it,” Mr Bryant muttered gruffly. “What good does it do?”

There was a scuffle outside the door, drawing all of their attention as a woman cried out,

“Leave me alone!”

A young woman burst into the room, a child only a couple of years old in her arms, followed by Mrs Hughes and Anna, both of whom looked visibly distressed by the scene taking place.

“Ethel!”

“I tried to stop her…”

“What on earth?”

Whilst most of the family seemed to recognise the young woman Lady Cora was the only one of them who seemed to realise what was going on, her expression visibly hardening.

“I know what this is,” she announced. “Mrs Hughes, I don't think it's quite the right…”

“I'm stopping!” the young woman, Ethel, all but snapped. “Until I've had my say.”

She turned, shrugging off Mrs Hughes hands, as she focused on Mrs Bryant.

“This is Charlie, your grandson,” she announced, shifting the boy on her hip. Thomas wasn’t the only one to inhale sharply, his gaze snapping to the Bryant’s. “He's almost a year old.”

So the boy was younger than Thomas had thought…

Not that that mattered much under the circumstances, Mr Bryant making several of the ladies present jump by rising from his seat and angrily throwing his napkin onto the table.

“What proof have you?”

His demand, logical and cruel all at once, seemed to take the wind out of Ethel’s sails.

“…what?”

“I say, what proof have you?” Bryant reiterated his previous question, his gaze cold. “If my son was the father of this boy, where's your proof? Any letters? Any signed statement?”

“…why would there be any letters? We were in the same house.”

Oh, you poor, naïve little girl, Thomas thought to himself, You're so unprepared for this.

Mrs Hughes hurried to interject,

“I think she's telling the truth.”
“I'm not interested in think,” Bryant scoffed derisively, looking the poor young woman up and down. Ethel shifted nervously, her pleading gaze moving back and forth between Mr Bryant and his wife. “I want proof that my son acknowledged paternity of this boy. If what you say is true, then he would've known of the boy's existence for months before he...”

For the first time since arriving the unpleasant man paused, struggling with his emotions.

“...before he was killed.”

“Yes, he knew.”

Mr Bryant seemed less than impressed with her nervous response.

“So, what did he do about it?”

“Nothing,” Ethel confessed tearfully. “He did nothing.”

“Thank you,” Mr Bryant harrumphed triumphantly. “That's the proof I was looking for.”

Visibly dismissing the young woman he turned to address his wife and their hosts,

“If Charles was the father, he would never have shirked his responsibilities. Never.”

“Well, he did!”

“I won't listen to any more slander!” Mr Bryant all but screamed across at her, his poor wife jumping in her seat and letting out a whimper of distress. Ethel was all out sobbing. “Now, will you please go and take that boy with you, whoever he is! You're upsetting Mrs Bryant!”

Lady Cora wasn’t the only one to stare at him, appalled by his behaviour.

A soft voice tried to speak up, Mrs Bryant, although she was quickly drowned out.

“Well, I would like...”

“I said you are upsetting Mrs Bryant!”

Ethel had been reduced to pitiful sobs, her face almost as red as her hair.

“Lord Grantham,” Mr Bryant intoned authoritatively, turning to all but glare across the table at his host. His wife was visibly struggling to hold back tears of her own, her gaze fixated on the confused little boy. “Are you going to stand by while this woman holds us to ransom?”

In spite of his obvious irritation the Earl of Grantham rose to his feet and announced,

“This isn't doing much good.”

“Ethel, you better come with me,” Mrs Hughes spoke up softly. “Come on.”

Thomas moved to hold the door open so that Anna and Mrs Hughes could escort the hysterical young woman out, her son just beginning to become upset by the goings on.

Once the group had left the room Robert and Mr Bryant settled back into their seats.

“She thinks we're a soft touch,” Mr Bryant announced, calmly placing his napkin back on his lap and picking up his knife and fork so that he could continue eating his meal. “They hear of a dead
officer with some money behind them and suddenly there's a baby on every corner.”

Mrs Crawley frowned,

“But if she's telling the truth…”

“If Charles had fathered that boy, he would've told us.”

Judging by the tortured expression on Mrs Bryant’s face that probably wasn’t the case.

“No, I'd say she's done her homework and discovered he was an only child,” her husband continued, his voice as unpleasantly cold as ever. “She thinks we'd be ripe for the plucking.”

“You knew her,” Mrs Bryant commented. “Was she one of the nurses when he was here?”

Obviously reluctant to do so Lady Cora answered,

“She was a housemaid.”

A noise of distaste fell from Sir Richard before he turned to address his fiancé,

“Were you aware?”

“No.”

Sympathy filling her expressive eyes Mrs Crawley leaned forwards to speak to Mr Bryant,

“No one told me Major Bryant was your only son.”

“That's right. Just Charles.”

“Matthew is my only son,” Mrs Crawley explained, smiling across at her son and his fiancé. “And he nearly died at the Battle of Jutland so I can imagine what you're going through.”

Mrs Bryant smiled, first at the mother and then the son,

“He seems such a nice young man…”

Once again, much to Thomas’ disapproval, her husband spoke over her.

“Well, I think that's cast rather a shadow over the proceedings, so I don't see any point in prolonging it,” he announced, rising from his seat and making his way out of the room. Lady Cora hurried after him, concerned due to her role as hostess of the luncheon. If Thomas’ opinion of the man hadn’t already been so low it would have fallen even further when his supposed “better” turned to call over his shoulder, “Daphne, come on; we're leaving.”

“He's afraid of his own grief,” Mrs Bryant murmured heavily, moving to follow her husband. Around the table people began rising to their feet, obviously startled by the turn of events, and Thomas hurried forwards to pull Matthew’s chair out for him when he struggled to do so himself. He’d insisted on leaving his wheelchair by the stairs, wanting to walk as much as possible during the visit. “That's why he behaves as he does. He's terrified of his own grief.”

Thankfully only the Earl and Lady Cora were required to see their guests off, the others all going about their business which for most of them meant gathering in the library for a cup of tea. After getting Matthew settled in the library with Miss Swire who, much to Thomas’ amusement, was already berating his employer for pushing himself too far by walking from the dining room to the
library Thomas followed Mr Carson down the narrow servants stairs.

“Mr Barrow, if you are agreeable the two of us shall take the tea up to the library whilst the maids put the dining room back to rights,” the butler announced just as they reached the basement level, pausing until Thomas had nodded his head in agreement. “I really must organise the hiring of a pair of suitable footmen; we can’t go on doing their jobs as well.”

“Agreed.”

Ethel was surrounded by most of their fellow servants when they entered the kitchen.

“Anna, will you kindly go upstairs and help in the dining room?”

The kind-hearted housemaid murmured an affirmative.

“Ethel, please take the child and leave.”

Ducking her head the poor young woman placed the empty mug on the kitchen table and took her child back from Anna who had been holding the little boy for her whilst she drank.

Mr Carson frowned down at her,

“How did you get here?”

“I caught the bus and walked up from the village.”

“Then can you reverse the process as quickly as possible.”

“She's very badly shaken, Mr Carson,” Mr Bates offered softly. “She's lost everything.”

“Are you all right for the fare?”

From someone else the question might have come across as sympathetic.

From Mr Carson it was clipped, precise and simply a means to an end.

“Yes,” Ethel murmured softly. “Thank you.”

“He's their only grandchild,” Lady Mary was saying as Thomas and Mr Carson carried the trays into the library, taking them over to the sideboard. “There can never be another.”

Her fiancé huffed loudly,

“Even if Ethel is telling the truth…”

“I believe she is.”

“Even so, there's no legal reality to it,” Sir Richard continued, all but ignoring his future mother-in-law’s opinion. “It is simple; the child is her bastard and has no claim on them.”

Everyone present, Thomas and Mr Carson included, reacted to his use of foul language.

Thomas was particularly disgusted when he saw how uncomfortable Lady Cora appeared.

As a former sailor he had heard more swear words during his four years in the Royal Navy than he had in his entire lifetime before, the occupation having been notorious for its use of foul language for centuries, but even then it was never the Officers, only the lower ranks.
And none of them, himself most definitely included, would ever dream of using foul language in
front of a lady, be they someone of high social standing or just a servant.

“Steady on, sir,” Robert spoke up. “The ladies have had enough shocks for one day.”

Sir Richard, unsurprisingly, seemed nonplussed by the censure.

“I just don’t see the point in pretending something can be done when it can’t.”

Matthew, his expression full of disapproval, attempted to rescue the conversation,

“What about you, mother? Can’t one of your refugee charities help?”

“But she’s not a refugee,” Mrs Crawley pointed out sadly, thanking Thomas for the cup of tea he
handed her. “And we have more claims on our funding than we can possibly meet.”

“The truth is,” Lady Mary spoke up. “Ethel's made her choice and now she's stuck with it.”

Miss Swire frowned,

“That seems a little harsh.”

“Does it?” Lady Mary responded calmly, accepting her own cup of tea from Thomas without so
much as a glance up towards his face. “Aren't all of us stuck with the choices we make?”

The urge to “accidentally” dump its contents on her was the strongest it’d ever been.

He didn’t, though, no matter how much he wanted to.

Conversation from then on was tense to non-existent and Thomas was glad to get out of there as
soon as he was able to, carrying the tray of empty teacups down to the kitchen.

The rest of the day passed much the same as any other until the afternoon post arrived, bringing
with it another surprise, this one altogether more pleasant; a parcel for Thomas.

It was a relatively large box, wrapped in brown paper and string, and sat upon the servants dining

table for over an hour before he was able to take a break from his duties to open it.

By then a crowd had formed, everyone eager to know what it contained after everything that had
gone on with Gwen and her secret postal course in typing and secretarial work.

“Well, at least we know it’s not a typewriter,” Ivy giggled. “It’s not big enough.”

“Well on earth would I order a typewriter?” Thomas scoffed as he set about releasing the knots in
the string, cursing when they refused to budge until he’d removed his gloves. The leather was
quickly replaced once the string had been dealt with. “As a matter of fact I haven’t ordered
anything so this is as much a surprise for me as it is for the rest of you.”

That said he carefully unwrapped the brown paper, revealing the sturdy cardboard box.

Resting on top of the box, below the wrapping paper, sat a crisp white envelope.

Picking it up he quickly broke the seal, retrieved the sheet of paper and unfolded it.

The first thing he did was glance at the senders address in the top right hand corner,


“…who on earth is writing to me from *HMS Warspite*?”

“Wasn’t that your last ship, Mr Barrow?”

“Yes, Ivy, but most of those I was close with will have returned to civilian life by now.”

His gaze dropped to the bottom of the page and he couldn’t hold back a laugh when the identity of the sender became apparent, although not what they were doing on *Warspite*.

Best Regards,

*Horace Greenaway*

“Who’s it from, Mr Barrow?”

“Someone I knew aboard *Warrior,*” he answered, folding up the letter as it would no doubt be too private to read in public. “We received different postings after *Jutland* so we lost touch. I had no idea he’d been transferred to *Warspite.* What a remarkable coincidence.”

“What’s he sent you?” Daisy enquired, nodding to the box. “And why?”

“I’ve no idea,” Thomas answered, tucking the letter into his pocket before moving to the box and carefully removing the lid. Although some of his former lovers would have been inclined to send him something inappropriate he knew that Greenaway was too, well, green to do anything like that. Inside the box, under some straw, were three bottles. “He didn’t…”

“Didn’t what?”

Picking up one of the bottles reverently Thomas almost choked when he saw the label.

“He *did*!”

“What?”

Thomas tore his gaze away from the precious bottle in his hands, blinking at the crowd gathered around him who were all shooting him looks of impatience and confusion.

He couldn’t help but smile at them.

“He’s sent me not one, not two but *three* bottles of *Lambs Navy Rum,*” he explained, turning the bottle around so that they could see the label. “It’s the finest dark rum money can buy.”

“…sounds expensive…”

Thomas could only nod in response, placing the bottle reverently back in the box.

“So this friends of yours,” Mr Bates hummed softly. “An Officer, was he?”

“Yes, one of the junior ones,” Thomas confirmed as he placed the straw back in the box and secured the lid. “He’d been a Midshipman until the outbreak of war. I knew him as a rather naïve
Ensign and a woefully unprepared Sub-Lieutenant. He had potential, though, but he needed a bit of looking after at times. He wasn’t the only one, of course; no one was truly prepared for the realities of war at sea, nor were we prepared for the difficulties of battle.”

They were satisfied with his answer which was the truth, to a degree.

He was pretty sure that a couple of them, including Mr Bates, might have read between the lines and deduced that there was a little bit more to the story that he would never share.

“You should ask Mr Carson to put them in his cupboard for safekeeping,” Anna suggested, resting her hand on top of the cardboard box. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind, Mr Barrow.”

She was correct.

Mr Carson did not mind, in fact he openly approved of the arrangement as it would mean he could ensure that Thomas would not “over-indulge” in the overly generous gift. Not that the former steward ever would; he’d seen what drinking too much rum could do to a man when a seaman had somehow done something to warrant each of his friends giving him their rum.

It hadn’t been pretty and the seaman in questioned had ended up in the brig for a week.

He wasn’t able to read the letter until after dinner.

Greenaway had just received his promotion to Lieutenant, he learned, and with it had come a transfer to *HMS Warspite*. He’d spent the final two years of the war aboard *HMS Valiant* after recovering from the injuries he’d sustained at the *Battle of Jutland*, injuries which had thankfully been relatively minor. Apparently since arriving on *HMS Warspite* his former lover had heard nothing but praise for Thomas, prompting the young officer to make contact with the former steward. This had been easier said than done, or so the letter had explained, as Thomas’ former crew members had only been able to tell Greenaway about his transfer. He had ended up writing to Thomas care of *HMS Excellent* only to have his letter returned with a stamp on the front informing him that Thomas was no longer serving in the *Royal Navy*.

It had taken Greenaway what he termed as “an embarrassingly long time” to remember that Thomas had worked for Lieutenant Crawley before the war. He’d taken a chance by posting the letter to the Abbey in the hopes that if nothing else they would be able to forward it onto Thomas. It was simply a lucky coincidence that Matthew had decided to reward Thomas’ actions during the battle with an offer of employment which meant that the letter, technically Greenaway’s second letter, had arrived at the correct destination.

The letter and the three bottles of rum which were a gift in honour of their friendship.

He could have read the letter in the servant’s hall after all, he reflected as he settled down to write his reply in the privacy of his tin bedroom, as Greenaway had been vague enough each time he had referred to their past and the nature of their friendship. He had learned how to be discreet about such things, partly from Thomas during the time they had spent together and partly from whoever his lover was. And he definitely had a lover; there was just enough in the letter to give away the fact that Horace was seeing someone on *Warspite*.

His own letter filled the younger man in on what he had been doing since they’d last seen each, including a whole page about his time on *Warspite* and another paragraph on which stewards he should approach with his “legitimate” needs as an officer. He thanked him for the overly generous gift and, in a rather spur of the moment decision, mentioned that he hoped the young officer liked his. Precisely what he’d send him he didn’t quite know yet, something that he could use or enjoy
whilst at sea that wouldn’t end up being too costly.

With his letter finished but for the as yet unknown gift Thomas headed back do to continue serving the family as needed, eventually helping Mathew upstairs so that his employer could change into something more suitable for dinner. He didn’t miss the sheen of sweat on the other man’s forehead, nor the way his limbs trembled and spasmed; he was exhausted. As such, once he was changed into his suit, Thomas all but forced Matthew into his wheelchair.

“I really ought to walk to the library.”

“No need to rush it, sir,” Thomas countered firmly. “You're getting better every day.”

Neither of them were expecting the knock that came on the door.

Frowning softly Thomas moved to open it, stepping back in surprise when he found the Dowager Countess standing on the other side of it. The elderly woman looked past him.

“Oh, Cousin Matthew, may I come in?”

“Please.”

Now that he knew he could Matthew instinctively tried to get up out of his wheelchair.

“No, no, no,” the Dowager muttered quickly. “No, stay where you are.”

A simple look from the Crawley matriarch was enough to send Thomas out of the room, the imposing woman offering her thanks to him as he pulled the door almost all the way closed behind him. He knew he shouldn’t but he couldn’t resist waiting right outside the door, his ear all but pressed to the gap he’d purposefully left so that he could hear their conversation.

“No doubt you will regard this as rather unorthodox, my pushing into a man's bedroom uninvited.”

“Well, um…”

“It’s just I don't want us to be disturbed.”

There was a pause, a rustle of fabric and then the Dowager Countess continued,

“I'm sure you know how pleased I am that you will recover after all.”

“Thank you.”

“Just as I am delighted that you can once more look forward to a...to a happy married life.”

Even Thomas felt uncomfortable as she discretely referenced Matthew’s future sex life.

“I…I'm very lucky.”

“Now, this may come as a surprise, but I feel I must say it all the same.”

“Please do.”

“Mary is still in love with you.”

Thomas couldn’t hold back his hiss.

How dare she?
How dare she?

“What?”

“I was watching her the other night when you spoke of your wedding,” the Dowager continued, playing with his emotions. “She looked like Juliet on awakening in the tomb.”

“Mary and I have always…”

“Of course, I suspected long ago that the flame hadn’t quite gone out,” she pressed on, drowning out his uncomfortable attempt to diffuse her argument. “But then there was no chance of your recovery, and it seemed best to let her try for happiness where she could.”

“I… I quite agree, and…and Sir Richard is…”

“No, let's not muddy the pool by discussing Sir Richard.”

No, let’s talk about Sir Richard, Thomas thought angrily, Her fiancé!

“The point is, you loved her once, are you sure you can't love her again?”

“Cousin Violet, I... please don't think I mind your... speaking to me in this way,” Matthew interjected, his voice growing stronger as he continued. “I quite admire it, but... consider this; Lavinia came back against my orders, determined to look after me for the rest of my life, which meant that she would wash me and feed me and do things that only the most dedicated nurse would undertake, and all with no hope of children or any improvement.”

“Yes,” the Dowager conceded. “Yes, it's all very admirable, and I give her full credit.”

“Giving her that credit, do you think it would be right for me to throw her over because I can walk?” Matthew pressed. “To dismiss her because I no longer have need of her services?”

“Spoken like a man of honour,” the Dowager responded. “And we will not fall out over this.”

“But you don’t agree.”

“I would just say one thing; marriage is a long business.”

A sigh, undoubtedly from Matthew.

“There's no getting out of it for our kind of people. I mean, you may live forty... fifty years with one of these two women. Just... just make sure you have selected the right one.”

Thomas barely had time to move out of the way before she exited the room, hurrying inside once it was safe to do so. He found his employer sitting in his wheelchair looking stunned.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Barrow, sorry,” Matthew started, blinking up at him. “I was just...”

“Thinking about what the Dowager had to say about Lady Mary?” Thomas interjected, earning a frown of confusion. “I may or may not have been listening outside the door.”

“I should tell you off for that,” Matthew sighed. “But I could do an impartial opinion.”

“Hardly impartial but certainly not as invested as a member of the family,” Thomas pointed out,
moving to stand in front of his employer. “How can I help you, Sir? What do you need?”

“I need to be sure I’m doing the right thing.”

“Well then the question is, Sir, when you close your eyes and picture yourself in fifty years time with your children and grandchildren around you who do you see sat by your side?”

Matthew hesitated, actually going so far as to close his eyes as he pictured the scene. Finally, his tone relieved, he answered,

“I see Lavinia.”

“Then that’s that, isn’t it?”

“Yes. That’s that.”

~ * ~

A/N So I’m making up for a longer than planned absence with a longer than planned chapter which ended up featuring Thomas Barrow; Relationship Advice Guru. Whoops. I hadn’t originally planned it that way but it just happened. Hope people are still enjoying this story. Comments/Suggestions/Requests always welcome. Next up; Spanish Flu and a Wedding. X
Chapter Fifteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Downton Abbey.

Summary: What if Doctor Clarkson had been forced to leave the garden party early, before Thomas had had a chance to speak to him? What if, following a suggestive comment by a colleague, the First Footman had decided against joining the British Army at all? What if, instead, he’d decided to join the Royal Navy? How different might things have been for him?

Warnings: Slash, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Violence, First World War.

A/N So the idea for this particular story has been rattling around in the back of my mind since I attended the ‘Mountbatten Festival of Music’ back in 2016 during which there was a memorial piece for the 100th commemoration of the ‘Battle of Jutland.’ I knew then that I wanted to do a story focusing on the naval aspects of the First World War which isn’t as well known as the land based aspects, mostly due to the fact that the evidence of the battles are at the bottom of the ocean and can no longer be seen. Now, I don’t claim to be a historian so please excuse me if I get anything wrong despite my research in this particular subject.

A/N 2 please be aware that whilst HMS Warrior was a real ship and I have managed to find a list of her crew I have opted to used entirely fictional characters for the use of this story so as not to dishonour any of their memories. In terms of the naval facts that I am including in this story I am from a naval family, my great-grandfather was killed during World War Two, my grandfather served during the final year of the war and my husband served back in the 1980’s, and as such want to be as accurate as possible so have done as much research as possible (mostly using a fantastic book from the Jutland Museum at Portsmouth Historic Dockyards called '36 Hours. Jutland 1916. The Battle That Won The War.' Which I would highly recommend to anyone interested in the subject.) I am, however, not a historian and so there may be some factual errors so please forgive me and enjoy my work of fiction.

THE BOYS IN NAVY BLUE
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Downton Abbey
February 1919

Thomas was making his way down the narrow servant’s staircase, intending to grab a quick cup of tea and a smoke whilst his employer was happily discussing his oncoming wedding, when he almost barrelled into Anna who was more focused on the keys in her hand than the staircase she was all but sprinting up. In fact she only just spotted him in time to prevent what could have been a rather nasty accident, one or both of them tumbling down the stairs.

“Thomas!” she gasped sharply, finally looking up from the keys in her hand as his hands settled onto her shoulders to steady her. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“Evidently.”

In the past Thomas would probably have brushed off her apologies and continued down to the kitchen but there was something in her expression that prompted him to frown and ask,

“…what’s wrong?”
He paused, thinking back to the last time she had seemed so out of sorts.

“Has Sir Richard done something to upset you? If so I can…”

“No, it’s not Sir Richard,” she reassured him hurriedly, her hand clenching and unclenching around the keys so tightly that they jingled, drawing his attention back down to them. They looked like Mrs Hughes keys to the house but why would Anna have them? “…Lady Sybil’s bedroom door is locked and she won’t answer. Lady Mary is worried and, frankly, so am I.”

An unpleasant feeling settled deep and heavy in his gut as he vividly recalled the scene in the garage between the young Lady in question and the families Chauffeur, recalled their conversation about “burning bridges” and the things that he and Tom had spoken of after.

They wouldn’t have done anything so stupid as to…

He’d thought that Tom had understood the precariousness of his situation…

And perhaps he had, Thomas reflected, but Lady Sybil was as obstinate and strong-willed a woman as he’d ever met and if she’d gotten it into her head to do something rash them he doubted there was a man alive who could have stopped her short of locking her in a tower.

“I’ll come too,” he announced, turning himself around and heading back up the stairs with Anna following close behind, a sigh of relief escaping the worried housemaid. “Just in case.”

Hurrying up the winding staircase Thomas held the door open for Anna once they’d reached the correct level and followed the young woman along the corridor to Lady Sybil’s bedroom.

They found Lady Mary waiting anxiously outside of her sisters door, wringing her gloved hands as she kept glancing back forth between the locked door and the grand staircase.

Gone was the calm and calculating woman Thomas had seen at dinner only an hour ago.

In her place stood a big sister, body taught with worry.

“Barrow?” she gasped upon seeing him. “What are you doing here? I don’t think…”

“Never mind that now, Milady,” Anna murmured, hurrying to the door in question. It took her a long moment to find the correct key and open the door. “Lady Sybil? Are you alright?”

Nothing.

Hurrying into the room the three of them found it empty.

“Where is she?”

Thomas had a really bad feeling about this…

Letting out a gasp Lady Mary hurried across to the mantelpiece where a folded sheet of paper had been propped up in the centre, the words ‘For My Family’ written clearly on it.

“Oh, my God,” Lady Mary cursed softly as she read the notes contents. “She’s eloped.”

Thomas kept his own curses to himself given that they weren’t fit for female company no matter the situation, his four years as a sailor having extended that part of his vocabulary.

Of all the things the young couple could decide to do they had to go with the one that could ruin all
there were chances of being together. He’d warned Tom not to do anything rash and yet here they were. Perhaps, in hindsight, he should have brought Anna into his confidence and asked her to have a discreet word with Lady Sybil on the subject. Yes, that might’ve helped.

There was no use worrying about what he should have done, however, not right now.

“She’s on her way to Gretna Green.”

Gretna bloody Green.

Located in the southern county of Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, it was historically the first village a traveller would come across once they had crossed the border separating England and Scotland when following the old coaching route from London to Edinburgh.

It had become famous, or perhaps infamous, in the years following the enforcement of Lord Hardwicke’s 1754 Marriage Act which stated that if a parent of a person under the age of twenty-one objected to the minor’s marriage, the parent could legally veto the union.

The Act tightened the requirements for marrying in England and Wales but did not apply in Scotland where it remained possible for boys to marry at fourteen and girls at twelve, a fact which had rather alarmed Thomas when he’d first read about it, with or without parental consent. Following the construction of a toll road passing through the village of Graitney in the 1770’s Gretna Green became the first easily reachable village over the Scottish border.

And, thus, the so called “runaway marriages” began.

Scottish law had allowed for “irregular marriages”, meaning that if a declaration was made before two witnesses, almost anybody had the authority to conduct the marriage ceremony and in Gretna Green it had been blacksmiths or “anvil priests” as they were known who had stepped up to perform the hundreds if not thousands of clandestine elopements. Because of this the blacksmith and his anvil had become lasting symbols of Gretna Green weddings.

“We have to stop her,” Lady Mary gasped. “We have to go after her!”

“Should we inform His Lordship?”

“No,” Lady Mary countered Anna’s logical question with a firm shake of her head. “Papa can’t know. Not yet, anyway; not until she’s safely back home and we know that nothing untoward has happened. He’d go after them with a shotgun if he thought they might be…”

Fornicating, Thomas’ mind happily filled in the blanks as she trailed off uncomfortably.

“We’ll have to go after them ourselves,” Lady Mary announced. “Barrow, can you drive?”

“No, Milady, I’m afraid I can’t,” he apologised quickly. “I’ve had no need to learn.”

“Of course not, I just just hoped…well…never mind…” Lady Mary muttered regretfully. “There’s nothing else for it, then; we have to involve Edith as she knows how to drive.”

The fact that even now her rivalry with her other sister tainted her thought process wasn’t lost on either Thomas or Anna, nor was it a surprise; those two would fight if the house were burning down around them. They were too similar in some ways, too different in others and it had always made it impossible for the sisters to get along with each other.

“Shall I go and fetch her, Milady?”
“Yes,” Lady Mary agreed. “But do be discreet about it.”

Anna nodded, hurrying out of the room.

A tense few minutes passed, Lady Mary holding herself rigid as she refused to show weakness in front of a servant who wasn’t her closest confidant, until Anna returned.

A confused Lady Edith followed her into the room.

“What’s going on?”

“Read for yourself,” Lady Mary muttered, thrusting the note at her. Visibly startled, Lady Edith did so, her mouth dropping in shock. “We have to go after her before it’s too late.”

“Yes,” Lady Edith agreed with hesitation. “What can I do to help?”

“You can drive.”

And so Thomas found himself sat beside Lady Edith, his eyes pinned to the road ahead as the middle daughter of the Earl of Grantham followed the most logical route that the two lovebirds would have taken when they set out. Behind him sat Lady Mary and Anna, both equally as invested in the road and their surroundings as the light was beginning to fade.

“They must stop at some point.”

“She won’t expect us to be in pursuit until tomorrow,” Lady Edith pointed out, dropping them down a gear so that she could take a tight corner a little bit slower than they had been travelling, her elegant coat falling open in her lap. “So they’ll stay somewhere on the road.”

Anna sighed deeply,

“We hope.”

“Everyone keep an eye out for the motor.”

None of them pointed out to Lady Edith that they already were.

It wasn’t until much later, darkness having already fallen, that they finally spotted them.

Actually it was Anna that spotted them, enquiring sharply as they passed a roadside inn,

“Isn’t that the car?”

A rather terrifying emergency stop following by a quick bit of reversing confirmed that it was indeed the Crawleys other vehicle sitting outside the inn alongside a rather inferior model.

“…so what now?”

“Now we go inside and get our sister,” Lady Mary announced firmly, gesturing for her sister to park the vehicle alongside the others. In what felt like no time at all but was in fact a few minutes as parking was easier said than done under the present conditions Thomas was following the three young women inside the inn. It was relatively quiet so there arrival caused something of a stir amongst the local patrons as they approached the innkeeper. “Excuse me, my name is Lady Mary Crawley. I believe my sister is staying at your inn.”

“I’ve no one staying registered under the name Crawley.”
“What about Branson?” Thomas enquired, drawing the innkeepers attention to him even as Lady Mary bristled as his disrespect and disregard. “She’s travelling with…with her fiancé.”

He felt both of the Crawley sisters stiffen beside him at his choice of explanation.

“Jumping the gun, are they?” the innkeeper snorted, bringing out the book this time to check on the current guests. “Aye, I’ve got a Mr and Mrs Branson staying in room six.”

“Thank you…” Thomas murmured politely even as the two Crawley sisters hurried up the narrow and uneven staircase of the inn, Anna following close behind. “Well just go and…”

“Aye,” the innkeeper chuckled. “Go on then.”

By the time Thomas reached the top of the stairs they’d already found the room, knocking briefly before stepping and by the time he had entered Sybil and Tom were on their feet.

The separate blankets, one on the bed and one over a chair, reassured him that nothing untoward had happened between the young couple. Lady Mary let out a sigh of relief.

“How did you find us?” Tom gasped fearfully. “How did you know?”

“Never mind that,” Lady Mary dismissed him. “At least nothing’s happened, thank God.”

“What do you mean nothing’s happened?” Sybil demanded indignantly, scowling at her sisters who’d spoiled her plan. Tom shot her an alarmed look, concerned about what she was implying. “I’ve decided to marry Tom, and your coming after me won’t change that.”

Oh, how naïve she was…

Lady Edith sighed sadly, pointing out, “This isn't the way.”

“She's right,” Lady Mary added. “Of course Mama and Papa will hate it…”

Rather predictably this didn’t sit well with the proud Irishman, “Why should they? I’m not…”

“Oh, pipe down,” Lady Mary cut him off before Thomas could speak up to do the same in a slightly less insulting manner. As it was he moved so that he was stood off to one side, ready to step in between the would be runaways and those who had come after them. “Sybil, can't you let them get used to the idea? Take your stand and refuse to budge, but allow them time. That way you won't have to break up the family by doing something so rash.”

Now it was Lady Sybil’s turn to scoff, “They would never give permission.”

“You don't need permission, you're twenty-one,” Lady Mary pointed out, her voice tight. “But you do need their forgiveness if you're not to start your new life under a black cloud.”

“How do I know you’re not pretending to be reasonable to get me home again?”

Tom glanced towards Thomas, wisely remaining silent, his expression full of regret.
“Even if I am, even if I think this is mad, I know it would be better to do it in broad daylight than to sneak off like a thief in the night,” Lady Mary answered honestly. “Sybil, please…”

“Alright,” Lady Sybil agreed softly, turning to face Tom who offered her a reassuring smile. They moved at the same time, taking each other’s hands as they stepped closer to each other. “I don’t like deceit and my parents don’t deserve it so I think we should go back.”

“I understand,” Tom murmured. “And, honestly, I’d rather do everything above board.”

“No more whirlwind adventure?”

“Not until after we’re married, anyway.” Tom chuckled deeply, leaning forwards to kiss her forehead. They were a handsome looking couple, Thomas realised. “Once you’re officially Mrs Tom Branson I’ll let you drag me all across the globe if that’s what’ll make you happy.”

Sybil laughed tearfully, leaning in to give him a soft kiss in spite of her sisters disapproval.

“I’ll return the car in the morning,” Tom offered as they parted, nudging the woman he loved to go with her sisters. “I suppose you’re confident you can bring her round, then?”

“Fairly,” Lady Mary answered him, earning a glare from her sister. “I’ll certainly try.”

They quickly gathered up Lady Sybil’s things, Anna taking more than the others.

“Barrow?”

Sybil’s voice surprised him, prompting him to turn to where she was stood by the door.

“Yes, Lady Sybil?”

“I know it’s a lot to ask but could you stay with Tom and come back in the morning?” the young woman curing all the fuss asked of him. “I don’t want him to be alone after all this.”

It was at the same time a lot to ask of him and a simple thing to ask of him.

“Of course, Milady,” he found himself agreeing before adding quickly. “I’m afraid Mr Carson will need to be informed of my whereabouts; currently he believes that I have gone into the village to meet a friend of mine from my time in the Royal Navy. It was the only plausible excuse I could come up with for disappearing for the evening at such short notice. It would have been suspicious if Anna and I had both used the same excuse of a cold to go to bed.”

“I’ll make sure he is aware of the situation,” Lady Edith offered without hesitation, gesturing for Anna to leave the room first, followed closely by the somewhat dejected Sybil. “Mary?”

“Do you want some money?” Lady Mary asked the disgraced chauffeur. “For the room?”

“No thank you, Milady,” the Irishman responded, watching Sybil’s retreating form until she was gone. “I can pay my own way else I wouldn’t have agreed to run away with your sister.”

“…it was her idea, then?”

“Yes, Milady,” Tom answered. “A friend gave me some advice about our relationship and how our behaviour now would influence our future together so I was content to wait until the time was right to approach your father. Your sister, on the other hand, is sick of waiting for the world to change and I don’t need to tell you how stubborn she can be. It took me years to convince her that my feelings were genuine, that it was love and not infatuation.”
It was like something out of a romantic novel, Thomas reflected as Lady Mary processed the information she’d been given. She wasn’t any more surprised than he was to hear that Lady Sybil had been the one to suggest that they elope together. She was clearly surprised by the depth of love that the young chauffeur clearly felt for his sister, not to mention how much he respected her and her right to make decisions about her own life. He was still a servant, though, and in her eyes that meant he simply wasn’t good enough for her sweet baby sister.

“So when she came to me and asked me to run away with her I couldn’t refuse her,” Tom continued sincerely. “Oh, I tried talking her out of it but it was as plain as the nose on your face that she wasn’t going to back down without at least trying so I agreed to her scheme.”

“What brought this on, do you know?”

“Sybil told me she was sick of waiting but I have a feeling that all of the talk of weddings at the dinner table had something to do with it,” Tom offered up with complete honesty. “I know you don’t approve. I can guess why. But I would never do anything to dishonour your sister. I love her and one day, soon I hope, I will have the honour of calling her my wife.”

Lady Mary let out a huff which was clearly meant to imply “We’ll see about that” before the elegant woman with a heart of stone finally turned and left the two men in the bedroom.

“…shit…”

“Quite,” Thomas sighed, moving to help guide the poor young man who was rapidly turning a concerning ashen colour back to the seat he had previously been trying to sleep in, gently guiding his head down between his knees. “So, Lady Sybil says jump and you ask how high?”

Tom huffed out a weak laugh,

“Yeah, pretty much…”

“Well, nothing we can do about any of it now,” Thomas sighed, rubbing a hand up and down the chauffeurs back as he struggled to control his breathing in the wake of everything. If he she’d a few tears, mostly out of frustration, Thomas chose not to notice. “We’ll head back first thing in the morning and see what’s to be done. For now we should get some sleep.”

Except that, as it turned out, was easier said than done.

Thomas stripped himself down to his vest and boxers, both made of white cotton, and hung his shirt, trousers and suit jacket up in the wardrobe in the corner of the room. His socks, tie and gloves were tucked into his shoes and placed under the bed. Satisfied that there wasn’t anything else he could do to keep his clothes from being ruined overnight Thomas washed his hands and face at the washstand beside the wardrobe, forgoing the soap which the inn had provided as he feared it would dry his skin our too much, particularly around his scars.

In comparison to his calculated movements Tom made no move to relax any further.

“Are you really going to sleep in your uniform?” Thomas enquired as he pulled back the covers on the double bed and slipped beneath them on the side closest to the door. “It doesn’t look particularly comfortable, not to mention the creases you’ll have by morning.”

A quickly glance down at himself and the state of his clothes had the Irishman flushing.

“I didn’t want to give anyone the impression that Sybil and I had…”
Thomas grunted in understanding, pulling the covers up to his shoulders as he rolled onto his side, curling his legs up ever so slightly as was his preferred sleeping position in a bed.

He could already tell that this would be one of the many nights where he missed his hammock, what with the lumpy mattress and less that plump feathers in the pillows.

Shutting his eyes he listened to the sounds of the Irishman stripping down to his own vest and boxers, hanging his uniform up in the wardrobe. Unfortunately rather than retake his seat or even claim the other side of the bed the anxious young man began to pace back and forth in front of the small fire, his footsteps repeatedly triggering several creaky floorboards.

Thomas tried to ignore him, his eyes firmly shut as he attempted to drift off to sleep…

“…you know the whole point of going to bed is to go to sleep, correct?”

“I’m sorry,” Tom sighed, freezing mid-step in front of the fire. “I just can’t…settle…”

“To my mind you haven’t even tried,” Thomas pointed out, sitting up in the bed and pulling himself up to lean back against the headboard, punching the pillows until they adopted a comfortable position between his spine and the wooden headboard. “Come and sit down.”

“I don’t…”

“You’re not my type,” Thomas informed him dryly, patting the untouched pillows on the other side of the bed until with a huff the Irishman joined him, adopting the same position as Thomas only on top of the covers rather than beneath them. His hands settled in his lap, fingers linked together nervously, as he worried his lower lip beneath his teeth. “There is absolutely no point in dwelling on your troubles, especially not at the expense of our sleep.”

“I know, but…”

“…you can’t stop thinking about it?”

The unfortunate chauffeur shook his head dejectedly.

“Right,” Thomas sighed, running his fingers through his hair to push it back out of his eyes. “How about a distraction? Take your mind off everything. How about a naval story or two?”

He received no verbal response and so launched into a light-hearted recollection of his time in basic training and the events that had eventually led to him becoming a steward, much to the annoyance of some of his fellow volunteers who had ended up being sent to fight at the Front as part of the newly formed Royal Naval Division. They’d had a tough time of it, or so he’d heard since the war had ended, and had seen action in Belgium at the start of the war, at Gallipoli during the now infamous landings before spending the final two years of the war on the Western Front. He made it perfectly clear that he was eternally grateful to the young officer who had questioned him about what he had done before the war and, upon hearing that he’d been a footman and temporary valet, had recommended that he be transferred.

“As horrific as the Battle of Jutland was, both in terms of the fighting and the loss of life, I’d much rather have lived through that than spent any length of time in the trenches,” he told the Irishmen frankly, his hands absentmindedly massaging the worst of the scarring on his hands. Tom grunted in agreement, thinking of the same stories that Thomas was in regards to what it had been truly like at the Front rather than what the papers had tried to tell them it was like for the duration of the war. “I was much better suited to life at sea, I can tell you.”
“If they were sending volunteers to the Front rather than to sea how did Mr Crawley end up on board a ship?” Tom asked after a moments pause. “Or was it just the ordinary sailors?”

“No, they sent Officers to the Royal Naval Division as well although the Army were in overall command of the Division,” Thomas answered, chuckling as he recalled a poem he had heard whilst they were undergoing repairs towards the end of the war. “There was one, General Shute, who was so unpopular with the sailors under his command that they wrote a poem about him and that poem got turned into a song. Hang on, let me see if I can remember it…”

“The General inspecting the trenches,
Exclaimed with a horrified shout,
'I refuse to command a division,
Which leaves its excreta about.'

But nobody took any notice,
No one was prepared to refute,
That the presence of shit was congenial,
Compared to the presence of Shute.”

Thomas paused as his companion snorted in response to the crude nature of the poem.

“And certain responsible critics,
Made haste to reply to his words,
Observing that his staff advisors,
Consisted entirely of turds.

For shit may be shot at odd corners,
And paper supplied there to suit,
But a shit would be shot without mourners,
If somebody shot that shit Shute.”

By the time Thomas finished his recitation of the poem, surprising himself as he recalled every line perfectly with only a couple of moments of hesitation, Tom had tears flowing down his cheeks as he struggled to contain his laughter so as not to disturb anyone else.

“I’ll bet General Shute loved that…”

“I’ll bet,” Thomas agreed with a chuckle of his own. “And to answer your question about Mr Crawley I honestly don’t know. Perhaps he showed potential during his own basic training? Perhaps he was lucky and they were looking for a replacement as he was coming through?”

“I didn’t come across any other volunteers when I joined HMS Warrior,” Thomas explained, thinking back to the first time he’d seen the ship in harbour. “They were all pre-war sailors.”
He found himself sharing a few more stories about his time in the Navy, starting with one about his first day aboard *Warrior* when he had been so overwhelmed he’d felt like a green young hall boy arriving at a grand house for the first time and being thrown in the deep end.

Given that he’d already confessed to Tom about his relationship with Phillip, the Duke of Crowborough, when they’d spoken in the garage he found himself sharing a few stories about his time at sea that made the relationships he’d had perfectly clear to the Irishman.

“Were you and Mr…” Tom trailed off suddenly, a flush working its way up his neck as he cleared his throat with obvious discomfort. “No, never mind. I shouldn’t ask you that…”

It took Thomas a moment to realise what the other man had stopped himself from asking.

“Mr Crawley? You want to know if I’ve ever been intimate with my employer?”

“…I don’t think *want to know* is quite the phrase I’d use but…yes…”

Thomas hesitated, purposefully drawing out the silence as he watched the other man squirm before he finally let out a deep laugh and shook his head, finally answering him,

“No, there’s never been anything between us other than the proper relationship between an Officer and a Steward and, now, a gentleman and his valet. He’s not that way inclined.”

Judging by the arched eyebrow being shot his way the Irishman sensed, correctly, that he wouldn’t have said no to his employer had that not been the case. Thomas would never make the first move, however, just as he never had; he couldn’t risk making a mistake, not when the punishment for being a homosexual was so severe. He wouldn’t survive prison.

“You’re being surprisingly understanding about all of this, especially for a Catholic…”

“A Catholic who’s in love with a Protestant woman,” Tom pointed out, pausing as his jaw stretched open around a yawn. “Not only that but a member of the English aristocracy…”

Thomas shared the other man’s wince.

Yes, their relationship certainly blurred several lines that would upset some people.

“And anyway I think one of my neighbours was like you,” he continued softly. “He ran away when he was fifteen after his dad gave him a proper hiding. They never speak of him now.”

“Oh…”

They talked for a little longer, the conversation shifting to Tom’s life before he’d left Ireland and Thomas was grateful when the other man began to yawn more and more, sleep finally beginning to overcome his senses as his eyelids obviously became heavy. It didn’t take much to convince the chauffeur to slip beneath the bed covers or to lie down properly on the bed.

He was asleep less than five minutes after his head finally touched the pillow.

Sighing with relief Thomas reached out to switch off the lamp, leaving the room illuminated by the fire still glowing away in the grate as he was finally able to drift off to sleep himself.

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A/N I ended up adding quite a bit to the plan I originally had of this chapter in order to get it to flow how I wanted it to. The friendship growing between Thomas and Tom was not in my original
plan, I’d like to add, and seems to be coming out of nowhere but it’s working for the overall story plan so I’m going to let it unfold as my subconscious plot bunny demands. On a side note the history of the Royal Naval Division is quite fascinating and in reality Thomas and Matthew would have probably ended up there rather than at sea however I didn’t find out about the Royal Naval Division until after I’d begun writing this story and so decided to allow myself a little “artistic license” in order to create the storyline I wanted to. The poem Thomas recites is a real poem written by Sub-Lieutenant A. P. Herbert, who later became a famous humorous writer, legal satirist and Member of Parliament, about General C. Shute and although soldier poems and songs that were hostile towards superior officers were not rare it’s unusual to have a song aimed at a specifically named officer. Comments welcome. X

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