Toil and Strife

by BarbariousBarbarian

Summary

Five hundred years after the Elves and the Kul Tiras sealed their alliance with a political marriage, the world is at peace - but that doesn't mean life is easy for the Navy. Hostile forces sail the restless seas, and Kul Tiras sends forth its sailors to meet them, as it always has.

Join Fitz, the least promising Midshipman in all the world, as she takes her place aboard the fighting ships which safeguard her nation's trade network.

Set within Quickyoke's world as built in "Increments of Longing."

Notes

Look; Quickyoke asked me heaps about fighting ships in the age of sail. Her story was pretty sweet and all, fantastic slow burn romance, awesome dialogue, great world building. But where was the Navy?! So I wrote this for their private edification, and they said to me I should post it up.
So here it is; a mediocre sequel to a slow-burn arranged marriage F/F romance. And that sequel is almost 100% about a fighting Navy in the age of sail.

Seems completely legit.

- Inspired by *Increments of Longing* by QuickYoke
Chapter 1

CHAPTER ONE

It was a fine gale that blew up across the ocean. It roared up against the harbour breakwater, picking up the water as it went, only to dash the waves to pieces on the rocks. Rain fell in great sheets, beating loudly on the canvas coats of those at Kul Tiran sailors who held the watch. Even in the sheltered basin of Boralus the frigate *Intrepid* moved with the sea's impulses, held in place only by the strength of the ropes tying her down against her mooring buoy.

An open dinghy picked its way between the anchored fleet. Two burly men pulled against the oars, but it was tough going; the choppy water yawed and dragged at it, now and then sending spray flying to pelt the occupants. The oarsmen knew their business though, and their backs were strong. The boat not only ducked between the heavy cables of the fleet, but used the bulky hulls to intercept the worst of the waves. With quick darts and heavy going, it slowly drew up along the starboard side of the *Intrepid*.

As it approached the mainchains the midshipman of the watch hailed it.

“Aye aye!” roared the oarsman back. Kul Tiras had been an ocean-going people for as long as the seas were old, and with that tradition came a certain number of conventions which made little sense. The oarsman had replied in a way which signalled that the dinghy had one of the ship's officers on board.

The middy on watch strained to make out which one, but the driving rain prevented her from recognising anyone. That, and all the familiar faces she had already seen on board. But it was Boralus, and officers came and went all the time - she ordered the boat to draw up, and moved towards the side to receive its cargo.

Up on the quarterdeck, the lieutenant of the watch was moving through routine duties. The Navy demanded perfection even from watchstanders in port. The hourglass turned, and three bells were struck; when he finished his labours, the boat was already skittering back towards the shoreline, the oarsmen clearly more motivated on the homeward leg than they ever had been rowing out. In their wake they had left their passenger - a young woman, who was now being deposited at his feet by an indifferent midshipman. The Lieutenant waved her off, and turned to greet his new acquaintance.

Mr Reginald was both career Navy, and completely without connections. It was his skills alone which had dragged him up to lieutenant - and it was the lack of influence which had stranded him there. This did not overly worry him; the currents of politics were as inexorable as the tide, and both were well understood by a seafaring people. He knew he was an officer in the mightiest Navy to ever sail - and more than that, he was an officer in a service where nobles came to make themselves. A man in his position needed the ability to quickly pass judgement on his fellows, with a premium on accuracy.

Reginald therefore looked carefully at the bedraggled figure before him. A gangly pile of arms and legs and elbows stared back. The girl fit badly into her blue uniform, which had soaked into misshapenness under the rain and spray. Above the blue collar, dark brown eyes stood out clearly against pale skin - actually, was that a touch of green to the skin? The entire mess was topped by a pile of red hair.

Reginald noted her overall fairness with a trace of pity. Manning a ship of war burned fair skin over and over without mercy. If the newcomer didn’t tan quickly - or at all - then she was in for an
entirely new world of suffering. He also noted her hints of seasickness with something like incredulity. A Kul Tiran without sea-legs? Impossible.

During his musings the figure had obviously taken herself in hand. She drew herself up, touched a shaking hand to the brim of her hat, and opened her mouth to speak. She then shut it again abruptly, swallowing heavily and breathing deeply through her nose before trying again.

“Permission to come aboard, Sir.”

“What is your name?” said Reginald, kindly enough.

“Fitzwillamia Fitzwilliams, Sir. To be a Midshipman,” the girl sighed.

“Good Tides, another one?” spluttered Reginald, before mastering himself. “Very good, Miss Fitzwilliams. Did you bring your sea chest with you?”

“Yes Sir; it is at the entry port.” Fitzwilliams swayed slightly as a particularly fierce tug of the tides pulled at the anchored *Intrepid*. Her face went even more white, if such a thing were possible.

Reginald noted her distress with growing discomfort. “I’ll detail a hand to move it to the midshipman’s billet, but you cannot follow yet I am afraid. The captain prefers to meet all arrivals before they settle in, in case she decides she must pack them off again. I would advise you not to tarry to the meeting.”

“Aye aye, Sir,” said Fitzwilliams. Her culture, her training, her very identity told her this was the only answer possible. Just as much cultural pressure beat down on her at the mere whisper she might be found unworthy and sent back to shore. Her family might never look at her again.

Reginald looked expectant, and Fitz belatedly brought her hand to her brim again. He returned her compliment, and gestured sharply towards a drenched cabinboy huddling under a pitched tarpaulin.

“Boy! Take Miss Fitzwilliams down to the captain’s cabin!”

“Aye aye, Sir.”

Fitzwilliams stumbled after the boy, moving aft towards a small hatchway. The seasickness which made every motion agony also made her unsteady - she barked her knees against a rail when *Intrepid* unexpectedly pitched, and her stomach rolled unpleasantly when she descended the ladder into the twilight of the ’tweendecks. She stooped uncomfortably in deference to the low ceiling. A host of smells and tastes assaulted her - oil, sweat, damp, and tar. The heaviness of the air stuck to the back of her throat. At the foot of the ladder, the boy waited with studied indifference and a just a hint of impatience.

“Come along, Ma’am.”

He tracked down a small, shadowed corridor and fetched up against a door. A silent Marine stood guard there, just slightly too tall for the desk space, but with his musket sloped neatly. The boy gestured to the door and then retreated.

“Midshipman Fitzwilliams, to see the captain,” Fitz said, hating how weakly her voice carried.

The sentry eyed her incuriously and knocked heavily on the door. He pushed it open slightly but didn’t look in.

“Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams, Ma’am,” he called loudly.
“Come!” came the imperious command, and Fitz forced herself to enter the cramped cabin.

Captain Forster was an active, quick-tempered woman. In command of one of the finest frigates of the fleet, her history dripping with rich prizes, her reputation was such that places aboard the *Intrepid* were highly sought after and keenly contested. Not for her was the sullen, resentful dregs of the press against the Drust, or the castoffs of the training schools. Her officers admired her greatly, and tended to be either highly skilled or highly born. Frequently they were both both.

Fitzwilliams had a keen mind, and knew without a shadow of a doubt that she was neither.

For such a famous sailor, Forster was unprepossessing in person. Dark haired, brown-eyed. She sat behind a sturdy desk, lanterns already lit to compensate for the fading light from the big stern window. Her steward worked steadily in the limited space, maneuvering around the canons secured and ineffectively camouflaged by coverings. The desk was strewn with papers.

“Miss Fitzwilliams,” Forster said formally. “Welcome aboard my ship.”

“Yes Ma’am,” said Fitzwilliams. It seemed sensible to say either that or “aye aye ma’am” for the foreseeable future.

Forster pulled towards her a sheet of paper that somehow seemed sadder than the rest.

“Let me see. Yes, I recall now. Seventeen years of age. Posted midshipman last month.”

Since that was the sum and total of Fitz’s brief career, it was not a surprise when Forster pushed the sheet away. Her eyes held no hint of warmth.

“I cannot imagine you are of a different quality, or something I have not seen before, Miss Fitzwilliams. You are the third such Midshipman from your family come aboard the *Intrepid*.”

“Yes Ma’am,” said Fitzwilliams, who was indeed a great deal different.

“Seventeen,” stated Forster coldly. “You should have started at twelve.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“I have no time for privilege or idleness aboard my ship, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Forster, who was clearly warming to her topic. “You will attend to your orders at every instant, or you will regret it.”

“Yes Ma’am,” said Fitzwilliams. Frankly, she was slightly unsure sure how well the interview was going, but she had a cool head in a crisis.

“A wastrel’s daughter from a disgraced line,” said Forster. “You should have chosen better stock from which to spring if you wished to make a career for yourself.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Your education - detail it.”

“To the sixth form, Ma’am.”

“So you can compose shanties and speak Thalassian?”

“Yes Ma’am,” Fitzwilliams allowed. “But not very well, Ma’am.”

“You will find no such uselessness in the fleet,” Forster said emphatically, eyes flashing. “It would
have been better if you had applied yourself to Trigonometry and arithmetic. Better again to understand Tidesages and tide-tables."

“Yes Ma’am,” said Fitzwilliam. Truth to tell, her life at home had been an unhappy one, crammed among nine children, and she was often squeezed out of the rambling house. The great University nearby had been a refuge from the sleet and from boredom; several of the most eminent of the professors had taken to tutoring her after finding her skulking at the back of their classes. Her mathematics were quite advanced.

It did not strike her as a good idea to tell this to Forster.

The captain was now gritting her teeth, staring at her with dark eyes.

“Well. It cannot be helped. Obey your orders, learn your duties. That is all.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” said Fitz, retiring.

The door closed behind her with a sharp snap. So she was to stay then - that was just as well. Fitz thought she had better find her berth before the Captain changed her mind, and stumbled out into the bowels of the ship. The gloomy underdeck heaved with crew and cables, and the light was dim. It was only through sheer dumb luck that Fitzwilliams managed to stumble into one cavity rather than another one. But that dumb luck did pay through, and in the shadows of the tallow dip lay a table around which were seated four young Officers in various states of undress.

The young man at the head of the table thumped the table with one heavy fist and eyed her with pleasure.

“Fitz, you rascal! What took you so long?”

The other Middies eyed him in confusion. He ignored this.

“Well? Speak up, sister - tell the others what our father named you. Best get it over with.”

Fitz felt a wave of nausea overcoming her - the stuffiness of the air below and the rank of confined humanity only poured salt on that open wound. Her smiling, hale brother only made things worse.

“Fitzwillamia Fitzwilliams,” she gasped out, wavering.

“My condolences,” stated one of the other young men at the table, sounding reasonably sincere. “Your parents must have been drunk. But how do we tell you apart from the Fitz we already have?”

“Hey now -” cut in the male half of the Fitzwilliams’ available progeny, “I’m the senior midshipman abroad. Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams, if you please.” He made an expansive gesture.

The other midshipman grudgingly conceded the rightness of this, but Fitz had already turned away and stumbled back into the darkness.

"Tides!" exclaimed somebody behind her. "Is she seasick?"

"Seasick at harbour!" said somebody else, in a tone of amazement. "Did your father marry a foreigner?"

But Fitz had ceased to care; it was her greatest hope that she had turned towards the hatchway. She felt it was imperative that she get air. Failing that, she thought it best to find a shameful kind of privacy to explore her weakness - but another jerk of the Intrepid and Fitz was thrown against the
ladder. With shaking, grasping fingers she dragged herself up the flights to the very top and out into
the open. The shock of freezing air and spray hit her like a living thing, and she fought off her urge
just enough to make it to the side. There she vomited copiously into the water.

Shuddering with cold, Fitz lay there unnoticed and discarded, until the bells struck for the first watch.
In which Fitz finds herself in a spot of danger.

CHAPTER TWO

Those cruel first days at anchor were a blur of disorientation and misery. Only Fitz’s natural strengths of mind compensated for the suffering her stomach put her through; she retained just enough wit to learn the stations allocated to her and those sailors under her eye. Fitz also began the impossible task of memorising all the ropes and stays which comprised the rigging, and what orders the crew needed when the ship was required to move.

Fitz also came to the conclusion that she was lucky - lucky for this gift of time. Time enough to become, if not a useful Officer, then at least not a burdensome one. Time enough to learn names and faces. Time enough for her stomach to grow resigned to its fate. Time enough to begin the harsh apprenticeship expected of an Officer sailing out to engage the Lord Admiral’s enemies.

Captain Forster was a restless woman, suited for the long chase and the craft of war. She was profoundly unsuited for a ship at anchor. Under her watchful eye, both ship and crew were driven hard; water was pumped abroad from heaving, potbellied hoys, kept for only a few days, then dumped into the harbour in favour of a fresher load. Crewmen were constantly scrubbing the smooth deck, even though it was already spotless. Great hogsheads of salt beef and pork were swayed aboard, sampled, then rolled to fill every tiny nook and cranny of the cramped ship. The Intrepid boiled with activity.

Throughout it all, Fitz attended to her duties as the most junior warrant officer aboard. There was little allowance for her ignorance; the Navy had long held the view that that doing a task was its most effective teacher. It was therefore her privilege to take on the darkest, most broken watches, and endure the worst and most difficult tasks - the other officers considered this improving. She stood to her duty uncomplainingly.

Finally, by the time the last of the winter storms had tossed out its fury, the Intrepid put out to sea. The relief of starting out was short-lived; the ceaseless tasks of a ship in port were replaced by the ceaseless tasks of the ship at sea. Ranging alone, the frigate beat proudly up the Gullet, catching fair winds nor-east by east; the sky was ringed with friendly sails, and all the midshipmen grew sick of signalling duties. Finally, forty days from Kul Taris, the sails thinned out, and the choppy waves of the Gullet lengthened out into the long rollers of the open North Sea.

There Captain Forster began to prowl. Intrepid was clawing her way northward under reefed topsails, an easterly wind laying her over as she thrashed along, heading for those latitudes where she would pick up the strong ocean gales that would send her flying. Even now the wind sang in the taut rigging, and blustered around Fitz’s ears as she stood on the starboard side of the quarterdeck. Reginald, with the practiced ease of twenty years at sea, was riding the heaving deck with every sign of enjoyment. A month at sea had also
taught Fitz to balance to the roll rather than being flung about by it; this discovery had improved her quality of life considerably. The roaring wind sent one sparkling wave after another dashing at the ship; the port bow received the wave first, beginning her leisurely climb, heaving the bowsprit up. For a moment she hung there. And then the bows shook themselves free and began to slide down the far side of the wave, the wake cream foam around them. Pitch and roll and heave and then roll again; it was magnificent, especially after Fitz’s seasickness had waned. Unfortunately, she had lost a great deal of weight during her trials, and the food provided was ill-suited to clawing it back on - frankly, she looked like a bundle of sticks in a uniform.

The *Intrepid*'s hunt was for small prey; no great wars had threatened Kul Tiras in centuries, although there were always whispers. Not many foes would dare the Lord Admiral’s wrath - no, nor that of her wife. But little local wars, and raids by smugglers and pirates, kept the Navy’s best minds hard at work. The threat of a big war sharpened the mind of every Kul Tiran. Complete peace tended to be fleeting, even with the powers the Lord Admiral could command. Therefore the Navy sailed, ever watchful, searching for battle. They could keep on station for months without action. An entire deployment could come to a close without so much as the twitch of an enemy sail on the horizon.

Today, Forster was lucky.

"Beat to Quarters!" came a roar from deck.

Fitz had been expecting this; actually everyone had been expecting this. The baggy sails spotted two days ago had spotted them in turn and immediately attempted to flee - a good indication that the *Intrepid* should probably chase. It had been a long, slow overhaul; Forster had her hands running up and down the rigging, setting sails and wearing round the ship to lie as closely to the wind as was possible. The tension was thick. At one point, the hands had been ordered to run out the guns on the weather side to counteract the heel and give *Intrepid* more grip upon the water; Fitz idly sketched out the maths in her mind; a hundred yards gained to windward would count as much as a nautical mile a day at their present speed.

But now, the crew was being promised action. The roar of the marine bandsmen's drums echoed through the ship; the pipes twittered as the bosun's mates repeated the order, and the crew ran in disciplined fashion to their duties. They came boiling out from below like the inhabitants of a kicked ant-heap. Fitz sprinted for the weather mizzen shrouds and started clambering up. Around her were eager grins on half a dozen faces - finally, battle and the imminent possibility of death. Even Fitz was finding possible danger to a welcome change from the eternal monotony of patrolling.

Up in the mizzen-top she looked over her men - unusually, they were all men. Carter, the most senior man, was double-checking that everyone had their musket-locks uncovered and that their priming was sound; satisfied, he nodded shortly at his nominal commander, and she turned her attention towards the swivel gun. She calmly removed its coverings, double-checking the breech was clear before passing back the tampion from the muzzle. She unhooked the ropes which prevented the gun from swinging around when not in use, and then checked that it did indeed now swing around. Finally, she jerked the lanyard which comprised its trigger - the flint struck a strong, clear spark, exactly as it was supposed to do. Carter took position next to her; around him was slung a series of bags and belts holding musket balls and powder. He was the only man not carrying a musket.

“All set, Ma’am?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you Carter,” Fitz replied, stepping back. “Charge the gun, if you would be so good.”

Carter passed her a bag of musket balls and stepped forward to ram home a cartridge down the short muzzle; Fitz pushed the bag of musket balls after it. Then Fitz took a long quill, and forced it down the touchhole. Down below, where the world wasn’t wreathed in canvas and tar-covered ropes, it
was possible to fire guns using slow matches, or even braziers of hot coals. In the shrouded mizzen-top the danger of fire was so great that the expensive flint was a necessary economy. It was too good of a firing position to not have a gun here; Fitz and her men could look down on a hostile quarterdeck and sweep it clear, potentially even killing the captain and his officers in a single definitive blow.

Another squeal from the pipes, and the topmen poured through the rigging, flinging themselves hand-over-hand up the topgallant-shrouds like the gymnasts they were.

"Hands wear ship!" came the shouted order from the deck below, and the Intrepid swung around. The pirate quickly followed, anxious to prevent a lethal broadside smashing into her vulnerable stern. She was a formidable enemy, her wood scarred from previous battle, the crew moving in ways only discipline and experience could explain. Some of those figures were moving up in the yards just like Fitz was; Carter made a rude gesture at them. Just like that the two sets of fighters were shaking their fists and brandishing their weapons. With the ships parallel to each, those enemy marksmen would be the maintop's problem - they could rake the Intrepid's quarterdeck just as easily as she could target theirs. She gazed curiously at the men and women it was to be her duty to kill.

So invested was Fitz in ensuring that her position was ready, the bang of a single cannon actually took her by surprise. She blinked, and the rest of the pirate’s guns crashed out in a dribbling, drabbling stream.

“Fire!” came the cry from below, and a moment later the Intrepid physically staggered as her entire broadside went off at once. Smoke rose in the air, but in the mizzen-top they were not troubled by it. A glance down showed dead Kul Tiran lying on the deck, and more dead bodies strewn around the deck of the pirate. Fitz looked back to the pirate's quarterdeck and estimated the distance; from there the calculations were swift. The weight of powder in the swivel-gun, the force of the wind, the dampness of the day. Her hand went slack on the trigger-lanyard.

"They're shootin' at us, Ma'am," said Carter anxiously.

"Yes," said Fitz, still running through the optimum mathematics. “So they are.”

No musket fired from a heaving masthead at that range could possibly score a hit. Fitz’s calm certainty was apparent in her tone. The men around her steadied. Down below the guns were banging out their rage continuously, and the ships were closing in on each other. Fitz identified a point in her head, and when they reached it, she turned to Carter and the rest.

"Open fire!" she said. “Carter, help me with this.”

There was a ripping rattle of musketry behind her as she turned to stare down the short length of the swivel gun. In the muzzle was a notch by which a bombardier could pretend to aim. Through it she could see the pirate’s wheel, the railings, and a group of officers and men striding about purposefully. She yanked the lanyard. The was a delay that felt like an eternity, but was only a tenth of a second - and then the gun roared out.

The noise was stupendous. The smell of the powder, the smoke and soot. Carter was already sponging out the gun. Fitz coughed, then took a long second to assess her handiwork - frankly, a bad shot. Far too low; the railing had disintegrated and the wheel was missing spokes, but the officers still stood and therefore the pirate ship still had her brain.

At that moment the whole top lurched; Fitz felt it move but could not explain it. There was too much happening at once. A man behind her cried out and fell. The solid timbers under her feet quivered. Carter was ramming in another cartridge just as something struck the gun with a screeching clang;
the bright splash of metal indicated how close some marksman had come to ending Fitz’s career permanently. But Fitz was too busy to give this much mind; she took out the sharpened quill and coaxed it down into the touchhole again. Carter was busy loading the gun with more balls, and packing the wadding tightly.

Fitz sighted down the notch again; this seemed more difficult this time, as the ship seemed to be swaying even more than usual. Around her men were crying out in fear and alarm, but Fitz had finally got her range in and ignored it all. She carefully centered her aim on the central character of the enemy quarterdeck, then tugged at the lanyard again. The smoke and embers boiled around her, and her ears rang - but when it cleared away, she could see this second blow was a telling one.

Enemy officers lay like heaps of broken trash around the quarterdeck, and the wheel was a ruin of its former self.

Below her feet was a moaning, cracking, groaning sound. The timbers beneath her feet began to cant. The mast was falling. Some lucky shot from the enemy’s broadside must have punched through the wood below and the force of the wind on the sails was ripping it apart. Fitz turned to see two of her men dead, and the others looking for her orders with a kind of despair. The mast began to give way.

“Hold, boys!” Fitz heard her voice cry. “Hold for my signal! When it comes, jump for your lives!” A musket-ball zipped by her head, accompanied by the smell of heated lead. She turned and pointed at the mainyard. “She’s going to settle forwards! There is your target!”

The mizzenmast was swaying back and forth, and really Fitz had no idea if it would settle forwards towards the mainyard or would tip backwards and drop them all into the sea. But if it went backwards they were all dead, and her crew wouldn’t live to judge her wrong.

Everything above her was a ruin. Sails spars and ropes were smashed into broken tangles, and the mizzen-topsail had torn itself free. Fitz’s eyes met Carter’s. Then she straightened, reset her hat, and ran out slightly along the yards, distaining the footrope.

This wasn’t heroics - she was simply afraid that if she tried to jump from her previous position, she would get tangled up or trip over a rail and plunge to the deck sixty feet below. A quick glance told her that her men had followed her out.

The mast began to slip, to roll. The worst, most terrible sound accompanied it; the deep, thrumming groan was louder than all the spars smashing, and twang of ropes parting. It was louder even than the guns still crashing out below, and the screaming. The mast tilted forward.

"The mainyard!" Fitz screamed. “Jump!”

Around her figures launched themselves into the air. She turned. One figure had slipped during his attempt, landing bodily on the yard. His feet now kicked helplessly in the air, searching for the footrope. The mast tilted back again, away from safety. The rolling was gaining speed. Fitz needed to jump.

With a curse, she turned and run back along the narrow beam, dropping hard to straddle the yard and grab at his slipping fingers. Carter’s eyes looked up at her, full of terror.

“Grab on, man!” Fitz yelled angrily, “Take my hand!”

The panicking topman didn’t seem to grasp the point of her command. She grabbed at the back of his shirt and hauled him up. Straining, he managed to get one leg over the yardarm and pull himself completely up. He stayed there, panting.
“Up, man!” Fitz yelled, “Up!"

Around her the mast was tilting and rolling back towards the mainmast, and once again she pulled herself up to jump. Carter did the same, but froze when he saw the gap. His hands clutched weakly at a fallen shroud, steadying himself.

“Go!” snapped Fitz. “Jump, damn you! Jump, you lubberly fool!”

Carter finally let go of the shroud he was clinging to. With an abrupt, lurching motion he toppled forward. His hands reached out, and he plunged towards safety. Fitz didn’t stick around to watch his progress - she pushed off as well, but not as strongly. Her hands clutched desperately at the outermost shroud, and she swung around crazily. Then she was scrambling up and along the canvas, mad with panic. Here was the precious wooden mainyard, and she threw herself across it, gripping it with her whole body, feet feeling for the footrope. Finally, she was safe and steady.

Behind her, the mizzenmast gave a tearing shriek and gave way. It toppled backwards - ropes and spars and splinters of wood - straight into the sea behind them. Instantly men swarmed over the ropes and wreckage that remained with axes, chopping frantically at what bound the mizzen to the Intrepid. The sails and mast were like a huge sea anchor, making steerage uncontrollable, tearing apart the deck, and threatening to damage the rudder. It needed to be cut away.

Fitz slow-walked along the yard towards the maintop. The face of her grinning brother met her there.

"You looked like an idiot," said Mr Midshipman Fizwilliams, helping her in. "A flying idiot. Thought you were a goner, frankly. I was trying to figure out how to tell mother."

Fitz shot him an unimpressed look, and turned to count up the survivors. They stood, surrounded by those fellows stationed in the top, panting and red-faced. Adrenalin burned clean paths through Fitz, and with a shock like an electric current, she remembered that they were in the thick of battle.

Everything had gone pretty quiet though - there was no banging and roaring of cannons and muskets, and even the continuous yelling was much less than before. She staggered to the side of the top with an effort and looked over. Her brother came with her.

Below her, on the pirate’s deck, stood a figure wearing a glittering hat. Surely that was the First Lieutenant of the Intrepid, Lieutenant Cordiner. Even now she was surrounded by figures running to do her bidding.

"What?" young Fitz asked the other Fitz, confused.

Her brother stared at her blankly before laughing. "Prizemoney, sister mine! The instant we got near her the boarding party was away, and the whole ship was taken. Why sink her when we can have prizemoney? Weren’t you paying attention?"

“I was thinking of other things,” Fitz replied shortly. She felt sick, but didn’t want to vomit up here - knowing her luck, and judging by the roll of the ship, she’d sweep the deck with more efficiency than the swivel-gun ever could.

"I must go on deck and report," she said instead, looking around. “Mizzentop hands, follow me.”

Fitz had a strong head for heights and had found pleasure in the task of climbing up and down the rigging, but for some reason now the whole affair seemed difficult. Her body didn’t shake, exactly, but it certainly felt clumsy and weak. It was with relief that her feet hit the deck, and the short trip to the quarterdeck supervising the clearing away of the wreck of the mizzenmast. Behind her, the remains of her section bunched together and watched her.
Captain Forster was on the quarterdeck, giving orders about her and pacing. Despite Fitz’s attempts to report to Lieutenant Reginald without being seen, Forster gave a start of surprise at the sight of her, and a second later she strode up.

"I thought you were overside with the tides," she said gruffly, acknowledging the hastily performed compliments of the other two officers. She glanced aloft, calculating. "You reached the mainyard in time?"

"Yes, Ma’am."

“Fine shooting before that,” the Captain said. Her facial expression was unreadable. She glanced behind Fitz, over to where her section was still huddling. Fitz took a quick glance over there as well. The Captain looked at the sailors for a steady second before her eyes narrowed in consideration.

“That second shot. It happened after the mast was hit?"

“Yes Ma’am,” said Fitz, slightly puzzled.

“Excellent. Well. To your duties.” Forster turned away. “Mr. Reginald, reconstitute the crew, if you please!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” Reginald called, and then turned to the Bosan.

Soon there came a shouted “Vast heaving, there! Barrywhite, steady with that pulling!"

Reginald and Fitz watched the men be chivved about for some minutes; without a mizzentop to man, Fitz was at a bit of a loss as to what her duties now were. Reginald seemed in no hurry to redistribute her.

"No more trouble with the men for a couple of months," he said cheerfully. "That mizzenmast will need replacing and refitting, then rerigging. We're going to be bone tired. The prize crew will leave us shorthanded as well, and the dead."

"Yes, sir," said Fitz. “May I be dismissed to my section, Sir?"

“Of course Miss Fitzwilliams, of course.” Reginald waved her off, and Fitz trudged wearily back down towards her men.

“Clyburn, report,” she ordered curtly.

“Three dead, two wounded Ma’am,” Clyburn said. “Hoiser was killed by a musket, Illingsworth by a splinter. And you know about Carter, of course Ma’am, falling off the shrouds at the end there. Damned shamed about that Ma’am, begging yer pardon, as he were that close to safety.”

Fitzwilliams looked at him.

“Yes,” she said.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

In which Fitz finds herself in rather an awful lot of danger.

CHAPTER THREE

*Intrepid* was a fine and gallant sight as she boldly made her way eastwards, sailing freely down the wild coast. Forster had taken advantage of the fine sailing weather over the springtime and summer to continue her patrol in the north, only beating back down towards Kul Tiras in time to avoid the winter storms. Even then they hadn’t docked - merely made rendezvous with the innumerable lighters and hoys needed to replenish *Intrepid*’s depleted stores. Then Forster went seeking further duty south. Fitz’s second spring on station had found her bold ship on the eastern edge of the Great Sea, guarding the convoys that formed the heart of Kul Tiran power.

*Intrepid* was still on detached patrol. The Great Combined Fleet was sailing somewhere off in the west, showing the flag and projecting the Admiralty’s might. Regular displays of force tended to have a salutary effect on those wondering if the Admiral was declining in her old age. But this left only small squadrons and single ships to quash the pirates that sprang up to menace the merchantmen.

Midshipman Fitzwilliams the Younger was walking the lee side of the quarterdeck. The spraying water which hit her was an unfortunate consequence of her status as the most junior of the officers of the watch - not for her the high and dry side - but it was a lovely morning, with favourable winds, clear sunlight, and an easy current. Not even the extremely salty nature of this morning’s boiled beef could upset her from her mood - Fitz was positively cheerful.

Midshipman Porter, the second-most senior middy in the wardroom and a pretty good sort, approached her at her post with a grave expression. Fitz stilled her expression.

“Most Noble and Courageous Scion of house Fitzwilliams,” intoned Porter, bowing with multiple flourishes and twirls. “I beg an audience of you in order to deliver a missive from Captain Forster.”

Fitz jerkily bowed several times in return.

“Most humbly will I condescend to receive this largess,” she replied. “Her munificence moves me.”

They flourished their hats at each other again and bowed several more times, before a cleared throat interrupted them. Lieutenant Carrick, the fourth lieutenant, stood at the windward side of the quarterdeck, and he did not look amused. Fitz shoved her hat back on and nodded a quick goodbye to Porter, before resumed the series of duties watchstanders were expected to undertake. The monotonous updating of the log, the flipping of the sandtimer, the periodic sounding of the well and
the setting of hands to pumps - over the last year Fitz had gotten used to the routine, and more duties besides. Carrick deigned to call her over at one point to drill her in navigational mathematics, which Fitz undertook with pleasure. Overall it had been a quiet, easy, pleasant watch.

When the first bell struck, Fitz struggled into her best clothes - which had been shabby hand-me-downs even before a year of salt had tarnished them - and by two bells she stooped quietly in front of the Captain’s cabin, waiting to be called into that august presence. There her brother had slapped her heartily on the back, which was her first indication that he too had been invited.

There was a surprising number of lieutenants at that dinner in the great cabin of the Intrepid. Forster was a quick and lively host, sending the conversation darting along a multitude of interesting channels - no mean feat when all those present had been in each other’s exclusive company for over a year. The two senior lieutenants, Cordiner and Reginald were there, as well as Carrick, and the sailing master, Ward. Braithwaite, the third lieutenant, was absent; he was the unlucky soul who held the watch. The two Midshipmen Fitzwilliams kept small and silent, as behooved their status, and as was demanded by their appetite for dinner. The midshipmen’s communal stores had run out long ago, meager as they had been to begin with. With nine children the Fitzwilliams’ were unlikely to be able to afford to send anything choice by packet to supplement Navy rations. The current spread therefore represented the only break from boiled salt pork or salt beef the Fitzwilliams siblings had seen for over two months.

"A glass of port for you, Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams," said Forster, raising her glass. “Perhaps your sister could try the brandy.”

The Fitzwilliams’ attempted to perform courtesies gracefully in their seats in reply to this bounty - standing to bow their thanks was quite impossible under the low ceiling. Fitz drank carefully and slowly; she had not managed to regain the weight lost in her initial seasick months at sea, and as a consequence was impaired sharply by even the smallest hints of alcohol.

In time, the remains of the food were cleared away - Fitz had toasted the Lord Admiral, as was tradition for the youngest present - and a tension fell over the assembled officers as they waited for Forster’s orders.

"Mrs Ward," said Forster, "please unroll the map, and mark out our position."

It was a chart of the Bay of Birds, on the wild coast. The mouth of the Feste river was labelled with soundings, and markings covered Ba’reeri’ae Island. Somebody had pencilled the icon for a fortress on it.

"The Barrier Island Fortress," said Forster (she did not condescend to pronounce it in the Elvish fashion), "lies just here. And beyond its lies the Ravager."

She tapped the Feste River. “Ravager hit a Kul Tiran convoy a month ago, and cut out the Northern Star as a prize - a prize full of rice and spices, the loss of which has caused the Admiralty great consternation."

"I will maneuver the Intrepid to get you close enough. Then I will engage the Ravager. At the same time, the boats will be dropped and the merchantman will be taken. Lieutenant Cordiner will be in general command of the boarding party. I will ask her to tell you her plan at that point."

The iron-haired first lieutenant looked round at the others.

"We shall take the cutter and the launch," she said, "Mrs Ward will command the one and I the other. Thirty of the most able of the hands in each. Carrick will stay here to support the Captain. Each of
the boats will have a junior officer second in command. Mr Fitzwilliams, you will be with me."

It was a large force that was being dispatched - a hundred people, or nearly a quarter of the ship's company.

"The Star will be well guarded," explained Cordiner, reading their thoughts. "And it’s a merchantman with ten guns a side. The pirates will need to be subdued with haste. But once she is under sail then she will escape with ease - a single pirateship will find recapturing it in the face of the Intrepid a difficult task."

Captain Forster leaned forward and tapped the chart again.

"The last element is the Barrier Fortress. It is only a little post, but its guns could potentially make life unpleasant for anyone taking the Star back out of the bay again."

She turned to Reginald.

"You will take the gig," she said. "And a party of Marines. It is only lightly defended. Your orders are to take and hold it until the Star is safely at sea again. Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams will assist you."

Fitz felt a momentary jolt of disappointment - it was clearly a relegation to the safest, quietest post - but held her peace. Her job was to obey orders diligently and excellently, even those given to her out of doubt in her abilities.

"We will be re-taking the Star by night," said Cordiner. "It is imperative that no noise is made."

"Speed is key," put in Forster, "I find that surprise is the best spice for any Kul Tiran seeking battle, ladies and gentlemen. Please pardon the interruption, Ms. Cordiner - continue."

"At this moment," went on Cordiner, "we are in sight of the pirates and their spyglasses. We will beat out to sea again at around dusk - it is a good new moon, and the tides are coming in. We have never hung about this part of the coast, and we are only one ship besides - the pirates are bound to think we've gone for good. High water to-morrow morning is at three fifteen; dawn is at five-thirty. The attack will be delivered at four. The tide will take us out and the Intrepid will stand in to meet us and engage the pirate."

Cordiner looked round at the other officers, and they nodded understanding.

"Mr Reginald, the fortress must be taken by sunrise to ensure the boats won’t be spotted, and an alarm cannot be raised. When you see the Star clear the bay, you are to row with all haste back to rendezvous with either her or the Intrepid."

"Any comments, gentlemen?" asked Forster.

Fitz looked round at the unmoving faces; she should say something. She should say something about how she had barely any skill with a cutlass, about how she was the physically least prepossessing of all the midshipmen on board. That her dead reckoning navigation was superb, such as would be convenient to sail a small boat right up to an enemy, as was her skill at ascending the rigging at night.

But nobody was paying any attention to her, and she shied away from making herself conspicuous - especially when such commentary could open her to questions of cowardness. She swallowed hard and stayed silent.

"Very well, then, ladies and gentlemen," said Forster. "We will break up into our respective parts
and go through the plan again in more detail."

And then it was too late. Reginald, with a smaller chart in front of him, was having her plot the currents and tides which lay between where the Intrepid would drop her boats and the little rock with the tiny fortress atop it. The other side of the table was cluttered with officers noting the positions of sandbanks and river flows, pirate villages and possible sources of light. Then Fitz was sent out to organise and prepare the gig with supplies - food, ammunition, weaponry. She had barely any time to contemplate her apprehensions.

“Clyburn!” she called. A pigtailed, tattooed seaman scampered up and put his knuckles to his forehead.

“Ma’am?”

“Muster the section, Clyburn. And another twelve more.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am.”

After a year at sea, Fitz knew every single man and woman aboard the ship, and trusted Clyburn did also. The sailor knuckled his forehead again, but Fitz had already turned away.

“Mr Braithwaite, Sir!” she called. “Lieutenant Reginald sends his regards, and asks that the Marines be mustered immediately to the port gig.”

“Thank you, Miss Fitzwilliams, I will send word.”

In the waist the gig's crew formed up for inspection. Fitz double-checked that the oars were wrapped in the cloth which would dampen noise, and that each man and woman had weapons. She physically inspected each of the pistols to make sure they were unloaded and uncocked - the initial assault would be made at the point of the bayonet and the cutlass only. In the meantime, the party of blue-jacketed Marines marched smartly up to the entry port, led by a sword-wielding Captain Hinckley. There was an interminable wait, as the Intrepid crept close enough to the Island to launch the boat.

Finally, Lieutenant Reginald came for one last inspection before nodding and ordering everyone away into the gig.

In this whole time, Fitz had not managed to exchange one word with her brother, or he with her.

Fitz brought up the rear of the party, leaving the longest jump for her when it came time for her to transfer herself. With a nimble leap she left the Intrepid, cleanly clearing the gunwale of the gig but landing awkwardly in a heap on a group of bodies. Hands reached out to steady her, and she straightened with a jerk.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the huge woman she had effectively bowled into. That bulk had barely moved, but still. “Thank you for the help.”

“Never mind Ma’am,” said the woman. “Better a jump too much inside than too much overside.”

The sailors around here nodded in agreement with this wisdom.

“Miss Fitzwilliams!” called Reginald. "Position yourself beside Jackson. You will debark last and follow the orders of Major Hinckley should I fall."

“Aye aye, Sir.” Fitz said. Captain Hinckley nodded to her.

Jackson was the coxswain, the enormous woman who had prevented Fitz from tumbling into the
water. She was the veteran of twenty years at sea, and more boarding actions than Fitz had years alive.

Fitz suspected she was being quietly coddled, and she didn’t like it.

Reginald gave the command to shove off, and seated himself in the bow. Fitz quietly called navigation points to Jackson, who held the tiller — her giant hand on the solid bar of wood was steady. The Marines lined the centre of the gig as the oarsmen began to pull slowly and carefully. There was plenty of time - over half an hour to get to the shore - and the flowing tide was with them. Silence was essential and more than essential - the fortress might be small, but the shore battery inside it was unquestionably enough to menace the *Intrepid*. The tiny gig would not stand a chance if the garrison was to wake and fire on them.

Fitz was far too busy gauging current and speed to think about the destination. It was only when Reginald called back that land was in sight that she remembered she was probably in mortal danger.

With a light crumbling crunching noise, the gig ran itself up the sandy beach. Instantly, men and women hopped the gunwales and staggered up the shore, sloshing through the water and dropping into the rocks which covered this section of the shoreline. The Marines formed up in a neat line. Fitz saw a small party detach itself to seize a particularly prominent feature and anchor the flank. With a start, she realised she was now the last still aboard the gig, and could now leave it in accordance to her orders. Not a single shot had been fired, or steel employed.

Dropping to the sand, she quickly spotted Clyburn, and organised the unloading of the spare ammunition. Reginald and Hinckley were in deep discussion further along the beach - with mounting confusion, Fitz wondered why they hadn’t moved to seize the battery yet. Finally she was waved over and brought into their confidence.

“The map is wrong,” Reginald said bluntly. “There was supposed to be a second route into the fortress from this direction. We will have to move up to the wall and find another way in.”

Fitz nodded and turned to organise the men.

With a small party left to secure the gig, the little force moved deeper into the rocks, working their way up a steep gully. More than once an unwary foot dislodged rocks, sending them tumbling down on the unprotected heads of the soldiers and sailors behind. More than once, a hissed command brought the column of Kul Tirans to an abrupt halt, peering out into the darkness for hints of sentries or other dangers.

With every passing second, Fitz grew more concerned about the time. The fortress must be taken before the *Northern Star* attempted to flee - not only to save the valuable cargo from red hot cannonballs being launched from this fort into her merchantman sides, but also because they still had to then evacuate the fortress in enough time to return to the *Intrepid*.

At least in the dark, Fitz was proving her worth; her uncanny sense of direction had already prompted Reginald to bring her forward to his position. She was now possibly the only Kul Tiran who knew along what heading they moved.

Finally came the hissed word, passed down to the command group from the head of the column.

"Fort in sight, Sir."

"Excellent. How far?"

"Four hundred yards, Sir. Perhaps less. Major Hinckley has halted the advance for your arrival, Sir."
"Thank you."

There could be only one Captain of a ship of war - Hinckley would be promoted by courtesy by every Jack Tar in the Navy to avoid confusion. Fitz trailed along behind Lieutenant Reginald, dread gnawing her innards, but Reginald seemed positively buoyed by the promise of action - his silhouette in the dark was firm and fierce. The pace of the sailors behind them increased to match theirs.

Hinckley was waiting for them at the approach; she quietly pointed out the ditch, the walls, the heavy gate. In the dark the Fortress seemed to loom out. The night was still, bar the steady flapping of some pennant the pirates had been too lazy to take down. Fitz forced herself to relax, to shoulder her cutlass and turn to the sailors that surrounded her. They were shadows in the pitch night.

Arrangements were quickly made. Orders were passed along the line, and then back again to ensure accuracy. Warnings were given. The Marines and sailors fanned out into a line of attack.

Hinckley gave the order to fix bayonets.

"You take the right, Miss Fitzwilliams," Reginald ordered. "Hinckey will have the left, and I will take the centre."

"Aye aye, Sir." replied Fitz, slipping away. She barely felt tired, even after scrambling up a gully in the dark. Her presence was welcomed with pleasure on the right flank by Clyburn, who knuckled his forehead and took his place beside her.

"Prepare for the attack," said Fitz. Then she waited for the Lieutenant to order the charge. But on the left, she could hear the sounds of the men in the center already moving. Rocks being kicked, plants being brushed aside carelessly, yelling and the calling out of orders. The attack had begun without clear orders being sent to her.

That was of no matter; she stood and held up her cutlass. The centre couldn’t hold without the flank secure and in support - therefore, her duty was clear. Beside and around her men and women rose to their feet, their bulk reassuring.

"Forward!" she called. "Steady as she goes!"

The line began to walk forward, keeping to her pace. Adrenaline burned through her, but she knew to keep it slow. The energy they’d waste now would be precious beyond price when they reached the objective. A single wave needed to crash onto the walls of the fortress - not the faster runners outpacing the slower, splashing droplets of one or two. The fort bulked square in front of them, dark and forbidding.

She quickened her step at two hundred yards. At fifty yards she broke into a run. Distantly, she could hear the baying of the soldiers and sailors as they followed her up; to the left she could see the centre pressing forward apace, bunching together as they ran.

Suddenly, there was the ditch - six feet deep, a scar in the dirt. Fitz almost laughed at its inadequacy before the crew of a frigate’s rigging. Even with a cutlass, or a musket, it was no feat at all to drop into it then scale the opposite side.

"Hoist the Marines!" shouted Fitz to her sailors, and some of them dropped to their stomachs to grab at arms. Marines were pulled up boldly. Other sailors flung ropes and grapples up to the top of the walls, jerking the ropes until they caught fast. The first of the sailors began hauling herself up. Before she had even cleared the ramparts, two more sailors had also seized the rope and followed her up, hand over hand, cutlasses slung in belts or hooked into slings. The Marines started pushing forward
to get an early place on one of the lines.

From the interior of the fortress now came yelling and screaming; a musket went off, and the smell of powder lay faintly on the still air. There was a strange metallic grating sound, like a barbarian’s spoon scraping sauce from the bottom of a pot. It could only be cutlasses clashing together in deadly earnest.

Fitz had lost sight of the centre, and the left flank had never been discernible from where she had stood. But the center and left were the core of the assault; her right flank was mostly supposed to be diversionary. Fitz turned and ran along the wall to check on the progress of the main effort.

The sight wasn’t good; the center boiled with confusion. The line of soldiers and sailors was recoiling away from the walls, but its efforts to withdraw were being prevented by the steep-sided ditch. Fitz took in the course of the skirmish at a single glance.

The center had aimed its assault at what had seemed in the dark to be a sally port - a wooden door with thick bands of rusting metal wrapping around it. Even now a small knot of sailors was struggling to get into its lee, hiding from pirates firing down from the walls with muskets.

Fitz felt for the cutlass at her side and the pistol in her belt, and then she sprang for the nearest group of Kul Tirans. With a mad leap she cleared the bodies which littered the way, reached the knot of sailors, then stood straight and true before them all.

“Rally to me, Intrepid!” she snapped, “Get away and fight, damn you!”

She threw aside one sailor who was blocking the door and inspected it closely, just as the flash of another musket shot lit the night. Where was Lieutenant Reginald?

“Axemen!” she cried. “Axemen to me! Axemen to the center! Steady, Intrepid!”

Around her sailors took up her call. The centre surged forward again, rallying about the surety her orders were providing. Men and women who had been mere moments from breaking now threw themselves prone so as to lay still against the ground. They were watching her and waiting. Fitz had no time to waste thinking about them.

Within a minute a woman raced forward with a heavy ship’s axe. It was Jackson, and an instant later she began to hack and chop at the heavy door. Jackson was a powerful figure, hardened from a lifetime of Kul Tiran service; her blows were methodical and steady. She gleamed with sweat as she threw herself into the task. The blows rained down upon the door, increasingly kinetic. Fitz unhooked her pistol and her cutlass in preparation.

With one last massive swing, the door broke completely in half. Fitz barely had enough time to claw Jackson out of the way before a volley of musket shot fired from within splintered what remained.

For a moment, Fitz was gripped by a paralyzing force. Her entire body rebelled against the idea she would step through the doorway; it was raw, unadulterated fear of the most powerful kind. But Fitz was also an officer - more, an officer from a family held in low regard, famous for producing men and women of little talent, sneered at on the street. She could not bear the thought of her mother thinking she was a coward, nor could she stand to let the sailors around her think that the slander aimed at Fitzwilliams’ was true. Better to be shot down by a pirate’s musket, better to be gutted by a rusty cutlass than prove general opinion to be correct.

“Come on, Intrepid!” she roared, plunging through the sallyport.

Now here was the open courtyard of the fortress - above along the walls, figures were struggling
against each other, intermittently lit by the flash of a musket report. Before her stood four pirates frantically reloading their muskets, each of them in nightshirts and disheveled. Fitz flung herself upon the first one like a maniac, swinging her cutlass. With a cry the pirate stumbled back, clutching the remains of her hand. Next to her, Jackson had put her axe through a second pirate - Fitz was just fast enough to aim and fire her pistol at the third before the coxswain was stabbed. The flash of the pan and the smoke briefly obscured everything.

Behind her, the center of the assault crashed through the breech and into the fortress like a wave, sweeping all before it. The crew of the right flank helped them from the walls, picking off the unwary with captured muskets hastily loaded from supplies lying strewn about the sentry posts. With a cry, the pirates turned and fled into the building.

“Intrepid!” Fitz cried, mind empty of anything else to say. “Intrepid!”

A blue-jacketed Marine, eyes wild from the charge, ran to her side.

“Both dead!” he yelled looking on the edge of panic. “Both dead! Orders? Orders?”

“Into the building!” Fitz told him firmly. “Rally your men and then into the building. Pen them together and block their approach. Then find the battery!”

The Marine visibly steadied at her tone. Then he saluted and sprinted off again.

There were other Marines, all yelling, all mad with fighting. The seamen were spilling from the walls down into the courtyard, smashing open the doors of the outbuildings and ripping apart everything stored there.

Clyburn appeared at her shoulder, as did Jackson.

“Call them off, Clyburn!” snapped Fitz, “post a guard on the portal, and follow me!”

“Aye aye ma’am!” Clyburn said, knuckling his forehead and plunging into the chaos.

From around the sides of the building came yet more sailors; the left flank had finally broken in, and had come to reinforce them.

“Follow me!” Fitz told the crowd, and rushed on into the building.

Everything was quiet inside. Splashes of dark liquids shone grimly in the torchlight. Fitz made for the ladder and climbed to the very top.

On the roof of the fortress building was the battery. Two large guns, pitted with misuse and neglect, lay peacefully in their carriages. Spread out before her was the entire bay, and standing off just a little way outside of it was the Intrepid. Overhead a large standard flapped - the pirate symbol was something vulgar with lightning and skulls. The sky was brightening up with the light of the dawn.

Fitz looked at that dawn grimly. It had been a near-run thing; the delays imposed on them by Reginald’s caution had made capturing the fortress by dawn almost impossible. Even now the tardiness of the assault might well place the boats trying to retake the Northern Star in jeopardy. The Intrepid might not be able to cover the gap.

“Ma’am?” called a voice from the ladder.

“Yes, what is it?”

“We should push the boats all the way up!”
“Major Hinckley, Ma’am. She’s asking for you to come quick. She’s sore wounded, ma’am.”

“I understand. I’ll come at once. Now find Clyburn and tell him to marshal a party to man these guns.”

The sailor knuckled his forehead and ducked back down the hatchway. Fitz gave one last look around before hurrying down herself - but not a moments peace was to be hers. She was interrupted in her stride across the courtyard by Jackson.

“Congratulations, Ma’am.” she said.

“Thank you,” said Fitz.

“We ‘ave all that side, Ma’am,” continued Jackson. “And the building. Prisoners aplenty.”

“I see.”

There was a brief hesitation by Jackson.

“Some got away, Ma’am,” said Jackson. She might have almost sounded anxious. “They booked it out of the main gate and we couldn’t catch ‘em.”

Fitz considered this. “Post a guard on the entrance, Jackson. I’ll rate you a petty officer; take charge there and let no one through.

“Aye aye, Ma’am”

“Carry on, Jackson.” replied Fitz, moving to turn away. Jackson hesitated again.

“Begging your pardon, Ma’am, but you’re bleeding pretty good.”

Fitz glanced down at her coat. There, on the right arm, was a rent in the fabric and a dark stain of blood.

"Just let me fix that up for you, Ma’am.” Jackson pulled the wrap from her head and started to bandage it around Fitz’s arm. “Very reckless, you was, beggin’ your pardon for saying so, Ma’am, sprinting into the fortress all heedless like that. Very reckless.”

She eyed Fitz warily, looking to see how this impudence would be taken.

“Someone had to be first, Jackson,” Fitz stated, flatly.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Let’s hear no more about this.”

“Yes, ma’am.

“Round up your people and carry on.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am.”

This time Fitz could touch her hat in response to the knuckled courtesy. She turned back to looking for Hinckley. She also kept a weather-eye out for signs that the crew had found any alcohol - if liquor was found and consumed the entire force was doomed. Luckily these pirates seemed to be a poor sort; hopefully what stores of spirits they might have brought here had been long since drunk
Captain Hinckley was lying next to Cox, the surgeon's mate. There seemed little Cox could do - Hinckley was still alive and sensible, but the leeking bandage around her torso and the faint smell of the sewer told its own tale.


“The fortress is secure,” replied Fitz. “Lieutenant Reginald is dead.”

There could be no other explanation for the chaos in the center, for the desperation with which sailor and marine alike accepted a lowly midshipman’s authority.

Hinckley groaned. “Plan?”

“The plan is unchanged Ma’am,” said Fitz. “I will man the battery and use it to cover the escape of the Star. Then we will pull off and away in the gig.”

Hinckley seemed to relax slightly. Her face was pale, and she was sweating, even in the chill of the half-dawn. She had no more orders.

“Take four men and carry the wounded down to the gig,” Fitz ordered Cox, after a long moment. “Easy does it.”

Then she turned away. There was a rumble as of thunder, but the sky was clear.

“Clyburn!” she called, and he appeared as if by magic. “Get ready to signal the Intrepid.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” he said, and run off towards the battery.

Fitz was tired, and was now working hard after great exertions, no sleep, and no breakfast. She felt muddy and slow. Although perhaps twenty minutes had elapsed since the fortress at been taken, her mind raced with all the things that should have happened in those twenty minutes that she had failed to do. Another distant boom of thunder rolled out across the sky.

It was a relief to start laying about with orders - to put the worthy in charge of working parties, and to organise the aftermath of the battle. Soon sailors and marines were scurrying hither and thither in accordance with her will.

Nearly all of the dead pirates were being piled into the ditch outside, and Fitz couldn’t help but be surprised at their number. A hastily flagged down marine explained that over forty pirates still lived, locked under guard in the kitchen pantry. It was impossible to tell which of them was in charge, or even if any of them were. Fitz was uncomfortably conscious that the gig had only held thirty-five from the Intrepid, and three of those had been left behind to guard the boat. A quick headcount showed she still commanded a force of twenty-five. Three of the wounded could walk if aided, Hinckley was in mortal danger, and the remainder of the casualties were dead.

Fitz was just pondering the best deployment of her meager forces when Clyburn came racing up again.

“The Star is in sight, Ma’am!” he said. “And being pursued, even though Intrepid is engaged!”

“I’ll come right now,” said Fitz, and they both hurried towards the ladder leading to the battery. The scene at the top was controlled activity. The guns had been unlimbered and rolled out towards the likely direction they would be fired. Shot had been carefully stacked out of the way, and the
“Found a whole magazine, Ma’am” said Clyburn. “Not a good ‘un - no strips of cloth or anything. We’d best be careful, Ma’am - one flash and the whole thing will go.”

“Thank you, Clyburn.” Fitz said. If the magazine went up, then the fortress would be well and truly out of action - the passage for the Star and the Intrepid would be secure. Her mind rapidly thought through the potentials of this, then reluctantly abandoned the idea - there would be no way to set it off in time without killing her crew, and also murdering the helpless prisoners trapped in the pantry.

She turned to the horizon and took in the scene with rising horror.

The Intrepid had beaten out slightly. The reason was fairly obvious; the pirate ship Ravager had engaged her as planned, and the mysterious, rainless thunder was actually the exchange of broadsides. As per the plan, creeping up the channel, sails set, came the Northern Star. But behind her was a second, completely unexpected warship - unlooked for, unplanned for. This new predator was more than a match for the unarmed merchantman.

The Star was well handled, tacking and clawing up into the wind, but she still should have been easy pickings. The pirate pursued her closely, clearly unwilling to risk the cargo to a raking stern-shot. Everything was in range of the fortress battery.

Fitz knew she had to seize control of the men or they might realise how badly wrong this had all gone. She cleared her throat and put a hand on her cutlass.

“Clyburn!” she called strongly. “Lay the guns in on the newcomer - repay them with their own coin. We want to give them a warm, Kul Tiran welcome.”

Around her the hands cheered lustily. The bloody work of the morning had left them in fine fettle; nothing lifted the spirits of a crew so much as winning the day.

“Run up!” Fitz called.

The guns’ crews seized the tackles and heaved. The guns rolled slowly forward to point their muzzles out to sea.

“Fire!” she cried, and the heavy guns boomed out their anger. Eyes strained to see the splash.

“Fairly done, Clyburn,” she allowed. “Just a little short.”

That craggly sailor - at least twice her age, and twenty times her years at sea - flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

The impact of the shot was negligible. Signal flags soared up the mast of the unknown pirate, probably to berate the fortress for their poor aim in almost hitting them. Fitz gauged the factors involved and ordered another screw turn of elevation.

“Fire!” she cried again, and this time there was no splash.

“Did we hit her, Ma’am?” asked Clyburn.

“Perhaps so,” allowed Fitz carefully. “But let us make sure. Fire at will.”

The guns roared out again, the crews sweating with the physical exertion of it. Without the ship’s movement to help them reset the guns back to the ports, they were having to haul the guns in by
main force - on the other hand, they were not straining to keep the guns from giving way from their tackles.

Their fire had definitely caught the attention of the second pirate now; its masts seemed to almost shiver slightly, a telltale sign that the crew aloft were discomforted. The *Northern Star* continued to claw desperately into the wind, slowly winning that deadly race. Each tack of the merchantman was a masterpiece of Kul Tarian seamanship, as precisely done as an Elven ritual.

With a distant boom, the second pirate ship fired a broadside. Fitz heard the whine of cannonballs whistling closely over her head, and around her sailors instinctively ducked.

“Back to your posts, *Intrepid!*” snapped Fitz, still standing. “They couldn’t hit a stationary fortress with an entire broadside of cannon. No need to skulk about like landsmen.”

With a rush, the crew returned to the guns and they thundered out their reply. A lucky shot carried away an enemy yardarm and the ship fell even more behind its prey. The cannon crew cheered their fine shooting heartily.

Fitz seized hold of the flag from the flagpole, hurling it down.

“A prize for the team that cripples her!” she yelled. The pirate flag was tasteless, but frankly so were most of the sailors aboard *Intrepid*. She wrapped it around and across her shoulders like a knight’s sash, figuring she couldn’t look any more ridiculous anyway. The cannon boomed out again.

Suddenly, from below her feet, there came the yells and cries of angry men. That spoon-scrape cutlass sound could be heard, and babble in a foreign tongue. With a curse, Fitz sprang for the hatchway - either the prisoners had come free, or the ones escaped into the rocks of the island had returned. Either way it was time to go.

“Spike the guns and follow me, *Intrepid!*” she yelled to the men behind her. Shot and ball were abandoned as they came tumbling after her. Below was a jumble of men and prisoners. The Kul Tirans appeared to have the upper hand for now, but every second more pirates came boiling up from somewhere inside the building.

“Rally to the courtyard!” Fitz cried, and made her way to the doorway. A couple of sailors stuck with her closely, eyes looking about for danger. She paid them no mind.

In the courtyard the confusion was rapidly giving way to order; marines steadily fired from the walls, which was holding the tide of pirates back. At the gate Jackson stood finishing off the last of a few who had rushed her position. She raised her axe as a signal the way was clear.

“Fall back by divisions!” yelled Fitz calmly. A retreat was the most dangerous of the military maneuvers one could attempt. “Marines, take position at the gate!”

One by one, groups of sailors stood up and rushed back behind the steady line of blue-jacketed muskets. The marine sergeant was calmly walking his people through their drills; at each crash of disciplined fire, the pirates withered and recoiled. With each recoil, the tide became a little less eager to charge that tidy line.

“Excellent work, Sergeant,” Fitz called, falling in beside him. One of the two sailors who had shadowed her out cleared his throat diffidently.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Ma’am, but you’re needed with the retreat.”

“Fine then, damn your eyes,” Fitz growled. “Sergeant - fall back by the numbers.”
“Yes Ma’am,” he said calmly, before continuing the drill count.

Fitz found herself scrambling down the gully, crewmen ahead of her leading the way, tumbling back down to the beach. Once there she rapidly organised the remainder of the ammunition to be dumped into the ocean, before checking on the presence of the wounded, and beginning the loading of the gig with its precious cargo of crew. It seemed like mere moments before the marines appeared as well, falling back in an orderly way, firing methodical volleys back up the path.

“Oars ready!” called Fitz.

The marines let loose one final crashing volley, then the line broke apart. With a sudden rush, the Marines poured across the sand and into the gig, pushing it firmly into the water before climbing onto the gunwales. Willing hands dragged the blue-jackets up and into the boat, and then every man jack of the sailors begin rowing like the wind.

Fitz found herself once again in the stern of the boat, Jackson on the tiller. Figures were now leaping over the rocks on the beach. Fitz discharged her pistol at them to discourage them from coming any closer.

They were now engaged in a desperate race. The *Intrepid* would not be reachable, engaged as she was at the mouth of the bay. The gig would have to pull on an intercept course for the *Northern Star*, which was currently coming up the passage behind them. This was going to be a tricky rendezvous; the gig would need either get a line or transfer aboard completely before the pursuing vessel could catch them, and also before the fortress organised itself enough to fire on their escape.

Fitz kept herself deliberately still and her facial expression unworried. The sailors hauled away on the oars, helped in some cases by marines deeply invested in the little boat's speed. Clyburn called the stroke. Jackson sat, steady and calm, her hands upon the tiller.

Her silent fears about their chances were not unfounded. With a whistling roar, there was a sudden, thumping splash to port and the smell of boiling seawater. The fortress had found the guns, fixed the all-to-hasty spikes, and run them out to fire on the gig.

With a jerk, Fitz realised that the thunder didn’t just come from the fortress; from up the channel the pirate had abandoned the chase. The yardarm shot away had proved the difference in the pursuit, and the *Northern Star* had worked up a definitive lead. The pirate in consequence wore around, and was now firing in frustration at the tiny gig and its fragile crew.

It was an unenviable situation, but even as Fitz wished to find a solution there came the realisation that if the pirate was firing at them, it wasn’t targeting the *Star*. The *Star* had seen the pirate break pursuit and taken a tactical risk, heaving itself around to fill its sails more completely, and at the same time presenting its stern. The increase in speed would take it quickly outside effective broadside range, but in the meantime it was frightfully exposed to a crippling blow by the pirate. The gig being fired-on by the pirate ship protected a hundred of their fellow crew, and however many merchant sailors were on board to be rescued.

The fortress boomed out again, and the shot fell a little closer to the gig. Fitz stood up, and addressed the nearest man.

“Give me your oar!”

He looked at her blankly.

“Your oar, man!” she snarled with impatience. “Give it to me now! Keep rowing, all you rest. Row
for your lives!”

She unhooked the pirate flag, still worn as a sash around her body, and shook it out. It was tricky work to attach it to the oar in a way that wouldn't slip, but only a few cannonballs splashed around them before the makeshift flagpole was ready. Then she held it up so that it streamed behind them in the breeze.

“Raise a cheer, *Intrepid!*” she called to her sweating, rowing crew. “Cheer this cursed flag like its the Lord Admiral’s own pennant!”

They raised a half-hearted cheer. The pirate ship’s straggly broadside shuddered to a halt. Only the fortress continued to boom out its disapproval.

“Jackson, aim the boat for the pirate ship,” ordered Fitz.

Jackson gaped at her in confusion.

“Do as I say, woman!” said Fitz, completely out of patience. She continued to wave the pirate flag as high as she could above the gig.

The gig changed course, visibly angling towards the pirate. Fitz starting crunching the numbers, speeds, current, tangent lines.

The pirate fired again and briefly Fitz felt a blaze of disappointment, until Clyburn cried out in wonder.

“They’re firing on the fortress, ma’am!”

And so they were. Convinced the gig was full of allies, the pirate misunderstood the allegiance of the fort instead. Why else would it be firing on a gig flying the pirate's flag? But if the fort was in Kul Tiran hands, then the pirate ship was blocked from escaping from the bay - and its recapture of the rich prize. The captain, quite correctly therefore, had turned the warship's fire from the gig and towards the real enemy. The fire from the fortress began to slacken under the bombardment, becoming irregular.

“Towards the *Star* now, Jackson!” called Fitz, almost wild with excitement. “Pull, you seamen you!”

The coxswain looked at her in amazement and heeled over the tiller. Around them the cannons still roared - the fortress at them, and the pirate ship at the fortress. The gig, in the middle of all of this, fled towards the shadow of the friendly *Star*, which was slipping quietly away into the mouth of the bay, out of range and safe.

Fitz dropped the oar and its flag down into the gig and looked up at the bulk of the merchantman, the cause of so much activity and confusion. “What ship there?” came the demand, in a Kul Tiran accent.

“Aye aye!” she called back. There was some muffled activity on the deck. “’Ware below!” someone cried, before a heavy rope was dropped into the water. This was seized and wrapped around the prow-hook. The oarsmen gratefully ceased to row, and the *Star* picked up the slack of the line and began towing them along behind.

“We can’t stop to get you!” yelled a voice from up on sterndeck. “The guns of the fortress can still hit us here, and if we pause the pirate might take a chance to catch us. We’ll tow you out and pick you up…”
A huge roar went up behind them, along with a flash of heat and pressure. Fitz turned.

Where the fortress had been there was now a smoking crater. The ill discipline of the pirates, and their poorly baffled magazine, had obviously proved their undoing. Some unlucky shot from the pirate warship had struck a spark in the packed gunpowder, and the eruption had been extraordinary. The pirate herself had been too close, and her foremast had shattered as if under a giant’s blow. Fitz gazed on the scene as if in a dream.

“Three cheers for Miss Fitzwilliams!” cried Clyburn exultantly. The storm of cheering that instantly followed drowned out Fitz’s strong protests. The crew of the boat shouted themselves hoarse, all grinning with enthusiasm for the victories upon victories they had gained for themselves in the last twelve hours. Fitz was miserable with embarrassment.

“All right now, all right. Let’s get up onto the Star and then worry about such things,” she said, hoping desperately she didn’t sound pompous. Jackson, grinning, clapped a hand on the tiller and steered them handily behind.

Later, when Fitz was safely back aboard the Intrepid, (that noble ship having fought the Ravager and conquered it in a subsequently famous duel) the Captain summoned her to the great cabin; so quickly did this missive arrive that Fitz barely had time to change into a coat that wasn’t stained with blood and rent with swordcuts.

“I want your report,” said Forster, steely-eyed.

“I regret to inform you, Ma’am, of the death of Lieutenant Reginald,” Fitz said steadily, “and the loss of several hands. A full recounting has been made to the sailing master. Further, Major Hinckley was critically wounded in the assault and several more were badly injured.”

“Hinckley is also dead,” stated Forster, coolly.

Fitz stayed silent at this news.

“And what of your conduct, Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams?” asked Forster. “Explain to me the sequence of events which led to you abandoning the fortress.”

“Yes ma’am,” replied Fitz. She recounted the events as simply as they could be reduced to. Something in her revolted against being one of those officers that sang their own praises, that grasped for their own glory; she was cruelly aware of her failings on the mission; the delay in the assault, the failure to secure the prisoners correctly, the inadequate arrangements in spiking the guns. She only rose from this simplicity to commend Jackson and Clyburn in the highest terms for their devotion to duty.

Forster listened carefully and was silent when Fitz was done.

“Miss Fitzwilliams…” Forster said, consideringly. “Do you know why you were accepted as a midshipman aboard my ship?”

Fitz imitated that she did not.

“Your eldest brother served with me as a lieutenant aboard the old Trident,” Forster said slowly. “He threw himself on a grenade, which would have killed every man jack of us if he hadn’t.”

She narrowed her eyes at Fitz, then clearly decided she had said enough already.

“You are dismissed, Miss Fitzwilliams. And for the sake of the Tides, get that cut stitched.”
Fitz sketched a salute and saw herself out.

It would be her turn to take the watch in less than an hour, and she didn’t want to be late.
As the Intrepid rounded the horn into Sunsail Anchorage, the crew came to high alert. It was a busy waterway; dredging barges, lighters, and schooners all made way before the warship. The heavy heat of the tropics made the interior of Intrepid stifling; even in the rigging every breath of air was an effort.

Abeam of them peaked the golden walls of the New Fortress. The flag of Quel’Thalas flapped above the central tower, and just below it hung a second, smaller flag - the blue and iron anchor of the Admiralty.

The Intrepid slunk forward under minimal sails, closer and closer under the jaws of the fortress’ guns.

"Haul down!" snapped Captain Forster. The call was instantly echoed by the lieutenant of the watch - the deck erupted into purposeful motion. Officers, red-faced and broiling inside heavy uniform jackets, called orders and strode about commandingly. Under their eyes the anchor was let go, the giant cable spluttering through the hawsehole. Simultaneously, a hundred crew leapt up the mast to pull in the last of the canvas. Quick as a maiden’s fancy, the frigate was riding the tides as neatly as if she had always been there.

"Hmmm," said Captain Forster. Lieutenant Cordiner wiped her sweat-beaded brow with a handkerchief, and allowed herself a small nod of satisfaction.

The Quel’Thalan Navy was descended from the Kul Tiran one, built by the own two hands of their Lord Admiral. Most Kul Tiran would grudgingly concede that Quel’Thalas was a worthy ally, and that they sailed in some fine ships. But those same Kul Tiran sailors - and Intrepid in particular - remained of the opinion that every Elf should stand in awe before Kul Tiran seamanship; by that token, even the least maneuver - like dropping anchor in a friendly harbour - was one that every Kul Tiran ship’s crew would take deadly seriously.

Fitz, signal midshipman of the watch, trained her eyeglass on the fortress’ signal staff, ignoring the high-sided Elven battleships that now surrounded them.

Forward, the saluting gun on Intrepid began to bang out its respect. Over a tonne of powder from the ship’s store would be burned honouring Kul Tiras’s closest and most important ally.

There was a couple of puffs of smoke from the fortress in return - Captain Forster was entitled to nine guns back.

“Miss Fitzwilliams!” bellowed Cordiner. She was of a school that held Midshipmen should always
be bellowed at, as it was inherently improving. “Make our number to the fort!”

“Aye aye ma’am!” said Fitz, making a note with a stub of pencil. In a trice the signal hands were set to bend on the required flags and the messages were sent soaring up the halliards.

“Fort to Intrepid, Ma’am,” Fitz called, watching the return signals fluttering up the fortress’ signal staff. She did not glance at the signal book. “Captain to come aboard flag.”

"Ms Cordiner, call away the quarter boat,” said Captain Forster. “Miss Fitzwilliams, attend me at the entry port."

“Aye aye ma’am!” Fitz and Cordiner said together.

Fitz hurriedly passed the signal book and log over to Midshipman Porter, scrambling after the Captain. She was in acute distress. Her shabby uniform was the very worst out of all the current members of the wardroom; her jacket was a wreck after eighteen months at sea, and her trousers were a seaman’s issue liberated from the slop cupboard. But the Captain was not a woman to be delayed by dilapidated pants. For whatever reason she had decided that Fitz might be useful, and that meant Fitz’s jacket would have to embarrass itself in front of high ranking, fancy, pompous elves.

Forster’s boat was neat and seamanlike; white with blue trimming, and the crew at the oars all in matching checked shirts. Forster herself was also a fine sight, standing at the prow as the boat cut a bright path through the water. Fitz, sitting alongside her, looked like a heap of trash attempting to make itself inconspicuous.

Fitz’s general anxiety was temporarily stymied by the demands of getting onboard the Elven ship. Its tall sides were smooth, and lacked the generous tumble-home of a proper Kul Tiran man o’ war. Getting aboard her was a tricky business.

Somehow Captain Forster managed to get up the side without tangling herself in her sword; foreign bosun’s pipes twittered and squealed their respects. Fitz was less lucky in her ascent. The mangy jacket gained one last rip and tear before she safely gained the rail. Luckily her low rank made it so she might as well have been invisible; the elf standing guard didn’t even bother to acknowledge her compliments as she turned and saluted the quarterdeck.

A gaudily dressed elf was standing at the end of the row of sideboys. He touched his hat to Captain Forster, speaking Thalassian.

"Here now, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Forster, smiling fixedly at him. “Speak Thalassian to this fellow for me please. Render him compliments, praise his… damnable climate. You know the thing."

Fitz turned and in passible Elvish halted out a few courtly phrases. Forster swept into a bow. To Fitz’s relief the elf appeared flattered, and he bowed elegantly back.

Fitz struggled through several more minutes of compliments. Apparently the Elvish admiral was the most excellent and serene Ocean-Brigadier Lord Ya’phess of Quel’Thalas, keeper of the Sunsail Anchorage, Rear-Admiral of the Interior Fleet, etc etc. The elf in front of them - who seemed to be some sort of high-ranking aide - presented the Admiral’s compliments at length to the most Gallant and Stalwart Ship-Captain Alexandra Forster. The Admiral appeared to have expectations.

Fitz cleared her throat.

“The Elvish admiral wants to appoint a lieutenant aboard the Intrepid, Ma’am.”

Forster started involuntarily. Then she went white with anger, despite her tan.
“A foreign admiral appointing a...” she began, then mastered her rage. “He presumes a great deal.”

She grimaced out a smile, pulled her hat off and bowed again. It was a courtly effect. The elf bowed to her in return again.

"Tell him... tell him I receive his message with pleasure.” Forster straightened with a snap and thrust her hat back atop her her. “Then make our excuses to go. Let us be off this lubberly ship, Miss Fitzwilliams! Over the side now - and with dignity, if you please.”

She turned back to the entry port, lifting an arm to signal the waiting quarter boat. The sideboys and bosun’s mates, still at their stations from receiving them aboard, set about piping them off again. The Elvish aide-de-camp looked confounded by their retreat, and made a graceless kind of lunge in trying to stop them. Captain Forster was too quick for him however; in a trice she was over the side, and it was all too late for him to call them back. Fitz noted the expression on his face with guilty pleasure as the crew rowed the boat away.

*Intrepid* was bustling with activity upon their return. Hoys had pulled alongside, crew had been set to the pumps, and everyone was luxuriating in the novelty of unlimited water. Only two fresh gallons per day was a hardship when eating Navy salt pork and beef; this hardship was acute when they sailed the tropics. Anchoring also brought improvements to the food - salt pork was difficult to eat in the stifling heat, and the crew cheered the lugger carrying their rations of fresh vegetables and soft bread. So pleased were the crew that the food was aboard double-quick, despite the Quel’Thalan bread being flat and the vegetables unfamiliar.

"Boat with Kul Tiran colours alongside, ma’am," called Fitz, who had relieved Porter and resumed her duties.

“Thank you, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Forster. “Allow them up.”

The man who came on board was balding, dressed in a sober black suit, quite unsuited to the heat.

"Harvey," he said, bowing to Captain Forster amid the pipes and sideboys; "The Lord Admiral’s consular agent at Sunsail."

"What can I do for you, Mr Harvey?” asked Forster.

"Come with me for a minute, please, Captain” said Harvey. He gestured towards the lee of the quarter-deck. The officers on the windward side of the deck crowded away and out of earshot, practicing casualness. The conference went on for some time. Finally, with flashing eyes and a thunderous expression, Forster escorted Harvey to the side again. She wordlessly stalked below.

Fitz shared a look with her brother, who had just come on deck to relieve her. The four bells struck.

“Thunderclouds today, Mr Fitzwilliams,” she said.

“Dangerous weather indeed, Miss Fitzwilliams,” he replied. They touched the brims of their hats, and then Fitz moved to go below.

“Miss Fitzwilliams!” said Lieutenant Braithwaite.

“Yes ma’am?”

“Captain’s compliments, and you are to call away the gig for the Victualling Yard. Here are the indents. The yard might require hands to man their lighters - see to that also, if you please.”
“Aye aye ma’am!”

The Victualling Yard in Sunsail Anchorage was a massive building, whose officials were technically in place to supply both Kul Tiran and Quel’Thalan vessels. In practice Admiralty vessels preferred to resupply via lighter from Boralus, as it allowed them to remain on station - *Intrepid* had sustained herself that way over the past year and a half, despite several times being proximate to Quel’Thalas.

Fitz wished they had continued to do so. She found herself practically begging the victualling superintendent for supplies in broken Elvish.

"I bring strong crew of work, Sir," she said. "You need not your own labour."

"M'm," said the victualling superintendent.

"Everything by us is movement to the quayside. Then, by us, we take supplies to the ship, Sir."

"M'm," said the victualling superintendent again, a trifle more receptively.

"Lord Admiral commands," went on Fitz, warming to her theme. "That we make to sail soon; the crew is eager. If you instruct paper-clerk, we take stores without help. Everything that is work, we are to do Sir."

It seemed to please the elf to have Fitz offer up the *Intrepid’s* crew. Fitz could see the fat satisfaction of the cost savings on his face. Her irritation was mastered only with an effort of will - botching it now would only delay the supplies reaching the *Intrepid*, and make it difficult for those ships following in her wake. She launched into another round of compliments as to the elf and his noble forebears; then she promised the elf a working party on the quayside in less than ten minutes. The deal was struck.

By the time the dusk settled over the Anchorage, Fitz had the gig pulling strongly for the *Intrepid*, towing a lighter packed with hogsheads and kegs and biscuit bags. Her men and women worked at the sweeps, straining to row it all over to be swayed up.

Fitz was by this time feeling the effort of her exertions; heaving and carrying in the close tropical heat had streaked her shirt with sweat. Passing over the task of stowing the supplies to Miss Midshipman Vinton, she stooped below deck to strip off her jacket and grab some rest.

“Miss Fitzwilliams!” bellowed Lieutenant Cordiner from the quarterdeck. Fitz steeled herself.

“Captain’s compliments, and she would like to see you in her cabin.”

“Miss Fitzwilliams reporting as ordered, ma’am,” said Fitz.

The tweendeck was oppressive in the heat. Fitz made her way past the sentry to the great cabin; it was brightly lit, and she blinked as she entered, and stumbled over the edge of the carpet. It was only then that she remembered that she had not straightened her neckcloth and seen to it that her dirk hung correctly at her side. Happily for her state of mind, the captain was paying her no attention. She was seated behind her desk, looking grimly at an elvish man with bright red hair. He was tall, dressed in an immaculate Quel’Thalan uniform, and was bent almost double under the low deck.

“Miss Fitzwilliams reporting as ordered, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“I require your assistance Miss Fitzwilliams,” said the Captain. “And I trust you will fully exercise your discretion.”

It was beginning to dawn upon Fitz that she might be the only officer aboard the *Intrepid* that could
speak Elvish. Most Kul Tiran citizens stubbornly still spoke only common, even after five hundred years of trade and alliance with the Elves. Nobles however were expected to be a bit better, and though Fitz's line was much diminished, she still got the schooling. The other officers probably also had a few lines, but restricted to stock compliments about ballroom decor. That would be of limited use to a Captain refitting her vessel for sea.

It was a queer, uncomfortable feeling to be indispensable. Fitz didn’t know if she entirely liked it.

“Good evening,” said the stranger to her in slow, heavily accented common. “My name is Ship-Lieutenant Galadin Windrunner.”

Fitz gave a start. Lieutenant Windrunner gave her an apologetic look and continued in Thalassian. “I am afraid it has been a long time since I last spoke common; like any skill, it rusts with time.”

“Of a certain, Sir.” replied Fitz in the same tongue.

The Captain was clearly impatient. “What’s he saying, Miss Fitzwilliams?” Fitz dutifully translated. She scowled in disapproval.

“Tell him to oil his jaws, Miss Fitzwilliams. I will have no miscommunication aboard my ship.”

Fitz relayed the message. Captain Forster sat back in her chair.

“I have little use for an Elvish princeling aboard my warship, Mr Windrunner, except for in one respect. Tell me the current political situation with the Zandalari,” she ordered.

“The conditions in which we find ourselves are both trying and grave,” replied the elf. “Warships have approached the straits between Boralus and the Sunwell; armies have been mobilised, and they expand their fleet day by day. It is likely that the Zandalari will sail soon, and that the Kul Tiran Great Fleet will stand out to meet them. It can be only a matter of months before the hammer falls.”

The Captain listened with grave attention. Fitz did as well. It was general knowledge that the Zandalari coveted the Kul Tiran trading routes, and had for countless centuries thought to take them by force. The Lord Admiral had kept them at bay for five hundred years - she had crushed them over and over with spell and sail - but now she aged. Tensions stirred again. The situation wasn’t helped by her refusal to name an heir.

“Mr Windrunner is to be an idler for now,” said the Captain, after a pause. “My compliments to Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams, and he is to take Mr Windrunnder under his lee.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz, and escorted Windrunner out.

Poor Fitz did not enjoy her time at Sunsail. It took several days more days of toil to make the ship ready - days in which she was called on a dozen times at every watch. It would have taken several more days had the crew not been spurred by the Captain’s open desire to be back out at sea. Mercifully, finally, one bright morning, all was in order, and Fitz had a moment of rest.

Among the mass of luggers and lighters that had visited the ship came one long-delayed mail packet from Kul Tiras. The captain had vanished below decks immediately after the mailbag had been brought aboard, presumably to read the Intrepid’s orders. To Fitz’s surprise, a crumpled letter had arrived for her as well, presumably from her mother. (Her brother received his usual portion of envelopes from every port along the coast, many of them lightly perfumed. Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams might be of a decayed line, but he was a handsome devil.) It was only now that she had time to open it.
Fitz walked over to the leeward rail and opened her letter with suspicious trepidation. It was indeed from her mother.

Fitz read, several times, that she was Dearly Loved, and that Mother missed her Angel. The letter continued into a lengthy paragraph dwelling on how happy all the landside Fitzwilliams’ found themselves to have their Two Heroes protecting Kul Tiras’s interests Upon The Briny Deep. Fitz was then forbid from running into much danger, and further instructed on the necessity of changing her socks if they should get wet. So far, so normal.

The next paragraph caused Fitz’s blood to run cold. Expressing her confidence that she understood the feelings of her Valiant Sailor Daughter, her mother wished to convey the most delightful, the most momentous news for her Darling. With her Nautical Career assured, the Fitzwilliam’s would start to cast about for her to arrange a marriage, so that her life (already so Blissful on the waves), would be further Blessed.

Shaking, Fitz passed over the final few lines. They were a few about stock phrases how much her mother hoped her Gallant Warrior would add to the family Laurels by engaging with the enemy at the next available opportunity - but that of course she was not to expose herself more than was necessary to add to her Glory. Fitz was seized with a dreadful, consuming panic.

“Ho, sister mine!” called Mr. Midshipman Fitzwilliams. “Post from mum then? What does she say?”

He made to grab for the letter, but with a swift gesture she pitched the wretched thing into the ocean. They both watched it bob gently in water.

“Not good news then?” said the elder Fitz. “Cheer up; it could be worse. Mum betrothed me to daughter of a merchant on one of these trips a year or so ago - luckily the both of us have managed to avoid each other by staying at sea.”

He pulled out one of the letters, which was conspicuously fragrance free. “This will be her telling me which ports to avoid meeting her.”

He smiled, clearly charmed by the thoughtfulness of his fiancee.

“Where is Mr. Windrunner?” asked Fitz uncomfortably.

“Supervising the capstan,” said Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams. “He’s a good sort. Not a lick of common though, so he mostly just stands around and looks foreign. He’ll learn; we’ll be back out to sea soon enough.”

He touched his hat and sauntered off.

Fitz touched the brim of her hat in acknowledgement. In an instant, her fatigue from the exertions of the several days at anchor took charge and she resolved to worry about her mother at some other time. For now, she wished to go below and sleep.
In which Captain Forster makes command decisions, and the author struggles with WOW's geography.

CHAPTER FIVE

The open water that Fitz had so longed for brought with it a bout of sea sickness so severe that her brother, unsolicited, had her removed from the duty roster. Lieutenant Windrunner seemed blessed with the sailing genes of his father’s line, and escaped with only minor discomfort. He did send a strange bottle down to Fitz though, and admonished her to drink it immediately. As she was in no mood to upset her stomach further, she put it in her sea chest for later.

By the time she was fit for duty again the Intrepid was beating strongly northward. It did not escape notice that this was right into the teeth of the current crisis; even worse, after quitting the Sunsail harbour, fresh information as to the political situation ceased. Zandalari and Kul Tiras could already be at war. But equally, human and troll might still exist in an uneasy peace, and the Captain of the Intrepid needed to exercise her best judgement.

The contrast between the tension onboard and the weather for sailing was quite fantastic. These were golden days, but also busy ones. The Intrepid was the eyes and ears of the Navy, and as she sailed up the coast of the island of Zandalar all hands were kept watching for Trollish war preparations. Captain Forster, positively cheerful so close to a dangerous foe, took the opportunity to perform feats of great daring. They peeped into bays and the mouths of rivers to measure activity; they studied the tides, took soundings, and cataloged the prevailing winds, updating charts and approach maps.

Zandalar was a rich island, productive and well-populated, and the trolls were worthy seafolk. Close to shore flitted a multitude of small boats fishing and carrying messages. There was no navigable river, no canal that did not have at least one of these boats darting along it. But the great quantity of materials needed to equip a battlefleet, and sustain it at sea, could never be carried by such small ships. The cannons for a first-rate ship-of-the-line weighed two hundred tons; cables and powder, anchors and shot. The mainmast of a first-rate was a hundred feet long and three feet thick; only special ships could transport those. None of the mighty transporter ships were on the move.

So the Intrepid sailed onwards, watching and waiting for the noose to tighten around Kul Terian necks. Finally, the ship made boldly for the trollish Capital itself. Within the month, good Kul Terian spyglasses were trained on Zuldazar, the golden city; Fitz was one of the two officers ordered up to the crow’s nest to count the masts of an idle Golden Fleet. Forster then condescended to allow her into the council of lieutenants discussing how many trolls would need to be mobilized to man such a quantity of vessels; rough mathematics told a story of thirty thousand hostile beings required for that single fleet. It was a sobering number - but size brought its own troubles. Proper seatrolls would have to be pressed from every merchant ship, and willing lands-trolls brought to supplement them. Those thirty thousand trolls would then need food and clothing - and not just any food and clothing, but the rugged sort that could survive the brutal conditions of the ocean. That fleet would need ship’s hardtack, different kinds of meat and the salt to preserve it, and a vast weight of alcohol. They would also need to coop the tremendous quantities of barrels and chests into which the supplies would be...
packed - a half-year’s supply for every ship.

On each of her watches, Fitz had observed a constant trickle of supply ships heading into every harbour and fortified island in the Bay of Kings. If war should come - when war came - it would be the Navy’s duty to cut these off and starve the enemy. For this task the Lord Admiral looked to her frigates and the sloops - Captain Forster’s observations about wind and tide would be critical to their success. The more she knew and could report, the safer would be those Kul Tirans sailing in her wake.

Fitz’s mind was thus engaged as the *Intrepid* stood in once more past the dangerous reefs, lurking at the mouth of the Bay of Kings for a fresh look. The wind was south-easterly this afternoon. The ship was close-hauled, and with her look-outs posted they were able to see some considerable way in the morning sunshine.

From foremast and mizzenmast came two successive hails.

"There's a ship coming down the channel!"

"She's a third-rate, sir!" That was Porter, supplementing Midshipman Vinton’s report.

"Very well," hailed the Captain in return. There was a bustle of activity on the quarterdeck, and Lieutenant Windrunner (the elder Fitzwilliams trailing him) walked up the ladder to join the conference. Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams waited patiently at her present station by the signals. It was of course possible the appearance of a trollish warship had nothing to do with *Intrepid* sailing around in front of the most populous and well defended coastline in the Zandalari Empire - but then again, that did seemed unlikely.

"Steady as you go," Captain Forster said to the quartermaster. She looked quite at her ease. Her tone implied her day had been enriched by the appearance of a potentially hostile force that outgunned her by a factor of two. "Ms Ward - we'll hoist our colours, if you please."

Fitz’s spyglass showed the third-rate's topgallant sails; running freely, she came down the narrow channel of sandbars and reef rocks, on a course that would intersect theirs some miles ahead. Fitz automatically estimated her speed and did the calculations.

"Ms Cordiner! I'd like you on deck, if you please, as soon as you have completed your observations."

"Aye aye, sir."

The *Intrepid* continued to sail as she was; there was no attempt to crowd on more sail, or of pretending to be doing anything but what she was doing - spying. The bold act of approaching the Bay of Kings, which had produced so much valuable intelligence, nonetheless was difficult to disguise.

On the quarterdeck, Ward, the sailing mistress, was looking at the approaching man o’ war with a worried expression.

"You're not going to trust them, ma’am?"

Fitz understood Ward's position. If the Zandalari had gone to war then *Intrepid* had no way to gain news of it. At any moment, the Zandalari could sail forth from the harbour, fresh with the knowledge of war, and try to sink them - indeed, that was what they appeared to be doing now. Normally, under these conditions, letting a hostile vessel approach was an invitation for complete destruction.
But if war was still undeclared, then the *Intrepid* would be fleeing from nothing. The Kul Tiran Navy would suffer grave harm from being chased out to sea by nothing more than a bluff; it had taken the Lord Admiral five hundred years to drive fear deep into the heart of her enemies, and Fitz was certain it would take only a single act to undo it. The *Intrepid* was in sight of the many thousands of Zandalari citizens and sailors she was observing in turn; an investment in caution now could pay bloody, costly dividends in latter battles.

Captain Forster had the weather gauge. She could turn tail and run with but one shouted order to her crew. Were the Captain to do that - war or no - the warship behind them would pile on all sail and hurry after them, presenting the picture of the Zandalari driving them ignominiously into the sea. But a bold move - ah, now a bold move would drive home Kul Tiran dash and skill.

Coasters had streamed out of the Bay as they normally did. Surely, Fitz reasoned, if war had broken out, a hostile frigate on the waters would have deterred them? And the wind was fair - if they fled into the deep waters, how long would it take to tack the ship and come back around again?

The third-rat was big, and the handling of her crew was superb. Fitz trained her spyglass on it in search of any signals, but there were none. It was hull up, fairly leaping over the water under its press of canvass, with her two gundecks and at least thirty-five ports a side, as well as more cannons up on the quarterdeck and forecastle. It was not just the number of guns, but the weight as well; the broadside of such a ship would batter any frigate apart, even one as bonny as *Intrepid*.

Her guns had not been run out.

"Any orders, ma’am?" asked Ward.

Captain Forster tucked her spyglass under her arm and looked thoughtful for a second. Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams glanced at the marine bandsman with his drum. This marine’s drum would rumble out the long roll of “beat to quarters” - the signal to draw swords, drive the *Intrepid*’s crew to their action stations, and run out the guns. Fitz ruminated on her brother’s lack of imagination. If war had not yet been declared, Kul Tirans pointing cannons at a ship sailing in its own waters would surely bring such war about.

“I do have orders, Mrs Ward,” stated the Captain thoughtfully, and Fitz felt her heart sink in her chest.

"We must render passing honours."

There was something mad about the coolness with which she delivered this. Fritz forced herself to stillness and formality. Internally, she was boiling with excitement.

"Aye aye, ma’am," said Ward. It was the disciplined answer, the only answer when a superior officer spoke.

"Do you remember the procedure, Mrs Ward?"

Fritz had never heard of anyone ever rendering honours to a Zandalari ship of war; every officer aboard the ship had previously only met such ships in battle.

"Ma’am, begging your pardon but I do not."

Captain Forster scowled and cast her eyes about the quarterdeck.

“Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams!”
"Yes Ma’am?"

"Be so good as to ask Lieutenant Windrunner for the correct procedures for saluting a trollish ship."

"Aye aye, ma’am!"

The good lieutenant, having been confused for a great deal of the past two hours, was quickly briefed and began to provide the necessary information. Captain Forster stood with her hands behind her back, still and relaxed.

"Be so good as to give the orders, Miss Fitzwilliams, as related to you by Mr Windrunner.'

"Aye aye, sir," replied Fitz. She took ahold of the speaking trumpet.

"All hands! All hands!" she cried. "Man the side! Mr Midshipman Porter! If you please, see that all hands keep good order. Sergeant of marines! Parade your people on the quarter-deck! Smartly, if you please - drummer on the right. Bos'n's mates! Stand by to pipe on the beat of the drum!"

Fitz turned apologetically to the Captain. "All is now correct, ma’am. We’ve no music though, begging your pardon, except the drum and the pipes."

"They won’t expect more," said Forster. "Well? What are you waiting for? Carry on, Miss Fitzwilliams."

Then, leaving Fitz stunned with her unexpected continuation of command, Forster set her eye back onto her spyglass. The company of marines was currently lead by the sergeant, the captain having been killed by pirates, and the lieutenant recalled before that to take up a promotion back in Boralus. The twenty privates and corporals made a fine sight though, all dark blue jackets and clay-white leather.

Forster’s entire attention was fixated on the enemy ship. No doubt a dozen trolls were doing the same on the deck of the third-rate. There was a great storm of activity happening over there, and Fitz wondered if today was the day she was to be blown apart. Trolls poured into the rigging and across the deck - the ship would carry no less than six hundred of them, twice the numbers of the *Intrepid*.

"Silence!" ordered Fitz, judging her moment. Too soon as the hands would fidget and grow restless as they passed by, giving the ship a sloppy note. Too late and the noise would carry to the enemy regardless, spoiling the effect.

Flashes of pale bone and gorgeous feathers; there were the trollish infantry forming up on the third-rate's quarter-deck; there beside them was the flash of dark metal as swords were drawn. Was that the gleam of brass from the musical instruments, or was it instead the beginnings of guns being loaded?

The ships were closing steadily on their converging courses. The third-rate, with more canvass and having now rounded the spit which prevented them from holding the weather gauge, now sailed nearer and nearer.

Lieutenant Windrunner murmured to her in quiet Elvish that as the visiting ship, they were to begin the salute first. Fitz relayed this, then waited for her Captain.

Forster put away her telescope.

"Now," she said.
"Drum!" ordered Fitz immediately.

The drummer beat a long roll.

"PLATOON! PRESENT! ARMS!" ordered the sergeant of marines, and in a much lower voice, "One. Two. Three!"

The muskets of the marines and the half-pike of the sergeant were thrust forward, and it was beautiful. The pipes shrilled out.

As a single unit, every officer aboard the ship removed their hat and placed it over their chest. Opposite them now was a fearsome beast of a Zandalari, bedecked with all the accouterments of his position. He stood with his hands behind his back, at attention in the trollish fashion. No war. No guns. No death today.

Fitz came back to herself with a start - as the *Intrepid* had rendered the honours first, it must be the first to stop.

“Drum!” Fitz ordered again. The long roll ceased, and the pipes cut off. From the enemy ship came a single, wailing horn, then a crash of martial drums. Fitz listened with a sense of unreality as Zandarlari trolls played the Kul Tiran national anthem with more skill and care than she had ever heard it played back home.

“PLATOON! SHOULDER! ARMS!” roared the sergeant.

"All hands! Dismiss!" called Fitz, and then turned to Lieutenant Braithwaite. Braithwaite was an older lieutenant, unlikely to ever make post rank. He was looking at Fitz with almost paternal approval.

“Mr Braithwaite, Sir, I return the ship to you.”

“Thank you, Miss Fitzwilliams,” replied Braithwaite. "Bosun, steady the crew!"

The hands were excited. None of them had ever been so close to trolls without shot in the air and blood in the water. They broke from their stations with an unusual reluctance.

"You were right, ma'am, not to run away from them," said Ward.

Forster turned on her heel with a quick motion and walked towards the ladder.

“Mr Braithwaite, keep us on station,” she said.

The elder Fitzwilliams, still shadowing Lieutenant Windrunner, watched her go.

“The Captain doesn’t seem pleased?” He said. "Not one captain in ten would have called their bluff. However she knew, it was fine work.”

Fitz said nothing. Standing on the quarterdeck, the Captain had looked completely relaxed - except for the knuckles straining white from her grip on her spyglass.

"Perhaps she wishes to check her charts," said Fitz. It felt necessary to change the subject.

"Take my glass - perhaps we should count the little boats again?"

And with that, the officers of the *Intrepid* returned to their duties.
In which Fitz discovers the truth to the saying "too much inside is better than too much overside."

It was blowing a gale off the island of Zandalar; a two-reef gale from the westward, full of freezing rain. The fine sailing weather of the summer had continued into the early autumn - but the bite of winter now rode the water. *Intrepid* was approaching two years at sea, and would soon be relieved from her patrol - her crew would be broken up, the officers promoted or discarded, and the ship completely refit. But for this last month of patrol, *Intrepid* would continue to do her duty, and act as the eyes and ears of the Lord Admiral.

The ship was under close-reefed topsails, reaching broadly on the port-tack. Fitz, who had believed herself cured of her seasickness after months in these waters, found herself once again desperately unhappy. Huge rollers swept *Intrepid* up and pushed her forward; she would roll, lift, pitch, and then roll again. The wind tore through the rigging, and her sails groaned under their labour. Fitz knew the sails’ songs by heart now, and this one was a sweet one; the mast and rigging were holding firm, and the creaks of the ship itself echoed that the hull also was weathering the storm easily. Fitz took her turn at watch without issues, snug under her ancient, inherited oilcoat. Her father had been dead for a decade, but wearing his coat she could almost feel him with her.

Her brother came up on deck to bring her a warm drink; he also wore an oilcoat, this one inherited from their eldest brother. Fitz touched her hat to him, then wrapped her hands around the brew.

"Anything amiss?" asked Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams. He looked pointedly towards Lieutenant Windrunner, who had command of the vessel, and was standing to windward. Windrunner was a fine sailor; even now he had a grin on his face and his eyes were dancing, enjoying every minute of the gale. The red peacoat of Quel'Thalas stood out sharply against the blues and browns and whites of the rest of the crew. He swayed easily with the roll of the ship, and stood firmly against the wind. Fitz was slightly envious of his sea legs.

"Nothing is amiss," replied Fitz.

“Good.”

Mr Fitzwilliams turned back to his charge - his friend and mentor now, actually. The two had become inseparable, despite being barely able to communicate; Windrunner might be a prince, several hundred years older, and a superior officer - but he had a streak of mischief, a warm disposition, and a fine head for cards.

Mr Fitzwilliams borrowed his sister’s glass for a moment in order to look about. Fitz privately wished him luck. The horizon was in no way discernable, with rain pouring down in thick sheets and lashing the deck. On the port quarter, somewhere away, there would be the white tumble of water churned up by the reefs and shoals of the coastline. These waters were treacherous, and Fitz had been extra-diligent looking for any sign of trouble from that direction - that care was also a good excuse for why she needed to be positioned nearby the rail.
Ahead, a wave crested in a towering pillar of white water, reaching up higher than the frigates decks, before it slipped away from them. Intrepid was the centre of its own world; a world of tossing grey sea, and clouds so low they were almost a blanket.

A timid Captain would have gone out farther to sea at the first sign of bad weather - but then, a timid Captain was unlikely to be chosen to command the finest of the Lord Admiral’s frigates. Forster’s orders were to watch, and watch she would do; at the first hint of the weather she had moved them into the coast, not away from it. The course she chose was on the finest line between boldness and folly - but there was little chance a Zandalari warship would escape their notice. Now there was nothing further to do except wait.

The waiting was almost over, of course. Intrepid had struggled eastward on one tack, and then had gone about and struggled westwards again. A month before relief! For the men and women who made up the soul of the Intrepid, a month was a snap of the fingers, and also an eternity.

They still had no word of if war had broken out.

"Mr. Windrunner!" Fitz heard. Looking up, she saw a hand waving from the masthead. “Mr Windrunner, Sir!”

“Lookout's hailing from the masthead, sir,” called Fitz in Thalassian. “He’ll come down to deliver it.”

Any message yelled during this storm would vanish with the wind.

"Send another hand aloft to take his place,” said Windrunner.

“Aye aye, Sir.”

“I’ll go,” said Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams, who understood Elvish far better than what he could speak. In a trice he had darted up the mainmast and tumbled into the crow’s nest.

By the time he got up there, the lookout was down on the quarterdeck. The man knuckled his forehead several times, looking nervous to be in Officer’s country.

"Begging your pardon Sir, but I thought I saw that big Zandalari third-rate. You know? The one we saw all up close-like."

Fitz was already moving. “Go get the captain,” she said to a nearby idler. “Find another hand and put them aloft immediately.”

"Where away this ship?” demanded Windrunner in accented common. He was frowning fiercely, making sure he understood every word as clearly as he could. It was just as clearly terrifying the poor lookout.

"Off...off to starboard, Sir! I saw her masts and hull pretty clear, Sir!"

“And her course?”

"Heeling us, Sir!"

Windrunner turned and strode over to the captain, who had just appeared on deck.

"Go below and get something warm inside of you,” said Fitz to the lookout. “Then get back aloft; keep the extra lookout with you.”
"Aye aye, ma’am."

He knuckled his forehead gratefully and scuttled away.

Fitz turned to starboard, straining to see through the thick rain. Why would the Zandarlari ship come out to sea in this weather? Did the captain wish to drill her seatrials in heavy weather? It was a possibility. But more likely the third-rate was following them because the Trollish captain wished to hold a violent conversation with Captain Forster - a conversation of cannonfire.

Captain Forster came striding up to her, Windrunner in tow.

"Report, Miss Fitzwilliams - I am afraid Mr Windrunner and I are having some communication difficulties."

"Aye aye ma’am.” said Fitz. “There was a Zandalari third-rate sighted from the masthead. If accurate, her position would be at two points on us to windward.”

It was a dangerous place for *Intrepid* to have an enemy - the third-rate would hold the weather gauge in any action. Fitz had already quietly alerted the bosun to prepare the ship for defensive evolutions.

Captain Forster frowned as she thought through the problem.

"Put the ship about, Mr Windrunner,” she said. “Add as much sail as can be safely carried.”

At that very moment the lookout yelled again.

"There she is, ma’am! One point, starboard beam!"

The shrilling of pipes sounded all hands.

The Captain snapped her glass up and trained it on the pursuing ship, saying nothing.

*Intrepid* tacked, swinging around to close-haul into the wind. Without the danger of the sweeping waves the frigate could have taken a safer, faster course - as it was she was cutting practically in front of the enemy.

"She's going about to follow us, ma’am!” roared the lookout.

Windrunner also had his glass trained on the enemy.

"*She went about the moment she saw what we’d done, ma’am - she knows its us.*"

“Yes,” said the captain, after translation. "We are at war."

Windrunner nodded grimly.

Fitz stood against the wind, huddled in her coat, waiting for orders. War or no war, the Navy did its duty; a change in the political state meant only that her coming shoreleave was likely to be shortened, and possibilities for promotion enhanced.

"Send the hands to quarters, Mr Windrunner. Clear for action, but don’t run out the guns."

"Aye aye, sir!"

The lieutenant turned and made a gesture to the sailing master Ward, who began to shout orders
through the speaking trumpet. The pipes were twittering, faintly audible over the wind. Somewhere the marine drummer was playing; the beat of the drum mirrored the thrum of activity which had overtaken the ship.

The captain stood, still and quiet, a picture of calm. Fitz made for her station in the mizzen, but Windrunner stopped her.

“I will go up,” he said shortly. “I hope I give no offense when I say my eyesight’s the best on the ship, and it is a station that does not require speech. You will attend the captain.”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat, and remained on the quarterdeck - Ms Cordiner took Windrunner’s spot.

The *Intrepid* was handier than the third-rate - the prompt tack had given the Kul Tiran some seaway - but in the heavy waves the weight of the Zandarlari ship gave her the critical advantage. A heavier ship meant less slippage through the water. The light *Intrepid* was having to haul close to the wind, whereas the third-rate could hold the same course while reaching broadly on the starboard beam.

Effectively, this made the enemy faster than she ought to be.

The bosun hurried up to Fitz and reported the preparations of the crew. Fitz nodded, thanked the woman, and then turned to the captain.

"The bosun’s compliments, ma’am and she reports the ship cleared for action."

"Thank you, Miss Fitzwilliams."

Fitz turned back to her spyglass and remained alert for new orders. This was the Navy she had grown to know - a few minutes of desperate decisions, executed as quickly as possible by a relentlessly drilled crew. Then the tension of a thick, uncertain wait. The decisions made in a fraction of a second wouldn’t prove good or ill until hours later - perhaps days later.

The two ships - Kul Tiran and Zandalari - were less than four miles apart. As long as *Intrepid* could preserve that distance she was safe. If the third-rate closed on them, then *Intrepid* was doomed.

The bosun came aft again, much more diffidently than before; she stood holding her hat in her hand, her pigtail swinging and a few loose strands of hair blowing in the gale. Fitz intercepted her, thinking it kinder than forcing her to interrupt the Captain.

“Can I help you, Mrs Beauchamp?”

"Ma’am," the bosun said to Fitz. "The crew is asking - are at war, ma’am?"

Fitz gave her a rueful expression. She didn't want to preempt any announcement the captain wanted to make, but she also thought the crew deserved information. “It is impossible to say for sure, Mrs Beauchamp.” Fitz temporized. "The only people who know are the Zandalari, and I’m not sure I want to stop and ask them.”

It wasn’t a good joke, but the bosun smiled at it anyway - possibly to show willing. She touched her forehead again and moved back away towards the main deck.

Ward, the sailing master, gauged the amount of sail that *Intrepid* had set. She looked thoughtful, but did not speak. More sail could push the frigate over too far, the force plunging her into the waves. This would decrease her speed. After almost two years at sea there was the possibility that masts and spars and canvass simply couldn’t cope anymore, and would give way. If even a single stitch of sail came loose, or tore, then the Zandalari would be on them, and it would be disaster.
"Ms Cordiner!" Captain Forster suddenly said. "You may dismiss the watch below."

"Aye aye, ma'am," said Cordiner.

The pursuit might last a single bell - or it could be several watch cycles. Keeping the crew at general quarters would only exhaust them. With the ship cleared for action, the crew could neither string their hammocks for sleep nor light fires for their drinks; fatigue and cold would be killers if the chase stretched on for days.

*Intrepid* tossed and threw herself across every wave. Fitz caught a good glimpse of the Zandarlari behind them through a lighter patch of rain; the trolls were fine seamen, and their captain was a good one. The third-rate - not generally a fast or handy ship - was lying steeply over, yards braced up. Neither ship was gaining on the other. But if *Intrepid* held her course then there was a good chance the weather would change and the frigate could take advantage to escape cleanly.

Fitz was just admiring the Trollish rigging when a sudden burst of shouting drew her attention to the *Intrepid*'s mainmast. A gust had torn away a tackle, and as it fell it had struck a jackstay off the main yardarm. It was a freak accident, and would normally have been of no merit - except somehow it had also torn away half of the footrope the hands used to walk out along the yards. Fitz watched in horror as a struggling figure clung on with just their arms, kicking desperately for purchase. Down below, figures swarmed around another body lying broken and crumpled on the deck.

The Captain began calling orders, and Cordiner set about restoring order. But Fitz was transfixed by the drama that was occurring above. In a burst of horror, she realised that another figure was working its way out along the yard, clearly attempting a rescue. It was a figure not in brown or blue or white, but in red; the red peacoat of Quel'Thalas.

"Belay that, Mr Windrunner!" roared the captain. "Belay that rescue!"

But perhaps by wind, stubbornness, or just a failure to understand - for whatever reason, Windrunner didn’t respond. Reaching the end of the footrope that remained, he threw a leg over the yard and inched out along it. It was breathtakingly courageous; the wind was howling through the stays and shrouds, and all aloft risked being picked up and blown into the sea. Windrunner, painfully slow, braved it all to save a crewman he undoubtedly couldn’t even speak to.

The menacing Zandalari lurked behind them. Fitz calculated speed and windage - *Intrepid* was still holding four precious miles of separation. Mathematically, there could be no deviation of course; the enemy would be on them in an instant.

Windrunner reached the figure, red hair clearly visible; his hat must be overboard with the fishes somewhere. Fitz began to believe that he might succeed, and willed him to keep his purchase on rain-slicked wood.

But *Intrepid* pitched sharply, and a huge spray of water was thrown athwart the ship. It struck the exposed Lieutenant directly, washing him off. In many ways Windrunner was lucky; rather than striking the deck, he instead tumbled heavily through the air and crashed into the water.

In times of crisis, Fitz had a tendency to calculate; the calculations on this particular crisis was grim. The prince fell from about seventy feet, which would normally easily kill an adult human who was unprepared to strike the water. But the *Intrepid* was rolling sharply when he fell - likely the reason he went into the ocean and not onto the deck - and the prince was only partly human. It was likely Windrunner was now floating in the water, and it was equally likely that he remained alive. Possibly he was unconscious, in which case mounting a rescue would be an exercise in futility - but for now, he must be considered alive. Either living or dead, he must be retrieved with haste.
Fitz was already running for the life preservers, which were actually just rolled up hammocks stored on the deck. She flung an entire net of them into the sea. Then she turned and sprinted for the quarter-boat.

The ship could not heave-to; the Zandalari would destroy them utterly. But if rescue wasn’t mounted swiftly, then Windrunner would drown, and that was unacceptable. The situation was a political nightmare; it would damage the alliance, destroy Captain Forster’s career, and badly impact morale. It would also tear apart Fitz’s brother, with another male role-model dying in front of him. Finally, it would give the Zandalari a coup which would fuel their propaganda during the critical first months of war.

“Make ready the quarter boat!” she roared at Mrs Beauchamp, diving into the jolly boat headlong. “Five crewmen, volunteers only! Lower away, lower away, quickly now!”

Five other figures leapt into the jolly boat; there was Clyburn and Jackson, and three others - Gregory, Pritchard, and Farrow. All men who had stormed the fortress of pirates with her. More men started pushing the boat over the side, and Fitz fumed over the delay.

“Fitzwilliams!” snapped the Captain. She too had rushed to the launch area, eyes blazing.

Fitz touched the brim of her hat, slightly longer than would normally be done, but said nothing.

Forster’s face flickered, and there was a hint of anguish. “I will be damned if I lose you as well Fitzwilliams.”

But she knew as well as Fitz that sending her away in the jolly boat had to be the answer; the Intrepid could escape, having sacrificed as much as it could in its effort to save the prince. And Fitz had to be the officer so sacrificed; she was the most junior, the least integral to the functioning of the ship - and her dead reckoning and navigation was superb. If the plan was the sail the little jolly boat to land, she gave the team its best chance. She was also of noble birth - enough to impress any trollish captors - but not of a birth so noble that her death or capture would cause additional troubles. Fitz was perfect.

Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams appeared behind the captain, looking horrified.

“Quarter boat away!” Fitz called, before her brother could pull rank and take her place.

The little boat dropped into the heaving ocean, and the four burly crew took the oars. It practically flew across the waters - the volunteers were excellent seamen. It wasn’t quite as bad as it might have been; the weather was easing quickly and the waves slid easily under them - but the going was still heavy. Fitz ignored all of this, blinking the rain and spray from her eyes. She hunched over her thwart, scribbling calculations straight onto the wood with a wax crayon. Then she checked her compass, grasping the tiller firmly, and issued her orders.

“Pull away, Intrepid !”

The tiller was difficult to handle, and Jackson lent her weight to the task. Fitz finally left it in her hands, giving the heading, and jumping up to stand by the little mast. She anxiously scanned the water for a flash of red. The odds were terrific - and less likely again was the possibility that the Lieutenant was still alive. The boat began to drift slightly, and Fitz encouraged the oarsmen to hold steady.

“Over there ma’am!” yelled Clyburn in excitement, and Fitz strained her eyes to catch what he had seen.
Miraculously, there he was. Windrunner was awake and thrashing in the water, clinging to a lifesaving hammock; clearly he was a strong swimmer, but any mortal would tire in this weather.

“Jackson!” Fitz yelled, pointing; the massive coxswain angled the jolly boat towards the drowning Lieutenant.

They pulled alongside him, and eager hands snatched him up from the water. Thick oily blankets were produced from the locker and wrapped around him; a flask of rum was poured down his grateful throat. He had been in the water less than fifteen minutes.

Fitz couldn’t believe it. Windrunner seemed to her in that moment to be the most fortunate being who had ever touched the face of Azeroth. If they could get back to the Intrepid, every Kul Tiran on the ocean would want to sail with him, superstitiously believing that luck to be contagious. Hell, Fitz herself was overjoyed to be sailing with him right now. She would never again doubt stories about the legendary Windrunners - they were as tough as solid oak.

“Orders, ma’am?” called Jackson, and Fitz stood up to look behind them. Intrepid was well out of reach. The waves were heavy, and the odds of making land suddenly seemed remote. It would take them two days at least to reach Zandalar, and that was if the weather didn’t turn again.

A sudden thought stuck her, and her heart sank. But it was the best chance for survival.

“Clyburn, what do we have in the stores?” she said.

“Ropes, sails, some food and water, spare clothes...,” started Clyburn, opening the locker up again.

“Thank you, Clyburn,” Fitz said. She turned “Wind …” she bit her words off and reformatted them in her mind. The lieutenant outranked her. “Begging your indulgence, Sir, and we need to disguise you.”

Windrunner looked at her blankly, shivering under his blankets. Fitz suppressed her impatience.

“It really is important, Sir. You need to pretend to be an ordinary crewman.”

Understanding dawned on the prince’s face, and he nodded his acceptance.

“Pass Lieutenant Windrunner the spare clothes, Clyburn.” Fitz said. “From now on, you are all to treat him as an ordinary seaman. A mute one.”

Fitz sat back down and rubbed out her wax calculations. Then she drew some new ones. She took a new bearing. By the time she looked up, Windrunner was in bedraggled castoffs - in a fit of brilliance Jackson had wound a bandana around his head to hide his ears, and his human features stood out in clearer relief. His queue of red hair only added to the effect; it was the same colour as Fitz’s. Homogeneity would be key.

The red peacoat had been cast back into the ocean.

Fitz nodded her thanks to the crewmen, and then called the heading to Jackson. The Intrepid’s rescue team pulled strongly.

Fitz had plotted them an intercept course for the Zandalari warship.
CHAPTER SEVEN

The tension lay thickly on that little jolly boat. Apart from heading corrections, not one word was spoken. By the time the Zandalari was in sight the *Intrepid* was gone - she had increased her lead to the point where further pursuit was likely to be fruitless. That was just as well. Had the chase been close, the Trolls might well have swept on past them and left them in the water. But as it was, the top-sails on the third-rate were backed, and a line was thrown down to bring them alongside.

Fitz touched the Kul Tiran anchor buttons on her father’s coat for luck. Then she climbed the ladder. The entry-port was lined with trolls. While armed, they seemed more curious than anything; they watched with fascination as she slowly removed her hat in the traditional Kul Tiran salute of the ship's quarterdeck.

A particularly fine troll strode towards her. Fitz stood stock still. In her state she registered only that this must be an Officer. A short one - only as tall as Fitz herself, and sodden with wind and rain - but an Officer. Surely only officers could wear such gorgeous feathers, or such magnificent headwear. Fitz, warm and dry in her oilskin, touched her hand to the brim of her hat again in automatic courtesy.

"Welcome aboard the *Krag 'Wa,*" the Zandalari officer said in common. She waved a hand in a gesture Fitz didn't recognise. "I am Third Subcommander Pulnuat of this ship. Do you require medical attention?"

"I beg your indulgence to accept, yes." Fitz replied in rusty Zandalari. "One of my crew... was become lost in the ocean. He is now cold."

"He will be given aid," replied Pulnuat in her own tongue. She gave a brisk order to the Zandalari standing beside her, and he ran off. "And you are the commander?"

"Yes," said Fitz.

"Will you give me your name and rank?" asked the Troll.

"Midshipman Fitzwilliams, of the Lord Admiral's Ship *Intrepid*," replied Fitz.

"Be not distressed at the fortunes that brought you here," Pulnuat said, once again in common. "For you, now the war is over. Are you an officer? Will you give parole?"

Temptation gnawed. Officers, with their commissions from the Lord Admiral, were considered gentlefolk - a broken oath was a betrayal of Kul Tiras itself. An officer’s parole would be accepted
without question, and they would receive better treatment. With better treatment would come separation from the five crew members, who did not have honour to risk - and Windrunner, who was at the mercy of his disguise.

"A thousand pardons, Subcommander" said Fitz, truthfully. "My rank does not entitle me to parole."

"Ah," said Pulnuat. Her eyes lit with greed. She stepped forward, and fingered the sleeve of her father’s coat, admiring the buttons for a second. Then she jerked a thumb towards the hatch. "Come then."

With a bow she led the way below. The jolly boat's crew trooped gloomily after her. Jackson's fists were white-knuckled. Clyburn brought up the rear, propping up the swaying Windrunner.

Zandalari peered at them from every nook and cranny; the familiar spars and rigging contrasted with the foreign lilting language. Fitz forced herself to walk as tall as she could - the Trollish ship had higher decking than she was used to, presumably because the average Zandalari was taller.

Two decks down, probably at the level of a foot or two below the water line, it was dimly lit and scantily ventilated by the hatchways. A scurrying Troll appeared to thrust blankets and hot stones into Jackson's massive arms.

"This door in this bulkhead," the Subcommander said. "Here are your cots. We will lock."

Fitz stole a glance behind her at the others. Jackson looked grim and Clyburn looked slightly stricken. The other three looked blank. Windrunner continued to shiver.

“Inside, *Intrepid,*” she said shortly. She waited while they filed inside.

Pulnuat stopped her before she could follow.

“Your coat,” she said. “I require.”

Fitz involuntarily touched her father’s oilskin. It was too big on her, sturdy and well made.

“Give me the coat,” said Pulnuat, impatiently. “It is raining.”

Fitz shucked it off. The door swung closed. She let out a long, shuddering breath.

Then she turned, and rushed to Windrunner's side.

"Warm him," she ordered the crew, and they surrounded the stricken Elf with the stones, wrapping him in the blankets, bringing the smoking lamp closer for its heat. Fitz privately thought that the little cell was likely to warm quickly with six people.

"How are we getting out of here, ma'am?" asked Clyburn, fidgeting with the corner of a blanket he was wrapping.

Fitz had no idea, but wasn't about to tell him that.

"We must wait, Clyburn," she said firmly. "And do nothing to jeopardize..." Fitz glanced involuntarily at Windrunner. "The Lord Admiral's faith in us."

Windrunner was shuddering. His eyes were bright and fierce.

"Fitzwilliams," he croaked.
She crouched and lowered her voice. "Yes, Sir?"

"Do nothing rash, Fitzwilliams," he said. "Patience."

Fitz swallowed down her angry response; Windrunner had reasserted command, and he was her superior officer. But, thought Fitz, a little less rashness on the part of Mr. Lieutenant Prince Windrunner and they all wouldn't be the hapless guests of the Zandalari. This thought was followed by guilt - he hadn't asked them to follow him into the water. Fitz glanced at her crew and guilt hit her with even greater force. She had called for volunteers knowing that those who came would likely pay the cost in death or capture. She had also lost the jolly boat in the mission - a smart prize for the Krag'Wa.

Finally, most anxiously of all to Fitz, was Windrunner's condition. It was easing from critical to grave, but his improvement while trapped in the bowels of an enemy ship was hardly a great comfort.

She dwelt on this guilt every day of the next two months.

They were long, hard days. Fitz struggled to keep morale up. She created small routines; pacing the twenty feet of the hull for an hour, practicing mathematics, dreaming of escape. The worst enemy was boredom, followed swiftly by despair. The little cabin quickly grew stifling, and its inhabitants struggled with the forced confinement. In truth the space was what a Kul Tiran sailor had to put up with at sea anyway - about seven feet each - but the loss of freedom was oppressive. The food was irregular, and sometimes unfit for human consumption.

When the Zandalari ship hit a squall and forcibly pressed them onto the menial work of pumping the seawater out of the ship, Fitz protested weakly against the indignity, but pragmatically was glad for the space and exercise.

The day of her birthday, Fitz brooded at herself from the vast age of twenty. Her self-respect was at its lowest ebb. Twenty and a discredited prisoner in a hold of a Zandalari ship - one that she had meekly surrendered to while holding her first independent command. A true Fitzwilliams, she thought to herself darkly.

The best day was the one when Windrunner rose to take command in earnest.

It was two long months at sea like this; two months of teaching Clyburn to read, his pointer finger tracing the letters as he mouthed out the words. It was two months of savouring every minute allowed up in the fresh air. It was two months of maintaining, with Windrunner, that loneliness of command even as her most loyal crewmen surrounded her. Those two months felt like an eternity.

Finally came the day that the eternal motion of the ship's roll altered; it smoothed, pitching less. Everyone in the fetid cabin bolted upright. Sheltered water meant harbour, and harbour meant prisoner transfers. It seemed like an age that they were trapped in the dark compartment waiting for news. Outside there was shouting and the thumping of feet, which lasted a long time.

Without warning, the door was pushed open.

"Out," ordered the Zandalari, gesturing with his musket.

Fitz and the others rose, stumbling, into the next phase of their captivity.

The dismasted hulk they were brought to was moored on the edges of a little fishing harbour. This harbour was filled to bursting with Zandalari merchant barques and sloops, ketches and schooners, and the shores were lined with warehouses. Conditions on board the prison-ship were basic for the
prisoners; a hammock in the ‘tween-decks, and not much else. They were trapped below by the simple expedient of locking the hatches at night. Fitz and her little company were also all alone; the current war was so fresh they might well have been the first captives taken. They were certainly the only current occupants of the huge hull.

Fitz had the ocean again. Allowed on deck for exercise and air, she could brace herself on the rail and feel the wind and the sun, see the water, and smell the salt. The closeness of the sea did more than anything to alleviate the sick misery of captivity.

It was still misery though. Sometimes, Zandalari trolls with glittering braid would come and interrogate Fitz; it quickly became clear she knew nothing of value, but they seemed to enjoy gloatingly reciting fanciful Zandalari victories anyway, or taking the opportunity to mock the Lord Admiral, or other such propaganda. Fitz couldn’t help but grit her teeth at the insults to the House of Proudmoore - but Windrunner seemed to find the talk of his aunt amusing.

Finding things that amused Windrunner was becoming increasingly important. Passivity didn’t suit any Windrunner, and their particular Prince was taking his captivity hard. The crew had noticed the Lieutenant’s increasing despondency - indeed, it would have been hard to miss considering how pleasant a man he had always previously been. Clyburn had taken to making him warm mash out of their ration of biscuit; Jackson had whittled him a little wooden flute; Gregory told stories - Fitz had suspicions that the stories were considerably spicier when she was out of earshot. And Windrunner did seem to brighten at these efforts. But he also, periodically, would stare at them all and look stricken. None of them knew to assuage his guilt.

"Fitz," said Windrunner one evening over two-man whist. He pushed some more dead weevils into the kitty, and flipped over a card from the pile in front of him. "We are going to escape."

"Yes, Sir," said Fitz. She puzzled over her hand, finally selecting the lowest.

"The longer we stay here, the more vulnerable I make my Aunts," he said, taking the trick. He flipped over another card to start the next set.

"Yes sir," said Fitz. She tentatively played another low.

Windrunner abruptly stood. Fitz stared at him in confusion, but he ignored her. His fists crushed the playing cards he still held, knuckles white around the edges.

It seemed to Fitz in that moment that perhaps trapping a Windrunner was like putting a keg of gunpowder in your hold; eventually it would explode.

"We are escaping, Miss Fitzwilliams. Tonight." Windrunner turned to look at her. "Submit your plan to spring the hatch. Then get the crew ready to fight."

“Aye aye, Sir,” replied Fitz, dropping her cards and gathering up her hat.

It was fortunate that wind blew south-easterly that day. A south-easterly meant rain lashing in, all of it fresh from the Great Maelstrom in the south. Across nine thousand miles of water it came, its joy undiminished, sending water spraying up the cliffs overlooking the prison-hulk. Rain also meant soggy, unresponsive guards.

Fitz held her hands clasped behind her back, walking the deck in her usual way. The rain beat down onto her battered hat. Jackson had fashioned her a kind of canvass sack to replace her oilskin; the water trickled into the nape, but Fitz was grateful for every clumsy stitch. Jackson herself lay in the lee of a hatch, whittling a little dog with her carving knife. Clyburn and Gregory were playing some
complex dice game under a tarp, with Pritchard and Farrow watching. Five wardens were standing about, looking board and damp. A Zandalari appeared with the usual bucket of broth for them, sloshing it carelessly as he came up the ladder.

Windrunner nodded absently.

Clyburn stood up and threw the dice hard at Gregory’s face. “I’ve about had it with you and your loaded dice!” he snapped. “Go to hell!”

“Belay that, Clyburn!” roared Fitz, but it was too late. Gregory had taken a wild swing. The sentry-troll dropped the broth and run towards the ruckus, blowing his whistle; the other trolls leapt towards the brawl as well. Somehow the tarp came down in the confusion, tangling the participants all together.

Fitz rushed forward, yelling and generally adding to the chaos. By the time the fight was over, Farrow was bleeding from a cut above his eye, and Clyburn was wheezing from where he had been solidly kicked. The tarp had a big rip in it from where a Zandalari tusk had caught it.

“Line up!” barked the angry watch supervisor in common. “I said, line up!”

He struck Windrunner in the back of the head as figures hurried to their places. The crew were trying to get into a line, but they were also trying to sort themselves out; Pritchard swapped with Gregory to wipe the blood from Farrow’s face. Windrunner knuckled his forehead when he found himself next to Fitz, and swapped with Clyburn, supposedly his superior as a warrant officer; Fitz kept anxiously moving, looking down the line, tallying the damage.

The troll in charge roared with frustration. He grabbed Fitz by her filthy jacket, and she could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“Get below,” he snarled, throwing her to the deck.

Fitz scrambled up and gave the order, voice a little hoarse from yelling. In a tangle of limbs and spurred by kicks from angry sentries, they were dumped back ‘tween decks, panting and sore. Windrunner stood, brushing himself off. His bandana was absolutely untouched.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” he said lightly, then he laughed. The crew, some bleeding, stood around grinning. Fitz felt laughter burble up inside her also, but managed to choke it down.

“Miss Fitzwilliams,” Windrunner said. “Please make the crew ready to leave this hulk.”

“Aye aye, Sir,” she said smartly. She turned, ducking low under a heavy beam. “Clyburn, you heard the lieutenant. Grab what you can and let's get out of here.”

After almost three months of captivity the crew didn’t have much to their names; what hadn’t been souvenired by the crew of the Zandalari third-rate had been fleeced by the guards on the hulk. But some ragged blankets and a few hordeded pieces of bread still remained. A few improvised billies and clubs were also produced - Farrow, in a fit of bloodthirstiness, had actually hammered some nails into his. Fitz just hoped he managed to strike a Troll without hitting himself with it instead.

The crew gathered again under the forrad hatchway. There was no laughter now. The wait was agony. Fitz strained her ears for any sign that the plan had failed, that they were discovered. The tension stretched. In the gloom of the ‘tween decks it was difficult to make time, but the sounds Finally came the faint sounds of a hatch being undogged.

“Now, Clyburn,” whispered Fitz.
Clyburn and Gregory brushed past her to climb the ladder; as one, they put their backs to the hatch and applied pressure. The hatch swung open, and the two crew scrambled out.

Fitz looked up through the hatch and into the night sky. It was quiet. The hiss of rain, the crash of waves; all those things were the instrumental accompaniment to a clean getaway. Jackson’s smiling face looked down at them, her hand clasping the little carving knife she’d used to cut the ropes dogging the hatches down. Fitz passed her up a heavy slab of wood to use as a club, then scrambled up the ladder. It was so dark it was impossible to see anything.

Farrow had just appeared behind her when it all went terribly wrong.

“Hey!” yelled a Zandalari from somewhere over to port. “The priso…”

Gregory moved quickly, and her club struck true and heavily. It was too late. The first Zandalari was cut off, but other bright cries of alarm split the night. Footsteps pounded up from the Zandalari quarters aft. Fitz snatched up the fallen sentry’s musket and took aim in the darkness; when she fired, the bright flash of powder illuminated at least fifteen wardens in various stages of undress.

The Troll that Gregory had struck was lying on the deck, her neck at an unnatural angle.

The next few moments were a whirl of noise and sound and fury. Flashes lit the scene like a nightmare; one showed the surprise on a Zandalari face when he was accidentally shot - another showed the rictus of agony on Pritchard’s face as he lay on the deck with a bayonet through his chest. Finally a troll flung an open lantern into the centre of the melee. Windrunner, lit weirdly from below, was roaring some wild elvish battlecry; this rose above the yelling and screams.

The little party was steadily being pushed back towards the bow of the hulk. Farrow was shot in the head, and died without a whimper; Jackson took a slashing blow to her arm and staggered back; Fitz took a musket-butt to the face and spat out a great mouthful of blood as she stabbed her assailant.

She took a quick glance around her and it was grim - there was nowhere to go. Around them was the dark ocean, and in front of them the enemy. Fitz resigned herself to it all, but she wasn’t bitter. This was a solid end for a Kul Tiran. She arrayed herself without fear beside Windrunner, her salvaged bayonet at the ready.

The Zandalari surrounded them now; probably five wardens lay killed or wounded behind them. They grasped their muskets, angling the bayonets to cut of any assault. Windrunner snarled at them all, roaring that Thalassian battlecry one more time.

Unexpectedly, from behind the Wardens, the Elvish cry was returned.

Fitz couldn’t believe her ears. Behind her, Clyburn mastered his own shock and started whooping and hollering, knocking at bayonets with his billy club. The sentries were turning to look as well, their disciplined ranks shivering and fracturing as individuals realised they had been flanked.

Shadowed figures had fallen upon their rear, all of them lit weirdly in the lamplight, and all of them singing out an echo to the call Windrunner had made. Blackened steel caught the light as it rose and fell; hopelessly outmatched, Zandalari scattered, fought, and died.

The little band of former captives remained in the bow of the ship, defending their line. The Prince did make a move to surge forward, but Fitz was having none of it; she stuck out her foot and tripped him up. Clyburn then promptly sat on him. Fitz nodded gratefully; two were dead defending the Prince already, and she wasn’t willing to have Windrunner get himself stabbed just when it seemed rescue was at hand.
Whoever the Quel’Thalasan people were - and who else would be yelling in Elvish aboard a Zandalari prison-ship? - whoever they were, they were expert. The trolls were dispatched with clinical precision. In what seemed like an instant the deck was quiet again but for the groans of the wounded and dying.

Windrunner was slapping the deck and swearing in fluent common at Clyburn; his bandanna had fallen off, and his red hair lay limply against his face. Fitz was impressed with his repertoire of Kul Tiran swearwords; perhaps he had indeed improved his language skills more than expected while resident aboard the *Intrepid*. Two dark shapes detached itself from the gloom. The drizzle was easing, but everything was still slick and dark.

One of those dark silhouettes lit a storm lantern.

Illuminated by the light was an elven woman, hair silver-gold in the dim light, wearing leather armour. It had been crudely blackened with what smelled like boot polish - it made the fresh scuff-marks especially visible. She took one look at Windrunner, who was still swearing, then turned to the companion standing next to her. With a few sharp words Fitz couldn’t quite hear, he hurried off back aft and into the dark. The lady then tucked her single free hand behind her back and strode directly towards the Kul Tiran party, her footsteps lithe as a cat’s.

Perhaps not a cat, Fitz thought. Something more deadly.

“*Galadin*?” the woman said.

Windrunner stopped wriggling, and craned his neck upwards. “*Auntie?*”

“*Don’t you ‘auntie’ me!*” she snapped, turning to look at the rest of them. Blue eyes considered them appraisingly.

Fitz was tired, bleeding, and still on a Zandalari prison-hulk. Two of the people who had followed her into hell lay dead and broken on the wooden deck. Still; the woman's gaze was intense. And she was fiendishly tall - taller even that Fitz, who was from a family known for their height. Fitz involuntarily stood straighter, touching the brim of her hat.

“*Midshipman Fitzwillamia Fitzwilliams,*” she said. “I am charmed to meet you, ma’am.” She had never meant any sentence more strongly.

The woman’s ears slanted in some complex way Fitz didn’t really understand. “*Sylvanas Windrunner,*” she said. “You must forgive the tardiness. Tracking my idiot hero of a nephew took longer than expected.”

“Your timing was exquisite,” Fitz said. Then she mentally replayed the name of her introducee, and calmly began to panic. “*Ahem. Clyburn? Perhaps the Lieutenant could be allowed to stand?*”

Windrunner - their Windrunner - scrambled up from the deck. He looked at Sylvanas like he couldn’t believe she was real; in turn she grinned at him with far too many teeth. They were speaking in liquid Elvish, some sort of dialect Fitz couldn’t entirely follow, but seemed to be mostly about Windrunner’s mother, and also about how someone they both knew seemed to have a lot of cousins.

Fitz was bursting with questions, aching with hurt, and shocked by her deliverance. She looked with dim eyes about the seemingly empty prison-hulk. Then she sought to interrupt with the minimum of rudeness. “*Excuse me, Ma’am?*”

Sylvanas turned, breaking off mid-flow, her long ears cantiing up.
“What is the plan of escape?” Fitz said.

“It was to travel overland and drop down into a particular bay,” replied Sylvanas. “There is a frigate waiting for our signal to take us off the beach. But I don’t think that would be sensible now.”

With a wave of her hand, Sylvanas indicated the shoreline. The fighting and screaming had clearly carried across the water, and it had caused alarms to go off in the landside garrison. The Zandalari shore was now alive with moving storm lanterns, and the sound of orders and hurry was floating softly in the air. Figures hurried around large launches, which looked ready to push out from shore. Whatever decisions were to be made, they would need to be made quickly.

Fitz grimaced, mostly at the dryness of the Ranger-General’s tone. Her head felt light. Blood dripped down her sleeve to pool on the deck at her feet.

“Begging your pardon ma’am, but how did you get on board the hulk?”

“We borrowed a boat and rowed here,” said Sylvanas. “A little one.”

Fitz nodded, swaying slightly. A boat was something she could work with. “Get us Kul Tiran on the boat,” she said. “And we will leave in... that.”

She pointed at random; her finger landed on a nearby Zandalari schooner. Behind her, Jackson staggered to her feet, helped by Gregory. Clyburn stood firmly at her shoulder - he looked ready to grab Fitz should she topple over. Sylvanas gazed at them consideringly.

“We shall do as you suggest,” Sylvanas said, and she smiled at Fitz for the first time. “You remind me of my wife. She would probably gamble on Kul Tiran seamanship over Elvish rangers as well.”

“Lord Admiral’s finest,” Fitz mumbled, before her head caught up with her mouth. “Oh, wait, your wife is the…”

Sylvanas looked amused at her stammering. “Yes. I am aware.” Mercifully, she turned to her own people. “To the boat at the double, ladies and gentlemen!”

With a dozen inexpert, but strong oarsmen - and Jackson softly calling time while a Quel’Thalasan medic stitched her arm - the little boat flew across the water. The closest schooner was a whaler of about fifty feet, gaff rigged and ready for sea. Fitz looked it over with a professional eye; she was a lovely little ship, with speed written into every line - its smaller whaling boat was also beautiful, even lodged snugly in its davit. The harpoon-gun was shrouded in canvass, and was no threat to the approaching party.

With a sharp gesture from Sylvanas, the rangers leapt up and jumped nimbly aboard - someone cried out, but this was swiftly cut off. Fitz scrambled up after them with much less grace, calling orders to her three tired sailors. Her mind was already running complex sums and actions necessary to get them underway, but truthfully she wasn’t worried.

The Rangers were busy also; in a trice, a line of bound Zandalari trolls were being dropped into the little boat they’d arrived on, and then it was shoved off with long poles. The Trollish launches from the shore were now in the water and pulling for them strongly, but Fitz knew they were beaten; she felt the thrill of victory.

Ahead of them lay safety and a Lord Admiral keen on recovering both her wife and nephew. Behind them lay a defeated enemy. Life was good.

Fitz took her rightful place on the quarterdeck. Windrunner joined her, with Sylvanas not far behind.
“Your orders, Sir?” she asked the Lieutenant.

“Get us out of here, Fitz,” ordered Windrunner. “I will take the wheel.”

“Aye aye, Sir,” she said. Then she called out to the deck. “Cut the anchor cable!”

A faint splash indicated one of the Elves had taken an axe to it; the schooner started to drift, almost imperceptibly out to sea. The tide was ebbing - even if they made no sail they would escape the anchorage eventually. Fitz felt like laughing.

“Hoist away!” she said to her Kul Tirans, who were chivvying the most likely-looking Rangers up the mast to help.

Mainsail and jib rose, to the accompaniment of the creaking of the blocks. The sails flapped, bellied, flapped again. Then they filled. Windrunner at the wheel signalled that he felt a steady pressure, and the schooner began gathering way; she was changing from a dormant thing to a living force. Fitz thrilled at the tiny heel the hull took as the wind pushed her forward, at the subdued creak of her ropes and stays, and at the little burble of water flowing over a smooth bow.

The schooner glided out of the harbour mouth to meet the open sea. The sun glimmered below the horizon, and false dawn lit the sky. The rain had faded, but through the mist the semaphore station on the mainland was visible; its arms were spinning wildly, presumably reporting urgently on their escape. But what could the trolls do? The schooner was out of cannon range from shore, even if artillery was in the area. Fitz gave into her temptation and laughed brightly.

So taken with tides and winds and her own joy was Fitz, that Sylvanas’s approach was actually a surprise.

“Midshipman Fitzwilliams,” she said. Fitz turned, smiling. Sylvanas smiled back.

“What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“If you sail around the coast,” said Sylvanas, “we can still rendezvous with the frigate.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz. “I will submit the plan to Lieutenant Windrunner immediately.”


It was late morning by the time they reached the bay designated for the extraction. The schooner flew across the water, but no other sail was in sight; Fitz didn’t want to hove-to just yet in case they were surprised by an enemy. Clyburn, the only uninjured crewman, was sent up the mainmast to watch and wait.

“I see ‘er!” he finally called. Fitz craned her neck upwards - Clyburn was practically dancing in his excitement. “It’s the Intrepid ma’am!”

And indeed it was. The weathered frigate - scheduled to have headed home over two months ago - instead took her station off the schooner with all the crisp professionalism of the finest of the Lord Admiral’s Navy.

Fitz noted the signs of recent, heavy battle; parts of the rail looked patched, and gouges flecked across the hull. But none of that mattered; Intrepid was here - home was here - and she couldn’t wait to be back aboard. The sturdy beauty of the ship, the two yellow streaks along her sides, checkered with black gunports, the pendant at the mainmast, the hands on the deck, the blue coats of the
marines, the boatswain's voice roaring at dilatory seamen; it was Fitz’s navy, the end of captivity and flight.

A quarter boat was swung out, and came across the water to meet them. Midshipman Porter was in the strensheet, and he rushed to embrace her the second he was aboard. “Risen from the grave, old girl!” he said over and over. Then he practically pushed her into the quarter boat, which was already partly filled with elves. “Get along with you, the Captain wants a word.”

Sylvanas went up Intrepid’s side first, of course; she was unquestionably the most superior Officer Fitz had ever seen. Faintly came the noisy trilling of what had to be every single bosun’s mate aboard. By the time all the formalities were completed and Fitz herself could come up, Sylvanas and Windrunner had both already been handed off to a group of anxious looking Rangers. Windrunner caught her eye as he was whisked away - he shot her a wink and weary grin before he was hurried off.

Captain Forster was standing by the entry port waiting for her. Fitz touched her hat in salute.

“Midshipman Fitzwilliams, ma’am, reporting back aboard.”

Captain Forster regarded Fitz implacably. “Good afternoon, Miss Fitzwilliams. You forgot this.”

She threw something. Fitz reflexively caught it out of the air - it was, inexplicably, undeniably, her father’s oilskin coat. She noted a few new stitches in it, but otherwise it was in remarkable condition, perhaps better than when she had lost it, even. She ran her hand over it slowly, looking at Forster in confusion.

“When we ambushed the third-rate,” the Captain said, “we found this on one of the dead. That was how we knew you were alive.”

Fitz nodded, a little jerkily. She touched the button with the anchor of Kul Tiras on it.

Captain Forster paused, an odd look on her face, waiting. Fitz cleared her throat. Stupid and dull, she made a stumbling report, forcing herself to remember to commend the bravery of the crew in the highest terms.

"The Lord Admiral will be pleased," said Forster steadily at the end of it. “And not just about her family. That schooner will bring a pretty penny in prize money. Shared with the elves, of course.”

“They deserve it ma’am,” said Fitz. “They fight well.”

Forster looked at Fitz steadily. “We suffered heavy casualties in the boarding action. Braithwaite is dead. Windrunner is being recalled by Quel’Thalas, and will depart on the next piquet boat. I have one commissioned officer left. Will you be fit to stand watch?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fitz.

“I will rate you Acting-Lieutenant,” said Forster. “This was a fine piece of work, Miss Fitzwilliams - very fine work. Dismissed below now, go get some sleep - tomorrow we set sail for the Great Fleet.”
In which the author struggles to write a chapter without at least one thing being set on fire.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The *Intrepid* came running down the gullet under a fine spread of canvass. The wind filling the sails still carried the bite of winter, but Fitz barely noticed after over two years in the navy. Instead she focused on the horizon; *Intrepid’s* junction with the Great Fleet was imminent.

The wood creaked under her feet as she stood on the windward side of the quarterdeck - the traditional place for the senior watchstander. Her spyglass was tucked firmly under her arm. Vincent, the signal Midshipman, stood nearby.

"Sail ho! Dead to loo'ard!" came the excited cry from the lookout. "And a whole fleet beyond that!"

"Bear down on them, Mrs. Ward," Fitz said to the sailing master. "Mr. Midshipman Fitzwilliams! My compliments to the Captain, and please inform her the Great Fleet is in sight."

This was the third of the rendezvous points between which the Fleet sailed during the winter months. Fitz privately thought they were lucky to have found them at all; in less than fifteen days the Fleet would have switched to the Spring rendezvous points, and *Intrepid* would have had to return to port embarrassed. Not one sail had been sighted since leaving Zandalar to help guide them; the ocean seemed empty of every ship bar the little whaling schooner liberated during Fitz’s escape. That was leaping joyfully alongside them, and would make a fine prize when sold at the Admiralty court.

Lieutenant Windunner had begged for command of the schooner. He was under the constant eyes of a dozen fierce Quel'Thalan rangers, and thought to escape. Unfortunately for him the bulk of the rangers had also transferred to the smaller vessel - they seemed to have an unflatteringly accurate view of how much mischief he could cause when unsupervised. Sylvanas Windrunner herself, and two honour guards, had remained aboard the *Intrepid*.

Captain Forster swung up onto the quarterdeck. Her glass came up, and she trained it on the horizon. Sylvanas Windrunner followed, also looking in the direction of the Fleet - it seemed her eyesight was such that she needed no mechanical aide.

"Captain, ma’am,” said Fitz, touching the brim of her hat. “General Windrunner, ma’am. The ship closest to us is the frigate LAS *Action*, number 57."

"Very well.” Captain Forster said. “Signal midshipman! Be ready with the private signal and our number. Mrs Beauchamp; have the gunner make ready to salute the Flag, if you please."

There was the Great Fleet appearing up over the horizon; seventy ships of the line and a host of smaller ones, all moving slowly in six columns across the grey sea. Like the tentacles of a kraken, the scouting frigates and sloops stood out from the main body, put there to identify ships both hostile or
friendly. *Intrepid* had spotted one of these sentries. Fitz on the quarter-deck, with her glass to her eye, could just see the columns of topsails of ships of the line. They were close hauled, every ship exactly the same distance astern of her predecessor. And atop the lead ship of the weather line, streaming proudly in the wind, was the enormous long pennant of the Lord Admiral herself. The effect on the crew was electric.

“General signal from the flag, Ma’am. ‘Tack,’” said Vincent.

“Very good, Miss Vincent.” said Forster. *Intrepid* could safely ignore the order, as they had not taken up station on the flagship. It did mean, however, that they would have to plot a new intercept course.

Down came the signal from the flagship’s yardarm; that was the signal to start the maneuver. Round came the flagship's yards; round came the yards of the scouting frigates, and of the leaders of all the lee columns. One by one, at precise intervals, the succeeding ships came round to follow the flag. Fitz could see the backing and filling of the topsails needed to keep everything so exactly apart. This was nautical perfection; this was what it meant to be Kul Tiran.

The manoeuvre was completed crisply, and the fleet plunged forward on its new tack.

More bunting fluttered up the flagship's yardarm.

"Our number, ma’am!” said Vincent. “Flag to *Intrepid*. Take station to windward of me at two cables' lengths. Schooner to leeward."

"Very well,” said Captain Forster calmly. “Acknowledge."

From about the whole ship there was a certain tension. It was a highly visible, important spot that *Intrepid* was being ordered to take up; presumably the Lord Admiral knew that her wife was aboard, and wanted her close. But to reach that station they would have to pass all the frigates, sweep down upon the weather column, cut through it, then swing round into the wind at exactly the right moment; the whole Great Fleet would be watching them and judging their performance. Missing the cut might mean a collision.

Fitz ran through the calculations in her mind; how far the flagship would travel over time, how fast the *Intrepid* was moving, how far behind the second ship was following, and the impact of the tides running down the Gullet.

Captain Forster looked almost bored. “Steady as she goes, Mrs Ward.”

“Aye aye Ma’am.”

And that was it. No more orders; they passed the Action handily to port, swept past the inner screening frigates, and bore down full speed on the weather column under practically all of their sail.

Mrs Ward looked nervous. “Shall I send some hands up to brace the yards a little more, ma’am?” she asked.

“No need,” said Forster dismissively. Fitz clasped her hands behind her back and consciously attempted to mimic the Captain’s coolness. From the amused slant to General Windrunner’s ears she suspected she hadn’t entirely succeeded.

The flagship of the weather column was now nearly on the port beam. The cut between the front of the second ship and the stern of the flagship was clearly visible. They were still going at a significant rate of knots, and the intercept course demanded that *Intrepid* aim dead-centre of the Fleet’s flagship.
If they had miscalculated then the frigate would collide with the flank of the Lord Admiral herself. "Mrs. Ward! Clue up the mizzen tops'l." The Captain ordered, and the breakneck speed of *Intrepid* slowed by a fraction. "Stand by the mizzen tops'l sheets."

They were fast approaching their appointed station. Fitz’s eye darted from one column of ships to the other; she could see all the starboard sides of one and all the port sides of the other. "Hard to port," called the Captain. "Bring her to the wind."

Fitz saw the helmsman drag the wheel over. The heel of the ship responded immediately. *Intrepid* flew past the stern of the flagship - Fitz sighed with admiration for its power - then swung up and into the wind. With the bulky flagship between them she now couldn’t see how Luitenant Windrunner was fairing but there wasn’t any unusual activity on the flagship - that was surely a good sign. "Sheet home the mizzen tops'l," said the Captain, and the sails snapped home once more. Fitz glanced up. They were exactly to windward of the flagship, with two cables of separation. "You may begin the salute," said Forster, looking satisfied.

Twenty-one guns for the Lord Admiral; a minute and three-quarters of gunfire.

Beside the *Intrepid* rode the might of Kul Tiras; there were first-rates and second-rates; there were three-deckers and two-deckers; there were ships that had fought in a hundred battles and others who had fought in none. Fitz felt a well of patriotic pride; let the lubbers keep their armies. As long as Kul Tiras retained its skill, they would rule the ocean. Let an invader press forward against over two hundred ships-of-the-line, and another hundred in drydock.

And the sixty odd Elvish ships, Fitz grudgingly allowed. Those were almost Kul Tiran. "Our number, ma’am!” called Vincent. “Flag to *Intrepid*. ‘Welcome. Report aboard. Bring wife.’" "Reply to Flag.” said Forster. “‘Respectful greetings, will comply.’ Mrs Ward, you have the ship.” “Aye aye, ma’am,” Ward said.

Eager hands worked vigorously on the signal halyards. "Call away my gig, Mrs Beauchamp," the Captain was saying. “General Windrunner; your indulgence, ma’am - please alight the craft and we will be away.”

Fitz retook her spot on the bridge and busied herself ensuring all the signaled orders were obeyed promptly; it was an exercise in itself. Half-remembered bunting flown at odd angles all needed immediate action to maintain *Intrepid*’s station - the activity and urgency of it all was a pleasant way to pass the afternoon. It was with a sigh that she handed over the watch to Mr Carrick. Carrick had once been the most junior commissioned officer aboard the frigate, but was now the lofty Second Lieutenant - he enjoyed every scrap of his newfound authority. Fitz had plenty of chances to practice standing watch during the run back down from Zandalar.

Fitz was snug in her b favoured in a book of geometry, when her brother appeared at the wardroom doorway. "Captain's compliments, ma'am, and she'd like to see you in the great cabin."

Fitz looked at him helplessly. Then she threw a gesture at her general dishevelment. He grinned back
in pure mischief. “Examine your conscience, sister mine,” he drawled. “As well as examine your best jacket."

"If I examine my jacket too hard it might disintegrate," groused Fitz.

Her brother grinned again, then took off his own. “Here you are, Willa,” he said, throwing it over. It was slightly too big, but it hadn’t taken half the beating her own clothes had. “This is your shot. This is our shot. Don’t embarrass us.”

Fitz was a little alarmed at this, and puzzled also. She scrambled to get ready. It was always a worrisome thing to be called to the Captain; Fitz had a little routine to make sure she remembered everything. At the ladderway, check her hat. At this particular beam, check her dirk hanging straight. At the sentry, smooth one’s hair as much as possible and then knock firmly.

Forster looked up with a smile from her desk.

“Miss Fitzwilliams, I have good news; there is an examination for lieutenant tomorrow on the flagship. I have entered your name as a late participant - you are, of course, ready for the exam?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fitz, who felt deeply unready.

“Excellent.” Forster was practically genial. “The fleet will heave to and remain on station to set and retrieve the boats. Report to the flag at one in the afternoon with all your certificates - I will sign them before you go.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am,” said Fitz.

It all seemed very hasty for such an important occasion; Fitz had been an acting-lieutenant for only two months, and was only eligible for the exam due to a year spent in the sea-cadets. Otherwise she would only be two-thirds of the way through the three-year minimum service time. And if she failed, she would revert to Midshipman, barred from taking the exam again for another eighteen months. The loss of twenty months seniority would impact her entire career.

But Fitz also felt the pleasure of potential success - if she passed, then she would be a lieutenant with two month’s seniority already. Perhaps Captain Forster would even condescend to allow her a junior slot aboard Intrepid.

The Captain was scribbling something into the ship’s log.

"Tell Mrs Beauchamp you have my permission to leave the ship to-morrow,” she said, looking up. “You may use one of the ship's boats."

"Thank you, ma’am."

"Good luck, Fitz," the Captain said, “Close the door behind you.”

During the next twenty-four hours, Fitz found herself at the centre of a whirlwind. Porter helped her stitch her best uniform while Vincent read excerpts from the Art of Navigation. Someone had used their rum ration to bribe the cook into letting her near the fires to iron her shirt, and her brother regaled her with complaints while shining her shoes. Her hat — her poor, battered hat, which had suffered through storms and captivity - her hat was a wreck. But somehow Fitz managed to coax it into hints that it once had an actual shape.

"If you take it off," mused Carrick. "Maybe the board just won't notice?"
As the Fleet had hove-to, everybody was free to turn out and see Fitz leave the ship. She felt incredibly awkward, with her dirk and jacket and bundles of paper. There were certificates of sobriety and good conduct, copies of completed assignments and navigation results. They made an awkward bundle while trying to get aboard the new jolly boat. At the oars were Clyburn and Gregory, and at the tillar was Jackson. They knuckled their foreheads steadily as she climbed the flagship's side to report herself to the officer of the watch.

She was as ready as a crew of three hundred people could make her.

"Hmm," said the officer who greeted her — an elderly lieutenant with only one eye. He ran that single eye over Fitz’s outwardly-immaculate uniform, as well as the bundle she was carrying. "There’s a lot of you today. I think twenty-two are already abroad, and another twelve en route." He pointed laconically. It looked like every ship in the whole Fleet had dropped a boat with at least one hopeful Midshipman aboard.

“I’m not sure what the exam masters are going to do with you all,” said the lieutenant. “But whatever it is, it will probably be done quickly, With this many there won’t be time to spare. Go aft and wait in the corridor in front of the Midshipman’s berth, quickly now.”

The space was cramped. Chairs and crates had been hastily produced and placed in the corridor, but all were taken when she arrived. She stood under a beam, her hand using it to steady herself; the flag was a lot bigger than *Intrepid*, and the roll swept through a greater arc.

Around her, there were Midshipmen of all ages and types waiting for the call to come inside, and more entering at every passing moment.

"Forty of us," commented a tall, thin, clerkly officer, counting heads. "How many of us will they pass, do you think? Five?"

“One in five,” said someone else. “So eight.”

“Hear that?” said a third Midshipman.

From outside came the muffled, long-drawn twittering of the pipes of the bos'n's mates. Someone on deck was shouting an order, and there was the thump of Marines coming to attention.

"A captain," remarked someone.

The clerkly-looking officer had already jumped up and poked his head out the top of the hatchway. Another Midshipman took the change to steal his seat.

"It's Sutherland," he reported.

Everyone winced. “He’s a fire-breather,” someone said.

Again the pipes twittered.

"Lucky number two is Smith," reported the lookout.

“Not too bad,” called another voice. “Although he likes to follow the rules.”

The third captain followed immediately. "It's Forster," said the lookout.

Fitz started, then looked around self-consciously.
"Forster?" exclaimed someone, also scrambling to his feet in haste and pushing to the door. "So it is! She's a cool one, lads, I had her last time; better sharpen up your mathematics."

"The board's compliments, sirs and madams," said a Marine, appearing as if from nowhere. "Will you please come along?"

The throng stood, and like a hesitant, breaking wave they moved aft towards the Great Cabin. The sentries posted at the door ignored them completely, their muskets tucked neatly by their sides.

There was a momentary hesitation; no one was anxious to be the first victim.

"You, by the door," said the marine messenger. "If you could come along Ma'am, it will be over soon."

"Pray for me," said the officer candidate, desperately.

She settled her sword on her hip, visibly steeled herself, then walked into the cabin. A full ten minutes passed before she came back out again.

“How’d it go?” someone asked. But the candidate just shook her head, walking up the ladder.

“Here now,” said the messenger marine. “You can’t ask questions, nor tell anyone about anything about the test. It’s a fail for the talker and for the listener!”

The room quietened instantly. Some souls pulled out surreptitious copies of *The Gentleman’s Guide to Sea Warfare*, but Fitz wasn’t one of them. Instead she did some quick math. Forty officers, ten minutes each... that was the best part of seven hours, without breaks. She glanced around and saw faces drawn into tight lines; clearly she wasn’t the only person in the room considering the odds of even getting a hearing.

Suddenly, the competition to be picked was fierce, limited only by the candidate's dignity. The marine came back again and again, and each time failed to pick Fitz, despite her attempts to make eye contact. The candidates dwindled; some left the cabin looking devastated, some left looking thoughtful, and a few - a very few - exited the door beaming like the sun. The corridor became less crowded. Fitz eventually gave up all hope and took a seat, stretching out her legs with a sigh of relief.

Night fell. The sentries changed their watch. A hand came to light the lamps. The room held only nine weary souls to go. Finally, the marine returned and pointed at Fitz - “You next, ma’am. Your turn. You should hurry up, they’re pretty grouchy.”

Fitz leapt up, almost tripping on her sword. She staggered towards the cabin door and pushed it open; inside there was a great low desk and behind it sat five people. One more stood motionless in the corner of the room.

The door closed behind her.

"Report," said the officer in the middle of the room. "Succinctly. We have no time to waste."

It was the Lord Admiral. That was the Lord Admiral in the middle, clad in her formal finery, iron-grey hair pulled into a braid over one shoulder. Her epaulettes gleamed. She looked as much like steel as as she did in Fitz’s childhood memories, memories of being on the outskirts of noble balls and parties. Tall and stocky, grave-eyed and still; Jaina Proudmoore was the heart and soul of the Navy, and the Navy was Kul Tiras.
She was also staring at Fitz like she was stripping off layers of cloth and skin, seeing everything underneath.

"F-Fitzwilliams, Ma’am. F-Fitzwilliamia Fitzwilliams. Acting-Lieutenant of the Lord Admiral’s Ship _Intrepid_."

"Your certificates, please," said the young lady on the Admiral’s right. Her peacoat was the red of Quel’Thalas, and her rank was an incomprehensible half-sunburst on her high collar.

Fitz handed them over obediently, and waited for the assistant to examine them.

The Lord Admiral sighed audibly. She turned to Forster.

“What are you doing, Alex?” she said.

“How do you mean, ma’am?” said Forster.

“A Fitzwilliams?” said Proudmoore, impatiently. “Really?”

Forster smiled. “I think you might find this particular Fitz will surprise you.”

“Perhaps,” said Proudmoore, dismissively. “They never have before.”

The exchange hit Fitz like a bucket of cold water. Her mind went clear and cold, almost like it did when she was in mortal peril. The stakes could not be higher; Captain Forster had wagered something of herself by bringing her here - quite apart from her own chances of ever being promoted. Perfection was the only possible outcome.

“Upon receiving orders to sail from Boralus with a south-east wind,” said the heavy-set Captain on the far left, “at what time of tide will you begin to unmoor that you may have the advantage of it in plying down to Sunsail?”

“Two hours past high,” said Fitz promptly.

“Your single-decked eighty-foot sloop of war has been taken to sea and its trimmed by the head,” said the next Captain. “Your ship carries nine-pounders. What correction do you make?

Fitz paused fractionally. Nine-pounders weighed twenty-six hundred-weight each. Along with the gun carriages and the ready use shot which would have to be brought aft too there would be a total transfer of four tons for two sets. Her mind’s eye measured the distances, forward and aft of the centre of imagined flotation, from forty feet before to thirty feet abaft. The deadweight of such a ship would be over four hundred tons.

“The number three guns would come aft,” said Fitz. “To the rearmost ports, Sir. That should compensate.”

The Lord Admiral frowned heavily. “I have a single-handed ketch,” she said in Thalassian, “It’s mizzen is fifteen feet and eight, and its mainmast is ten and five. How do I set this to properly fish?”

Fitz narrowed her eyes. “I must beg the most serene and excellent Grand Ocean-Lord Admiral’s Pardon,” she said firmly. “On a ketch the mainmast should be taller than the mizzen. That is how you can set a single mizzen sail to steer into the wind.”

The Lord Admiral leaned back. “Well, well, well,” she said slowly.
The Admiral’s assistant was staring at her as well, looking thoughtful. The two strangers of the board were looking confused; the quick exchange in technical Thalassian had been hard to follow. Fitz risked a quick glance at her own Captain; her expression was cool, but there was a hint of satisfaction about Forster eyes.

As for Fitz herself, she was quite annoyed. The last question had been a trap, set and sprung in another language. If she hadn’t just spent four months in the exclusive company of a man who spoke mostly in Quel’Thalan sailing terms, then she would have been in serious trouble.

Only one question to go - Forster’s question. Fitz clasped her hands firmly behind her back, and prepared for a real challenge.

She never got the chance to answer it. Outside the cabin, there was a sudden, insistent drumming. Alarms and cries were audible, muffled by the door, and there was the cash and roar of cannons firing.

Without hesitation the Lord Admiral stood and stormed around the desk, straight past Fitz. An armoured elven man in a heavy cloak followed, armed with some sort of foreign polearm and a tower shield. The Captains barely restrained themselves from rushing the door - once Proudmoore had exited they followed her out quick as a flash. Fitz thought she had better tag along with Captain Forster and joined the general exodus, just behind the red-coated Elvish woman - half-elf, Fitz corrected herself, noting the light dusting of freckles and the shorter pointed ears.

Outside the night was lit with the glare of rockets firing; red ones, the colour of a general alarm. From every side came drumming - the entire fleet must be beating to quarters - and on the flagship men and woman rushed about the deck in preparation to fight.

The half-elf assistant turned to Fitz and pointed across the water; about a half-mile to windward a yellow light was growing. The shape floated forward until it resolved itself; it was a ship, wreathed in flames, drifting slowly towards the crowded fleet. Behind it was another.

"Fire ships!" cried someone on deck.

"Officer of the watch! Call my gig!" bellowed Foster.

A line of orange flame lit up the water, followed at once by the roar of a broadside; some ship was firing her guns. Fire on a ship of the line was the ultimate danger - set much tar and canvass and wood aflame, and not a single thing short of magic would put it out again. It would be like a dragon attack.

Proudmoore called out crisp orders from the quarterdeck, and signals soared into the night sky; the Great Fleet was setting all sail, seeking speed enough to remove themselves from the path of danger. But the fire ships turned to keep on an intercept course, showing themselves to be still under control. They bore down directly at the flagship, ignoring other targets.

Fitz watched them come with a mixture of horror and admiration; the Trollish crews aboard the flaming ships were brave to the point of madness.

The leadmost fireship was a small brig, bearing down under nothing but topsails. To Fitz’s left, a group of Kul Tiran Tidesages joined together; they threw a pillar of water at it trying to douse the fire - or perhaps just push it aside. But the water sloughed off without effect. Not only brave crews of Zandalari trolls aboard then, but also shamans; Fitz knew in that instant that this must be an attempt on the Lord Admiral’s life. No other reward could be worth the terrific cost of this attack.
The screening frigate had seen the Tidesage’s failure, and its Captain tacked about with their own reckless courage. Fitz watched with horror as it deliberately rammed into the Zandalari fireship; instantly, the Kul Tiran ship was wreathed in flames. Hands leapt screaming from the deck into ocean; the heat was so intense she could feel it from where she was standing. But the first fireship was neutralised; locked as it was in embrace with the frigate, it was unable to continue forward to menace the flag. It burned impotently on the water.

“Fitz!” someone called, and she turned from the death of the frigate. Captain Forster was standing at the port waist with a throng of other captains and officers, all clamoring for boats to take them back to their ships.

Fitz pushed her way through the crowd. “Your orders ma’am?” she said.

“Find me a boat, Miss Fitzwilliams!” she ordered.

“Aye aye, Ma’am,” said Fitz smartly. “I think we’re better off to starboard.”

The flagship was the leader of the weather column; every single ship, including Intrepid, was to the port of her. The only ship lying to starboard, aside from the unfortunate screening frigate, was Windrunner’s schooner. Below, to the empty starboard side of the flag, was a boat. Inside it was the Lord Admiral’s Quel’Thalan assistant.

“Avast there!” yelled Captain Forster. “Belay your rowing!” She dropped down the side of the flagship and into the jolly boat so quickly Fitz was worried that she had actually fallen.

Fitz threw herself down the ladder as well, leaping gracelessly over the last few feet of ocean. She clattered into the bow of the boat, tripping over a thwart and knocking the breath out of herself. Her sword smacked into the canvass shroud of a harpoon-gun. The boat must be the whaler from the schooner they had captured.

“Pull for the Intrepid,” said Foster, who was a woman currently uninterested in details. “Go around the stern.”

“I regret to advise,” said the half-elf. She looked, if anything, faintly amused by the order. Her pointed ears slanted back at a rakish angle. “The Lord Admiral tasked me with securing her nephew. I am just waiting for the Admiral’s consort, who will also be here soon.”

As if summoned, a dark shape plummeted from the deck into the ocean, entering with hardly a splash. A figure in leather armour made dark by water slipped easily into the small craft, bright blue eyes lit with purpose.

“Make for the ship, Jess!” Sylvanas Windrunner said, ears swiveling quickly.

Fitz tumbled forward and grabbed the portside oar, which the half-elf surrendered without comment. They both bent their backs to row.

“Pull!” urged Sylvanas, and Fitz redoubled her efforts. The schooner lay before them, and figures surged about its decks; one had a shock of red hair, clearly visible in the rocket light.

Suddenly the little whaling boat pitched and surged upwards with some violence, carried by the crest of an enormous wave. The Tidesages were trying once again to douse the second fireship. They once again failed; the sole fruit of their efforts was they had inadvertently tossed the little boat about like so much debris.

Fitz was thrown clear across the thwart and into the lap of the Quel’Thalan officer, who grabbed her.
jacket to stop her going overside. Fitz blinked stupidly up into her face.

“Well,” said the half-elf. “If you’re going to stay there then you should know my name. Jessanydra Sagewood.”

“Fitzwilliamia Fitwilliams,” replied Fitz.

“Yes,” Sagewood said. Her ears twitched. “I was in your exam.”

Fitz flailed a little trying to disentangle herself; the elf finally pushed her gently onto the floor of the boat. When she managed to lever herself up, she could feel the heat of the second fireship, and see the circle of shamans chanting their ward-songs.

The fireship was perilously close to the flagship now. Shot and shell were landing in the water them as the flag unloaded its ordinance trying to cripple it.

Fitz’s mind raced - if it could be made to drift even twenty feet to the stern of the flagship, perhaps it would pass completely behind.

“Rig the sails!” cried Forster, who had clearly come to the same conclusion. “Unfurl all the canvas you can find there, Miss Fitzwilliams! We must get aboard and take the wheel!”

Sylvanas smiled, and there was a lot of teeth. “Boarding a ship filled with at least twenty shamans, and that is also on fire? What a terrible plan! Jania would approve.”

Fitz ignored her betters. She was far to busy hastily fastening the dismounted mast back in place, and methodically connecting ties. When it was securely fastened, Sagewood passed her the sail. Fitz glanced up, and with muttered thanks reached out and took it. Then she dropped it to the floor of the boat, staring at the prow.

“The harpoon ma’am!” she said, pointing. “The harpoon has an attached rope! If we can hit them in the hull, we could back sails and drag them astern!”

“Ready the gun, Miss Fitzwilliams!” Forster snapped. “I’ve got the sail.”

Sylvanas and Sagewood leapt out of the way as Fitz crashed forward, but the younger officer was far too busy to care; she reached the gun and her fingers fumbled over the knots that held the canvas shroud in place. The wind and weather had swollen them tight. Fitz was just about in despair when there was a pointed tap on her shoulder - Sagewood pushed her aside, and made a single cut. The shroud fell away. The gleaming harpoon was revealed.

“Gunpowder!” called Fitz. She reached back without looking and a cartridge was pressed into her hands. A priming charge was ready for her a second later. With a sharp tap of a quill, the paper was pierced and in another instant the slow-match was lit; the harpoon-gun was ready. The last step was unhooking the stays and ensuring the gun could swivel about; Fitz felt the knife pressed into her hands, and she cut the cords swiftly.

She finally turned; Sagewood had found the rest of the firearms when seeking gunpowder. Sylvanas had taken advantage, and was now armed to the teeth; a cutlass dangled at her side, and she held a long Kul Tiran musket. A stack of five other muskets - presumably uncocked but pre-loaded - lay propped neatly beside her. Forster was further astern, having taken charge of the sail; that was set and ready to unfurl. At some point she had thrown her sword to the floor of the boat and thrust a cutlass through her belt instead.

Fitz turned back to the fireship, and her world narrowed. They were almost within range of the
The shamans aboard the fireship had seen them now, and were glaring at them fiercely, but they didn’t stop chanting - presumably if they lost concentration, the Tide Sages would overwhelm them. Fitz scanned the hull of the fireship, thinking through the effect of a hit verses the odds of missing. It needed to be awkward enough to avoid the crew cutting it with an axe, close enough to the water that the fire wouldn’t burn through it, and high enough that harpoon didn’t go into the water and sink.

She took aim for a meaty part of bow.

Sylvanas stood and fired a musket; the smoke from the shot briefly blanketed the whaler, but it cleared quickly. The musketball itself had no effect - red-hot, it was visible frozen and unmoving in front of a particularly ugly troll.

Fitz readied the harpoon. Took aim. Steadied her breathing. Tightened the lanyard.

With a terrific, metallic clang the harpoon roared out, and struck the hull of the fireship just behind the bow.

“Now!” yelled Sylvanas, firing another musket, but the order was unneeded. Forster had let the sails fly almost the instant the harpoon had struck home. Those sails fluttered, luffed a little, then filled - but only weakly.

Fitz flung herself for the oars, thinking to row - but realistically the lack of wind was a disaster. She reached the port oar and looked for her erstwhile companion to help. Sagewood, however had stood, and was now calmly removing her leather gloves. Cool and precise, she made a complex gesture with her hands, followed by a kind of pushing motion.

A wind blew up out of nowhere. The sail billowed and filled; the heavy rope attaching the whaling boat to the harpoon grew taunt. The laws of physics acted inexorably on the fireship, and its bows began to slip from its heading. It wasn’t much. Fitz couldn’t tell if it would be enough to save the flag. But it was something.

The Zandalari shaman - the one Sylvanas had shot at - had finally noticed their efforts. Standing in a circle of all the others, his face nonetheless was the one that snarled with anger, visible through his chanting. He made a quick gesture, and a dark cloud leapt across the water. Fitz ducked, but the magic was poorly aimed - perhaps because of haste with which it was cast. It fell well clear of the boat.

Sylvanas calmly stood and fired a second musket. Fitz grabbed up another and fired a third. Forster’s attempt to join them was a misfire; the Captain tossed the malfunction over the side without hesitation, and reached for a replacement. As with the first shot, the volley of balls stopped dead on some sort of shield - presumably the same one protecting the ship from the canons and magic of the fleet.

The fireship gave more way under the insistent towline of the whaler. Fitz glanced at Sagewood; she continued perform the exact gestures needed to call the wind. She looked perfectly calm, and her uniform was flawless, even as the fireship bathed them in heat and the trolls threw their unsavory magic at her.

“Watch out!” yelled Sylvanas. The angry shaman had finally taken enough; he broke ranks with the others and lunged for the side of the fireship. He was still chanting, but clearly more interested in them. Lit by the fire of his own ship, he flashed out another gesture that looked entirely vicious, and
the same dark cloud rolled across the waves, directly for the little boat.

Sagewood wasn’t about to give up now. She made a sharp, abrupt gesture of her own, and cried out something challenging. The dark cloud struck the boat and rolled off, like smoke around a soap-bubble. Fitz stood and fired another musket at the shaman, again without effect.

Incandescent with rage, the shaman stopped chanting, and started to prepare something far more powerful; a giant ball of some kind, boiling with energy and malice. His eyes were alight with the anticipatory pleasure of their deaths. Sagewood looked grim.

Fitz just hoped they had done enough to save the flagship.

But their deaths were not scheduled for today. With a single, terrific crack, the entire fire ship froze over; everything was suddenly encased in a solid fist of ice.

Fitz flinched at the sudden cessation of heat. Then she leapt to sever the harpoon rope. She was proud of the way her hands didn’t shake. The ice was so clear she could see the shaman frozen inside, still snarling, locked in the act of preparing her death.

“Jania,” said Sylvanas. She was unloading the last few muskets, stowing them back in the locker. “She only needs a little.”

Fitz stared at her. There had to have been twenty shamans chanting on board the fireship, and the four of them in the boat had only managed to distract one. Apparently that had been enough.

“Man the oar, Fitz.” said Forster. “I will join you.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Sagewood had sat down on one of the forward thwarts; her expression was cool and her posture firm, but her pointed ears were trembling slightly with exhaustion. Fitz made no comment, just grabbed the port oar and bent her back to the task.

She didn’t have to row long. The flagship, which had been clawing away from the fireship, now turned to bear down on them. A line was thrown, and the little party began to clamber up the side.

“Ho, aunt!” called a familiar voice from the waist. Lieutenant Windrunner was peering at them over the rails, his grin clearly visible. “Ho Fitz and Jess!” He then noticed Captain Forster and he straightened, grin disappearing. “Ma’am.”

“As you were, Lieutenant Windrunner,” said Captain Forster. There was a bite to her voice. “Why are you here, instead of the schooner?”

“The Lord Admiral commands,” said the Lieutenant in common. “And they enforce.” He shot a thumb at a patch of especially deep shadows. Fitz realised it was packed with Qual'Thalan rangers.

“Fair enough,” said Forster, sounding resigned. “Return when allowed.”

Sylvanas brushed past them and a path was opening for her to the quarterdeck. Forster strode confidently after her, with Sagewood respectfully one pace behind. Fitz trailed along behind them all.

The Lord Admiral was standing on the windward side of the quarterdeck, tall and firm. Directly beside her was the elven guard, silent and omnipresent as a shadow. One of officers from the exam was also standing next to her. A small group of staff officers stood respectfully off, far enough away to give privacy.
Sylvanas swept right up to her and dropped a kiss on her cheek. Forster also approached, as did Sagewood. Fitz hovered awkwardly on the outskirts of the circle, trying to be inconspicuous.

“Perfect timing, beloved,” Sylvanas was saying to the Lord Admiral.

“I thought I should take the opportunity to save you,” said Proudmoore dryly. “You would be troublesome to replace.”

Sylvanas laughed, and the sound lightened Fitz’s heart. The exam Captain looked a bit discomforted, but all ignored him. The Admiral smiled fondly at her wife before she turned to the others, and her expression returned to blank immobility.

“Fine definition on the wards,” she said to Sagewood. “Perhaps a little more emphasis on the downward strokes.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

“And you, Alex -” the Lord Admiral said to Forster. “That harpoon plan was an excellent use of available resources. I hated every second of it.”

Forster laughed. “Don’t blame me, ma’am - blame Acting-Lieutenant Fitzwilliams. I was planning a boarding action.”

Fitz started at her mention, and then tried to surreptitiously inch behind her Captain. The Lord Admiral’s gaze, however, fixed her in place. She was suddenly conscious of how she must look; gritty gunpowder residue streaking her face, one of the sleeves of her borrowed jacket completely gone, and her gangly frame wasn’t exactly dignified at the best of times. She touched her hat nervously.

“How shall I record the examination result, ma’am?” said Sagewood, suddenly. “The oral section was interrupted.”

The exam Captain cleared his throat. “Candidates are not permitted to leave the examination before its completion, ma’am,” he said. “And she only answered three of the required four questions. My vote is to disqualify.”

Captain Forster bristled.

Proudmoore stared at him, her brows furrowed. “You can’t be serious,” When the Captain did not respond, her jaw squared. “Don’t be fucking stupid. Who has a spare epaulette?”

The senior officers all looked at one another - epaulettes weren’t exactly an item for which you carried spares. The Lord Admiral looked impatient.

“Here,” she said, and pulled off one of hers. It was heavy, fringed with real gold. She tossed it to Fitz, who caught it awkwardly. “You’re a lieutenant now. Congratulations. Throw out your godawful hat.”

Fitz touched her hand to the brim of her hat reflexively, then hurriedly removed it.

“Congratulations, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Captain Forster warmly. “I hope you will consider staying aboard Intrepid?”

“Intrepid is going home for refit,” said the Lord Admiral. “So I will keep Lieutenant Fitzwilliams for now. Take the mailbags home, and when you get there, transfer to Firedrake. Fair tides to you,
Alex.”

It was like Fitz was stuck in a dream. An unfamiliar midshipman took her by the arm and led her gently away. The flagship’s ‘tweendecks were like a maze; she was grateful when they finally reached the wardroom; she toppled into an unused cot and stared blankly at the beams above her head.

It was a long time before she fell asleep.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

In which the author learns that there are only two official whales in Azaroth’s ocean, and (perhaps disappointingly) the author declined the ship name LAS Baleen Whale.

The first thing Fitz discovered when she woke aboard the flagship was that the *Intrepid* had set sail during the night. Forster had been given an order directly from the Lord Admiral; that was apparently all the spur she needed. Unfortunately, in the confusion of getting the mail and refreshing the water, the ship had eventually sailed off with Fitz’s sea chest still on board.

This was a pickle. Fitz had no hat (she had thrown her previous disaster overboard); she was covered with gunpowder residue; and most pressingly, her jacket had only one sleeve on it. The other lieutenants in the wardroom were of no help; she was an other, both by being a stranger, and by being the Admiral’s rather than part of the ship. One Lieutenant did offer, with a gleam of avarice in his eye, a single clean shirt - in exchange for the Lord Admiral’s gifted epaulette. Fitz couldn’t bring herself to the exchange. Her mother’s joy would be worth everything suffered if only that epaulette could make it home to her.

In a fit of desperation Fitz approached Lieutenant Windrunner. She thought, after everything, they might be friends. Gratifyingly, he clearly thought so as well - she got a sympathetic slap on the back, a glass of rum, and a pile of spare uniform items. Galadin was a tall, well-built man, and the clothes did not fit well, but every stitch was finer than anything she had ever owned. The red of Quel’Thalas clashed horribly with her hair.

Dressed in her Princely uniform, the golden epaulette foreign on her left shoulder, Fitz reported to the flag to find out what her duty would require.

That turned out to be rather more difficult than she would have imagined. There was a great line of people waiting for their turn in the Admiral’s sea cabin, all of them wearing braid and dripping with sashes and glittering stars. A lot of them looked nervous. Occasionally some lucky officer would breeze past them all and walk straight inside.

Fitz joined the back of the queue, and waited for her turn to be called in.

The Great Cabin turned out to be divided into two parts; Fitz couldn’t see anything of the inner, because it was blocked off by a heavy door. The outer part, however, held nothing but Sagewood sitting behind an enormous teak desk. Papers sat neatly stacked, and she herself was frowning over another sheet, quill posed.

“Name and rank,” she said crisply, without looking up.

“Fitzwilliams, Lieutenant.”

Sagewood did glance up at that; Fitz resisted the urge to fidget under her gaze. She felt intensely foolish; the borrowed red coat felt a million times heavier and the cabin too warm. The half-elf contemplated her silently for a moment before smiling, long and slow.
“I don’t remember processing transfer papers along with your promotion, Miss Fitzwilliams.”

“The new hat I borrowed didn’t match my pants,” Fitz extemporised. “It was desperate times, Miss Sagewood.”


Sagewood continued to look at her, ears canted forward. After seeing several iterations of that same ear movement from Windrunner, she strongly suspected it meant the half-elf was laughing. That seemed fair.

“Could I please be informed of my duty?” asked Fitz.

Sagewood smiled again. “That’s not for me to say,” she said. “But do go straight in.”

Fitz’s heart fell; her great hope had been that she could escape with the minimum of notice. But she steelied herself. Her normal routine for reporting to Officers was of no help; she checked her hat - but it was some Elfish confection, and she wasn’t entirely sure how it was supposed to sit. Her dirk defied straightness from the broad leather belt, and after running around all morning her hair was stubbornly escaping its pigtail. All in all, she was as scruffy and disheveled as it was possible for a young officer to be. Fitz knocked firmly on the door.

“Come!”

Fitz pushed open the door and came to attention on the thick carpet.

“Fitzwilliams, Lieutenant,” she said.

The Lord Admiral was standing with her back towards the room, looking out the huge stern windows at the sea. “Ah, Miss Fitzwilliams.” she said turning. “I have been waiting for you. What is your…” she stopped and stared. In the corner, the Thalassan warrior - the one with the polearm and shield - glowered as well.

Fitz broke into sweat.


“None, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“But you can swim?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good,” the Admiral seemed pleased. “A guest will be arriving soon; I will summon you when he does. Until then, you are to report to Lieutenant Sagewood - thank you, you are dismissed.”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat and exited with relief.

In the outer office, a man with the accoutrements of a senior Captain was storming out - Sagewood calmly watched him, pen still poised. The door slammed shut.

“Captain Donnelly,” Sagewood said flatly, “desires his sister’s countship. As she is currently embroiled in scandal, now would be a fine time to strike.” She frowned lightly, and wrote something on a piece of paper. It was then neatly placed on the leftmost stack. “Such a shame that would mean abandoning his ship.”
Fitz clasped her hands behind her back. “The Lord Admiral said you might have tasks?” she said.

“Nothing that can be delegated.” Sagewood looked thoughtful. “Perhaps Captain Conrad could use you?”

Captain Conrad, it turned out, could indeed use Fitz; he needed a clerk. Fitz’s hand was slightly crabbed, but it was fair and round enough for dockets and lists. She spent several weeks tucked away in a corner, back hunched, hand cramping, never seeing the sun. Her off-shift hours were spent playing cards with Windrunner, practicing navigation, or pacing the deck. In many ways life returned to the shape it had held when she was captive aboard the Zandalari hulk.

Fitz was still in this limbo the day Windrunner was promoted; he stopped by her desk during her duty shift, beaming, his epaulette swapped the to right-hand shoulder.

“I’ve been given command of the sloop Archer,” he said, animatedly. “Twenty-two guns. It will be attached to the Inner Squadron under Commodore Warwick.”

Fitz rose and firmly shook his hand in congratulations.

The next two days were agony. Fitz hoped desperately that Windrunner would ask for her as his First Lieutenant - a sloop only had one. Sea-service on a smart sloop, with all its dangers and possibilities for action, was far superior in her mind to endless clerking on a Captain’s staff. But her hopes were dashed; Archer set sail three days later, leaving Fitz behind.

Without the distraction of company, Fitz threw herself into her work. She began to note patterns in inventory and task lists; a few simple equations helped her organise those. Captain Conrad had also asked her to prepare personnel paperwork, so she spent some time templating the most common requests and storing them up; this also saved much time. From there it was a simple matter to understand which visitors should be allowed entrance and which should be delayed, or even have their problems resolved completely. Her desk was a sprawl of paper. Every night Fitz would stumble to her cot exhausted, only to wake and repeat the same day over again.

The end to this toil came without warning; a quick knock on Captain Conrad’s door and Sagewood touching the brim of her hat.

“The Lord Admiral’s compliments to you,” she said to the Captain. “If it is convenient, Lieutenant Fitzwilliams is being recalled.”

“Well.” Conrad said with irritation. “No, that is quite inconvenient. Must it be Lieutenant Fitzwilliams? The Lord Admiral can surely have some other Lieutenant?”

“Begging your pardon Sir,” said Sagewood coolly. “But the Lord Admiral specifically requested Fitzwilliams. I can help you draft a response if you would prefer?”

It turned out Conrad really didn’t prefer. Fitz was allowed only enough time to make sure all was in good order before thanking Conrad for his condescension in hosting her, and being ushered quickly out the door.

Sagewood was silent on the walk back - her feet barely whispered across the floor. She ducked in such a way that her height was no impediment to her movements in the low ‘tweendecks; this seemed the deepest kind of black magic to Fitz. The junior was so distracted trying to work out how it was done that her hat bounced off a deck beam, and then she was so occupied with trying to coax out the dent that she had no time to worry about her impending interview.

Suddenly, there was the door. Fitz checked her hat, dirk, and hair. Then she knocked.
“Come!” came the call, and Fitz pushed inside.

The Admiral was there, behind her huge desk. Her Thalassan bodyguard stood in his usual corner. There was also a jauntily dressed civilian, and a Tidesage.

The flagship had other Tidesages - most Kul Tiran ships did. Intrepid had not, but that was the exception. Truthfully Fitz found them unsettling, and tended to avoid the Services of Blessing which marked the only rites open to the ship’s company.

This one was especially forbidding. Cold eyes blazed from underneath a deep blue hood, but the face was hidden in shadows. One clawed hand wrapped around a garish staff. The buckle of the priest’s belt didn’t seem to gleam as metal should.

“Fitzwilliams, Lieutenant.” Fitz said gamely.

“Good,” said Proudmoore. “You’re here. Take this.” She tossed a heavy packet across the office, which Fitz managed to catch. “Take into your ship Mr. William Cooper, of the Honourable House of Ashvane, and Brother Gull. Then sail to Booty Bay where you will await further instructions from them.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fitz. Then her ears updated her brain. “My ship, ma’am?”

“I have purchased the schooner into service,” replied Proudmoore, “and renamed her Orca. Only two six-pounder guns, and sixteen crew - it’s a lieutenant’s command.”

It was a lieutenant's dream command. Fitz was stunned. “Thank you ma’am.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” said the Lord Admiral dryly. “Perhaps return alive first. Take the...”

Mr. Cooper cleared his throat and interrupted the Admiral; “I’ll need to bring my divers in comfort,” he said, over her. “They feel the cold after they’ve been down.”

Fitz was slightly shocked. Cooper was a burly, heavy-set man in his early forties, brown-eyed and with a thick shock of brown hair. The fellow carried himself with an air of vast independence. Yet judging by the scantiness of the silver lace on his civilian coat, and by the fact that he wore no sword, he was not of a very lofty position in the Kul Tiran hierarchy.

“And your position, Sir?” asked Fitzwilliams, with a slight bite.

“Wreck-master and salvage director,” replied Cooper.

That explained that then; he was an expert, whose skill made him fancy himself too indispensable to be pulled up short. The more gold lace he was addressing the more was likely to assert his trifling power - and no one wore more gold lace than the Lord Admiral.

“You are dismissed, Lieutenant,” Proudmoore said. “Make your ship ready for sea. Mr Cooper, your people will board at the earliest possible moment. Within an hour. Ship your equipment at the same time. Brother Gull, you are of course free to embark at your leisure, but the Admiralty would appreciate some haste.”

Fitzwilliam touched the birm of her hat and withdrew, but paused in the outer office.

“Mr Cooper,” she hailed as he passed her. “Your equipment; will it require special handling?”

“Yes,” he said curtly. “Lines, pipes, and a large pump. All will need to be shrouded from the
elements.”

“A pump!” said Fitz. "Why would..." she wrestled herself into silence. “Certainly; I will ensure it is placed safely under shrouds.”

"See that you do," said Cooper, haughtily. “Its proper functioning will be the only thing keeping the divers alive.” He then swept rom the cabin. Fitz watched him go.

“Lieutenant Fitzwilliams.”

Fitz turned to Sagewood, who was once again seated behind her teak desk. She was holding a pen, ears cocked forward and looking thoughtful. “Perhaps I could assist you in outfitting the Orca for sea? You will need food, water, and other essentials.”

“That would be a great kindness,” Fitz said, gratefully. Sagewood’s ears perked up, but her expression did not alter.

“It will be done then,” she said. Fitz nodded awkwardly in thanks. They looked at each other.

“Well,” said Fitz. “Goodbye, Miss Sagewood. It has been a pleasure to serve onboard with you.”

Sagewood’s ears flickered in an amused way, and she smiled. “Goodbye, Miss Fitzwilliams. Safe seas to you. I believe we will meet again..”

The preparation of her ship - her ship! - for sea was suddenly consuming all her thoughts. Cordage and sails, handtools and timber - she suddenly felt a great swell of gratitude to Captain Conrad and his endless administration of the last few months. She knew down to the last nail what her little schooner would require for sea, and exactly the forms required to secure them.

There was no ceremony for her when she transferred aboard the schooner. Her heart flew when the challenge came down from its deck, and the coxswain of the jolly boat called back “Orca!” - an announcement that the new commander was arriving. There was already a bustle on deck - a large object covered in tarpaulin was being strapped down with ropes just before the mast. Presumably that was the pump.

Fitz stepped up onto the deck, and the single midshipman aboard saluted. He didn’t quite manage to control his confusion at her Quel-Thalan uniform, but his effort was admirable. In turn, Fitz touched the brim of her hat to the quarterdeck, and pulled out her orders. “My name is Fitzwilliams,” she said. Then she produced her orders, and read them aloud.

"Orders from the Lady Jaina Proudmoore, Lord Admiral of the Navy, Knight of the Thalassan Order of the Sun, Commanding all of the Admiralty, its ships and vessels, to Lieutenant Fitzwilliamina Williams Fitzwilliams, lately of the Lord Admiral’s ship Intrepid. You are hereby requested and required to repair immediately on board of the Lord Admiral’s schooner Orca, now sailing with the Great Fleet, and to take command pro tempore of the aforesaid ship Orca."

Fitz folded her orders again. The assumption of command, even temporarily, of one of the Admiral's ships was a solemn act, only to be performed with the correct ceremonies. No orders that Fitz might give on board would be legal until she had read aloud the authority by which she gave them. But now she had read herself in. Now she held the enormous powers of a captain on board, even as a lowly lieutenant. She could make and unmake warrant officers, she could order someone into the brig or to a flogging. A ship at sea was its own world, and by virtue of her orders she was now the sole authority; only the Admiral, who had made her, could now contermaind her orders aboard this ship.
All sixteen of her hands had stopped, and were now staring at her with curiosity. Most were familiar faces - the prize-crew from *Intrepid*. Fitz was uncomfortably aware that now was probably the time for a speech - but in her haste she had prepared nothing.

“Carry on,” she said instead, and turned to the midshipman. “My apologies; you are…?”

“Daniel Featherstone, ma’am” said the midshipman. “Lately of the *Shortsword*.”

“Thank you, Mr Featherstone,” Fitz said. “Walk me through what has been completed.”

“Pump’s aboard ma’am; food and water swayed up, ships supplies placed below. The bosun is awfully good, begging your pardon Ma’am; she said she knew how you’d want it trimmed. The other warrant is the gunner and he had them hopping to.”

Fitz turned; waiting for her attention, unseen in the excitement of getting aboard and reading her orders, were Jackson and Clyburn. Presumably Forster had warranted them before leaving, putting them aboard the schooner as an act of charity to the next commander. Fitz had to consciously suppress a delighted grin at her luck, turning back to Featherstone.

“Excellent work; my compliments, Mr. Featherstone. Once the pump has been secured, please dismiss the hands below for dinner.”

Featherstone looked gratified. He touched his hat once more, and turned away.

Fitz walked unhurriedly to the schooner’s little cabin, shutting the door behind her. Then she rushed to her cot and ripped into her packet of orders. It was remarkably heavy - once she had unwrapped the oily wrapper, it turned out it had been weighted with a chunk of scrap metal.

‘Instructions for Fitzwilliamina Fitzwilliams, Esq., Lieutenant in Command, L.A. schooner *Orca*,’ the envelope inside said. Fitz slit this open and impatiently began to read. It was as the Lord Admiral had stated in her cabin; sail to Booty Bay with the Tidesage and the divers, then receive verbal instructions from them. There was no more information than that.

Fitz pulled some scrap paper to herself and laboured over the calculations; she had taken the position of the fleet from the Chief Navigator, but it never hurt to double check. With her equations complete, she reset her elvish hat and returned to the deck of the *Orca*.

Mr Cooper had come onboard, and was engaged in cross words with Jackson, who was shaking her head at whatever he was saying. Fitz decided to leave them to it; if Jackson believed it needed an Officer, then Fitz trusted her to say so.

There was a loud gasp from one of the crew, and Fitz glanced about to see what had caused it. The Tidesage was coming, but had declined the use of a smaller boat; instead he was gliding across the ocean itself, as if he was a man standing still. The crew crowded away from the rails. Fitz was just about to call for ceremonial honours when the waves forestalled it, lifting the Tidesage up so he could step onto the deck of the schooner.

Fitzwilliams touched the brim of her hat instead. “Welcome aboard the *Orca*, my Lord.” she said politely. The crew were silent, and didn’t move closer. Cooper openly sneered, turning his back.

The Tidesage was hidden, as he had been in the Admiral’s cabin, by the deep hood of his robe. But Fitz could see him tilt his head sideways, contemplating the schooner.

“This ship is unblessed by the Tides,” he said. The crew shuffled uneasily.
“Yes,” said Fitz. “The Orca is a captured Zandalari vessel; there has not yet been the opportunity…”

The Tidesage was ignoring her, muttering to himself. Suddenly he pulled a vial of water from his belt, raising his staff up high. “None shall stand against the storm!” he yelled, smashing the vial to the deck. There was a blaze of power from the staff; Fitz blinked the aftereffects from her eyes.

The Tidesage’s muttering was far more pleased now, and he tucked his hands inside the sleeves of his robes. The staff stood unnaturally upright where he had let it go. Cooper’s face was white with fury.

“The pump!” He cried, “You fool -!”

“Thank you, my Lord,” said Fitz firmly, cutting off the divemaster. “We are glad to receive your blessing. We are now ready to sail. Ms Jackson, prepare to set the mainsail please, with a hand especially placed on the running backstay. Mr Featherstone, signal the flag with our number and our heading.”

Within the hour, the schooner broke ranks with the fleet and leapt joyfully towards the warm south; the flag threw up just one signal as she left - “Goodbye” - and Fitzwilliams rejoiced in the feel of the deck under her feet, the feel of the spray and the nearness of the ocean. The cold spring was giving way to perfect summer - her third at sea - and the waves were not enough to upset her delicate stomach. If Fitz had her suspicions about how natural the perfect sailing conditions were - well - she was not above enjoying the benefits a tidesage could offer. Certainly it was small recompense for how Brother Gull terrified her crew and infuriated Cooper.

They were idyllic days; Fitz, slightly discomforted by command, acted as if she was still under Forster’s eye. The steady routine of drills had the little ship flying; constant adjustment of movable stores (and strategically eating through some non-movable ones) had the trim of the little schooner at the optimum distribution for speed; and her crew, most already honed by service aboard the Intrepid, was coming together into the perfection demanded by the Lord Admiral of all her ships of war. Cooper occasionally stormed about the deck complaining that vibration from the gunnery drills might damage the pump, or about some nonsense the Tidesage had supposedly done, but Fitz ignored this. They could fix a broken pump, but if the schooner couldn’t defend itself then a working pump wouldn’t help them much.

The only fly in the ointment was that Fitz had no cabin furniture for her personal space, nor private stories to make her dinners more palatable; she ate the food the crew ate, and drank the same spirits; endless rounds of rum, salt pork, and biscuit. She extended invitations to dine with her in her cabin, as tradition and good manners demanded - but mercifully made this infrequent.

It was a very pleasant journey, beating down to Booty Bay, and a long one; two whole months, marking five since she had left Intrepid at the beginning of spring. The fourth day of the new month had just passed when the Tidesage designed to visit her in her cabin within an invitation.

“Summon Cooper,” Brother Gull said, striding in. Fitz swallowed her gall.

“Of course, my Lord,” she said smoothly, enjoying that the cabin had nowhere for him to sit. She raised her voice and called out the door - “Mr Featherstone! My compliments to Mr Cooper, and I require his presence in the day cabin.”

“The latitude is now correct,” said Brother Gull when the salvager appeared. “It is the same latitude as when the Scarecrow foundered.”

Scarecrow? Fitz racked her memory; she remembered hearing something about it at one of Forster’s
dinners. A transport, one which had overturned and sunk at a Kul Tiran anchorage off Janeiro's Point.

Cooper scowled at Gull’s words. "Scarecrow had a secret cargo," he said bluntly. “The entire military chest for the Southern Fleet." "

Ah,” said Fitz.

"It was a very considerable sum in gold," said Cooper unnecessarily. “Enough to pay for the running costs of an entire year. And she has sunk in water far deeper than any diver in the service could reach. But the goblins might fashion some contraption to reach it, and so it was decided to keep the loss a secret."

"Yes,” said Fitz. Certainly it was not common knowledge that a fortune in coin lay at the bottom of the entrance to a major neutral port city.

"It is too deep for a diver alone," continued Cooper. “But with a Tidesage, even this -”

"I see,” interrupted Fitz, who did indeed see.

Never in her wildest dreams had she thought she would be tasked with recovering treasure. Such a quantity of hard currency would be a godsend for the Lord Admiral; money with which to pay neutral parties for all the pigs and cattle and timber of war.

"Be careful, Miss Fitzwilliams," hissed the Tidesage. “The ocean loves you, but it will not save you if you aggravate the goblins.”

"Aye aye, my lord," she said. Frankly, Fitz was hardly likely to be belligerent in a schooner with two six-pounder guns against an entire harbour full of every type of pirate. But she understood the point.

“I have also calculated we are on the correct latitude,” she said instead. “I am glad for my Lord’s confirmation of that. We will turn directly east then, and it won’t be long until we reach the Bay.”

The words proved correct; two days later, along with the rising sun, was the shape of Janeiro’s Point. Beyond it lay the ramshackle buildings of the goblins. Orca sauntered up to the Bay, making no particular hurry. Fitz ordered the crew to drop the anchor almost in an almost leisurely way; after two months at sea filled with energy and activity, the crew were puzzled but pleased by the change of pace.

Within the bay there were gaily painted small craft everywhere; a fresh north-easterly wind was blowing, and bumboats sailed out immediately with fresh fruit and bread to haggle with sailors sick of salt pork and hardtack. Cooper demanded use of the whaleboat to visit the shore; he was anxious for more supplies, some of which only the goblins could make. The expense he wished to claim from the ship’s safe was stupendous - the biggest demand was for almost a quarter-mile of waterproof slow match. Cooper had snapped and snarled when Fitz had balked at the cost of it, telling her sharply to leave the diving operation to him. Fitz had gone over the demand with Jackson, and then signed the chit.

The inevitable fact now was that every single sailor aboard the Orca wished to go ashore; every man and woman jack of them was presenting irrefutable reasons about why they should and must have shore leave. Fitz grouped them up into sets of five, and sent them out in rotation under the charge of
Fitz was working through some paperwork, enjoying a delicious orange, when the inevitable disaster struck.

"If you please, ma’am," said a wide-eyed and harried Featherstone, rushing into her office. “The Tidesage -!"

Fitz looked up. “You will knock before you enter,” she said firmly. “And report properly, Featherstone. Exit the cabin and start again.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” the boy said miserably. He returned outside and knocked firmly.

“Come!” said Fitz.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” Featherstone said. “The Tidesage and Mr Cooper got into an argument on the quarterdeck, and the Tidesage has mostly drowned him.”

Fitz stared at him.

“What?” said Fitz, rocketing up. Then repeated, “What?”

She grabbed her stupid lacy Thelassan hat and dashed out of the day cabin. Poor Featherstone ran along in her wake.

“Only mostly ma’am!” he said desperately, puffing. “Mr Cooper went all blue and such inside the waterball but when the gunner got there and grabbed him out, he kicked Mr Cooper in the chest. Mr Cooper coughed up all this water, but hasn’t woken up yet.”

Fitz was cycling between disbelief and fury. Depending on how long Cooper had been starved of air, he could be damaged to the point where he wouldn’t wake up; potentially even if he did wake, he wouldn’t even be able to speak, yet alone direct complex operations. It was impossible to imagine the man diving to a sunken wreck. It would take months to return to the fleet, and the months again to sail back out here with another diving master - who knew how long it would take to persuade another Tidesage to embark? And they all spelled out the mission incomplete, left for another, better commander, with Fitz having failed the Lord Admiral so completely in the charge to which she had been set.

Fitz wondered if any Lieutenant had ever been so cursed.

"Where is he now?" she asked Featherstone.

"Mr. Cooper, ma’am? We stashed him in the ‘tween decks. The bosun and the gunner are attending him."

"He’s still alive?"

Featherstone spread despairing hands.

"Yes, ma’am. He was alive fifteen minutes ago."

The schooner didn’t have a doctor - it was too small. It did have a loblolly boy - but realistically only one man aboard had the skill and the magic to save Cooper’s life.
"Mr Cooper is to be given everything possible," said Fitz. "Where is the Tidesage?"

A wave of fury passed over her such as she seldom felt; the inconvenience and loss incurred by two idiots who were unable to hold to their duty staggered her - the arrogant Brother Gull and the bad-tempered Cooper. The Lord Admiral had needed them, and they had failed her, indulging instead their own ridiculous desire for conflict.

Guilt crashed over Fitz; she should have been better - she had known of the mutual dislike of the two most important people aboard, and she had ignored it. In the crowded little ship, the salvager and the Tidesage couldn’t avoid one another. She rode a wave of bitter self-contempt. Perhaps she was unfit to be commanding one of the Lord Admiral’s ships.

She couldn’t bear the thought, couldn’t bear the idea that the Lord Admiral’s epaulette was misplaced upon her shoulder. Fitz resolved that she must prove herself - she must that prove every Fitzwilliams afloat - was worthy of trust and confidence. She must carry through that salvage operation if it killed her.

Her brain worked feverishly; Cooper had asked for waterproof slow-match; he must have been planning to crack the hull of the *Scarecrow* open to scoop out the treasure. That was something, but the salvage master was something more. She went searching for the Tidesage.

She found him at the stern of the *Orca*, praying to the ocean. His back was turned.

"My Lord," she said flatly. "Mr Cooper is still alive."

"A pity," hissed the Tidesage. He did not look around.

"My orders to you as the commander of this ship are that you are to make every effort for his survival," said Fitz.

The Tidesage’s response was an unintelligible noise, akin to a wave slapping a hull.

"Your answer to me is 'aye aye', My Lord," said Fitz, sternly. "Mr Cooper's life is extremely valuable. The Lord Admiral expects him to perform, my Lord, and he cannot do it dead."

It was taking all of her effort to keep her voice from betraying her strain; the Tidesage had proven himself extremely dangerous when provoked, and this was the most provoking she had ever been. Her fist clenched behind her back, and she couldn’t help but breathe deeply in anticipation of having air cut off.

The Tidesage said nothing.

"It is your duty to keep him alive," said Fitz again. "Tomorrow we were to start the diving. Mr Cooper must live long enough until he can execute his duty - the duty which has brought both him and you this far from Boralus."

Fitz had options; the Tidesage knew it. A ruthless Captain could go ashore and tell the goblins that a sage such as he was aboard, and barter him to them for experiments. More reasonable Captains - correct captains! - might send a report back overland to the Lord Admiral or the Monastery detailing what had happened; Brother Gull was certainly not immune to the wrath of his own superiors.

But if Cooper died, nothing mattered; Fitz would report all she wanted, she would have still failed. If Cooper lived, then the near fatal brush with magic was also rendered moot. Fitz held out a thin offer; draw the water from Cooper's lungs, and perhaps none of this need even be mentioned, save a line in passing during a report of success.
“Yes,” hissed the Tidesage after the longest of moments. “I will save Cooper for you.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” said Fitz calmly. Inside she was thick with relief. “I will make a note of your generosity in the log. All should thank the tides you were aboard.”

The Tidesage’s eye blazed at her. And then he turned away.
The next day, miraculously, Cooper was still alive. Fitz walked forward to where he had been brought up on deck. The crew had clustered aft, away from Brother Gull, who was chanting over Cooper and waving his staff. Three divers, in their heavy suits and bronze headgear, had been stowed below in preparation for the nighttime dive; it was far more dangerous that way, but Fitz didn’t want any of the bumboats to see them and guess the Orca’s true purpose.

"All well, Mr Cooper?" asked Fitz.

“Not as well as I would like,” rasped Cooper back. He was weak and pale, unable to rise; Clyburn and Jackson had set a constant rotation of hands to attend him and his comfort. He had woken quite sensible after the Tidesage had drawn the water from his lungs - indeed, he was sensible enough to panic when seeing the Sage close by. He had only subsided when Fitz had pointed out to him that the Tidesage was literally all that still stood between him and certain death. Cooper had been - and remained - a very sick man.

Fitz could not imagine how she would conduct the salvage operation without Cooper. But she was about to try.

“Brother Gull and Ms Jackson have located the wreck,” she said. “They have placed a buoy and fished there all day; hopefully this will throw off suspicion.”

"Are you sure it is the wreck?" croaked Cooper.

"Brother Gull is quite sure,” said Fitz. “It is in the place where observers said she sank; it is the right size and shape, and there is nothing around it.”

“I will send the divers,” said Cooper, “when I am well again.”

Fitz frowned heavily. “We must go now,” she said. “We are under the eyes of thousands of neutral parties who would overwhelm us in an instant if they knew our real purpose. You must instruct your divers in the plans so that they can start now. Immediately.”

"What is the depth?" said Cooper.

“Seventeen fathoms,” said Fitz.

“Five dives a night then,” said Cooper, leaning back. He looked tired and resigned. “They’ll need weights and men to man the pump. When they tug the rope to be pulled back up again, do it slowly; the divers will bleed from the nose otherwise, and get pains in all their limbs.”
Fitz had noted all this down, and then let the man sleep. Everything that could contribute to success she had used; the whaling boat had run out the air-pipe and the rope for ascent, and attached them to the buoy. She had struggled not to fret, but had succumbed enough to instruct that there was plenty of slack. Too much tension and the fragile pipe would snap, cutting off the diver’s air supply. The buoy would keep the tethers from dragging the divers around once they descended. Two days later, under the obligingly new moon, the first diver was rowed out over the wreck.

Fitz joined the crew of the jolly boat, as did Brother Gull. He prayed to the tides; Fitz wasn’t a religious kind of person, but she muttered out a quick prayer as well. Once they both finished Brother Gull had leaned over the side, a ball of power glowing in his hands; it dropped into the water and vanished in the depths. The diver watched it go, then prepared herself to dive; when all was arranged she propped herself up on the side of the gunwale and leaned back over it. The cold water closed around her also, and she too vanished into the deep.

Clyburn gave two sharp tugs on the ropeline - the signal for Jackson to set the hands to pumping air.

“Are there monsters down there?” Fitz asked, almost to herself.

“Yes,” said the Tidesage. “Terrible monsters.” He seemed to be concentrating hard on something only he could see. His hands occasionally twitched, as if brushing things away.

Three quarter-hours later come a single firm tug on the ascent rope. The hands set to reel the diver in, and grasping hands pulled her heavily into the boat. Fitz remembered to give the line three long and three short pulls to tell the Orca the pumping of air could stop.

“The wreck is upside down,” reported the diver after her helmet had been removed. “Greatly overgrown, the timbers are rotten, but we might get in without explosives. The problem might be the copper.”

She then scrambled up to bow deeply to the Tidesage. “I know what you did,” she said. “I will never forget it, and I will pay the price to the tides if I can.”

Fitz had no idea what this was about, but she did know that the pipe now needed to be clipped to the second diver. The first diver moved to the prow out of the way, and the Tidesage began to concentrate once more.

Once more a shining bronze diving helmet sank into the ocean. Once more the Tidesage chanted, made gestures, and was silent. One more Fitz thought of monsters.

Two more dives were made that night, before Fitz decided dawn was too close. She ordered the air pipe stowed and the rope secured; then the whaler was rowed back to the Orca. After a night of no sleep, Fitz wanted desperately to retire to bed, but she had duties to attend.

"The water casks are refilled, ma’am," said one hand.

“The biscuit bags are full again,” said another. “I grabbed fresh lemons as well. All the eggs there were, and a few coconuts.”

“Very good,” said Fitz. Hopefully their open pockets would explain to any watchers why they were there; the supplies that could be found in Booty Bay were far superior to anything that might be had in leagues, and its neutrality made it a fairly safe place to rest. So long as the goblins gave Fitz no attention, they were giving her time enough to grab the Admiral’s golden treasure.

Fitz reported their night's labour to Cooper, who listened hungrily.
“A shame she isn’t upright,” he said. “The money was in the lower magazine, down the aft hatchway. Three short ton of coined gold in iron chests, and nearly eight tons of coined silver in bags.”

Fitz stared at him in amazement before taking hold of herself. "Ye-es,” she said. “We will have to break it up and place it along the *Orca’s* keel.”

"I expect the money is still inside the ship,” said Cooper. “The deck of the transport was stiffened to allow for troops to be placed there, and the magazine is double-timbered to deflect cannonballs anyway. We’ll just have to go inside and get it.”

“Hmm,” said Fitz, still amazed at the amount of money.

"Scarecrow also had ordinance and artillery for the Quel-Thalans,” Cooper said. “The inside of the ship must be a wreck; they would have shifted around and broken free as soon as she capsized. No; it will have to be explosives.”

"We must blow up the wreck?” Fitz said dubiously.

"Yes,” said Cooper firmly. “Gunpowder in the right place will peel her open like magic. I can effect it better than the Tidesage ever could.”

“Err…” said Fitz.

"We’ll try the fuse-hoses first,” said Cooper, warming to his topic. ”Then we’ll try the old staple of waterproofing barrels and using a slow match. Water directs pressure. It is quite inelastic; the crew will enjoy the geyser.”

“Ahh…” said Fitz.

“Now go, “ said Cooper. “I need my rest.”

Fitz went.

It took two days to ready the explosives. Two days of pleading with the Tidesage to hide the geyser from the shore, and muffle the sound of the explosion; finally, reluctantly, he agreed - but, he warned darkly, danger from the shore wasn’t the only direction that Fitz should be worried about.

"I've picked a couple of sound kegs, sir,” said Clyburn, readying the gunpowder. "Fifty-pound kegs. We’ve also prepared the slow-match.”

"Very well,” said Fitz. One hundred pounds of gunpowder was going to make a hell of a bang; she hoped profoundly that Cooper knew what he was doing. After three days of rest he was looking far better, but the subordinate divers one by one had told him the he must be kept out of the water for several days yet. The salvage master had stormed and raved when she had forbidden him from going below.

"Will we shatter the wreck to pieces?" asked Fitz. Surely the pressure at that depth would impact the way the powder burned?

“We will split her open,” replied Cooper.

“Even if we err,” said Brother Gull, “I will keep the wreck together.”

Fitz quickly separated the men before words could become heated yet again.
Fitz had now been in the bay for several days, and their presence was slowly moving from being a non-event to being faintly odd; Kul Tiran ships were filled with people who lived for the tides and the winds, and one voluntarily becalming itself at anchor was an oddity without explanation. Fitz had put about the story that they were nursing an injured civilian, but she didn’t expect that story to hold water for long.

"We’ll do it tonight," she decided. “Ready the divers, and the quarter-boat.”

But before that could happen, Midshipman Featherstone came and fetched her - it seemed a little lanteen was in the water and pulling for the Orca, flying the flag of the Steamwheedle clan. Fitz frowned at it, hoping that it was nothing. She ostentatiously sent the whaler to the buoy to fish.

"Mr Featherstone," she said. “It looks like we're going to have an official visitor. You may instruct Jackson to pipe the side for him. Hide the Tidesage and the divers."

"Aye aye, ma'am.,” he said.

A fine looking goblin mounted the deck with surprising grace, despite how awkward transferring from one boat to another always was. Fitz was slightly envious for a second before she moved to greet and be seen. The goblin, for his part, was looking with great interest around the deck of the Orca, giving Fitz’s Quel-Thalan uniform a long look, and listening intently to the shrill trilling of the single Bosun pipe aboard. His hawk-like nose only emphasized fierce eyes, and fine clothes completed the effect. Fitz touched her hat. The goblin place a hand over his heart.

“Welcome aboard the Orca,” said Fitz politely in common."Won’t you come below? I have a fresh bottle of rum open.”

Down in the cabin, Fitz wished she could offer a chair; instead she poured the rum and stood by the open stern window.

“I hope your crewmember has recovered his health,” the goblin said as an opening. Fitz, who had no prior interaction with a goblin of any kind, could not tell if this was a normal thing for one to say. She decided to throw her lot to the Tides, and hope for the best.

"He is on the mend," she said.

"And you have had a prosperous voyage?" the goblin asked.

“A voyage all the more prosperous for us being able to purchase these oranges,” Fitz replied. “Would you care for one?”

Blow and counter-blow, polite phrase after polite inanity; Fitz was in an agony, and the goblin didn’t seem to be in any hurry to complete the visit and go back over the side.

“Will your fine ship be staying long?” he asked, tone casual.

"I have not completed my stores yet," Fitz said. She suspected this might well be the meat of the conversation, and spoke with caution. “I am seeking a fresh supply of lemons for the Kul Tiran fleet. There are some contacts that are to meet me here, but they have not yet come.”

“Do tell me who they are,” said the goblin. “Perhaps I can hasten them.”

“Thank you, but no,” said Fitz firmly. “That is commercially sensitive.”

The goblin nodded immediately, understanding her point.
What was even more commercially sensitive, of course, was the presence of a terrific fortune in coins directly below their feet - but Fitz could hardly tell him that.

"This is a good place for information about Zandalari movements," said the goblin. "It is a nexus for trade."

"I have my orders," said Fitz. She narrowed her eyes. It seemed strange that the goblin wanted them to stay put. Either the little ship was somehow good diplomacy, or this was a trap.

"We would..." said the goblin slow. "We would like you to stay for a while."

"Why?" demanded Fitz.

"There is a pirate," said the goblin heavily.

"This is Booty Bay," said Fitz. "That is a given."

"This is a most hostile pirate," said the goblin. "One that doesn’t respect the sanctity of our neutrality. Your presence here... deters them."

Fitz made a show of thinking it over. In reality, if the story was truthful, then it was a great stroke of luck. The operation could slow down, and safety efforts for the dives could be more properly observed. Perhaps Cooper might even recover to the point where he could dive himself. Fitz twisted up her mouth in a grimace, and nodded to the goblin.

"No," she said. "Orca will sail once we have our lemons."

"We will feed you!" said the goblin, sounding desperate. "As many lemons as you want!"

Fitz shook her head. "The Lord Admiral commands..."

"Stay at anchor for six days. No more," said the goblin. "We will row you bread and fruit; all free. After six days, if the pirate still sails, then we will not keep you."

"Very well," sighed Fitz. "Six days."

That was how the crew wound up showered in fresh fruit. The next day was even better; the boat of bananas was also carrying mail. The post must have been sailed to Quel-Thalas and then portalled to Booty Bay to have reached them so quickly; Fitz was surprised to get a mailbag, although she herself had dispatched a few nondescript reports back the same way.

Jackson saw to the distribution of the packets and letters, handing over to Fitz three envelopes of her own. The first was thick and emblazoned with the anchor of Kul Tiras; that would be official dispatches and updates. She lay it aside; it would tell her nothing useful.

The second was from her mother. Fitz eyed the envelope dubiously. She had written a hasty and vague letter back home explaining her capture and the circumstances of her promotion. The worry was, of course, that her brother might have been more forthcoming.

The third letter was written on smooth paper, in handwriting she didn’t recognise. She looked at it, deeply tempted, then firmed her soul and took up the one from her mother instead.

Fitz read that her mother shook with Emotion at the news of her Ordeal of Capture, and that she was Incandescent to be so vastly fortunate as to be the Mother of a Lieutenant. That was it. The rest, it turned out, was news about how one of her sisters had married a butcher and was expecting a New
Year's Child; Fitz was relieved that her sister had diverted her mother so extensively. Likely the next few letters would all be devoted more to the Blessed Increase than to her Longed-for but Distant Jewel. In any case, her mother seemed consumed with hope that the Little Cherub, if a Boy, would be the Image of the Famous Father of the line Fitzsimmons Fitzwilliams, or, if a Girl, that she should be the opposite of that.

Fitz was positively cheerful as she thumbed open the mysterious envelope. She pulled out a few sheets of fine paper; it was from Lieutenant Sagewood.

My dear friend, Miss Fitzwilliams, she began. I hope you will not mind me writing to you.

Fitz was astonished. She most certainly did not mind Sagewood writing to her. She skimmed through news of mutual acquaintances, the state of the weather, and other small amusements. Every observation was keen intellect itself, layered with the lightest dusting of wit. The letter was a wonderful treat for a woman accustomed to getting nothing.

I hope your endeavours find you successful, finished Sagewood. There are several people here who await your return. I remain

Your friend

Jessanydra Sagewood

Fitz read the missive several times, then laid it down in confusion. With a flash of insight, she thought that Sagewood might be writing as a method to report back to the Lord Admiral in secret. With an eager hand she pulled a spare piece of paper towards her and started to scrawl out a reply - it would need careful writing. As carefully written, in fact, as the one Sagewood had written to her; small drops of information wrapped in the camouflage of letters between friends. She would drop it in the next bumboat and hope it reached its destination.

With this proof that the Admiral was watching, she was determined to blow the wreck at the first available moment. A hundred odd feet of hose was carefully coiled on deck. One end disappeared into a powder keg covered over with canvas which Clyburn was smearing thickly with pitch. At a hundred feet below water the pressures were enormous. A minute, indetectable pinprick anywhere in the fabric and water would be forced in, ruining the powder.

"Tonight," said Fitz. "Tonight we crack her open."

Down went the sun. Out went the little whaler. Cooper insisted he go into the boat as well, although he was restrained from anything further. Down went the diver, backed by the Tidesage. The canvas-covered powder keg went with her as well; the fuse-hose uncoiled.

The diver was tugged back to the surface, and the whaler rowed away.

"Strike a light," said Fitz to Clyburn. The tinder caught, and the slow-match lit. He carefully transferred the fire to the quick-match. The fire ran along the line, then vanished down the hose.

"Stopper it!" said Fitz. They had time; quick match and slow match were spliced together. They could row away a little more before anything bad could possibly happen.

"Oars!" said Fitz quietly. "Give way!"

They pulled away some distance before Fitz decided they were probably safe; the crew waited patiently for some sign that anything would happen. The Tidesage, for his part, was concentrating hard. His hands looking ready to grasp something imagined before him.
There was the chance — a likely chance, according to Cooper — that there would be no explosion at all. A glance at the salvage master’s face told Fitz that the bang was by now overdue. With an appearance of the utmost indifference, Fitz leaned over.

“If we attempted it again, perhaps we would have better luck?”

“Or even a fly-fuse,” said Cooper. “I never trust a hose beyon…”

There was a sullen, muffled roar, not very loud, as if a gun had been fired. Fitz swung round in her seat just in time to see a wave heave under the stern of the whaler - the water that surged round them was discoloured and dark. The Tidesage swayed a little, and then sat down gracefully.

"She's gone up, ma’am," said Clyburn, inanely.

“Thank you, Mr Clyburn,” Fitz said dryly. “Silence please! Back to the Scarecrow now, quickly.”

The whaler swung round around. Dead fish were floating up to the surface, and air bubbles. Pieces of floating coral and seaweed popped up.

“My Lord,” said Fitz, eyeing the debris. “We must contain this from the shore.”

“I am aware,” said the sage.

The divers had broken out into a fierce argument. One was indicating that he wanted to dive; the others were telling him he was a fool for not waiting. Cooper stepped in and settled the argument; on went the diver’s helmet, out went the command for the Orca to pump air, and down went the man to the bottom of the bay.

He seemed to be down there an age, but finally the rope signaled that he wanted to come up. The diver was exhausted when he got on board, but though his teeth were chattering he was still smiling. He threw something to Fitz, who caught it.

It was a tarnished silver price.

“Back to the Orca,” she said. One silver did not a fleet’s ransom make - but it was a good start. The divers would have their work cut out for them very soon.

"The bags have rotted,” explained the diver as they rowed back. “The treasure room was blown open during the explosion. The divers will have to collect it - it’s everywhere about the wreck. The gold will be easier.”

"What do you mean?” asked Fitz.

“It still looks to be in its chests,” the man said. “If we run lines to them we should be able to pull them up all in one piece. But the silver is going to be a puzzle.”

“We’ll rig buckets,” said Fitz. “Fill them and we’ll haul them up. Get ready to start tomorrow.”

Cooper was gloating as his good fortune. “You see?” he told Fitz. “This is why I was brought - the ship perfectly split open, the golden horde laid out to pick up from the ocean floor. Let the Tidesage keep his prayers; I will take gunpowder.”

“Hmm,” said Fitz, unconvinced.

It was pleasant later, when eating a dinner of lemon salt pork, eggs, and fruit, to contemplate that the thing might actually be done; that all the orders she could give had been given, that all the
preparations that could be made had been made. Somewhere below her there was a horde of
treasure. All of it could be recovered and returned to the Lord Admiral; Fitz thought even the
inscrutable Jaina Proudmoore might be pleased by several tons of gold. If not, Sylvanas Windrunner
most certainly would be. And the Tidesages would surely be pleased with their cut as well. Life was
good for the junior lieutenant in command.

The next evening was the real triumph. Fitz stayed on board the ship and left the crew to their work;
Cooper had recovered well from his near fatal drowning by Tidesage, and there now seemed no
reason for him to not supervise the dives as he was supposed to do. When the whaler returned it was
heaped with silver, and towing ropes attached to iron boxes carrying the gold. Gold! The crew pulled
so eagerly on the ropes that the boxes were up and tucked away well before the sun rose; it was good
to have their best efforts, as the weight was stupendous. The mast had creaked ominously as they had
used the blocks and tackles and chains of the rigging to haul it abroad.

“We’ll need to weigh the silver,” said the dive master. “It’s faster than trying to count.”

Treasure by the ton! There was so much there was not enough sail to make bags to hold it; Fitz had
to press it loose into the ballast of the ship. She then set about weighing every man aboard, and their
possessions.

Fitz knew every man and woman that made the Orca; they were faithful crew, loyal to the Lord
Admiral and with integrity that would be the envy of any man or woman. But Fitz was also not a
fool; some of her people had been given the option of prison or the fleet; others of them had not two
coppers to rub together, so fond of grog and brothels were they. If Fitz could not prove they had not
stolen anything, then there would be always whispers of suspicion that would followed them
forward. When he had outlined her plan to weigh them, proving their innocence and shaming any
doubters, the entire crew had volunteered with a single voice.

Every day the piles of coins grew larger, and every day the Orca settled a little lower in the water.
She was filled with a King’s ransom; all the boxes of gold were up, and the last two days were
dedicated to the frantic collection of silver. She could not get all of it - she had resigned herself to that
but she could aim for most. Buckets of glittering treasure were hauled up from out of the deep,
every piece another blow against the Zandalari.

The mornings in the tropics were beautiful. But this particular morning, when Fitz came up to take
her walk about the deck, something niggled at her awareness.

"Might I borrow your glass?” she asked Featherstone, who promptly handed it over. There were
troops on the beach; troops where there had been no troops yesterday, and launches to take them on
the water. Fitz’s eyes widened, and she handed the glass back without her customary thanks.

“Prepare to make sail,” she said. “Immediately. Call all hands. Alert the Tidesage.”

Jackson’s piercing whistle split the deck. Fitz ran forward and threw herself up the mast; she had
always been good in the rigging. From the top she could just see over the island she was anchored
off - to Fitz’s growing horror, a ship sailed here, flying the flag of the pirates. They were trapped
between a hostile force and a lee shore, in a ship filled with gold.

Fitz had been deceived, outplayed by pirates clearly more wise to the waters of their bay than any
any passing lieutenant. It was a bad moment; Fitz had to steel her heart against the knowledge that
she had put everyone in danger, and that the Orca might not escape. She gave herself a minute to
collect herself, then slid back down the mast.

“Clear for action, Ms Jackson,” she ordered crisply.
“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Jackson. The ship was too small for a drummer; the pitiful two guns looked feeble in the dawn’s light.

"Cleared for action, ma’am!” reported Jackson.

“What are you doing?” asked the Tidesage.

“Preparing to receive boarders,” replied Cooper, before Fitz could say anything. “What does it look like, fool?”

“Belay that, Mr Cooper,” Fitz snapped. “Go below immediately, if you please.”

Cooper was grabbed by Clyburn and stuffed through a nearby hatch. The Tidesage said nothing.

The pirate ship, gaudily painted, rounded the island on a wide course to avoid the shallow rocks. Fitz judged her as she came, and was not impressed; any competent Kul Tiran ship of a similar size would outfight her easily. As it was she outgunned the Orca by a factor of at least twenty, and the difference in the weight of shot was likely to be even greater.

Fitz watched it come with a calm expression that did not match the turmoil of her inner thoughts. If she had held the advantage of nighttime, then she could have done something; if she had a friendly fleet on the horizon, or an army ashore, or even a larger ship - with any of those things she might have done something. She had nothing, and that would have to suffice.

The Tidesage was standing beside her now, openly on deck. Fitz thought he might as well; word of the money had clearly gotten out somehow, and the neutrality of the goblins clearly didn’t extend to getting between a stupidly large pile of gold and a large pirate ship. The blue, deep hood of the Tidesage was, for the first time, comforting. Fitz thought if she was going to die, then her spirit could tag along with his to get where it needed to go.

“I can help, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Brother Gull.

“Yes, my Lord,” said Fitz. “But first, I must take you to the real ocean. Mr Featherstone! Cut the anchor, and set all sail!”

The cable splashed into the water, and the schooner moved sluggishly forward; she heaved herself up where once she flew. The extra weight did sit her more firmly in the water, and drew the canvass more tightly; she did also drift less. But realistically the force required to push the schooner through the water was now much greater than before she had been loaded to the brim with precious metals.

“Helm, swing to port!” called Fitzwilliams. The hand obeyed her command instantly, and the schooner wheeled about towards the shore. “Starboard now!” she called, and the ship swung back around to face the mouth of the bay.

“Ma’am,” said Fatherstone timidly. “Won’t we hull the ship on the rocks?”

“Better to send this gold to the bottom,” said Fitz fiercely, “than let even a single piece fall into the hands of an enemy.”

There was silence at that.

“That’s not the plan though,” said Fitz, belatedly. “Don’t worry. We will scrape them off like a barnacle on the rocks.”

Fitz’s initial course had taken them on a collision course directly with the pirate ship; her subsequent
corrections had pushed the schooner close inshore to the island. It was far closer than the larger warship could follow and not wreck itself. Frankly, even the schooner was in danger - Fitz had a man stand with a lead line calling soundings as fast as the lead could be dropped, and another man calling frantic course corrections as he saw the white tips of waves breaking on rocks. But the pirate attempted to cut them off anyway, a fortune in gold seemingly too tempting for caution; the big warship maneuvered so close even Fitz thought it was reckless. But the schooner could sail even closer, and its crew were Kul Tiran to the bone; a good thirty meters separated the two ships, and that was enough to pass.

With a crash and a roar the pirate let fly with their broadside; they clearly believed they had a better chance of recovering the money from a wreck close to shore than they did of retrieving it from one at the bottom of the open ocean. But the shot sailed high above the little schooner - they were so close the cannons were unable to depress themselves enough to fire down into them, and the roll of the water in the bay was not enough to bring them to bear. A single gun fired in reply from Orca. It was pathetic, more to show willing than anything, but the crew cheered it anyway.

The crew started cheering again when they drew past the pirate warship, but Fitz knew that it was false glory. The pirate would simply tack around and come after them again. No guns were firing at them now - clearly the money was the most important part of the equation, and the pirates would have to board them to get it.

It was a losing game for the Orca - the pirates had more sail and less weight making them sluggish - but Fitz had to play it to the end regardless.

The Tidesage had stood next to Fitz for the entire length of this little drama, utterly still. His baleful presence was forgotten in the excitement of action, but now he turned. His eyes gleamed under his hood, still shrouded. Fitz realised with a start she had never seen his face.

“You asked me if there were monsters in the ocean,” he said. “And I told you; yes. Terrible monsters.”

And then he called the Deep.

The crew fell silent as the ocean-dwellers came. The pirate ship was torn apart; the groans of its splintering decking, and the screaming audible even from where they sailed. Fitz stood silently and watched its destruction, hands clasped respectfully behind her back. It was the only thing she could offer her foes.

The schooner sailed on out into the ocean, slipping away.
Chapter 11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For the second time in her life, Fitz found herself sailing into the stifling heat of Sunsail harbour. The waterway hadn’t changed at all, despite the war. The little boats were playing back and forth, and dredging barges were out again, their work letting the heavy warships warp their way down the channel. The Orca followed along behind a ketch wending its way to the civil moorings. Back home the trees would be well into their autumn finery. Here in the tropics Fitz doubted the trees would even notice the change in season.

The little schooner was still laid low down with gold. That certainly wasn’t Fitz’ preference; it was badly affecting the handling of the little ship, and she wanted the money safely in the arms of the fleet’s purser as soon as could be arranged. But when Orca had arrived at the rendezvous set out in Fitz’s orders, the only ship there had been a packet boat. This had thrown aboard a mail bag, rapidly taken off Cooper, divers, and the pump, and then had departed. The entire operation had taken less than two hours.

Her new orders had been discovered by Jackson only when the mailbag was emptied; they directed the Orcato sail directly to Quel’Thalas. (There was also a second letter from Sagewood - Fitz hadn’t been able to contain her pleasure, and Jackson had given her a strange look as she had handed it over.) So the Orca had laid in a new course, following the Great Fleet’s wake to this year’s winter anchorage.

Normally a whaling schooner would laugh at only six months at sea, and be even less bothered when most of those six months were a fine sailing summer. But the last three of those months had seen the Orca laden with a weight she was never designed to carry. Whales were one thing; enormous quantities of hard currency were quite another. The hands had been worked to exhaustion pumping out all the water being let in through straining seams. Fitz had finally had Clyburn sound the well at the beginning of every watch.

Brother Gull had said nothing either way about the crew’s precautions. Fitz took this to mean the pumping was a good idea.

The sticky, oppressive heat of Quel’Thalas was therefore a welcome end to a difficult journey. It was also a personal misery for Fitz; her borrowed uniform had handled the rigours of the service better than anything she had ever owned before, but elves had thin blood. Their sea-going clothes were thick. The layers of felt and wool had been uncomfortably warm at sea; they were now unbearable. Fitz had taken to stripping right back to a singlet and underwear when she was not required on the quarterdeck.

She was on the quarter-deck today though, sweating profusely under her fine hat. The schooner was obviously expected. The signal-jack on the fortress fluttered her number and directed her to dock at the wharf alongside the victualling yard. Lines were thrown, bumpers put out, and sails secured. The crew breathed a sigh of relief when the ship was safely tied up.

Fitz then armed every single one of her little crew with cutlasses and loaded muskets; she instructed Featherstone - and more importantly Jackson - that not a single soul was to board or leave the Orca without her express permission. Brother Gull, it was widely understood, was the exception.
But no one else. Not even Sylvanas Windrunner herself should be allowed aboard the *Orca* without Fitz’s express permission.

Fitz took Clyburn and went searching for the Lord Admiral.

A Kul Tiran sailor enjoying a drink told them that the Lord Admiral was taking shore leave. She had no idea where. That ruled out a simple trip to the flagship, anyway. Fitz therefore strode towards the customs house, thinking to ask the officials there. Walking, however, was difficult - it had been over a year since her feet had touched dry land, and the cobbles over which she was crossing seemed incapable of staying still. She knew she was rolling in her gait like the very meanest of sailors - the ones of the cable-tier, sentenced to the Fleet for their crimes - and yet, even trying as hard as she could, the solid earth seemed to seesaw under her feet.

The customs official looked at her swaying into his office, took a long look at her red uniform, then touched the brim of his hat. The directions he gave her to the Lord Admiral’s family estate were detailed. Apparently it was less than three hours ride by a good road.

Fitz then staggered out again. The heat and the inconvenience were trying her patience, but duty demanded she report as soon as possible. A livery stable down the street stood out as the next logical stop; she stood impatiently as Clyburn haggled over the rental of two horses. Fitz paid in a single piece of brightly minted new silver, and pocketed the receipt. Then she eyed the horse which had been brought out to her.

“Clyburn,” she said. “How do you sail one of these?”

“Don’t rightly know, begging your pardon ma’am,” Clyburn said. “It’s got a fair load of rigging.”

Indeed it did; there were footropes with metal dangly loops at the end, backstays that seemed to go up and all over its head, and a kind of tiny crow’s nest on its back made of leather. The horse tossed its head and snorted.

“Does madame need help?” asked the Quel’Thalan who owned the stable. He looked at her with narrowed eyes.

“No,” said Fitz decisively. Then she marched forward and clambered up. It took a couple of seconds, and the horse seemed confused, but overall she thought the operation was remarkably successful.

“Is that how all humans mount?” said the elf.

“Yes,” said Fitz. “It is a modern innovation. You wouldn't understand.”

She then grasped the horse’s tiller ropes firmly. “It’s very simple in principle, Clyburn. The beast’s head acts as its rudder.”

“I see, ma’am,” said Clyburn, looking impressed.

It took another fifteen minutes to get the sailor onto the back of his own horse, and then another couple of minutes to coax their steeds into a walk. Fitz was quite annoyed at the delay; the horses couldn’t be going faster than five knots. She was tempted to get off and walk, but the die was cast now; besides, it wouldn’t do the dignity of her borrowed uniform any good to be seen unable to ride.

The road wended its way between golden-branched trees, ascending gently. Fitz bounced around in the saddle, gripping tightly to the little prow in front of her. Sometimes there was the sight of the ocean, caught in glimpses and swatches of blue between the trees.
“I just need to check something Clyburn,” Fitz said, sliding off the damnable horse and tossing him the ropes. She walked slowly but firmly into the forest until she was out of sight. Then she doubled over and was violently, silently seasick.

It was perverse, she thought to herself in her misery, that the body grew so used to the motion of the sea that its cessation was a problem. The very stillness of the land was now as unnatural as the waves had been when she had first joined Intrepid. The attack was mild and soon over; Fitz rose shakily, took a sip of water, then pressed on.

The sun was high overhead when the two Kul Tirans reached Goldenbough Manor. It was perched above a little village, backed onto a cliff. On the air, Fitz could hear the sounds of the ocean. The manor itself was terribly Quel'Thalan; its central building had as many spines as a porcupine, so great was the proliferation of spires, towers, and balconies. Everything was disagreeably slender and elegant.

A servant in Windrunner livery intercepted them as they crossed the courtyard.

“Please state your business,” she said in perfect common.

"It is the Lord Admiral’s business," said Fitz in Thalassian, with regret. “For her ears, by her orders. I will wait outside, however, if you would be so good as to tell Lieutenant Sagewood that we are here?”

“Lieutenant Sagewood is with her mother and grandparents at the Academy,” replied the servant, frowning. “I will not disturb them for an officer who will not state their business.”

“Prince Galadin?” said Fitz hopefully. “Perhaps the Archer is returned to port? He will vouchsafe me.”

The servant frowned even more deeply, and shook her head. Fitz wracked her brain for another name.

“Is there a problem?” called a voice.

Fitz turned; the servant beside her bowed deeply.

Sylvanas was sauntering across the courtyard, dressed in casual hunting leathers. A half-cloak hung rakishly off one shoulder.

“Fitz!” she said with real delight. “It is you! I almost didn’t recognise you - where did you get that uniform?”

“A very generous gift,” said Fitz, who felt like it was baking her alive. Sylvanas tilted her head to one side and studied her with a knowing look.

“Come inside where it’s cooler,” said Sylvanas. “Remara, could you please fetch my wife?”

The servant bowed again, then slipped off. Like magic more Quel'Thalans appeared; a bustling footman took charge of her hat and coat, and a bootboy took charge of Clyburn. As he was led off somewhere, Fitz felt a twinge of worry - but she reassured herself he was clever enough to find her if he caught trouble.

Sylvanas turned towards the massive front door, and Fitz had to hurry to catch up. The blessed dimness of the entranceway was like heaven.
“This is the room with chairs,” Sylvanas said, breezing through an open door on the left. Fitz followed. She felt relief; relief at her timely rescue from the servant, that the air was indeed cooler inside, and most of all that she was getting a real seat. For a time the lounging-sofas common in Quel'Thalas had been popular at home. Fitz had been bad at them.

Sylvanas glanced again at her uniform, and her ears flattened in sympathy. “My idiot nephew,” she said kindly. “He means well. Sit down. We’ll get you swapped out into summer robes. Perhaps a cool drink for now?”

The servant from before appeared like magic. Fitz took the water gratefully, and picked a chair. Ice clinked cheerfully. What Fitz actually wanted to do, of course, was gulp down three-quarters of what was in the glass and then pour the rest out over her head - but that was quite impossible.

“Thank you, ma’am,” she said instead, gratefully. “But I have imposed enough on your hospitality. I really must make my report to the Admiral.”

“Then you should do so,” said Proudmoore herself, sweeping into the room.

Fitz bolted up from the chair. Reflexively she tried to both come to attention and touch her hat - except the servant had taken her hat, and she had water in her hand besides. She wound up splashing water in her hair, fumbling with the glass, and then almost dropping it.

The Lord Admiral frowned. “Lieutenant Fitzwilliams, you are a guest in my home. I won’t bite.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fitz, hastily putting the water down onto a nearby table and clasping her hands behind her back. She was embarrassed, uncomfortable, and terrified. “I beg leave to report, ma’am? We recovered all of the gold, and most of the silver. We also acquired a great quantity of lemons. No loss to the ship’s company or supernumeraries. The Orca is docked at Sunsail awaiting your orders ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral gracefully lowered herself into a high-backed chair, pointing at the seat Fitz had just vacated. “Sit, Lieutenant Fitzwilliams.”

Fitz sat.

Sylvanas dropped onto the only elven-style sofa in the room, propping herself up on one elbow. Fitz felt envy for this effortless display of louche.

“Fitzwilliams,” said the Lord Admiral. “I have also received a report from Brother Gull. He states that you did indeed recover the gold. He also reports that you navigated the Orca by dead reckoning to within three nautical miles of the actual, that you had to organise the underwater explosives, and that you quote ‘displayed the appropriate humbleness before the Tides,’ whatever that means.”

Sylvanas’s ears flickered. Proudmore tapped the arm of her chair and leaned forward. “How is the Orca, really?”

Fitz swallowed her first response, which was to claim everything was fine. Then she felt a wave of self-loathing. The gold would be worse than useless to the Admiral at the bottom of the ocean.

“The weight of the gold is not good for her, ma’am,” she said instead. “The crew stood to their duty and made every effort, but the seams are letting in a great deal of water. I regretfully cannot recommend her for sea.” Fitz paused against the weight in her chest. “I accept full responsibility for her state.”

The Lord Admiral waved this off, looking worried. “I had wondered if the gold would be too much.
We will have to transship the cargo in Sunsail.” She looked thoughtful, and then stood. “Come with me - I should have a look.”

Fitz scrambled back out of her chair, and bobbed along in the Lord Admiral’s wake. Sylvanas had also risen to follow, and in two long strides was walking beside her wife.

“You do remember, Jaina, that you are on holiday?” said Sylvanas as they rounded the door back into the entryway. “You have people for this. You literally have a person for this standing right there.”

“You’re one to talk. Besides, war is expensive,” replied the Lord Admiral, as they stepped out into the bright sunshine. “This war has been especially costly. The money on the Orca is needed.”

A servant appeared; Fitz’s hat was suddenly on her head, a half-cloak clipped about her shoulders. Clyburn was produced, looking both disgruntled and freshly scrubbed; whatever indignities he had suffered had involved the bathhouse.

“And Ithedis?” said Sylvanas “We could send word for him.”

“No need,” said Proudmoore, sounding slightly condescending. “It’s only Sunsail.” Then she opened opened them a portal and they all stepped through.

The scene they dropped into was one of utter chaos. The Orca’s crew were all on deck, brandishing their muskets and cutlasses. Someone had pushed the gangway off the side of the ship and closed the waist. This was probably all that was stopping the mob of Quel'Thalan dockworkers crowding up and onto the little ship; the elves held a proliferation of clubs and billies, and looked ready to rush the sides. The victualling yard superintendent was among them, yelling stridently in Thalassian.

Above it all stood Brother Gull. He was utterly still, standing on the deck of the little schooner. Not even his eyes were visible; the deep hood shrouded him completely. The only flesh visible was one clawed hand, gripping his staff.

Fitz acted immediately.

“Belay all that!” she roared, rushing forward. “Belay this nonsense at once! Ms Jackson, prepare to render honours and man the rails! Admiral in sight!”

The dock workers had spotted Sylvanas, and were falling back slightly as well. The Orca's crew seemed to hesitate. Then the shrill whistle of Jackson’s pipe cut through the noise, and the sailors began to move toward the rail of the ship. It was ragged, and a gap was present around the Tidesage - no one wanted to get too close. But a line it was, and hands raised unevenly to knuckle foreheads to Lady Proudmoore. The only sign something was amiss was that all aboard kept a firm hold on their muskets.

The danger of immediate violence thus thwarted, the victualling superintendent - Fitz remembered his smug face very well indeed - became far braver. He swore at everyone present, then stormed towards their little party.

“Salvage is a civil matter!” the victualling superintendent yelled. “How dare the military keep it from us?”

“You forget yourself, Inspector,” said Sylvanas. Her cloak flared a little in the hot breeze; suddenly she looked a lot less rakish and a lot more like a dangerous, powerful Ranger-General.

The inspector sputtered. “T-this is highly irregular!” he said. “I have my orders from Prince
Kael’thas himself! The military cannot interfere in civilian business!”

“Kael’thas,” repeated the Lord Admiral. Her face was terrifyingly neutral.

“You have been misinformed,” said Fitz, firmly. “The contents of this ship were drawn from the wreck of a Kul Tiran transport; all Kul Tiran wrecks belong by law to the Lord Admiral.”

“The law of Kul Tiras,” sneered the inspector. “You are in Quel’Thalas now, and salvage is civilian. You will let my men aboard your ship.”

“My crew will shoot you first,” said Fitz hotly.

“Thank you, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said the Lord Admiral, shooting her a glance. “Let us have no quarrels between allies.”

“Miss Fitzwilliams,” hissed a cold voice from up on deck. Fitz turned and looked up at the Tidesage.

“Yes, my lord?” she said cautiously.

“This treasure belongs to the Tides,” he said. “And the Tides do not recognise petty elvish lordlings.”

“Thank you, Brother Gull,” said the Lord Admiral, even more firmly, pinching the bridge of her nose with a sigh. “Let us have no tidal waves between allies either.”

Sylvanas had called loudly to a sentry, and the woman had come over; a couple of crisply delivered orders later, and the woman had hurried off again. It seemed like only seconds before the place was swarming with the Ranger uniforms of Quel-Thalas. They muscled their way between the stevedores and the Orca, forming a barrier. Sylvanas turned to Proudmoore.

“Just like old times,” Sylvanas said, jovially. The Lord Admiral gave her an exasperated look, and then turned to the superintendent.

“Stay off the schooner,” she said. “It will remain at this berth until this dispute is resolved.”

“The Prince is in seclusion and cannot be disturbed,” said the inspector, haughtily. “It might be days before he is available.”

“Of course he is,” muttered Sylvanas.

“Considering his royal birthday party is approaching,” said Proudmoore, “it will be no more than three.”

“The Rangers will provide security here,” added Sylvanas cheerfully. “They will ensure the schooner doesn’t abscond.” Left unsaid was how the Rangers were likely to be quite a bit more sympathetic to their General’s wife than to their capricious civil Prince - the dock workers wouldn’t be boarding the Orca either.

Fitz, who knew the state of her little ship, was horrified; at the moment the Prince was legally wrong and attempting theft - but if the schooner sunk at the moorings then the cargo would need to be salvaged again, and ownership really would transfer to the Elves. She hoped an exception might be made for her to get back on board the Orca - her only heart’s desire in that moment was to effect a hasty, secret repair.

In a fit of daring, Fitz edged her way towards the schooner. A tall Ranger stopped her with a regretful frown. Sylvanas clapped a hand on her shoulder, and towed her back. Fitz felt sick.
The Lord Admiral was staring at the trim of the schooner. She reached out a hand towards the hull and traced a complex shape in the air. Bright lines trailed from her fingertips, then faded from sight. “Thank you, Brother Gull. You can let go now. Carry on, Orca.”

Brother Gull bowed his head, and Fitz blinked. The schooner already looked to be riding a little more handily on the shallow inland swell; whatever had been done, she was in no immediate danger of foundering.

Sylvanas cleared a space behind them, and Proudmoore opened a new portal in it. Then she turned to Fitz. The Lord Admiral’s gaze was like paint stripper.

“You had better come back with us,” she finally said. “You have a party to prepare for.”

Then she stepped through, leaving the mess behind. Sylvanas did not wait; she trailed after her wife. With a new sense of dread, Fitz cast one longing look over her shoulder towards to schooner, then steeled her soul, and walked away from her ship; with a heavy heart she stepped through the portal after the Lord Admiral.

Chapter End Notes

During this chapter, Ao3 decided to tantrum over the formatting; I have been squashing formatting errors as I spot them, but I apologise for those that remain.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

In which, regrettably, Fitz is asked to party.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The first thing Fitz saw when she exited the gate was a Quel'Thalan warrior standing on the other side. He was holding his shield and his pole-arm, and for someone with such a neutral expression he looked extremely reproachful.

The Lord Admiral sighed. “I apologise for not sending you word. Is Jess around?”

“She is with her mother,” the warrior said. “Shall I fetch her?”

“I am sorry to disturb them, Ithedis, but yes.”

Ithedis shot a meaningful glance at a discreetly hovering servant, who dashed off immediately. He then fell in respectfully behind the Admiral as she made her way back towards the house.

Fitz glanced discreetly around. Perhaps she might make her escape, if she could only get out of the Lord Admiral’s line of sight. There was a kind of outbuilding over on the port side of the courtyard, filled with moorings and docks for horses - she might be able to hide in there. Her memory supplied her half-forgotten imagery of glittering parties, filled with sneers and mockery; her father had not been a good sailor, but he had done his duty and Fitz had loved him. If humans had looked down upon her family for their social standing, then how much worse would the Elves be at their Prince’s birthday?

Fitz shortened her steps a little, attempting to create some seaway between her and the real officers. But no sooner was the attempt made than it failed; Sylvanas seemed to sense her attempt to flee, and turned to give her a level look.

“Come along, Fitz,” she said. "Keep up." And that was that.

The politics of the situation was so clearly beyond Fitz that she was not entirely sure why she was being invited to follow; the only explanation she could think of was that Lady Proudmoore considered junior Lieutenants as useful accessory items. As the officers reclined onto sofas around a low table covered with reports, Fitz took up station along one wall. Even as her active mind worried over her ship, and all the ways she could disappoint her superiors, another part of her marveled at her good fortune. She was in the Lord Admiral's house, eavesdropping on her war cabinet. This was a priceless opportunity to learn - and possibly even be useful.

“It is theft,” Sylvanas was saying. “He can’t simply take the cargo off a friendly ship.”

“That won’t stop him,” replied the Lord Admiral. “He knows Kul Tiras needs the alliance, and that politically you - as the military - can do nothing to intervene.”

“I want to,” mused Sylvanas. "It is a lot of money."
“It’s not enough money.” The Lord Admiral tapped a report on the table in front of her. “Revenue has dropped with Zandalari predation along the trade routes. When the *Orca* was dispatched, a great sum of gold would have been pleasant. Now a great sum is vital.”

There was a knock on the doorframe; Sagewood stood outside, dressed in casual clothing. She quirked an ear at Fitz, but otherwise looked expectantly at the Lord Admiral.

“Ah,” said Proudmoore. “Jess, come in. You remember Lieutenant Fitzwilliams?”

“I do, Lady Proudmoore,” Sagewood replied.

“Good. I am afraid the Lieutenant succeeded in her mission, and is now being punished for it. She will need your help. Do sit down.”

Sagewood took an empty recliner, gracefully lounging and looking intrigued. The Lord Admiral gave her a brief overview of what had occurred, paused a moment to let her process the implications, and then turned the conversation to possible solutions.

“The *Orca* is not fit to take back out to sea,” said the Lord Admiral firmly. “It was only fine seamanship that got her to Sunsail at all.”

“There are, perhaps, other options?” Sylvanas said. “We could portal the gold out from the ship’s hull, or remove it at night to another ship? What are the laws around that?”

“I must advise the General against it,” said Sagewood regretfully. “Unless the portal could reach Boralus, attempts to get around customs would count as smuggling. It renders the cargo subject to seizure by civilian authorities.”

“So the situation remains the same,” mused Sylvanas. “Except instead of theft, we would render the seizure completely legal.”

“No good,” said the Lord Admiral. “Fitzwilliams? What do you think.”

Fitz’s mouth went dry. “P-pay customs, ma’am?” she joked weakly.

The Lord Admiral stared at her unblinkingly. Sagewood’s ears slanted back.

Sylvanas’ own ears flattened in what was possibly irritation. “Could someone include the infantry in this conversation, please? Why are we all staring at Fitz?”

“Different laws,” said Lady Proudmoore, slowly. “Paying customs would change the nature of the cargo. It would be an import instead of salvage. We would pay customs, then be free to take the rest of the money away overland to the permanent portal at Falthrien Academy.”

“How is that different?” said Sylvanas. “It’s not like Kael’thas has a legal right to take anything now, and that’s not stopped him. Wouldn’t he just take the gold anyway?”

“The economic consequences for him would be greater if it were an import, ma’am,” said Sagewood. “And excise tax would have fifteen percent of the gold land in his pocket anyway, completely legally. No political damage to the alliance. He will leap at it.”

“Fifteen percent is too much,” said the Admiral.

Fitz thought of the moonless dives - the madness of Cooper almost drowning - the straining, leaking *Orca*. She thought of the screams of pirates being devoured by the deep dwellers. She thought of the
terrific wealth entrusted to her, an officer who couldn’t even afford to replace her hairbrush, and the way she had delivered it safely down to the last pennyweight. All for Kul Tiras.

Fitz thought fifteen percent was indeed too much. A single copper farthing would be too much. Paying off some scheming, thieving Prince - even an allied one - galled her more than anything she had ever endured. Her crew had sweat and bled for that money. They had done it for the Lord Admiral. Now that same Lord Admiral was bartering it away in some back room.

But bribing some little Elvish prick was likely to succeed, and Kul Tiras needed gold more than it needed a fight with its oldest ally.

“Maybe we can negotiate ten,” Sagewood was saying. “But we should be prepared for twelve.”

“How much would twelve percent be, Fitz?” asked Sylvanas.

“Seven hundred twenty pounds of gold,” answered Fitz promptly. “One thousand, four hundred and forty pounds of silver. And seventy-two lemons.”

Sagewood’s ears swiveled slowly up until they pointing straight above her head. Fitz glanced at the other elf - Sylvanas’s ears had also crept up. Apparently the term “massive quantity of gold” hadn’t quite registered emotionally.

“Enough to satisfy,” said Lady Proudmoore calmly. Then after a pause added, “Minus the lemons, perhaps.”

She turned back to her reports, jotting figures quickly. Then she put her quill down.

“Yes. We can survive this. Sagewood?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Lieutenant Fitzwilliams is my cousin, and is currently a guest on the estate. She will have to attend the Prince’s birthday party.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Find her a Kul Tiran uniform, please. The red is striking, but it is also politically unacceptable here.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I have some old ones in storage; take off the worst of the gold braiding and get them taken in.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Fitzwilliams?”

“Yes, ma’am?” said Fitz, cringing internally when the full brunt of the Lord Admiral’s attention turned to her.

“You are relieved from the Orca. The chances of you recovering your sea chest are not strong; go to the city and fit yourself out with replacements, please.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Can we go back to our holiday now?” said Sylvanas, who was making comical eyes at her wife.
“I think so,” said the Lord Admiral, sparing her a softer glance. “Thank you for your time, ladies; you are dismissed.”

Fitz was out the door like a pistol shot. She strode quickly around the corner, through a random doorway, and then made a detour into a kind of outdoor garden area. There she made the executive decision to scuttle around the back wall and lurk behind some trees.

She was entirely overwhelmed. This morning she had been the temporary commander of a leaky schooner filled with gold, and this evening she was demoted to an extremely distant cousin begrudgingly hosted until she could be sent away again. Adding insult to injury, her painfully reconstituted sea chest - filled with things begged, improvised and scavenged - had been lost as well. The cost of outfitting herself for a third time would be literally ruinous. It would certainly consume almost the entire sum she had earned at a Lieutenant's rate, except that her mother would have already been drawing against it back in Boralus. She would have to pawn her sword to raise capital, and there would be no money for any little luxuries to make life aboard more bearable.

The heat of Quel'Thalas was oppressive, but Fitz didn’t pay it any thought. There was no way she was going back inside the manor. For a bitter, brief moment she wished she had never signed on aboard *Intrepid*. She could have been a fisherman. Why not complete the fall of her line?

Fitz sat down and leaned back against the wall. She pulled off her hat, tilted her head back, and let the sweat trickle down her face; the shade was protecting her from the sun, but the heat was omnipresent. Regardless, she drifted into the sleep of the completely exhausted.

The next thing she was sensible of was a hand on her shoulder, which was shaking her gently. The entire garden was shrouded in darkness. Fitz came awake with a start; briefly, she thought the hand belonged to Lieutenant Sagewood - then her eyes registered the differences. No freckles, longer ears, glowing blue eyes rather than light grey ones - although the laughter in them was the same. Fitz didn’t know how to read Quel'Thalas rank markings, but this woman had a significant amount of gold on her Ranger uniform. Fitz reminded herself: Quel'Thalan elves seemed to like gold in general. It might mean nothing at all.

“You must be Fitzwilliams,” the stranger said. “We were wondering where you had hidden yourself.”

“M-ma’am,” stammered Fitz. The woman’s ears slanted forward into a familiar, laughing angle.

“Elodis,” the woman said. “Jess’s mother.”

“Oh,” said Fitz, intelligently.

Elodis slowly sat down beside her and leaned against the wall. There was silence for a minute, but it was not an unpleasant one. The Quel'Thalan night was full of sounds; strange insects, the trilling of birds. Beyond it all there was the faint, endless crashing of the ocean.

“Nearly time for dinner,” said Elodis, apropos of nothing. Fitz nodded and thanked her politely, but couldn’t muster up much enthusiasm. She just wasn’t overly hungry, even for something guaranteed to be not salt pork.

Silence settled back over the night.

“How old are you, Fitzwilliams?” asked the elf.

“Twenty,” replied Fitz.
“Oh, yes,” Elodis said thoughtfully. “Humans age strangely when young. My late husband mentioned that.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” said Fitz anxiously, but Elodis waved her off.

“It was a long time ago, as humans measure these things; ninety-seven years this spring. I was lucky to have him as long as I did, and I still have my daughter.” A shadow passed across her face. “But of course, time is not the same to an elf.”

The sorrow on her face was brief; Fitz watched her breathe deeply, then lean back and settle more comfortably against the wall. The silence was almost companionable now.

“I was here when Jaina was first brought to Quel'Thalas, you know,” Elodis said conversationally. “My father, Ithedis, was assigned to her almost the first day she arrived; I was his youngest, no more than fifty, and just joined the Rangers.”

Fitz was impressed with this. “Did you see the…?”

“…the ice-siege of Boralus?” said Elodis, smiling. “Kul Tirans always ask me that - but no, I was still in Ranger training.”

Fitz was still impressed; this elf had just admitted to roughly five hundred years of seniority. She now suspected strongly all the gold on the elf’s fine uniform did indeed mean rank, and that possibly she should be saluting a lot.

Elodis shot her a quick, flashing grin; Fitz threw formality aside for the first time in years, and grinned back.

“That’s better,” said Elodis, pleased. “I’ve seen a lot of reactions to being told they have to attend the Prince’s birthday party, and to be fair hiding in the Lord Admiral’s garden is easily the most sensible. But it also seems slightly out of character for you. My daughter tells me you find trouble with distressing regularity, but normally drag yourself back out of it again.”

Fitz couldn’t repress her wince. “Ah. Well, ma’am,” she said. “The Lord Admiral commands and Kul Tiras obeys.”

“Sure,” said the elf, musingly. “But what does that mean?”

It was a good question. Fitz looked up at the sky; the comforting stars winked at her, orienting and reliable.

“I guess it means I should go and get fitted for a uniform, ma’am,” she said. “And tomorrow I should head down to the city for a new sea chest.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Elodis. Her ears flickered, and she smiled. “Up you get, and along to the baths with you. The Lord Admiral expects you at dinner.”

Suddenly, Fitz found the idea of a dinner free from salt pork rather appealing. She stood, brushed herself off, then returned inside.

It was three days later when she found herself mounting the steps at the Court of the Sun, trailing in the Lord Admiral’s wake. The party was as bad as Fitz had feared it would be. Glittering elves swirled about her, giving her disdainful looks half-hidden behind polite greetings; there was dancing, and lively music made on a kind of long-necked lute. Fitz felt like a stormcrow among peacocks in her dark blue Admiralty jacket.
Her borrowed Kul Tiran uniform was frankly gorgeous. The Lord Admiral was built far more strongly than Fitz ever would be, and when she had first put it on the jacket had hung off her like she was a child wearing her mother’s clothes. But the height was roughly the same, or close. Once Fitz was encouraged to stand up a little straighter, the seamstress had taken in the fabric with the minimum of fuss. Fitz still looked gangly and awkward, but no uniform was going to hide that. The precious golden epaulette was the only thing she had rescued for herself before Galadin’s uniform was taken away.

“Don’t get into trouble, please,” the Lord Admiral had instructed her as they stepped into the party proper. Then she had walked with purpose towards some point further in the room, the crowd scattering in front of her like fish before a shark. Sylvanas and the two Sagewoods had followed her confidently, presumably off to do all the things important people did at parties.

And so Fitz was left to her own devices. She thought this might have been a tactical mistake on their part. “Don’t get into trouble” sounded very well in theory, but frankly Fitz wasn’t entirely sure the how one stayed out of trouble at fancy elven parties.

The blue cocktail drink being served was an easy decision; clearly a bad idea. She surreptitiously tipped most of her glass into a nearby plant. Interacting with the guests, however, was quite a different set of problems. Should she just endeavour to say as little as possible?

It quickly became apparent this was also not a good plan. The few Elves who deigned to speak to her had been surprised, and then delighted by what one had called her ‘brooding intensity’. Fitz had extracted herself from their clutches only with difficulty.

Finally, Fitz found a reliable way to avoid conversation - by pretending to admire the art. Then she continued to avoid them by actually admiring the art, because it was amazing. The walls of the ballroom burst with geometric tiles. Other areas held looping, repeating flower designs in exotic colours. She was just examining an intricate sort of tulip when her luck ran out; an elf tapped her on her shoulder, and she was forced back into the trapped forest of social interaction.

He was a particularly gaudy elf. Fitz briefly wondered if a seamstress had sewed several outfits together by mistake. For some Tides-forsaken reason his shoulders had been shaped to flare like wings. Fitz had very little experience of birds outside of seagulls, and these were shaped quite differently to that; she had the vague impression they might be from some sort of large golden chicken.

The elf was looking at her, smiling a sharp smile and sipping wine from a crystal goblet. “Why, don’t you look grand, for a minor Kul Tiran cousin!” he said in common. “I wonder where you got the money?”

Fitz didn’t know how to reply to this; there was some implication in what he was saying, but it wasn’t something she entirely understood. So she sipped her drink quietly, and said nothing. He would either explain, change the topic, or leave.

In the face of her silence, the elf’s smile slipped a little.

Mercifully for him, the orchestra finished their previous work and changed up the music; Fitz vaguely recognised the opening strains of one of the new Quadrille rhythms. Immediately, guests began to head towards the centre of the floor, forming lines across a great sunburst mosaic in the middle of the room.

“May I have this dance?” asked the Quel’Thalan in a syrupy sweet voice.
Fitz bowed gravely, and held out her arm in the Kul Tiran fashion. She was actually quite proud of herself for remembering; her mother had drilled her relentlessly in court etiquette, and she knew that the person who was taller should always offer their arm. Potentially the elf’s ears gave him another four inches, but Fitz’s Kul Tiran hat was cocked at a rakish angle, and she thought that probably carried the day.

The elf gave her a look of utter bewilderment as he hesitantly took her arm.

As she led him out onto the floor she wondered idly if the rules were different here, but the die was now cast; Fitz swept him into the summer part of the dance.

“A dashing smuggler, I see,” said the elf. Fitz watched with interest as he stumbled a little over his trailing cloak - perhaps he wasn’t used to his partners leading? Again, he seemed to be speaking words that meant one thing but with meaning hidden underneath. Once again, Fitz wasn’t entirely sure what those under-words might be.

“A simple sailor,” replied Fitz finally. “A humble servant of the Lord Admiral.”

She led the elf into the slowest of whirls - he was recovering his grace now, and his motion was truly beautiful. Thankfully, it also prevented further speech for a good thirty seconds. She then dipped him, which burned another several seconds.

“The Lord Admiral,” said the elf when he was back on his feet. He stared at her slyly. ”She commands your loyalty so completely?”

“The Admiral is to the Tides,” said Fitz vaguely, “as the Prince is to the Sun.” She wasn’t really sure what she was talking about, but it sounded pretty good.

They spun around the floor again, completing the star figure portion of the dance, and then mercifully it was done. Fitz bowed to her partner gravely, and walked to the side of the dance floor. The Quel'Thalan followed along behind.

“Lieutenant Fitzwilliams,” came a smooth voice. Fitz turned; the elf also turned. Lieutenant Sagewood had walked up to them both, smiling. “I am glad I caught you. You haven’t forgotten the dance you saved me? My truest apologies -“ here Sagewood bowed deeply to Fitz’s dance partner “- I must beg your indulgence to interrupt. The Lieutenant and I have a longstanding engagement for the minuet.”

“Of course,” said the Quel'Thalan, evenly. “Let me not stand between you.”

Sagewood bowed to him again, then gripped Fitz’s arm firmly. Fitz just managed to touch the brim of her hat in his general direction before Sagewood towed her back out onto the dance floor.

Fitz was a bit bewildered by this turn of events. Sagewood’s ears were flicking between lying flat and stabbing upward, but Fitz couldn’t really say anything to try and parse her mood. The minuet had a lot of fancy footwork and thus required all of Fitz’s concentration.

Sagewood was an exquisite dancer.

“What did he ask you?” said Sagewood finally, sounding worried. Fitz had traded her the lead - they were the same height - and at last there was a few seconds spent together, dancing the classic Z-shaped pattern across the floor.

“I think he told me I was a pirate?” said Fitz, “I’m not sure, he lost his train of thought when I took him through that chassé.”
“You are the bravest woman I have ever met, Fitzwilliams,” said Sagewood. “I can think of no one else who would lead the Prince in a dance; it was a political thunderbolt.” She stepped back and slipped behind another couple in a complex round; Fitz mirrored her on the opposite side before they came back together.

“The wh-what?” said Fitz.

Sagewood’s ears flickered straight up, before cocking forward and positively quivering in delight. “The Prince,” she said. Her amused affection was clear; warmth streaked through her tone. This softened the blow; her words had struck Fitz like a hammer. “That was the sovereign Prince Kael’thas, by the Grace of the Sun.”

“That was your Prince?” said Fitz, inanely. She and Sagewood spun together, and then broke apart again.

“Well, yes. We find he suffices,” said Sagewood when they came back together. “Besides which, Quel’Thalas subcontracted Jaina Proudmoore by marriage. We have oak, iron, and willpower to spare.”

The music came to rest on the tonic, and the two dance partners bowed to each other.

“Where did you learn to dance, Miss Fitzwilliams?” Sagewood said.

“There were nine of us,” said Fitz. “My mother had to entertain us somehow.”

Sagewood smiled. It soothed away the last of Fitz’s distress; the mess with the prince couldn’t be too unsalvageable, if Sagewood would still smile at her like that.

“We’d better find the Lord Admiral,” said Sagewood. “Perhaps you should stay close to me? The strong, silent thing you’ve been doing, and the dance with Kael’thas… well. You’re about to find yourself the most sought-after dance partner in Silvermoon.”

Fitz shot her a look of desperate panic. Sagewood smiled again. She placed one hand firmly on Fitz’s arm, and led them both deeper into the party.

The Lord Admiral was holed up in a little nook in the far corner, Sylvanas at her side. They were standing around a tall table covered with paper. Prince Kael’thas was also there looking trim and relaxed. Fitz touched the brim of her hat in respect to the party, and moved to take a post up and along the wall.

“There you are, Lieutenant Fitzwilliams,” said Lady Proudmoore. “Come do mathematics for us.”

Fitz obediently altered course towards the table.

“The standard excise for imports is fifteen percent,” said Kael’thas.

“Because the import is Kul Tiran, it is covered under the Marriage Treaty,” replied Sylvanas. “That would make the excise lower, at eight percent.”

“Don’t forget the reasonable administrative fee,” said the Prince. He looked like a cat with his whiskers in cream. “Traditionally that has been calculated as a percentage of the gross.”

“A percentage of the gross value under seven thousand gold pieces,” drawled the Lord Admiral. “Which would cap the skimming at seven hundred total.”
“What’s a few percentage points between allies?” purred the Prince.

“About a hundred pounds of gold,” said Sylvanas flatly.

Fitz listened to them dicker, and thought about the *Orca*. Even now, Brother Gull was probably… the Tidesage was…

Fitz narrowed her eyes in thought, just as negotiations drew to a conclusion.

“A steep discount,” said the Prince joyfully. “In light of the importers being our most trusted allies. Twelve percent.”

“Agreed,” said the Lord Admiral, sounding weary. “That is seven hundred twenty pounds of gold, one thousand, four hundred forty pounds of silver.”

“Forgive me, my Lord Admiral,” said Fitz firmly. “But that is twelve percent of the total overall. You have forgotten the Tide-tithe, owed to the Sages once they rescue a ship. That would be twenty percent of the total cargo value, my Lady. And naturally it would be blasphemous to subject it to tax.”

The Lord Admiral’s eyes raked over here for a brief moment. Then she nodded, ever so slightly; Fitz thought it might be in approval. “I did indeed forget that, Lieutenant. Thank you; please recalculate the totals.”

“Five hundred seventy-six pounds of gold; one thousand, one hundred and fifty-two pounds of silver,” Fitz said. “And fifty-eight lemons.”

The Prince gave her a hard look. “Minus the lemons, perhaps?” he said.

“Oh no,” said Fitz. She clasped her hands behind her back; she needed to hide her balled fist. “It is your due, your Majesty. If my crew and I had our way, you would eat them all.”

The Prince looked at her with uncertainty, and Fitz took a breath. Her fist relaxed. The Prince was only doing his best for his people, just as the Lord Admiral would do for Kul Tiras.

“They are quite delicious, your Majesty,” she continued. “May I send some to you from my private store? I am sure lemonade would be refreshing in this heat.”

The Prince smiled. It looked genuine. “Thank you, Lieutenant.” He scrawled his name over the documents in front of him with a dramatic flourish, then cocked a foppish ear at her. “Will you save me another dance?”

“I am afraid Lieutenant Fitzwilliams must tender her apologies,” said the Lord Admiral. “She will supervise the unloading of the ship; it is best this task is done in darkness. Send your customs official to the *Orca* for their own count.”

The prince gave her an ironic salute, shot Fitz a rakish wink, and then sauntered out.

“Fitzwilliams,” sighed the Lord Admiral. She was shaking her head. Sylvanas was grinning like a kid who had just seen the best Darkmoon Faire show ever.

“Just go, Fitzwilliams,” the Admiral said. “Transfer the gold to the Academy; there are some wagons at the Barracks which will fit through the portal to Boralus. And for the sake of the Tides – don’t let anyone see you try to ride a horse.”
Fitz touched the brim of her hat, glanced her farewell to Lieutenant Sagewood, and then fled the nook with as much grace as she could muster. When the heavy court doors closed firmly shut behind her, she loosened her necktie and strode out firmly into the night. She did not look back.
Chapter 13

The fleet wintered in Quel-Thalas. Fitz spent most of that time pining for the sea.

Theoretically, at least, Fitz should have been the happiest lieutenant in the fleet. She was certainly the most popular one - after the debacle of the Prince’s Birthday, Fitz had received over a dozen party invitations in quick succession. A good hour of wringing her hands in private saw Fitz seek out Elodis to beg for advice.

Brigadier Sagewood was very kind. *Decline with regrets*, she had advised; *and cite the immediate necessity of sea service*. Her being a Brigadier explained a lot about Lieutenant Sagewood. Fitz sneaked a vase of Kul Tiran roses into Elodis’ office as a thank you gift; frankly she didn’t feel herself on land, and any plan that involved simply fleeing across the ocean sounded quite appealing.

After days of feeling sick and listless, Fitz set out to find a ship and make good on her excuse. The *Orca* was no help; it had been deemed unfit for further service. When Fitz had finally got aboard to inspect it in the company of a Quel'Thalan customs officer, she had found the frame had buckled. Her former sea chest, and all her possessions, had been ruined by the great quantity of water this had allowed inside.

The little schooner was decommissioned and towed away to be broken up; its crew were made ready for the next ship that had need of them. This did not include Fitz.

She didn’t really understand the specifics. Somehow she had found herself a part of the Admiral’s staff, and reassignment was frustratingly difficult. Fitz had taken to simply roaming the wharf like a beggar. Finally, she wriggled aboard a little packet-boat as a lowly Third Lieutenant; each day she donned her thin Kul Tiran uniform, and worked a short voyage delivering news and mail to the Great Fleet cruising in the ocean beyond. It was a continuous delight; the deck heaving under her feet, and the joy of each ship’s crew as the packet-boat delivered their post. Her violent seasickness was the only impediment to her happiness; finally one of the other Kul Tirans told her about an Elvish potion which quelled its symptoms for an hour or two. Fitz - who had suffered gamely through her affliction for almost three years - was deeply annoyed.

But the world was still at war. It was inevitable that the Great Fleet would set sail again; Sylvanas grew ever more protective of the Lord Admiral’s time at home. Fitz knew she would be summoned for some task eventually.

That day finally came in the first week of spring; Fitz had been sailing a little dinghy out of a small bay tucked in the lee of the Goldenbough cliffs, and when she returned she was ordered to present herself to the Lord Admiral immediately. Her little checklist calmed Fitz as she stood before the Lord Admiral’s door. Hat, dirk (her sword was in pawn) then hair. Knock firmly.

“Come!” said the Lord Admiral

Fitz walked inside, touching the brim of her hat.

“Thank you, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Lady Proudmoore. “Do sit down.” There was a large stack of ominous papers in front of her, bound in a cardboard file.

Fitz pulled the wooden chair closer to the desk and pulled off her hat.

“This is your personnel jacket, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said the Lord Admiral. “It contains every commendation, every mistake, every promotion, every reprimand, every transfer request that anyone
has ever made for you.”

Fitz shuffled uneasily on her hard seat.

“The transfer requests are especially fascinating,” The Lord Admiral turned over a few pages. “Captain Conrad asked for you on the Tiragarde; so did Commander Windrunner for Archer. You have two from Forster. Oh yes, and this last one from Kael’Thas for you to be his attache.”

Fitz squirmed. She was suspicious - this must be leading somewhere, and the whole thing seemed like flattery. From the Lord Admiral, this probably meant Fitz’s next task was going to be unpleasant.

Lady Proudmoore leaned back, pushing Fitz’s file away. She pulled another stack of papers towards her. These were not bound; they were papers of all different sizes, handwritten. She couldn’t read them upside down, but by the colour of the inks Fitz estimated there was at least six or seven different authors.

“These are from the officers aboard Thunderhawk,” the Lord Admiral said. “Every single Lieutenant posted there, and two of the three Midshipmen, have written to me directly to request an assignment off the ship. One has said he will resign his commission and go before the mast to get out. Two have asked for release from the Navy.”

The Admiral dropped the papers back to the desk, and gave Fitz a long, searching look.

Fitz clutched nervously at her hat. “My Lord Admiral,” she said, uncomfortably. “You wish me to volunteer for the Thunderhawk?”

“Yes,” said the Lord Admiral. “I do.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” said Fitz.

The Lord Admiral’s gaze was piercing; Fitz did her best to look resolute.

“I am sorry, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said the Admiral. “This is not what you deserve, but I have no use for you here. My Flag Lieutenant is highly capable, and you are not happy here on shore. I am giving this ship an entirely new wardroom; I will arrange it so that you will be the Second Lieutenant, under Lieutenant Powell.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” Fitz said again.

“The captain is a tyrant,” said Lady Proudmoore flatly. “The crew, by all accounts, is near mutiny. But his last name is Ashvane, and the Thunderhawk was paid for by subscription. Do your duty.”

“When does the transfer sloop leave, ma’am?” said Fitz.

“Tonight. High tide is three bells in the second dogwatch; be aboard before then. I am assigning you the two Orca warrant officers; use them well.”

“Thank you ma’am,” said Fitz, standing. “I’ll be along then.”

The Lord Admiral stood as well. “Good luck, Miss Fitzwilliams,” she said. “I don’t expect we will meet again. A commendation will be placed in your file for your work here. Fair Tides, and may they preserve you.”

If Fitz hadn’t known better, she would have thought the Lord Admiral looked regretful. But surely Lady Proudmoore, of anyone, knew what a Kul Tiran’s duty demanded - Fitz touched the brim of
her hat and left the office. She would have to make haste in order to make the tide.

It was a surprising wrench, though, leaving Goldenbough. Even as servants lifted her sea chest onto the running board of a cart, Fitz found herself stammering goodbyes to a great variety of people. Even Sylvanas came out to see what the fuss was about, and wound up giving her the knife off her belt as a parting gift. The worst farewell was to Lieutenant Sagewood; Fitz shook her hand formally, and they wished one another well. A promise to write died unspoken on Fitz’s lips - it seemed inadequate - and then it was too late. Sagewood retreated. The crowd surged forward again. Everyone wanted their turn and it all took some time. By the time Fitz was safely aboard the cart and away, the driver had to take several shortcuts to get her down to the harbour before the packet left.

She was greeted at the docks by a cheerful Clyburn and Jackson; they knuckled their foreheads and trotted towards the pier. Jackson grabbed up her sea chest from the cart, while Clyburn slung two canvas bags over his shoulders - Fitz then signaled for a boat to take them out to the transfer sloop.

The ride to Kul Tiran waters was swift; a fine spring gale whisked them homeward. Fitz felt her spirits lift the moment they reached blue water - helped along by the discovery of a gift from Sagewood in her sea chest. Fitz read the short letter with a smile, and tucked the warm gloves away in her jacket pocket for when the nights grew cold; it was all extremely thoughtful.

In the same paper-wrapped parcel, Sagewood had also snuck her a litre of that Elvish potion. Fitz hoarded this bounty like she was a dragon.

The fair winds and charming seas gave the sloop wings. It seemed like only a few days before the sloop hove in sight of their goal, so greatly did Fitz enjoy the journey. It was almost with disappointment that a convoy of fat merchantmen appeared on the horizon; Fitz worked her eyeglass relentlessly until she finally spied, shepherding the flock of sails watchfully, the LAS Thunderhawk, third-rate, Captain Thomas Ashvane in command.

After an exchange of signals the convoy clewed up. A lighter was lowered from the sloop, and the little party was rowed out with great efficiency. Thunderhawk was a fine ship, built in the newest Kul Tiran style; her clean lines cut through the water. Fitz noted with some surprise, however, that she was slightly clumsy in coming about. After the precision of the Great Fleet, Fitz found this offensive. She made a note to ensure some extra sail drill.

“’Aye aye!’” called the lighter. Down came the ladder, and up went Fitz, stepping aboard the waist of her new home.

Fitz didn’t see the captain when she came on board. That wasn’t necessarily normal, but it wasn’t unusual either. Instead, she reported herself to the officer of the watch up on the quarterdeck; this was a short, portly young man with hollow eyes and a general air of defeat. His uniform looked to be of a fine cut, but wrinkles had badly affected it.

"Glad to have you aboard, ma’am," he said, sounding tired. "My name's Harper. The captain's down below - the First lieutenant went for'ard with the bosun ten minutes ago."

"Thank you," said Fitz.

"What's your length of service?" asked Harper, almost off-handedly.

“Twelve months actual,” said Fitz. “Twenty-two months seniority.”

Officially, service with the Lord Admiral counted double. Fitz hadn’t cared one jot about that while she was in Quel-Thalas - there everyone had outranked her much in the same way as a shark
outranked a sardine. But on the Thunderhawk her length of service time was absolutely vital; the order of rank for the lieutenants depended on it.

“This is a young ship,” said Harper, looked a little disconsolate. “I have only been a Lieutenant eighteen months, and I will be Third.”

This didn’t seem to please him though. Every lieutenant dreamed of promotion - even lieutenants with no political connections like Fitz. After all, there was no guarantees of making it that one last step to Captain. Some unlucky souls sailed their entire careers as lieutenants, unable to make that final leap to Commander, and then post-rank.

It was at least theoretically possible to be promoted without some powerful patron. But it was unlikely. The surest way to promotion was to catch some Admiral’s eye, and be under that Admiral’s command when a vacancy occurred. Hadn’t Fitz been given her beloved, departed Orca in that exact way?

But the Lord Admiral was far away now, and their final parting implied that Fitz was on her own. Sometimes a lieutenant won a promotion fair and square though; they seized an opportunity, finding fame and glory in a grateful nation’s newspapers - or perhaps generating a great deal of prize money, which would soften the blow of staying lieutenant. Sometimes a lieutenant was even promoted as blind luck - if the right ship performed splendidly in combat, some soul could be plucked from her wardroom and promoted as a compliment to the victorious captain. These things did happen.

But the point was, these things happened to the senior lieutenant - the First of the ship, the captain’s strong right hand. There were a lot of middle-aged lieutenants in the service, all striving for ships where their seniority could be brought to bear to gain that precious slot. Thunderhawk’s group of officers, on such a fine ship with a good chance of action, and all with such little service time, was deeply unusual.

"It's the Night Elves for us, anyway," said Harper. "Perhaps the war has the senior lieutenants staying close to Zandalar, although there is ten times more chances of action here than with the Great Fleet."

"That's so," agreed Fitz.

"Captain's coming, sir," reported the midshipman of the watch hurriedly.

Harper whipped around with the speed of a snake. “Run for’ard,” he said. "And fetch Powell."

Captain Ashvane came up the rear ladder, ignored Fitz touching her hat, and stared at them both suspiciously.

He had a long, thin face and a dropping scowl, which he turned this way and that as he stood on the quarterdeck.

“My compliments, Sir. I am Lieutenant Fitzwilliamia Fitzwilliams, to join the ship.”

"You came aboard without my permission, did you?" asked Ashvane.

"Yes, sir," said Fitz, a little surprised.

"Who told you to do so?"

"No one, sir."

The Captain almost looked triumphant. "Well, why did you do it then?"
Fitz was a little stumped. "In accordance with my orders, sir. They were to report to you aboard the Thunderhawk, and serve the ship in accordance with my duty, Sir."

"And your chat with Mr Harper?" the Captain balled a fist, "Why are you talking to him? You know each other already?"

"No, sir. I reported to him when I came on board."

"So that you could have a few private words without my knowledge?"

"No, sir."

Fitz mastered her confusion with effort, and remained still and silent. Captain Forster had never encouraged more words than needed to answer a question. With this Captain, unsolicited comments seemed even more unwise.

"I'll have you know I allow no questioning of my authority, Miss Fitzwilliams," said the captain.

"Aye aye, sir." said Fitz promptly.

The Captain of a ship was a King of their own world, and only the God-like power of the Lord Admiral could gainsay it.

"I know whose epaulette you wear, and that you've come to spy on me," said the Captain, his voice low and angry. "I'll remember this."

With that he turned away and went below. Fitz paused a little bit, processing this encounter, but it was so surreal she could barely understand it. Harper was still standing rigidly, face set. Fitz was about to ask him where to stow her sea chest when she spotted the Captain's head peeking back up and over the deck - Ashvane must have hunkered down out of sight in order to eavesdrop.

Fitz was now seriously concerned.

"Can I borrow someone to carry my sea chest to the wardroom?" she asked.

"Of course," said Harper. "The two warrant officers should report to Mr Runklin; I believe they are a bosun's- and a gunner's-mate?"

Fitz confirmed this, and made to walk to the hatch and go below. But the Captain had disappeared.

As Fitz followed her sea chest deep into the bowels of the ‘tween decks, she mused as to what her next move should be; she thanked the hand, set herself up on a narrow cot, and then paced the small wardroom restlessly. There was nothing for it; she would have to venture up and find her watchbill from the First Lieutenant - much as it might risk the Captain’s uncertain temper to see her dealing with other officers without his permission.

Strangely enough the Thunderhawk was still clewed up. Sailors sat scattered around the decks, holystoning the bright wood, or chatting in small groups. The murmuring was quiet - far quieter than Fitz was used to, despite the Thunderhawk’s crew being over twice the size of that aboard the old Intrepid. The tension was palpable. Fitz thought she had better find the First Lieutenant as soon as possible; the crew needed to be distracted from their thoughts, and without the business of sailing they seemed listless.

The First Lieutenant, who had returned to the quarterdeck and relieved Harper, was exactly as old as Fitz thought a proper First Lieutenant should be. That was, she was at least sixty-five and most likely older. She also was grizzled and no-nonsense, her face leather from the sun of the tropics and lined
by service in the wind of a hundred storms. Lieutenant Powell looked like a woman who suffered no fools and took no prisoners. Fitz perked up immediately.

“Welcome aboard, Miss Fitzwilliams,” Powell said. “You will take the second division and I will add you to the watch roster. The ship will remain here until the Tidesage arrives. Dinner is at four bells in the afternoon watch. You are dismissed.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz appreciatively, and turned for’ard to check in with her new division.

They were sullen and suspicious, but she soon had them in hand. An impromptu relay race up and across the rigging soon had them performing truly daring feats to beat each other. Jackson pulled a carved bit of wood from her pocket to act as a prize. It was all ostensibly to gauge their prowess and determine what first to drill, but secretly Fitz had no doubts about the quality of her people - they were Kul Tiran topmen, after all.

An hour after she dismissed them back to their idling - all of them laughing, and mocking the losers - a frigate hove into sight. Its timbers were bleached and crooked, and no crew moved about its decks. Thick black glyphs were visible even at a distance. The dead ship pgyed towards them steadily despite the skeletal masts being completely bare. Fitz found the whole thing deeply eerie. There was a ripple of uncertainty among the crew.

“Tidesage, ho!” came the roar from Powell. She came striding awkwardly down the quarterdeck stares, her hands clasped behind her back. The woman had to have lungs of leather. “Bosun, be ready to render full honours!”

With a great bustle of movement, the crew rushed about to complete their preparations; bosun’s mates, including Jackson, manned the sides with their whistles. Sideboys in white gloves stood at the waist preparing to salute the Tidesage aboard.

Harper, and another stranger clustered around near the main mast. Fitz went to join them; they all touched their hats to one another, and the stranger was introduced as Whitesmith, the most junior Lieutenant abroad.

“I’ve never met a Tidesage before,” Harper was saying nervously. “I’ve only sailed sloops.”

“They normally don’t speak to us. Don’t worry,” said Whitesmith. She was an older Lieutenant, which considering her lack of seniority didn’t bode well. “I served aboard Bastion three years as a Midshipman. Sister Wilder didn’t talk to me once.”

Fitz made a noncommittal noise and turned her attention to the waist, which still did not contain the Captain.

A great wave appeared, unnaturally still; it almost daintily touched the side of the skeleton ship. A blue-cloaked figure alighted onto it. As the wave and its cargo surged forward towards the Thunderhawk, the glyphs flared out; the frigate let out a great groan, and sank into the waters.

“Steady there!” yelled Powell.

Fitz walked to her division and inspected their lines with a critical eye; she brushed a few stray pieces of lint from her cabin girl’s hat, and chivved a few sailors into standing up a little more straight. Her calmness in the face of this ill omen seemed to steady them; Fitz let nothing on her face to tell them she was an unnerved as they were.

The wave rushed towards them, leaping up and lifting the Tidesage to the entry-port. It hovered as the robed, shrouded figure stepped lightly from it. Then it sank back down like it had never been.
Jackson started twittering her pipe; raggedly, the bosun’s mates around her joined in.

Fitz still couldn’t see the captain, and this was genuinely alarming. A mage as powerful as a Tidesage wasn’t a personnage to be impressed by petty games - which, fairly or not, appeared to be exactly what the Captain was playing.

The hooded figure started walking aft, ignoring the salutes and the pipes, making their way back towards the quarterdeck. Fitz, who had returned to the clump of Lieutenants standing beside the main-mast, touched the brim of her hat respectfully as he passed.

The shrouded figure stopped, and turned towards Fitz. Cold eyes blazed out from under the hood, and a clawed hand gripped a long staff. Fitz recognised him, and bowed in deep respect.

“My Lord,” she said. “It is an honour to be on your ship.”

“Fitzwilliams,” hissed Brother Gull. “Have a care. The ocean is fickle.”

Fitz deepened her bow as Brother Gull swept on. Only once he was entirely passed did she straighten and clasp her hands behind her back.

“What was that about?” whispered Harper.

“Be quiet,” snapped Fitz in a low voice.

“Who is that?” cried a voice. Captain Ashvane climbed up the hatchway like a stormcloud, much in the same way as he had went Fitz had first reported to him. “Who has come aboard my ship without permission?”

The Tidesage ignored this.

Fitz thought she had better go below and make herself ready to stand her watch; Lieutenant Powell did not seem to be the type who would excuse lateness, especially when the cause was her own rank curiosity. She dismissed her section, gave the middy a little feedback on how they would do better next time an important guest was greeted, and then ducked below deck herself. She would need to get her spyglass, grab a bite to eat, and change out of her best coat.

By the time she was back on deck again it was the second dogwatch, and the ship was moving. Fitz took her station on the windward side of the quarterdeck with an exhale of satisfaction. For all the trials this posting promised, the surging deck under her feet - and the potion used strategically to quell her stomach - brought her nothing but joy. The sailing master and the bosun knew their business; the Thunderhawk heeled gracefully under a full spread of canvas, surging to the windward of the line of lumbering merchantmen.

Fitz stood to her duty with fierce attention. The merchantmen were vulnerable prey to a marauding Zandalari ship, and the Thunderhawk was the only Kul Tiran warship in sight. She ordered a second hand aloft to keep a lookout, and meticulously scanned to windward herself at every bell. The Tidesage had placed himself near the wheel, to the terror of the helmswoman. But he said and did nothing.

At seven bells, Lieutenant Powell appeared and also scanned the horizon - she nodded to Fitz, and vanished back below again.

But no invitation had arrived from the Captain for a meeting in his cabin, no drill sheet had been drawn, and the fine bureaucracy that acted to sustain a ship at sea had not been done. The log hadn’t been signed by the Captain in several days, reports on stores and water had not been acknowledged,
and requests to rebalance divisions had been ignored. The wardroom officers - the lieutenants and the master and the surgeon and the purser - all seemed fearful and disheveled. The only thing the Captain seemed to sign with any regularity was the officer’s watchbill, which he modified with a ruthless pen. Fitz had never before been on a ship where all the papers were not in order, and she couldn’t help but feel slightly adrift.

The days flowed into weeks. The weeks flowed into the months. Powell looked more sour every time Fitz passed her on deck, although they barely spoke. The convoy surged on; the voyage to the Night Elves was the longest trade route that Kul Tiran’s navy pried. Fitz’s division started to take shape as she drilled them; Jackson and Clyburn showed them the way. She began keeping a sandglass in her pocket, ready to time them in their tasks. The Tidesage continued to be inscrutable.

But somehow rest always seemed to elude Fitz. She always seemed to be placed on the worst watches, unevenly staggered, and guaranteed to force broken sleep. The first three months at sea was difficult. Jackson had slipped her a little carved bone. Fitz didn’t entirely know what to make of that - the bosun’s mate was from Drustvar, and they were a bit odd over there. She pocketed it and didn’t think of it again. But she slept better.

Spirits lifted when the convoy sighted the Broken Isles; it was a chance for fresh water and a delayed postbag. It was also a flurry of activity; the poor paperwork made refreshing the stores of the ship a thousand times harder, as payment chits and waybills were not ready. Lighters floated around the Thunderhawk, refusing to unload their precious cargo before payment. The Tidesage then asked to be rowed around the ship, which also took time. When she was relieved by Whitesmith from the quarterdeck only half the work had been completed, and she repaired below with uncharacteristic relief - she had stood two watches in succession and had nothing left to spare.

Fitz had just made ready to brush her teeth when a midshipman came to find her.

“Captain’s compliments, ma’am, and he would like you at the Great Cabin,” she said.

“Very good,” said Fitz.

It was late in the evening, and the summons could only be designed to catch her at her very worst and most exhausted. But she readonned her coat, took a small sip of potion, and walked aft to her fate.


“Come!”

Fitz pushed inside and walked to stand in front of the Captain’s desk. The room was outfitted gorgeously; the Quel’Thalan desk had a matching chair, art adorned the walls, and red velvet was draped strategically about the cabin to create little sections of privacy. Powell also stood in front of the desk; there was no seat for visitors.

“Fitzwilliams,” said the Captain snidely. “So good of you to finally join us.”

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back and said nothing.

“The mail came today,” said the Captain. “And guess what I found inside?” He threw down two letters, both of them in Sagewood’s handwriting. The envelopes they had presumably arrived in were torn open on the desk.

Fitz stiffened. Powell stared off at a point beyond the cabin walls, her craggy face completely emotionless.
“You’re a bilgerat, Fitzwilliams,” the Captain said with deep scorn. “A mangy ferret the Lord 
Admiral has sent to trap me.”

There was a pregnant pause.

“My mail, Sir,” said Fitz evenly. “Have you opened it?”

“I am entitled to do whatever I want on board my own ship!” snarled the Captain immediately. “You 
are in league with the Lord Admiral, out to destroy me!”

“No, Sir.” said Fitz.

“No sir,” mocked the Captain. “I have open in my hands a letter from that fucking mutt of a Flag 
Lieutenant, asking you directly about life aboard my ship!”

Fitz said nothing. Every option seemed a trap.

Ashvane swept the letters from the desk, and they dropped to the floor in front of Fitz. “Get out of 
my cabin,” yelled the Captain. “I will be reading your reply to these, oh yes, and you will be writing 
back what I tell you! You have no honour, filth. Get out!”

Fitz calmly gathered up the fallen letters, touched the brim of her hat, and walked out.

Once back in the relative safety of the wardroom, Fitz smoothed out the two letters from Sagewood 
carefully. They were everything she had hoped they would be; warm and light, full of tales all 
carefully curated to flatter the people involved. They both did indeed contain a cheerful, formulaic 
query about how Fitz was finding the Thunderhawk.

Your friend, they ended, Jessanydra Sagewood

Fitz clutched them briefly to her chest and rocked slightly. Her entire body seized with the force of 
her desire to be back on the flagship; she would fill out a thousand templates for Captain Conrad, 
lose a million times at cards to Windrunner, endure a million days on land.

But she was here, where the Lord Admiral had asked her to sail. Fitz had to be content with that.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fitz did write back to Lieutenant Sagewood - light, amusing things, of no particular moment. The Captain censored all her mail anyway.

_The Captain is kind, and the crew are happy_, he dictated to her, and which she dutifully wrote at the end of every letter.

_All is well here._

_Your friend, Fitzwilliamia Fitzwilliams._

It was with sadness that she sent these false assurances, and she sent many; one letter left her pen for each stop the convoy made around the North of the Broken Isles. But she didn’t regret sending them either. Jess would only be concerned if she knew how the _Thunderhawk_ was officered, and the voyage to Kalimdor and back again was expected to take almost five years. Fitz couldn’t bear the idea of Jess being worried all that time.

Fitz wasn’t exactly unhappy with her lot, really; she was too much of a sailor for that. Hollow-cheeked and tired, every day Fitz would nonetheless drill her division with bright efficiency. Her people challenged others, and the whole ship began to compete in sails-setting and gunnery. Every day Clyburn would report to her those of her division who needed correction or advice. And every week, regular as clockwork, she’d run a rigging race with a new carving from Jackson to use as a prize.

The carvings were becoming quite sought after on the _Thunderhawk_ - the crew were convinced they were lucky.

As the voyage lengthened past six months, Powell had started to delegate. Just small tasks, and nothing that impacted the functioning of the ship. That was right and proper, of course; Fitz was the Second Lieutenant, and her job to shadow the First. But Fitz worried about why Powell might be delegating now; what reason she might have, when the Second was so far out of favour with the Captain. The older Lieutenant was an unbending rock - the crew respected her implicitly - but she was also sixty-eight, and the stress of the voyage was unceasing.

This stress was added to by the uncertainty of the bureaucracy. The Captain still refused to sign his name to any paper which might condemn him later; this ranged from reports and chits, to bills of lading. Administration of the _Thunderhawk_ weltered in a state constant confusion. Finally, Fitz had Mr Runklin, the Bosun, constantly inventorizing the food and water in order to keep an unofficial tally. Powell had quietly thanked her, and Fitz had been emboldened enough to have the purser start a second set of books. But this was discovered somehow by Ashvane, and was quickly stopped.
was on watch when Powell was summoned to the great cabin. She could clearly hear the Captain through the decking as he raved and raged in the cabin below.

What the Tidesage thought of all this chaos was a mystery. He sometimes walked the deck, shrouded and alone; he never seemed to eat or sleep. The only times he spoke seemed to be the once a week that he would go to the bow and hold a public service to the Tides. The crew - despite their fear of him - packed the deck to attend, even as the weather grew colder. The sailors superstitiously considered the Tidesage the luckiest thing on an unlucky ship.

“They’re being ridiculous,” huffed Harper one evening over cards. The wardroom was full, except for Whitesmith, who held the watch. “They’ll believe any film-flam that crosses their path.”


“I’m just saying,” he whined. “The crew will believe anything.”

Powell played a card, and after a brief hesitation Fitz finessed it.

“They won’t believe everything,” said Powell, carefully, eying this move carefully.

The surgeon played a card, and Fitz took the trick.

“So you believe as well?” jeered Harper. “Albatrosses that lead you from kraken? Cursed mariners sailing the ocean forever? Drust that can turn into deer? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Shut your fool mouth,” said the purser. His hands trembled slightly. “The Drust… you haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.”

There was silence as the wardroom members played another hand.

“The problem isn’t that the sailors believe it,” said Powell, finally. She put down her last card, and looked directly at Fitz. “Sailors see things. It doesn’t matter if they believe in them. The problem comes when they decide that it’s lucky or not.”

Fitz was uncomfortably suspicious that Powell was talking about something specific. She wracked her brains for what it could be. A glimmer of a thought formed.

“The bosun’s mate of my division,” she said slowly. “Jackson. She carves little… tokens.”

“Yes,” said Powell.

“The people in my division. They think it protects them from…” Fitz trailed off.

“…from?” the surgeon asked. He watched Powell shuffling the cards, ready for the next round.

“From being noticed by the Captain,” said Fitz.

She felt anxious at saying this aloud; anything that could even hint at disloyalty brought an extreme reaction from Ashvane - even perfectly normal comments about the strength or weakness of the wind.

Powell nodded. “And does it?”

Harper sneered gently, but Fitz paused.

“Well, no. No, I don’t think... I mean. Surely not. They are just carvings?” Fitz trailed off in
confusion.

Powell looked at her steadily, shrugged, and dealt the cards.

“It does no harm,” she said. “It might do good. Let them have their drop of magic.”

When they pulled into the next port, Fitz found herself wishing for a little luck herself. She found herself denied shore-leave - so far, so normal. But this time she was also confined to the wardroom, not even allowed to help resupply the ship. The Captain seemed to know the close quarters would grate. This isolation only ended when the Captain, with a cruel smile, summoned her to collect her latest letter from Sagewood.

“What a shame,” he crooned. “Your little friend won’t be checking in on you anymore.” He dropped an opened sheet of paper on his desk and waved for her to collect it. He also threw her an envelope from her mother, unopened.

Fitz was terrified. Surely Sagewood was safe. Surely. She locked her left hand behind her back to stop it from trembling, and held her face expressionless. It was only with the most serious effort that she found herself touching the brim of her hat to the Captain, and every nerve screamed as she casually strode back towards the wardroom. Then she rushed inside to put the letter near enough to a candle to make out the letters.

My dearest Fitz, began the letter. I have been promoted.

Fitz felt like a crushing weight had been lifted from her chest. Then her chest kept inflating with pleasure, barely able to contain her joy. Sagewood! Promoted!

I hope you will be glad for me, the letter continued, and forgive me also. I am being reassigned from the Lord Admiral’s staff. My task will now send me out to negotiate the acquisition of suitable naval timber, and this will be a long journey. There will be no opportunity for letters.

My dearest Fitz, I hope you will not think me too forward when I ask you to remember me. I think of you fondly.

May the Tides preserve you, and grant you fair seas.

Your friend
Jess Sagewood

Fitz read this and blinked. Then she felt a little dizzy, so she sat on her sea chest. Then she read the letter again.

It was only after the sounding of the next bell that Fitz could bring herself to put the letter away. She placed it atop Sagewood’s other letters, carefully re-wrapping the bundle with the oiled paper she used to keep out the damp. Then she tucked it into the lid of her sea chest.

Fitz took a deep breath, and turned to the letter from her mother.

My Noble Sailor Daughter, the letter began, I have news so exciting that I can scarcely inform my Glittering Jewel, such is my Trembling Emotion.

All the air seemed to be sucked out of the wardroom, all at once.

In light of your Successful Adventures, wrote her mother, your Hand in Marriage has become as sought after as in my Deepest Hopes. I have arranged for you to be Bestowed Like a Laurel upon a
charming Former Hero Sailor, a woman who now owns a Respectable Public House. When you next land in Boralus, I will introduce you to your Blushing Bride.

From your brother’s letters, I understand you prefer the Maturity of Lovely Elves, and while they are clearly out of your reach, I hope that the Established Nature of your Betrothed appeals to you.

Congratulations!

Mother

Fitz staggered up and out of the wardroom, falling up against the ladder. She climbed. It was a new moon, and the deck, thankfully, was dark. The rail was close, and the ocean beyond it. Fitz swayed a little, feeling sick, staring at nothing. Her hands fisted. Sagewood’s letter was now a dagger in her heart.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to tell her mother that she didn’t want to marry an older woman and live in a pub. Everything Fitz wanted was crumbling to ashes, leaving nothing but duty. Duty to Kul Tiras, trapping her aboard the Thunderhawk. Duty to her family, which would push her into a loveless, landlocked marriage. She was entangled in duty like a fish in a net, gills flapping, hemmed in on every side.

But then - and here Fitz gripped the rail, knuckles white. Hadn’t her brother shown her the way? The journey to the Night Elves was expected to take five years. And after that, was there any reason to return to Boralus? The life of a sailor was a roving one, and her career could last as long as she found a new ship to employ her. Fitz thought through this quickly, and it calmed her. There was no reason to panic, and plenty of time to fix everything. The ocean, as it always had, would be her escape.

Fitz turned to see the Tidesage was behind her, watching - she started slightly. Normally Brother Gull was unmissable, but in her state she hadn’t seen him. His eyes blazed from underneath that deep hood, studying her with an intensity that almost burned. His clawed fingers wrapped around his tall staff.

Fitz hesitated, touched the brim of her hat to him, and then went back down below.

Four days after this, Powell died peacefully in her sleep.

The night before had been a double-watch night, and Fitz was exhausted. When the cablingirl had woken her to inform her she was needed in the great cabin, she was so tired she could barely put her shoes on the correct foot. But the news of Powell, delivered by the furious Captain Ashvane, was like icy sea water splashed directly onto her face.

The Captain, for his part, seemed mostly outraged that Powell would inconvenience him. He ordered her body jettisoned from the main deck, and then threw Fitz out of the great cabin. Fitz had touched the brim of her hat as she had left, but interpreted his orders in the best possible light that she could. A proper burial was not so hard to arrange for the main deck; it held enough space for all the crew off duty. The Tidesage led the service. The Captain didn’t bother to attend.

“The Tides are cruel and kind,” Brother Gull said. “They ebb and flow, as is their way - and in the end there is only the ocean.”

He lifted his staff, and rang a bell with a single peeling note.

Fitz made a sharp gesture to the Midshipman. Three volleys retorted from seven muskets. Powell’s body, wrapped in sailcloth and weighted with shot, was tipped up and sent feet-first into the water. The bosun’s mates waited a respectful second before ordering their hands back to duty.
Mr Runklin, the bosun, appeared at Fitz’s elbow immediately. Mrs Forsythe, the Gunner, trotted up seconds later, followed by the purser.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” Runklin said anxiously. “The divisions need balancing.”

“Beg your leave to report powder readiness, ma’am,” interrupted Forsythe.

“Miss Fitzwilliams,” said the purser imperiously. “I need your attention on the consumables - some of the line items are being expended faster than anticipated.”

Fitz looked at them all, rapidly calculating her workload. The Captain was still below; from her experience, she knew he rarely came up on deck.

“Wait here,” she ordered the crowd curtly.

Then she strode off down below.


“Come!” came the reedy voice. Fitz pushed inside.

The Captain was hunched over his desk, the remains of a rich meal pushed to one side.

“I expect you’re happy, Fitzwilliams,” he said. “The most worthless officer aboard my ship, this might well be the only way you would advance.”

“The wind is freshening from the sou–sou-east, Sir,” said Fitz. “I wish to take in another reef. Will you come on deck, sir? We can also discuss the...”

“Don’t get clever with me,” the Captain snapped. “Just do your duty. And bring me the watchbill. Double shifts! That is the way to ensure officers are too busy to cause mischief!”

“Aye aye, Sir,” Fitz said.

“Now, get out,” said the Captain. Fitz touched the brim of her hat, and left.

Fitz closed the door behind her, and gave a nod to the Marine sentry standing guard at the door. Her active mind worked furiously.

The Captain was the ultimate authority on any ship. The vast powers of the Lord Admiral and the very fabric of Kul Tiran society had combined to give Ashvane command of the Thunderhawk. His orders were to be obeyed immediately, prompted, and efficiently. This was desirable in the Navy, where the cold sacrifice of one hand might save the ship.

Captains held their vast power because it was necessary; because at any minute a Zandalari troll could heave into sight, and even a split-second of hesitation could spell defeat and disaster.

On the other hand, Fitz was now the First Lieutenant. It was her job to solve those problems that could be solved, in accordance with the Captain’s orders. The Captain had given her no instructions - just ordered her to do her utmost duty.

By the time Fitz appeared back on deck the crowd of people seeking an authority figure had swelled to well over seven people. The vacum of power created by the death of Powell was a wound which would threaten the body if not swiftly closed. Fitz considered her options.

Then she ignored them all, instead calling over the most promising of the Midshipman. The middy
trotted over obediently, the green armband of mourning still wrapped around her arm.

“Good news,” Fitz said loudly, forcing cheer into her voice. “You are being promoted to… Special Midshipman, effective immediately. From henceforth, you will stand watch with the Lieutenants - the sailing master will be on hand to supervise you. Your extra math classes begin tomorrow.”

The Midshipman looked startled, but gamely touched the brim of her hat. “Very good, ma’am.”

“Mr Runklin,” said Fitz, turning to the bosun. “The hands are also to be given extra instruction. We will have them exercise their minds by restowing the stores. They will mark quantities as they go; warn them that there will be a test later.”

“Very good, ma’am,” said Runklin, looking puzzled.

“That powder is getting old, isn’t it, Forsythe?” said Fitz. “I expect it will do for gunnery practice though. We will exercise the whole ship, say two days from now, and then tally up what is left only. Take up more from the merchantmen - I am sure they have spare.”

Forsythe looked at her, and knuckled his forehead. “Aye aye, ma’am. I will have the boys break down the casks in preparation for firing. I’ll also warn the merchants that we’re going to requisition.”

“Very good,” said Fitz. She turned to the purser last. “Mr Baty,” she said, coolly. “The Captain is a busy man. There is not need to bother him with such minor details. Bring the books to me and we can go over them together; I will make a running tally in my journals.”

“Sounds good,” said the Purser. “I’ll meet you at three bells.”

It struck Fitz later, as she retrieved the officer’s watchlist from Powell’s sea chest, that the former First had been a good lieutenant. For the Lord Admiral to have posted her specifically to this most unhappy ship, Powell must have demonstrated qualities of organisation and leadership. But Fitz also thought, with a brief flash of discomfort, that there might have been a reason Powell had remained a lieutenant until the very end of her days.

She delivered a balanced roster to the marine guarding the outside of the great cabin - she was denied entry herself. The Captain returned the watchbills by runner that night, heavily modified. Fitz ordered the officers aboard the Thunderhawk to follow it to the letter.

The next few days aboard the Thunderhawk were akin to a hurricane for those on board. Fitz felt like she would never sleep again. Powell had been a rock for the crew, but the Thunderhawk needed a storm. Fitz knew that it was her duty to provide it.

The first morning after the funeral, she woke early and rousted the sailing master. Bleary-eyed, he had followed her to the quarterdeck, where she had evicted a startled Whitesmith to the lee of the quarterdeck. Clyburn had been called forward to carry the heavy compass; he had stood silently as the two officers had schemed and plotted and poured over instruments. They had an argument. Fitz send Clyburn scrambling below, and when he returned he was armed with several nautical charts. The master and Fitz stabbed this with their fingers several times, still arguing. But they agreed in the end, after two more rounds of calculations. Fitz was incredulous. So worried was she, Fitz had begged a boon from the Tidesage, who deigned to confirm their labours.

It was with a snap in Fitz’s voice that the signal middy went hurrying for his heretofore unneeded code books; pennants soared up the halliards, ordering the convoy to tack sharply northward. Their previous course had aimed them squarely at the Great Maelstrom.

Fitz, tired and alarmed, roared through every square inch of the ship; Jackson and Clyburn were her
faithful hounds. Even in her own division she spared nothing. Stores were dragged from the hold and ripped open - to Fitz’s private consternation, several massive hogsheads of salt pork were green with rot. Whitesmith hadn’t known to rotate the older barrels to the front, and they had sat too long in their own brine. Fitz had stared at her coldly, and had the surgeon officially condemn them. The meat was then shoved overside into the ocean.

The next day, Fitz ordered the other officers to find sandglasses. Then she timed them. She also timed them timing others. As she drilled the ship mercilessly, the lieutenants and midshipman ran to and fro, scrambling and upset. She paced impatiently and fumed at every mistake; finally she ordered the sailing master to leave the windward station and tack up and down the column.

At first, Fitz had intended to cut through the convoy at full speed, as she had once seen Captain Forster do to the Great Fleet - but she quickly abandoned that plan. The crew was going to need a lot of work; topmen tripped over cables and the spars shivered when the ship came about. Fitz called the officers together that night, and coldly, calmly, listed their failings. She drew up methods for how each would improve themselves.

Late that night, burning tallow in her shirtsleeves and underwear, she slaved over the tallies and totals which represented the ship’s lifeblood. The letter from Jess lay open beside her.

The next morning brought almost complete disaster. The food was one thing - that could be seized from the fat merchantmen, at a pinch - but the water was quite another. No ship had water to spare - especially not ships attempting a year-long crossing. Thunderhawk’s leaguers had been far lighter than expected when they were pulled free - inspection suggested they hadn’t been refilled when they had left the final port. Jackson was ordered to round up some trustworthy hands to stand guard over what was left.

Fitz had demanded all officers repair to the quarter-deck immediately. Silent and furious, full of self-loathing, she listened carefully as the surgeon had raged and ranted about the effects of water deprivation on the human body. The only sensible course was to turn back, and complete the total failure of Thunderhawk’s officers. The alternative was the destruction of the Thunderhawk itself.

But saving its crew was not her Captain’s highest priority. Fitz was convinced he must know of this catastrophe, but if he ever quit his cabin, then it was only under the cover of deepest darkness. Fitz knew there was no way he would admit to this level of incompetence aboard his vessel - he would see them all burn in the hell of thirst first. Another solution would have to be found, and quickly, before they got so far from freshwater that every soul perished.

Fitz dropped the water ration to one-half - a real hardship on a diet of salt pork. This also meant she needed to reduce the frequency of the drill schedule. She dropped the officer’s ration to one-quarter - only enough to live. Canvas traps were rigged to capture rainwater; various devices were contrived to evaporate seawater.

Captain Ashvane was exempt from her orders, and seemed oblivious to the dangers of his consumption - Fitz was forced to leave a water barrel untouched for his personal use. Written reports continued to be sent back unopened, and while Fitz several times attempted to see him in his cabin, she was always turned away.

It was Harper who finally saved the ship; she came up the ladder on the sixth day to find him on bended knees before the Tidesage. Harper was not a prize officer - Fitz had found him to be about average, and his company in the wardroom was something she endured rather than enjoyed - but he was not a bad person. But he had been the officer of the watch when the Thunderhawk had last made landfall, and thus directly responsible for the empty leaguers. His guilt had been eating him alive.
The Tidesage was inscrutable in his blue robes and deep hood.

“I do not do this for you,” he had finally said. “But for the ship.”

His voice held echoes, like the sound itself had been dragged up from some dark place. With Harper still kneeling, he raised his staff and slammed it onto the deck.

Fitz felt a pulse of energy lash through her - around her the ocean flexed and rippled; the ripple ran away from the ship in all directions. The whole ship lurched down, then popped back up again. It was as if the Thunderhawk was an enormous stone dropped straight into the water.

The crew shrieked with fear, and Fitz grabbed ahold of a rail, calling for order; topmen clung like limpets to their spars. The Tidesage was indifferent, surefooted and unmoved by the energy he had unleashed.

The ripple rushed out, but like a man exhaling, it turned to rush back in again. Fitz had just enough presence of mind to command the hands to hold on fast before the wave of water broke over the main deck.

It punched into her like a fist. She hung onto the rail for dear life, even as the water grabbed her and pulled.

When it cleared, Fitz allowed herself a single moment of shock and confusion. Then she was up and striding across the main deck, calling loudly for the bosun. He had been below and was quite battered from being thrown about; without explaining Fitz demanded he do a roll call immediately.

Then she turned and started calling for canvas and barrels and buckets; hands shot away from her in every direction, grabbing anything that could have water scooped into it. Jackson appeared at her heels, and the sharp trills of the mate’s pipe were a welcome supplement to the chaotic melee which had engulfed the ship; Fitz felt like she had yelled herself hoarse ensuring not a spare moment of time was wasted. Every drop of the water that had washed on the deck had been fresh. Brackish. Empty. But fresh.

When the roll call was complete, the only soul aboard missing was Lieutenant Harper. And though she must have imagined it, Fitz could have sworn she saw his hat bobbing amidst the waves, then sinking out of sight.

Later on, the cabin girl had been sent scurrying to the Tidesage with an imperious summons. Fitz had intercepted this, only succeeding in preventing disaster by gravely promising the child to deliver the message. Then she had found Clyburn, and quietly ordered him to see the girl below, fed and in her hammock; the little cabin girl was red from crying.

Fitz had taken a deep breath, and gone looking for the Tidesage. Brother Gull was easy to find; standing half in darkness by the wheel. His burning eyes watched Fitz as she carefully picked her way towards him.

She touched the brim of her hat. “My Lord.”

“Fitzwilliams,” said the Tidesage. “You have come to give me a message.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Fitzwilliams cautiously.

“You may go,” he said, unmoving.

Fitz touched her hat to him, and left. The Captain didn’t try again.
With the water overflowing every tank, the *Thunderhawk* once again was a ship of war - and down another Lieutenant. Fitz appointed a second and third midshipman to her fantasy Special rank. Then she sent flags soaring up the halliards again, calling for volunteers. Every merchantman had hardy souls who had failed the Navy entry exam, but who still dreamed. Within four hours Fitz had five new Midshipman - she left them delightedly apportioning the space in the middy’s berth, joking and laughing. She hoped she hadn’t condemned their dreams to ashes.

That night she restlessly visited the water leaguers again. She found Jackson there alone, carving something. In the sinking darkness of the ‘tweendecks, lit only by a candle, the bosun’s mate had looked unearthly.

“What are you doing, Jackson?” Fitz had asked.

“Just hangin’ some of these, begging your pardon ma’am,” Jackson had replied. “It’ll keep the water fresh.”

The mate had held a piece of scrimshaw up to the candle; in the light, Fitz could see the whorls of careful designs traced across the bone. If she hadn’t known any better, she could have sworn that it flashed blue, just a little. Fitz hesitated.

“Carry on, Jackson,” she had said, and withdrew.

At the end of that first frantic, insane week - half-delirious with exhaustion and the strain of keeping every detail to hand - Fitz threw herself into drill. The crew set sail, and took it back in again; they ran the guns out to fire at bobbing targets, straining and sweating to roll the heavy cannon back into place. Then Fitz made them do it again and again. Her sandtimer was always present. Competitions against a fixed mark seemed especially effective, she discovered - doubly so when coupled to a desirable prize.

Whitesmith she set to the task of training the new midshipmen - with strong leadership, she was turning into a halfway decent officer. Her mistake with the rotten barrels had given her the necessary fright, and her eye for detail had significantly improved.

Ten days after Powell had gone to the Tides, the port watch managed to fire four broadsides in a minute - the standard for a Kul Tiran ship was three. Fitz called for an extra rum ration for them. The hands, exhausted, cheered their achievement; the two new middies beamed with pleasure at their victory.

“Why are you cheering, you lubbers?” came a strident voice. The noise cut off.

“Well?” said the Captain. He stood still at the top of the hatchway, glaring. “Speak up there!”

The crew looked at each other uncertainly. A sullen, low muttering rose. Fitz stood still, hands clasped behind her back.

“Did I tell you you could talk?” said the Captain, stalking slowly down the gundeck. The murmuring died away. “I see how it is! Disloyal scum, the lot of you! Planning a mutiny!”

“Sir,” said Fitz. “Perhaps I can brief you on the quarterdeck?”

“You!” sid the Captain. He whitlled and advanced on her. His face was red, and his whole body shook with the force of his rage. “You! This is my ship, my crew! How dare you try and take it from me!”

“I am your servant, Sir,” said Fitz. “I have endeavoured only to carry out your orders.”
“Changing course! Promoting officers!” raged the Captain. He lifted a balled his and looked as if he would strike her. “I will see you flogged!”

The mutterings from the crew grew louder. There was a ripple of movement - like a swaying of the stalks in a field. Flogging officers was against the ordinances of war; a Lieutenant held the Lord Admiral’s commission, and a flogging would dishonour it.

But then, the Lord Admiral was very far away.

“Settle down, Thunderhawk,” said Fitz. She was resigned; order must be maintained. “Miss Whitesmith, you hold the watch. Run and fetch Mr Runklin now; tell him to bring his cat.”

She began to unbutton her jacket - she couldn’t really afford to have this one torn, so it was better off.

“Stop,” said a cold voice. The hands began to mutter again.

Brother Gull had stepped down onto the deck from his perch on the quarterdeck. One clawed finger now pointed at the Captain. “I forbid it.”

Fitz froze with her jacket half-off.

“What?!” the Captain yelled. He looked quite unhinged. “You can forbid me nothing, foolish magician! I am the Captain of this ship!”

“Nonetheless,” said Brother Gull, sounding indifferent.

Internally, Fitz cursed the Tidesage’s intervention - there could be only one authority aboard a warship. Even now the crew were shuffling their feet and looking between them all; the spectacle would not be conductive to discipline. Fitz had just spent ten of the longest days of her life reminding these people that they were Kul Tiran - it seemed a bitter irony to her that arguably the most Kul Tiran soul of all aboard was about to undo her work.

The Captain seemed torn between glaring holes through Brother Gull, and continuing to scream at the crew. He spluttered, then turned on Fitz.

“Get the cat, Fitzwilliams,” he hissed dangerously. “I will not use it on you. No, your precious hide is safe. So you yourself will use it on her.” He pointed at Jackson.

“What?” blurted Fitz, before she mastered herself. “Sir? Begging your par…”

“Hanging filthy Drust trinkets about the ship,” said the Captain with relish. “Corrupting the crew. I know, I know everything that goes on aboard this ship, Fitzwilliams. Everything. Twenty lashes for witchery.”

“But Sir, I…”

“Enough!” the Captain roared. “Enough, Fitzwilliams!”

Fitz shot a desperate glance at the Tidesage, hoping for his intervention - his posture clearly stated his lack of interest. She turned to look at Jackson.

The bosun’s mate looked resigned; she knuckled her forehead at Fitz. “Won’t be the first time, ma’am,” she said quietly, so quietly that Fitz thought she might not even have heard it. She shuffled off towards the grating. The murmuring of the crew was growing louder.
Fitz carefully removed her jacket, and handed it to Whitesmith. She waited, hands clasped behind her back, for the cat-o’-nine-tails to arrive. She was sick to her stomach; the crew were frowning and elbowing each other. This could turn ugly.

“All hands to witness punishment!” said the Captain, loudly. The shrill whistles of the bosun’s pipes echoed throughout the ship - hands tumbled up from the ‘tweendecks, and came swinging down the backstays from aloft. They joined the guncrews on the main deck, looking curious.

Jackson silently stood by the grate where she would be whipped. Her gnarled hands were open; her powerful frame made no aggressive moves.

Fitz fought a significant battle with herself. On the one hand Jackson was undoubtedly guilty - Drust witchery was forbidden on Kul Tiran ships. On the other hand, hadn’t Fitz seen those tokens and waved them on? Hadn’t she actually handed out scrim out as prizes to the best and brightest aboard the ship?

Fitz despaired. She knew the move she must make in this game, which was the same one as when she had been ready to take the lashes on her own back. The Captain must be the only authority aboard a ship; the crew must know that when danger came, only one man’s voice would animate them all, and no confusion would be possible. This desperate unfairness must continue.

Mr Runklin handed Fitz the cat, which she shook out. Two other mates helped Jackson out of her shirt, and lashed her slowly and carefully to the grate.

“If you go easy on her, Fitzwilliams, we will land another dozen,” said the Captain.

Fitz swallowed down her urge to vomit. She swung the cat, its tails brushing the deck.

“SAIL HO!” roared a voice from up the mast. “SAIL DEAD TO WINDWARD!”

Fitz took an involuntary step back from the grate, looking at the horizon. Whatever sail was there, however, would need her eyeglass.

The Captain snarled. “Quiet there, you!”

“Zandalari raider in sight!” yelled the quarterdeck. “Bearing down on us from the nor-east, sir!”

The Captain looked almost confused. The cat dropped from Fitz’s hand almost without her noticing; she looked at him expectantly, waiting for orders. Behind her the mates were frantically undoing the lashings binding Jackson down.

“Order the… order the convoy to scatter!” said Ashvane. He seemed agitated. Was that a note of panic laced his voice? “Signal midshipman - make a general signal. Scatter! Helm, tack and get us out of here!”

Fitz was aghast. With the Merchantmen together, any raider would have to go through the Thunderhawk to score a prize. If the column scattered, however then the raider was free to hunt them down one by one, and the Thunderhawk might never catch her. But the Thunderhawk couldn’t be brought to battle either.

Fitz understood in a sudden flash of clarity. Then she couldn’t keep the betrayal from her face; she and Jackson, Powell and Harper - all the officers aboard the ship had suffered to keep this man in charge - it was their duty. Ashvane had drunk his privilege and authority to the last drop. All for this moment. And now it was here, the Captain was going to abandon his own duty to save his skin.
“Sir,” said Fitz coldly. “We must stand and fight.”

The Captain didn’t seem to hear her. He turned to walk to the quarterdeck.

“Your orders to fight, Sir?” said Fitz, walking after him. “What are your orders?”

Ashvane didn’t make eye contact. He mounted the stairs and moved to the windward side of the quarterdeck, staring over the side at the Thunderhawk's wake.

Fitz paused. Her fists balled, and for a wild moment she was tempted to swing. But instead she turned and cried loudly out to the bosun. “Captain’s compliments to you, Mr Runklin! Beat to quarters!”

The long roll of the drum set the ship into a wild fury. Both watches had been on deck for the punishment to begin, and (urged on by the petty officers) the entire crew flung themselves into the business of getting the ship ready for action.

The decks were soused with water and strewn with sand; the bulkheads were knocked away; the fire parties took their places at the pumps; the boys and girls ran breathless with cartridges for the guns; down below the surgeon was dragging together the midshipmen's chests in the cockpit to make an operating table.

"Guns loaded and run out, if you please, Miss Whitesmith,” said Fitz.

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Whitesmith crisply.

“What are you doing?” said the Captain.

“Be quiet,” said Fitz. “Signal midshipman! Captain Ashvane has new orders - make a general signal to the convoy, if you please. “Reform”!”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said the middy - one of the new ones. He gave her a hesitant look, then called a few orders to his assistant. They began frantically flipping through the signal book.

The instant the black bundles of cloth broke at the halliard, the merchantmen swung their yards around. The lumbering hulls squared up, and settled back into their line - the merchant Captains must have been anxious about the orders from the Thunderhawk as well for the manoeuvres to be completed so quickly.

The Captain stirred again. “What are you…”

“I said be quiet!” snapped Fitz. Ashvane shrank back.

A distant boom and a puff of smoke came on the air; the Zandalari had fallen on a straggler, and the merchantman was firing its small battery in an attempt to escape. The trollish ship hadn’t bothered to return this paltry fire.

“Steady now!” Fitz yelled.

She had a decision to make. What to do? She should, all things being equal, attempt to pass either before or behind the trollish ship, and fire the weight of the Thunderhawk's broadside straight into the raider’s gullet. But doing that would smash the Kul Tiran merchantman to pieces, and probably kill its entire human crew. Thunderhawk was also to leeward; the Zandalari could disengage at any time.

No, thought Fitz. Folly must be made into favour - the disorganisation of the convoy was an
opportunity to be seized, and the unfortunate merchantman would make the perfect bait.

The *Thunderhawk* looked like an overawed ship with a Captain that was fleeing from battle - Fitz’s mind shied away from the idea that was the actual truth of the matter - and the Zandalari must be praising all their heathen totems at their luck. They would take the opportunity to board, seizing whatever Kul Tiran riches had been sent to pay for war supplies from the Night Elves.

If she timed her approach correctly, the *Thunderhawk* could lay alongside the Zandalari, and board her in a rush - but this was risky. The Trollish warship was on the opposite side of the merchantman to where the *Thunderhawk* was, and Fitz would have to tack several times to get to windwards so she could beat back down again. In that time the trolls could wreak fearful havoc, steal everything, and even quite possibly escape.

Or Fitz could sail up behind the merchantman. She could swing around and alongside its unoccupied side, safe from the infused Zandalari cannons. Then she could lead a counter boarding-party, trusting in the swords and heart and skill of her people.

"Muster the port side guns’ crews," she said to Miss Whitesmith. "Every man, gun captains and all. Arm them for boarding. Arm every idler in the ship. But leave the hands at the mizzen braces."

"Aye aye, ma’am," said Whitesmith.

Fitz turned to the Captain, who was pale and trembling. “A fine plan, Captain,” she said loudly. “I will issue the cutlasses immediately.”

She turned. “Mr Runklin! Please make ready for battle, if you please!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” said Runklin.

The Captain was standing, bewildered on deck. Fitz paid him no mind. He didn’t attempt to interfere, and she didn’t care about him anymore. Fitz peered through her glass, waiting for the exact moment when the trolls had fully committed to their boarding action.

“Bring her about, sharply now!” she called.

The sailing master roared commands, and the sails snapped open. The extra sail on the mizzen heeled the ship over, but *Thunderhawk* was of the latest design, and her speed was impressive.

Fitz looked over at Brother Gull, who was standing in his customary place near the helmsman. He wasn’t saying anything, or doing anything extraordinary - but his motionlessness seemed to be the product of extra concentration, rather than indifference. Fitz surmised from this that the enemy had a shaman who was keeping him busy.

The helpless merchantman was a scene of chaos. Her sails were flapping in the wind as the civilian crew fought whatever horrors had boarded them; the Trollish ship lay tightly alongside her, dwarfed by the Kul Tiran’s size.

"Starboard two points," Fitz said to the helmsman.

"Starboard two point, aye aye" came the reply.

Clyburn came hurrying up; he clipped a cutlass to Fitz’s belt, then took up station beside her. She nodded at him in thanks before turning back to the battle.

“Starboard now! Slowly does it, swing her round!”
Only discipline kept the helmswoman at her post. The Zandalari had stern-chasers, and the two guns opened with heavy thuds. The range was so close that Fitz could see the trolls rushing around the deck, reloading and running them out again. The balls struck into the gun-deck roughly midships; there were screams and frightful crashes. Fitz ignored this, pacing the quarterdeck. She calculated distance, drift, and speed.

"Now!" she yelled. “Hard a-port! Braces there! Back the mizzen tops'l!"

There was only tiny space left between the side of the Thunderhawk and the Kul Tiran merchantman. If Thunderhawk closed that gap and hit the side, she might simply bounce off again, and any boarders who moved too soon might be crushed as the ships came back together again. Or the Thunderhawk might go too fast, then skid right past the merchant ship.

"Starboard side!" yelled Fitz. “Ropes!"

Throwers hurled lines up onto the Kul Tiran’s deck, and others scrambled up the sides to fix them tight. From up on deck was the screams and sounds of desperate fighting men; the civilians were not going down easily. Fitz slapped the cutlass on her belt to make sure it was secure, and scrambled down onto the main deck of the Thunderhawk.

"Come on!" she yelled, grabbing a rope and climbing the side of the merchantman. “Come on, Thunderhawk!"

She emerged at the top in eddying smoke pierced by sunbeams; her cutlass in hand, wild with fear and excitement, she charged the nearest troll.

Her first target was a distorted face, heavy with fangs; this stared at her in mute surprise and she lashed out. Fitz swung the heavy blade like an axe, then wrenched the blade free. Behind the troll, in the haze and confusion, was many more just alike; Fitz rushed forward and struck again at a new face. Behind her, she just registered that Clyburn had stabbed a troll looking to gut her, but this was background noise. Her world reduced to simple steps; cut, thrust, chop, then plunge forward. Golden feathers here, a Kul Tiran there cut almost in half, a heavy polearm plunging towards her. Her arms ached with the strain of lifting the cutlass again and again; around her was the flash and crack of musketry. A ball creased her sleeve. Speed, speed! Fitz had the impression this was all taking too long, they needed to clear the Kul Tiran to get to the Zandalari, they needed speed!

“For the Lord Admiral!” roared Fitz at the top of her lungs. She raised her cutlass above her head to act as a rally marker. “For the Admiral, and Kul Tiras!”

She lurched forward, tripping over something but recovering quickly. A knot of Kul Tirans in civilian clothes were fighting like heroes up on the quarterdeck; she saw them dispatch a couple of desperate trolls that ran in the face of her fury.

"Come on!" she cried, and plunged down the other side of the Kul Tiran merchantman, onto the main deck of the Zandalari. Behind her came the wild yells of sailors with their blood up.

Something hit her cutlass blade and it shattered, sending fragments everywhere. Fights broke out everywhere around her, as the Thunderhawk's crew crashed into the trollish one like a wave breaking over rocks. Fitz pulled her dirk and fought her way towards the flapping Zandalari flag, but around it there was a crowd of trolls. They massed around a shaman. Fitz steeled her soul in preparation for a desperate charge - but she didn’t have to. Just as the shaman was frantically chanting incantations, Jackson appeared, leveled a musket and fired. A bloody hole appeared in the shaman’s chest. He fell, magic dying.
Opposition ceased after that. Fitz herself grabbed the Zandalarі colours and struck them; no trollish officers remained alive to do it for her. She stood amid the wreckage and the dead with the madness ebbing out, sweat running into her eyes. Around her, Kul Tiran were cheering lustily; they were exultant, full-throated in victory. With a start, she realised she must now organise the prize crew; she must requisition sailors from the merchantmen to strip the ship of its valuables, detail officers to check the seaworthiness of the merchantman - it would have to be Whitesmith, she was the only one left - and reform the crew of Thunderhawk back on board her.

All these orders took some time.

When she dropped, exhausted, back onto the deck of the Thunderhawk she just wanted rest - or rather, a wash in a bucket of seawater, which was then followed by said rest. But the Kul Tiran merchant captain had also come down onto the deck to thank Captain Ashvane personally for his intervention. Fitz noted a strong family resemblance between the two men.

Mr Runklin intercepted her as she led her guest up the steps towards the quarterdeck.

“Ma’am,” he said, looking relieved to see her. “Ma’am I have sorrowful news - the Captain is dead, ma’am.”

“What?” blurted Fitz. “Wh- how?”

“Trolls got him with a musket-ball, ma’am,” said Runklin confidently. “Straight through the eyes, ma’am.”

Fitz processed the odds of a Trollish musket-ball being fired upward, then carrying over the top of the Kul Tiran merchant, and plunging directly between the Captain’s eyes.

“A tragic day, Runklin,” said Fitz faintly.

“A real tragedy!” said the merchant Captain, sounding genuinely upset. “After he ordered us to scatter like that, luring the Zandalarі in. I don’t mind telling you, when he mimicked fleeing like that he had me taken in as well. A brilliant piece of seamanship. Then the risk of using the merchantman to capture the raider… he should get a medal. I’ll be writing to the papers!”

Fitz looked at him steadily. The bosun, the midshipman, all the officers of the Thunderhawk were staring at her; Clyburn looked especially upset.

“Yes,” said Fitz. “A great loss to Kul Tiras, may the Tides take him in safety. I will report as such also.”

Then she touched the brim of her hat to him, and turned away. There was much to do.

Chapter End Notes

It is very convenient that enemy ships interrupt Fitz’s life at key moments. She is just lucky in that way.
Chapter 15

Fitz calmly stripped the merchantmen of sailors.

She didn’t take all of them, of course - just the ones with experience in the Navy. The fury of the two dozen merchant Captains had been unbridled as she had rowed their best away - they screamed about it so loudly she wondered if they could hear it in Boralus.

The sailors were needed though. Brother Gull had casually blessed the Zandalari raider into Kul Tiran service and renamed it the Ocean. Fitz hadn’t asked for him to do this - as she had stood upon its bloody deck, she had considered just sinking it as an offering to the Tides. But Fitz had the niggling feeling that it was un-Kul Tiran somehow for her to turn a gift from a Tidesage. That seemed doubly true when the gift was a warship.

And so the merchant Captains must be displeased. The Ocean had to be crewed, and Fitz resigned herself the social freezing which was the result. There were no invitations to dinner, no small gifts of jam or honey, and only desultory responses to her general signals for about the next two months. Then the convoy was jumped by swarm of smaller Zandalari ships working as a pack - the Thunderhawk and the Ocean together had their hands full sending them scurrying back into the north - and after that the merchantmen behaved themselves.

Fitz hosted her own dinners awkwardly jammed into the wardroom. The wardroom was not set up for this, but she flatly refused to move into the Thunderhawk's Great Cabin, and so it was endured. The Midshipmen were especially thrown into consternation; with Whitesmith commanding the Ocean, Fitz was now the only remaining Lieutenant, and the wardroom was positively spacious. At least, it was spacious when not full of rich merchants dubiously eating salt pork. The nine Midshipman were jammed together cheek by jowl in the middy’s berth, and they looked upon any free cot with envious eyes. But Fitz wasn’t budging, and so the midshipmen remained cramped into where they were.

The Thunderhawk sailed on, shepherding the convoy on its slow way.

Fitz obsessively tracked the passing of time; after all, it was one of the mathematical constraints she needed for the delightful business of navigation. But it was also the final countdown to the end of a very long journey. The convoy had launched in spring, and transiting the Broken Isles - with its profusion of ports and trade - had taken six months. The convoy had then launched itself out across the edges of the Frozen Sea, riding the fine gales of autumn. Fitz obtained her twenty-second year under the thumb of Captain Ashvane, which she celebrated by standing a double watch under raw winter sleet. She celebrated her twenty-third birthday by tacking south to find a stray current of the Maelstrom, using its raw power to shave an entire three months from the convoy’s journey.

It was a battered, weathered group of ships that sighted land that second spring. Even for Kul Tirans, fifteen months at sea was a long time. Supply ships were practically empty, beer casks were low, and clothes hung in rags from those sailors unwise enough to pawn the ship’s issue. The white smudge on the horizon - which resolved itself into the snow-capped mountains of Winterspring - was met with general excitement. Sailors sang all their favourite shanties, totted up their accumulated pay in anticipation of shore leave, and took any excuse to set a greater spread of sail. Brother Gull, eternally shrouded, had taken to standing in the stern, staring back out into the ocean.

A month later, a lookout spotted the titanic tree which represented their destination. Every hand aboard the Thunderhawk cheered wildly; across the waters came the faint sound of the merchant crews cheering back. After the terror and madness of the early journey, the final stages had been
pleasantly uneventful.

Fitz, however, took nothing for granted. The *Thunderhawk* and the *Ocean* stood out from the little island of Rut’theran Village, which the Night Elves fondly pretended to be a port. Rut’theran Village was frustratingly inefficient, and Fitz couldn’t quite believe the place was real. No natural shelter welcomed ships; only one pier was operating, and it had such a shallow draught only small ships could dock. Compared to these embarrassments, the gargantuan tree seemed much less impressive. The Kul Tiran merchantmen were therefore forced to anchor on an offshore bar to disgorge their cargo, with the enormous quantities of goods swayed onto a barge. One by one these warped to the little pier, only to be unloaded again by sweating Kul Tirans. It was backbreaking labour; the Elves provided carts, but otherwise seemed to expect this tremendous effort as a matter of course.

Fitz was in her shirtsleeves in the wardroom when the messenger came.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said the cabingirl cheerfully. “Mr Robinson’s compliments. The Western Fleet is’n sight, and he reckon’s he’s spotted the admiral’s flag, ma’am. He’s going to start the salute.”

“Thank you, Misha. I appreciate that,” said Fitz, grabbing her hat and jacket. “Send him my approval, and I’ll be right up.”

Robinson was one of the brighter of her conscripted Middies - a lowranking Ashvane cousin. Fitz privately hoped the admiral would confirm his appointment, despite his failing of the Naval entrance exam. One of his many seamanlike qualities was that he was not one to let the spray freeze; by the time she had gained the deck the saluting gun was already banging out its respects.

Fitz counted them carefully as she strode towards the quarterdeck. Fifteen. Her new commander was a vice-admiral then, in charge of nearly fifty ships. Not someone to be crossed.

Mr Robinson touched the brim of his hat to her when she climbed the stairs, and she gravely returned the compliment as he dropped away from the windward rail to let her take his place.

“What signals from the flag?” Fitz asked, clasping her hands behind her back.

“Our number, ma’am, and the signal to anchor.”

“Very good - carry on, Mr Robinson.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.” Robinson turned. “Mr Runklin! Lay aft, if you please! All hands! All hands prepare to wear ship!”

There was a muffled cheer from the crew, who threw themselves into this activity with a will; to their minds shore leave was imminent. In a trice all the sails had been clewed up except for the topsails; the helm spun the wheel to port, and the *Thunderhawk* come up and into the wind. To the starboard, the *Ocean* was following suit.

“Let go the anchor!” roared Mr Robinson, “Clew up topsails!”

The ship juddered as she lost speed. There was roar of the cable falling through the hawsehole, the anchor plunging towards the sandy bar below. There was an instant as the cable took up the strain - and then the *Thunderhawk* was at anchor, riding lightly on the gentle swell.

The crew cheered again. Fitz felt nothing but loss. The intense burdens placed on her by the *Thunderhawk* were now over. In a few hours she would be relieved of her temporary command and the little world of the ship would be thrown into confusion; her midshipmen would be dismissed or
demoted, Whitesmith recalled, and the crews that she had laboured to gather and train would be
snatched back by their employers. The outside world would come rushing in; the reports she had so
laboured over would be read and filed, and protocol demanded - especially after such a cursed
voyage - that an admiral commission an Admiralty inquiry into every aspect of the Thunderhawk’s
administration.

Fitz stared at the flagship on the horizon, which represented the closing of a chapter in her life.
Possibly even her final chapter in the Navy. After all, Captain Ashvane had died a hero - a politically
connected, wealthy hero, cut down by treacherous Zandalari. The admiral might need a scapegoat,
and Fitz was the most likely option. There was a real chance that her career would be destroyed.

“Signal from the flag, ma’am,” said Mr Robinson. “Our number - Captain to report aboard, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Mr Robinson,” Fitz said. “Call away the gig. You have the ship.”

“Aye Aye, ma’am,” said Robinson. He then paused, and looked like he was about to say something
else. But the moment passed, and he held silent.

Fitz walked back down below to get ready. She estimated she had roughly an hour before the Fleet
sailed up and anchored with them; plenty of time to make the best of what clothing she had left. One
of the corns of her cocked hat was crooked, and the buttons on her jacket had tarnished after two
years at sea - but the golden epaulette of her rank, at least, she could set proudly on her left shoulder.

The time fled swiftly. Soon the cabingirl was knocking on the door of the wardroom again,
summoning her to the waist of the Thunderhawk.

Hands paused in their celebrations to knuckle their foreheads as she passed, but she gestured for
them to continue with their work. Their real Captain would be aboard shortly, and there would be
more than enough time for pomp then. Brother Gull stood silent and still by the mizzenmast - she
touched the brim of her hat to him, but he seemed indifferent to her.

By the time she dropped down into the little boat, all was ready. Clyburn was chivving a few tardy
rowers to the oars and Jackson took up the tiller. Fitz sat quietly in the sternsheets. She was sick with
dread. One of her hands crept into her pocket - in a fit of weakness, she had brought the letter from
Sagewood - and in her lap sat the box of papers which detailed every moment of time aboard the
Thunderhawk.

There were several minutes of painful silence as the gig rowed out, broken only by the noise of the
hands pulling at the oars.

“The admiral will be looking at the Ocean, ma’am” murmured Jackson, apropos of nothing.
“Everyone in the flagship will be looking and wondering about it. The admiral will get one-eighth of
its value, ma’am, as the Thunderhawk was technically assigned here, and the Tidesage has already
forced the sale.”

Fitz mastered herself and nodded shallowly. “Yes. All that is true.”

Jackson eyed her cautiously. “And you wearing the Lord Admiral’s epaulette and all, Ma’am....”

“Belay that, Jackson,” Fitz said, without heat. “Silence in the boat, please.”

Jackson subsided. In time, the gig pulled alongside the Flag; oars were shipped and helping hands
sent Fitz clumsily leaping for the ladder. Getting a good grip on the rolling hull was a tricky business
- especially while holding the precious box of reports. Even worse was the idea that she might
destroy Sagewood’s letter by falling into the sea. She clung to the side with a desperate grip, and
made quite sure of each hold before securing the top.

Fitz finally made it up onto the deck to pause at the entry-port and salute the quarterdeck.

Around her, life on the flag was carried on with bustling efficiency. Not for a lowly lieutenant was the circumstance of shrilling bosun’s pipes, or sideboys saluting with their white gloves; instead there were hands racing up and down the rigging to check on ropes, and up on the quarterdeck stood the lieutenant of the watch. The brass of his spyglass flamed warmly in the sun, and every button gleamed.

Another lieutenant - this one with the red braiding of a Kul Tiran Flag Lieutenant - stepped up to the entry-port to greet her.

“Lieutenant Powell?” said the Flag.

“No,” said Fitz. “I am Lieutenant Fitzwilliams.”

“His Lordship is waiting for you,” said the Flag Lieutenant. “Follow me; I will show you the way.”

Lord McKinley rose when she entered. He was a large man, stoop-shouldered under the low ceiling of the great cabin. Fitz touched the brim of her hat in respect, but he waved her off and shook her hand briskly.

“Fitzwilliams,” he said. “You’re not the lieutenant I was expecting - these are your reports?”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Fitzwilliams.

McKinley took the box, and put it on his desk. “Sit down, Fitzwilliams,” he said, as he cracked it open. “A glass of wine for you? Whiskey?”

“Thank you Sir, but no,” said Fitz, sitting hesitantly on a chair. She steeled herself as much as possible while the admiral flipped through the papers. He was quick, scanning the titles only until he reached the personnel docket. That he pulled out and studied with rapt attention.

“Powell, dead!” McKinley exclaimed. “Damn shame! She was my First on the old Glory - that must have been twenty years ago.”

Fitz nodded jerkily, but said nothing.

“Twenty-three! Forgive me, you look younger.”

The Admiral continued to scan the sheet. “Lieutenant Harper drowned. And... here we are. This action where you captured the sixth-rate. Were you there when Captain Ashvane died?”

“No sir,” replied Fitz. “He was killed on the quarterdeck of the Thunderhawk. An inquiry was held but it was inconclusive. It seemed most likely he was struck by a ball from out of the mizzen-top.”

“Hmm,” said the admiral. He looked up and fixed her with his gaze. “You must realise Fitzwilliams, that I knew the man.”

Fitz said nothing.

McKinley sighed. “You’re right, of course. It is important that he died a hero, and I will endorse him as such in my report.” He flipped back to the personnel docket. “I see now why you appointed three Ashvane cousins as midshipmen afterwards - very wise; it will soothe some ruffled feathers. As for this other nonsense...”
He put the papers back into the box, and closed the lid. “I refuse your resignation of course.”

Fitz was astonished.

“B-but Sir, the water - the navigation…”

“You are brave, Fitzwilliams,” interrupted McKinley, “but there is no need to protect the Lord Admiral here. I am her man.”

Fitz’s head was spinning; she genuinely had no idea what was going on. But McKinley was oblivious to her confusion. He was already flipping back through the pile of paper.

“Lieutenant Powell was sending reports to the Great Fleet,” McKinley said, “and Lady Proudmoore deigned to divert some of them to me on the last packetboat - may the Tides protect and preserve her. The paper-trail for you is ironclad. Ashvane’s death was timely. The truth overall, however, is extremely inconvenient. So we will store these reports here, in the naval office in Darnassus. Who knows - perhaps they will be misfiled? Such mistakes happen.”

He carefully placed down the papers, and closed the lid. His flag lieutenant stepped forward and McKinley shot him a significant look as he passed over the box.

“That leaves you, Fitzwilliams,” said McKinley, when the Flag had disappeared. “Normally there would be an inquiry - but as you can appreciate, that would be unwise. And there is no question of you continuing aboard the Thunderhawk. You served as its Captain for over a year, it would destabilise the crew. Take a whiskey.”

The Admiral’s steward appeared, and a tumbler appeared in her hand like magic. Fitz took the glass with nerveless hands. The whole interview had the quality of a terrible nightmare; reports vanishing, political promotions, smokey whiskey for an officer who should be summarily fired. This was not the navy as Fitz understood it. Fitz was not sure she even wanted to understand it.

The Admiral sipped his own whiskey appreciatively, staring pensively at nothing in particular.

“So many deaths,” he said thoughtfully. “Plenty of space. I will promote you into Tenacity as a Commander; that is the neatest solution.”

“Sir,” said Fitz. The whiskey went down her throat like fire, the burn lingering alongside silent words of guilt and shame.

“No need to thank me, Commander,” said McKinley expansively. “Loyalty is rewarded in time. In fact, you solve a difficult problem for me - Tenacity is the fastest sloop on station, and we have need for a fast ship.”

“Aye aye, Sir,” Fitz said.

“You need to retrieve some diplomats,” McKinley took another sip of whiskey, leaning back in his chair. “They went into the Ashenvale forest to negotiate with the Elves, but something has gone wrong. The last message that got through requested evacuation from the western beaches.”

“Yes Sir. When did the message arrive, Sir?”

“Four days ago. You had better leave as soon as you transfer your things; I’ll inform Moore on Tenacity that he will move to take command of the Ocean. Jennings will move to Thunderhawk.”

“Very good, Sir.”
“Tides preserve you, Commander Fitzwilliams, and the Lord Admiral also. Jones? Call away the Commander’s gig, if you please.”

Fitz rose. This was clearly a dismissal if she had ever heard one, she was just touching the brim of her hat when McKinley stepped forward with a smile.

“You have forgotten something,” he said. With deft movements he unhooked her golden epaulette, and swapped it into her right shoulder. Then he gave her a firm handshake.

“Remember me to the Lord Admiral,” McKinley said, before ushering her out.

Fitz barely paid attention to the journey she took back off the flagship. The flag lieutenant pushed a bundle of papers and orders into her hands before she climbed down the ladder to the little jolly boat, and Jackson and Clyburn were silent as they hands pulled strong back to the Thunderhawk. Fitz did think they seemed to have a certain air of smugness, but that could be down to the shore leave about to be awarded to everyone on board.

“Boat ahoy!” cried a voice from the Thunderhawk.

“Aye aye!” roared back Clyburn, “Commander!”

There was a sudden hustle and bustle up on deck, and shouting. When the gig pulled alongside, Fitz managed her awkward, scrambling leap onto the ladder and began her customary clamber up.

For the first time in her career, as she stepped into the entry-port, it was to the sound of bosun’s pipes trilling, and the salutes of sideboys - all the honours due to a Commander of a Kul Tiran warship. The marine sentry presented arms smartly. Only the automatic reflex of six years had her turn to touch the brim of her hat to the quarterdeck.

She felt like a desperate fraud.

“Congratulations, ma’am!” carolled the Midshipman as she climbed up to the quarterdeck.

“Thank you, Mr Robinson,” said Fitz automatically. “Could you organise my sea chest to be brought to the deck please? I will be transferring immediately to the Tenacity.”

The smile fell off Robinson’s face.

“Don’t worry,” Fitz reassured him hastily. “You will continue aboard the Thunderhawk, and with all your seniority. I have confirmed your appointment with the Admiral.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Robinson said. Strangely, this news didn’t seem to cheer him.

Behind him, a murmur was also rippling through the ordinary sailors on the main deck; Fitz looked at them in concern.

Time was slipping away, however. She could already see a small boat carrying a figure towards them - a figure covered in gold lace, which could only be the new Captain of the Thunderhawk. It would behoove Fitz to leave swiftly and avoid any awkwardness.

“Thank you, ladies and gentleman,” Fitz called loudly. “No one could ask to serve alongside people so loyal, or so resilient.”

Then she walked quickly to the waist. Clyburn and Jackson met her there; Jackson held Fitz’s sea chest, and Clyburn had two canvas sea-bags slung over his shoulders. Fitz gave them both a level
look. Clyburn grinned at her before being elbowed by Jackson.

“We’re all here then,” said Fitz. “Make steerway for Tenacity, if you please.”

The Thunderhawk crew crowded up against the railings as she left. Fitz thought they might be trying to catch a glimpse of their new captain; she herself stood and touched the brim of her hat to the glittering woman as their jolly boats passed one another.

Her new sloop of war was a beauty; flush-decked, fore-and-aft rigged, with three tall raking masts. She looked magnificent under the afternoon sunshine. The gunports had been picked out smartly in red and black trim, and the crews worked energetically.

Fitz’s delight in the little ship lifted her out of her depression somewhat; any Kul Tiran’s heart would beat a little faster at the sight of such a saucy vessel. It was with enthusiasm that Clyburn stood up to answer the hailed challenge.

“Tenacity!”

The pipes shrilled (expected this time) as she mounted the side and Fitz mechanically touched the brim of her hat to the colours hanging from the stern - there was no quarterdeck to salute.

“Ma’am?” said an older man in a splendid uniform.

Fitz’s mind snapped back onto her duty at once; enough time for self-recrimination and pleasure when the work was done. “You are Mr Sprocket, at present the First Lieutenant on board this ship?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. “Lieutenant Jonathan Sprocket, at your service.”

“My name is Fitzwilliams,” said Fitz. She reached into her pocket to pull out her orders, then casually replaced the letter from Sagewood she had withdrawn by mistake. Correct paperwork in hand, she unfolded it and began to read. “Orders from Sir Robert McKinley, Vice Admiral of the Blue, Knight of the Most Generous Order of the Lamp…”

When she was done, she folded the paper away again. Her mother would be pleased in her next letter home; from this moment her pay was almost ten silvers per day.

“Welcome on board, ma’am,” said Sprocket, touching his hat again. He was nervous, and kept looking over her shoulder. “Will you address the crew, ma’am?”

Fitz had once again forgotten this. She looked at the deck full of curious eyes. The weathervane fluttered slightly in the breeze, catching her eye; without effort she calculated the angles. The sloop would have a terrific rate of speed running before the wind, and right now it could not be more favourable. They should leave as soon as possible.

“Mr Sprocket, I am afraid we do not have much time,” she said. “We are all Kul Tirans here, and the wind is fair. It will do its talking for me. Will you repair with me to the quarterdeck? Clyburn, could you place my sea chest away somewhere, please? Jackson, if you could find the bosun and ask them to prepare to set out.”

Fitz turned and almost ran head first into the Tidesage.

He had been standing behind her. Cold eyes blazed at her as she caught herself and straightened. His clawed hands folded around the heavy wood of his staff, and his deep hood still hid his face.

“My apologies, my Lord,” Fitz said weakly. “I didn’t see you.”
Sprocket hovered anxiously.

“The Tides bless you,” Brother Gull hissed. “You are wise to stay from land. Let us leave this place.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” she said firmly. Frankly, she was just guessing responses to him at this point. Fitz then slowly sidestepped around his motionless figure, and dropped down the rear hatch to her new cabin.

This cabin had no furniture. The last captain would have taken their possessions away with them, of course, but knowing something and seeing it were two entirely different things; the space was completely barren, except for where the cannons lay bare and lashed down with ropes. Fitz couldn’t stop looking around in amazement though, speechless at her fortune. It would be the largest room Fitz had ever occupied alone.

Fitz turned to where Clyburn was unpacking her sea chest. He seemed to have appointed himself her new keeper, so that was the steward problem solved - and serviceable furniture could be knocked up by Jackson, who was as good as a carpenter.

There was a firm knock behind her, and Sprocket entered, touching the brim of his hat. “Begging your pardon, ma’am. Are you ready to issue your orders?”

“Yes,” said Fitz. She clasped her hands behind her back, awkward in the empty cabin. “We are mounting a rescue mission. Speed is of the essence.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Sprocket.

“Is the ship ready for sea?” asked Fitz.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Full of water?”

“Yes ma’am. Just finished topping up the barrels as you came onboard, begging your pardon.”

Fitz paused, then jerked her head at Clyburn. He vanished out of the cabin to check - she knew he would also run down the purser and grab the dockets. Sprocket looked faintly annoyed, but Captains were allowed their little quirks, so Fitz ignored it.

“Do you have the ship’s charts?”

These were produced.

Fitz spread these on the deck of the cabin, and - with no other option - Sprocket joined her on the floor. He traced the lines as she took notations in her battered journal, and then laboriously validated her own solutions. The course was thus plotted with minimal delay.

Fitz and Sprocket left her cabin to put the wheels into motion. Night had fallen, soft and cool; Fitz slipped on her gloves and walked to the windward side of the area designated as the quarterdeck.

“May I ask after the Bosun?” said Fitz.

“Yes ma’am,” said Sprocket “Mrs Pritchard.”

“My compliments to her. Please send the hands to the capstan. Midshipman - my apologies, I do not
know your name - please make the night signal for “am getting underway.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

The capstan was turning; each pawl clinked into place and the hands on the spokes sweated with the efforts of their labours.

“Mr Sprocket, set the sails as soon as is convenient to you. Midshipman, make the signal.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Sprocket and the middy.

A coloured lantern was lit, casting blue light across the rear of the sloop. From the flag came a white light, which blinked twice as it was screened.

“Flagship acknowledges, Ma’am.”

“Very good.”

*Tenacity* was turning into the wind now; it still blew fair, and the sails caught, billowing out.

Fitz judged the quality of her new crew as they ran up and down the moonlit rigging. Overall she was fairly pleased. They responded quickly to instructions from Mrs Pritchard, which spoke well of the bosun’s leadership. A good drill schedule would have them in peak condition.

Unfortunately for Fitz, *Tenacity* didn’t have much chance to drill as the ship ran down the western coast of Kalimdor. The crew were far busier employing their skills for real.

Whatever trouble the diplomatic party had run into, it had stirred the Zandalari into a frenzy. Every time Fitz thought she had dodged an encounter, another hostile sail appeared on the horizon. Fitz had plenty of opportunity to judge the mettle of her crew; it was only precise timing that had evaded a marauding frigate, it was strong backs and arms in the squall which confused the third-rate the next afternoon. (The Tidesage had thrown a spiteful water elemental at it, which probably contributed to its distraction). But it had been speed which had outpaced the trollish sloop encountered on the fifth day - pure, raw speed.

Fitz had walked the quarterdeck restlessly the entire time the Trollish sloop was in sight. She would have liked to tack and fight; to lay alongside it and give it a taste of grapeshot and Kul Tiran steel - it was, after all, a ship of equal guns. But slowing would have had the rest of the Zandalari pack on them in an instant, and the diplomats wouldn’t be saved by *Tenacity* lying at the bottom of the ocean.

The Zandalari sloop’s topsails dropped below the horizon on the seventh day - not one Kul Tiran soul believed they had seen the last of her.

That made Fitz a slave to speed. Even the crew had taken to marvelling at the foaming wake they were leaving as they cut through the water; *Tenacity* flew as if the ocean was helping her. Fitz piled on all scrap of sail, and knew she was riding the edge of madness - but her orders said to make haste, and the sheer quantity of trolls told her time was running out.

Finally to the port of the *Tenacity* was Ashenvale; the rocky cliffs and shadowed ruins gave way to white strands and misty forests full of timber. Fitz’s ship roared down the coast like fury, until the sloop reached mountains. Then, under cover of both night and convenient rain, she crept back up again.

“Set out the lantern, Mr Sprocket,” she said. “If you please. Four red flashes, followed by white.”
“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said. There was a minute of silence, broken only by rain hitting the deck.

Then from the shore came an answering signal - a weak ball of golden light, probably from a mage.

Fitz wanted to slump over in relief, but she tucked her spyglass up into her arm instead. Water trickled inside her greatcoat as she nodded coolly to Sprocket.

“Allay away the jolly boat.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said.

The gig - its crew wearing black and its oars muffled - struck out for the shore and disappeared. The two hours they were gone seemed like an eternity. Fitz eventually forced herself to go below and out of the rain. She even persuaded herself to eat some dinner at her new table; the salt pork sat uneasily in her belly, although Clyburn had done an excellent job seasoning it.

Finally came a knock on her cabin door, and Sprocket ducked his head inside, dripping water. “Begging your pardon, Captain, the diplomats are aboard.”

Fitz jumped to her feet. “Thank you, Mr Sprocket; rouse the hands and get us out of here, full press of sail. Clyburn, could you fetch...” She trailed off.

Sprocket touched the brim of his hat and hurried away, but Fitz barely noticed.

Another figure had been ushered straight into the cabin by Jackson. She was sleek with rain, shivering, coat missing, long ears dripping water. Her shirt-sleeve was in tatters. Indeed, the only part of her uniform still complete was the incomprehensible burst of golden rank on a high collar.

The woman was quite possibly the most beautiful person Fitz had ever seen in her life.

It was Jess Sagewood.
Fitz was shocked dumb. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined Sagewood would be the one stumbling into her ship’s cabin. Her eyes took in Jess’s face, her ears and hair, her exposure and exhaustion.

“Jackson!” she said roughly. “Run to the Purser. Tell him you are authorised to have as many clothes and blankets as you can carry. My compliments also to the cook, and he is to set a fire immediately.”

One of the carved chairs had an oakum cushion that Jackson had thoughtfully sewn. Fitz pulled this out from under the table, and Sagewood slumped into it. Brackish water dripped from her tattered clothing onto the floor, but Fitz paid it no mind. Clyburn hovered anxiously with a towel.

For a Kul Tiran, the little cabin was pleasantly cool - for an elf it must be freezing. Fitz had no spare clothes, and she cast her eyes about for something else that might do as Clyburn worked on getting Jess dry. The woolen bedding on her cot had been made up beautifully; she ruthlessly stripped it all off and threw it around Sagewood’s shoulders.

“M-my people will need a-accommodation,” said Jess. Her teeth were chattering. Mud flecked her cheek, and her blond hair was dark with water. She hadn’t acknowledged where she was.

“Clyburn,” Fitz said, giving him a significant look. He knuckled his forehead and hurried out.

“A-and p-papers,” Jess said. “Th-they are in m-my b-bag.”

“I’ll take care of it,” promised Fitz. “They’ll be safe.”

Prior to this interruption, Fitz had been drinking tea; she pushed this into Sagewood’s hand. Jess’s fingers curled around the warm tin mug, and she cradled it to her face as she sipped. Her ears were still shivering.

“Midshipman Woods reporting, ma’am,” said a young man, diffidently poking his head inside the cabin. “Lieutenant Sprocket’s compliments, and the sails are set. He wants permission to clear the bay at speed.”

“Thank you, Mr Woods,” said Fitz, still more concerned with Sagewood. “Tell him to do so. Then find the rest of the Quel’Thalans, if you please. Get them beside the galley fire.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said the Midshipman, touching the brim of his hat.

Jess slowly slumped in her chair, her eyes half closed. The tea had given her face a little colour, but she was clearly chilled and exhausted. Fitz had a hundred questions, but swallowed all of them.

Jackson bustled in then, her arms full of blankets - Fitz blessed her and all her ancestors. It was almost impossible to be warm aboard a sailing ship, but Fitz would be damned if she wasn’t going to expend every effort trying anyway.

It was not to be. From up on the deck above there was a great and abrupt profusion of noise, of feet pounding, and of shouting. Fitz jerked upright - they couldn’t have cleared the bay yet. Another
Middy hurriedly shoved his head inside the cabin, his face a picture of urgency.

“Begging your pardon Captain,” he said, “Mr Sprocket’s compliments and the Tidesage is saying there’s trouble!”

“I’ll be right up,” said Fitz. She snatched up her hat and coat, and ran out the door. “Jackson! Please… carry on here!”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” called Jackson after her.

*Tenacity* was in a state of fury when she reached the main deck. Somewhere off to starboard, unseen in the night, there was a rocky reef. A stern was the beach. Through the driving rain and darkness, Fitz could make out the shadows of sailors rushing everywhere, some of them scrambling up slick ropes. A marine bolted past her to the quarterdeck carrying a drum - only seconds came the long, insistent beat of general quarters.

A sudden yell of alarm came from the bow of *Tenacity*, then twelve hostile guns roared out in a single moment of hell. Timber splintered across the *Tenacity’s* main deck, the flash lit up the night, and the air tore itself apart with noise and heat. Above her a sail began flapping as a staysail line parted. There was screaming, smoke, darkness, and yelling.

“Mr. Sprocket!” ordered Fitz coolly, walking towards the quarterdeck. “Tack the ship!”

“Aye aye, ma’am! All hands! All hands! ‘Bout ship!”

The helmsman flung over his wheel, and *Tenacity* heeled over instantly.

Off to the port another broadside roared fruitlessly; Fitz couldn’t see where they fell, nor did she particularly particularly care. Only one cannonball, fired late, carried on to smash ragefully into *Tenacity*.

“Keep wearing, Mr Sprocket,” Fitz said calmly. “Hard a-lee, if you please. There’s a reef I wish you to avoid.”

Her mind raced.

*Tenacity’s* prompt handling had bought time, but the ship was still in mortal peril - they needed to get out of the bay before the enemy sealed the entrance shut. Fitz coolly calculated the odds, and decided on a plan.. She would turn as tightly in the little bay as was possible, gambling against the likely risk of grounding, or a raking shot to *Tenacity’s* stern. If the enemy were beating against the wind to prevent their escape to the north, then they would be out of position to prevent the sloop flying to the south - mostly because the manoeuvre Fitz was set upon was insanely reckless.

Fitz wiped rainwater out of her eyes as she peered upwards. With the running lights doused, it was difficult to see the spread of the sail.

“Midshipman of the watch, run to Mrs Pritchard - tell her my compliments, and she is to load the cannons, but not to run them out. Mr Sprocket, prepare the spinnaker, if you please.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

Fitz’s heart was in her throat. Sprocket stepped up beside her, face tense. Rain soaked through both of them, but they ignored it.

Running the ship aground would be death for her and her crew, and the total failure of Sagewood’s
mission. But there was also a chance to escape. Staying to fight was certain doom. For Fitz, therefore, the maths were simple - the distinction between life and death was that *Tenacity* drew ten feet of water.

Her beautiful ship pointed its nose directly at the shore. Then it kept swinging. Fitz kept her face still and calm, but her thoughts were nothing but prayers to the ocean. Never had she wished for its depths so fervently. The ship kept turning.

Then the boom swept over the deck, and the sloop completed its jibe. The *Tenacity* snapped onto its new course.

“Steady as she goes now!” called Fitz. “Spinnaker, Mrs Pritchard! Set all sail!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” came the reply.

The sloop picked up speed, water hissing over her hull, flying downwind. She had completed the turn; they hadn’t gone aground, and now were away, boiling sou-west like a kraken was chasing them. The shore was astern, as was the enemy.

An enemy that could - and would - turn to follow them.

Fitz turned and made her way to the stern of the *Tenacity*. There stood Brother Gull. He looked like some dark wave of the ocean had frozen into stillness on the deck.

“My lord,” said Fitz. “The ship is endangered.”

“Give me silence,” said the Tidesage, after an eternal instant. “I will give you an escape.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Fitz said, touching the brim of her hat. Then she turned and walked grimly back to the quarterdeck.

“Pass the word, Mr Sprocket,” she whispered. “All hands silent.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he whispered back, then slipped off into the darkness.

The sounds of the crew died away; the fierce discipline of sea acted even on the wounded and dying. In under a minute not a sound was left; only the hiss of water, the groans of the hull, and the creaks of the rigging. Then the ship itself seemed to fade.

Behind them, the sounds of Zandalari calling orders faded into the distance. *Tenacity* stayed silent throughout the remaining hours of darkness.

It was a bleary-eyed crew that greeted the first rays of dawn that morning; the rain had eased to a drizzle, and visibility was clearing. The ship’s timbers seemed solid and real beneath them after the fancy of their insubstantiality. Battle damage seemed extensive in the wan light, but detailed inspection found it to be mostly cosmetic; the scars the traced *Tenacity*’s flanks did not impact her handling, or her seaworthiness. Fitz grimly took a report on the casualties; two deaths, four seriously wounded by splinters or shot, and the snapping staysail had carried off a woman’s arm. A bloody night.

As for what had attacked them - the thirty-two pound cannonball found embedded in the deck told its own story. It could only have been fired by a Zandalari ship of the line.

In the cold light of day, Fitz appreciated much more the miracle of the second broadside missing; the weight of shot from a man o’ war would smash any sloop into kindling. The first broadside, which
had mostly hit, was made up of only 12 pound cannonballs. They were pried out of the *Tenacity’s* timbers and put aside for possible reuse.

In a quiet moment, Fitz climbed the mainmast herself, armed with her spyglass. She needed the reassurance of her own eyes. The sea was clear, and to the port were iron-grey mountains.

She slid down the backstays wearily. “Dismiss the hands, Mr Sprocket. I am going below.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Sprocket.

Fitz really looked at him - his eyes were sunken, and his face was grey with fatigue.

“Belay my last, Mr Sprocket;” she said. “I will hold the watch. Relieve me at eight bells.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Sprocket again, without protest. He vanished down below.

Fitz walked to the windward rail and brooded into the grey ocean.

It seemed a fantastic coincidence to Fitz that an enemy piquet would just happen on them immediately after they had picked up their evacuees. No, she decided; it was far more likely the Quel’Thalans had been betrayed somehow; that the Zandalari had been unable to capture their prey on the land, and had decided instead to strike by sea. The ambush had been well executed - only the intervention of Brother Gull, a shallow daught, and a frighteningly reckless piece of seamanship had prevented *Tenacity* from being completely destroyed.

Fitz was exhausted long before her watch was done. That didn’t matter. She was the Captain of *Tenacity*. Her people needed her to endure. Outwardly she projected nothing but firm confidence, and under her watchful eye the repair of the little ship proceeded apace. By two bells, the rain had almost completely cleared. At three bells, Mrs Pritchard touched the brim of her hat and reported that the ship had not been struck below the waterline. At four bells, Fitz called the signal midshipman over for a spot of light arithmetic.

Even as the middy sweated and laboured under her eye, her mind wandered elsewhere. She seethed with the desire to get to Darnassus - to complete her mission - to deliver Sagewood in safety - to blacken the Trollish eye in repayment for the damage to her beautiful sloop.

Her fierce glower inspired the midshipman to her best efforts.

Once the middy was dismissed, Fitz spent the rest of the watch restlessly pacing up and down the quarterdeck. Plans and counter-plans, sailing lanes, even land routes - Fitz considered all of them. None of them appealed.

The situation wasn’t good. The quick tack might have saved the ship, but flying with the wind had given the trolls the weather gauge. The prevailing breeze was from the north; *Tenacity* would have to claw her way up the coast, while the Zandalari squadron had as much wind and space to manœuvre as it pleased. Fitz could fight a Trollish sloop, or outrun a Trollish man o’ war - but together they had her stymied.

Fitz decided plotting a route was pointless unless she could talk to Jess.

It was with a weary heart that Fitz heard eight bells ring, and with a weary mind that she acknowledged the compliments of a refreshed Lieutenant Sprocket. But not a trace of it was allowed onto her face; her steps were firm as she walked below to her cabin.

“Begging your pardon ma’am,” Clyburn said as he intercepted her at the door. “But the Lieu- uh, I
mean - the Captain -?” He cleared his throat. “Major Sagewood is sleeping, ma’am, along with all the other Elves.”

“Thank you, Clyburn,” said Fitz. “In the cabin?”

“No ma’am. Jackson and I moved her to the galley when the fire was started back up. She weren’t half frozen, ma’am.” He gave her a mournful look.

Fitz interpreted this to mean he didn’t really want to disturb anyone now warm and resting. There were, of course, a hundred reasons to prompt Fitz to do so: the imperative of setting a course - the danger of the Zandalari sloop - the apparent urgency of her mission. She dwelt a little on Sagewood’s consummate professionalism, and sighed.

“Thank you, Clyburn.”

Then she walked into her cabin, stripped off her jacket, and fell into her empty cot. All the bedding was missing. Fitz slept anyway.

When she woke again it was to the sun slanting in through the stern window.

“What time is it?” she rasped.

“Six bells in the afternoon watch,” Clyburn replied smartly. He was sitting on the other side of the cabin in one of Jackson’s carved chairs, carefully darning a sock. A hot breakfast sat on the table next to him - clearly for her.

Fitz had overslept. In silent contempt of herself, she threw on some clothes and made haste through her ablutions; the shock of splashing cold water on her face was enough to wake her fully. The shirt she’d slept in was wrinkled beyond description. Clyburn, Bless him, had managed to press her other one - Tides only knew how. Swapping them was the work of a moment, leaving only the jacket and hat.

Clyburn insisted on fussing over her for several minutes more before pointing her towards where the Quel’Thalans had been stowed. She didn't mind. For some especially superstitious sailors, the Captain was the ship.

When Fitz found her, Jess was still sleeping, wrapped in a nest made of bedding. Around her were four other slumbering Quel’Thalans, also swaddled in blankets. They lay tucked snugly behind the massive stove that formed the ship’s galley - the only place on the ship allowed fire. Leather Ranger gear had been strewn about the deck to dry. Blackened weapons were carefully placed next to their respective owners.

Fitz picked her way around these hazards to go on one knee beside Jess, whose ears drooped peacefully in sleep. Fitz felt awkward, but cleared her throat gently.

“Major Sagewood,” said Fitz quietly. “How do you feel?”

Jess stirred, muzzily. “Fitz?”

Then she came awake all at once, scrambling out of the bedding. Jess’s ears stood straight up in alarm, then flattened against the side of her head as she searched around herself. “Where is my bag?”

“Your bag is dry and all the papers survived,” said Fitz, holding out a steadying hand. With her other she held out a tab of etched metal. “I had it placed in the cabin safe. This is the only ward-key.”
Sagewood’s relief at this news was obvious - her ears relaxed as she took the tab. With Fitz’s nodded permission, she traced the glyph lightly with one finger, and green light flared along the edge. Now only she could use it. Fitz watched the magework in fascination.

“Where do you need to deliver these papers, Major?” Fitz asked, after the glowing had stopped.

“Quel’Thalas,” Jess replied. “But to do so we must first return to Darnassus.” One ear cocked towards her. “What happened last night? And why do you keep calling me Major?”

“Last night we sailed into a little trouble,” said Fitz. “Nothing the Tenacity couldn’t handle.”

Sagewood looked at her levelly. One ear flicked.

“And for the crew,” Fitz hastily added. “They only wish to show you honour. But Quel’Thalan rank markings are quite different to ours, and… well… we just…”

Jess’s ears slowly slid forward to an achingly familiar angle. Mirth filled her grey eyes, and the exhaustion fell from her face. Fitz smiled at her helplessly. It had been two years since she had last been laughed at by those ears. She had missed it.

“Major it shall be then,” said Jess. “How soon before we can leave for Darnassus? We must go as soon as possible. Urgently.”

“Tenacity is at your command,” Fitz said. “But there might be a delay.”

She briefly outlined the Zandalari ambush, the ship’s flight to the south, and the unenviable tactical situation. She spoke of how Tenacity would jibe about as soon as night fell, and attempt to sail through the Zandalari cordon. Fitz then grew quite animated talking about Tenacity’s many excellent features, lingering over the description of her elegant rigging and masts, sleek decking, and beautiful smooth hull.

Jess listened carefully. There was a moment of silence after Fitz finished.

“Thank you, Captain Fitzwilliams” Sagewood said at last. “She sounds like a wonderful ship.”

Fitz beamed at her, pleased beyond measure. Sagewood involuntarily smiled back, then seemed to catch herself. Her long ears flickered, and she glanced around, a study in casualness. “There is one other matter…”

Fitz glanced around as well, curious. The Quel’Thalan rangers had vanished somewhere - Fitz hadn’t seen them go. When she turned back to Jess, the half-elf’s ears had gone a little rigid.

“Perhaps you… perhaps you received my letter?” she asked.

Fitz froze.

Now seemed the moment for all the best words. There was Jess, sitting right there, looking at her hopefully. Fitz wanted to say that she had indeed remembered Sagewood fondly. Or perhaps more boldly, ask if Jess might be enticed to dine with her in the after cabin one evening. A stroll along the quarterdeck might also be refreshing? Any of all of these words would have sufficed. But when Fitz opened her mouth, she found her powers of speech were missing.

Instead, Fitz looked at Jess blindly. The tension was unbearable. Her hand involuntarily crept into the breast pocket of her jacket where the letter in question was safely tucked away - Fitz pulled it out, but no inspiration came. The piece of fine paper lay inertly in her hand, folded and worn, dogeared from
the passage of a hundred re-readings.

Jess looked from Fitz’s face to the tattered letter. Her ears wriggled just slightly, and she smiled a small, secret smile.

“It was forward of me to send that, and we hardly know one another,” said Jess. “I hope you will forgive me. Shall we talk later?” She leaned over and touched the back of Fitz’s hand.

“Oh,” said Fitz. Speech seemed difficult. “Yes, of course. Of course, Major.”

Sagewood withdrew, and Fitz stood, wincing at the dirt on her knee. She swallowed, and touched the brim of her hat. “You are welcome on the quarterdeck at any time.”

“That you, Captain,” said Jess, an indecipherable look on her face. “My compliments to you, and if you would be so kind as to allow me to dine with you in the after cabin this evening?”

Fitz agreed with alacrity, and basked in the dazzling smile she received in return. Her confusion as to what had just occurred was great. On the other hand, everything also seemed to have gone remarkably well. It was only with reluctance that she walked up the hatch onto the quarterdeck.

The slight afternoon drizzle seemed especially refreshing today - Fitz paced the windward side of the rail with great enjoyment, contemplating the future. Not only would she be privileged to dine with Jess Sagewood, Tenacity would afterwards sail north in order to thwart a determined enemy. There was nothing that could be added that could make this day any more glorious.

The whole crew seemed buoyed by her fine spirits; the shanties took on an especially martial quality.

At the first bell of the dogwatch, she asked Clyburn to break into the remaining crock of honey from the merchantmen, as well as the little bag of dried fruit for dessert. She also directed that the Quel’Thalan Rangers - who were huddled in misery at the taffrail - should be given the last drops of her seasickness potion. Frankly they needed it more than her.

Dinner was everything charming. Clyburn was solicitous; he had mashed the biscuit up into a paste - which had hidden the weevils admirably - and used it as the base for a meatloaf made of only the choicest pieces of salt beef. To cap off this culinary tour de force he produced a pot of mustard, thereby securing Fitz’s undying loyalty.

The officers of Tenacity had been invited for propriety’s sake, and every one of them tucked into this masterpiece appreciatively. The talk was bright - Jess was lively company, and the Kul Tiran uniform she had cobbled together made her hair look like burnished gold. Sprocket, especially, looked struck with admiration.

But Fitz wasn’t worried; she had planned for this very eventuality. One of the rangers had slid her a small brick of Quel’Thalan tea in exchange for a rum ration, and Fitz ordered this steeped in the horrible way elves seemed to like. She watched as Sagewood drank her serving with every sign of enjoyment - and how quickly the other officers donned their hats to make an exit.

Fitz smugly leaned back in her chair with her own cup, sipping the unpalatable taste of victory. Between the two of them, conversation flowed on; books - people left behind - mathematics - places they had both visited and liked. Deep in the First watch, four bells rang. Fitz was genuinely surprised to find they had been talking for over two hours.

“I must go on deck,” she said with reluctance, putting down her tin cup. “By my reckoning, it must be almost time to douse the lights. Will you stay below? Hopefully by morning I will offer you good news.”
“I think will come with you,” Jess said, attempting to put on a hat. This was a delicate endeavour - the Kul Tiran design wasn’t entirely compatible with her ears. “My people will want to be ready if a fight breaks out.”

And so they both left the cabin together, walking up the ladder onto the quarterdeck. With a quietly spoken word of good luck, Jess slipped forward and into the darkness.

Sprocket had been a busy man. All was in readiness. The lights were doused, and silence fell across the Tenacity as the ship came about. The sails were tightened until the ship was close-hauled on the port tack, making the most of the stiff breeze.

The moon was out, and the darkness much less impenetrable, but it was still almost impossible to see; Fitz had three keen-eyed Kul Tirans keeping lookout, as well as one willing Ranger. The Tenacity slid through the water like a part of the ocean itself.

Fitz stood still on the quarterdeck. The night wore on, and the moon set. The only interruption was at two bells, when Brother Gull approached - unusually, he had come out to see her rather than the opposite. Fitz touched the brim of her hat to him, stomach briefly fluttering in concern.

“My lord?” she said quietly. “Is something wrong?”

“The ocean is fickle, Fitzwilliams,” said the Tidesage, sounding almost amused. “I will not help you this time. She might decide to share you, or she might not.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Fitz said doubtfully.

Brother Gull made a noise which might well have been a laugh. Then he glided away.

Mrs Pritchard loomed out of the darkness. “Begging your pardon, Captain, but the elf up the mast reckons she can see a sail to loo’ard. Other hands report nothing.”

“Send the hands to their stations,” said Fitz firmly. She couldn’t see anything ethier, but she was no Elf.. “Quietly does it.”

There was the paterring of bare feet across wood as the sailors streamed towards their duties. Fitz knew down below all was already in readiness; the cannons were loaded, and the bulkheads cleared. Possibly they might still slip past. But if now, then Tenacity would have to pummel the Troll so suddenly and so furiously that the enemy didn’t dare follow them. There was a part of Fitz that thirsted for this. The cooler part of her hoped stealth would hold.

She peered out into the darkness, straining for the shape of an enemy, listening with all her might for the sound of the Trolls spotting them in the dark. She understood their night vision to be excellent.

Another figure stepped onto the quarterdeck from for’ard - a figure dressed in Kul Tiran blue, but with an incomprehensible flair of gold on the collar.

“Major,” whispered Fitz. “We may need to bloody our enemy. I suggest you arm yourself.”

The shadow touched the brim of her hat in acknowledgement.

Jackson came running up at that moment; in her hands she held two cutlasses. Sagewood took one and stuck it through her belt, her ears set in a rakish backwards slant.

Jackson was clipping Fitz’s own cutlass on; the bosun’s mate hung it straight, then she slipped a small wooden token into Fitz’s hand, hand-carved in Drust fashion. Fitz hesitated only a fraction of
an instant before tucking it into her pocket with a quiet nod. She then turned to Sprocket.

“Run out the cannons, quietly now.”

Sprocket ducked his head below the hatch. There was a moment's delay, then the low rumble of gun carriages.

Fitz peered into the darkness, searching for her prey, but all her efforts were frustrated. The enemy was shrouded in darkness. With each passing minute she grew more anxious, although she forced herself into stillness. If the Zandalari ship was nearby, then *Tenacity* would eventually be spotted: the trolls saw well in low light. It would be far better to find them, and shoot first. A single broadside of shock and surprise would be enough - *Tenacity* didn't need much in advantage to get away cleanly. But Fitz couldn’t see well enough in the dark to see the trolls at all, yet along launch a broadside with the exact timing needed to score a hit.

She touched the letter in her breast pocket to calm herself - then her eyes widened.

“Major Sagewood,” she whispered. “Can you see the enemy?”

“Of course Captain Fitzwilliams,” whispered Jess back. “A sloop. We are closing well - she is almost abeam.”

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back. They trembled with relief.

“Please inform me when we are almost in range, Major,” she said evenly. “Then, my compliments to you, please fire when ready.”

“As you wish,” she said. There was silence for another few endless minutes.

“Be ready, Captain.”

“Thank you Major. Spread the word, Jackson.”

A whisper was passed down the deck. Then silence, thick and dripping. Tension you could cut. Fitz strained, searching, waiting, her ship in elven hands.

“Fire,” Sagewood said calmly.

“FIRE!” roared the Bosun.

The *Tenacity* physically staggered as her entire broadside went off as one; it struck the enemy like a hammer. Fitz could hear the screams of dying trolls, hear the crack of splintering wood, and smell the gunpowder. The flashes of muskets split the night, but Fitz couldn’t see anything through the smoke. There was yells and rumbles and thumping as *Tenacity’s* guns were reloaded. On the Zandalari there were garbled orders as well - a broadside was let off, but it was staggered and confused. They had mistimed it with the roll and their cannonballs splashed harmlessly into the sea.

“FIRE!” yelled the bosun again, and the *Tenacity* was shoved back into the water again, as if by some mighty hand. Then they were past.

“Set the jib!” ordered Fitz.

“Aye aye, ma’am!” said Mrs Pritchard. “Jackson! Go for’ad and supervise, smartly now!”

“I will go forward also,” Jess said. “My people were in the bow.” She touched the brim of her hat and walked into the darkness.
Fitz felt like laughing. The smell of gunsmoke, the crash of the guns, a wounded enemy - and Tenacity free, free to plunge north, dashing past the Zandalari and into the wide blue sea. Her crew was cheering their own skill and courage; Fitz doubted that there was a even single casualty. The great trust Fitz had shown when handing Sagewood the ship had not been misplaced. In the flash of gunpowder, the enemy sloop was so close the Kul Tiras could have hit the enemy with a pistol-shot as well as a cannon. Fitz did laugh at that, filled with admiration for Sagewood’s daring.

“And so it is,” hissed Brother Gull. “You have chosen wisely.”

Fitz practically leapt out of her skin in fright - she was glad the crew couldn’t see her in the darkness.

By the time she turned around, the Tidesage was gone.

The rest of the cruise was uneventful. With the Zandalari sloop left bloody and slow in the Tenacity’s wake, the crew made fine time, contemptuously out-sailing the remaining blockaders. The elves, once fortified with potion, strode around looking blond and mysterious - the crew were very taken with them, and Fitz had her doubts they would ever want for rum again.

Sagewood herself was toasted in every mess across the ship - her tale of escape and revenge was a a fine, romantic one - which seemed to grow only more fine and romantic as the ship beat back up the coast of Kalimdor. Fitz enjoyed many of the more outrageous additions, although she was certain there were some versions floating around that Clyburn wasn’t telling her about. For her part, Sagewood accepted the attention with gracious forbearance. Best of all, she continued to accept invitations to dinner.

The great Tree looming on the horizon was greeted with smiling hands and pleased officers; Ruth’theran signalled the end of Tenacity’s part of the mission. With regards to her duty, it was with pleasure that Fitz gazed again on the shonky port; she thrilled as the nine-pound saluting gun started crashing out its respect for the admiral’s flag - those things proclaimed Tenacity’s complete success.

But she also hid her disappointment at Jess’s departure being so imminent. The entire journey had taken less than a month.


“Acknowledge, Mr Woods.”

The flagship started saluting back. Fitz counted eleven guns, so it had to be for some other ship - a commander was only entitled to seven.

“Our number, ma’am - anchor.”

“Acknowledge. Mr Sprocket, my compliments, and take station to the weatherward of the flag.”

Hands scurried to a fro; others threw themselves up the rigging. The Tenacity’s nose eased round, leaving a bright trail of foam. As she lost way her sails disappeared; the anchor dropped with a great splash of water.

“Our number, ma’am,” said Woods. “Captain and Commodore to report to Flag.”

“Acknowledge,” said Fitz. “My compliments to Mrs Pritchard, and she is to prepare the gig. And the sideboys.” Then she turned to Sagewood. “Begging your pardon C-commodore, but the Admiral requests your presence aboard the Flag.”

Sagewood was looking at her, face unreadable. “It is a courtesy promotion only, Captain Fitzwilliams,” she said. “My permanent rank is Captain.”
“Very good, ma’am,” said Fitz. Since all appointments as commodore were technically courtesy promotions, this did not settle Fitz’s mind.

“I am sure I need not ask you to treat me as you had before,” Sagewood said. “Considering the rank was only granted to negotiate with the Night Elves.” She had leaned forward, and dropped her voice to the barest whisper.

Fitz panicked quietly. She had hoped that Jess’s squiggly rank marker meant a Commander. After all, Quel’Thalans lived long lives - their rates of promotion was notoriously slow. Some Elven officers spent decades waiting for one of their seniors to retire so they could move up. Sagewood must have proven herself exceptional beyond all of them to fly the broad pennant of executive authority so young.

Around her, Kul Tiran sailors were whispering excitedly and nudging one another; clearly Sagewood being a secret Commodore was beyond their wildest imaginings. Fitz resigned herself to this voyage going down in infamy.

Sagewood was looking at her, still unreadable. Not even her ears were helpful. Fitz smiled ruefully to herself.

“It could not have been more of a pleasure to host you, Commodore,” she said. “I cannot tell you how much. Tenacity was always yours to command, even when you were a Major.”

Jess’s ears slanted forward quickly, then back again. Her eyes relaxed. “Thank you, Captain Fitzwilliams. Will you escort me to the the gig?”

Fitz accepted, and they walked to the waist in silence.

Sagewood paused as the bosun’s pipes twittered, and white-gloved saluted her; there was a lot of pomp for a Commodore leaving a Kul Tiran ship. The commodore in question shot Fitz an exasperated look before she dropped over the side and into the little boat. She was quickly followed by two of the rangers, who were armed to the teeth.

“Jackson?” said Fitz. “Could you bring the gift, please?”

“Aye aye ma’am,” said the bosun’s mate.

The pipes wailed again, as there was a reasonable amount of pomp for a Commander going over the side as well.

The gig’s crew, in their smart checked shirts, began to row for the flag. Sagewood sat in the stern, Fitz opposite her. Jackson was seated in the thwart in front, carrying the thirty-two pound Zandalari cannonball. She was a powerfully built woman, and she needed every scrap of muscle to lift it.

Jess kept giving the hunk of metal some odd looks.

“Captain Fitzwilliams,” she finally said. “Why are we bringing that cannonball?”

“It is a gift for the Admiral,” replied Fitz, pleased with herself. “Do you think he will like it?”

“That depends,” said Jess faintly. “On what it is intended to mean.”

Fitz made a mental note; elvish gift-giving was clearly a dangerous business. It was a timely warning - her father’s compass was tucked away in her chest, and Fitz had thought it might please Jess. Now, however, she knew to enlist expert aid. Perhaps Windrunner - surely Windrunner would help her
determine if it was a good idea?

Fitz was still considering this they reached the side of the Flag. She courteously helped Jess onto the ladder, then organised herself for the grueling task of getting up the side herself. She waited until the pipes had trilled before leaping onto the heaving side of the Flag; two of the sideboys would be removed for a mere commander, and she wanted to give them time to organise it.

Once again, when she reached the top, the red braiding of a Kul Tiran Flag Lieutenant was there to greet her.

“Welcome back, Commander Fitzwilliams,” he said. “Commodore Sagewood has just been telling me of your success. Now that we are all here, if you would be so good as to follow me to the after cabin? The Admiral has prepared a small luncheon.”

Fitz paused just long enough to ask that Jackson be helped aboard with the cannonball, and to discreetly pass over her reports, before following along behind.

Lord McKinley rose when they entered; today he was clean-shaven, and dressed in a splendid uniform. His frame seemed to fill the cabin, and his mood was expansive. Fitz touched the brim of her hat in respect, as did Sagewood. He nodded to them both, and asked them to be seated.

The Admiral kept a fine table. A couple of ducks were served, and some kind of flat toast. Jess washed her hands delicately in the scented bowl of water, then ate in the Quel’Thalan fashion; Fitz resolutely stuck to her fork. Glasses of wine were poured.

The conversation was wide ranging. Jess and the Admiral discussed many important things, most of which Fitz didn’t entirely understand. They discussed the disposition of various kingdoms, the sustainability of certain great merchant houses, and the health of the Quel’Thalan farmlands. Fitz ate her duck toast and listened carefully.

With the end of the food the talk started to naturally die away; Fitz judged it the perfect time to present her gift. Jackson carefully carried the heavy cannonball into the cabin, and stood uncomplainingly as it was thoroughly admired. Finally, McKinley had two of his own hands come to take it away. Then he asked Jess if she would mind being taken on a tour around the ship.

“Commander Fitzwilliams and I must talk logistics,” he explained apologetically. “Will you excuse us?”

Sagewood graciously agreed, and vanished out of the door in the company of the handsome Flag Lieutenant. The Admiral waited until she was surely out of earshot before dropping into his desk chair.

“Good Tides, Fitzwilliams!” he exclaimed. “That was a clever piece of work, gifting me that cannonball. I wouldn’t have guessed how serious this was otherwise. Let me see your reports.”

He grabbed them up and started to scan them quickly. Fitz stayed silent. She had gifted him the cannonball because she thought he might like it, not because it might impart information.

“Twelve sails sighted on a month-long journey, and one of them a Zandalari man o’ war,” said McKinley thoughtfully. “The enemy must truly be alarmed to send such a force to stop the good Commodore. You were boldness itself to escape - good of you to credit the Elves for it. Did you discern what her mission entailed?”

“Not much, my Lord,” said Fitz uneasily. “But it involves timber.”
The Admiral’s browns drew into a heavy frown. Fitz also thought this was strange; the Quel’Thalans had extensive woodlands, filled with fine lumber. The only wood there was a chronic shortage of was from the semi-magic Livewood tree; even then there was plenty, as the wood was only used for the single massive kneel of Elvish naval ships.

Fitz narrowed her eyes. “Sir, do you know if the Quel’Thalans are expanding their navy?”

The Admiral shook his head. “Not to my knowledge,” he said. “They have sixty fine ships.” Then his eyes widened also. “But my news might be out of date.”

McKinley seemed to contemplate the idea. Fitz remained silent.

“Remember, Fitzwilliams,” he finally said, soberly. “That time passes differently for an Elf. We humans might not remember a time when our two nations were at odds, but they do. They already ruled the land, and we have taught them how to belong to the sea. So when the Lord Admiral passes, who knows what the world will bring?”

“I understand, my Lord,” said Fitz.

“I think you do,” said the Admiral. “I will detail you to take the Commodore back to Quel’Thalas; Tenacity is a fast ship, the voyage should only take fourteen months.”

“Aye aye, Sir.”

“Is the damage extensive?”

“No Sir.”

“Good. You will carry the mailbag with you. Signal the fleet to send boats with their post.”

“Aye aye, Sir.”

“I will give you priority for water-hoys and fresh ship’s stores - although you will find the Night Elves rations unusual.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“That’s it then. Sail as soon as you are able. Is there anything else?”

“No, sir,” Fitz said.

“Tides preserve you, Fitzwilliams,” said the Admiral. “Safe voyage.”

Fitz touched her hat, and departed swiftly; she had a ship to prepare for sea, and a Commodore to accommodate. Her duty called.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

In which Fitz struggles greatly with a normal voyage.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jackson was weighed heavily down with mail.

Fitz was frankly amazed at its quantity; hands from all across the Flag had to help Jackson get down the side. As more and more mailbags arrived, Fitz intervened, and had the rest swayed down via rope and tackle. Fitz thought that a dispatch vessel must have made port since Fitz had been away on Tenacity, and every Jack and Jill Tar was now sending home replies to letters and parcels to their loved ones.

When the Tenacity’s gig was about half-way back to the ship, the Flag sent soaring signals up the halliards - an order for the rest of the fleet to also send their mail to Tenacity. Fitz wondered where she would store it all - and also made a mental note to prepare the Midshipman of the Watch. It wasn’t every day a sloop would have to deal with coordinating over thirty gigs all at once.

As they approached the sloop, the challenge cry rang out.

“Tenacity!” yelled Jackson in response.

Fitz felt inexplicably guilty, and fiddled with one of the anchor buttons on her coat. At any other time, the cry would be “Commodore!” in honour of Sagewood - but for some especially salty Kul Tiran seadogs, the Captain and the ship were one living thing. It was for that reason that Fitz was referred to as Tenacity when off the ship - and the reason that her crew would welcome her return above all others.

Fitz wished they had made an exception today.

Her graceless, desperate scramble up the ship’s side never seemed to get any easier - Fitz had watched Jess gracefully climb up before her with envious eyes. The twittering of the pipes rose and fell around her as she saluted the colours on the stern of her ship.

“Mr Woods,” she said, after the fuss was over with. “The Admiral has sent the Commodore’s pennant for Tenacity to fly. See to it, if you please. Then organise the stowage of the mailbags - and make sure you keep them in the mid-tier. Tenacity will have a long voyage.”

“Aye aye, Ma’am,” said the Midshipman.

“Be prepared for more mail to come,” said Fitz, smiling. “We will be a popular destination for the fleet today.”

On the still waters, a dozen small boats were already pulling for the Tenacity. The cries of the oarsmen made it clear they were engaged in a race. Other ships were still lowing their boats into the water, but even from the quarterdeck Fitz could see the heaping stacks of postbags.

It was a beautiful clear day for rowing a small boat; the waters were still, and the sun was out and
shining. Sagewood had gone for’ad to huddle in conference with her Quel’Thalan rangers, and the spot they picked just happened to be the place bathed most fully in sunlight. Even Brother Gull seemed to be enjoying the day, as much as he seemed to enjoy anything; he was shrouded deeply and clutching his staff, which Fitz presumed meant he was having a fine time. Fitz herself was worried she would burn, and remained in the shadow of the mizzen. Since she was already there, Fitz relieved a grateful Sprocket, and began the watering and resupplying of the Tenacity for the long voyage home.

“Ma’am?” said Midshipman Woods, touching the brim of his hat. “There was a bag of personal mail arrived for the crew included with the dispatches. Permission to distribute this to those aboard?”

“Granted,” said Fitz, clasping her hands behind her back. She was pleased; mail was excellent for morale. “But please ensure no skylarking, Mr Woods. High tide tomorrow is two bells in the forenoon, and I mean for Tenacity to sail with it.”

Woods hastily touched the brim of his hat again, trying and failing to hide his excitement. The Thunderhawk convoy had carried post, but the lumbering ships were slow, and letters had arrived outdated. The mailbag now onboard represented the very freshest of news from families at home.

The bulging bag was handed over to a strapping bosun’s mate, who began to loudly call out names. A crowd of eager hands gathered around him, hoping for their own name to be called. All across the ship, hands were ripping into envelopes with eagerness.

Jackson appeared at Fitz’s elbow, and handed her a letter from her mother. Fitz was much less pleased with this development, but she wasn’t overly alarmed; they tended towards the harmless. She opened it dutifully.

My Valorous Daughter, she read.

Your letter dated autumn was received by me with Shock and Disquiet. My intention was only for my Dearest Stalwart to have Companionship as she strode forward in Noble Purpose. Surely, I thought, this could only add to her Contentment.

Your strong objections to the Marriage have come as a Shattering Earthquake. Of course, the House of Fitzwilliams would never compel one of its Sparkling Lights to marry against their Firmest Wishes, and I will convey this Aversion to your Bereft Would-be Swain as soon as you confirm to me you wish to do so.

Apropos of Nothing, your Fledgling Hero sisters and I have been forced to move from our previous Lodgings. The building was condemned. Our Desperate Plight was relieved by your Kind and Beautiful Current Betrothed, who presumed upon her Future Family Ties to move us into her Public House. I therefore insisted that the Navy Office allow her to draw against your pay and prize-money. Upon presentation of her Betrothal Documents, this was granted. I trust my Angel understands. The cost of our keep is a strain and our Financial Position is otherwise Perilous.

I await your Inexorable Instructions

Your loving

Mother

Fitz started. Then she read the letter again, but the words on the page didn’t change. Fitz’s disbelief melted into the white-hot fire of fury and frustration. Not only was she still officially engaged, but her mother had used that status to get at her salary and prize-money. Reading between the lines, it
seemed that all of her accumulated savings - including the sums necessary for her own expenses - was now gone. She wouldn’t even be able to redeem her sword from pawn.

Fitz had never before felt such anger. She flung herself into pacing the windward side of the quarterdeck, which was a span of perhaps twenty feet. The letter was crushed in a vice-like grip, and her furious scowl was enough to discourage those seeking to disturb her.

The ship fairly boiled with activity. The hands picked up on her agitation and threw themselves anxiously into their tasks in case it was they who had displeased her. Normally this would have immediately prompted Fitz to project calm and strength, but in her frame of mind she didn’t even notice them. The area around her emptied of officers until it was quite deserted; apparently they believed she wished for privacy, and regardless it was wise to avoid a Captain who was storming. But she was beyond such concerns as privacy; she was consumed with her unexpected poverty and ill-fortune. It was clear to Fitz that her mother would not act to dissolve the match. A personal visit would be required to this publican - a visit that was at least fourteen months of brutal ocean away.

Fitz ground her teeth, tasting gall and wormwood. She let herself drink her frustration to the last drop. Then she read the letter again, trying to see it from her mother’s perspective.

The tenement where she had grown up had indeed been rotten and unwholesome - that was what made it affordable. Her father was dead, and even fourteen years later there were four Fitzwilliams siblings still dependant. Two of her older siblings had been killed at sea, and their pensions had long since run dry. Mr Midshipman Fitzwilliams was likely still on less than a silver a day. Fitz must be their only source of income; an increase in their costs of living must have strained their mother to the breaking point.

Fitz breathed deeply and mastered herself, but it was with effort.

“Captain Fitzwilliams?” came a soft voice. Fitz turned.

Jess Sagewood was standing just outside the quarterdeck, a hint of concern about her eyes. “Are you well?”

“No,” said Fitz crossly. “I am engaged to be married.”

Sagewood’s ears bolted upright. Fitz began to pace again.

“Quite without my permission,” said Fitz, tapping the railing of *Tenacity* with a closed fist, walking back and forth. “It is an entanglement that will be ended as soon as this journey does. It will be expensive, but it cannot be borne. I do not consent.”

Sagewood was silent.

Fitz turned to her with an expression almost begging. The few steps between them felt like the ocean. “These are not my feelings,” she said. “It was done without my input. You must believe me.”

Sagewood’s ears were flicking back and forth. “I do believe you, Captain,” she said at last. “I am simply struggling to understand. What are the implications?”

“There are none,” said Fitz forcefully. “Save that I am presently not at liberty to accept another proposal.”

Sagewood paused. There was silence for a second.

“So, you would, for instance, accept an invitation to dine?” said Sagewood. Her ears perked slowly
“As long as the salt pork doesn’t ask me for my hand,” said Fitz. “Although I believe what we currently have on board has indeed reached marriageable age.”

“Best to not risk it,” said Sagewood lightly. “Perhaps once we are well underway, I will send Clyburn some of my cabin stores. Until then, will you excuse me, Captain Fitzwilliams?”

Jess smiled; Fitz smiled back, quite involuntarily. Suddenly Fitz felt awed, tongue-tied, and clumsy. She touched the brim of her hat and mumbled some nonsense; it must have been reasonable, as Sagewood said something back and departed for’ard again.

Fitz turned back to her duties – to her pleasure, she found them almost complete. She called over the bosun, and ran down the check-list of things to do before departure.

“My compliments to the crew, Mrs Pritchard,” Fitz said. “The ship has been made ready in sterling time.” She saw a couple of the hands nudge each other with significant looks and idle a little closer. Fitz made her voice a fraction louder, so it would carry. “Everything has been most handsomely done.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Mrs Pritchard, looking cautiously pleased. “Lord Admiral’s finest.”

She touched the brim of her hat when Fitz dismissed her, walking over to supervise the alcohol ration.

Fitz went and looked for the Tidesage; he was now unobtrusively standing at the very stern, cowled, patient as the depths. His staff towered over the flag jack, and his clawed fingers held it lightly.

“Good afternoon, my Lord,” said Fitz.

“All is well,” he hissed. “The sea is calm.”

Fitz was filled with elation. She grinned at him – a brief, flashing smile. “Thank you, my Lord,” she said.

His head dipped in acknowledgement as she touched the brim of her hat. The helmsman, who had heard this exchange, was already quivering with excitement. Fitz knew the news of this excellent omen would race around the crew – the voyage was blessed, and no harm could possibly come to any on board. They wouldn’t have any problems with shirkers for a few days at least.

The rest of the work proceeded at a cracking pace. There was a brief dispute over where to house the Quel’Thalans; Fitz wished to evict the members of the wardroom and place them there, but the elves themselves protested. After several minutes of wrangling, one finally admitted they wanted the heat of the massive stove. Negotiations concluded with sackcloth being nailed up around their nook for privacy and to keep out the draught. The crew jokingly dubbed it ‘Little Quel’Thalas.’

Fitz simply refused to countenance the commodore joining them. Instead she evacuated her after cabin and moved into the purser’s office. Sagewood would be carried in the finest space Tenacity had to offer.

She also ordered Jackson to provide an extra hammock for Little Quel’Thalas. Just in case.

With preparations made, and with salutary bunting flying from the Flag, the Tenacity drew up her anchor and made a course for the open sea. The crew was ecstatic, as any Kul Tiran would be to take to the deep waters on such a fine ship; moreover, this particular crew had been stationed in the
west for quite some time. It had been five years or more for some since they had seen family or friend. They raised a mighty cheer as the ship gained speed, cutting a fine bright path through the water as she sailed sou-east for home.

They had left on the very first day of a western summer – Fitz planned an easy lope down the coast of Kalimdor to catch the trade-winds. They would then pass below the Great Maelstrom, letting its massive currents speed their journey, and tack immediately up to avoid the Straits of Zandalar. Even in a ship as fast and bonny as the *Tenacity* this was no easy journey.

The first several days passed in a blaze of activity. Fitz was so engrossed in the business of navigation, and setting the drill plan, and the ship’s trim, that she had almost forgotten about her invitation to dinner; it was midday on day eight when Clyburn knocked on the little purser’s office. He had obviously just returned from the Tidesage’s weekly service – his head was neatly wrapped in a blue bandanna as he poked his head inside. There wasn’t room enough for him to come inside any further.

“Begging your pardon Captain,” said Clyburn, looking shifty. “But the Commodore requests the pleasure of your company this evening for dinner.”

Fitz looked up from where she had been methodically updating the log. “I would be delighted!” she said with real feeling. “Please convey my acceptance to the Commodore.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Clyburn with satisfaction. “She suggests four bells in the dogwatch.”

“Excellent. Will you attend me at three bells, Clyburn? I will need help tying that infernal cravat.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

Fitz found returning to the paperwork slightly difficult; it was only with discipline that she was able to do so.

By the time four bells rang out on board the ship, night had fallen over the waters. The great tree still cast a shadow which blotted out the moon. Fitz, tucked into a space so small she was barely able to sleep, had to get changed inside the wardroom. Jackson helped with the cravat. Clyburn was busy cooking.

The evening passed much as it had the when returning to Darnassus, except Jess was now the host, and Fitz the invited visitor. Sagewood served seasoned chicken and a medley of unidentifiable vegetables; Fitz ate it, and marvelled that it didn’t taste of brine.

As the evening wore on, the other officers laughed, drank rum, and occasionally burst into shanties – they even sang Fitz’s personal favourite, which was a classic about getting drunk and fighting in a pub. Fitz noted with interest that the Commodore didn’t entirely know what to do during the singing. She certainly didn’t join in, and the slant of her ears seemed uncertain. Fitz thought maybe Jess just wasn’t confident enough; after all, Fitz herself sang only softly, and was never the caller.

It seemed like no time had passed before the shanties turned melancholy. Fitz normally used this to tell her when to cut off the alcohol; Fitz managed to catch Clyburn’s eye just as Sprocket began crooning about sailors doomed to roam the ocean forever. Clyburn was back in a twinkling holding the after-dinner refreshments. For a craggly, battered sailor, he did a fine job of looking down his nose at all the other officers, even in his checked shirt and bare feet.

“Tea, sirs or madams?” he said. “Elven style.”

Around the table there was the scraping of chairs. Figures reached for hats, stooped under the low
decking, and made their goodbyes to the Commodore.

Fitz leaned back in her chair, entirely pleased as she took her tin mug from the battered tray. Jess smiled at her. Life was excellent.

Sagewood then asked her a technical question about the trim of the Tenacity, which segued into other topics; mathematics, timekeeping, and charming small-talk. Their evening conversation was just as successful as the first time they had spoken, and Fitz lingered until the edge of impropriety before making her own farewell.

A certain routine developed over the months that followed. Fitz took the morning for paperwork and inspections; the afternoon for drill. About one evening in five the Commodore would host a dinner – the remaining nights Fitz stood watch, underneath the clear moon. Fitz found this life very pleasant indeed.

As the months wore on, the voyage became remarkable for its uneventfulness. The weather was excellent; rain fell regularly enough to refresh water, but otherwise it was sunny and the breeze was steady. Fitz, whose prior experience suggested this was unusual, copiously drilled the crew. For roughly two weeks she didn’t sleep well – she constantly roaming the deck, eyeglass fixed on the horizon, waiting for the enemy to show themselves. They never did. The only unsatisfactory thing was that Fitz was unable to reprise her good fortune so far as to find another of the Maelstrom’s shifting currents.

By month five, she was able to sleep through her periods off watch again. The crew had fully embraced the idea that the voyage really had been blessed by the Tides; their confidence was infectious. Brother Gull was toasted by every mess on board the ship, and superstitious offerings of rum were left on the deck around him - even as the crew remained deeply wary of actually getting too close. Fitz continued to drill them, just in case, but after six months, the sailors were perfection itself.

The broad Commodore’s pennant flew from the mainmast, and Fitz took great pleasure in it bravely streaming in the wind. The Commodore herself was a cheerful, exotic presence for all on board. Her rangers continued to live next to the stove – Fitz noticed now that winter was upon them, the stock of blankets seemed to be depleting much faster than other line items. The elves drilled sometimes on the foredeck, and those sessions were always watched by a crowd of goggling hands. The sparring was especially popular; Kul Tiran sailors would bet on anything at all, and this was no exception. Hands cheered on each fighter lustily.

It was one of these mornings that Fitz walked up to find the Commodore had joined into these games. She stood in the centre of a ring of cheering Kul Tirans, dressed in her undershirt and trousers; Fitz’s eyes caught on the smooth muscles of her arms as she crash-tackled a second Elf, flipping him over.

Sagewood stood up over him as he groaned. Her grin was ever-so-slightly feral, and her ears slid into a rakish angle. “Better luck next time,” she said to him. “Are there any other challengers?”

The Kul Tiran crowd roared its approval, but no one stepped forward. Fitz found herself pushing through them. Her fingers were unbuttoning her jacket almost without her input. As she stepped into the ring, she dropped it into Clyburn’s outstretched hands.

The little crowd went wild as the fallen elf scrambled away. Sagewood’s grin faltered for an instant.

“I didn’t take you for brawler, Captain Fitzwilliams,” said Sagewood.
“You mustn’t know many Kul Tirans,” said Fitz. “We’re the Lord Admiral’s finest. Are you withdrawing?”

Sagewood’s eyes widened. “No,” she said. “Playing with my food.”

Fitz laughed. In an instant Sagewood had rushed across the circle, hoping to take advantage of her distraction. Fitz jumped sideways to avoid it, grabbing at one of Jess’s arms as it swung past.

They were the same height, but Sagewood was powerfully built and knew how to maximise every ounce of the weight advantage. It was also clear that she had been formally trained; Fitz, by contrast, had learned her combat in the same place as all Kul Tirans – a couple of bar brawls followed by a naval boarding action.

They struggled, trading blows, Jess hampered by Fitz’s grip on her arm. Finally, with a sharp twisting motion, Jess managed to pull herself free. Fitz was impressed. So was the crowd, if the baying was any indication. Fitz was weedy, but her muscles were honed from six years of climbing up rigging; her arms were like corded steel. Sagewood danced away, then rushed again - Fitz ducked under this charge, kicking out at Sagewood’s legs.

Sagewood twisted like a snake. Even as the elf was falling from having the legs taken out from under her, her hands were getting a good fistful of shirt, and momentum was a cruel god. Fitz felt herself yanked off her feet, crashing to the deck with a heavy thump.

Fitz opened her eyes and stared up into Sagewood’s grey ones.

“Gotcha,” said Jess, grinning. Her ears were set at a cocky angle. Behind her, the crowd was losing its collective mind.

Fitz grinned back. “Indeed, Commodore Sagewood.”

Jess got up, and offered a hand; Fitz gripped it, and found herself being pulled smoothly to her feet.

“This dinner?” said Sagewood lightly.

“With pleasure,” said Fitz.

Those dinner invitations continued to arrive, although that was the last time they sparred. Instead Fitz and Sagewood spent many hours by themselves talking. In the chill comfort of the great cabin, their talks was much better than they had ever been in Quel’Thalas - even as Fitz struggled through those conversations about politics. But Fitz was an excellent listener, and Sagewood was a real expert. Fitz decided she could enjoy this time aboard the Tenacity, and she could enjoy the commodore’s regard while she had it.

Fitz found herself waking for her watch shaking off dreams of grey eyes and golden hair, layered with the anguish of loss.

The Commodore, for her part, began finding excuses to drop by the little purser’s office during the day – once it was to fetch Fitz to see a pod of baleen whales – another it was to begin a technical discussion of the rigging of Elvish merchant ships. Fitz would push aside the paperwork gladly, and ask Jackson if she would return later. Sagewood was like the north pole, and herself the compass needle. If they were staying put and not going up on deck, then there was no space, and she always felt awkward. But Jess never seemed to mind. Whenever Sagewood walked out, she carried a little more of Fitz’s heart with her.

Seven months into the voyage, just after Fitz’s twenty-fourth birthday, the ship had hove-to at a small
island for water. Fitz was called up onto the deck by Jackson, who explained there was a minor manning problem.

“Mrs Pritchard?” said Fitz, slightly impatiently. “What seems to be the issue?”

Pritchard removed her hat and turned it in her hands, nervously.

“Well ma’am,” she said. “It’s just that the hands don’t really want to go there without the Commodore.”

Fitz looked at her incredulously. “The hands of the Tenacity refuse to go get water without the Commodore.”

“Yes ma’am. She’s good with the water, ma’am.”

“Good with the water?” Fitz was confused.

“Yes ma’am,” said Pritchard, slightly miserably. “The last stop she came along to stretch her legs, and said the spring we were going to use was all bad, ma’am. Used her magecraft to find it out – glowed blue and everything. The hands are insisting she come.”

Fitz scrubbed her face with her hands. Then she strode over to the waist, and looked over the side of Tenacity; looking back up at her guiltily were eight fine Kul Tiran sailors and a dozen barrels.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Fitz, calmly. “Pull away for the island, if you please.”

They knuckled their foreheads and ducked their heads in acquiescence but didn’t move towards the oars.

“Ma’am,” said one diffidently. “Wouldn’t it be a lovely day for the Commodore to come for a walk, ma’am?”

Fitz felt a quick flash of temper, which she tamped down. Sailors were superstitious; this particular new quirk of her people was at least reasonably understandable.

“The Commodore is a busy woman,” said Fitz. “Her time is precious.”

“She’d do it for you though, ma’am?” burst out another, before she was roundly shushed quiet by the rest of the boat.

Fitz ground her teeth in frustration. Then she stalked aft to the hatch and dropped down into the chill of the ‘tweedocks. The Marine sentry stationed by the door saluted her smartly – the ranger also lurking gave her a casual wave.

“Come!”

Fitz pushed inside.

“Captain Fitzwilliams!” said Sagewood brightly. “What brings you here?”

“My crew,” said Fitz, her irritation dissolving into ruefulness. “I’m very much afraid they think you’re lucky.”

She quickly outlined the situation. Before she had even reached her request, Jess was standing and putting on her hat.
“No harm,” said Sagewood, smiling. “It is a little enough magic, and it does support the health of the ship. I find myself thinking a walk in the sunshine does appeal.”

Fitz watched from the quarterdeck as the gig rowed away.

That evening, Sagewood invited the officers to dine. She had returned bright from the exercise, and looked increasingly restless as the dinner wore on; the officers cleared from the after cabin with alacrity after the meal itself was finished. Fitz thought this was just as well – they had run out of Elvish tea long ago and now she was simply bluffing them.

“Thank you, Clyburn,” said Fitz, as she had said every other time before. “I will take a cup of tea, if the Commodore will also indulge?”

Sagewood was sitting at the head of the table Jackson had carved. She was leaning back, tracing the wood of the table, looking quite at her ease. “It is a fine night,” she said instead. “Perhaps you would you escort me onto the main deck? I wish to take a final view of the island. I believe this may be the last night I will ever see it.”

“I would escort you with pleasure, ma’am,” said Fitz, who couldn’t believe her luck.

The main deck had a brisk evening breeze, and Fitz could see Jess tremor ever so slightly. The Kul Tiran clothing was a lot lighter than the Quel’Thalan issue; Fitz rebuked herself for not thinking of this, and turned to ask Clyburn for a scarf. He vanished down below.

The darkness enclosed them intimately, like it was only they two in the entire world. Fitz coughed lightly and stood with as much space between them as propriety allowed.

The walk, when it began, was slow and aimless; the Tenacity was not a large ship, and there was nowhere in particular to go. They mainly spoke of the sea. Jess’s eyes sparkled with joy as she recounted learning to sail, her hands gesturing for each remembered tack and jibe. Fitz was mesmerised by this passion, until Jess mentioned that the Lord Admiral herself had provided instruction. Then Fitz was only amazed. She found herself touching her epaulette self-consciously. Jess didn’t seem to notice, caught up in recounting Lady Proudmoore’s delight at an elf without seasickness.

They passed a few sailors attending duties on deck; sidelong glances followed them as they walked past. No one was quite bold enough to stare openly. Clyburn was pacing after them in case they needed something, and Fitz thought it might be his flat stare that secured their privacy, to a point. On the other side of the mast, an older sailor coincidentally began to sing one of the most romantic of Kul Tiran shanties. Voices around them joined in, picking out the chorus carefully. Fitz swallowed nervously, and her hand involuntarily twitched.

“I have never heard this one,” murmured Sagewood, softly. “Who is it about?”

“The Lord Admiral,” said Fitz.


“The first verse is about how the Lord Admiral is a mighty, roaring seadog.”

“Naturally,” said Jess. “How else would one start a song?”

“Yes,” said Fitz, grateful this was understood. “And the second verse is about how she fell in love with her own wife.”
“Ah,” said Jess. “That is a good story.”

Fitz stopped, and turned towards the singer. Jess stopped also. In the darkness, Fitz could just see her ears had cocked forward, listening intently.

The singer had a fine bass; he lamented that the Lord Admiral was forced to leave her True Love behind every year to sail the Ocean Blue. The others joined in dolefully, asking if this year would be the year she would return to shore to find her General wasn’t waiting for her.

Jess’s ears flickered mightily. “This is romantic for a Kul Tiran?” she said, sounding a little disbelieving.

“Well,” said Fitz, extemporising. “Sailors can be gone a long time.”

The third verse started; a promise that one day the Lord Admiral would go home for good, her dominion secured, and never part again from the Ranger-General. The caller sung the part about the kissing with especial zeal.

“Wha… but what happens if the sailor singing this really has been left by their spouse?” said Jess incredulous. Her ears had shot upright, slightly dislodging her hat.

“Don’t worry. The last verse is about the sea,” said Fitz. “And then going to the pub to drown yourself in rum.” She couldn’t help herself, she reached forward to straighten Jess’s headwear, her hand lingering.

“Of course,” said Jess faintly. Her ears slid forward, but she stood still under Fitz’s hands.

Fitz was in tremendous trouble. Sagewood was warm under the moonlight, the ocean was all around them, and the crew was singing romantic music. Jess smelled of salt and sunlight; of sea-soaked timbers, soap, and wool. Any Kul Tiran would find this charming, and Fitz was deeply Kul Tiran.

Her fingers prickled where they almost touched Jess’s face. It was a real force of effort not to step that half-step closer, to tuck herself alongside the heat of Jess’s flank, to touch the point of one gorgeous ear.

But that would be forward – incredibly forward – forward to the point where it would be scandalous. And Fitz could not shake the thought that all of this was based on a lie; that Jess would never walk with her like this if she knew the full extent of how poor and distant the Fitzwilliams’ really were from Jaina Proudmoore. Fitz swallowed, her mouth dry, and stepped back again; Jess followed her lead. When they took their leave of one another at the hatchway, Fitz felt like she was made of stone; Sagewood’s face was in shadow, but her hand reached out, and Fitz’s hand clasped hers in a parody of a handshake before they both moved away.

“Thank you for the walk, Captain,” said Sagewood. Her ears wriggled, just slightly. “I hope you will join me again.”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat and slipped back towards the aft of the ship. Jess stepped below. She would relieve Sprocket, and stand on the leeward side of the deck. Hopefully the cold seawater that would strike her there would act to bring her racing heart under control.

The next two months were pure, unmitigated torture. Jess had asked that she be allowed to stand watch with the rest of the officers; the part of Fitz that organised the watch-bills was delighted at the promise of extra sleep. Another part of Fitz that was only concerned with the honour of the Commodore was horrified. Sagewood insisted. “I am only Commodore as a courtesy to the Night Elves,” she said. “What is a Commodore with no fleet of ships? When I return, I will be a Captain
again. It is good for me to practice standing watch.”

Captain Fitzwilliams, who was uncomfortably aware that she was currently standing under the streaming pennant of Sagewood’s authority, reluctantly allowed herself to be persuaded.

But that meant that Fitz and Jess were often on the deck together, issuing instructions and discussing the proper set of sail. Sagewood was a superb watch stander; her orders were crisp and her decisions regarding the sails lean and elegant. She also had a cold temper, as Midshipman Woods found during cannon drill when his division fired prematurely. Fitz found it all unbearably wonderful. She struggled mightily against her own desires. Sagewood was no longer some point to which Fitz oriented; she was the maelstrom. Fitz felt the tug of her presence everywhere she went aboard her little ship. It was difficult to prevent herself from pining in ways such that the crew would notice.

Everything, however, also seemed determined to remind Fitz that Sagewood was out of her romantic reach. The Broken Isles were sighted on the horizon, loomed, then began passing by. Fitz was tormented not just by the talk of important personages at dinner – it was how everyone else related to Sagewood herself.

Fitz had been inspecting the galley in the tenth month, when the Rangers hailed her over to show her the improvements they had made to their nook. It was indeed impressive; oakum had been employed to make throw-pillows for the deck, and the hammocks had been slung long and low. The elves lay on them, half-propped on an elbow, idly playing a card game.

“Good morning, Captain Fitzwilliams,” one said with a jaunty salute. “How is the Commodore today?”

“Good morning, Ranger-Corporal,” said Fitz, slightly puzzled. “I am afraid I haven’t seen the Commodore as yet. Shall I present to her your regards?”

The Ranger grinned at her slyly. “Thank you,” she said. “We watch out for her overmuch, perhaps. But I am a friend of her mother’s, and she is dear to all of us.”

“Brigadier Sagewood is an impressive officer,” said Fitz, wondering where all of this was going. “It must be a pleasure to be under her command.”

“Yes,” said the elf, looking proud. Her ears cocked forward. “The Sagewood family have been especially blessed with talent these late few hundred years. It is no wonder they are favoured by the Ranger-General herself. If they are not nobles yet, then they soon will be.”

Fitz was uncomfortably reminded of her own family’s decline; their reputation for being poor sailors had been well earned. “Well. Perhaps the particular merits of Commodore Sagewood will be instrumental in that regard.”

“If not by appointment, then perhaps by other means,” agreed the elf. “Surely anyone would be honoured to receive her suit for marriage. Even a noble.”

“Surely,” said Fitz faintly.

Then she took her leave politely and fled.

By the eleventh month, Tenacity was rounding the last of the Broken Isles, and Fitz admitted to herself she was helplessly in love with Jess Sagewood. Her hands trembled when the elf came near, and she had to deliberately slow the beating of her excited heart before talking to her. Fitz also found herself doing ridiculous things; she sought out Clyburn to make sure Jess was eating properly, that extra blankets were issued to her, and that her people had enough of the seasickness potion to be
comfortable. Clyburn would always knuckle his forehead to these kinds of requests, and his facial expression gave nothing away - but Fitz thought darkly he might suspect something.

By month twelve, everyone was bored out of their minds. The novelty of land had well and truly worn off, especially as *Tenacity* wasn’t pausing at any of the small ports or towns along the route. The weather continued as it had been; regular rain and sunshine. The winter they had sailed through was uncommonly mild, although every elf on board seemed to brighten with the hotter temperatures of summer. Fitz had run out of reading material long ago, and her fall-back plan of terrorising the Midshipmen with geometry had reached the point where they were sadly now all quite competent. Without action – or even the hint or the threat of action – every drill had to be carefully constructed to avoid sloppiness in the hands. Watch standing, especially, held a certain sameness. The only relief was the Commodore’s dinners – Fitz and Jess didn’t necessarily talk for hours anymore. Sometimes they would just sit with a cup of tea in comfortable silence, enjoying each other’s company.

“Tell me about your family,” said Sagewood into one of these silences.

A cup of Kul Tiran tea steamed next to her – Fitz thought Clyburn might have added more than a dash of rum to it. It was hard to tell, as the water was not fresh. Sagewood was on the final drops of a whiskey bottle she had been nursing since Kalimdor.

“My family?” said Fitz. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything,” said Sagewood. “What is your mother like?”

“An ambulatory pile of ruffles,” said Fitz. “With a dash of flightiness.”

Jess’s laughed, then her ears cocked curiously. “Is she proud of you being at sea?”

Fitz contemplated this muzzily. Perhaps there had been far more rum in her drink than she had thought.

“I suppose,” she finally said. “Although two of my brothers have already perished in the Lord Admiral’s service. I think she wants me to marry well before I follow suit.”

“Is that so?” Jess looked pensive. Her ears slanted backwards. “Will she try and affiance you off again, do you think?”

“Probably,” said Fitz. “Depends on the person offering, I guess. What about yours?”

“Will mine try to marry me off?” laughed Jess. “No, never. My mother knows I do things in my own time.”

Silence fell over the cabin again. Sagewood looked thoughtful, sipping her whiskey slowly, occasionally shooting quick glances at Fitz. Hazy in the warmth of the rum, Fitz didn’t really notice.

“I love the sea,” said Jess, apropos of nothing. “But I do miss my family.”

Fitz tilted her head, listening.

Jess swirled the drink in her glass. Her ears drooped. “My own sister… she and her husband both died in a hunting accident a few years ago. A river flooded, and they were swept away.”

“I am so sorry,” said Fitz, gently.

“Thank you,” said Jess. “But it means my nephew… he is only a quarter-elf, and he grows so
quickly. I am always conscious of what I will miss.”

Clyburn appeared like magic to refill each glass. Fitz eyed him suspiciously, but his demeanour was coolness itself. The officers waited for him to exit before continuing.

“Humans do grow up quickly,” said Fitz, muzzily trying to lighten the tone. “My own sisters, I remember chasing them as they crawled underneath the furniture. But the youngest must be – oh, at least fourteen by now. Almost old enough to take the Navy exam.”

“You haven’t known trouble until you’ve met my nephew,” Jess said, her face twitching into a smile, and her ears perking. “He’s half Kul Tiran, you know. Trying to keep him away from the shoreline is a real exercise.”

Fitz leaned forward, confidingly. “My mother had triplets.”

“…I stand corrected,” said Jess, dryly.

Silence fell over the little cabin again.

“How old are you, anyway?” asked Jess. Her ears cocked forward. “It is difficult for me to tell, with humans.”

“Twenty-four,” said Fitz. “My birthday was this past winter.”

Jess looked at her, then frowned. She leaned forward to stare even more closely at Fitz’s; the whiskey seemed to have finally bit deep. She crinkled her brows in confusion, and her ears swivelled back and forth.

“Humans age very strangely,” she said finally. “Sometimes they look younger than what an elf would, and sometimes you all look older.”

Fitz nodded at this piece of wisdom. “We’re just a bit contrary, I suppose. How old are you?”

“One hundred and fifteen. But my brother in law looked older,” Jess said sagely. “He was… actually I think he might have been your cousin. Trevor Buckland?”

Fitz looked at her in vague distress. The Bucklands were indeed her distant cousins; the most talented, rich, and important of them all. It seemed the house of Buckland had been Blessed with all the gifts the Tides could offer, and members currently occupied several important Admiralty posts. It was widely held in Boralus that the Bucklands might even be the next line of Lord Admirals, Tides grant that time be far away. Fitz could still remember being a child at one of the Anniversary Balls, watching them coldly snubbing her mother.

“Yes,” said Fitz evenly. “But I have a lot of cousins. I don’t think I knew him.”

“A shame,” said Jess sadly. “He was a nice man, and my sister loved him.”

Fitz spent the rest of the evening feeling small.

Jess’s lively curiosity expressed itself in other ways. Curiosity was a virtue for a naval officer, but also a terrible misfortune for someone twelve months into a fourteen-month voyage. Fitz seethed with shame at not being one of those Captains able to provide books and games.

Happily, Jess was capable of making her own amusement, and often stopped to talk to the crew. She was endlessly fascinated by them; it had come out early that her father was from Lordaeron, and her
only introduction to Kul Tiran previously had been through the Lord Admiral.

“Jackson,” she said one day. “Can I ask you about your carvings?”

The bosun’s mate had frozen, before she had shot a sidelong glance at Fitz. Clyburn also looked up with slight alarm. They need not have worried. Fitz nodded permission; by now she was truly comfortable with the idea that the water would be fresher and the timbers less inclined to leak. Jackson put down the rope she had been coiling to knuckle her forehead at Sagewood.

“Yes ma’am,” she said shyly. “What about my carvings, ma’am?”

“They have a certain tackiness,” said Sagewood thoughtfully. “Like the sap of a plant.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Jackson again. Clyburn nudged her; she mumbled something inaudible to him, then cleared her throat. “Drust, ma’am.”

“What is a Drust?” said Sagewood.

“Tree witch, ma’am,” Jackson said.

“A druid on the ocean,” Sagewood said, sounding surprised. “What brought you to the Navy?”

Jackson frowned at her in puzzlement. “Press gang, ma’am,” she said. “Used to be an apple-grower. The press grabbed me right around harvest time and brought me aboard the Bluebird.”

Sagewood looked at her with a strange expression. “Ah yes,” she said, sounding faintly distressed. “The Kul Tiran's conscript their sailors. I had forgotten.”

Jackson stroked the railing of the Tenacity. “It’s not so bad, ma’am,” she said. “It was hard at first, but being surrounded by all this wood… it’s like having your own little forest ma’am.”

“The ocean surrounds and provides for those she loves,” hissed Brother Gull. “As it should be.”

Fitz didn’t even bother to be surprised by his presence at this point – neither did either Jess or Jackson. The Tidesage appeared and disappeared as he pleased, looming over important conversations as well as the most trivial. After twelve months they were all used to it.

“The master of the hunt directs the hounds, my Lord,” said Jackson, respectfully. Her tone gave every indication of agreement, while her words meant literally nothing to Fitz. “They course where they are sent, and nevermind who owns the fields.”

Brother Gull nodded approvingly. They all contemplated this.

“Thank you, Jackson,” said Sagewood, also sounding slightly confused.

“You’re quite welcome, ma’am,” was the reply. “I will bring around a token for good fortune for questions. You can never have enough luck for questions, ma’am.”

Sagewood didn’t really ask her anything more.

By the end of thirteen months, the crew was counting down practically every hour left until they docked. Fitz was as well, albeit for a different reason. The voyage had been like a dream; like a wonderful, perfect dream where she was allowed to spend as much time with Sagewood as good manners and close quarters coordinated to allow. Her tumble headlong into adoration was complete; it took every ounce of her self-control to keep it off her face when they interacted.
Her general excitement was also building for reasons she didn’t entirely understand; there was something greasy in the air and sky. Fitz took to staring south, unsettled. It was like electricity was building up over her skin. She paced back and forth on the windward side of the deck, unable to suppress the energy which sparked across every nerve. Her hands itched to heave on ropes; she climbed the mast at least twice a day, and forced herself down the backstays again only with effort. She wished she could spar with Jess; the ferocity of grappling with her suddenly sounded extraordinarily appealing.

Older hands watched her disquiet and whispered to the younger; rain-gear was suddenly in evidence all over the ship, and the weather-worn dogs on hatches were replaced with bright new stays. Every day, Fitz grew more and more restless.

It was only two weeks until Fitz believed they would make landfall. They were approaching midway through the gullet; Kul Tiran sails were a frequent occurrence, and the signal middy was kept busy throwing up hails and greetings. The golden trees of Quel’Thalas had appeared off the starboard bow, and the Rangers had almost climbed over the railings in their pleasure and eagerness to be home.

Their pleasant sail was finally interrupted, however, by the three-reef gale that Fitz had been unconsciously anticipating – the first proper storm that had struck the ship since setting out from the western fleet. It was a wild, unseasonable summer tempest, blowing up from out of the south. Fitz sent the idlers below before demanding the watch – when Sprocket came up to relieve her, she sent him straight back down below again. Finally, everything made sense to Fitz. Under the driving rain in her tarpaulin, riding the heaving deck, the storm seemed to take hold of her; it seized her unsettled emotions and drove her forward. She paced up and down the deck until she could hold it in no more, and she laughed with joy at the power of the ocean and the intensity of her reaction to it. In the face of the raging storm, her insecurities seemed pathetic.

“Captain Fitzwilliams?” came the yell. Jess walked up onto the deck with difficulty; she made heavy use of the lines strung to aid movement. “Are you well?”

Fitz flashed her a cocky smile. “Commodore!” she roared back, then got hit with a huge spray of water. She shook herself like a dog, grinning wider.

Jess was grinning fiercely at her as well. “Having fun, Fitz?”

“I could be having more,” said Fitz, grabbing a line to help her stride across the deck. The weather seemed to sweep her up. All the restlessness, all the unsettling energy she had been riding needed an escape. She dropped the line, slipped one hand behind Jess’s frozen neck, looked into her storm-grey eyes. Then Fitz kissed her with all the force burning through her, intensified by three years of pent-up passion.

The kiss was fervent and heady; Jess didn’t even have a flicker of hesitation about returning it. Fitz gripped Jess’s Kul Tiran jacket for purchase with one hand, and dropped the other to wrap around her waist. Jess’s hands clawed for purchase against Fitz’s back as the ship reeled again. When they drew apart, Jess looked profoundly shocked – but she also looked hungry.

Fitz and Jess looked at each other for a single, endless moment – then the wind screamed through the rigging. Fitz came back to the storm, and walked forward to find some hands to pull in more sails; the rain was still lashing the deck and visibility was poor. Jess cast a magelight to help her find her way. When she got back to the quarterdeck, Jess was standing with her hands behind her back, looking at her with indecipherable eyes. She said nothing - not that anything could be heard over the gale. With a wave, Sagewood dismissed the light, touched the brim of her hat, and strode back down the hatch. Fitz, who still burned with the power of the sea, watched her go regretfully.
Later, Fitz didn’t entirely understand why she had done it. Well, she did know really – she had wanted to kiss Sagewood for a long time – but not how she had lost control so completely. In the days that followed she thought on it often, and almost managed to convince herself it had never happened – except with a guilty pleasure that burned bitterly in her heart. The last few days of the journey was a torment; neither Jess nor Fitz had mentioned anything had changed, and they had gone back to how all was before. Dinner taken in the cabin with the officers, then either tea or a walk. The conversations remained light, but Fitz imagined an undercurrent of tension lay between them.

Tenacity wore into the anchorage at Sunsail with great cheers from every Jack and Jill Tar aboard her – the ship was weathered and worn from her unbroken service, but still was a proud image in the afternoon sunlight. Above her flew the pennant of a Commodore safely home, and the hands had cheered again as the saluting gun crashed out its eleven shots. It had been a journey of unsurpassed good fortune – unbothered by Trolls, weather, or creature of the deep.

Fitz ducked down into her little office to collect up the reports. Jess would be going soon; she would be leaving Tenacity. The actual force of it hit her all at once. Fitz slumped onto her cot and put her head in her hands. Then she got up and walked to the after-cabin.

“Come!” called Sagewood.

Fitz pushed inside and closed the door. She put the box down on the desk.

“Sit down, Fitz,” said Jess. “We have to talk about this.”

Fitz sat, and stared at the top of the table. There was a tentative touch at the back of Fitz’s neck, and she looked up. Sagewood was standing beside her, all power and grace and angles; she had rolled up her sleeves, and the muscles of her arms stood out. Here and there a scar marred their perfection. Fitz wanted desperately to reach out and stroke them, to feel the contrast between those marks and the smooth skin.

Sagewood reached down and took Fitz’s hand in her own, grazing each finger down to the palm. Then she carefully, delicately, kissed the centre of it. Fitz stared up into her eyes; they were soft, a contrast to the planes of her face and the gold of her hair. The dust motes fell around them, dancing in the sunshine slanting through the after-cabin windows.

“Fitz,” she said quietly. “Will you marry me?”

These words landed like a physical blow, shattering the peace of the moment like a pane of glass. Fitz jerked back; her stomach dropped.

“I am still engaged,” stammered Fitz.

Sagewood looked at her, and frowned slightly. “No, Fitz,” she said gently. “You aren’t. Neither you nor I believe that.”

Fitz looked at her helplessly. A thousand thoughts roared through her head. Sagewood was offering herself – she was offering everything Fitz had ever wanted. A lifetime of companionship, laughter, teasing, and wonder, with a woman who understood what it was the love the ocean. Fitz glanced down at her own hands, caught on her own inadequacy. What could she offer in return? She was a lowly Commander, a pauper with a needy family – totally and irrevocably human. A memory of Sagewood’s mother flashed through her mind, her grief and pain when she talked of her human husband. How could she shackle the women she loved desperately into a life of constant absence, poverty, and ultimately loss?
“Ah,” said Jess, sadly. “That is the real problem. You do not believe you are good enough for me.”

Fitz’s face fell.

“You are a Commodore,” said Fitz quietly. “You are a mage, trained by the Lord Admiral herself. You are her most trusted aide. You are from a fine family. I am a talentless cousin so poor and distant no one can quite work out how I’m actually related.”

“No Fitz,” said Sagewood. “You are a highly educated Kul Tiran naval officer, and your seamanship is beyond exceptional. The Lord Admiral favours you. Your crews would die for you.”

“And my duty keeps me at sea,” said Fitz. “I have not set foot on land in six years. You know how Kul Tirans are - how could I ask you to wait for me?”

“I have barely stood on land in years either,” said Sagewood. Her ears quivered in agitation. “But you are not asking me to wait. I am offering.”

“I have literally nothing to offer back,” said Fitz anguished. “I am penniless. My family and I grew up in a tenement. I can’t even afford to eat one meal not pickled for me by the navy.”

“When did I ever give you the impression I cared about any of that?” said Sagewood. Her eyes sparked fire, and she grimaced. “I never asked for your money, or your family! I have only ever asked for you! I am not another of your duties, Fitzwilliams!”

Fitz felt like her heart was being ripped from her chest. “It cannot… I cannot…”

Sagewood glared at her, her ears slanted almost horizontal.

“I cannot stop you being cruel to yourself, Fitz,” she said. “It is as part of you as your ears or your mouth. But I love you. I cannot tell you how long I have loved you. That is why I cannot stay.”

Then she swept out of the cabin with all the dignity of the highest of Quel’Thalan elves. She closed the door quietly behind her.

Fitz doubled over in a rictus of agony. She gasped, struggling for air, gulping down heavy sobs of breath, but this only made her feel dizzy and sick. A small, detached part of her worried she would lose the contents of her stomach across the after-cabin floor; that wouldn’t be fair to Clyburn. There was too much pain for other kinds of self-loathing, although that tickled the edges of her awareness. Fitz was unaware of time; she thought she heard, through the open window of her little cabin, the ships bells ringing. At one point, perhaps, there was the shrilling pipes of the bosun’s mates that meant a post-rank was leaving the ship. But she didn’t give this much mind.

The cabin had long since gone dark when a tentative knocking on the door roused her. With an effort, she recalled that she was still the commander of the Tenacity, that her will still animated the ship. She staggered up, stiff from lying on the cold floor, and made it to the window. The lights of Sunsail Anchorage gleamed merrily off the water; the sea lapped against the stern of Tenacity soothingly.
“Come,” she said, unable to turn away from the water.

“Begging your pardon, Captain,” said Sprocket, sounding hesitant. “The Commodore has gone for shore ma’am.”

“Yes,” said Fitz.

There was another pause. “Permission to call the water-hoys alongside and send a midshipman to the victualling yard?” he said.

“Granted,” replied Fitz. “Make the arrangements.” She thought she should possibly light a lamp; then she discounted the idea. She didn’t want light.

“By your leave then, ma’am,” he said.

She heard the cabin door shut. The ocean spread out below her window, long and dark.

Fitz stared at it for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter subtitle was going to be "In which Fitz finds out she is a massive doofus," but I rather thought the reader should find that out for themselves.
Chapter 18

In which Fitz is not the only Fitz

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Fitz couldn’t sleep.

The night was humid and opening the window for the shallow breeze didn’t help. Clouds scudded lazily across the night sky, and down below the world sweated. The water of the anchorage was calm and steady.

Fitz felt like a storm had slashed through her. Her grief wanted her to cut Tenacity’s anchor immediately and flee across the ocean, her anger made her want to rage against the storm, and her heart wanted her to swim for shore and beg Jess’ forgiveness. In the end, she did none of those things - instead she brooded into the sparkling sea. When dawn arrived her hands were still shaking enough that she couldn’t wield her hairbrush.

“Here ma’am,” said Jackson, who was delivering breakfast. “Pass that brush over. You have some of this.”

Fitz was embarrassed to need the help, but grateful that it had been offered. She picked at her salt pork as Jackson plaited the customary sailor’s braid. Her meat had been boiled, which was normally Fitz’s favourite, but today she could only push it around with her fork.

Clyburn took especial care in dressing her that morning. He handed over each battered piece of her uniform like a squire buckling on armour. With every Kul Tiran button he fastened, Fitz was reminded of the weight of her responsibilities. Jackson slid the final accoutrement - a battered dirk - into place, then stepped back, leaving the path to the door open. The Tenacity’s hold bulged with mail. Fitz’s duty demanded its delivery.

Fitz took a deep breath, ducked under a low-slung beam, and walked to the hatch. The sun had mostly risen - even early, the air was already sticky and hot. The colours mounted on stern drooped limply, and the only boats moving in the channel had oars.

The other watchstanders - Sprocket, Pritchard, and Woods - dropped back as she approached, moving to the lee respectfully. The crew seemed subdued.

“Begin the provisioning, Mr Sprocket,” said Fitz quietly.

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said.

The signal middy was sent scurrying to the halliyards, and the flags soared up to begin provisioning. By six bells, a lighter had swayed out with replacement salt pork and beef in great hogsheads. At eight bells, timber and cordage arrived on a barge. By two bells in the forenoon, they had finished loading the water out of the hoys.

Fitz had forgotten that Elves were terrible gossips.
It was the signal midshipman who approached her, just as Fitz was gathering her bosun’s mates. Parties would need to be organised for shore leave - petty officers for each group, to ensure good behaviour.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said Crosby. “But the fortress is flying our number from the flag-jack.”

“Indeed, Miss Crosby?” said Fitz, puzzled.

“Yes ma’am,” she said. “Two signals: ‘take onboard mail’ and ‘depart for fleet immediately’.”

Fitz paused. “Thank you, Miss Crosby. Please inform Mr Woods to expect significant mail to be delivered to the waist. Please also tell Mr Sprocket to prepare the ship for sea.”

The crew was tired. Fitz was tired. The Quel’Thalan summer was damnable. But the sailors of Tenacity didn’t falter; their backs were straight and their eyes flashed as they ran to their stations. Blocks and tackles were run out. A line was dropped smartly into the water to pull the mail onboard.

“Haul up!” roared Mrs Pritchard, as the sweating sailors heaved the first bale off the Elvish gig. “Sway in now, easy does it! Now let go!”

Fitz was a bit startled; the bosun had just dumped the bale straight down through the hatch. Normally cargo was lowered down carefully - but Mrs Pritchard seemed unconcerned by such minor details. She strode around, roaring more orders. Two more bales were swayed up. Both were dropped with a thump into the darkness below. Fitz narrowed her eyes.

“Mr Woods,” said Fitz. “Mrs Pritchard. A moment, if you please.”

The midshipman nominally in charge of the operation hurried over, touching the brim of his hat - the bosun wasn’t far behind.

“Where is the Elvish mail being stored, Mr Woods?” Fitz asked.

“Not to worry ma’am,” said Woods breezily. “We’ve wrapped it in canvas.”

“That wasn’t what I asked, Mr Woods,” said Fitz.

“Well, the hold is mighty full, ma’am,” Pritchard added, looking shifty. Fitz knew that look; it helped her routinely defeat the bosun at cards. “So we’ve tucked it away soundly in the cable-tier.”

Fitz looked at them both. The cable-tier was the worst place on the ship, mostly occupied by hungry rats and dripping, fetid water. Her thoughts turned to the privations of the crew: the lack of shore leave, the Elvish assumption that they would run Quel’Thalan errands without complaint. She then thought of the scuttlebutt surely racing around the ship regarding Sagewood - nothing was private on a warship.

“Mr Woods,” said Fitz firmly. “Mrs Pritchard. Please ensure the mail is placed in a dry, safe place. The Lord Admiral expects our best, and Tenacity’s honour demands it.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” they both said in unison, slightly abashed.

Fitz strode forward to where the fiddle-player sawed; he was only indifferently skilled, but the sailors heaved on the capstan with a will anyway, cursing each pawl. At the final clank, the bar was sheeted home. A short time later the Bosun’s whistles blew, and sailors streamed up into the rigging - others disappeared into the ‘tweenedecks - yet still more occupied themselves taking down the tackles.
Tenacity cleared back out to sea with the ebb tide. Brother Gull took to his customary spot on the stern, as if the voyage had never been interrupted - the tilt of his head seemed pleased to be sailing out again. But there were no cheers from the crew at their departure, or much sorrow either; the sailors watched the golden trees fall away behind them with haughty disdain.

Fitz turned her eyes to the open sea.

The endless ocean soothed something battered in Fitz; over the next couple of weeks she walked the deck endlessly. Fitz’s duty had steadied her, but it hadn’t helped mend the broken things. Sagewood’s absence was like missing a limb; Fitz was constantly seeing her out of the corner of one eye, only to turn and see nothing. What helped was the spray, the blessed chill, the nauseating pitch of Tenacity with her nose into the waves. With each day that passed Fitz found the feeling of dislocation fading.

The crew also did their best. About eight days out to sea, Fitz noticed the hands had developed new themes to their work songs. After six years, she had believed there were no more shanties left to be heard, but her education was clearly lacking; the crew now sang of lusty seadogs with a girl in every port, the pleasures of paid company, and a sailor’s true love being the sea. Some of these tunes were so spicy they made Fitz’s ears burn. Other efforts were also being made; Sprocket was aggressively chasing invitations to dinner, and was lively company, adapting quickly to Fitz’s long silences. The middies also all seemed unusually keen on pursuing instruction in arithmetic.

These endeavours were not entirely successful, but Fitz was not a fool. On the twentieth day of sailing, she ordered an extra ration of rum for all hands - the hands cheered her loudly as she had the barrel swayed up.

It was under a fine spread of canvass that Tenacity came flying down the Gullet. No enemy interrupted the voyage - apparently their golden luck still held. Warm winds carried them south, and strengthened as the month wore on - the larger waves sent little ship pitching and dancing across the summer waters. The only complication was that the fleet was nowhere in sight. Tenacity ran all the way down to the last rendezvous point, then turned and beat back up again. Lookouts were perched on every mast, keeping a sharp eye out for both friend and foe alike, but they sighted nothing.

The wood creaked under Fitz’s feet as she stood on the windward side of the quarterdeck, spyglass tucked firmly under her arm. Her active mind sought the most expedient solution, but her options were limited. The only choice was for Tenacity to sail endlessly and hope to find the Fleet in transit; there were four summer rendezvous points, so this was likely to take some time.

The summer wore on. Autumn threatened. The Fleet remained elusive. Fitz spent her every waking moment on the quarterdeck, avoiding the after cabin. She hoped the crew believed that she was eager for the Fleet - actually, without Sagewood the room felt empty.

"Sail ho!" came the cry, finally, from the lookout. It was two months since they had visited Quel’Thalas. “It’s the fleet, ma’am!”

"Bear down on them, Mr. Sprocket,” Fitz said.

The crew flew up the mast to see - excited shouts and calls echoed across the little ship. One sailor launched into an energetic jig. Fitz placed her spyglass to her eye, and noted the lines of topsails; her heart stirred with the sight. Her personal world may had been smashed apart like a bowl of eggs, but the precision of the Navy endured.

"Captain, ma’am,” said Woods, touching the brim of his hat. “The ship closest to us is the frigate LAS Irritable , number 79."
"Very well," Fitz said. "Signal midshipman!"

"Yes ma’am!" called Crosby.

"Be ready with the private signal and our number, if you please," said Fitz. "Mrs Pritchard; have the gunner make ready to salute the Flag."

_Tenacity_ bore down quickly. The fleet was in no hurry; the great ships strode proudly across the grey sea, and around their mighty hulls coursed the smaller scouts and outriders. Pennants streamed proudly in the wind, and over the van rode the Admiral’s own standard. Fitz’s ragged heart beat a little faster. The Lord Admiral commanded the hunt, and her faithful seadogs ranged beside her bristling with teeth.

"Our number, ma’am," said Crosby. "Flag to _Tenacity_. Take station to windward of me at two cables’ length."

"Very well," said Fitz. "Acknowledge."

About the whole ship there was a certain tension. It was not every day a mere sloop was ordered to take up station on the flagship itself, and this position of importance would require sailing through the weather column with every massive ship watching. But after eighteen months commanding _Tenacity_, Fitz did not find the calculations overly difficult - and besides, she had seen an expert do it once before. Fitz automatically estimated distance and speed, tides and momentum, then thought about the wind.

"Steady as she goes, Mr Sprocket," said Fitz. "Please have the helm steer smaller."

Then, for the first time in days, she smiled.

Sprocket brightened, looking pleased. “Aye aye Ma’am.” He made a note on the deck log.

_Tenacity_ had a good turn of speed, even after her time at sea - and her rigging made her remarkably handy besides. She flew past the screening frigate like lightning, streaming towards the weather column with a full press of sail. Fitz began to pace the quarterdeck, enjoying the change - it was amusing to consider how quickly she might be able comply with the Flagship’s orders. The moving hazards to her navigation only made the normal maths more interesting.

Mr Sprocket cleared his throat, still smiling. “Shall I send some hands to haul in the jib, ma’am?”

“No need,” said Fitz. “We will wait until we are through - have hands ready to pull in the topsail when we do.”

Fitz was of the opinion that slowing down might actually hazard the ship - if they lingered in the gap, they risked being run down by a ship in the column. The weight of a man o’ war’s bow would dash _Tenacity_ into pieces. Best to fly through the gap as fast as possible, and worry about the sails on the other side. She reassured herself that she certainly wasn’t doing it just to showcase her exceptional crew.

“A touch to starboard, if you please, Mr Sprocket,” said Fitz, clasping her hands behind her back. She noted the wind speed with detached coolness.

He roared out orders, and sailors rushed about to obey - their movements were more than unusually precise. The massive ships of the line crashed north, and Fitz aimed for a point roughly where the quarterdeck was on the Flagship; their relative speeds made that the perfect place to aim in order to interdict the line.
The *Tenacity* handled beautifully under the helmsman's expert hands, slipping underneath the stern of the Flagship.

"Hard to port," said Fitz, sharply "Bring her up, if you please Mr Sprocket. Mrs Pritchard, haul in both the jib, and the topsail."

Lines spun and sailors heaved; the sails vanished like a magic trick. Fitz glanced up, evaluating their position relative to the rest of the fleet; they were exactly to windward of the flagship, with two cables of separation.

“You may begin the salute,” said Fitz, satisfied.

Twenty-one guns for the Lord Admiral. A minute and three-quarters of gunfire.

“Ms Jackson,” she said, once the smoke had cleared. “Please repair to my cabin and fetch the report box. I expect I will be called away shortly.”

"Our number, ma’am!" called Crosby. “Flag to *Tenacity*. 'Welcome. Captain to report aboard.'"

"Reply to Flag," said Fitz. ‘‘Honoured to comply.' Mr Sprocket, you have the ship. Call away the gig."

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said.

The little boat looked fragile when dropped into the heaving ocean; around it moved massive ships of the line, and their shadows blocked out the afternoon sun. Jackson tossed the report-box down to a fellow already abroad it, who nimbly caught it and stowed it underneath a thwart. Jackson then jumped easily into the stern and took the tiller. Fitz clambered down awkwardly after her, landing in the gig like a sack of potatoes. Jackson helped her up; Fitz felt something slip into her jacket pocket.

“Pull for the Flag, if you please,” said Fitz to the crew of the jolly boat, attempting to regain her dignity. The hands wasted no time in knuckling their foreheads and putting their back to the oars. Fitz used the journey to contemplate the huge steep sides of the Flag with trepidation; even with backed topsails, the oarsmen struggled to keep pace with it - the line thrown down was attached with relief.

“Commander Fitzwilliams?” said the smartly dressed officer who greeted her on deck. “Welcome aboard, Ma’am. The Lord Admiral’s compliments, and I am to bring you to her cabin immediately.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” she said automatically. Then she blinked. “Mr Porter?”

Mr Midshipman Porter - rather, Mr Lieutenant Porter - flashed her a quick grin. “A pleasure to see you again, ma’am. You look exactly as when you just stepped off *Intrepid*. I understand you have struggled to avoid adventures since last we spoke.”

“Perhaps so,” agreed Fitz ruefully.

What she really wanted was to ask him about the people of the *Intrepid* - their triumphs, their postings, their troubles. She had not had news of her brother, for instance, except for her mother mentioning he still sailed on that frigate.

Porter looked at her silently, and the gulf in their rank lay between them.

“Will you escort me, Mr Porter?” she said instead. “My previous dealings with the Lord Admiral suggest it is unwise to keep her waiting.”
Porter touched the brim of his hat, and led the way below. Everything was familiar - the slightly worn carpet, the long line of important visitors, the outer office containing a desk. Fitz felt a pang of grief at not seeing Sagewood sitting there with her ears cocked, efficiently screening Lady Proudmoore’s time. Today there was no Flag Lieutenant at all - Porter didn’t have any red braid, so presumably he was on loan from the actual ship’s company.

Fitx stopped at the inner door, and body-blocked Porter from announcing her presence - he fell back a little in confusion, but didn’t protest. Fitz methodically checked her hat was on straight, then wriggled her dirk to make sure it was correctly placed. Finally she smoothed her hair. When she knocked, it was firmly.

“Come!” came the call.

Fitz winked at Porter, pushed open the door and came to attention on the thick carpet. Porter didn’t follow her - the door swung shut behind her.

“Fitzwilliams, Commander,” she said strongly. “Reporting as ordered, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral looked up from where she was sitting behind her desk. Ithedis, the Lord Admiral’s bodyguard, didn’t move - he just pinned Fitz with his eyes.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” said the Lord Admiral. “I’ve expected you for some time.”

“No excuse, ma’am,” said Fitz, then fell silent.

“Missed junctions happen,” the Lord Admiral said dismissively. “Did you bring the post?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fitz. “Approximately four tonnes of it from both Quel’Thalas and Kalimdor, although none of it is sorted.”

Lady Proudmoore sighed and picked up her pen. “It will need to be returned to the post office in Boralus then,” she said. She scribbled something onto the notepad in front of her. “Tell Captain Conrad to make a note. Give him your reports as well.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz.

The Lord Admiral looked back up, and scrutinised her visitor in that way she alone had, where her gaze flayed your skin and saw through the muscle and bones right to the heart.

“You look like hell, Fitz,” she said bluntly. “When did you last sleep?”

Fitz paused. “I am currently dealing with a personal matter, my Lady,” she finally said. Then she fell silent, and clasped her hands behind her back.

Ithedis’s hands caressed his polearm - the man had a face like wood, but somehow he looked menacing anyway.

“Yes. A packet boat from Quel’Thalas arrived two weeks ago,” said the Lord Admiral, ignoring her bodyguard. “Your ‘personal matter’ has caused a minor diplomatic crisis. Apparently my cousin declined an important marriage proposal, and the Elves are taking it as a sign of my waning interest in the alliance.”

Fitz winced, just a little, but said nothing.

Lady Proudmoore was staring at her. “You have terrible timing, Fitz.” She tapped on a neat stack of
letters in a pile next to her. “These are the protests. The ranger responsible for spreading the story has been disciplined, but the Quel’Thalans are making political hay. It’s making it difficult to get the new naval appropriations through the Elvish council.”

Fitz stood silent, waiting for the axe to fall. She flinched as the Lord Admiral leaned forward - with a blast of power, the the entire stack of letters under her hand froze into solid ice.

“Fitz,” she said. “Fuck the elves. I don’t care about their pride - that’s Sylvanas’s problem. I am the Lord Admiral of Kul Tiras. You are mine, and you have done nothing wrong.”

She turned and looked at Ithedis. “I can feel your glower from here,” she said to him. “And you need to stop. I love Jess as well, but this is one of my finest officers, and I am proud she is my cousin. You will respect Fitzwilliam’s choices.”

The elf continued to look wooden, but his ears twitched. It made him look slightly abashed.

It dawned on Fitz, through all her humiliation and embarrassment, that ignoring politics might only really be an option if politics ignored you in turn. That her status as a Kul Tiran noble distantly of the Lord Admiral’s line - begrudgingly and barely acknowledged at home - might well be more when enemies sought a weapon.

The Lord Admiral took her hand off the frozen papers, picked back up her pen, and made another note. “I am not going to punish you, Fitz, but unfortunately I am required to manage this.”

“My lady,” said Fitz. “I am your servant.”

“Hmm. Well, I can’t confirm your promotion to Captain right now, although you deserve it. When it happens I will backdate the seniority, but it won’t be for another six months.”

“I understand, ma’am.”

“Good. Until then I am assigning you back onto my staff. Ever since Sagewood left I have been down a Flag Lieutenant. You are too senior for the position, but it can’t be helped.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“My wedding anniversary is approaching, and I recall that you are excellent with parties; you will attend the Ranger-General and myself there.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Fitz,” the Lord Admiral pinned her with a fierce gaze. “None of this is fair. You are allowed to take care of yourself. Would you tell me what you want?”

Fitz took a deep breath. The Navy was an unforgiving service; it expected its officers to perform, under every circumstance, uncomplainingly and well. Her personal problems were trifling next to the enormous expectation of her duty. The only response possible was to tell the Lord Admiral she wanted to begin her duties immediately.

“My Lord Admiral,” said Fitz. “I request shore leave.”

Lady Proudmoore leaned back, an unreadable expression in her eyes. “I am proud of you for saying so, Fitz. Take the Tenacity - she will be yours just a little longer. Deliver the post. Take the Dispatch Box personally. And for the sake of the Tides, get some sleep.”
“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“Dismissed.”

Fitz turned smartly on her heel and strode out; Porter waited for her in the outer office. Her hand crept up and lightly rested on the outside of her pocket; through the thin fabric she could feel the little token Jackson had slipped there.

“I need to stop by Captain Conrad’s office,” said Fitz. “Has my warrant brought up Tenacity’s reports?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Porter. “Shall I take you there?”

“No, no,” said Fitz. “No need. I know the way.” She ducked up the rear hatchway and sent a hand running forward for Jackson.

The burly Tenacity warrant came striding forward, searching Fitz’s face - whatever she saw in it made her shoulders relax, even carrying the heavy chest of reports.

“We’ll just drop these into the Captain,” said Fitz. “Then we’ll be on our way.”

But it took considerably longer than that. Captain Conrad was gratifyingly pleased to see Fitz again; he put the reports to one side, and insisted on Fitz having lunch with him. Over a glass of deep Kul Tiran wine, toasted biscuit and smollett, they discussed the progress of the war. Fitz ate the fish with interest - most sailors avoided eating it. Conrad’s family had migrated from the south, and had clearly retained a few preferences. He was a gracious host, listening with great attention to Fitz’s experiences in the west, and explained that here in the east the Zandalari had been avoiding battle.

“It’s almost like they’re waiting for something,” said Conrad thoughtfully. One of his massive hands was wrapped delicately around the stem of his wine glass. “The Tidesages are being very squirrely.”

“I have a Tidesage on my ship and they tend to be like that,” said Fitz, grinning. “Mine specialises in brooding into the ocean. The crew thinks he’s lucky.”

Conrad laughed. “A good fit with Tenacity then. Tides preserve you, Fitzwilliams; I will see you upon your return.”

“Thank you sir,” said Fitz, standing up and touching the brim of her hat. “Safe voyages to you.”

Tenacity broke from the Fleet that evening. The crew were wild with excitement over their destination; they launched three cheers for their commander, and no cajoling was needed for them to set the sails. Even deep in the night men and women littered the deck in groups of four and five, enjoying the last of the summer weather and discussing their plans for shore leave.

The crew cheered again a month later when the icy autumn gales started, and the rain fell in great sheets across the deck. Kul Tiras was a rain-soaked island; the crew took the weather as a sign they were close to harbour. They were right.

Tenacity cruised into the great harbour of Boralus with the incoming tide, dropping anchor in the Navy moorings opposite Marina’s Row. The rain soaked every stitch of cloth. By late afternoon, her sails were furled, her water leaguers emptied to prevent mould and growth, and the shore-crew embarked. Lighters from the postal office had swarmed alongside and taken off all the post, safely wrapped in canvas against the persistent sleet. The Naval Dispatch box stayed with Fitz; she intended to deliver it - but not tonight. It was late, and the Navy Office was closed.
In a matter of hours *Tenacity* - their little wooden home, and the only sanctuary of one hundred and sixty souls from the depths of the sea - turned from a living spirit into a shell.

Brother Gull raised his staff, and without a word of goodbye he summoned an enormous water elemental; the raindrops hit it and sent ripples skittering over its surface. The beast lifted the Tidesage gently in one massive, liquid hand. Then it turned and sped across the harbour towards Stormwind Monastery. Fitz touched the brim of her hat to him as he left, but he couldn’t possibly have seen her - she wondered if they would see each other again.

Ferries and gigs crowded around the sides of *Tenacity*, offering passage to shore for a modest fee; sailors clustered eagerly around the bosun's mates issuing the leave chits. Disembarking without a chit meant a sailor risked being impressed by some other Navy captain hungry for prime sailors; many sailors looped theirs around their necks in case they drunkenly sold their clothes in the coming debauchery.

“Call away the jolly boat,” said Fitz. “Stow the Naval Dispatch box aboard. I am leaving the ship.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” said the unfamiliar midshipman. He was safely tucked into his heavy wet-weather gear, and would command the shore-crew - the men who would survey and man the empty ship while the crew was gone.

Fitz ducked below and had a long drink of elven potion in the privacy and dry of her cabin; she hadn’t set foot on land since the winter of the Quel’Thalan party and her stomach remembered antisea-sickness well. When she came up, Jackson and Clyburn were waiting for her.

“Begging your pardon ma’am,” said Clyburn, under his tarpaulin coat. “We’ll be staying at the Rum and Raisin, if you need us.” He stepped forward and twitched her oiled woolen cloak straight, bowing his voice. “Come get us if you’re planning anything dangerous or heroic, ma’am, we’ll gather up the crew right quick.”

“Thank you,” said Fitz, puzzled. “But I have no such plans.”

Clyburn gave her a knowing look. “Right. Well, we’ll just follow you now as well, ma’am, and get you safely where you’re going.” Jackson actually winked.

Fitz stifled the urge to sigh. With a twittering of bosun’s pipes, Fitz dropped down the ladder and into her gig; her two faithful shadows jumped easily alongside her.

By the time she was ashore it was far too late to go anywhere but home; Fitz - struggling to walk on land again - rolled down the laneways, getting progressively colder and more damp. Her mother’s cursive was looping and difficult to read. That was why it was some time before she found the right combination of streets and shops to set her in the direction of the new lodgings. Quietly, she was thankful for Jackson and Clyburn escorting her home - and for her dirk. The area they were walking through was the meanest, roughest part of Dampwick Ward. Had she been alone, she was sure someone would have mugged her for her woolen socks by now.

“Here we are, ma’am,” said Clyburn. “Do you want us to walk you up?”

“No, thank you Clyburn,” said Fitz. “Thank you for your presence this evening; find your own lodgings.”

“We’ll raise a glass to you ma’am,” said Jackson. “Good evening to you.” Then she took Clyburn by the shoulder and steered him back up the street.

Fitz knocked on the rickety door. A sharp, hard-faced woman opened it, barring entrance. This
woman frowned when Fitz asked for Mrs Fitzwilliams.

"Top of the house," she finally said, still keeping Fitz outside in the rain. "If you’re staying as well, then it will be a silver for the bed. I can’t wash the linens for less than that - not with soap." She put her hand out.

This was purest extortion. Fitz reached into her pocket anyway, fishing out a lonely, battered silver piece. “Here.”

The coin disappeared faster than a blink. “Don’t be up all night,” she said querulously. “And don’t burn the candles down, or I’ll take another silver for the tallow.” She glared at Fitz and let her inside.

The water dripped from Fitz’s cloak - the landlady hadn’t offered to take it, and Fitz didn’t trust her anyway. The stairs creaked ominously as she ascended. Up and up she went, up increasingly narrow stairs, until there was a door - it clearly led into the attic. Fitz knocked loudly.

There was a burst of noise from inside the door.

“Jane! Herbeta! Stephanie!” came a feminine voice. “Sit down at once; a Fitzwilliams should always be proper and civil. Robin! Please receive our guest!”

There was the pattering of bare feet, and then the door creaked open; a pair of intense brown eyes peered out at her from underneath a mop of unruly red hair. The last time Fitz had seen those eyes, they had been nine years old - now they were the eyes of a young woman of fifteen.

“Hello Willa,” Robin said, her face lighting up. “You look the same.”

Fitz smiled at her awkwardly. “Hullo, Robin. You look totally different.”

“Willa?” her mother warbled, shoving past her youngest. “Willa, my Darling, is that you?! Oh, Willa, Angel!”

Abruptly Fitz had her arms full of fluffy dress and heaving bosom. She extracted a hand and desperately threw her hat deeper into the attic, hoping to avoid it getting a new dent.

“Willa!” came the cry from inside the room.

Two of the triplets launched themselves in her direction. Fitz just managed to push her mother out of harm's way before an avalanche of knees and elbows and red hair crashed into her; she staggered, banging her shin against the doorframe.

“Let me take your coat,” said Fitzrobin, deftly untangling it from the mess. Then she walked off. Strangely, no water dripped onto the floor.

The attic was freezing, even for Kul Tiras. Four beds clustered closely around a small lantern, and makeshift buckets had been placed under leaks in the roof. The space was otherwise crammed. Her grandfather’s wobbly kraken desk was tucked under an eave - one of its legs had been knocked off by a cannonball long ago, and it was unsellable. Sloping sideboards were stacked carelessly, and the dining table could have easily seated twelve if an accident-prone ancestor hadn’t crashed a ship aground and wreaked everything onboard - half its boards were cracked. Six rickety chairs surrounded that table, lit by a cheap, smoky rush. Cards lay scattered where they had been unceremoniously dropped.

“My Nautical Dove, you can and must sit down to supper,” tutted her mother. “What have they been feeding you on that awful boat? I don’t entirely understand it. Sit down at once. Jane, fetch a plate
for your sister!

Fitz was whisked to a seat, and dumped into it. A plate was shoved begrudgingly in front of her - the otherwise fine china was chipped. Fitz made eye-contact with Fitzjane and mouthed an apology. Her sister looked back with the disdain only a sixteen-year old sister could muster.

Fitz had been given two sausages, embedded in a mass of coagulated pease pudding. Fitz caught the fork thrown at her by Fitzstephanie and began to eat - or began to try to eat, at least. The cow from which these sausages derived must have been made of nothing but gristle. Fitz chewed heroically, but even jaws honed from endless salt pork was stymied by the sausage’s power. By the third valiant bite, she had decided the cause was hopeless.

“Is that a new tablecloth, mother?” said Fitz, pointing over her mother’s shoulder. Mrs Fitzwilliams glanced away, and Fitz palmed the second sausage and hid it under the table. Fitzherberta made eye contact, and nodded; there was a moment of sisterly solidarity.

Mrs Fitzwilliams began to flutter about the tablecloth, pulling it straight so that Fitz could admire it. Fitz’s head was nodding, but her mind was elsewhere - the sausage was hot and greasy, and she was worried about her pants. But the die was truly cast. Fitz started making inroads on the pease pudding.

“You eat so fast, my Maritime Flower,” said her mother. “It cannot be good for your constitution.”

“Just hungry for good Kul Tiran food,” said Fitz vaguely. “I wouldn’t mind a breath of fresh Boralus air, either.”

Fitzjane sneered - apparently her sister felt this extraordinary statement would challenge even Mrs Fitzwilliam’s suspension of disbelief. Fitz jumped up, slipping the sausage out of sight before striding over to the window. She threw it open.

“A fine night,” Fitz declared confidently, gesturing expansively, and not incidentally chucking the offending meat out of the window. She disguised the final part of the movement by turning it into a stretch. “I think I might turn in for bed.”

Luckily the rain was muting most of the more noxious smells of Boralus, but Fitz made haste to shut the window anyway.

Her mother fluttered about behind her. “Oh Willa,” she cried dramatically. “But your wedding must be planned!”

Fitz paused. “How much do you owe, mother?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, my Lion,” said her mother gaily. “Much of the debt will be forgiven once you are married.”

“I’m not getting married, mother,” said Fitz sharply. “My letters were quite clear. I have given up far more than you understand. This one thing will be mine.”

Her mother’s watery eyes stared at her limply. ‘Georgia married well,” she said. “Her husband is a butcher down in Bridgeport - he was the one who provided the sausages. Oh, Willa, my Swan, please! Rowena owns the Rumstock Row Tavern. If I can see you all safely settled on deserving people, then my life will be happy.”

“It’s serious, Willa,” said Fitzrobin, appearing from nowhere. “We haven’t any more money for school. Your prize-money paid off our father’s debts but did not touch our mother’s.”
“There is no chance we can take the Navy exam,” said Herberta softly.

“Or obtain a position of any kind,” scoffed Jane. “We really are in trouble.”

Stephanie, all height and corded muscle, just looked at Fitz mutely and nodded.

“Where is Lawrence?” said Fitz, tiredly. “I left him on board the Intrepid. Surely he can help?”

“He lost his legs in an action off Zandalar,” said Jane. “He’s in some hospital up north.”

Fitz felt the crushing weight of every responsibility come down on her shoulders again. Her hand was greasy, and her heart was still sore. Tonight, she simply couldn’t muster up the energy to cope with all the disaster that came with being a Fitzwilliams.

“I need sleep,” she said huskily. “Tomorrow I will go to the Navy Office to present my reports. When I get back, we can talk again.”

Fitz unceremoniously shucked her jacket and flopped face-first into the closest bed. It smelt like the clean salt-spray of water over Tenacity’s bow; like damp wool and new sailcloth. Fitz had just enough facilities left to wonder at the soap-maker before falling dead asleep. She hadn’t even managed to take her shoes off.

The next day dawned bright and clear; the rain of the previous night had washed away out to sea, leaving only its memory. It was still cold, of course. Boralus was in the middle of autumn - it might as well have been winter. But the weak sunlight slanting into her face was enough to wake her. She pulled a pillow over her head, and groaned, feeling listless and unrested. Then all the breath was driven from her in a great whuff; Fitzjane had jumped on her and her knee was lethal.

“Sorry,” said Fitzsjane, who was not sorry. “But mother says the Navy Office gets crowded when the sun comes up, and that if you want to go down there then you need to go now.”

Fitzstephanie ripped off her blankets; Fitzherberta dropped a spoon on her head, but was kind enough to leave the bowl on the table.

“Up you get, lazybones!”

Fitz rolled out of bed and onto the floor with a thump. “I have a broken heart, you know,” she said pitifully, into the ragged carpet.

“Wow,” said Fitzherberta sympathetically. “Get up anyway.”

Fitzrobin threw the Navy coat on top of Fitz’s prone figure. “You might need this. It’s going to rain.”

By the time Fitz was fed and watered, dawn had well and truly broken - her mother was still abed. None of the Fitzwilliams’ had much breakfast - in Fitz’s case, her stomach was roiling unpleasantly, and her inner ear hadn’t entirely grasped that she was stationary. But the four Fitzwilliams children didn’t need much. Their family’s cuisine tended towards the fortifying - a lot of lentils had been involved in Fitz’s morning meals over the long years.

The Navy Office was crowded with officers; they sat in their best uniforms, hats in their laps, waiting for an appointment. Fitz glanced at them uncomfortably; they sat in various states of frustration, impatience, and resignation. All were surplus to Navy requirements, unlucky enough to be without patrons or connections. Even in a service as large and hungry at the Admiralty, there were only limited slots for employment; those still shipless waited in hope for an opening they might snatch before some more fortunate officer was appointed.
Fitz carried her box of reports to the reception area, and waited patiently for one of the clerks to receive her.

“Yes?” said one. “What do you want?”

“I have reports,” said Fitz crisply. “I am to deliver them into the hands of Vice-Admiral Grey personally.”

“Ha,” scoffed the clerk. “Right. Do you know how many commanders try and get into the Admiral’s office? Not for all the tea in Quel’Thallas.”

Fitz had a moment of profound, malicious pleasure; her career had been bedeviled by just such men as this one - all well-meaning and necessary to the smooth functioning of the Navy, but also her natural enemy. She took a moment to savour what she was about to do.

Then Fitz pulled her orders from her jacket pocket. “I really cannot delay,” she said silkily. “Perhaps this might help with your decision-making process?”

She dropped the paper onto the desk, directly on top of the clerk’s current task. He glanced at it contemptuously, then blanched - it was signed with the flourishing signature of the Lord Admiral. He stood hastily, the chair clattering over behind him.

“Please fill out this form, ma’am,” he said anxiously.

It took everything within Fitz to not look smug. Instead she tucked the Dispatch Box more firmly under her arm, and quickly jotted some nonsense onto his paperwork.

“This way ma’am, please,” the clerk stuttered. “Please follow me.”

Fitz walked behind him with a spring in her step. The corridor was long and brightly lit; on every side were large paintings of famous Admirals. The clerk stopped in front of a massive wooden door - overlooking it was a fine painting of the Lord Admiral herself.

The clerk knocked firmly and opened the door. “Commander Fitzwilliams to see you, Ma’am,” he said. “Dispatches from the Lord Admiral.”

“Come!”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat jauntily to the clerk, and strode through the doorway.

Admiral Grey was tall, muscular, and dark - her hair was tied back neatly with a ribbon. The room was huge, but this particular Admiral filled it.

“Fitzwilliams, Commander,” Fitz said, coming to attention on the carpet in front of her. “Carrying the Dispatch Box for the Lord Admiral’s ship Tenacity, and sent by her own hand.”

“Good morning, Commander,” said the Admiral. Her accent spoke of fine schools and society parties, but her tone was iron. “I presume it goes from your hands and into mine?”

“Only into yours ma’am,” said Fitz gratefully.

“Please take a seat, Commander,” said Grey coolly. “I think Admiral McKinley might have mentioned to me about the contents. You will want to stay.”

Fitz sat in an uncomfortable wingback chair and tried not to fidget. Admiral Grey was flipping through the papers in the box, sorting them quickly. It all took some time. With certain papers Grey
would pull a bellrope and summon Lieutenants - they all seemed to be different Lieutenants. Fitz supposed the Admiral must have a limitless supply somewhere. Each of these glittering Lieutenants would be rapidly tasked, often given the paper, and sent hurrying away.

Fitz waited some considerable time before Grey reached a particular page.

“Aha,” she said, pleased. “Here it is. It is not often I get to deliver such news, but I will not turn down the opportunity. It was kind of the Lord Admiral to let me do so, especially for such a fine action.”

Fitz shook her head slightly, banishing the memory of soft grey eyes; she was still tired, and her mind had drifted in the long period where the Admiral had other matters. “I am sorry, ma’am?”

Grey looked at her. “It is the official notification for the awarding of prize money,” she explained. “Specifically, the money to be granted for the capture of the Ocean. A fine piece of work, Commander Fitzwilliams - when I received your report, I took the liberty of having it published in the Gazette.”

Fitz ducked her head nervously, saying nothing.

Grey’s eyes widened, and she suddenly beamed. Her eyes twinkled with pleasure. “You have no idea, have you?” she said, sounding charmed. “You have no idea.”

“Ma’am?” said Fitz, confused.

Grey practically wriggled in her seat; Fitz was astonished. This was the victor of the Battle of the Forston Shore and the Gulf of Broken Teeth - a Lady from a powerful family, and a commander with a record so valorous every Jack and Jill Tar still toasted her name and glory.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” she said. “Prize-money is awarded in shares. The Thunderhawk was the only ship to fight, and is therefore the only ship to profit. Captain Ashvane’s family will get one eighth - no preventing that, the official story is that the man died a hero - McKinley will get one eighth, the crew of Thunderhawk will get two eighths, the warrants will get two-eighths, and the final slice goes to the wardroom.”

Fitz nodded slowly. She knew all of this. She just wondered what it had to do with her, specifically.

“There were only two members of the wardroom, Commander Fitzwilliams,” said Grey. “Yourself and a Lieutenant named Whitesmith. Half of the entire share will go to you.”

Understanding dawned. “Have I come into a sum of money, Admiral?” said Fitz, hopefully.

“You could say that, Commander,” said Grey. “That would certainly be one way of describing it. You captured a brand new Zandalari frigate, fully supplied with guns and cargo. You also rescued a Kul Tiran merchantship that had already struck its colours - it was full of Elvish trade goods. Your share is roughly four hundred and twenty thousand gold pieces. After the taxes and charges applied, of course.”

Fitz stared at her blankly. Her entire yearly pay as a Commander was thirty-five gold pieces. “Four hundred and twenty gold pieces?” she ventured.

“Four hundred and twenty thousand gold pieces,” repeated the Admiral. “After tax.” Then it appeared she could hold it in no longer, and she laughed in delight.

Fitz was glad she was sitting down; that amount of money was incomprehensible. It was literally
“Whitesmith will get the same amount,” the Admiral said, still laughing. “She’s going to be the most popular Lieutenant in the fleet. Which banker do you use? You might wish to warn them; I will give you the bank slip so you can immediately draw against the sum.”

“I don’t have a banker,” said Fitz. She was struggling to comprehend the world.

“Let me call mine,” said the Admiral genially. “Because you now need one.”

When he arrived, the portly banker in his fine suit had swept past Fitz as if she didn’t exist. By the end of the meeting, he was bowing to her as if she was the Lord Admiral herself. Fitz was still unable to fully grasp her change in fortune; three hours ago she had been facing marriage to escape her family’s certain financial ruin. Now a thick fold of banknotes was tucked into her jacket pocket, more sat in her account, and yet more money had been invested into indices and shares and bonds by attentive financiers. The Admiral had helped her with that, and patiently convinced her that no one would take the money away.

She put her hand in her pocket and touched the money, just to reassure herself it was real. Beside the fold lay Jackson's little carved token - Fitz refused to leave it behind.

When she left the Navy office, she wasn’t entirely sure what to do. It was raining. Her life for the last six years had been ruled by duty and every moment of time organised; now her time was her own, and she could even afford to spend it. Fitz walked at random down streets, ignoring the sleet. The city was fully awake, and stout Kul Tirans hustled and bustled about. They paid her no attention; her tattered naval uniform announced her as just one more sailor, not worth bothering, or bothering about. Fitz saw none of it. Her aimless wandering was interrupted only by her growling stomach. Automatically, she dreamed of having enough coppers for a pie.

Then she took ahold of herself, and asked a nearby shopkeeper for specific directions. Perhaps she didn’t have naval duties - that didn’t mean other duties didn’t need solving. By the time she had walked the hour it took to reach the correct street, she was soaked. Lunch was ending, and workers were streaming back to the docks.

Fitz paused in front of one establishment - the sign said Rumstock Row Tavern. The doors were open, and the taproom was modestly busy.

It was a proper Kul Tiran pub; a solid one, for established sailors and middling merchants. The whole place was paneled in some dark wood. A stack of broken chairs was piled up in one corner to be repaired, and everything smelt like stale beer. Fitz removed her hat and tucked it under one arm, walking towards the long bar.

“Excuse me,” she said to a handsome older woman, who was drying glasses with a clean tea towel. “Do you know where I can find Rowena?”

The woman smiled. “Yes,” she said, picking up another glass. “That would be me. What can I do for you, Commander?”

“My name is Fitzwilliamia Fitzwilliams,” Fitz said firmly. “And I will not marry you. I desperately love someone else.”

“Alright,” said the woman, looking shocked. There was a profoundly awkward pause while they both looked at each other. Fitz really couldn't think of anything else to say, and the tavern owner was still mastering her thoughts. Finally Rowena hesitated slightly, putting down the beer mug. “That
does leave me a little short on your mam’s bill. I mean, we were to be family and all, so I loaned her some money. I, err. Do you and I work out a payment plan?”

“I’m good for it,” said Fitz. “Don’t worry. How much in total?”

The publican winced, and named a figure.

Four hours ago, Fitz would have had to pawn practically everything she owned to make even a third of the money. Now, however, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a single, crisp, fifty gold note.

“May I have a receipt?” Fitz said politely.

The innkeeper stared at her in complete amazement. Her hand slowly reached out and took the banknote. Fitz didn’t blame her - it was more money than the average sailor would make in three years.


“A pie would be lovely,” said Fitz. She slipped her hand into her pocket to touch the money again. “But I will pay. I cannot impose further on your generosity.” The food, when it came, was delicious - chicken, with a bonus plate of greens. Fitz enjoyed every bite, then stood up to go.

“Thank you for your kindness to my mother,” she said. “I will not forget it.”

“See that you don’t,” said her erstwhile betrothed with a toothy smile. Rowena had clearly recovered in the hour she had been given to process things. “It’s a shame for me - you seem like a live one. If your other woman doesn’t pan out, don’t be a stranger.” Then she winked.

Fitz hurriedly put on her hat and fled.

There were four more stops at four more stores on the way home - it would have been three stops, but the first tailor she walked into had sniffed haughtily and tossed her back out onto the street. The second tailor had paid more attention; then she had taken a thousand measurements, and assured Fitz that her new uniforms would be ready to collect before her leave ended.

When she pushed past the dour landlady of her family’s slum house, it was carrying a basket filled with things Fitzwilliams’ barely ever saw - fresh fruit, pies, Elvish salads, jam, and white bread. By contrast with the day before, her sisters ignored her coming back into the attic room - obviously a single evening was enough to acclimate to her again after a six year absence. Mrs Fitzwilliams was having an attack of the vapours, and the girls were busy fanning her. Fitz put her hat on a hook, and carried the basket over to the table.

“Mother,” said Fitz. “You need to get up now - we have to talk.”

“Ohhh,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, her eyes fluttering. She placed the back of her hand dramatically over her forehead.

Fitz pulled out a chair and sat. “I told Rowena I wouldn’t marry her.”

“Ohh,” groaned Mrs Fitzwilliams again, far more soulfully. The other Fitzwilliams girls looked at her in disappointment - Jane openly grimaced.

Fitz ignored them all, carefully taking off her gloves. They were the ones from Sagewood, battered with use, and some of the stitching was coming undone. Fitz didn’t care.
“If we had the money,” Fitz said, carefully folding away the gloves. “What would you each do?”

“They would join the Navy!” said her mother stridently. “Like all the Fitzwilliams Heroes before them!”

“It’s nice to do new things,” said Fitz. “If we had the money, what would you want to do? Would you tell me honestly?”

“Join the guard,” said Fitzjane promptly. She was the slenderest, delicate, and most elegant of all the Fitzwilliams’ sisters. This contrasted oddly when she cracked her knuckles with a dark look.

Fitzstephanie looked dreamy - no need to ask what she wanted. Her massive frame had been built honestly; half of Fitz’s childhood had been spent fetching her from one blacksmith’s shop or another.

Fitzherbeta cleared her throat nervously. “I actually would like to take the Navy exam,” she said, hesitantly. “I’ve been studying my trigonometry.”

“How’s your Elvish?” said Fitz lightly. “It’s surprisingly useful.”

Fitzherbeta shrugged.

Fitz glanced around at Fitzrobin, but the youngest sister didn’t answer. That was normal; she was a strange young thing. Fitz knew she would say something when she was ready.

“I can’t get you into the city guard,” said Fitz to Jane. “But the Proudmoore Guard can be done. Would you like some of this pie?”

She lifted the lid of the travel pot, and the smell of aromatic herbs filled the cold, damp attic. Jane gaped at her in amazement. Mrs Fitzwilliams bolted upright. “Oh Willa,” she fretted. “We can’t afford it.”

“You can’t afford it, that is correct,” said Fitz. “But I can, and bought it for you. So please sit down and eat.” She pulled a knife from her belt - General Windrunner’s trail knife - and began to cut thick slices. “Its venison,” she said gleefully. “Not a trace of salt pork or beef at all.”

Her sisters looked at her in puzzlement. “Willia,” said Fitzherbeta quietly. “Where did you get this?”

“At a shop in Hook Point,” said Fitz. “Don’t worry - it was a nice shop.”

“No, I mean…”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Fitz firmly. She wiped the knife clean and put it back on her belt. “We’ll organise the move from this place tomorrow, but schooling comes first. We’ll re-enroll you this afternoon. The navy exam is really very straightforward. I will help you study.”

She picked up a fork and took a bite of pie - the venison melted in her mouth.

Her family gaped at her - all except Fitzstephanie. Steph and Fitz had always understood one another, and she alone looked hopeful. Fitz nodded to her, and her sister’s face lit up. Steph likely already knew to whom she wanted to be apprenticed.

“Willa,” said her mother slowly. “What have you done?”

“My duty,” said Fitz with satisfaction. “But I had a Tidesage on my last ship, and he was extraordinarily lucky. Now have some of this food, Mother - blackcurrant jam is your favourite, isn’t it?”
Fitz’s leave chit had exactly one month before she had to report back to duty; as she swallowed her fine pie with every enjoyment, she thought with satisfaction that this was plenty of time to upend her family’s life completely.

Fitzjane went first; Fitz wished she could say something other than it was because her teenage angst was the most annoying. Fitz rousted her out of bed the next morning with a friendly “Rise and shine, idiot!”, then marched her down to the gates of Proudmoore Keep. There Fitz handed her over to the Seneschal - the whole thing was even easier than expected. It turned out Fitz’s appointment as Flag Lieutenant had already come through, and once Fitz understood this, she abused it ruthlessly to get through the main gate. Jane did the rest, flying through the physical test by displaying admirable levels of aggression at the target dummies. When Fitz walked away, Jane was already running about the courtyard in a blue recruit uniform, a faintly harried expression on her face.

Fitzstephanie came next. When Fitz got back to the attic room, she was already dressed and waiting silently at the door; it seemed she wanted to make sure Fitz wouldn’t change her mind. Her mother stood behind her looking reproachful. Fitz didn’t take off her hat - just held the door as Steph came out, then closed it again to cut off her mother’s sigh.

Steph beamed with joy as they walked into the artificer’s quarter - it seemed she had a lot of friends in blacksmithing circles. The barrel-chested dwarf she hoped for as a teacher had been two steps away from just apprenticing her without the fee or familial approval, and guild rules be damned. He was grateful, however, when Fitz signed her name on the form and slipped him the twenty gold joining fee.

“Could have shut down my business,” he said gruffly. “But talent has to be taught. She’ll be guildmaster one day, you wait and see.”

Fitz smiled politely and nodded, but privately thought Fitzstephanie would have to string two words together in the same sentence before that could actually happen.

Two days later she sent a carefully worded letter and a thick stack of paperwork to the Navy Office - five days after that, she received confirmation that her brother would be transferred to a hospital in Boralus.

With Jane in barracks and Steph housed above the shop, Fitz next turned her attention to alternative accommodation for her remaining sisters. Another night of the greedy landlord demanding coins had Fitz gnashing her teeth; the very next morning she took her mother to find a quality place.

Her mother was sullen and confused. “I am the head of the household,” she said irritably. “My daughters should be more respectful. This is all very high handed, Willa.”

Fitz didn’t really reply to this - just handed her the key to a single-story cottage near Unity Square. For the first time in a long time, her mother had been unable to utter a syllable, sitting quite still in the hired carriage.

It was the work of a single lunchtime to drop by the Rum and Raisin; the tavern was an absolute dive, and the crew of Tenacity clearly had spent the entire part of their leave inside it. The appearance of their Commander had them cheering, and offering up strong backs and arms to move the furniture into the new apartment - a good thing, as most of the furniture had been well made once upon a time. It was all astonishingly heavy.

The landlady had snapped and snarled at losing her captive tenants.

“Noise!” she’d yelled. “Damage to my walls! No notice! I’ll shut the doors and lock you all out, see
if I don’t!”

Fitz put a silver piece into her hand - those grasping fingers stayed outstretched. Fitz dropped another on in there - then another. Almost two weeks of rent were eventually paid in advance - Fitz privately hoped the whole place rotted and fell about her ears.

Her mother drifted about during the removal, looking matronly. The sailors had joked and laughed as they worked - except when Mrs Fitzwilliams was about. She insisted on scrubbing their cheeks and brewing them tea; in return they knuckled their foreheads bashfully and fell silent whenever she was nearby. It was clear Fitz’s mother was everything the average sailor thought a fine lady should be - kindly, flighty, and completely covered in lace.

Her brave crew also collectively fell in love with the hideously tasteless kraken desk. Fitz suppressed a wince as they oohed and ahhed over it, and insisted it be placed where every visitor could see it coming into the new house.

Everything was finished by the time the sun began to set. Fitz led the entire gaggle of them straight back to the Rum and Raisin pub, and covered their drinks for the next four days. The sailors cheered her lustily as she ducked back out - it was clear she had won their undying loyalty.

Fitz was drained. Her shore-leave had turned into a whirlwind of purchases, running around the city, and shuffling family members. Her body felt slow and sluggish. But her duty was almost done.

Aside from her, there was just one more Fitzwilliams sibling.

Fitzrobin had said nothing as Fitz upended her sister’s lives and fortunes; she had moved to the new house with calm indifference, and stayed out of Fitz’s way as she had stormed about the city. She had the uncanny ability to appear and disappear. This was why Fitz didn’t immediately panic the night she had intended to talk to Fitzrobin about the future.

“Mother? Where is Robin?” asked Fitz.

“Probably at the docks,” sighed her mother. “I can’t keep her away from there. I swear, it is like she talks to the fish.”

Fitz’s heart stuttered. Everything snapped into terrible, inevitable clarity.

When Fitz reached the shoreline, red-faced and panting from her headless sprint, all her fears were confirmed. Robin was indeed there - and so was Brother Gull. They looked at her steadily. Brother Gull’s eyes blazed from under his deep hood. Robin’s eyes were equally intense.

“My Lord,” Fitz said weakly.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” he hissed. “Your sister and I have been speaking with the ocean.”

“Well, that’s… that…” said Fitz. Then she realised she didn’t have the words for this situation. She lapsed into silence.

“It’s alright Willa,” said Robin, sibilantly. A tiny elemental was dribbling around her feet, gamboling like a terrifying water-puppy. “It really is alright. You should go back out to sea soon.”

“Your sister is powerful, Commander,” said Brother Gull. He sounded approving. “Lady Stormsong will be pleased. We will go now.”
Fitz touched the brim of her hat to them both - she watched as the older Tidesage summoned his enormous water elemental again - then she stayed at the dock to look at the waves crashing into the breakwater of the harbour. She wondered how to tell her mother.

But it was done. Her duty was done; there was time enough now to sleep.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

In which Fitz dances around.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fitz dreamed of the sea.

This was in the literal sense. After days packed with chores, she would close her eyes and fall asleep - the ocean was always there. When she woke again, her senses were actively disoriented at finding themselves ashore. The house didn’t creak or sway, the rhythms of watchstanding weren’t followed, and nothing smelled like tar. Fitz’s nights were dark waters that reached down endlessly.

Although her sleep was peaceful, her daylight hours began to grow restless - she felt like she had stalked down every alleyway in Boralus just to see what was there. Finally she gave up all pretence. She roved the docks and jetties, staring longingly over the breakwater. The transfer gigs she occasionally hired were reluctant to row her out very far - especially after she began to vomit.

The day before her shove-leave was done, Fitz once again presented herself at the Navy office. She cut a dashing figure - the new uniforms had arrived; and somehow the tailor had made her look only moderately gangly. The golden, gleaming epaulette rode proudly on her shoulder and her battered dirk was at her hip; it was with a spring in her step and a gleam in her eye that she walked up the stairs and through the wooden doors into the foyer.

At the reception desk, she was once again asked to scrawl down something meaningless on a piece of paper, before the clerk led her down the corridor and into Lady Grey’s office. Fitz stood at attention on her fine carpet, touching the brim of her hat.

“Fitzwilliams, Commander,” she said. “Reporting for orders to return to the Fleet, ma’am.”

“Ah, Commander, yes,” said Admiral Grey, looking up. She wore a different ribbon in her hair today - it made her look especially stern. “Do take a seat. I believe your leave doesn’t finish until tomorrow?”

“Lord Admiral’s finest, ma’am,” Fitz replied cheerfully. She pulled the chair closer and taking off her hat. “High tide is in the forenoon watch, and Tenacity should be ready to sail out with it.”

“Your eagerness is appreciated,” said the Admiral. “But unnecessary. Tenacity is, of course, being held here in Boralus.”

She fixed Fitz in place with a skewering stare.

“I understand, ma’am,” said Fitz, slightly startled. “I’ll advise the crew. Do you know when Tenacity is scheduled to depart again?”
“Commander,” said Lady Grey impatiently. “*Tenacity* isn’t going anywhere. The Lord Admiral’s wedding anniversary is only next month, and it would be a trifle difficult for you to organise it while at sea.”

“O-organise the Lord Admiral’s wedding anniversary, ma’am?” Fitz repeated, faintly.

“Oh, you weren’t told?” Lady Grey said, looking surprised. Then she chuckled; “How droll. Anyway, your official orders are here on my desk - I rather think you should open them now.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz.

Her mind was stirring up memories - painful, cherished memories from months ago, of wonderful walks under a bright moon. Sagewood had mentioned organising an important anniversary occasion, and of how intricate it had been; her ears had twitched and swiveled the entire time she spoke. Fitz had been enthralled, and also slightly distracted at the time.

Now the Lord Admiral wanted her to manage the same thing.

Lady Grey picked up a parchment-wrapped parcel and tossed it in Fitz’s direction - Fitz caught it awkwardly.

A swift cut from her little belt-knife, and the corded twine fell away. Inside the oiled wrapper were two things: a folded piece of paper sealed with wax, and a blood-red aiguillette. The aiguillette marked her as a Flag officer - Fitz left it well enough alone, and instead broke open the letter.

*To: Commander Fitzwillimia Williams Fitzwilliams, lately of the Lord Admiral’s Ship Tenacity*

*You are hereby requested and required, immediately upon receipt of these orders, to wait upon Mrs Denise Choplin, Esq. Pursuivant of Arms, at Proudmoore Keep, there to consult with her upon arrangements to be made for the reception of Lord Admiral Jaina Proudmoore and Ranger-General Sylvanas Windrunner.*

*You will also, by diligent attendance on Mrs Denise Choplin, Esq, organise the Ceremonial and Precedence for this reception; likewise you will organise its sustenance and supply.*

*In light of ongoing hostilities, you are also requested and required to take unto yourself, by this hand and seal, the command of all Admiralty assets, including Guardsmen, Naval officers, and Marines, currently in your vicinity, to deploy as is needed; likewise all vessels and fortresses required for this reception are to be held under your authority to ensure the safety and peace of the event.*

*Fail not in this charge at your peril.*

*Jaina Proudmoore,*

*Lord Admiral, Kul Tiran Admiralty.*

There was silence in the little room, as Fitz contemplated these instructions. Then she read them again, just to be sure what she was seeing was correct.

“Ma’am,” said Fitz, slowly. “Have you been briefed on this?”

“Oh yes,” said Lady Grey. “Congratulations - you are now the most powerful party planner in Naval history.”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said Fitz, genuinely amazed. “But I’ve never… what does this even
Grey gave her a long, measuring look. “I would imagine that is up to you, Commander.”

If anything, this increased Fitz’s disquiet. The Lord Admiral had cut orders delegating into her hands all of the massive power of the Admiralty - this seemed like a singularly dangerous thing to do. Fitz would need to exercise her uttermost loyalty and common sense to avoid its misuse.

“Perhaps examples might be illustrative?” said Lady Grey, taking a pen and returning to her paperwork. “Would you consider Tenacity to be in your vicinity?”

“Well,” said Fitz, spluttering a little. “Yes ma’am, she’s right there in the harbour.”

“Good,” the Admiral said, continuing to write. “And it’s crew?”

“Only down the street from us now, ma’am, at the Rum and Raisin.”

“Quite so. Proudmoore Keep?”

“It’s not ten minutes walk from Navy House, ma’am.”

“Excellent,” said the Admiral, leaning back with a satisfied expression. “All of those would report to you - if you told them they should. You are a fast learner, Fitzwilliams. I approve of that in young officers.”

“Thank you ma’am,” said Fitz, suspiciously.

Lady Grey cocked her head. “Would you consider me to be in your vicinity?”

“No, Ma’am,” said Fitz seriously. “You seem very distant. I have never been less in the vicinity of anyone so much as you, ma’am. Except perhaps the Lord Admiral.”

Lady Grey smiled, a twinkle in her eye. “As I said; a very fast learner. You’ll wind up an Admiral yourself one day Fitzwilliams, mark my words. Now - you can show yourself out. Give my regards to Jaina when you next see her.” She went back to her paperwork.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Fitz, jumping up from her chair. This was completely ignored; she beat a hasty retreat.

The door closed heavily, and Fitz paused in the corridor. Glaring down at her was the huge portrait of the Lord Admiral - she looked much younger with blonde hair, and her antiquated uniform. Fitz blinked up at it. The tangled red aiguillette still lay in her hand - then she turned and strode up the corridor.

Fitz knew the aiguillette should be attached to her shoulder in some complex way, but she wasn’t entirely sure how, and the Navy office wasn’t really the place to experiment. So she shoved it into her jacket instead, and hoped nobody would notice her clothing seemed lumpy.

By the time Fitz reached the outside air, she had begun to think through the resources she would have to mobilise first.

The weak Boralus sunlight failed to warm, but it didn’t hinder pedestrians like rain might have done; Mariner’s Row was teeming with people. The noise was riotous - hawkers sold their wares at full volume, and customers stormed about as they haggled the price.

The Rum and Raisin’s taproom was packed full of sailors; every rickety chair and dingy table was
taken. The liquor of choice seemed to be a raw kind of cheap rum, and it was sold by the tankard; faces were heavily flushed. Along one side of the space there was a noisy, vicious fight in progress; the crowd surged back and forth, alternatively spectating and participating, churning the dirt floor to mud. The smell of sweat was overpowering.

Fitz shoved her way carelessly through the crowd, looking for familiar faces; Clyburn spotted her first.

“...danger ma’am?” he yelled.

Fitz could only partly hear over the noise. Around him, Tenacity’s crew had also noticed her presence, and started to shove and shout to be let through. Unrelated patrons started to turn, looking for the source of the jostling.

“...let a kid in here?” said a random sailor, pointing at Fitz. A woman from Tenacity turned and punched this unfortunate soul in the mouth. The madness increased as curses and fists began to fly; everything got, if that was possible, even louder.

“I can’t hear you Clyburn!” yelled Fitz. “We need to muster the crew!”

Clyburn made a face of confusion at her, and reached into the press of bodies behind him - Jackson was pulled free, a cut above her eye.

“Muster the crew!” said Fitz again. “Outside!”

Jackson nodded, and turned to the room at large.

“Tenacity!” she roared - Fitz felt her teeth vibrate with it. It wasn’t loud; it was simply everywhere. The taproom stilled for a single moment.

Fitz took her chance and ducked through the door. Once back onto the street, she straightened her hat. The available members of the Tenacity - the ones that hadn’t spent their whole pay in the first few days at least - started to stumble outside as well. In dribs and drabs they formed up, into a slightly staggering series of lines in front of her. There were bruises and cuts on every face; clothes looked even more ragged than at sea. A few people were giggling, and others were loudly shushing them and elbowing them in ways meant to be furtive. Up the back, someone was throwing up into the gutter.

Fitz stood, tall and proud, her hands clasped behind her back. Their warlike desires were obvious; several had lost teeth since last she had seen them, and they looked at her with a gleam of drunken anticipation in their eyes.

“The Admiralty has a task,” replied Fitz, pacing down the line slowly. “A task requiring the strongest backs, steadiest hands, and only the most willing of hearts.”

“Is that us?” someone wondered.

“Indeed that is us,” said Fitz, whirling and pacing back along the line. “Are you not the Lord Admiral’s finest? Are you not her loyal sailors - her teeth and claws? Do we not fight in her name across all the seas, with ships, and cannons, and steel?”

Along the line sailors were nodding. A couple swayed slightly.

“The Lord Admiral is a fierce warchief,” Fitz said. “She fights many battles for us; not just at sea, but in laws and diplomacy and policy. Her weapons are subtle, and powerful. Food, dancing, and fine
“And stabby ice!” said one sailor excitedly.

“...and yes, sometimes also ice,” said Fitz. She took a deep breath. “But would we go into battle without holding the weather gauge?”

“No,” yelled her crew.

“Would we go into battle without powder? Or grapeshot? Or rum?”

“NO!” roared the crew.

“The Lord Admiral needs us to create for her the perfect battlefield,” said Fitz, clenching a fist. “So they she may cleave her enemies! From this moment on, Tenacity is the flagship of the Lord Admiral’s wedding anniversary! The gig’s crew will need to be on standby at all times. Clyburn - find me Mr Sprocket at once, if you please, and tell him to bring paper. Jackson; my request to you is that you find the rest of the warrant officers, especially Mrs Pritchard. The rest of you - report to Proudmoore Keep when your leave expires. You are dismissed!”

The crew cheered, then scattered. Some of them went back inside the tavern - others hurried away to complete the tasks that were set. Jackson and Clyburn knuckled their foreheads, and broke away up the street.

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back and strode purposefully towards the little cottage where her family now lived; her mind was whirring. As she crossed the bridge towards Unity Square, she stopped, looking blindly into the water.

As a child she had been to many of the Proudmoore’s parties. In her memory they were a jumble of autumn rains and sneering relatives, glittering clothes and the warmth of the massive fire - there was dancing with Lawrence, and learning which fork was which, and practicing eating soup without making any noise. But all of skills were to participate in such an event as a minor cousin. There was a gap in her education that no amount of mathematics or sail-drill would be able to close. She would need an expert’s opinion. She needed her mother.

“Willa, my dear one?” said her mother, when Fitz pushed open the front door. “Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s just me!” said Fitz, putting her hat on the little hook, and throwing her boots in the corner. Then she walked into the parlour where her mother sat. “Can I ask you a question?”

Mrs Fitzwilliams looked at Fitz anxiously, her bodice straining under the force of her concern. “What is wrong, my Conquering Sealion?”

“Nothing, nothing,” said Fitz hastily. She was sure she looked shifty, but it couldn’t be helped. “I was just... there is this... I just wanted to ask you about the first time you went to one of the Lord Admiral’s wedding anniversaries.”

“Ah!” said Mrs Fitzwilliams. Her face brightened immediately, hands fluttering in delight. “If only you could have been there, my Naval Pumpkin - such tapestries! Such food and drinks! The dancing and music.” Her face softened into the warmth of memory. “I was just married to your father then, and he was so handsome in his uniform.”

“What kind of food?” asked Fitz casually. She reached into her pocket for a pen and paper.

“The plates were so elegant and tiny,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams. “We needed six separate forks. And
they were filled with all sorts of sumptuous foreign spices. It was all quite impossible to eat.” She stared dreamily into the fire. “That was how you could tell it was expensive.”

Fitz didn’t find this necessarily helpful. “And the dancing?” she said dubiously.

“It went on far into the night,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, sounding distant. “Such glittering luminaries were there - your father and I stayed long past the Lord Admiral and her wife.”

“Mm,” said Fitz.

“The Quel’Thalans were indifferent to all of it of course,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, her voice sharpening. “Just stood around next to the fireplace, looking that way they all do, you know. Haughty.”

“Mm,” said Fitz sadly.

“Sometimes I think the Elves believe us savages,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, snippily. “They act like our parties will never be good enough for them.”

“Mm,” said Fitz, narrowing her eyes. “Yes. You may be right, mother.”

“Of course I am right, my Maritime Petal,” said her mother expansively. “Now be a good girl and go look in on your sister - her exam is tomorrow and she needs a good night’s sleep.”

Fitz wandered back out into the corridor and walked towards her sister’s room. She was deep in though - a plan was half-formed in her mind, and the shape it was taking seemed insanely risky. But then - Fitz had a high tolerance for risk. The potential profit was stupendous.

The decision was made in front of the brand new hallway clock; then her body made known to her that it was weary and needed rest. She checked in on an anxious-looking Herberta before collapsing into bed - the ocean was waiting for her.

The next morning dawned cold and clear. Fitz dragged herself from bed to delivered her sister safely to the Navy office. Herberta didn’t enjoy exams, and looked sick with worry - but Fitz could not have been more confident. Fitz told her so at length. As she straightened Herbie’s jacket one last time, Jackson’s little token was quietly slipped into her sister’s pocket.

Proudmoore Keep wasn’t far away, but choosing to walk was a mistake. Fitz was uncomfortable every minute of the ten or so it took to reach her destination; she wasn’t entirely sure she had put the red braiding on her shoulder correctly, but it didn’t seem to matter. Pedestrians kept staring at her on the street, and sailors nervously knuckled their foreheads as she passed by. The braiding achieved the same reaction from the guard stationed at the Keep’s main entrance - she was ushered into the courtyard immediately. Tenacity’s crew were already there, milling about under the eyes of the warrants and Mr Sprocket.

Fitz frowned. She couldn’t see Mrs Pritchard.

Mrs Denise Choplin, Esq, was a massive, burly woman with the approximate chest-measurements of a rain barrel. “Commander Fitzwillamia Fitzwilliams,” she said, in a cultured voice. “Daughter of Fitzharold Fitzwilliams, of the Boralus line of Fitzwilliams. Welcome to Proudmoore Keep.”

“Yes,” said Fitz shortly. “I am here about the Lord Admiral’s Wedding Anniversary.”

“Ah,” said Mrs Choplin, with a beatific smile. “Such a marvellous time of year - such fine families, with such distinguished histories, many of whom cannot be seated together. I have the plan already
Fitz nodded. “This year we’re going to do something a bit different,” she said.

“Ah?” said Mrs Choplin. She gave Fitz a hostile look.

“We’ve been doing Quel’Thalan style parties,” said Fitz. “This year we will have something Kul Tiran.”

“No,” said Mrs Choplin. She stretched her frame to her full height, and eyed Fitz like she was a beatle. “I rather think we won’t. That sounds almost… crass.”

“Mrs Choplin,” said Fitz, already tired. “I am not here to quarrel with you. You are entitled to your opinion. But you must understand that I have been given orders to take command of all the resources of the Admiralty to ensure this party is a success.”

She waved an idle hand around, indicating the surrounding fortress, its grounds and tall walls - and also, not incidentally, the heavily-tattooed sailors of Tenacity. These were glaring at the herald-at-arms with unfriendly expressions. One of them hocked and spat on the ground.

“Competing for elegance with an Elf is a lost cause” said Fitz. “That is who Quel’Thalans are.” She paused to swallow down a flair of grief. “But let us instead show our guests ourselves. I, for one, believe in Kul Tiras.”

Mrs Choplin still looked doubtful.

“If this plan succeeds,” Fitz coaxed. “You will be the most celebrated Pursuivant of Arms in a dozen generations.”

This didn’t seem to move Choplin - her face was slowly reddening.

Fitz sighed. “And if the plan fails, I will accept full responsibility for my actions.”

The herald-at-arms brightened at last, just a little bit.

“Mr Sprocket,” Fitz called. “Jackson. Clyburn. A word with you all, if you please?” The two sailors knuckled their foreheads and hurried over; Sprocket followed behind; he touched the brim of his hat.

“I am grateful for your promptness in arriving at the fortress this morning,” said Fitz. “But where is Mrs Pritchard?”

“Just got married, ma’am,” said Jackson. “To some lady she met at a pub.”

“Perhaps I will look for her a little later then,” said Fitz, taken aback. “For now, Jackson, please assume the role of acting-bosun. Ladies and gentlemen, the floor is open - please advance suggestions for how we might prosecute a party in a Kul Tiran style.”

“A fancy party, ma’am?” said Clyburn.

“That would be an understatement,” said Mrs Choplin, sniffing. “It’s the social event of the season. Only the best and brightest of Kul Tiras’ nobility will be there.”

The two warrant-officers contemplated this.

“A butter sculpture, ma’am,” said Jackson.
“No,” said Choplin.

Fitz gave the herald-at-arms a hard look. “Thank you, Jackson,” she said. “That sounds very tasteful.”

“How about country-style, ma’am?” said Mr Sprocket, desperately. “Get a few mages to simulate driftwood bonfires; have the band play all the old-fashioned dances - the Lord Admiral is from back then; she’ll know ‘em. And if we bring out rugs and blankets like we’re at a picnic, the Elves won’t need to use chairs.”

Fitz was impressed. “A fine suggestion, Mr Sprocket.”

He beamed with pride.

“Romance!” said Mrs Choplin, reprovingly. “Where is the romance? Country festivals, bonfires… none of it speaks of passion, and everything hinges upon it. The Lord Admiral has been married five-hundred and twenty-seven years this month - these events are to celebrate her love!”

“That takes care of itself, ma’am,” said Clyburn seriously. “Because Boralus is the most romantic city in the world.”

“Thank you, Clyburn,” said Fitz, rubbing her brow. “The sentiment is noted. Mr Woods! Miss Crosby!”

The midshipman hurried over and joined the little circle of conspirators.

“We have a month to plan and execute this operation,” Fitz told her officers. “We will need every moment. Mr Woods, you are in charge of clearing the decks for action. Organise a working party, if you please, and measure how large the Great Hall is. Then start moving extra furniture out. Miss Crosby, you are now in charge of personnel and manning. Take your division and find the housekeeper - the staff will need drilling to ensure every hand understands their stations during battle. Coordinate with me once you have accurate headcount. Clyburn; we must assume the coming action will have dead and wounded - find the surgeon and ensure they have a plan for party casualties. Submit those plans to me for my review. Jackson, you are in charge of the Marines - your orders are simple. Prepare to repel boarders from the walls.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” they chorused.

“Make no mistakes with security,” said Fitz, sharply. “The Zandalari will not hesitate. Make sure that every hand is drilled with a cutlass for the entire month, and the Guards understand their duty.” Heads nodded, faces grim.

“As for you, Mrs Choplin,” Fitz said. The woman looked bewildered. “You are in charge of preparing invitations - ask a member of the crew to run down to the Navy office for a Lieutenant to help you. Give the clerk at the desk my compliments. Tell him that the Lieutenant with the best cursive is in my vicinity.”

“As you wish,” said Mrs Choplin. “This farce will continue then. What should we put on the invitations as expected dress?”

“It will be late autumn,” said Fitz. “Everyone will appreciate full Kul Tiran winter formals, I think.” In her head she could still see Sagewood shivering in her after cabin, unable to get warm.

“I’d best send the letters today then,” said Choplin, with disdain. “People will want to visit their tailors - it is most irregular.” She strode away; the set of her shoulders spoke volumes.
“Mr Sprocket,” said Fitz, turning to him last. “You are in charge of decorations. Use your best judgement; I will review your decisions if you wish. The country theme is excellent; do make sure to talk to the seneschal.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said. Then he hesitated.

“Take this, Mr Sprocket,” Fitz pulled from her pocket a thick roll of banknotes, and held it out. “Return to me if you require more funds - be sure to bring receipts.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” said Sprocket, taking the money. He looked deeply relieved. “Thank you ma’am.”

“Use some of it to buy clothes for the crew,” said Fitz. “They will need to look presentable. Dismissed.”

Sprocket touched the brim of his hat and hurried off, leaving Fitz standing alone. With her subordinates so tasked, it seemed like there was nothing left to do. They were a bustle of efficiency. Hands were running to and fro - Jackson started to bellow, and blue-jacketed Marines started to join the fray.

Fitz decided her presence was now more unsettling than helpful; her subordinates were trusted, and should be let alone to their tasks. She cocked her hat at a rakish angle, and strode briskly from the courtyard.

The morning was overcast; a passing city guardsman saluted her red braiding. At the steps of the Navy office stood a beaming Fitzherberta; when she spotted Fitz striding through the crowd, the full force of that luminous smile was turned upon her sister.

“I will take it that you passed,” said Fitz, smiling back at her.

“I did,” said Herbie proudly. “I have been appointed a Midshipman in the Lord Admiral’s service - now I simply need to find a ship.”

Fitz’s smile slipped a little; finding a berth for seatime would be a challenge. _Tenacity_ was technically only under her temporary command - and was at anchor besides. The Captains who might be inclined to grant her a favour were currently far from Boralus.

“I will write some letters,” said Fitz. “I think Captain Forster has been promoted to Commodore? - perhaps she has a space open. For now, there is no hurry for you to go to sea. May I treat you to lunch?”

Fitzherberta hopped down the stairs. “Be careful Willa,” she said teasingly. “I’m coming for your epaulette now - just you wait and see.”

“Over my dead body,” laughed Fitz. “Where do you want to go?”

“Rumstock Row Tavern? They’ve got the best batter for their fish.” Herbie looked a bit evasive. “We used to eat there sometimes.”

Fitz took this to mean Rowena had fed them when they had run out of money. “Sounds good,” she said lightly. “The pie I had there was excellent.”

They walked quickly down towards the inn; the wooden sign hung cheerily above the door, and the sounds of happy diners spilled out onto the street. Fitz took off her hat and cloak as she walked into the door, her mouth already anticipating a meal. Herberta saw what Fitz had done, and quickly
pulled her hat off her head as well, awkwardly tucking it under one arm.

Rowena was bustling around the tables, laying down plates piled high with food and whisking away the empty ones. A bright gold ring was prominent on her left hand. "Commander!" she said with laughing eyes. "You are now too late! An even more dashing sailor has swept me off my feet - I know this will leave you devastated."

Fitz laughed easily. "My congratulations to the happy couple," she said.

"She’s a charming rogue," said Rowena. "You sailors often are. Can I tempt you here for lunch?"

"With pleasure."

The door to the kitchen crashed open. A figure sauntered through it, dressed in a crisp white apron. Then her brown eyes caught sight of Fitz, and she blanched white.

"Mrs Pritchard?" said Fitz. "What are you doing here?"

"Mrs Rumstock now," said Rowena. "We thought it was best not to change the name of the tavern."

The bosun was looking hangdog. She mumbled something.

"It’s all very well and good to get married, Mrs Pritchard," said Fitz, annoyed. "But you missed roll call this morning. Jackson had to take up your duties."

"Yes ma’am," said Mrs Pritchard. "Only I put in my resignation today. I hope you will accept it, begging your pardon."

Rowena was looking between her wife and Fitz; her eyes narrowed. "Does the Commander need to leave now?" she said, in a low tone.

"No," said Fitz, mastering her irritation. "I will write a letter in support of your resignation, and make sure your hazard pay is correctly tallied. I know you have been lonely since Mr Pritchard passed. But it is a blow to lose you, Mrs Pri- Mrs Rumstock. A real blow."

"Thank you ma’am," said Pritchard.

"May I have the fish and chips, please?" interrupted Fitzherberta, brightly.

"Certainly," Rowena said. "Commander?"

"The same," growled Fitz.

The Rumstocks disappeared back into the tavern kitchen; Fitz glared at the swinging door. The bosun was a critical part of her crew, and the most senior post a non-commissioned sailor could hope to obtain. The loss of her experience would be painful.

"Can you get good fish and chips outside of Kul Tiras?" asked Fitzherberta, ignoring her mood.

"No," said Fitz grumpily. "They get the batter wrong." Then she paused, physically rocking in her chair. She looked at her sister with intense eyes. "Fish and chips. What other things are your favourite here?"

"Oh, the pies are pretty good," said Herbie, surprised. "The susuaged eggs, of course, and the pasties. I guess the bread as well. You know - the old-fashioned stuff."
“And all things you eat with your hands,” said Fitz. A sudden madness seized her. She wanted to jump up and begin pacing - but this wasn’t the quarterdeck of Tenacity, and her sister was already looking at her with alarm. They waited for their food in silence.

Rowena and Pritchard finally bustled up with two plates; Rowena put hers down in front of Fitz, and Rumstock in front of Herbie. Fitz ignored the food.

“A moment if you please, Mrs Rumstock,” Fitz said. “It shan’t take long. In your experience, what alcoholic contraband did the Quel’Thalans most value?”

“Oh, I, err...” said the former Mrs Pritchard.

“Off the record, if you please,” said Fitz impatiently.

“Well,” said Pritchard furtively. “Not that anyone off Tenacity would smuggle, ma’am, because that would be wrong. But whiskey fetched the highest prices in Sunsail, for sure.”

“Whiskey,” repeated Fitz.

“Yes ma’am,” said Pritchard. “Reminds ‘em of fire.”

“Thank you, Mrs Rumstock,” said Fitz. Sagewood had loved whiskey. “I appreciate your help very much.”

“Tides preserve you, ma’am,” said Pritchard, knuckling her forehead - Fitz stood and awkwardly shook her hand instead. The woman was standing in her own wife’s pub, for the sake of the Tides, after forty years of loyal service to the Navy; if anything, Fitz should be the one saluting her.

“What’s all this about, Willa?” asked Herbie curiously, once Fitz sat back down and the Rumstocks had gone to their other customers. “Whiskey? Food you can eat with your hands?”

“No?” said Herbie, looking at her incredulously.

“No, ma’am,” corrected Fitz. “You are in my vicinity, I think. I will have orders cut assigning you to me: there is a pressing need on the Lord Admiral’s staff for a non-drinker.”

Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams was looking at her with an odd expression. “Aye aye, ma’am?”

“We will go to the bank now,” said Fitz, ignoring this. “I will authorise you to draw on a particular account. Then you are to obtain enough good malt whiskey to float the Tenacity clean away. I think there might be a bar near Unity Square? Pick up every bottle of Quel’Thalan wine you can find, as well - it would be best to hedge our bets.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Miss Midshipman Fitzwilliams. “And for the Kul Tirans?”

Fitz had been thinking of nothing but blonde hair and grey eyes - she started at this reminder that humanity existed. “Tripels,” she said at random. “Fancier than lager.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

“Miss Fitzwilliams,” said Fitz. “You have just set the menu for the Lord Admiral’s wedding anniversary; you must now execute it. Once you have procured the alcohol, if you please, you have
exactly one month to coordinate with the chefs at the keep. Discover a way to keep the food hot and fresh; the pies might survive, but nothing is worse than cold fish and chips.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitzherberta. “Maybe Robin can help.”

“Perhaps. Make sure you place an order for butter,” said Fitz. “A great quantity of butter. Liaise with the Tenacity’s bosun, Ms Jackson.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Service on the Lord Admiral’s staff counts for double,” said Fitz, lowering her voice. “You will have to bear the burden of being related to me; it can’t be helped. Carry the Admiral’s honour with you. Do not let her down. I am trusting you with this.”

Her sister’s face was set in determined lines. “Lord Admiral’s finest ma’am,” she said. “I won’t let either of you down.”

“I know you won’t,” said Fitz, standing, and throwing down money for the meals. “Let’s go to the bank - a month isn’t much time.”

Her sister’s services thus secured, Fitz turned to other matters. As the days wore on, the pool of people in her vicinity increased steadily; with great diplomacy, she suborned the services of the deputy-head of the Proudmoore Guard, the Vice-Senechal, and a dozen other personages necessary for the smooth functioning of the event. Fitz went about it as methodically as a Captain provisioning her ship for sea, and wished for a hundred more days to organise the thousand details that bedeviled her mind.

But the date had been set five hundred and twenty seven years ago - it could not be changed. Suppliers who originally balked became quite single-minded once Fitz explained it was for the Lord Admiral- and opened the Admiralty’s pocketbook. Fitz felt like she lived in a permanent world of complex ledgers. The overall financial situation was also improved by ruthlessly culling her cousins from the main event.

“You cannot do this,” Choplin advised flatly, when Fitz ordered it. “The invitations have already gone out.”

“We make a second party,” said Fitz. “We have an usher at the gate, and push the lesser cousins into the courtyard.”

“They will freeze,” said Choplin.

“Have a bonfire,” said Fitz. “Not one of the fake blue ones we’re putting inside. A real one. Perhaps a fireworks display in the inner harbour, and enough beer - no one will care.”

“You realise that any other time, you would be one of these disinvited lesser cousins,” Choplin said, finally at her limit. Her eyes alight with anger. “Your family hasn’t produced anything of note since it split from the Lord Admiral’s line.”

“And I would have been thrilled to be outside,” said Fitz. “Where ridiculous people like you didn’t bother me, and I could leave whenever I liked. I want a list, Choplin - Admirals, heads of the Great Houses, and heirs only. The rest of the inside places go to foreign dignitaries, or people the Lord Admiral specifically wants nearby. Now get out, before I have Jackson throw you out.”

“I will personally protest to the Lord Admiral,” Choplin hissed, as Jackson loomed at her. “See if I don’t.” Then she stormed out.
Fitz thought her life would be a great deal simpler if the Lord Admiral did intervene; until that Tides blessed day, she could only do her duty. So she went back to her paperwork.

The next afternoon, she inspected Crosby as she had the footmen at speed-drill; they looked clumsy as they raced to serve imaginary pies before the pastry grew cold. Two days after that, she was praising Sprocket’s design for the Great Hall, and marvelling at the minor preservation and flame runes Fitzherberta was using to keep everything hot. A week beyond that, she visited the surgeon, methodically checking all his tools, before heading outside to watch Jackson and the Deputy-Commander repel a simulated Zandalari assault.

The decisions she was making now were far-reaching. With a stroke of a pen, Fitz authorised five hundred meal chits for redemption in two dozen separate taverns. With another scrawled signature, she sent patrol boats combing the inner harbour, creating a lattice of watchful eyes. With a quick instruction to Clyburn, fifty members of Tenacity began to methodically stock-take the entire pantry of the Keep.

Finally, ninety sets of orders, and all their duplicates, were written and distributed into every possible hand. These timetabled the day down to the last minute. Her eyes were sore; she felt like she hadn’t slept since the minute she walked onto land again. But the demands of Fitz’s duty propelled her; at the end of every completed sheet, she would call for a cabin boy or hand, sending them running down to warn whomever’s life she was about to disrupt.

Then, abruptly, the preparations were done. She wrote the final paragraph, and sent the last cabinboy away. Out the window it was still black as pitch, but the morning echoed with shouts and called orders. She had finished just in time. The day had finally arrived.

A messenger to the Monastery had returned advising that it wouldn’t rain; the messenger advised the Tidesages has seemed disappointed by this. Clyburn put away her heavy oilskin, instead helping her shrug into her best uniform. She strapped her battered dirk into place while he twitched the red aiguillette so it hung correctly. A dress-sword lay discarded on the dresser; she had refused to wear it. Her dirk had proven itself fifty times over.

With a silent nod of thanks to Clyburn, she strode out into the frigid pre-dawn morning. The streets were deserted as she walked to her station; the heavy walls of Proudmoore Keep loomed up out of the darkness.

“Halt!” called the sentry.

“Friend!” replied Fitz.

“Advance and be recognised.”

Fitz walked forward until her uniform was clearly visible in the sentry’s lamplight. “The Tides Preserve,” she said. This was the countersign.

“You may pass,” said the sentry. “It is five thirty. All is well.”

The guardsman was Fitzjane. She glowered at her older sister menacingly, clutching her spear - then she winked. Fitz touched the brim of her hat wearily. The Guard had brought in every recruit and reserve to man its checkpoints - Fitz wanted every sword to be at its very sharpest. The leaders of a half-dozen friendly nations would be converging on the Keep in less than eight hours, and Kul Tiras was still at war.

Mr Sprocket met her in the courtyard; the massive bonfire was already being assembled, carefully
avoiding the delicate brass anchor inset in the cobbles. A heaving, sweating team of sailors was hauling up a maypole. Huge trestle tables had been constructed, and barrels of beer were already being hoisted into their blocks. On another side of the yard, the tug-of-war rope was being unrolled right next to the puppet-theatre. Everything flickered weirdly in the light of the storm lanterns. Beyond, in the darkness, was the anchored barge filled with fireworks for the display.

Choplin was too busy to sneer at her - she stood imperiously in the middle of dozens of squires, all in tabards and strange hats, sending them scurrying around on pointless errands.

Fitz smiled in grim satisfaction - all things going well, most of the guests wouldn’t want to be inside the keep anyway; security would be streamlined significantly.

The Lord Admiral had arrived the evening before; Fitz had dimly heard the twenty-one guns that had roared out. Presumably the Ranger-General was around also, but Fitz had seen neither of them.

The day passed in a frantic flurry of requests and clarifications. Decisions needed to be made quickly and firmly; Fitz took to standing in the foyer so that people could find her.

The bustle and hustle died away as the afternoon wore on; Fitz recognised the lull as the deep breath five hundred people took before plunging into battle. Finally, the sun began to set. The party was officially on.

The first people to arrive were the minor cousins - the darkness covered the threadbare nature of some of their winter finary, and Fitz thought they looked a bit relieved to be ushered outside to the courtyard. The bonfire welcomed them cheerfully. The band struck up some jaunty tunes, and children started to run around the area designated for their use. Beer was soon in every adult hand, and smiles on every face.

Next game the glittering set; the tonne of the nobility. Carriages pulled by tossing horses, with gilded crests mounted on their sides, pulled right in front of the heavy Keep doors. These passengers swept past Fitz and up the stairs as if she didn’t exist. Frankly, Fitz didn’t care about them either; she considered them part of the ornamentation of the event - like mobile baubles, accenting the tapestries.

There was a lull in the guests; Fitz had staggered the arrivals to ensure traffic remained manageable for the footmen and guards. Clyburn took the opportunity to slide up to her and tuck a ham sandwich into her gloved hand; Fitz ate it gratefully.

The next lot were the Admirals and Commodores - Fitz’s arm grew tired from touching the brim of her hat to them. The idea of escaping behind a wall hanging was starting to appeal greatly.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” said a voice calmly. Striding up came Forster, from the old Intrepid; she had eschewed glitter. Her only accouterments were the epaulettes of her rank, and the well-worn handle of her sword. It only made her more striking.

“Commodore Forster, ma’am. I am pleased to see you.” Fitz struggled to contain her real pleasure.

Commodore Forster nodded, looking at her oddly.

“Good evening, Fitzwilliams,” said a second voice from behind them both.

Lady Grey had appeared - her matched horses were especially fine, and the Waycrest coat of arms gleamed upon her carriage. The stars and glittering medals of her full formal uniform shone brightly in the lamplight; the ribbon in her hair was bright red. She was looking at Commodore Forster with interest.
“Evening, ma’am,” Fitz said. “Can I introduce you to Commodore Forster, of the Firedrake?”

“Charmed,” said Forster, coolly.

“Yes,” said Lady Grey, smiling. “I am sure you are.” She turned to Fitz. “Is everything settled, and in place?”

“Yes indeed, ma’am,” Fitz said awkwardly. “The wind is blowing very fresh from the north, ma’am, which might delay the fireworks - but otherwise there is nothing to report.”

“The outside guests are unlikely to leave until the fireworks are over, Fitzwilliams,” chided Grey.

“This is so, ma’am.”

Privately, Fitz wondered what the Admiral thought she might do about that. It was unlikely she would be able to evict a Guildmaster, or the Lord Mayor of Boralus out of the party at the end of the night.

“Carry on, Fitzwilliams,” said Lady Grey, for all the world like she was in charge. She went sweeping on into the hall.

Forster watched her go. “So that was the victor of the Gulf of Broken Teeth,” she said, thoughtfully.

“Indeed ma’am,” said Fitz.

Forster turned back to her. “Fitzwilliams,” she said. “How long ago did you leave Intrepid?”

“Almost five years ago, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“None of your family was sired by an Elf?” she asked.

“Not a one,” said Fitz, puzzled. “Pure Kul Tiran, right back to the Lord Admiral’s line.”

“That is surprising, Commander,” said Forster. “You have not aged a day since last I saw you. But I have taken enough of your time. Excuse me.”

Fitz watched her go - then kicked herself. She hadn’t mentioned Fitzherberta; Herbie still needed a ship. But it was all too late; the Commodore was already inside.

Fitz turned back to the guests. She had missed several dozen streaming in while she had been otherwise engaged with her superiors, but none of them seemed to have been seriously important. The flood became a trickle, then tapered to almost no one.

Fitz glanced at the clock she had placed unobtrusively by the door. Then she hissed an order, and white-gloved guardsmen hurried to their places. The next block of guests were the ambassadors and dignitaires - the dwarves and humans who made up the bulk of Kul Tiras’ allies in the wide world. The Quel’Thalans, their closest allies, had arrived the day before, and were now housed in the Keep. Fitz, busy beyond imagination, had detailed Sprocket to receive them.

“Present! Arms!” whispered the sergeant quietly. Hands slapped the stocks of muskets; feet stamped in union.

The minutes ticked on. The guests streamed in. The weight of the last month was beginning to catch up with Fitz - she scrubbed her hand across her face. It felt like she had never slept, like she would never sleep again.
The minute hand of the clock clicked around until, the hour hand pointed at precisely three minutes to eight. With the precision of three weeks of drill, servants and footmen and grooms began swarming. More guardsmen rushed up to secure the now-open gates. A red storm-lantern flashed towards the Keep - three long blinks.

Fitz turned away; the guests had arrived, and from this point on no more would be accepted in. She was sure this would leave some fools stranded, but the invitations had been very clear.

She strode into the building, wishing she had the money for a pocket-watch. Then she recalled, in fact, she did; it was a thought to be tucked away for another day.

At the base of the stairs, she turned and waited. At exactly a quarter-past eight, Jaina Proudmoore and Sylvanas Windrunner appeared. Lady Proudmoore held General Windrunner’s arm, and they both looked determined.

Fitz stood to attention and removed her hat, pressing it over her heart. “Your servant, Lady Proudmoore,” she said.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” the Lord Admiral said. “Where is the reception line?” She looked faintly puzzled.

“No such line at a country feastival, ma’am,” said Fitz easily. “I believe your guests have already begun to dance.”

“Your innovations are appreciated, Fitzwilliams,” the Lord Admiral said. “There will be a medal for you tomorrow; report to the Navy office to select it.”

“Only my duty, ma’am,” said Fitz, pleased with herself. She turned to Sylvanas. “I believe the Quel’Thalan party has also already moved into the ballroom, ma’am.”

“So they definitely walked past this butter sculpture?”

“Oh yes, ma’am. They would have had to come this way.”

Sylvanas made a short, abortive gesture - it looked like trying to cover a laugh. “Carry on then, Commander.”

Fitz put her hat back on her head, and lead them towards the ballroom.

The Great Hall was normally a militant space; weapons, grey stone, tapestries, and retired regimental colours. Sprocket had leaned into this theme; he had done very little except add imposing cannons from Tenacity. Fitz wondered how long it would take for the male guests to be drunk enough to start sitting astride on them. The hall was well lit; cheerful multicoloured campfires dotted the landscape - magic, of course, so there was no heat - and the band was playing jigs and hornpipes, filling the air with sound.

“This is different,” said Sylvanas, looking around the hall. One of her ears started twitching along with the band. “Rustic. Katherine would have loved it.”

“She isn’t the only one,” said the Lord Admiral, dryly. “Your people appear to be enjoying the change in pace.”

The Quel’Thalan elves had all submitted themselves to the dress code, but their heavy winter formals all had little exotic touches - predominantly gold at the neck and sleeves. Several wore an ornate red peacoat - clearly Quel’Thalan Naval officers. Fitz’s eyes skittered over these figures nervously -
many had golden hair.

The free-wheeling nature of the party had fragmented the Elves up. Instead of the solid block of Fitz’s memory, now there were elves everywhere. One was watching the Morris dancers with an incredulous expression. Three others were standing around a green magefire, enjoying the warmth from the nearby actual fireplace; yet more were mingling around the tables. Fitz had never seen anyone eat a pie by holding it inside a slice of bread, but the Quel’Thalans seemed perfectly comfortable with the arrangement. One particularly adventurous soul held a piece of paper wrapped around a golden slice of fish.

“Fitz,” said Sylvanas intensely. “Tell me there are no forks.”

“No forks, ma’am,” said Fitz. “Can I offer you a glass of wine?”

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” said Lady Proudmoore. “Are we having fancy elven wine with fish and chips at our wedding anniversary?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“I see,” said the Lord Admiral. Her face was impassive. “Very good, Commander. You are dismissed.”

Fitz was a touch crestfallen. “Aye aye ma’am.” She touched the brim of her hat and withdrew.

“Where is the vinegar?” said Lady Proudmoore to Sylvanas as Fitz walked away. “Forget the wine; the chips need beer.”

Fitz smiled.

She was at a bit of a loss now; the party was in full swing, and nothing had so far gone wrong. She nervously avoided the bulk of the elves, and ducked out a door to chat with Clyburn - apart from a couple of minor alcohol-fueled dancing accidents that occurred outside, the casualty station was clear. The Marines under Jackson were watchful, but had equally little to report.

The party outside was a roaring success; Fitz’s many cousins were singing loudly - the band was almost drowned out. Groups of people stripped off their jackets and strained at the tug-of-war rope; the children were squealing and sprinting about in a game of tag. The fire was cheerful, and the carefully placed barrier ropes were holding well. Fitz noted the watchful Guardsmen everywhere, then slipped back inside.

There was no real destination; Fitz had been dismissed from the Lord Admiral’s side - her next duty would begin at exactly eleven, when she would signal for the fireworks to begin. Until then she was free to enjoy the festivities. Surrounded by superiors bedecked in their honours and finery, surrounded by foreign dignitaries, wracked by both fear and longing of seeing Sagewood around every corner - Fitz thought “enjoy” might be more difficult than it sounded.

Mrs Pritchard’s instincts had been good; the Quel’Thalans were greatly enjoying the whiskey. Fitz was avoiding alcohol herself - she walked towards the non-alcoholic table, thinking to take a lemonade. To her pleasure and delight, already standing beside it, dressed in a green Ranger uniform, was Galadin Windrunner.

Fitz strode over and beamed at him “Commander Windrunner!” - she held out her hand to shake - “You are looking very well!”

“Do I know you?” Galadin said coldly. His ears were held rigidly straight. He did not take her hand.
“Yes?” said Fitz, confused. “Galadin, it’s me, Fitz.”

“You have mistaken me for someone else,” said the man in perfect common. “Although you clearly do not know Galadin as well as you think you do, if you would mistake him for me.”

Fitz peered into his face; there was a certain hardness around the eyes and mouth. Her memories were of a comrade quick to smile. The elf stared back at her - his ears slowly flattened against his head.

“Give it away, Giramar,” said another voice. “You’re always so grim.”

Fitz turned - behind her was another Galadin Windrunner, except this second figure was dressed in the red uniform of the Quel’Thalan Navy. Fitz looked between them both, amazed.

“Fitz!” said the second, more cheerful Galadin; he slapped her on the back, ears wriggling in delight. “It’s been a long time, my friend; I take it that you have not met my brother?”

“Brigadier Giramar Windrunner,” said the first man. “And you are?”

“Commander Fitzwillimia Fitzwilliams,” said Fitz.

“I have heard of you,” said Giramar. “Your name has been spoken a lot in Quel’Thalas.”

“Gir,” said Galadin, sharply. His ears shot back.

“Let us not quarrel between allies,” said Fitz, desperate to avoid a scene. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Brigadier Windrunner. Might I renew my friendship with Captain Windrunner?” Fitz had belatedly noticed the two epaulettes riding Galadin’s shoulder.

“You may go,” said Giramar, shortly.

Fitz practically dragged Galadin away - when they reached an empty space, they shook hands with real affection, beaming with joy to see one another again. Galadin’s ears were once again wriggling.

“Sorry about that,” said Galadin. “Well done with this party, Fitz; this is my kind of night.”

He shot a glance at a group of about a dozen young Kul Tiran ladies and gentlemen; his ears went to a rakish angle. They all smiled and fluttered, and gave him intrigued looks. Fitz had never seen such elegantly dressed people holding pours of beer.

“I thought the Lord Admiral might like it too,” said Fitz. “How have you been? Captain already! What ship?”

“Dreams of Leaves Drifting - it’s a new construction of sixty guns; I think Command grew tired of my having adventures, and promoted me into the Fleet.”

“Knowing you, you’ll find adventure regardless,” said Fitz, laughing. “Congratulations! Now you will meet them in a fine young ship.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Galadin. Then he glanced left and right, before leaning in and dropping his voice to a whisper. “What in the hell happened with you and Jess? One second I’m getting a letter from you asking what kind of engagement gift to get her, the next second I hear you declined her proposal outright.”

Fitz paused; she had indeed sent a letter asking Galadin for clarity about gifting Jess her father’s compass. Apparently that had been an excellent idea.
“She is… very good,” said Fitz instead. “But not for me.”

“Don’t be daft, Fitz,” said Galadin, sharply. “She’s here right now. Just go find her and talk.”

Fitz’s heart raced; it thumped out a single rhythm. Sagewood was here. Sagewood was here.

“I can’t,” she said.

“What?” said Windrunner, incredulously. “What could possibly be the problem?”

“Time,” said Fitz

They looked at one another silently.

“Jess knows that you are human, Fitz,” said Galadin, gently. “Pain is a part of being an Elf. But I won’t convince you; I can only hope you will figure it out yourself. Now! Shall we go torment my brother? He is the heir to the Ranger-Generalship, you know. Perhaps he should be made to embrace the Kul Tiran alliance more fully. Wouldn’t he look splendid dancing with those men covered in bells?”

“The bells are traditional,” said Fitz. “Surely he cannot object too strongly to joining an important cultural practice.”

Galadin smiled with far too many teeth.

Fitz couldn’t enjoy Galadin’s company for long, of course - or Garimar’s stiff Morris dance. Her duties demanded her attention. The party was a blur of faces; in one corner stood the Lord Admiral, chatting with old Lord Ashvane; around a blue magefire Commodore Forster was staring down Admiral Grey; Lord Buckland, the heir to the prestigious Norwington Proudmoores, was holding court under the tapestry of the Kraken, surrounded by flunkies; in a deep patch of darkness stood Lady Stormsong, flanked by two Tidesages. One looked especially gangly somehow.

The all-powerful clock drove Fitz on; she ducked outside again to make her rounds. All was still well; the night was now almost halfway done. Jackson and Clyburn had things well under control; the crowd had thinned out as parents had taken their children home. The tug-of-war rope had been coiled away, and Mr Sprocket had organised some hands to feed the bonfire. More beer was being brought up all the time to wet thirsty throats.

The next time she stepped into the great hall, young Buckland - the son of Lord Buckland - was waiting.

“Fitzwilliams,” he said. “Shouldn’t you be outside?”

Fitz didn’t entirely know what to say to this, so she remained silent. Normally this was an effective strategy; this time it only allowed space for Buckland to maneuver.

“I saw you talking to the Elven princeling,” he said. “And heard about your other conquest. Looking above your station leads to painful falls, Fitzwilliams. Best for you to go back outside.”

Fitz glanced at the clock she had strategically placed on one of the tables. “Excuse me, Mr Buckland - I have duties.”

“That’s ‘my lord,’ to you,” he said, taking a sip of wine. “Don’t be uppity, Fitzwilliams. I heard the Ranger-General gave you a knife as a parting gift - the Elves don’t exactly think much of you.”
“When she handed it to me,” said Fitz evenly, “she said that I was her wife’s claws.”

Buckland sneered elegantly.

“Commander Fitzwilliams?” said another voice. “Commander Fitzwilliams, is that you?”

Fitz turned. To her astonishment, there stood Mr Robinson. When she had last seen him, he was a Midshipman onboard the Thunderhawk - for a minor Ashvane cousin, he was now looking quite grand. His uniform was made of rich fabric, and the same gleaming epaulette of rank as she herself wore graced his own right shoulder - he had made Commander in less than two years.

He rushed towards her. “Commander Fitzwilliams!” he said. “I cannot tell you what a pleasure it is to see you again!”

“No one has ever said that to a Fitzwilliams before,” laughed Buckland.

“Mr Robinson,” Fitz said, ignoring this jibe. “You were always seamanlike about getting things done. Congratulations on your swift promotions. When did you return from the west?”

“Please, call me Graham,” he replied. “If I may call you Fitz?”

She nodded. Buckland was staring at them both, frowning heavily.

Robinson’s face was red from the drink he was carrying, and he was expansive with his gestures. “I just wanted to express my gratitude,” he said. “Without your support I would never have been appointed, nor allowed to continue in the Navy.”

“Nonsense,” said Fitz, who privately agreed with him. “Talent will out.”

Buckland’s face had slowly drained of colour; Fitz looked at him in puzzlement.

“You don’t understand,” Mr Robinson said. “The current Lord Ashvane is childless, and took notice when your battle report was published. You mentioned my name. It was in all the papers. Even before I returned to Boralus, my Lord condescended to adopt me via correspondence. Without you, I would have remained a minor, forgotten cousin until the end of my days. I will not forget your kindness to me.”

Fitz was astonished; Robinson was the heir to the House of Ashvane. Presumably this sudden influx of power and influence was the reason he was a Commander after only two years.

Buckland looked like he would be sick. “Excuse me,” he said, and hurried away. Fitz ignored him.

“My sister,” said Fitz slowly. “She recently passed her entrance exam.”

“Tell her to report aboard the Seahorse,” said Robinson-Ashvane promptly. “My ship. It is only a small token of my regards - I owe you much more.”

Fitz stuttered her thanks, but Robinson waved it off. They talked for a good while longer - he was fine company, and just as intelligent as she had found him as a Midshipman. When they took leave of each other, it was with smiles and firmly shaken hands.

Fitz was entirely exhausted, but her party plan was still in motion. Outside she could hear the beginnings of the crash and snap of fireworks; it made a fine signal. At the sound, twenty servants hurried into the Great Hall and cleared away the remains of the food. On their heels followed fifty burly sailors dressed in checked shirts; they hoisted the tables, chairs, and Morris dancers into the air.
and carried them away. Ten more sailors rushed in with mops and brooms, clearing away the debris. They left a dance floor.

Then the band struck up a courtly tune.

“May I have this dance, Miss Fitzwilliams?”

Fitz turned. Her night never seemed to end; she was mad with exhaustion. But behind her stood the Prince of Quel’Thalas.

Kael’Thas Sunstrider alone had eschewed Kul Tiran dress. His thin silk robes would have been more than adequate for the heat and sunshine of Silvermoon, but in this heavy stone fortress, Fitz noted his ears trembling with cold. Not a trace of it could be seen on his face, however - he looked at her with that same smirking smile she remembered so clearly.

Fitz said nothing; simply bowed deeply. Then she swept her cloak from her shoulders and draped it around his own. The heavy fabric enveloped him; his ears quivered with some unidentifiable emotion, but he didn’t object, or otherwise move to throw the cloak off.

She held out her arm.

“Be careful, Miss Fitzwilliams,” said the Prince, taking it. They swept out onto the floor. “An elf could get ideas, you know. First lemons, and now clothing.”

Fitz didn’t really know what to say to this. Before she could gather something up, they had moved into a fox reel; Fitz was glad it was energetic. Without her coat the hall was quite nippy, and there were limited opportunities to talk.

Surprisingly, the Prince made no attempt to talk during their dance regardless. He simply smiled at her, like he knew a secret. They swept forward, away, and around each other; the Prince was especially adept at the gallop.

The reel closed out, and Fitz bowed deeply once again. She was relieved. The Prince was far older and more cunning than she could ever hope to be; whatever purpose this dance served, it was beyond Fitz’s understanding.

“Thank you, Commander,” said the Prince. “And now, according to the dance-card, it is time for the minuet.”

Fitz froze.

“I believe you have a longstanding engagement for the minuet,” said the Prince. His eyes were sharp. “Let me take you to your partner - I believe she is over by the fireplace.”

Fitz was nominally the leading party - the Prince of Quel’Thalas had taken her arm, not the other way around. But this detail was semantic. He took them both firmly towards the fire - to the place, in fact, that Fitz had been avoiding all night.

In a brilliant red uniform, hair golden and flicking in the flames, holding a tumbler of fine Kul Tiran whiskey, stood Commodore Sagewood.

The Prince let go of Fitz’s arm, but she barely noticed; Sagewood was both painful to look at, and mesmerizing. Fitz wanted to touch her face and kiss her mouth; Fitz wanted to flee into the night.

Sagewood carefully put down her glass, and bowed deeply to the Prince.
“Commodore,” he said. “I am glad I caught you. You haven’t forgotten the dance you saved for Commander Fitzwilliams? Let me not stand between you.”

He let go of Fitz’s arm and waved an encouraging hand. His smile was an active smirk.

Sagewood’s face was blank, and her expressive ears were still. Fitz didn’t know what this meant; frankly words had left her. There was a ringing noise in her ears that she normally only heard during boarding actions. The world had narrowed down to the figure standing before the fire; it was like the Prince was gone.

Fitz bowed, and offered her arm. Sagewood took it. Somehow, Fitz led her back towards the dancefloor, though she could not recall the journey. She was too engrossed by the warmth of the hand on her arm, though Sagewood’s silence was inscrutable.

The minuet was a slow, stately dance; it was designed for two people who liked each other a great deal. It also provided ample opportunities to both talk, and move close. Fitz and Jess did not talk. For Fitz’s part, Jess’s presence was like a scour, wiping away all words. What Jess was thinking, Fitz could not tell.

The steps felt heavy; Fitz led gently, and traded often. As the dance moved on, Fitz realised they had both indeed moved ever more closely together - she could hardly pull away from those grey eyes; her ears and heart were captive. So close were they, Fitz could smell clean soap, wool, and just a hint of salt water.

When the dance ended, they broke apart, and looked at one another. Fitz took off her hat, and pressed it over her heart. They had not spoken a single word. Jess bowed to her in turn.

“May I cut in?” said Sylvanas Windrunner. Giramar Windrunner was at her shoulder; he was shooting glances between Fitz and Jess, looking openly puzzled.

The band segued into a cotillion; Sylvanas gripped Fitz and pulled her into this, the third dance of Fitz’s night. Giramar had taken Jess. They danced away - somehow, the two couples found themselves at opposite ends of the floor.

“That was clever work by the Prince, Fitz,” said Sylvanas lowly. Fitz was slightly distracted not stepping on her foot. “He’s gotten you off the hook; scurrilous rumours look ridiculous when the two principles dance like...” she trailed off, looking uncomfortable. Then her long ears twitched, and she smirked a smile. “Also he looks really stupid in your coat.”

Fitz had to concede the rightness of this statement - she caught sight of the Prince on the edge of the room, still strutting around wearing it. Fitz thought that was probably because the second he shucked it, he would freeze solid.

“I went outside,” Sylvanus continued. She looked at Fitz, a strange light in her eyes. Her ears cocked forwards.

“Fitz,” she said. “Did you organise for a fight to break out at my wedding anniversary?”

“What? No ma’am!” said Fitz, horrified.

Actually, Clyburn had indeed suggested a fist-fighting tournament - but Fitz had judged it slightly more Kul Tiran culture than a wedding anniversary could respectfully maintain.

Sylvanas’s ears drooped. “There was shouting, and they were all pushing and shoving over this rope. I had hopes. Perhaps next year.”
Fitz realised she would never understand the Quel’Thalans, not in a thousand years.

The dance came to a close, and Fitz touched the brim of her hat in thanks.

“You’re an excellent dancer, Fitz,” said Sylvanas, easily. “But if you don’t mind, I now wish to dance with my wife.”

Fitz smiled tiredly. “Very good, ma’am.”

She beat a hasty retreat away from the dance floor; finally disentangled, she looked at the clock. Her timetable had her making another set of rounds beginning five minutes ago; Clyburn and Jackson were probably wondering where she was. She hurried towards the door, hoping no small disasters had occurred while politics had been happening to her.

Unfortunately, it seemed the political snares were not yet done. Before she could reach the door, a finely dressed servant approached her; she delivered an imperiously worded summons from old Lord Buckland. This worthy was still ensconced under the Kraken tapestry, but his sycophants seemed to have dispersed. As Fitz approached, he waved off several more - when Fitz touched the brim of her hat to him, she and he were alone.

“Fitzwilliams,” he said. “Thank you for speaking with me. A glass of whiskey for you?”

“An honour, Sir,” said Fitz. “Although I must decline. My duties demand my speedy return.”

“Of course,” Buckland said. He sipped his own glass. “You have risen far, Fitzwilliams, through your devotion to duty.”

Fitz waited in silence. In her experience, powerful political figures didn’t compliment insignificant Naval officers without an ulterior purpose.

“How does one earn such devotion?” he mused. “Will the next Lord Admiral receive it as his due?”

“The Lord Admiral sails,” said Fitz. “Kul Tiras sails with her.”

“But not forever,” said Buckland. “Already there are whispers; eight months of the year is a long time to be from home, more so when duty stretches out for so long.”

Fitz kept her face still, and steady. Silence seemed the absolute wisest policy to employ; she was uncertain where this conversation was going, but her instincts screamed of danger.

“The Lord Admiral has ruled for five hundred years,” continued Buckland. “Surely it will not be a long before she steps down, or - forgive me - before the Tides receive her back in glory. When this happens, the new Lord Admiral will require fine sailors. And will value loyalty.”

Fitz was entirely sure she didn’t want to be involved in this conversation, but Sagewood had once told her something about political self-preservation - Jess had told her to never leave an impression she was an outright enemy.

“Duty is a sailor’s only creed,” she said.

“Quite so, Fitzwilliams.” Buckland looked at her impassively. “With the Lord Admiral close to choosing an Heir, that duty requires you to choose your allies well. The Quel’Thalans expand their Navy; the trolls avoid battle; the Tidesages refuse to speak. The next Lord Admiral will need connections, standing, and confidence. They should be the flower of the Proudmoore line.”
“I couldn’t say anything about that, Sir,” said Fitz. “I am only a sailor.”

“Yes,” said Buckland. He gave her a piercing glance. “See that you remain so.”

He waved at her in dismissal; she touched the brim of her hat and walked steadily away.

Inside Fitz was deeply disturbed; she didn’t know what had just occurred, but she was fairly confident it should be reported. She casually looked around, but both Commodore Forster and Admiral Grey were gone - to her mind, either of these would be the optimal choice, and so the whole sorry mess would have to wait.

Fitz made her rounds again; outside the party was winding down. Although she couldn’t help but look, Sagewood was nowhere to be found - her absence was a dagger. It was well past midnight, and sailors were packing away the tables and barriers. The guards were keeping a strict count of those leaving, marking them off against the guest-list. No stragglers would be allowed to linger and compromise security.

It wouldn’t be much longer before the Lord Admiral and the Ranger-General staged their customary distraction, and disappeared back to their room. Fitz longed for it. She scrubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hands. The surgeon, when she had visited him as part of her final rounds, had offered her a cot - but she had declined; if she fell asleep, she would never wake back up again.

The implacable clock wound on: the Lord Admiral and Ranger-General had proposed a toast, then slipped out during the drinking of it; an hour later the alcohol was quietly removed; the fire was allowed to burn down, lowering the temperature significantly. Guests made their goodbyes, sweeping from the room in groups of six or seven, none of them wishing to be last. Fitz missed Galadin leaving, but found he had looked for her, and left Clyburn a cigar. He was puffing on it with every enjoyment.

The last guest was shuffled out. The cleaning crews arrived; food began to be removed for distribution in the Dampwick Ward. Tenacity sailors, stumbling with fatigue, streamed out of the gates and made for their lodgings. Choplin was crowing to the Seneschal that she had organised one of the greatest wedding parties in Kul Tiras history. Fitz walked inside, and slumped against a handy wall - then she thought she might take a seat. But the floor was entirely too comfortable; her eyes drifted closed. Everything went still and quiet.

Fitz was vaguely aware of urgent yet familiar voices, just on the edge of her understanding.

“...won’t wake up...”.

“...to the pier...” hissed another.

“...aye aye, my lord...”

“...careful there! Easy does it...”

Fitz wasn’t concerned about this; Clyburn, Jackson meant her no harm. Even Brother Gull probably didn’t currently want to kill her.

“Come now, ma’am - put your arm around my shoulders, that’s the way.”

Fitz staggered blindly, mind still sleeping. At points she was almost picked up and carried along by her supporter - then the crunch of footsteps ceased, and were replaced by the lapping of water; Fitz sank into the ocean with relief, and knew no more.
When she awoke, the sun was streaming through the after cabin windows of *Tenacity*; she was alone in her own cot. Fitz leapt out of bed. Her surroundings were like a tonic; she felt full of energy, eager for duty - and also faintly nauseous. The face in the mirror lacked the wear and care of yesterday, even if it was a bit green. Everything prior seemed like a dream. Had she really met Galadin’s Brother? Had Jackson really carved an enormous butter deer? Had she really danced with Sagewood, saying nothing, lit by the magefire of the Tidesages?

But the party was over at last. Fitz rejoiced in her duty safely done, and in the fact that the teardown plan was far less complex than the construction; Mr Sprocket would have everything well in hand by now. Fitz rubbed her hands, opened the window for some air, and then searched for a pen and paper - she had a letter to write to Herbie, and another to write to Forster. She had a careful, quiet letter to send to Galadin. She had orders to issue to the people of *Tenacity*, and elaborate thanks for the many subordinates from outside her own crew. Soon, the Lord Admiral would set sail for her winter moorings in Quel’Th alas - surely Sagewood and Galadin would be safe there, and just as surely Fitz wouldn’t be needed during that time. Surely she would be allowed to sail, to engage the enemy during the frigid months.

Around her lay the sounds and smells and tastes of the ocean; it was good to be home.

Chapter End Notes

It turns out that if the chapter is twice as long, it takes twice as long to update. =D"

EDIT: also, why does this site insist on putting random spaces everywhere? D= I cry salt tears to an indifferent moon.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

"In which Fitz learns that life is better than a poke in the eye with a blunt stick."

My wonderful QuickYoke drew Lady Sarah - here she is. I am not going to lie, I fully understand if you don't come back to this chapter for a while after viewing this. It's completely okay. Take all the time you need to process its magnificence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Fitz couldn’t afford to stay and enjoy her beautiful sloop for long. The Lord Admiral was in residence, and Fitz was her Flag officer - eventually, someone would require her presence ashore. But she could draw that time out; paperwork didn’t care where in the world it was signed, as long as was submitted.

Fitz settled herself at the desk, inked her quill, and began to write.

The sunshine quickly faded as the morning wore on; clouds gathered. Fitz rolled down her sleeves against the chill. At six bells, rain began pattering up against the glass of the stern windows - this grew increasingly intense. By seven bells the wind was howling. Fitz turned on an oil lamp, and kept going. Piles of completed papers grew across her desk. Occasionally the scratching of the pen had to be punctuated by scrambling for a bucket - the choppy swell upset her stomach.

Clyburn appeared as the bells rung eight. He bustled around, making up her bedding and delivering the mailbag; the whole while he was apologizing about her chances for breakfast.

“Begging your pardon ma’am, but the galley fire is out,” he said anxiously. “It might be best to go ashore to eat.”

Fitz pushed aside her pen and paper. Frankly she felt queasy - breakfast wasn’t necessarily a high priority. “Thank you, Clyburn. Would you be so good as to call away my gig, please?”

He hustled to the door and spoke a quiet word to the sentry, who in turn yelled it for’ard as loudly as possible; Jackson’s familiar voice rose up from out on deck in reply, muffled by the planking. There was the clatter of feet, and the creaking of blocks and tackles.

Fitz stood, and Clyburn helped her shrug into her second-best jacket - a delicate manouver while slouching under the low ceiling. Her dirk was buckled to her side, and her oilskin placed on top. The rhythm was familiar and soothing.

It was raining stiffly when she gained the deck; the wind plucked at her hat and the foaming whitecaps of the ocean were clearly visible beyond the breakwater. The little gig tossed cruelly once it was dropped into the sea; Fitz ordered the rowers to pull around Tenacity anyway. As they bobbed around under the sharp bowsprit, her eye caught on every change, noted every detail which might impact the ship’s readiness for deployment.
The shore-crew had done good work. The copper-plating of the hull had been cleaned, battle-scarred timbers replaced or repaired, and new rigging mounted. Fitz’s sloop had been returned to a state nearly as good as the day she had been delivered into the Navy; she made a brave sight at anchor, riding high on the rolling swell. The Kul Tiran colours snapped briskly at the flag-jack.

The rain sleeted down, hitting the surface of the ocean and the cobbles with thousands of tiny splashes; a long way off, there was the broken rumble of thunder.

When the gig finally pulled in, stepping onto land again was wearying - although Fitz’s stomach appreciated the lack of motion. The energy of the sea had been infectious; Fitz felt more alive there than she had in months.

On the waterfront, the only people outside were stevedores huddling miserably in their tarpaulins, and a couple of oarsmen waiting for hire. Fitz and her crew took shelter under a nearby awning as another roll of thunder echoed; for some reason, she was reluctant to go far from the ship.

“Congratulations, Ms Jackson,” Fitz finally said. “Your appointment as bosun is confirmed. I will see you in the evening to sign the paperwork.”

“Thank you ma’am,” said Jackson. A few of the other sailors cheered lowly, clapping her on the back.

“My sincere compliments to you,” Fitz said, after they were done. “The promotion has been well earned. Please liaise with Mr Sprocket, and make the ship ready for sea with all haste.”

“Very good ma’am,” said Jackson. “Do you expect us to sail soon?

Fitz couldn’t explain how she was so certain. She had duties to the Lord Admiral, and those had her in an office somewhere receiving reports and screening visitors. There was no reason to believe she would remain in command of *Tenacity*, and even less justification to order the ship to prepare for sea.

“Our departure time is uncertain,” said Fitz. “Begin victualling immediately and complete it today. We may leave as soon as tomorrow.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Jackson. The new bosun knuckled her forehead - Fitz made a note to get her a hat - and with a few swift orders the oarsmen were called together. They scuttled back through the rain towards the gig.

“Hire a carriage, if you please, Mr Clyburn,” Fitz said, turning away. “Then find a dry spot, and wait for my return. I am sorry - it could be a while.”

Clyburn knuckled his forehead.

“Wait,” Fitz called, swallowing heavily. “Could you… could you also find my father’s compass for me please? Pack it with my things.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Clyburn. “I’ll do that directly after I get your cab.”

“Thank you.”

There were hire carriages were waiting outside a tavern down the road; the horses were sleek and wet in the rain. Clyburn ran out to one of them and sent it clattering over to her.

Fitz steeled herself before climbing into the coach; she hated the things. They bumped and swayed, and given any other weather she would have preferred to walk. But the rain was roaring down in a
torrent now, spilling from roofs and spiralling down the drains. Fitz could barely see through the cab’s windows - she felt sorry for the driver perched outside.

The cab drew up outside the Navy office; Fitz handed over the fare. Then she settled her hat more firmly, double-checked her coat, and ducked up the white stairs. The rain beat strongly down; a real gale had blown in.

“Commander Fitzwilliams to see the Admiral,” Fitz said to the reception desk.

“My apologies, Commander,” said the clerk. “But Lady Grey is not here. I think she left instructions for you?” She started scrabbling through her papers, muttering to herself.

Fitz dripped water onto the marble floor, hat under her arm, waiting patiently.

“Ah, here it is,” said the clerk, pulling a bit of foolscap free; “Instructions from Vice-Admiral Sarah Grey, to Commander Fitzwillimia Fitzwilliams - report immediately to my quarters at Proudmoore Keep.”

“Thank you,” said Fitz politely, putting back on her hat. Then she headed back out into the rain and hailed another carriage.

By the time she reached the Keep it was mid-morning. The fortress seemed much more forbidding than the night before - probably because barely anything remained of the party. The massive bonfire was gone, and the tables had been packed away. The only people remaining outside were a section of bedraggled, soggy Guard recruits, who marched past Fitz’s window as the carriage pulled up. She thought one of them might have had bright red hair.

A footman was waiting for Fitz at the main entrance, and he ushered her deep into the private wing of the Keep. The door he led her to was a solid slab of lacquered oak; Fitz knocked on it firmly, and poked her head inside.

“Ah - there you are,” said Lady Grey. “Come in, Fitzwilliams.”

The Admiral seemed larger than the little space could contain. Grey lounged in her chair, looking out the window into the rain; today, the ribbon in her hair was purple, and she was dressed in a fine suit. A cheerful fire roared in the grate, and a bookshelf filled with battered sailing manuals - one lay open on a coffee table. The whole effect was like a Lady receiving a guest in a manor.

Fitz took off her hat and surreptitiously shook a few droplets of water out of her hair.

“Coffee for you, I think,” said the Admiral, smiling. “Do take a seat.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Fitz. She picked the blue chair - the one closer to the fire - and put her hat on the table next to it.

“I won’t keep you in suspense,” Grey said. “The Lord Admiral had a rather good time last night, and so did most everyone else. Choplin is the current toast of all the society papers - although you probably inferred all this when you were invited to sit.”

Fitz couldn’t help but smile.

“You did well, Fitzwilliams,” said Grey approvingly. “The last good party was the one Sagewood organised, and even that had an hour-long reception line.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Fitz. “Only my duty.”
“Of course it was,” said Grey. “An officer’s duty is never done. But how did you find the event personally?” She smirked lightly. “You can learn such a lot about a person when you watch them dance.”

“It was indeed highly educational, ma’am,” Fitz stuttered. Her heart was thumping loudly, memory spurred on by anxiety.

“Continuing your education is important. Good for you.” Grey leaned back in her chair and smirked again. “I also found the evening personally... instructive.”

Fitz blinked.

Mercifully, there came a knock on the door; a Lieutenant appeared. He held a silver tray, with a pot and a little punnet of sugar on top - it was the work of a moment to pour Fitz a mug of steaming coffee. She clutched it with cold hands, and warmth sank into her palms, chasing away the damp.

The door swung closed again.

“Begging your pardon ma’am, but may I ask for council?” Fitz blurted out: Grey seemed to be in a good mood; the topic needed to be changed; and there had been one event in particular that still preyed on Fitz’s mind.

“Granted,” said Grey, expansively.

“It’s about Lord Buckland, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“Ah.” Admiral Grey took a small sip of her own coffee, narrowing her eyes.

Fitz didn’t even know how to begin. The idea was literally unthinkable; Jaina Proudmoore, not the Lord Admiral? It was the wind not blowing, Kul Tiran’s not sailing, it was the Tides not flowing.

“He talked to me about the Admiralty, ma’am,” said Fitz. “I’m not entirely sure - but I believe he wished me to support his son becoming the next Lord Admiral?”

There was silence; the fireplace crackled, and the rain sleeted particularly fiercely up against the windows.


“Ma’am?” said Fitz.

“You, on the other hand, are far less astute,” sighed Grey. “We will have to remedy that eventually.”

She put down her cup; Fitz hastily put down her mug as well, although it was still completely full. In a twinkling, Grey was standing up, hat in hand and walking out the door.

“Come along, Fitzwilliams,” she said. “Young officers should never be late.”

Fitz scrambled after her, swiping her hat from the coffee-table. By the time she caught up, they were halfway down the corridor.

Fitz bobbed along in the Admiral’s wake; Grey walked through the corridors with all the confidence of someone intimately familiar with its layout.

“And here we are,” she said, stopping in front of a nondescript door. She looked at Fitz with a
critical eye, then twitched the line of Fitz’s jacket straight. “I guess you’ll do. Bow immediately.”

Then she knocked firmly.

“Come!”

Inside was a dining room - a private one, furnished with an odd mixture of chairs and sofas. The Lord Admiral was sitting in a tattered chair, dressed in a blue bathrobe, eating marmalade on toast. The Ranger-General was in mismatched socks and her shirtsleeves, lounging on a sofa next to the fire. She was reading a newspaper.

Ithedis brooded in a corner, impassive and deadly.

“Sarah,” said Sylvanas, glancing over the top of the page. “This is a pleasant surprise - my impression was that you had a late night. And Fitz as well. What brings you both here?”

Lady Grey straightened from her bow, leaving her hat over her heart. “Buckland.”

Sylvanas and the Lord Admiral both sighed heavily. Ithedis radiated disapproval.

“It is more of the same nonsense,” said Lady Grey. “I swear, one of these days I will seize him by the pants and throw him over the hedge. This time he wanted Fitzwilliams here to support him in his mischief.”

“Sit down, please,” said Lady Proudmoore, rubbing her temples.

Fitz took a chair. Lady Grey dropped into a Quel’Thalan sofa; she also selected a piece of toast for herself from the Lord Admiral’s plate.

“I suppose you should know that he’s partly right, Fitzwilliams,” said Lady Proudmoore. “It’s true that I am looking for a successor - although the formal announcement hasn’t gone out.”


“Contingent on finding a replacement,” said the Lady Proudmoore. “And the continuance of the alliance. And the conclusion of this war.”

“Details,” said Sylvanas smoothly, going back to her paper.

“If you choose Buckland to succeed you, please warn me first,” said Lady Grey; she was busy spreading jam on her purloined breakfast. “A proper rebellion does take some time to organise.”

“So noted,” said the Lord Admiral. She picked up the teapot, and poured out three cups.

Fitz took one mechanically; she couldn’t believe her ears. Down the long years of struggle and hardship, Kul Tiras had drawn strength from Jaina Proudmoore. Every single ancestor of her line had served the Lord Admiral their whole lives; Fitz had confidently expected to do the same. Her bewilderment must have leaked onto her face - Lady Grey shot her a disapproving look.

“Five hundred years is a long time, Fitzwilliams,” she said. “Kul Tiras has asked much of the Lady Proudmoore. We must let go eventually.”

“But not yet,” said the Lord Admiral; she took a sip of tea. “Not until we have found a replacement. The list of requirements is quite long, after all. Until then, this conversation must go no further than this room.”
“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz promptly.

Lady Grey smiled. “And I wouldn’t spoil such a capital surprise.”

“Good,” The Lord Admiral’s frown deepened. “While you’re here, you can give me your report, Vice-Admiral Grey. What is the news from Zandalar?”

Sylvanas’ face was hidden behind the newspaper. Her long ears, which peaked up over the broadsheet, quirked disapprovingly.

“There is no news from Zandalar. That is what is alarming,” said Lady Grey. She put her tea and toast down, brows furrowed. “Rear-Admiral Parker sent word this morning that two more of his frigates are overdue; that makes four overall. At the same time, enemy activity in other areas has almost completely ceased.”

“The trolls are on the move then,” said Sylvanas. She folded up the paper, ears cocked forwards intently. “Without the frigates keeping tabs on them, we have no idea where.”

The Lord Admiral tapped one finger on the side of her cup. “It is too important to be left to chance; the Fleet must be prepared to counter them. Fitzwilliams - is Tenacity ready for sea?”

“We could leave tomorrow, ma’am.” Excitement burbled up in Fitz’s chest; her hands shook with anticipation.

Admiral Grey balked. “Fitzwilliams is not the right choice,” she said. “All due respect, but there are other Commanders - other ships.”

“None so bold, or so lucky,” murmured the Lord Admiral. “And few sloops sail with a Tidesage.”

“The sharpest claws are the ones drawn first,” said Sylvanas.

Grey’s face was frozen. “If that is your wish, my Lady.”

Fitz was a bit hurt; this sounded like a mission that would require speed, skill, and daring. Tenacity was an excellent choice. The missing frigates were, of course, slightly concerning - but it also proved the value of the intelligence which the trolls wished to deny Kul Tiras.

The Lord Admiral was still looking at Grey; Grey was looking back. Fitz couldn’t read either of their expressions. Even dressed in a bathrobe and holding a cup of tea, Jaina Proudmoore cut a striking figure. Finally, Grey’s mouth quirked into resignation.

“Tenacity is gaff rigged, is it not?” said the Lord Admiral, turning to Fitz. “How long will the voyage to Zandalar and back take?”

“Six months,” said Fitz confidently. “Lord Admiral’s finest.”

“Sagewood has command of the Inshore Squadron,” said Sylvanas. Her ears cocked consideringly. “I’ll send her south to screen the winter moorings. If you put to sea early, Jaina, we can just about afford six months.”

The Lord Admiral put aside her plate of half-eaten toast, and her teacup.

Lady Grey took this as a signal the audience was over; she stood smoothly, brushing crumbs from her lap. Fitz jumped up as well, almost dropping her mug of tea onto the floor in her eagerness.

“Vice-Admiral Grey will cut your orders,” said Lady Proudmoore without standing. “Leave as soon
as you are able. Tides preserve you, Fitzwilliams; you are dismissed.”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat with elation; the next high tide would be during the morning watch. If she returned to her ship now, she might be able to slip out twelve hours early.

It took everything within her to allow her superior to exit the room first; Lady Grey remained silent as the door closed behind them. Fitz took the chance to stop a passing servant and ask him to fetch her oilskin. Then she forced herself walk a respectful half-pace behind the Vice-Admiral.

They navigated the warren of corridors without speaking. Grey was deep in thought; she walked maddeningly slowly. When they re-entered the Admiral’s private quarters, the fire still burned cheerfully, and the rain still lashed the window.

Grey walked to her chair, and sat down heavily; one hand stoked over the battered sailing manual.

“You now have a greater duty,” she said. “One that supersedes everything else. You must return alive.”

Fitz blinked; there was no possible response to that. She was an officer of the Navy. It was her duty to shoot, and be shot at - her life was valuable only as coin for Kul Tiras to spend.

“Let me be clear, Fitzwilliams,” said Grey sharply. “Because I see you are confused. Under no circumstances are you to engage the enemy. Your orders will state that explicitly.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz, astonished.

“Can you be back in less than six months?”

“It will depend on the winds and Tides, ma’am.”

“Do better.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Fitz fell silent. Grey drummed her fingers on her book in agitation.

“I will send a message to the Monastery for the Tidesage; go make your goodbyes to your mother and sisters. And if you were a more sensible person, you would also pen a letter to Jess Sagewood.”

“A-aye aye, ma’am.”

“Mark me, Fitzwilliams,” said Admiral Grey vehemently. She stabbed a finger into the sailing manual. “No heroics. No antics. There and back again, completely alive. You are dismissed.”

Fitz hurriedly touched the brim of her hat and fled.

Outside the servant was waiting with her oilskin; Fitz pulled it on as they walked, fumbling closed the familiar buttons and ties.

“Could you call me a carriage, please?” she said.

“Already waiting, ma’am,” said the servant. “Just to the left of the stairs.”

“Thank you,” Fitz said. Then she stepped back out into the rain.

The first stop he had the cab make was the small Fitzwilliams cottage - she left the driver waiting
outside as she rushed to make her goodbyes. Her mother reacted to the news of her immediate
departure with mingled pride and anxiety.

“You will be careful won’t you, my Daring Swordfish?” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, as Fitz hastily
shoved her things into a canvas satchel; when Fitz turned to say something vaguely reassuring, she
was startled to see her mother looked quite shrunken.

Fitz dropped her shirt onto the bed and rushed to her side. A husband and two children dead in the
Lord Admiral’s service, another crippled, and the youngest gone to the Tides. She wrapped her
mother into a hug, which was returned fiercely.

“When next I’m back, I’ll bring you Elvish spices,” Fitz soothed. “So many you could try a new one
every day and never run out of them.”

“Write to me,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams. She withdrew, surreptitiously wiping her eyes. Fitz went back
to packing.

The second stop was the merchant’s quarter - it was only early afternoon, and the shops were full of
buyers. The ship’s chandler was not the finest in the row of shops, but he wasn’t the cheapest either.
Fitz was contemplating the compasses, and didn’t bother haggling over the price. She paid in cash.

Also in the shop, tucked away in a corner, were sheets of fine paper and pens; there were even
stamps. Fitz wanted to send a letter to Sagewood - she wanted this very much. Fitz only had to
breathe, and she would love Sagewood. But words had never been her strong suit; no halting words
could explain, nor fix what had been broken. She wavered as she waited for the chandler to wrap her
purchases but in the end she turned away.

The third stop was the temporary billet for the Seahorse. Fitz swung out of her carriage laden with a
fine sea chest, a pile of bedding, and a sack of stores.

“Last stop!” she called to the cabman. “We’ll head down to the ship next.”

Then she strode inside.

“Commander Fitzwilliams!” Fitzherberta exclaimed, rising to her feet. “A pleasure to see you,
ma’am.”

“It’s just Willa today, Herbie,” said Fitz, waving her down. “I thought I might kit you out for sea.”
She put the chest down on a handy table

“A new chest!” said Fitzherberta, pawing through her treasures. “Oh, and bedding - food - a sailor’s
housewife - warm gloves! What’s this potion for?”

“Sealeg enhancer,” said Fitz vaguely. “You’ll know if you need it. Hey, do you remember much of
Dad?”

Fitzherberta’s face fell.

“It’s alright,” said Fitz. “It was just he left me an oilskin; Lawrence has it at the moment. It was really
lucky.”

“You’re giving me Dad’s coat?” said Fitzherberta, puzzled.

“I would have, I guess,” said Fitz. “But Jane will probably need one as well, and you’re leaving
soon. So...”
Fitz shrugged out of her own coat, and threw it around Fitzherberta’s shoulders. It was slightly too big for her sister, but it was warm and dry.

“I hear the sailor who had this before you was really lucky,” said Fitz. “They’re also expensive, so you’d better take good care of it.”

“Tides preserve you, Willa,” said Fitzherberta, looking shocked. She slowly lifted a hand and touched a button.

Fitz waved this off - then she rose, bowed mockingly, and strode out. Herbie recovered enough to throw a wad of paper at her retreating back, and call out teasing goodbyes.

In the carriage, Fitz calmed her traitorous breathing. Then she unwrapped the new oilskin she had purchased at the shop. It wasn’t nearly as fine the one she had given away; the buttons were tin, and some of the stitching would need to be redone - but it was thick, and would do the job. Fitz resolutely shrugged into it, and resettled her hat.

When the cab reached the quayside, Fitz jumped out into a boiling hive of activity. Teams of rain-soaked sailors heaved barrels and casks off from wagons and down to the docks; Fitz recognised many of them. Other sailors were strangers.

Fitz automatically glanced up at the harbour’s signal-staff, then did a double-take; it flew Tenacity’s number alongside the flag that meant “priority.” Every idle hand must have been rounded up by Lady Grey to help victual her faster.

The water teemed with lighters and hoys, most of which were currently converging on Tenacity. It was the work of moments to flag down one of these passing boats; Fitz jumped in and sat impatiently in the stern, trying not to fidget. The oarsmen called away, and pulled strongly against the weather; the harbour was quite choppy.

The challenge rang out from the deck of her beloved ship, and the ladder came down promptly; the bosun’s whistles shrilled out their welcome. Fitz clambered up awkwardly, hampered by her oilskin, and saluted the designated quarterdeck.

Crosby and Wood, the two midshipmen, were both there to greet her; they were send for’ard to supervise the stowage. Clyburn’s pigtails were ducking down into the after cabin already, presumably to start dinner. Brother Gull was also there, looking out to sea - the rain sleeted around, but never struck him. He stood silent as death. In four years of knowing him, Fitz had never seen his face.

Fitz turned away from the Tidesage; she had little time for mysteries today. “Pass the word for Mr Sprocket and Ms Jackson,” she said to a nearby sailor. “My compliments to them, and they are to report to me at once.”

Then she disappeared below.

The familiar rhythms of the sea put a spring in her step; outside her cabin the Marine sentry stood to attention and sloped his arms - she returned the compliment breezily. In such fine fettle was she that it took a half-second to notice that her cabin was different.

When she had left in the morning, the furniture had been hewn from left-over oak planking. Now, while the chairs and sideboards and cot still remained, her table was gone; in its place was the gleaming dark kraken desk.

Its leg had been repaired reasonably credibly, but the area was now conspicuously different - stained
oak rather than mahogany. The squid there had also been replaced by terrifying deer lashed with bone and ivy. This was still the least distressing thing about it; someone had touched up the main carvings as well, and now the beady-eyed krakens seemed even more sinister. They gleamed and writhed in the dimness. Fitz wondered how she would ever fall asleep.

A firm knock sounded at the door behind her.

“Come!” said Fitz.

Mr Sprocket and Ms Jackson walked through the door, all smiles, touching the brims of their hats. Jackson looked faintly smug, but Sprocket did a double-take at the sight of the desk - his face was openly admiring.

“Amazing, ma’am,” he greeted her. “Magnificent. What you deserve.”

“Thank you, Mr Sprocket,” said Fitz sturdily. She forced cheer into her voice. “I strongly suspect our bosun here had something to do with it appearing in my cabin.”

“No trouble, ma’am,” said Jackson, looking proud. “The crew and I carried it down at lunchtime; the carpenter made the leg. I carved the deer. And there was enough timber left over for this -”

Jackson held out one of her lucky carvings. Fitz took it with a smile of real pleasure, slipping it into her pocket.

“Any Kul Tiran would be proud of this desk,” said Sprocket, still transfixed. “It is a masterpiece.”

Fitz cleared her throat, and gingerly sat down behind the furniture in question.

“Have any orders come through from the Admiral?” she said, casually putting her elbow over the eye of one particularly hostile kraken. “We should begin plotting a course at once.”

The packet of orders were produced; Fitz ripped them open. Jackson ducked off to fetch the box compass, and Sprocket left to get the charts. Clyburn brought her a light supper of chicken soup, which Fitz ignored as she read.

Nothing in the packet changed what the Admiral had said in her private study. The block word ALIVE was written several times, each underlined - there was also a paragraph which forbade Tenacity from engaging the enemy. There was another couple of lines that specifically ordered Fitz to abandon her mission if encountering danger.

Fitz pondered these instructions, then got up and ordered the sentry to find a Midshipman to sway aboard more powder.

When Sprocket and Jackson returned, Fitz ran through the complex mathematics required to navigate a ship at sea; a course was proposed, and quickly agreed upon, then the Tide tables were checked and the sailplan was set. The Midshipmen were sent scurrying out to report on every single division of the ship. Finally, at two bells Fitz believed everything was in order - the crew were ordered to slip the cable and fire the departing salute.

Tenacity clawed out with the evening Tide.

The next day, however, saw them making poor speed; Fitz strode about the deck like thunder, demanding explanations. At four bells, it was discovered that an entire liberty boat of prime sailors had not made back to the ship; the Tenacity only had onboard a crew of one hundred, instead of one hundred and fifty. Fitz paced as Jackson reconstituted the watch bills - even stripping out non-
essential functions, they were critically shorthanded.

Compounding this loss was the weight of the fresh stores. They held *Tenacity* down by the head, and she was losing speed, ploughing deeply into every wave. Fitz was a woman possessed; she had all hands mustered to drag the movable stores aft, and when space ran out, she ordered huge hogsheads of meat and biscuits be thrown into the ocean. *Tenacity* had been provisioned as if her crew was complete; she had pork and beef to spare.

Even with the ship trimmed, Fitz wasn’t satisfied. Her crew poured through the little ship, hunting for every shred of dash and vim that could be coaxed from the straining timbers. Fitz moved Jackson’s lucky token into her breast pocket for extra efficacy; it lay tucked behind the other luckiest thing she owned, which was a tattered letter.

By noon on the third day, the sloop was flying. Fitz could feel the difference in the handling of the ship, and when the chip-log was called, she was begrudgingly satisfied with the result; eight knots in a moderate wind was reasonable. Jackson watched her face, then ordered a cask swayed up for an extra rum-ration; the crew drank and toasted one another with tired smiles.

That night, Fitz awkwardly stood at her stern window, her back to the ghastly desk, praying to the Tides for a stiffer breeze. Her heart was filled with disquiet.

The weeks wore on; the wind continued to blow only moderately. All the sails they spotted were Kul Tiran, but these thinned out as they coursed south. Winter arrived. As the days grew shorter, and the night longer, Fitz’s sense that something was wrong steadily increased.

Fitz’s anxiety appeared to have no real context; the voyage had proceeded normally. No enemies had appeared, and the wind had not been unfavourable. Still, Fitz could smell the danger in the air; she grew silent and grave, and hosted few dinners.

Brother Gull began to appear at random throughout the ship, staring into the waters all around them, terrifying the crew.

*Tenacity* loped on; soon the heat of the tropics wrapped around the little ship. Sailors sweated, stripped to their shirt-sleeves, and volunteered for lookout duty. Some took to lying at the end of the bowsprit, where the breeze and spray was freshest.

A month and twenty-seven days into into the voyage, Fitz was summoned to the deck by Crosby. The midshipman was vague, and would only say Mr Sprocket wanted her council. Fearing the worst, Fitz bolted down her lunch, grabbed her jacket, and made haste for the aft stairs.

Sprocket greeted her with relief, touching the brim of his hat. Then he reported the crew had seen an albatross.

“Yes, Mr Sprocket?” said Fitz, slightly impatiently. “And what of it?”

“It is a very unusual albatross, ma’am,” said Sprocket, hesitantly.

“That is an unhelpful thing to say,” grumbled Fitz. “I trust you will improve upon it shortly.”

“My apologies, ma’am,” he said. “Perhaps you should see for yourself?”

He handed her his glass, and pointed towards the port-side of the ship. Fitz strained her eyes for several seconds before she spotted it; it was indeed an albatross - a particularly large and fine one, with brown banding. As she watched it wheeled and soared in the sun - then it headed directly for the ship. The crew stopped what they were doing to stare at it, whispering.
Fitz frowned; it was indeed behaving oddly.

The few such birds she had seen in her travels had been content to follow the ship; the crew would throw them bits of meat, which they would gulp out of the air.

The crew began to smile out on the main deck and a couple drifted over to the rail for a closer look; an albatross sighting was a lucky omen, a sign there wasn’t Kraken about.

Fitz pondered the albatross as it swooped and dived; then it hovered off the starboard quarter, fluttering back and forth.

“It’s probably nothing,” said Fitz to herself. “Hold to our course.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Sprocket.

Fitz had closed her glass and ducked back below to complete her paperwork. She also felt slightly ill - lunch had been eaten too fast. She sat at her kraken desk, struggling to update the log, when there came another knock at the door.

“Come!” Fitz said, with real irritation.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said Woods, worriedly. “Mr Sprocket’s compliments, and an enemy fleet is in sight.”

“Thank you Mr Woods,” said Fitz. “Where away?”

“Sou-east ma’am,” Woods replied.

“Good,” she said coolly. She scribbled one last note. “Please find Mr Clyburn and ask him to fetch me a cup of tea, please. He will find me on deck.”

Fitz waited patiently until the Middy shut the door. Then she surged up and snatched her jacket; her hands shook. Hand on the doorframe, she took several depth breaths. Then she straightened, set her face in casual lines, and strode briskly up on to the quarterdeck.

She simply couldn’t prevent herself from snapping open her glass before Sprocket could report.

There, about seven miles distant off the port bow, was a Zandalari screening frigate. Behind it was a squadron of men o’ war; their sails lurked menacingly across the horizon. Fitz counted quickly; five ships of the line, with ten assorted lesser ships in screen.

Of the albatross, there was no sign.

The fleet was dangerous. Fitz knew it like she knew the contours of her own face, like she knew the reach of her own arm. Fitz’s couldn’t say how she knew this, only that her entire being revolted at the sight of those ships. The force of it was like a physical blow that curdled the blood.

Her mind rushed through the calculations that would send Tenacity flying directly away to the west; then she forced them from her mind. Such drastic action would add another week to the voyage.

“Steer two points to starboard, if you please Mr Sprocket,” Fitz said, calmly.

“Aye aye ma’am,” he said, almost cheerful. “They won’t catch us anyway, we’ve plenty of sea way.”

“Have they changed course since they’ve seen us?”
“No ma’am, they’re steady as they go.”

“Hmm.”

Fitz tucked her glass under her arm. She began to pace the windward rail, mostly for something to do - then her attention was caught. She stared into the waters; she had seen a lot of ocean in her time, and these waves were behaving erratically, surging and moving in defiance of the wind.

Fitz noticed the sounds of the ship had fallen away, leaving only a noise like a boiling kettle; the hands were shrinking back from the quarterdeck. Some of them had fallen over in their haste to retreat - faces were white, even through the sailor’s deep tans. Fitz turned in puzzlement.

Brother Gull was hissing. It was an uncanny, awful sound - like an angry, slithering sea-snake, bright with poison. Around the ship the waters continued to shiver with his rage - the ripples grew deeper, foaming white.

“My Lord?” said Fitz, stepping closer.

“Abomination!” snarled the Tidesage. “Usurpers!” He raised his staff, holding it like he was about to strike.

“My lord, what is wrong?” begged Fitz. “What can Tenacity do to serve you?”

Fear clawed up through her body; the rigging was moaning in a way she had never heard before, and the sea was now boiling around them.

“Trapped,” said the Tidesage. He swayed with the force of his rage “She is netted. I cannot free her - I do not have the power.”

He threw his staff down on the deck, and drew from his belt a silver bell. Fitz flinched back, stumbling; Brother Gull rang a single, sweet peel.

The sound tore through Fitz like a storm of ice; she wanted to surge, she wanted to thrash and rage, rip free. From the deck below came the terrified screams of her crew; the water of the sea writhed and threw the hull sideways. Then the pressure of ceased.

Fitz had taken to leaving Jackson’s token in her pockets; she found its weight reassuring. Now it had flared to almost the point of burning; Fitz swore the ship was glowing blue - but as it blazed, the Tidesage lost his hold on her, like a rabbit slipping a snare.

“Tenacity is endangered by your actions, my Lord!” said Fitz sharply. “Stop this at once!”

Brother Gull whirled on her. She raised her hands instinctively, recoiling. His blue eyes narrowed. Abruptly, his influence cut off like a door slamming closed.

“That squadron will bring ruin, Commander,” he said, angrily, shaking a clawed fist. “You must destroy it.”

Fitz straightened, clasping her hands behind her back and clearing her throat. The token was still in her pocket - when the Tidesage had controlled himself, it had cooled back to skin temperature.

“We cannot engage the squadron in this single vessel, my Lord,” said Fitz, carefully. “We are a small sloop, and they would batter us into pieces. But we are only two weeks from the Bay of Kings; if we complete the mission, we can return in haste and warn the fleet.”
Brother Gull held his hand out; the staff lept from the deck back into his hands. His eyes were fury.

“It must be so, my Lord,” said Fitz, gently. “You know this to be true.”

Brother Gull’s deep hood swung back and forth; he now appeared to be listening to words that no one else could hear.

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back, struggling to not betray herself by gulping for air. “I promise you; they cannot be making more than four knots together. Allow Tenacity to complete her mission, and the crew will fly to overtake them on the voyage home. We will tear our bones for you, my Lord.”

His clawed hand paused, then stretched out - it stopped just shy of grasping the front of Fitz’s jacket. Jackson’s token flashed hot for an instant, almost in warning - Brother Gull dropped his hand away. Fitz decided the Drust-thing could stay in her pocket.

“Make haste, Commander,” hissed the Tidesage. “If you do not, Kul Tiras will fall.” He turned back to the sea, fuming into it.

The trollish ships had sailed on; they could not possibly have missed the bell, or the strangely moving waters - but they continued north, ignoring the sloop. Fitz should have rejoiced in this deliverance, but was instead deeply uneasy. They had been easy prey; the Trolls must be either very confident, or very distracted to disregard their presence so completely.

It took some time to rally the crew. They were huddled in fearful clumps near the bow of the ship, insensible of anything but their own terror. Fitz glanced around the other officers; over to leeward on the quarterdeck, Woods was helping Sprocket back onto his feet - the middy’s hat had fallen off somewhere, but that was the least of all the problems aboard the ship at that moment. Clyburn had grabbed two hands, and had rushed to help a figure lying screaming on the deck - her leg was clearly broken. Other topmen were making their shaky way down the mast under Jackson’s orders, clearly unable to remain aloft. A sea of faces looked at Fitz, staring silently from every corner of the ship.

“To your duties, Tenacity,” said Fitz, calmly. “We are the Lord Admiral’s finest; she expects us to be her eyes.”

There was a pregnant moment of silence. Then there was a ripple of movement, spreading outwards - it was sailors knuckling their foreheads.

“Ms Jackson!” said Fitz.

“Yes ma’am?” said the bosun.

“Double the lookouts, Ms Jackson.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” Jackson said. Then she walked for’ard, quietly calling orders.

In ones and twos the sailors mastered themselves and made for their duties; the topmen pulled themselves back up the mast. Other hands went back to holystoning the deck - although without much enthusiasm. The greatest heroism was unquestionably displayed by the helmsman; she returned to her post and spent the next four hours ignored the brooding Tidesage immediately behind her.

The day wore on. Fitz never left the quarterdeck; occasionally a member of the crew would glance at her, and then return to their duties with more energy. The enemy fleet sailed away from them, dropping over the horizon with the evening sun. Their presence was a weight; Fitz was like a sighthound, unable to look away. It was only after they were well and truly gone that she began to
relax again.

Brother Gull stared in that direction for two days after that.

When Fitz made landfall on the Zandalari coast, she had all hands beat to quarters. Then the crew stayed there; there was simply no point in time in which they were not in danger. The coast was teeming with prizes: huge transport ships carrying massive timbers; transport ships with trolls crowding the main deck; cargo ships, riding low in the water with how full they were. They were the sinews of invasion, and they were all easy prey. Fitz longed for a baying pack of Kul Tiran frigates which which to take, and sink, and burn them all.

Tenacity was not the full hunt; she was more an unexpected hornet. Trollish ships still broke and fled in all directions when she roved in sight. Fitz reluctantly ignored all the rich opportunities for mischief; she dashed down the coast under full press of sail, hard over, every line of the ship creaking with the strain. There was only one prize her Lord Admiral wanted, and that was the knowledge which would prevent disaster.

When the Bay of Kings came into sight, and good Kul Tiran eyeglasses were once again trained on Zuldazar, they spied a massive fleet was preparing to set sail.

Fitz didn’t linger. The boldness of appearing outside the Bay of Kings during daylight precluded stealth - the ship was now in mortal danger. Tenacity took observations for less than an hour before Fitz turned her nose north and fled into the open sea. From the mouth of the bay a swarm of schooners rushed to pursue her, like wolves with the scent of a deer.

Tenacity fled north, fleet and swift, but the Trolls had their chances; they never got close, but occasionally something would thump, ice would appear, or the whole sloop would shudder. The most alarming period was the hour, abruptly, where the sea around them turned to blood. Two of the pursuing schooners glowed with magefire during the night - but nothing magic touched them. Brother Gull never left the stern rail. Occasionally his staff smoked slightly.

The schooners chased them for an entire week; they gave up the pursuit in the evening of the seventh day. Brother Gull once again found himself in the centre of a half-circle of little offerings of rum. The crew still refused to go anywhere near him otherwise.

Tenacity bounded north. Her sharp prow cut clean lines towards friendly waters; these beckoned both crew and captain, weary as they were from the strain of danger and flight. Normal routine was slow in returning, but return it did; Kul Tiran were sturdy folk. Within the fortnight, some of the braver hands began hesitantly attending the Tidesage’s weekly service again, and after a month, Tenacity was as it had always been. The only difference was that an especially sharp lookout was maintained for Zandalari ambushes - even the cabin boy kept a sharp eye on the southern horizon.

Fitz struggled for sleep. Every night she paced her cabin, watched by a hundred glittering kraken eyes. Every day she walked the deck and stared at the spread of sails, and the ocean. Her disquiet intensified; the token rarely left her pocket. She took to writing letters to Sagewood; words of love and loss and passion and regret. Each and every one of these was tossed out her cabin window - afterwards, she would sit and hold her father’s compass, watching the surety of the needle.

The nights lengthed again, and the seas turned colder. The dread in Fitz’s heart burned brighter and higher with every nautical mile they travelled closer to Boralus.

The day of her twenty-sixth birthday, the crew spotted another albatross.

“IT’s back!” yelled a hand. “Off the port quarter! It’s back!”
The crew rushed to the rails to look; there, indeed, was a second magnificent white bird.

Fitz, who held the watch, kept her face impassive. The albatross looked exactly the same as the one before it, down to the banding. She clasped her hands behind her back, and took a surreptitious glance at the Tidesage - but Brother Gull contributed nothing. He merely brooded into the sea.

“That is a very unusual albatross ma’am,” Clyburn said quietly at her elbow. “I’ve never seen one behave like that before, begging your pardon.”

“Mm,” said Fitz.

“Captain, now that it has returned, what do you want to do?” asked Jackson. She had walked up to stand at Fitz’s other elbow.

“Surely it cannot be the same bird, Ms Jackson,” Woods scoffed. “Besides, we are on a straight-line course for Boralus. Why go nor-west?”

“Belay that talk, Mr Woods,” said Fitz sharply. She gazed up at the omen in question, contemplating its motives.

The albatross soared up on the wind, maintaining its exact place on the port quarter. It looked impatient.

“Turn about, Ms Jackson,” said Fitz, sighing. “Follow the bird, if you please.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Jackson.

Woods looked confounded - Fitz didn’t blame him. Following a bird randomly into the ocean was hardly recommended naval practice. But the crew bustled around with relieved faces; they eagerly went for the braces, tacking the ship onto its new course.

For following a supposedly lucky omen, however, Fitz’s feeling of dread began to grow stronger, not less. The sky matched her moods; towering black clouds began forming. The waves lengthened into massive rollers which pitched Tenacity ever more roughly through the water. Her bowsprit buried deep, then heaved itself upwards in a sleet of spray. The wind strengthened; their speed increased. The crew rigged ratlines and worked without complaint. Throughout it all the glorious white albatross flew before them, leading them directly nor-west.

On the sixth day of the new course, the weather cleared, and the Zandalari squadron hove back into view. Tenacity had come in close under the cover of night and gale, and held the weather-gauge; the Trollish fleet couldn’t have caught them even had it wanted to.

The Trolls were in trouble. Downwind of both the enemy, and Tenacity, there was a forest of sails; Kul Tiran commissioning pennants streamed from the mainmasts of sixty ships of the line, and above the weathermost column rode the massive colours of the Lord Admiral herself.

Fitz couldn’t understand it; the Zandalari trolls had approached to within four miles of the most powerful fleet ever assembled at sea. With only fifteen ships of their own, there was no possible sense in battle, even holding the weather gauge. The wind only needed to back slightly for the Kul Tiran Fleet to be upon them like lions upon a deer carcass.

The Zandalari ships luffed their mainsails, shedding speed; Fitz snapped out her eyeglass, fixing it on the deck of the largest ship. There was a lot of movement aboard the vessel; magnificently dressed Trollish officers, made minuscule by distance, gestured and walked about the ship. Other trolls ran about in controlled chaos. In the centre of it all stood a masked troll wearing a long cloak of feathers.
This masked troll lifted a heavy chain into the air; it glowed blood-red.

A Kraken broached the water’s surface; the wave this caused flung the Kul Tiran fleet about like matchsticks. The huge brown mantle juddered before it opened a ship-sized beak, and screamed; its noise shrieked across the ocean.

From aboard Tenacity, sailors started yelling; others poured up on deck to see.

The kraken was enormous; Fitz had never seen any creature so big before. Its piercing eyes whirled with fury, and its tentacles writhed, unspooling slowly. One of these tentacles lashed out of the water, smashing a Kul Tiran ship into splinters. Another wrapped itself around a second ship, lifting it up and squeezing it slowly. A third tentacle also lifted to strike, but then jerked back - the ocean in front of it now boiled, and the huge gout of steam had blocked its attack. Abruptly, as fast as it had boiled, the sea between the Great Fleet and the creature froze over. This slowed the kraken not at all; two more tentacles smashed the sudden pack-ice into jagged pieces. It screamed again.

“Tides preserve us all!” said Sprocket. His face was white.

“Make a signal, Mr Woods!” Fitz snapped. “’Enemy to leeward! Fleet in peril!’ Keep flying it - don’t take it down. Helmsman, tack to the south; Ms Jackson - full press of sail, if you please!”

Distantly came the rippling crash of cannonfire; the flashes of the powder, and the smoke billowed up and obscured the Kul Tiran fleet from view.

The Zandalari fleet continued onwards, orderly and neat, holding the gauge and steering well clear of the creature in the water. The kraken thrashed against the ice again - stray chunks of iceberg, thrown by the power of its enormous tentacles, flew through the air in all directions. Freakish chance had one enormous piece land next to the Zandalari flagship; for a second the kraken seemed to still - but control was quickly reestablished. It surged back up again, lashing out with an arm to sink another unfortunate Kul Tiran ship.

For Tenacity’s part, she was sailing away from this disaster as fast as her sails could take her. Her crew still stood at their normal stations - general quarters had not yet been ordered. Hands began looking at each other in puzzlement; a few approached the bosun. Jackson’s voice was sharp, but the words were inaudible. The sailors went back to their normal stations, shoulders stiff.

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back, eyeglass under one arm, projecting strength and confidence. “Run out the signal gun, Miss Crosby.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said the Midshipman. She touched the brim of her hat, then made haste for’ard to her division.

Fitz’s hand crept into her pocket; she gripped the token hard. “Keep a sharp eye out for that albatross, Mr Sprocket,” she said. “I want to know the instant the bird appears.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said.

“Brother Gull?”

“Trapped,” hissed the Tidesage, staring at the kraken. “Netted. Unable to escape, poor sweet thing, so young.”

“Thank you, Brother Gull,” said Fitz flatly.

The kraken had killed at least a thousand Kul Tiran sailors, and destroyed four ships, in less than
fifteen minutes; Fitz hoped the Lord Admiral ripped off all its arms.

“The Albatross ma’am!” yelled the lookout. “On the starboard bow!”

“Fire the signal gun, Miss Crosby!” Fitz ordered. “Ms Jackson, wear the ship to starboard!”

The nine-pound saluting gun puffed out. The smoke billowed around the deck, whipping away in the breeze; when it cleared, there was a single sail just visible on the horizon - there was an answering puff of smoke back.

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back and forced herself into stillness. The wind was very fresh, but the Albatross didn’t seem to be affected; Tenacity roared across the water. She cursed every minute, every second they travelled south; behind them, her Lord Admiral was in terrible danger.

The little sloop heaved up and over a particularly heavy swell; the albatross swung away and vanished. In front of them rode the Elvish screening squadron. Five frigates, ten unrated ships of war - and above them flew the broad pennant of a Quel’Thalan Commodore. Without orders, the saluting gun puffed out again; Fitz made a note to commend Crosby’s initiative in the ship’s log.

“They’ve seen us, ma’am; it’s Sagewood’s squadron,” said Woods. “Commodore to Tenacity; acknowledge danger - join squadron at windward station. General signal: prepare for battle.”

“Acknowledge, Mr Woods.” Fitz glanced up at the signals on Tenacity’s halyard. “Raise ‘Kraken controlled from Zandalari flagship.’”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said. He started struggling through the codebook. Fitz waited impatiently.

“Commodore acknowledges, ma’am,” said Woods finally.

“Very good,” said Fitz. “Ms Jackson! Bring the ship about, if you please; take in the topsails - we will outrun the Elves otherwise.”

The sloop turned, trailing a long white wake of foam; the crew scrambled up and down the three masts, precise as clockwork. Jackson was staring into the sails, judging the exact amount needed for the five knots the Quel’Thalans were making; she called on the mizzen to be reefed, and the sails to be periodically luffed.

Fitz fidgeted - her hand crept into her pocket again, touching both token and letter. Her entire job during battle was to fight the ship - but the windward station of the Quel’Thalan squadron was the side farthest from the enemy. The lookout at the top of the mast was struggling to even see the course of the battle with the kraken - the mass of the bigger ships blocked their line of sight.

“Our number, ma’am - take station more to windward,” said Woods. He sounded puzzled.

“Acknowledge,” snarled Fitz. “Ms Jackson, increase separation from the squadron.”

They moved even further away from the Elves - and consequently from the Trollish enemy. Several times, Fitz was on the cusp of ordering more sail; to dart in front of the frigates and see the shape of battle for herself. But pride held her in check; the Elves - Jess Sagewood - would think her sloppy and impatient. She bit down her impulse to do it anyway, and paced the deck instead.

“Commodore to Squadron - fire only on signal,” said Woods.

“Acknowledge,” said Fitz, frustrated. “Beat to Quarters.”
They would hardly have anything to fire at - they were on the wrong side of the Quel’Thalan line of battle, and practically three nautical miles away from the enemy. But the Marine with his drum acknowledged the order, and started the long, low roll; the hands moved far less than might be expected; a couple dropped down the backstays, then climbed straight back up again.

Fitz blinked at them. Cutlasses had appeared like magic, far faster than normal; Clyburn appeared at her side, armed to the teeth with muskets. On the breeze, the kraken screamed again. Brother Gull keened.

“Commodore to Quel’Thalans; form a line,” said Woods, manfully.

“Acknowledge,” growled Fitz. She paced back and forth until she was certain there would be no instructions for Tenacity.

“Are we not going to be allowed to fight?” wondered Sprocket, quietly.

“Belay that talk,” snapped Fitz.

The elves slipped into their line of action; between their even ranks, Fitz could finally now see the Trolls. The position was very good; Sagewood held the gauge and the Zandalari were trapped between the elves and the kraken. It was only a matter of when Sagewood would launch her attack.

The kraken was also uncovered by the squadron’s positioning; its monstrous bulk still split the surface of the sea. The white eye was clearly visible, even at a distance - the Kul Tiran fleet was as well. It was in tatters; ships had scattered across the battlefield, and there weren’t as many sails visible as their should be. The horizon was a haze of gunpowder smoke, and in the roiling darkness of it, the bright flashes of the cannons stood out clearly. The Kul Tiran fleet was making a brave stand, but it wasn’t enough.

As Fitz watched this, the kraken raised a tentacle high into the air. With an enormous surge, the ocean around it rose up as well, like a mighty wave held static; the curl of the water wrapped around the arm, and washed it inside itself. The kraken screamed, and tried to pull free, but the water elemental refused to give it an inch; instead it violently washed away. The tentacle was torn from the mantle of the squid with a meaty ripping sound, and flung lengthwise into the sea.

Fitz raised a clenched fist and bared her teeth. Around her, sailors roared their approval.

“That’s our Lord Admiral!” said Clyburn. He sounded proud.

Fitz was still looking at the squid; it lay in the water, unmoving. Then, looking almost unwilling, it once again begun to squirm and thrash. Chunks of ice bounced off its mantle; dark ichor stained the water. A gargantuan spear of ice lanced upwards through its upper mantle, pinning it down; its tentacles lashed out in all directions.

“Poor thing, poor thing,” groaned Brother Gull. “But the pain will free it.”

“Pain will… what do you mean, my lord?” said Fitz sharply, but the Tidesage didn’t answer. He just rocked back and forth, clutching his staff; he made gasping, sobbing noises.

There was the deliberate thunder of a hundred guns going off at once; splinters flew from the leading ships of the Elvish line. Zandalari shot and shell had roared out from the enemy fleet - but Sagewood was as cool as any Kul Tiran, and there was no return fire from the Quel’Thalan line.

Fitz turned back to the kraken - she narrowed her eyes.
“Bring me a slate, if you please, Mr Woods!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

Woods rushed over with the slate and chalk; the Midshipman kept them for when Fitz wanted them to practice their arithmetic. She seized the items, and started writing out equations in a frenzy of calculations. Wind and speed; tide and drift.

Fitz lowered the slate.

“Ms Jackson!” she said coolly. “My compliments to you, and you are to build two rafts, immediately.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” said Jackson.

“A ra-“ Sprocket said - he was cut off by a terrific crash of noise; to leeward, every Quel’Thalan frigate had let fly their broadsides at once. Every elvish ship heeled back into the water simultaneously, as if pressed by some enormous hand - the smoke was tremendous, and both friend and foe totally disappeared under the thickly billowing clouds.

Jackson strode forward, yelling orders; crew members began ripping up the hatches from the Tenacity’s deck, as well as doors from off cabins below.

Their labours were punctuated by the continuing crash and rumble of the Quel’Thalans and Zandalari battering each other - the two squadrons were mixed now, fighting individual battles. As Fitz watched, an Elven mast separated from one ship with a great crash, plunging into the sea - its cannons roared out its continued defiance. Smoke wreathed everything.

The Kraken continued to scream.

Great quantities of empty barrels appeared on Tenacity’s deck; other barrels were made to be empty, their pork dumped overside. Crew began lashing everything together. Fitz watched with approval as the rafts were built - they would be quite seaworthy for an hour or two, which was all that was needed.

“Attach a rope, and push them into the water, Jackson,” Fitz said. She took a deep breath. “Lay the gigs alongside as well.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Jackson. Her eyes asked questions, but her mouth stayed shut; Sprocket, standing next to her, looked openly confused.

“Could you go below and fetch the ship’s papers, please,” Fitz said to dear, faithful Clyburn. She paused. “And my father’s compass.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” he said, giving her an odd look. He knuckled his forehead and ducked down the after hatch.

“Mr Sprocket,” she said. “Are the gigs and rafts complete and in the water?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said.

“Very good. Inform the gun-crews, cockpit, and magazine that they are to abandon ship, if you please. Ensure the loblolly boys also evacuate the wounded. Mr Woods is to be in command of one raft, and Crosby the other.”
“What?” he said, looking shocked. “I mean... aye aye, ma’am.”

Sprocket swallowed heavily, before striding forward and calling orders. There was a great ripple of movement across the deck as these instructions were processed. Then the bosun’s pipes blew shrilly, and Kul Tiran discipline proved itself - sailors ducked below for their hammocks, then climbed over the side into the rafts.

The topmen watched this activity with great interest. The men and women who manned the masts during battle were the elite of the crew, the gymnasts who vaunted over the poor souls who never left the safety of the deck. Fitz needed to hold on to them just a little bit longer.

“Are the rafts loaded, Mr Sprocket?”

“Yes ma’am,” he replied.

“Good; cut them loose from the ship, if you please. Then make a signal to the Quel’Talan sloops that there are people in the water.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said helplessly. He walked over to the signal locker and began to rummage through it.

“My lord,” Fitz said to Brother Gull.

“Yes,” he said, clutching his staff. He began gliding towards the waist.

Fitz watched him go gratefully; the rafts and gigs wouldn’t founder, at least - not with a Tidesage as a passenger.

“Ms Jackson,” said Fitz, turning to the bosun. “I want the complete spread of sail made ready - please have the crew stand by.”

“Aye aye ma’am.” Jackson was looking at her in some alarm.

Twenty-five hands each had gone aboard each raft - and one Tidesage. The *Tenacity* was now unable to fire its guns, even had it wanted to do so.

Clyburn puffed up the hatch, holding the precious chest containing the ship’s papers. “All set ma’am,” he said.

“Put them in the gig, please,” Fitz said.

Sprocket hurried back to the quarterdeck. “Ma’am,” he said. “The repeating frigate is making our number - the commodore is asking what we are doing.”

Fitz tilted her head. “I don’t see that signal. Perhaps the wind is blowing it away from us.”

Sprocket looked at her in complete amazement.

“I think it is time for you to take command, my friend,” Fitz said. “My crew are yours. Ms Jackson!”

“Yes ma’am?” said the bosun.

“Set all sails, if you please. Then all hands are to abandon ship.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Sprocket hotly.
“You can and you will, John,” said Fitz. “That is a direct order - I require you to perform your duty. Go into the gig, and take command of it. Take command of all of Tenacity’s crew. They need you now.”

“I... I... aye aye, ma’am,” he groaned. Then he grabbed his hat and whirled away down the deck.

“Ma’am,” said Jackson. “You are ordering your hounds to abandon the hunt,”

Behind her the sails sprang down and were lashed in place; Tenacity began to heel. Crew streamed down the mast and over the side into the boats; there wasn’t much time.

“That may be,” said Fitz, sadly. “Take care of Clyburn. He won’t understand.”

“I don’t understand either, ma’am,” said Jackson.

“It’s very simple,” said Fitz. “I don’t want you to die. So get into the boat, please. And give Jess the compass.”

Jackson wavered - then she touched the brim of her hat. “Aye aye ma’am,” she said. “But you can give it to her yourself. I will see you on the other side.”

She strode forward and dropped down the ladder into the gig; with her departure, the deck was completely empty. Fitz took out the knife given to her by Sylvanas and walked forward; it was a matter of seconds to make the several swift cuts that severed the lines which bound the two gigs to the side. Familiar faces stared up at her, then fell behind as Tenacity picked up speed. Fitz caught a brief sight of Clyburn’s anguish as he stood holding the box of papers; she hoped he would forgive her.

The ship creaked and groaned; the foamy wake churned behind the ship. The wind was blowing strong and even. Fitz walked back along the empty decks - the quiet was eerie after the noise and chatter of one hundred people. The lashings which held the wheel in place were firm; the sails were full - even the jib, which Fitz had been faintly worried about, was causing no trouble.

The Tenacity’s bows pointed directly at the kraken.

The monster was screaming and thrashing, but the Kul Tiran ships were learning. Now that it was pinned by ice, they could hold themselves apart, darting in when one ship was captured, tacking away at random to avoid the writhing tentacles. It was brave, but truly hopeless; the monster looked entirely unaffected by cannonfire and chainshot, and the wind prevented the Kul Tiran ships from getting closer. The only thing which currently held the Kraken at bay was the enormous power of the Lord Admiral’s magics - and even her might had its limits.

With nothing else to do for a little while, Fitz took her eyeglass and hoped to see the Trolls burn.

The Quel’Thalan squadron was now off the port beam, thoroughly mixed in with the Zandalari; they were fighting hard, despite being outgunned. Two frigates had lain themselves alongside separate enemies, and Fitz could see the bright red of Quel’Thalan peacoats as they struggled and died upon the enemy decks.

The ship that flew Sagewood’s broad pennant was clawing up to the enemy flagship; guns thundered out continuously between them. Fitz looked at the signal halyards; the Trollish flags were nonsense, but Sagewood was flying Tenacity’s number, alongside a string of seven flags. All meant some variation of ‘cease current activity.’

Fitz looked at her own signal locker - she walked forward and pulled out the flags and codebook.
They lay there, colourful cloth, all filled with their own meanings; Fitz looked at them, and bit her lip - for all their usefulness, they weren’t really designed for heartfelt apologies or declarations of love.

She picked two out, and tied them onto the little rope; then she sent them soaring up the halyard. When they broke, they fluttered the simplest message she could think of: ‘cannot comply’ and ‘sorry’.

*Tenacity* was living up to her name; the wind had freshened even more, and every plank in the ship was straining under the weight of her sails. But she made yet more speed. The Tides had truly blessed her - Fitz couldn’t have make changes to the sails even if she wanted, as they were far too heavy to manage alone. Fitz was so proud of the ship; she strode its deck, looking it over one last time. Then she walked back to the helm and placed her hands on the spokes of the wheel.

The ship tore down on the kraken - its tremendous bulk loomed larger every second. Fitz gazed at the horrible thing in disgust as it glistened and shone in the setting sun; its skin was almost slick. It ignored *Tenacity* completely; the larger ships were stinging it with cannonballs, holding its attention. Ice floated all around, and the noise as they scraped along *Tenacity*’s hull was terrible.

Fitz unlooped the stays on the wheel, and took up the tremendous strain of holding the ship steady. She dragged with all her might and twitched *Tenacity* a little more in line with the thing’s monstrous eye. Then she re-lashed the stays and held on tight.

The kraken noticed her all too late; *Tenacity* was moving like lightning under full press, and the tentacle that whipped out to stop her was far too slow. Fitz had just enough time to enjoy the fear in its massive eye before the bowsprit speared right into the meat of its orb, followed by the whole prow smashing deep.

There was the rending, tearing crash of timbers - the shrieking of the rigging as the stays and lines snapped and whipped back through the air - the wrenching jolt of the ship’s momentum transferring out of the hull and into the softness of the squid. Fitz was thrown completely forward; her body crashed into the mizzenmast and she landed on the deck heavily.

The kraken screamed; the noise was deafening from so close. Fitz felt herself start to slide as the giant squid reared out of the water in pain - she scrambled and kicked across the leaning deck, desperate to get for’ad. The ship was tearing itself in two - with the front stabbed so deeply in the eye of the kraken, the decks were splintering around the mainmast. Fitz reached the for-mast just as the whole back of the ship fell into the sea. She clutched at a rope as the ship was flung about - the kraken was flailing and lashing, trying to dislodge the wooden dagger that had been driven into it.

Fitz grabbed the for-mast and clung - it was pure animal terror that gave her the strength to not come loose. Once she had been atop a mast collapsing. This time there would be no escape; Fitz desperately hoped to slide into the water and reach a piece of ice, but knew this was hopeless. The jib-line snapped; other sails came free. Fitz desperately looked for a place to go - being entangled in the sails would be certain death.

From behind her came a boom, barely audible over the torment of her dying ship. Fitz saw the Quel'Thalans had scored a victory - a magazine had ignited on a Zandalari ship, and the spreading cloud of smoke and fire was quite magnificent in the dusk. Fitz had not a second to admire it.

The Kraken stilled; a final tentacle lashed out. *Tenacity* was struck and flung loose - Fitz’s grip was torn from the mast. She grabbed at it desperately, wishing to the Tides she had said yes to Sagewood - then she was falling.

The shock of hitting the water was terrific - it was the most significant blow Fitz had ever felt. Thick
canvas landed heavily around her, enveloping her completely and sucking her down. Fitz panicked, clawing at the slick material, but she was trapped and sinking; stays and lines wrapped around her, hampering her escape.

The token blazed in her pocket; it seared across and into her flesh, sinking its claws deep - the canvas pinning that shoulder fell away. With a twist she managed to grab her knife and cut at random - the complete blackness of the water meant this was done blindly. Dragged down, deeper and deeper. Her face started to ache from the pressure; she sawed at the ropes and then the sails, increasingly weakly - then, suddenly, she was out of *Tenacity*’s final grasp.

Fitz struck out with her arms and legs, trying to swim for the surface - saltwater stung every cut. Around her there was nothing but blackness. Panic swelled in her chest. Her clothes were heavy with water; the sea fought her at every turn, and her lungs screamed for air. Slowly her kicking ceased. Finally, Fitz could hold her breath no more and her mouth opened, inhaling saltwater.

She breathed, in and out, floating in the darkness of the ocean, limbs and body limp. For that endless time there was nothing.

For an endless time more there was even less than nothing. There was no concern, no sorrow, no loss. Then a whisper brushed over her skin. She became aware that her eyes were open, and that she could see a light, shimmering darkly through the vasty deep.

Something grabbed her by the back of her shirt, and hauled her up.

The moment her head broke the surface of the water, Fitz choked on a huge lungful of air. Then she was being dragged through the water; there was shouting, and the dark shape of a boat, tossing on the heavy swell. Fitz’s throat and nose felt burnt by salt, and all her limbs felt stiff - half a dozen hands grabbed her by her shoulders and clothes, dragging her over the gunwale and onto the timber floor.

“She is returned to you,” hissed a voice.

“Get blankets,” snapped another. “All of them.”

The was a rush, the boat rocked, and there was more shouting.

Fitz was pulled up. Her head was rested on something warm and soft, and her face was cradled in gentle hands. Fitz blinked weakly, eyes blurry and watering - when she looked up, it was into terrified grey eyes. Long ears lay flat against saturated blond hair.

“By the Sun, Fitz,” said Jess, sounding broken. “You surely should be dead.”

Then her face crumpled and she started rocking back and forth, choking on sobs, clutching Fitz to her chest. For Fitz’s own part, her brain didn’t quite seem to be working right, but Jess crying was definitely bad. She wanted to offer comfort, but her arms were leaden and everything was fuzzy. In the end Fitz could only turn her face sideways, and tuck herself more firmly into the crook of her Commodore’s neck. Jess was stripped to her shirtsleeves, completely soaked through; Fitz blearly wondered if she had gone swimming.

Someone threw a blanket on them both. Fitz realised with amazement just how cold she was.

“H-hey,” Fitz managed.

Jess pulled her up and even more firmly against her body, tucking Fitz’s head under her chin. “Never do that again,” she was saying. “Never, never do that again. It was so stupid. Never do that again.
Don’t even think it."

“Hey,” tried Fitz again. There was something scary she vaguely remembered seeing. “Hey. Big squid?”

“Hush,” said Jess, fiercely. “Yes, you drove off the bloody kraken - the Fleet is safe, your crew is safe. Just never do that again.”

“Alright,” said Fitz muzzily. “You’re really pretty.”

Jess gasped out a sobbing laugh. “Thank you, Fitz. You are also pretty.”

“Mm,” said Fitz, pleased. She tucked her head more firmly into Sagewood’s body.

“Commodore?” said a man’s voice. “Sorry to interrupt ma’am, but Flagship’s making a signal. ‘Terminate mission.’”

“Hoist an acknowledgement, Mr Woods, and advise we will require the surgeon.”

“She actually looks fine, ma’am,” said another voice, diffidently. Crosby. “Just how long was she under the water? The Tenacity went down over an hour ago - did she escape somehow?”

“No,” said the Tidesage.

Fitz didn’t really understand this; the world was returning, and mostly it was bringing with it a kind of stabbing pain. She vaguely remembered striking the Tenacity’s mast when she had crashed the ship; she also remembered the force of tumbling into the water. She flexed one hand and flinched.

“Ow,” said Fitz, softly. Jess did one of those soft sob-chuckle things again.

Fitz had been going to ask something; something important. But Jess was so comfortable and soft, and so beautiful. It was difficult to remember other things.

There was silence then, except for the soft thump and splash of rowers. This went on for quite some time; Jess’s hands kept trailing across Fitz’s neck and face.

“So, are we going to talk about how the Captain should not be alive right now?” said Woods, quietly.

“Begging your pardon, Sir, but shut the fuck up,” said Jackson. There was a ripple of firm agreement from other voices on the boat.

“Clyburn,” muttered Fitz.

“What?” Jess murmured. One hand stilled; the other started stroking Fitz’s hair softly.

“Clyburn’s got the compass,” said Fitz. This was important; everything was becoming clear again. “Is Clyburn in the gig?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Clyburn; his voice sounded rough. “And I’ve got the compass. Safe in my pocket it is - the ship’s papers are on the Elvish sloop what picked us up out of the water.”

Fitz couldn’t really see anything; her face was still tucked up against Jess’s chest, and she was loathe to move. But this was worth stirring for; she dropped her hands away from Jess’s side, and pushed herself slightly up. The blanket had literally just been draped over the top of the both of them; she made a slight scrabbling motion at it to get out - finally Jess tucked it open for her.
A wooden box was pressed into her hands.

“Thank you, Clyburn,” said Fitz gratefully. She slumped back into the cocoon of blankets and warm elf. “It’s for you, Jess. I brought it with me from Boralus to give to you.”

There was a rustle, and a second rush of cold air. Jess took the box - there was the creak of the latch Fitz never remembered to oil. Then the world went still, and quiet. Fitz knew that the compass was only brass, but it was steady and sturdy and always pointed true.

“What does this mean?” Jess asked, quietly. “I mean- do you know what this could mean?”

“I think so,” said Fitz, wrapping her arms around Jess’s waist. “Does it mean ‘marry me’?”

Jess stared at her. Slowly, she set the compass beside them on the thwart. Then she gathered Fitz back up into her arms again.

“Yes,” Jess breathed into Fitz’s hair. “Yes, it does. And yes, I will.”

For all the lingering cold, Fitz felt warm. The crew were silent. At one point, Woods did try to speak, but then yelped as someone elbowed him firmly.

“Sorry about before,” breathed Fitz. “When I said no.”

Jess smiled; Fitz could feel it against her cheek. “Hush now. We can talk later.”

There was no sound but the slow swish of the oars, and the lapping of the water against the sides of the little gig.

“I want to kiss you,” Jess whispered. “Is that alright?”

Fitz was battered, shipless, and frozen. But the world was coming right.

“You really should,” murmured Fitz. “You should do it often.”

And then the whole world truly was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

QuickYoke also - to my pleasure and delight - drew Jess Sagewood; honestly, I thought that she would be better put down here, all things considering.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The main deck of the Tiragarde blazed in the darkness. Its heavy sails had been furled, and lanterns hung thickly from the mainyards; shadows pitched crazily as people moved about its deck. Fitz peeked her head out of the blankets as the bulk of the flagship’s hull loomed up; bright flecks marred the side where timbers had shattered, and the smell of gunpowder lay heavily in the air.

Jackson was a superb coxswain; she called out a quiet order, and the officers of Tenacity clumsily shipped their oars. With the remaining way, it only took a light touch on the tiller to send the little boat slewing up to the side.

“Gig ahoy!” The challenge rang down. “What boat’s that?”

“Commodore Sagewood!” Jackson cried

There was a burst of movement from up on deck - some shouting - and then a line was dropped into the water. Sprocket hooked it nimbly, and tiptoed carefully around Brother Gull to loop it around the prow. A ladder unrolled from above, dropping down the side of the flagship with a twisting clatter; it swayed gently in the swell. Traditionally, the first person up the side would be the senior-most officer.

Jess, however, made absolutely no move to go. Instead her arms tightened, and her nose dropped back into Fitz’s hair. There was an uncomfortable silence as everyone else in the gig looked at one another, wondering what to do.

“How do you feel Fitz?” said Jess softly in Thalassian, ignoring them. “What are your chances of getting up the side?”

Fitz was so stiff and sore she could barely move; she made an abortive motion forward anyway, wheezing in pain. Concerned arms tightened around her, drawing her back.

“Be gentle on yourself,” murmured Jess. “You’ve had a rough day.”

Fitz grumbled irritably.

Jess smiled; she lifted her head. “Mr Sprocket - kindly ascend to the Tiragarde, if you please, and have them rig something to sway us aboard.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Sprocket uneasily. He stood, and with a spring, landed neatly on the ladder; Fitz watched his trim figure climb up into the darkness and out of sight. A few seconds later, suddenly there was a chorus of compliments - bosun’s pipes trilling out, the snap and crash of Marines coming to attention - all of which abruptly cut off. Angry voices rose.
Jess muffled a huff of laughter into Fitz’s hair; her ears fluttered. Fitz smiled helplessly. Sprocket had briefly been saluted like a full Quel’Thalan Commodore; she hoped he had enjoyed the experience.

More voices rose. Faintly came the creaking of blocks and tackle. Fitz, who had indeed had a rough day, dozed off gently against Jess’s shoulder. When she was called awake, Jackson and Clyburn were already holding the edges of a short plank; the lines that had lowered it disappeared up into darkness.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” said Clyburn apologetically. “Only this bosun’s chair has got no rails. Someone’s going to have to come with the Commander to make sure she doesn’t fall off.”

“Thank you, Mr Clyburn,” said Jess firmly. “I can manage.”

Clyburn hesitated. “Ms Jackson-”

“I will gratefully accept Ms Jackson’s help in passing the Commander to me from the gig.” Jess’s ears canted mulishly.

“Yes ma’am.” He looked rueful, but knuckled his forehead. Then he ducked respectfully for’ard again.

“Are you alright with this, Fitz?” said Jess, sounding a little worried.

In answer, Fitz tried to get up again; her limbs felt like they belonged to another person; Jess caught her quickly, before she toppled onto the floor.

“Easy there!” Jackson let go of her side of the plank, lunging forward. “I’ve got the Commander, ma’am. You jump on the chair.”

The bosun hoisted Fitz up by her shoulders - a small little flash of blue light immediately sparked, hidden by the blanket. Jackson stiffened. Fitz blinked slowly, unsure of reality.

Jess stiffly clambered up from the thwart; her movements were slightly clumsy, and her ears shivered as she fumbled with the buckles of the hoist. Finally satisfied, she sat, and hooked herself around the ropes. She nodded to Jackson, and held out her arms.

“Back to the Commodore now, that’s the way,” Jackson said to Fitz. “You’ll feel better up on deck, ma’am, surrounded by all that timber.” Her face was impassive, but something flickered in her eye.

Fitz was carried over to the chair; Jess took her again. The gig swayed and bobbed underneath them. There was a minor delay as Clyburn fussed, passing more ropes around and tucking them both in with another blanket; Jess waited patiently for him to finish. Then she reached up and gave the guideline a firm tug.

Being pulled up in a bosun’s chair was a new experience for Fitz; she wasn’t entirely sure she liked it. The sea fell away below them, taking Fitz’s stomach with it. The ropes creaked - the lights of the deck brightened - voices became louder. Jess held on tightly.

The bosun’s pipes once again began to twitter as they emerged in the light, and swang inboard; Fitz heard the crash of the marine’s coming to attention, and spotted the clay-white piping of their crossbelts. A small throng of officers had gathered respectfully to one side of the line of sideboys. Every single one of them looked tired and bruised.

By the rail stood the Lord Admiral; she was dressed in her Greatcoat of office, silent and grave. Ithedis stood next to her. They were lonely figures; the Lord Admiral’s shoulders stooped as if under
a heavy load. Ithedis was paying his charge little attention; his eyes instead anxiously searched out Jess’s face. They both stepped forward just as the bosun’s chair was lowered to the deck.

The Lord Admiral made a jerky movement, taking off her hat; she placed it over her heart. “I am so sorry, Jess,” she said, sounding stricken. “I really cannot tell you how sorry; it is a great loss. With your permission, we will have the funeral as soon as the da-”

Jess loosened her arms slightly, and Fitz twitched. It was a huge effort to drag one unresponsive hand up to her forehead, but this was the Lord Admiral.

“Ma’am,” Fitz croaked. “Fitzwilliams, Commander.”

Lady Proudmoore’s mouth dropped open; she froze, her eyes going wide.

The officers on the deck looked shocked. The hands hauling the tackle looked shocked. Ithedis somehow also looked shocked, although his facial expression remained the same.

Fitz let her hand drop. “Begging your leave, ma’am,” she mumbled. “The Trolls are mustering for invasion.”

“Fitzwilliams,” said the Lord Admiral, disbelievingly. “How are you alive?”

“With respect, ma’am,” said Jess; her ears were set in firm lines. “Perhaps we can discuss that once the Commander is warm again. Where is the surgeon?”

Lady Proudmoore drew herself up, looking rattled. Then she visibly straightened; her hat went back atop her head, she took a deep breath, and then once again her face was stern. “The surgeon, unfortunately, has been kept busy today - but I think this does call for an expedited diagnosis. With your permission, Fitzwilliams, I will check on you myself.”

“Your servant, ma’am,” murmured Fitz.

The Lord Admiral gave her a choppy nod. “Ithedis, will you assist the Commander into my cabin?”

Ithedis stepped forward - Jess’s arms tightened again, and the two Elves traded a silent stare full of ear twitches. Ithedis looked unimpressed. After a long moment, Jess reluctantly handed Fitz over; and Ithedis hoisted her up. It was a poor trade; the old man was all cold metal and steely arms, and his armour dug into her at random. He was also not overly gentle.

Fitz grouched. She felt like a particularly wondrous sack of potatoes. Hundreds of eyes watched her as she was hauled away - all across the deck, and the yards, sailors stopped their work or appeared from below to stare at her. Crew fell back and knuckled their foreheads as Ithedis passed. Fitz was embarrassed and annoyed - realistically the only option available to her was to pretend everything was normal. She plastered an expression of polite unconcern on her face, nodding acknowledgements as she passed, using her chin to tuck down the blanket.

They were most of the way across the deck before Fitz finally managed to wriggle an arm free; it trembled with cold, but it remained mostly under her control. She used it to knock on Ithedis’s breastplate weakly.

Ithedis stopped, and looked at her stiffly; his ears were rigid.

“If you would be so good, Ser Sagewood,” said Fitz. “Could we tack about please? I would like to see my crew settled.”
Ithedis didn’t change his facial expression - but he did turn. Sprocket was still standing by the waist; he had been immediately surrounded by a throng of officers, all affecting a casual air, but all attempting to ask questions at once. Jackson and Clyburn - less protected by the demands of dignity - had simply disappeared in a sea of chattering hands. Fitz could only tell roughly where they were because Jackson was massive, and her fine tricorn hat was above the press.

Jess was walking beside the Lord Admiral, looking fierce - but both women stopped when Ithedis did. Lady Proudmoore looked confused by the delay; after a moment she made an impatient gesture.

“Thank you, Ser Sagewood,” said Fitz. “I appreciate your time.”

Ithedis didn’t reply; just turned and stomped down the aft hatchway, ducking under the low beams of the ceiling. The maze of corridors posed him no challenge; he moved unerringly towards the Admiral’s cabin, navigating the twists and turns without any concession to the low light. Fitz bounced along awkwardly, wishing desperately her limbs would cooperate enough to allow her to walk.

A few officers milled in front of the heavy wooden door of the Lord Admiral’s cabin, clearly waiting for an audience - they scuttled hastily out of the way as Ithedis stormed through. The Blue-Jacketed sentry threw open the first door; a young Lieutenant wearing a red aiguillette scrambled up to open the second. Ithedis swept on into the inner office, Jess and the Lord Admiral followed, but then paused on the other side of the room, talking in low voices.

Servants appeared from every hidden nook; they took one look at the scene, then set about their work with ruthless efficiency.

An armchair was produced and cushions piled up - Fitz was deposited on this gently. A cup of steaming tea was delivered into her hand, and a heavily wrapped warm brick was tucked behind her. More blankets were tossed on top. Other servants fusssed over the Lord Admiral and Jess; Lady Proudmoore’s hat and Greatcoat were taken, and warm towels produced.

Jess broke away from her conversation to walk over to Fitz, rubbing her towel over her hair and arms; she paused to finish, then dropped onto the footstool. The towel was whisked away, and a cup of tea was placed into her hands - long ears shivered with pleasure as she took a sip.

“Thank you for delivering Fitz inside, Ithedis,” said the Lord Admiral.

Ser Sagewood, who was standing broodily in one corner, inclined his head just a fraction.

The Lord Admiral also was handed a cup of tea; she nodded distracted thanks, walking across the cabin to the other armchair. “Commander Fitzwilliams, you will be pleased to know that you are not a void-creature. No sun-elf could be that close to a void-beast and fail to notice. Ithedis and Commodore Sagewood both agree.”

Fitz didn’t know what a void-creature was, but she was glad she wasn't one anyway.

The Lord Admiral tapped one finger thoughtfully against her teacup; then she turned up her free hand and drew a complex shape with one finger; a cheerful green ball of light appeared. “This particular spell is designed to inspect arcane profiles. It would tickle slightly, but doesn’t hurt. May I use it on you?”

“Yes ma’am,” said Fitz - her voice wavered.

Jess’s ears cocked; she leaned forward and took Fitz’s hand.
“It won’t take long,” reassured Lady Proudmoore - then she was tracing a shape over Fitz’s neck; the green ball of light sank into the joint just below her jaw.

The magic slinked through her body like a stalking cat, prowling into every shadow; the whole process took some time. Every so often, the subtle presence would erupt into dozens of fingers trickling across a particularly interesting organ. Sometimes it would push gently out against Fitz’s skin. It did not tickle in the slightest.

Finally, the Lord Admiral leaned back and the magic ceased; Fitz was alone in her own body again. But the Lord Admiral was frowning. “Not undead either - actually, you are a perfectly ordinary human being. There is only one place of resistance.”

Jess squeezed her hand again.

The Lord Admiral, however, was staring at Fitz oddly. “Is part of your line from Drustvar, Fitzwilliams? I had your family tree pulled from the archives recently, and I got the impression from that it drew almost entirely from Tiragarde Sound.”

Fitz looked back at her muzzily. “No Drust ma’am.”

“Hmm.” The Lord Admiral tapped her own collarbone. “Maybe an inscription then? It seems to be primarily centred around your left shoulder. I apologise for the intrusion, but could you remove your jacket?”

Fitz obediently began to struggle up, pushing off the blankets; her tea spilled slightly. Jess, ears canted, jumped off the footstool to help. In the end, Fitz couldn’t even manage the buttons on her jacket alone; Jess had to carefully undo all the buttons for her. The warmth of the brick and the blankets had loosened her up, but fine motor control had not yet returned.

The sodden wool was peeled away. A neat round burn through the underside of the pocket was discovered; this burn continued down through the white shirt and into Fitz’s skin. Across her shoulder, outward from the scab, threaded lines, as black as ink, whirling and swirling; these lay inertly under the oil-lamps of the cabin.

“How unusual,” said the Lord Admiral, inspecting it. “Whichever Druid wrought you this, Fitzwilliams, they were immensely skilled; I have never seen anyone use a living shoulder-bone to anchor a ward like this before before.”

“A-anchor a ward, ma’am?” said Fitz faintly. “In my shoulder?” She flexed her hand anxiously, rolling her arm.

“Well, yes.” The Lord Admiral frowned and her brows drew together. “These are the Drust markings for the dead - they prevent things possessing a corpse. That is a strange thing for you to want, but probably fortuitous under the circumstances. Did you not ask about it when you had this done?”

Fitz was now quite tired. She scrubbed at the markings on her shoulder - but they stubbornly stayed put. “Honestly, ma’am, I’ve never seen this before in my life. The only Drust-thing I ever owned was a token in my pocket.”

The Lord Admiral looked at Fitz with an odd expression. “I see,” she finally said.

Jess’s ears were sliding back and forth. Her hands were clutching rhythmically. “Pardon me, my Lady, but have we established Commander Fitzwilliams is not a danger to the ship?”
“Yes,” said the Lord Admiral. “We have.” She eyed Jess consideringly, picking back up her tea. “Go to bed you two. Tomorrow I will request that Lady Stormsong joins us; perhaps she can shed some light on the situation. Report at six bells in the forenoon.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“Captain Conrad will find you a berth, Fitzwilliams” said the Lord Admiral; she took a sip of tea. “Perhaps in the wardroom?”

“There is no need,” said Jess. “I believe there could be a space free with me in the purser’s cabin. Fitzwilliams would be quite warm there.” Her ears twitched faintly.

The Lord Admiral had a hint of a smile now. “And clothing? Prince Windrunner is on Dreams; he will surely allow Fitz to borrow from him again.”

“My thanks to yourself and Captain Windrunner, but that will not be necessary either,” said Jess flatly. Her ears slowly moved until they were practically horizontal; Fitz had never seen this particular angle before. “I am sure I have enough items spare to outfit Commander Fitzwilliams. No need to trouble anyone, or confuse the issue.”

Ithedis’s ears twitched, and the Lord Admiral laughed quietly.

“Congratulations on your engagement you two,” said the Lord Admiral. “It is nice to have good news in the midst of all this. And it does make certain decisions much easier.”

“Thank you ma’am,” said Fitz, nonplussed. Clearly some Quel’Thalan culture had just happened; she didn’t entirely understand how or what.

Jess’s ears flipped up. Huffing slightly, she snagged Fitz’s jacket from a nearby coat-rack - this was followed by scooping up Fitz herself, blankets and all. “Excuse me,” she said. Then she swept out.

In contrast to her grandfather, Jess was very careful. They exited out of the cabin without a single jolt - she ducked under the low-slung beams and negotiated the vertical pillars without breaking side. Fitz watched the sailors they passed knuckle their foreheads to the Commodore with something approaching awe; Jess nodded to them regally, ears flickering when she accidentally brushed them on the low ceiling.

Clyburn met them outside a low wooden door, carrying a double arm-load of blankets; somehow he still managed to open the door for them. Inside was the Tiragarde purser’s cabin; it was a marvel of space and luxury. With the table folded away, and the books tucked into their nooks, there was probably just enough room left for two people to sleep lying down.

“Do you want me to fetch some more bedding, ma’am?” asked Clyburn dubiously. He eyed the makeshift pile of rugs and cushions heaped across the floor, then tossed the blankets he was holding at a particularly uncomfortable-looking spot.

“We’ll be fine, Mr Clyburn,” said Jess; her ears set forward. “Thank you for your efforts today.”

Fitz was carefully laid down on the pile of rugs; this was a relief. Her eyes fell half-closed; now she was tired, the light of the flickering oil-lamp was almost too bright.

Clyburn untangled a bunch of blankets quickly, then knuckled his forehead. “Call me anytime, Ma’am. I’ve slung my hammock outside; Jackson is about as well.”

“Thank you; you are dismissed,” said Jess.
The door quietly swung closed.

Fitz tilted her head. Muzzily, she realised Jess hadn’t moved from the door; there was nothing but still and quiet.

Finally, Jess ran her hands through her hair. Her face crumpled, and her ears slowly drooped. Her voice was a liquid murmur of Elvish. “That ward wasn’t anchored onto living bone.”

Fitz didn’t really know what to say to that; possibly no reply was wanted.

Jess walked over and sat down; her hands fistèd in the rugs underneath her. “I am pretty sure I watched you die today.”

Fitz eased herself up, and slowly, painfully, leaned over. She wrapped her hands around unresisting elf, and rested her head on blonde hair. Jess was rigid, but one of her hands tucked up and around Fitz’s arm.

“There was nothing I could do.” Jess was staring intensely at something only she could see. “It took fifteen minutes for the Trolls to strike their colours - another half-hour to reform the squadron - fifteen minutes more to collect your officers from the water.”

Fitz listened to this recitation silently, taking in its meaning. Fitz also heard what she wasn’t saying; Jess had ridden down an enemy squadron that outgunned her three-to-one, and utterly ruined them. There was a flicker of some emotion in Fitz’s chest that she didn’t entirely recognise, hot and coiling.

“It took another ten minutes to convince Lady Proudmoore to authorise the recovery mission.” Jess began to rock slowly. “Then your officers insisted on coming, and they’re terrible at rowing. By the time your Tidesage showed me where the Tenacity had sunk, it was too late. It was so dark, and you were so cold.”

Fitz held on to Jess tightly, and cast about for some other topic; her father had loved to fish, and she half-remembered advice about the bravest trout preferring the brightest lures.

“I’ve been carrying that compass for a while,” said Fitz at random. “Since we danced at the party.”

Jess sighed; sharp teeth worried her lower lip. One of her hands wandered towards the pocket of her jacket where the compass was stowed away; her ears canted.

“How could I resist you?” said Fitz, lightly. “So tall and cool and silent.”

“I am a great dancer.” Jess said weakly.

Fitz lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Better than the Prince. You should commit treason and tell him so.”

Jess chuckled - it sounded strained, but her ears were slowly lifting back above her head.

“I also accidentally acquired a great deal of prize-money,” said Fitz smugly. “I can afford my own uniforms now. Another factor in the overall strategic landscape.”

“What?” said Jess, with a small huff of laughter - small, but real. She dropped a small kiss on Fitz’s collarbone, and her ears slid forward just a little bit. “You won’t need to borrow Quel’Thalan uniforms from random officers? That’s a shame; I like you in red.”

“For you, I’d wear one.”
“Just make sure it’s one of mine this time.” Jess’s ears had relaxed almost all the way. “You’ve been lucky so far, but we don’t want any other Elves to get ideas.”

Fitz filed that cultural tidbit away in her mind - then considered, slowly, just how many times she had given and received clothing from Elves. She shoved her rising horror to the back of her mind. Instead she weakly grabbed a blanket and pulled it up around them. “There was one other critical factor in my decision making process,” she said musingly. “One I knew almost as soon as I met you in my Lieutenant’s exam.”

Jess tilted her head back and smiled, resettling the blanket. “Ah? Do tell.”

Fitz felt herself flush. “I find your ears unbearably attractive,” she said. “It’s time I faced that fact honestly.”

Jess laughed brightly again, wriggling the appendages in question; she kissed Fitz’s collarbone again. Grey eyes lidded. “We should definitely talk about that later, Commander Fitzwilliams.”

Fitz blinked slowly. “We really should, Commodore Sagewood.”

Jess sighed - it didn’t sound unhappy - then rearranged herself, drawing away from Fitz to pile up the bedding into a round shape around them. The wisdom of this strategy proved itself immediately. On the floor, they were at the mercy of the flagship’s rolling, and the cushions held them safely in place. Jess finally tossed a thick blanket over them both, cuddling close as the ship rolled back. Fitz started to gently roast; instead of mentioning that, she carefully focused on the elf in her arms, and on the duties of tomorrow morning.

The cabin was still and quiet.

“Most of me is so grateful you are alive,” Jess said finally. “And another part of me is still sick with fear. Does that make sense?”

Fitz paused. “Yes.”

Whispers of fingertips played across the skin of Fitz’s arm. There was silence for a long while. Jess’s movements trailed off; her hand slid down until it was lying between them. Her breathing slowed, and her ears stilled. Some time later, the oil-lamp flickered, and went out.

Fitz would have sworn that after everything, sleep would have been impossible. She was completely wrong. Eventually her eyes own drifted closed, and there behind them was the ocean; Fitz once again fell into its endless depths, welcoming the waters with joy.

It was a restful sleep, and a long one. When Fitz awoke the next morning, it was only because of a knocking on the cabin door. Her whole body ached; she was also snug and warm, swimming in a sea of bedding. Jess was gone, and in her place was a pile of cushions - clearly she hadn’t wanted to wake Fitz by accidentally pitching her out of bed.

Fitz realised then, uncomfortably, that she had never asked how exactly elves slept on their Quel’Thalan vessels; on Tenacity she had simply given them hammocks. Fitz cast her eyes about the cabin again, narrowing her eyes; the nest of blankets and cushions suddenly stuck her as suspicious.

The knock on the door sounded again, but louder.

“Come!” said Fitz firmly.

Clyburn peeked his head inside the cabin. “Good morning, ma’am,” he said, brightly. He
maneuvered into the small space carrying a small sea chest. Atop the lid was a tray, and a bowl of something steaming.

Fitz disentangled herself from her blankets, rising stiffly to her feet. Her clothes were ruined, and her body still didn’t feel entirely correct - sluggish and full of aches - but staggering forward under her own power felt like triumph.

“Easy there ma’am,” said Clyburn. “Let me just drop that table, and we’ll see to breakfast.”

Fitz was suddenly ravenous; she slumped into a chair and fell upon the food, eating every scrap of the huge bowl of stewed pork.

Clyburn looked on approvingly. “It’s only two bells, ma’am. The Commodore has returned to the squadron - she reckons she’ll be back at five in the forenoon. In the meantime, she sent this.” Clyburn shook the sea chest; it rustled slightly. “Replacement uniform, ma’am.”

“I hope it’s not one of the Commodore’s best ones,” said Fitz ruefully.

“I’m sure it’s alright ma’am,” Clyburn said confidently; he counted carefully on his fingers. “Fourth time’s the charm. And you almost managed to bring your jacket back this round.”

He held up the offending garment; the fine blue wool had dried it unevenly into a shapeless mass. Fitz sighed.

Clyburn’s practiced fingers rapidly stripped the Lord Admiral’s epaulette from the old jacket; he then began fixing it to a bright red peacoat he pulled from the box.

“Thank you, Clyburn,” Fitz said, as he brushed out the new garment, and hung it on a chair.

“Not a problem ma’am.” He started pulling more items of clothing out of the box, studiously casual.

Fitz was stiff and sore. Dappled bruising covered her stomach. Complicating matters further, it had been years since she had last battled to put on an Elven uniform. Everything smelled pleasingly of soap, wool, and a hint of salt-water - but nothing quite attached how she thought it might, the collars were high, and the cloth was thick. There was several minutes of silence; Fitz used them to concentrate deeply.

“About yesterday, ma’am?” said Clyburn.

Fitz glanced over at him; he had stopped bustling. Her ruined jacket was in his hands - he had been going through its pockets - but now he was staring down at the deck, looking forlorn. Fits paused in her fastening to turn and looked at him full in the face.

“There was no one else I could trust to deliver the ship’s papers, Mr Clyburn,” she said.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Clyburn replied unhappily.

Fitz gave him a hard look. “You fulfilled your duty to the utmost.”

“Lord Admiral’s finest,” he mumbled.

“Yes,” said Fitz. “I agree. Now let’s hear no more about this.” She turned back to struggling with the Elven undershirt. “What is wrong with having buttons?” she muttered darkly. “Whose ship do I need to sink for the Elves to have buttons?”

“Here, ma’am,” Clyburn said, reaching out. The shirt’s final golden hatch-dog was rapidly sheeted
home, and Fitz was once more an officer in the Lord Admiral’s service.

Her shoulders straightened; the weight of duty felt like slotting something important back in place. “Have the rest of the crew been transferred onboard?”

“No, ma’am. Begging your pardon, but the Lord Admiral sent a signal last night that they were transferred to Commodore Sagewood. I think they’re helping repair the Quel’Thalan ships.”

“Hmm,” said Fitz; she was uncomfortably aware that she should have expected something like this - there was no longer a Tenacity to require crew. “I will report to Captain Conrad then; perhaps he has some small duty for me to perform.”

Clyburn hurried ahead of her, and blocked her from the exit; with great concentration, he brushed down her red peacoat again, and readjusted her golden hat. Fitz didn’t fidget, or object; she thought of it as a kind of penance.

“And don’t worry about the court martial ma’am, because I am sure it will be alright,” said Clyburn staunchly.

“What?” said Fitz incredulously, but Clyburn had opened the door. Outside was a blue-jacketed Marine with a musket; he snapped to attention and presented arms smartly. Lieutenant Porter leapt up from a small stool, touching the brim of his hat.

“Court martial?” repeated Fitz.

Porter rocked his weight from one foot to another. “Just a formality ma’am,” he said, awkwardly. “On account of the loss of your ship.” His eyes darted about.

Fitz scowled helplessly; then she gripped the door frame to steady herself as the ship pitched. “Of course.”

“I am afraid I must escort you until the court is complete,” said Porter. “Will you… will you surrender your weapons, ma’am?”

“They all went down with my ship,” Fitz said sharply. “On account of how I rammed it into a kraken.” She drew herself up as much as the deck would allow, breathing deeply, wishing she could stand straight and tall. “Very well, Mr Porter; you have your duty. Come along.”

Porter looked sick. “Yes, ma’am.”

Fitz turned, and began walking painfully for’ard; Porter and the marine both trailed along behind. She stalked slowly towards the hatchway ladder, lost in the sounds of the ‘tweendecks. Sailors in every dark corner stared at her, whispering - the ones brave enough to step forward saluted her with shining eyes. But Fitz was unable to do more than nod to them.

The loss of a ship always triggered a court martial; the navy used them to investigate the causes of a sinking - and apportion blame. Fitz was anxious, furious, and frustrated all at once; the proximate cause of the Tenacity’s sinking was so obvious, she wondered why they were bothering with the inquiry at all. Regardless, her career was in mortal peril. Worse, until it was completed, neither she nor any of Tenacity’s other officers could be posted onto another ship.

When she gained the top of the ladder, the Tiragarde’s deck was still buzzing with activity - although the frantic efforts of the night before had given way to less urgent tasks. The damaged timbers had been swapped out for bright new planking, the tangled rigging replaced, and the debris of battle cleared away. Near the prow of the ship, shrouded bundles had been laid out in silent rows,
awaiting the Tidesage. A marine stood guard, and a Kul Tiran flag had been set from a nearby backstay to fly over them.

The morning sun also lit the rest of the fleet; on the blue ocean lay massive ships, all with their sails clewed, all with sailors scuttling over their decks. Several showed signs of heavy damage. One three-decker lay heeled hard over with a massive hole was exposed; crew were over its side on ratlines, sawing and hammering at the timbers, maneuvering new planks into place.

To windward, the whip-thin pennants of Quel’Thalas streamed from a battered collection of frigates and sloops; one ship listed heavily; another was dismasted. Gigs full of both humans and elves filled the waters, and more figures swarmed over the battle damage; fat supply vessels lingered nearby, disgorging timber and cordage.

Fitz walked slowly to the quarterdeck; Porter and the marine trailed silently after her. Four bells rang out.

On the windward side of the deck, feet apart, riding easily on the swell, was the Lord Admiral. Her official Greatcoat was slightly crumpled, and one sleeve was singed; small strands of hair had escaped her braid and were fluttering in the breeze. Once again, she stood alone, apart from the ever-present Ithedis.

“Fitzwilliams,” she called. “Will you join me?”

Ithedis dropped back towards the wheel slightly; the small knot of officers huddled even further over against the leeward rail. Porter broke away to join them - the Marine took up station by the mizzen.

“Ma’am.” Fitz walked carefully closer and touched the brim of her hat.

The Lord Admiral eyed her curiously. “You look well, Fitzwilliams - far better than I expected. How do you feel?”

Fitz considered this. “I’m afraid I don’t know, ma’am,” she finally said. “But I am eager to return to duty. Do you have any tasks for me?”

“No, Commander Fitzwilliams,” said the Lord Admiral; she sounded fond. “I do not have any tasks you can currently perform.”

Fitz’s shoulders couldn’t hide her dismay. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral looked at her for a long moment, before relenting. “Will you walk with me? After a battle, the quarterdeck can be a lonely place, and my wife is far away. It would be a kindness.”

Fitz looked at the Lord Admiral and saw exhaustion - bone-deep, like a groove cut into a rock. “It would be my pleasure ma’am.”

“You can call me Jaina,” said the Lord Admiral, turning to walk up the rail. “Even though I know you won’t just yet.”

“T-thank you, ma’am,” said Fitz, walking alongside her.

The sea air was invigorating; the seabirds wheeled aloft, and the swells heaved the Tiragarde up on long rollers.

“How goes the wedding planning?” the Lord Admiral finally said. “I see Jess has wasted no time in staking her claim; that uniform has several of her personal touches.”
“She is indeed very thoughtful, ma’am,” said Fitz. “May I ask some advice in relation?”

“That would greatly depend,” the Lord Admiral said, dryly. “Potentially Sarah would be a better source of—”

Fitz choked down a laugh. “Oh no, ma’am - don’t worry, you’re safe. It’s just about Quel’Thalan weddings. I’m not… I’ve not been to one, and I am not sure how to go about it.”

The Lord Admiral frowned. “Frankly, there was a lot of nonsense at mine. Cheering crowds, lacquered armour, ceremonial fire - that sort of thing. Probably not helpful.” She turned at the stern-rail, and began walking back. “But if you cannot organise a Quel’Thalan service soon enough, you should consider Kul Tiran. I strongly approve of this marriage Fitz - personally, but also politically on multiple levels.”

Fitz managed to prevent her consternation appearing on her face; she didn’t entirely understand how a minor cousin wedding an Elven yeoman would involve politics. But - and Fitz realised this with a rush of relief - Jess would know. She just had to bumble through until then.

The Lord Admiral seemed to be thinking deeply; she tucked her hands into the pockets of her Greatcoat. “I must say, you do make promoting you difficult. This time it is most definitely your fault.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fitz glumly.

The Lord Admiral glanced at her, and raised one eyebrow. “You actually created a substantial problem with your heroics. A Court Martial must be neutral. Considering that you just saved every ship in the Great Fleet, its officers are currently a trifle biased. We must wait for reinforcements to arrive.”

Fitz’s heart sank, but she straightened her shoulders.

“Reinforcements, ma’am?” Fitz asked. “Will the Great Fleet stand out to meet the Zandalari?”

“Oh yes.” The Lord Admiral smiled; her eyes were cold, like chips of ice. “My sailors lie dead at my feet, killed in my own waters. It has been many years since an invasion threatened Boralus - but the intelligence you gathered gives us a chance to muster. When I find them, I will destroy them utterly.”

Fitz’s battered heart rose at this display of pure, Kul Tiran belligerance; she touched the brim of her hat in respect for it. The two of them turned again, and began walking back towards the stern.

After a time, the Lord Admiral stopped, pointing at a small gig pulling towards the Tiragarde; a figure in a red peacoat sat in its stern-sheets. “There’s Jess now.” She winced faintly. “It means Lady Stormsong won’t be long.”

Fitz swayed towards the water to get a better look at the gig; her hip bumped into the rail.

The Lord Admiral looked at her, and smiled affectionately. “You have excellent taste - Jess is a particularly salty seadog.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Fitz said proudly.

“Hmm. Well, you’d best not keep her waiting. Off you go, Fitz. Thank you for your company.”

Fitz took off her hat and bowed; then she scuttled off the deck towards the waist. Lieutenant Porter and the marine guard detached themselves, and hurried after her - Fitz paid them no mind.
A group of officers was waiting for Jess at the top of the ladder; Fitz joined their cluster. It had only been a few hours, but she still had to clasp her hands behind her back to stop herself fidgeting. Instead she rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, fighting a grin.

“Present! Arms!” called the Sergeant, and the marines came crashing to attention.

The shrill pipes of the bosun’s mates twittered out. Fitz caught sight of Jackson in the line of them. The sideboys saluted. And then Jess was there, smoothly up and onto the deck, hand already saluting the quarterdeck.

A Lieutenant at the end of the line of sideboys stepped forward. “Ma’am?” he said. “Will you come with me? There is some question over the deposition of the prizes.”

Jess smiled at him. “Apologies, Lieutenant. But no - I have a prior engagement. Lieutenant Sprocket, formerly from *Tenacity*, may act on my behalf.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said, looking nonplussed.

Jess turned away from him, nodding to Fitz. In turn, Fitz bowed elaborately, twirling her Elven hat - this prompted an eyeroll. But those wonderful ears twitched forward into the briefest hint of laughter first, so Fitz was satisfied.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” Jess said cheerfully. “You are looking quite well.”

Fitz realised with a start that Jess was entirely correct; the walk about the deck, with its sea-air and view of the ocean, had been better than any tonic. She touched her stomach briefly, bracing for the dull ache of a pressed bruise; instead she felt nothing. She blinked up at Jess; in turn, Jess’s smile faded into slight concerned look.

“Would you escort me to the purser’s office, Commander?” Jess said slowly. “I believe… well, there is probably some good excuse for us to go there, but I can’t think of it. Come with me anyway.”

“With pleasure,” said Fitz faintly.

Jess held out her arm and Fitz took it; they walked easily down to the hatchway, dropping into the darkness of the ‘tween-decks. From there, it was a short stroll to the purser’s cabin, and relative privacy. Lieutenant Porter and the marine followed along behind - Jess closed the door in their face.

She turned, putting her hat down on a chair. “What’s wrong?”

Fitz pressed her hand to her stomach again, searching for the pain. Then she unbuckled her sleeves, and tried to roll them up - the cloth was thick, and wouldn’t roll over her elbows, but a good amount of arm was exposed. Jess watched her, openly puzzled.

Fitz stared at her unmarked skin; then she began pulling at the golden fasteners of her uniform, struggling with all the ties.

Jess caught her hands and stilled them - her ears were cocked in alarm. “Why are you doing this? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” said Fitz, bewildered. “Nothing is wrong! How is that possible?”

Jess looked at her blankly, and then her eyes widened; she swiftly untied the peacoat. She didn’t bother undoing the shirt - she just pulled it up to expose Fitz’s stomach. The angry bruising was completely gone.

“Breakfast,” said Fitz. “And a walk along the quarterdeck with the Lord Admiral. Can the Lord Admiral heal bruising?”

Jess was looking at her, ears fluttering; her hands began tracing anxious patterns over Fitz’s stomach. “You were looking at the water?”

“Yes?” Fitz jerked, shivering lightly. “Yes.”

“And you were just walking with Jaina?”

“Yeah.” Fitz was rapidly losing focus; she swallowed heavily.

“It… it has to be something to do with the ocean, right?” Jess still looked worried - her ears were standing straight up. “We need to talk to Lady Stormsong right away.”

“That seems wise,” said Fitz at random, breathlessly; a tangled coil was unrolling itself, heavy and thick under her skin. She jerked again, shallowly.

Jess finally looked up; grey eyes widened, and her hands flattened out, stilling over Fitz’s stomach. Silence stretched out between them.

“I’m sorry for - for touching you without asking,” Jess breathed.

“Thank you,” husked Fitz; then she cleared her throat. “But don’t worry about it. Continue if you want. Please.”

They were standing so close; Jess’s eyes slid down, lingering over Fitz’s mouth; she leaned forward. Her breath played lightly across Fitz’s cheek.

There was a knock on the cabin door.

With careful, deliberate movements, Jess leaned back; then she fixed Fitz’s undershirt. Slender hands reseated the red peacoat of Quel’Thalas, fingers nimbly flying across all the accursed golden stays. Then she reached out and cupped Fitz’s face. “The Lord Admiral has checked you,” she said fiercely. “You are still hers. Whatever this is, you are fully human. So I am not going to complain about any gift that returns you to me.”

Jess turned to pick up her own hat, but stopped. On the table lay the modest collection of things that had been in Fitz’s jacket pockets when she had gone down with Tenacity. It wasn’t much; a silver piece, a blue pen, and a square piece of ruined paper. All of these things had been laid out carefully in an attempt to dry them. But the letter’s paper was ripped; there was also a round burn-mark in it, right through the centre. The salt had stained it heavily, and not a trace of ink remained.

“This is my letter,” said Jess, quietly. “Isn’t this the letter I sent you?”

The knock sounded again, louder.

Fitz ignored this completely, walking over to Jess. “Yes it is. It was one of the luckiest things I have ever been given, and as soon as it is dry it will go back in my pocket.”

Jess also seemed in no hurry to leave; her ears set themselves at a rakish angle, and she looked pleased. “I didn’t realise it would be such a good token, although I’m sad it got ruined. The water must have washed the ink off.”
“It’s not ruined. It’s perfect. I wouldn't give it up for anything.”

The knock came again, quite insistently. “Just a minute!” yelled Fitz, irritatedly.

Jess glanced at the door, then looked back at her fondly. “You never really told me what changed. You know, between when you said no, and when you asked me to say yes. I'm not complaining, but I would like to know why.”


Jess kissed her lightly; her ears canted forward into laughter. “You realise you’re making no sense?”

Fitz sighed. “Yeah. All I know is that letting you go felt like the worst mistake of my life.”

“It was,” said Jess lightly. She brushed the back of her hand over Fitz’s cheek.

“A good thing the wind was fair, and I could jibe about,” said Fitz turning her head to kiss it. “Dying really put things in perspective; you're wonderful. That should be a challenge to be amazing back, rather than just... giving up.”

The door cracked open slightly. “I am sorry ma’ams,” said Porter; his posture was stiff and his eyes were fixed on the floor. “But Lady Stormsong is up on deck and the Lord Admiral is waiting for you.”

Fitz rubbed her forehead, then put her own hat on.

Jess’s face was set in serious lines, but her ears laughed. “Shall we depart?”

“After you, Commodore,” said Fitz.

The walk back through the 'tween decks was brief; the little party walked in silence to the ladder, and climbed up easily. The bright sunlight of the late morning greeted them; as they crossed the deck, Jess dropped back a half-step so Fitz was walking next to her.

Lady Proudmoore stood on the quarterdeck. Behind her was Ithedis, and next to her stood two Tidesages; one was Brother Gull with his staff, and his hood shadowing his face. The other robed figure could only be Lady Stormsong.

The Tidesage’s hood was folded back, and the mitre on her head left most of her jet-black hair exposed. This hat was also crooked; she was busy nuzzling an enormous water elemental, and in its enthusiasm, this had knocked the headgear askew. In Boralus, Brother Gull’s pet elemental had been surging and swirling, like the water across a tidal bar - this one was crystal clear.

“What a good and lovely entity you are,” Lady Stormsong was saying. “Yes, you are! Yes, you are!”

The water elemental rippled in pleasure, like jelly shaken in a mould. Its glowing eyes were narrowed into slits as Lady Stormsong rubbed her hand vigorously along its flank. Brother Gull stood impassively.

The Lord Admiral spotted their approach; a hint of relief appeared in the set of her shoulders as both Jess and Fitz touched the brims of their hats to her. “Lady Stormsong, may I introduce you to Commander Fitzwilliams? And of course you already know Commodore Sagewood.”
“Hullo Jess! A commodore? Good for you!” said Lady Stormsong brightly. She rubbed her hand on her robe to rid it of water, turning from the elemental. It continued to nudge at her shoulder with possibly its head, but Stormsong ignored it. “And Commander Fitzwilliams? What a pleasure - I have heard so much about you.”

“Your servant, ma’am,” said Fitz, confused. She tried to not stare at the water elemental, but failed.

“The ocean really likes you, you know,” said Stormsong, beaming. “An awful lot. You’re a lucky sailor, Commander.”

Around them, sailors were casually eavesdropping; some of them were coiling ropes at the waist, some of them were pawing at the sails in the yard immediately above. So many eyes were casually not watching them, Fitz felt entirely exposed.

“Ahem,” said the Lord Admiral, shooting one clump of whispering crewmembers a quelling look. “Perhaps we can discuss this in privacy?”

“Certainly!” said Lady Stormsong. “Let me just… will you wait for me here, sweetie?”

The giant water elemental rippled again.

“Good entity!” Lady Stormsong took a piece of some sort of glowing crystalline rock out of her pocket, and threw it into the heaving mass of the elemental's torso. She brushed her hands again, then made an expansive gesture. “Lead on, my Lady.”

The aft hatchway wasn’t far away; the Lord Admiral disappeared into its depths with alacrity. Fitz waited for all her social superiors to descend the ladder - she had to insist Jess go first - before heading down herself.

The normal crowd of supplicants was scattered around the corridor like a shoal of fish escaping from a shark - the outer door was held open by a Lieutenant, hand never dropping from his salute. Fitz nodded to him sympathetically as she walked through.

The inner door stood propped open; the Lord Admiral was already seated behind her desk. Her greatcoat had come off, and was hooked on the back of her wooden chair. Brother Gull and Ithedis were having a minor staring match over the corner with the best visibility - Ithedis won. Brother Gull ended up standing over by the window, looking into the sea.

In front of the desk, the armchairs had been pulled into a circle - Lady Stormsong had already perched in one, sitting cross-legged atop the seat; the shadows of the cabin seemed to dance around her, despite the sun being high. Jess took a second chair. Fitz gingerly sat in the final one; the Lord Admiral nodded her approval at this act of initiative.

Servants poured from everywhere; cup of tea were distributed widely. One of them discreetly left a bottle of whiskey next to the Lord Admiral’s elbow.

“So, Jaina,” said Lady Stormsong, waving the teacup absently. Not a drop spilled. “What can the Tidesages do for you today?”

The Lord Admiral looked awkward. “Commander Fitzwilliams appears to be unusually…”

“Young,” said Lady Stormsong, smiling and nodding. “Yes, you’re not wrong - Brother Gull tells me she is twenty-six. But don’t worry; it is all part of the doom.”

“Young?” repeated Lady Proudmoore.
“Doom?” blurted Fitz.

“It’s been ages since a sailor was chosen to roam the oceans forever,” said Lady Stormsong dreamily. “So lucky.”

“What?” said Jess, looking horrified; her ears shot straight up.

“The word I was actually going to say was ‘alive,’” said the Lord Admiral; she took the bottle of whiskey and poured a generous dollop into her teacup. Her face was the picture of consternation. “I was going to say ‘Fitzwilliams appears to be unusually alive.’ But now that you mention it, Fitz doesn’t look a day older than twenty.” She leaned forward in fascination, and stared intently at Fitz’s face.

Jess’s ears stabbed sharply at the Lord Admiral’s comment - she clearly hadn’t noticed anything was amiss in this regard. Her face and ears worked through a variety of emotions, all flickering too fast to be caught. After a long moment she passed her own teacup over the desk; the Lord Admiral poured a second slug of whiskey into it before passing it back.

“I apologise, Fitzwilliams,” the Lord Admiral continued. “Could you show her your markings? Perhaps that might shed some light on this enigma.”

Fitz struggled again with the foreign stays; she managed to get them off herself this time, and tugged her shirt-collar down enough that the Drust swirls were partly exposed. Lady Stormsong looked at them with cheerful curiosity.

“Oh, that’s got nothing to do with anything,” she said. “It does explain why the Commander’s body was still vacant though, when she came back to it - I had been wondering.”

Fitz felt a little sick. “I’m sorry, Lady Stormsong,” she said; she let her shirt fall back into place. “I’m not sure I understand.

Lady Stormsong beamed at Fitz. “That’s quite alright, Commander - I am not sure I understand either.”

The Lord Admiral rubbed her temples. “Could you try for us though, Charlotte? Only Fitzwilliams is one of my most useful officers, and we need to understand the implications.”

“Certainly,” said Lady Stormsong; she pondered her next words, brows furrowed, humming thoughtfully. Then she rapped her fingernails against her teacup, brightening. “You know, of course, that when a Tidesage dies their soul is collected by the ocean; as the Tide ebbs out, it is carried on to where it needs to go.”

“Of course the ocean doesn’t have much practice at putting souls back in,” said Lady Stormsong, voice lowered to a confiding hush. “So there might be a few side effects. It’s like a sea chest. When you pack it ashore it is neat as a pin, but somehow after you take everything out at sea, it never fits back quite right. You know? So you might find yourself especially prone to leak poetry from now
on. Or perhaps algae.”

Fitz looked at her in real horror.

“Back to this doom,” said Jess, ears flicking back and forth anxiously.

“Don’t worry,” said Lady Stormsong reassuringly. “The Tides preserve her, but they don’t want her
to do anything in particular but sail around. If she stays on the ocean and avoids being struck by a
cannonball, then she’ll be fine.” After a pause, she added, “Probably.”

Jess did not seem to find this reassuring; she took a heavy sip of her spiked tea.

The Lord Admiral had rolled her head back, and was staring at the ceiling of the cabin. “Why are
you like this, Charlotte,” she sighed.

Lady Stormsong smiled brilliantly, and took a sip of her tea, but did not answer. She shot a quiet, sly
wink to Fitz on the side. “There is a long tradition of Kul Tiran sailors that rove the ocean forever. I
am surprised that you are surprised.”

“Isn’t it normally considered a curse?” said Jess - there was an edge to her voice.

Brother Gull took a sharp breath. “Blasphemy,” he hissed.

“Yes,” said Lady Stormsong chidingly. “It is blasphemy. The ocean gives its gifts rarely.
Fitzwilliams is terribly lucky, and so is everyone onboard one of her ships.” She shot a dazzling
smile at the Lord Admiral. “Might I meet the Druid that cast the ward? Professional courtesy only - it
is fine work. Nature magic is truly uncanny in the hands of a proper Thornspeaker.”

Fitz didn’t know how she felt about Lady Stormsong describing anyone else as ‘uncanny.’

“I am sure that can be arranged,” said the Lord Admiral. “I find myself curious as well. Where did
you get the Drust token, Fitzwilliams?”

Fitz debated with herself; Jackson’s witchery was technically illegal. Exposing her could led to her
disratement, flogging, or even death.

The Lord Admiral watched the play of emotions across Fitz’s face; she set her cup down. “I
guarantee their safety, on my word of honour. They have done Kul Tiras a great service.”

“One of my warrants,” said Fitz reluctantly. “Ms Jackson.”

“Pass the word for Ms Jackson,” said the Lord Admiral to Ithedis. He nodded and strode towards the
doors.

“Could you ask for Mr Clyburn, also?” called Fitz after him. “My bosun… she will be alarmed at the
summons. It would be a kindness for her to have a friend.”

Ithedis shot her a glance, and kept walking out.

The Lord Admiral poured another slug of whiskey into her cup, and brooded into it deeply. Jess
looked so tense Fitz was worried for the teacup in her hands. There was silence in the cabin.

For her part, Fitz’s head was spinning. The whole thing was like some strange nightmare; she stood
up blindly, and looked over to the cabin window. The grey ocean, with its long rollers and the
foaming whitecaps, soothed her spirit. Fitz took a few deep breaths before sitting back down. The
Lord Admiral watched her with an unreadable expression.
There was a knock on the door, and the Lieutenant opened it. “Ms Jackson, and Mr Clyburn here to see you ma’am.”

“Let them in, please,” the Lord Admiral said.

Clyburn appeared through the doorway; he was so rigidly to attention it was almost like he was hopping as he moved. His face was a mixture of alarm and confusion. Behind him strode Jackson; the bosun’s face was impassive but brown eyes darted around the cabin, looking ready to flee.

“At ease, you two,” said the Lord Admiral, settling back in her chair. “This won’t take long. Can I offer you refreshments?”

A servant appeared like magic, proffering a tin of jam biscuits. Clyburn reached out and took one hesitantly. Jackson declined.

“The good Commander here was just telling me that you wrought her death-ward,” said the Lady Stormsong happily. “What fine work, Ms Jackson; I hope you will condescend to show me one of your tokens?”

Clyburn broke out into sweat, the biscuit shoved half-way into his mouth. Jackson’s eyes reflected panic.

“Pass the token to me,” said the Lord Admiral, kindly. “No harm will come to you.” She stood and held out her hand.

Jackson’s scarred hand slowly drifted over to one of her pockets; her shoulders hunched, but she pulled out a token, and handed it over.

“What a marvellous thing!” said Lady Stormsong, jumping up to peer at it closely. She clapped her hands in pleasure. “It doesn’t like me at all!”

The Lord Admiral also looked admiring. “The carvings are quite intricate,” she said. “They feel like… like the shadows under the branches. Like the leaves that stop the sun from burning. May I keep this?”

Jackson nodded; she shuffled from foot to foot, looking for all the world like a wild animal about to flee.

Lady Stormsong turned to smile at Jackson. “Drust are so fascinating, Ms Jackson; they are a personal study of mine. I presume Fitzwilliams is the master of your hunt?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jackson mumbled.

Stormsong seemed to have run out of questions; she jumped back into her armchair again, settling against the cushion.

Fitz was staring. “My Lady,” she said slowly. “My sailors aren’t going to turn into deer or sharks or something, are they?”

“No, no,” said Stormsong airly. “Probably not. A slim chance only.” She pointed at Jackson. “Although for our fine friend here - maybe.”

Clyburn looked slightly disappointed.

“Thank you for your time, you two,” the Lord Admiral said; she was running her thumb across
Jackson’s token, tracing its pattern. “If you run into trouble regarding these tokens, Jackson, please refer them to me. You are dismissed back to your duties.”

The two sailors knuckled their foreheads, and beat a hasty retreat back to the doorway.

“Are we all done, Jaina?” asked Lady Stormsong, sounding a little worried. “Only Wobbles gets lonely if I leave it alone too long, and when it gets anxious it gets a little destructive.”

The Lord Admiral stood quickly. “Oh yes, please Lady Stormsong, don’t let me keep you.” She left her teacup on the desk, walking around it and opening the cabin door.

Jess and Fitz rose automatically, resettling their peacoats and hats.

Reaching up to adjust her mitre, Lady Stormsong smiled one last time at Fitz. “It has been a pleasure to finally meet you, Commander. I shall pass along your regards to your sister. She is quite at home in the Monastery, I assure you.”

“Oh,” Fitz said, “Er -”

But Lady Stormsong had already turned. “Until next time, Jaina. And you, Jess.”

With a cheery wave, she vanished through the door, accompanied by Brother Gull. The dancing shadows at the corners of the room seemed to follow her out.

The three naval officers looked at each other. Jess looked upset; her hands kept clenching, and her body kept turning slightly towards Fitz.

Fitz, in turn, couldn’t entirely grasp what had just happened; she felt sick and tired. She also desperately wanted to disappear back to the purser’s office and bury herself in Jess’s arms.

But Lord Admiral was there, and she was staring at them both with a rueful expression. So Fitz stood straight and tall, and attempted to keep her sidelong, pining glances to a minimum.

There was silence in the cabin; Stormsong’s perky voice faded. There was the click of the outer door closing. Servants began bustling behind them, taking away the teacups and rearranging the armchairs.

“Commodore Sagewood,” said the Lord Admiral, looking abashed. “I have difficult news. The Inshore Squadron must return to Sunsail.”

Fitz froze.

Jess’s ears flicked with agitation; she opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her hands clasped firmly behind her back. “Aye aye, ma’am,” she eventually said.

“Your squadron is badly damaged,” said the Lord Admiral, looking regretful. “And the fleet currently screening the anchorage must be transferred to protect Boralus. It makes operational sense.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Jess.

“Fitz will shadow me,” said the Lord Admiral; she looked between them both. “I will return you both to one another safe, if I can. But this is the duty we all swore to do. We must do it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Jess again.

The Lord Admiral sighed. “Then there is nothing more to be said. Commodore - you have a little
time, but not much. Keep the crew from Tenacity; your casualties were heavy, and it is two months from here to Quel’Thalas. Leave today. As for you Fitz - after Jess has gone, find me in the second dogwatch; we will have you take up some of my duties. You are both dismissed.”

Jess touched the brim of her hat; Fitz managed the same. Fitz wasn’t entirely sure how they got back to their cabin; she registered neither the darkness of the ‘tweendecks, teeming with sailors, nor the silent shadows of Porter and the marine.

Fitz pulled the door closed, and turned. Jess threw her hat onto a chair, and jerked her peacoat off with swift, brutal movements; it was dropped summarily on the back of a chair. Clad only in her shirtsleeves, she turned and stepped deliberately towards Fitz. Her eyes were alight - her ears were cocked. “Do you know what this means?”

Fitz was mesmerized. “The ocean badly packed my sea chest, and Jackson can turn into a blue deer.”

“No,” said Jess, faltering. “What? No. It means you… it means we…”

“Time,” said Fitz, intently.


“It might be cursed time,” said Fitz haltingly. “The shanties…”

“I am not Kul Tiran, and don’t care,” said Jess forcefully. “So don’t get hit by a grapeshot, or eaten by a monster. I know you.”

They locked eyes. Jess reached up and pushed lightly on Fitz’s shoulders. Fitz gave way, walking backwards; with a small bump, she fetched up against one of the bulkheads. Jess deliberately stopped just a fraction short.

Fitz could feel the heat of her blazing across the distance, igniting every nerve. Jess was so precise; not a single part of them touched. They were both breathing shallowly - Fitz took a quick glance down and saw that the high collar of her peacoat had fallen open, leaving her neck exposed. Jess’s gaze was locked on the unblemished skin; she leaned forward. There was a whisper of teeth, and then a kiss pressed just below Fitz’s ear.

The knock on the door startled Fitz so badly she jerked up; her head thumped against the too-low roof. Jess started forward in concern, and her own ears scraped across the timbers; she winced as well.

“Come!” said Fitz, cringing and giving Jess a rueful look. Jess shot her an expression full of sympathy.

Clyburn walked in balancing a tray - he looked a bit startled to have caught them looking so disheveled in the middle of the day. “I’ll just… leave this here, ma’ams,” he said nervously, putting the tray on the table. “Begging your pardon.”

He backed out of the door quickly and closed it behind him.

Jess walked to the table and dropped into a chair, silently throwing up her hands. Fitz knew exactly how she felt; her blood felt thick and hot and pulsing, but the flagship was likely the worst place possible for romance. It boiled with activity - and as the time approached for Jess to sail, her presence would be increasingly demanded on deck.

Fitz thought of Sylvanas Windrunner with a sudden, frustrated sympathy.
Jess grimaced, and plucked the lid off the tray; she contemplated the boiled beef and roasted pork, Someone had gone to great lengths to make both of these delicious. The bread was soft, the pork had crackling, and the beef had been mixed in with fine spices. Two forks lay neatly in a little holder.

Fitz didn’t sit down - she instead walked to the cabin door, yanking it open.

“Fetch a bowl of fresh water please,” she said to a surprised Porter. “And a clean towel.”

She shut the door again.

Jess was giving her an odd look; her ears perked in curiosity. Fitz smiled at her but stayed by the door, riding the slow swell. A couple of minutes passed in silence before the second knock came - Fitz pulled the door open immediately.

“Thank you,” said Fitz, taking the bowl and towel. Then she shut the door in Porter’s face again.

She placed her burden on the table, tucking the towel so that the bowl wouldn’t move with the ship’s roll.

Jess gratefully washed her hands, then used the bread to scoop up some beef.

Fitz picked up her own fork. “Will you visit your family once you’re home?”

“My nephew should be home from the academy,” said Jess; her ears wiggled in anticipation. “He will be twelve this spring. I didn’t get to see him when I was last in Quel’Thallas - we missed each other by only a few days. He’s going to be a fine mage.”

“Is he any good with a fork?” asked Fitz slyly.

“I guess you’ll have to be the one to connect him to its true cultural heritage,” said Jess, dryly. “We elves just aren’t as fond of harpooning our food.”

“Well, we do like thrusting,” Fitz said lightly. “More bread?”

Jess took the basket with a huff of laughter, rocking on her chair; her ears relaxed.

“Sorry,” said Fitz, grinning. “You were talking about your family?”

“Mmm, yes,” Jess suddenly looked thoughtful. “Trevor - that was my brother in law - he was a fine young man. The Lord Admiral had her eye on him for… well, for more extensive duties. His death upset a lot of plans.”

“Mm,” said Fitz, uneasily; this sounded like politics again.

“Derek is too young for games,” Jess said decisively. “Besides, things are different now. Best he stays in Quel’Thallas.”

There was a sharp knock on the cabin door.

Fitz gave Jess an exasperated look. This was returned with interest.

“Come!” Jess said.

An Elvish lieutenant Fitz had never met poked his head inside the cabin; he eyed her curiously before turning his attention to Jess.
“I beg your pardon, Commodore, but Captain Sandpiper requests your presence. The squadron awaits your command to sail.”

“Tell the Captain that I will be on my way after lunch,” Jess said.

“I was ordered to escort you now, Ma’am,” the Elf said, standing awkwardly in the open door. He looked extremely uncomfortable. “The Kul Tiran sea witch says the winds are blowing exceedingly fair.”

Jess gave him a hard look; he quaked a little under her disapproval.

Turning from him, Jess put down her bread and washed her hands carefully. “Write to me immediately after the court martial, Fitz,” she said in common, as she toweled her hands dry. “Good news or bad, I will be back for you - or you will sail for me.” She snagged her coat as she rose from the chair, fastening all the stays neatly.

Then she tipped Fitz’s chair back, leaned down, and kissed her; it was a kiss full of teeth and storms and fire.

When she finally withdrew, Fitz could only blink up into grey eyes, which stared back down at her fiercely. “And remember what I said about the grapeshot.”

Then Jess clasped her hat to her head, and strode out.

Fitz couldn’t eat any more of lunch; she faintly heard the sound of the bosun’s pipes that signalled Jess was leaving, but didn’t go up on deck to see - she couldn’t trust herself to be aloof while the crew was watching.

The bells struck again. Fitz still couldn’t bring herself to leave; instead she asked outside for a pen and paper. Haltingly, she began drafting and completing paperwork.

It was six bells before she could take the deck; Porter and the marine were silent as she walked back and forth along the leeward rail, watching Elvish sails disappear towards the horizon. They had vanished by the time the bells struck eight.

At the next change of watch, Fitz could stand idleness and confinement no more; she went hunting for the Lord Admiral. It was several hours before she was due, but Lady Proudmoore did not seem surprised to see her; Ithedis also seemed welcoming in his own quiet way. Fitz was bade to follow Jaina to her next appointment - and the next one. And the one after that.

Tucked away in a corner, she watched as the Lord Admiral held counsel with her most trusted people. Officers with sashes and gleaming medals trooped in and out of the cabin - sometimes groups of advisors were brought in to touse with each other vigorously - and maps and charts were steadily scattered across every surface.

By the end of the final meeting the oil-lamps had been lit, and refreshed twice, and it was deep in the first watch. Jaina’s elbows were perched atop the desk; there were bruised shadows beneath her eyes.

“Was this educational, Fitz?” asked the Lord Admiral wearily.

“Very, thank you ma’am.”

“Good. What are your thoughts?”

Fitz cast her mind back on the opinions, the facts and suppositions.
“I agree with Admiral Parker, ma’am,” she said, firmly. “Boralus Station is powerful, but too small to defeat the Golden Fleet by itself; its ships will either be trapped in harbour, or pinned against the shore. Better to consolidate it with the Great Fleet, and hunt the enemy in mass.”

“I agree,” said the Lord Admiral, nodding. “Quite apart from that it makes the force mobile - who knows where on Kul Tiras the Trolls will land. Boralus might be exposed, but so is everywhere else.”

She picked up a pen, and jotted a quick note; this was handed off to a servant. Then she leaned back, scrubbing her face tiredly. “The die is cast; Admiral Grey will bring every ship, Commodore Forster will sail south to us as well, and Commodore Webb will take the support vessels to the emergency anchorage near Stormsong Valley.”

“Begging your pardon ma’am, but you should sleep,” said Fitz.

Ithedis radiated his approval for this plan.

The Lord Admiral smiled weakly at them both. “Probably. But the work never stops.”

“Let me help, ma’am,” Fitz said, walking to the door. She yanked it open, striding through the outer office and into the corridor. “The Lord Admiral has decided that the next person who wastes her time will be turned into a goat,” she told the assembled officers. “Who is next in line?”

The corridor abruptly cleared out. Fitz eyed this with satisfaction.

“Thank you, Commander Fitzwilliams,” came a voice from inside, muffled by two bulkheads; it sounded amused. “Very effective. You are dismissed.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” said Fitz, settling her hat firmly in place. Then she strode into the darkness of the tweendecks.

The days that stretched out before her held the promise of her court martial, with its risks of punishment and disgrace; even further out, the future promised a sea teeming with trolls and an air alive with shot and shell. But tonight she was just the Lord Admiral’s faithful seadog, her duty done, and sent to enjoy the warmth of her bed. It would be colder without Jess, but memory would bring heat.

Besides, the ocean expected her in sleep, and Fitz didn’t want to keep her waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Ahaha - writing dialogue is difficult.

EDIT: I forgot to thank asterCrash! Some of Fitz’s dialogue in this chapter is hers (the part about what changed). Thank you so much aster for all your help!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

In which Fitz experiences a no good, very bad, flat out terrible day.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As the weather warmed into late spring, the Great Fleet rode north to meet its reinforcements - this took longer than it should have. The first delay was simple logistics; nearly every ship bore the scars of recent battle, and it took almost a week for repairs to be complete. Then, when the planks were replaced and the sails finally set, the winds did not cooperate. The creaks and moans of the Tiragarde’s rigging sounded forlorn in the light breeze - flags drooped listlessly from every ship in the fleet.

Fitz felt like she was in an eternal purgatory. Her Court Martial could not be convened until the reinforcements arrived - until then she was officially relieved of all duties. Filling this sudden abundance of free-time was not a simple matter; Jess was gone, the ocean provided only so much scenery, and when approached, the Lieutenants of the Tiragarde behaved oddly. Silence would fall; they would move over to the leeward rail, and the juniors kept reflexively saluting. Fitz found this exasperating; she just wanted to play cards.

The Lord Admiral seemed to notice this sudden social isolation. With great kindness, she took to inviting Fitz onto the quarterdeck - there they walked the windward rail in peaceable silence, looking out over the blue ocean.

The voyage was slow, but untroubled; every day saw the Fleet practice some new drill or maneuver. Fitz watched with barely concealed envy as Captain Conrad strode about with his sandtimer, dishing out praise and criticism with an equally generous hand. The Lord Admiral watched these evolutions with interest, and never appeared on deck without her eyeglass placed under her arm.

“Fitz,” the Lord Admiral said one morning. “How are you at wargames?” Behind her, two ships puffed out mock fury and real smoke as they simulated battle.

“I don’t know, ma’am,” said Fitz. “I don’t think I’ve ever done any.”

“Hmm.” The Lord Admiral turned away to pace the deck again.

Before breakfast on the next day, the colourful signal flags were hoisted; every Commodore in the fleet mustered in the aftercabin of the Tiragarde. Fitz was ushered to a spot next to Ithedis in the corner, and given a stool. Some of the Commodores shot her darting glances - but most were preoccupied with unrolling charts on the tables, and organising stacks of crisp wooden tokens.

The Lord Admiral strode in, all dark coat, dignity, and iron-grey hair; she sat at the head of the main table. Then she leaned forward to sweep the room with her eyes. “Today’s scenario presumes the Great Fleet will engage the Zandalari at sea, with numerical superiority, a density of Tidesages, and
holding the weather-gauge. I will play the Zandalari.”

Sweat broke out on every forehead.

When the first token was placed, Fitz had no idea what was going on - but the Lord Admiral brightened, and leaned forward. The assembled Commodores made their moves with a great deal of talking to one another and mathematics - some used their hands to simulate maneuvers as the sandtimer wound down.

The Lord Admiral placed tokens almost carelessly.

By the third round, Fitz had some hazy idea of how it all worked; she watched with increasing interest as pieces were laid and removed. In the twelfth round, a particularly bad mistake was made by one of the Commodores; Fitz winced. The officers all winced as well, especially after the Lord Admiral neatly separated the exposed squadron from the main body and more than a dozen blue tokens were removed from the board.

“Display a touch more care for the little ships, ladies and gentlemen,” said the Lord Admiral dryly. “You would be surprised at what you can achieve in one.”

By the time the games were called off, it was time for dinner. Fitz’s backside had long since gone numb; she was also hungry. The only food she’d eaten all day had been a honey-cake, and that was because Ithedis had secretly slipped it to her from his pocket.

But even as the Commodores left, the Lord Admiral was waving Fitz forward and into one of the armchairs. Servants appeared like magic, carrying pork sandwiches and mugs of water. Fitz gratefully gobbled both down - she also surreptitiously shook out her legs. The Lord Admiral was busy fishing around in a dusty cabinet; a small chart was withdrawn, and a bottle of malt whiskey. Another drawer produced a handful of tokens, all worn smooth by use.

“You’ve never done this before,” said the Lord Admiral, putting her acquisitions down on the coffee table. “So we’ll do a fun one first; you play the Kul Tiran fleet. Not at sea - that’s a bit hard for your first try. We’ll make it Boralus, and the Zandalari have already landed.” She sat, pouring herself a sniff of the whiskey.

Fitz played out her game; the Lord Admiral was generous with help. The complex maths were delightful, and Fitz did her best - but it didn’t take long for the Lord Admiral to take control; from there, the rest of the game was spent on the defensive. Less than two hours later, under Ithedis’ impassive judgement, Fitz’s last cutter sank beneath the waves.

“Believe it or not, that was quite good,” the Lord Admiral said, as she laid the pieces back into a bag. “For a first try it was even more so.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Fitz said, straightening in her seat. At some point in the evening, she had forgotten her courtesies and undone the collar of her shirt. She promptly did it back up again, and put back on her hat.

The Lord Admiral pulled the drawstrings tight; then she smiled. “We should play again soon.”

Fitz immediately rose from her seat. “Of course, ma’am. It would be my pleasure.”

“Tell the middy to bring me some tea on your way out, won’t you?”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat, then headed for the door; she was actually a bit startled at how dark it was through the large stern windows. Ithedis nodded to her as she ducked out.
Fitz’s days slowly filled up again. The Lord Admiral started requesting her presence at meetings - at first only one a day. By the end of the second month, however, Fitz was sitting in on discussions about every conceivable topic; navigational buoys and trade routes, grain subsidies and water rights. Clyburn looked like he would explode with pride every time he delivered a new invitation to the purser’s cabin; her borrowed red uniform somehow became even more immaculate. Glittering officers began treating her presence as a matter of course. Several times, the Lord Admiral had to rush away for some other duty and Fitz was left to entertain one of these luminaries alone.

As if to make up for those times, the Lord Admiral also began inviting her more frequently to dinner; Fitz listened carefully to the other guests, but mostly looked forward to the food. Afterwards, the Lord Admiral would politely request she stay; the chart, tokens, and whiskey would come out. With each new wargame scenario, another wrinkle would be added - Fitz started being a bit careful about the alcohol so as to keep a clear head. The Lord Admiral was a methodical, merciless teacher.

About five months into the voyage, during a boring meeting about building a new lighthouse in Drustvar, Fitz happened to glance out of the stern window. The blue sea curled inwards all around them, fickle and ceaseless and eternal.

“Begging your pardon ma’am,” she said confidently. “But we will make junction today.”

“Thank you, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral calmly.

Fitz turned back to the group of officers; the Inspector of Lighthouses was sputtering and slowly turning red. Belatedly, Fitz realised she had interrupted his report. His two assistants were looking startled.

“Go up on deck and report back any signals, if you please,” the Lord Admiral said. “You are dismissed.”

“Aye Aye, ma’am.”

Fitz touched the brim of her hat, and walked swiftly from the room; she couldn’t keep the energy from her steps. Despite the perils of her impending Court Martial, it was at least an end to five months of waiting and reluctant idleness. The walk to the hatchway seemed to take no time at all.

Once the quarterdeck, she swiftly secured the services of the watch-keeper’s eyeglass; she then trained it carefully on the scouting frigate.

No new flags fluttered.

Fitz lowered the glass in confusion and disappointment; almost involuntarily, she looked again. Then she paced the windward rails restlessly. The watch-keeper dropped back to leeward, but Fitz barely noticed - when the bells rung again she took another long searching glance at the frigate.

Just as she was about to drop her glass for the third time, little black bundles went soaring up the scout’s halyard; they broke into dozens of flags, spelling out several separate messages.

The middy began to call out; “Pelican to Flag. Boralus Fleet in sight. Northern Squadron in sight. Supply ships in sight.”

A burst of energy and enthusiasm raced across every deck; sailors in the rigging began singing cheerfully. The signals meant the rest of the Navy had already assembled together, and was waiting for them at the rendezvous; the Combined Fleet could deploy against the Trolls without delay. Fitz passed the eyeglass back to the officer of the deck with quiet thanks; she walked with quick steps back down below.
A quick knock on the inner door, and the messages were delivered. The Lord Admiral took the news with equanimity, although the Inspector scowled again; afterwards Fitz was at a bit of a loss for what to do. She returned to the main deck again.

The combined fleets were a fine sight; they marched in columns across the blue ocean, skeletal masts clawing up against the horizon. Fitz watched them for a long time.

The sky darkened before they came together.

Although the sailors were eager to make junction anyway, the Lord Admiral ordered the two fleets to stand clear of one another during the night. On the *Tiragarde*, sailors raced up the backstays and hauled in the weathered sails; similar figures crawled through the rigging of every single other ship in sight. The executive signal fluttered commandingly, then came down; a hundred sleek hulls turned into the wind on nothing but momentum and ttrysails, precise as clockwork. Another signal, and drogues were dropped carefully into the water - then the running lights were set.

Fitz privately agreed with this decision; there was no need to risk collision by attempting to merge the mass of ships during the darkness. This knowledge didn’t help her nerves - nor did furiously pacing up and down the main deck. In the end she stripped her peacoat and scrambled up the backstays, right to the very top of the mainmast. Her shoulder-ward throbbed dully, but Fitz ignored it; deafened by the sound of the great streaming pennant of the Lord Admiral, unable to see anything, she clung to the swaying topyard and brooded. When she returned to the deck, exhausted, it was well past time to sleep.

The ocean of her dreams was gentle.

The next morning, Clyburn woke Fitz early. Breakfast steamed on the little pursuer's table, but Fitz wasn’t hungry; instead she picked up her hairbrush, wrangling the wispy bits around her ears. Behind her, Clyburn moved steadily about the little cabin, carefully laying out each piece of Jess’s uniform.

Fitz said nothing as she dressed herself, fingers fumbling over the golden stays and ties. Clyburn judged her efforts with the solemnity of a judge; finally, after tugging a few pieces straight, he nodded his satisfaction. Fitz dropped a hand into her pocket - her fingers curled around unexpected shapes. There was a carefully carved token in the shape of a deer; there was also a tattered piece of paper. She carefully let them bide.

Preparations complete, Fitz sat down at the table to wait. Her face was impassive. Clyburn remained with her in silence. Bells tolled out steadily up above, and the sounds of the morning watch slowly grew louder as the ship awoke. The creaking of the ship’s hull also intensified; wind must be filling the sails. Fitz could feel the shifting sounds that told her the ship had come about.

When the knock came, Fitz had been lulled into a kind of doze - she started. A single bell struck out above her, and the forenoon watch began to hustle through the underdeck. The knock came again.

Clyburn stood, and opened the door with haughty dignity. Outside stood Lieutenant Porter - he was dressed in an immaculate formal Kul Tiran uniform, white facings bright and clean, with a sword buckled to his waist.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he said. “But this letter has arrived for you. I am charged with seeing it into your hand.”

Fitz nodded jerkily; she stood up from her seat. Clyburn snatched the envelope up before she could reach for it; he delivered to her with graven dignity. The tar paper was heavy and slick in her hands,
and the twine took a short while to unwrap. Inside was a single sheet of parchment.

Fitzwilliamia Williams Fitzwilliams

You are hereby requested and required to attend, at your peril, upon the court martial to be held at nine in the forenoon in the Cabin of LAS Tiragarde. The purpose will be to try you, Commander Fitzwilliamia Williams Fitzwilliams, of the LA’s late sloop Tenacity, for the loss of the said vessel by stranding.

By my hand and authority -

Sarah Katherine Grey, Vice-Admiral

Commander-in-Chief; Boralus Station

Fitz swallowed heavily, composing her face. “When am I expected to appear before the Court, Mr Porter?”

“Immediately, ma’am,” he said. “The board is coming aboard; I have therefore been ordered to escort you to the waiting area with haste. Will you follow me, please?”

Clyburn scurried around the table to brush her jacket one last time, giving Porter a disdainful look; this took some time. Then he stood up straight under the low ceiling, and deliberately knuckled his forehead. Fitz nodded to him; then she donned her hat and strode outside the cabin door.

The marine was waiting there, also resplendent in his full formal uniform. The white clay-piping of his crossbelts shone in the dim half-light of the ‘tweendecks, as did the grim steel of his bayonet. He presented arms smartly, then wheeled to fall in behind the little party.

The ‘tweendecks seemed unusually busy for the forenoon, even for the change-in-watch; sailors crowded into the corridors, whispering and pushing. They fell back when the party appeared, whispers dying away into silence; every sailor knuckled their forehead as she drew abreast.

Fitz struggled to keep her face emotionless. She told herself firmly that she had nothing to worry about from the Court Martial; she had just to tell the truth and accept the verdict. But she also couldn’t quite bring herself to believe it - the loss of Tenacity fell so clearly on her shoulders, the court hadn’t even bothered to summon her officers to share the potential consequences.

“In here, ma’am,” said Porter, directing her into a storage area. This had been turned into a waiting room through the addition of a stool; there was barely enough room among the supplies to turn around. Fitz took off her hat and sat anyway; the hanging canvas that passed for a door was dropped to shield her.

Above her head she could hear the rush of movement and the yelling of orders. A short time later, there came the protracted shrilling of the bosun’s pipes. Then there was the muffled calls of the Marine Sergeant, followed by the crashing of boots coming to attention - the Captains and Commodores and Admirals who would decide her fate were stepping onto the deck. Shortly after, soft voices rose along the corridor; pairs of polished shoes walked past the nook, just visible in the gap under the door-cloth.

The noises of the main deck gradually fell away, replaced by only the familiar creaking and moaning
of the *Tiragarde* at sea. There came the sudden, booming roar of the court martial gun - the board had read itself in. The proceedings would soon begin.

Fitz took a deep breath, holding her face still; she couldn’t help but grip her hat though, turning it over and over in her lap.

“Ma’am?” said Porter, drawing back the hanging cloth. “Please come with me.”

Fitz barely saw him; she stood, stooping under the low deck, and walked blindly towards the aftercabin. The Flag Lieutenant stood to attention as she approached; he touched the brim of his hat, and opened the first door.

“Commander Fitzwilliams?” said a voice from within.

It was Captain Conrad; his face was grave. He was standing stiffly next to the inner door, dressed in a splendid uniform, and a sash with a glittering star crossed his jacket. The only oddity was that he held his sword in his hands.

“Commander,” he said. “The Lord Admiral has asked that I act as your friend in this court martial. Would that be acceptable to you?”

It took a second for Fitz to realise that Conrad was offering to conduct her defence. She cleared her throat. “I would be honoured.”

“The honour is mine,” Conrad said. “Before we go inside, a small matter. I know that you lost all your possessions on the *Tenacity*, including your sword. Would you accept this one?” He proffered the gleaming blade, hilt first.

With nerveless fingers, Fitz took it. “Thank you.”

“They are waiting for us,” Conrad said, but waved Fitz away from the door. Fitz blinked, then attempted to buckle on his blade. It took her a couple of tries to loop the belt correctly - nothing seemed to sit securely on the Thelassan uniform - but Fitz didn’t overly mind. The sword would come off soon enough, anyway.

Finally, she nodded. Conrad waved his hand, and the marine sentry knocked firmly. Fitz walked forward into the cabin. Immediately, she almost tripped on the unfamiliar sword - she staggered a little bit, managing to catch herself on the carpet. Next to her was a wooden chair. The roof wasn’t high enough to draw herself up straight, but she did her best anyway; her hand went to the brim of her hat in automatic courtesy.

Porter marched in behind her, his blade drawn.

Inside the cabin, two of the great stern-chase guns had been shoved up against the walls to create more room. The desk had been pushed together with the tables, and behind them sat four people, ordered by strict seniority. Out of the corner of Fitz’s eye, she could see two more figures standing motionless against the wall.

The door closed behind her.

Admiral Grey sat in the middle of the row of officers. Her face was expressionless; the ribbon in her hair was jet-black. Her eyes blazed. “Report.”

Fitz forced her voice to firmness. "Fitzwilliamia Fitzwilliams, formerly Commander of the Lord Admiral’s Sloop of War *Tenacity*.”
"Your sword, please," said Commodore Forster; she was sitting to the Admiral’s right. Her face was also expressionless. Fitz felt a hot flood of shame that her former captain would see her in this position.

Fitz made a motion towards her belt, but Captain Conrad cleared his throat and stepped forward. He unhooked the sword from Fitz’s waist, and walked it forward to the table; there he laid it sideways along the desk. It would remain there throughout the trial, a symbol of the judgement on her life and honour.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” said Forster. “In accordance with the procedures of the Admiralty of Kul Tiras, you are charged with the unnecessary hazard and loss of the sloop Tenacity, in contravention of your sworn duties. Do you understand the charges as they are placed?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“Good. Be seated.”

There was silence in the cabin; the officers all opened folders and turned pages. Fitz knew Smith; she had last seen him at her Lieutenant's exam, and wasn’t overly pleased at seeing him now. But the identity of the other captain was a mystery.

Fitz shot a darting, furtive glance at the two bystanders - standing against the wall was the Lord Admiral and Ithedis. Both looked carved from stone.

Out the stern-windows, Fitz could see the long rollers of the open sea.

From up above came the footsteps and muffled calls of the watch-standers - the ship groaned and creaked as it came about onto a new tack. One of the sunbeams falling through the stern window crawled across the cabin floor, climbing up her body to lance straight into Fitz’s eyes.

Smith picked up a piece of paper. “The facts as they are placed to this court are as follows: that Tenacity was ordered to proceed to Boralus Station. That the Kul Tiran fleet under Lord Admiral Proudmoore was brought to battle and Tenacity involved itself. That the screening squadron under the Quel’Thalan Commodore Sagewood took Tenacity under command. That Tenacity collided with a kraken in the course of this battle, and sank with the loss of none of the ship’s company.”

Lady Grey leaned back in her seat. “Incorrect.”

Smith blinked. “Apologies, Admiral?”

“One member of the ship’s company was killed,” Grey said; her face was iron, and she drummed her fingers on the desk. “Fitzwilliams was dead for over an hour.”

Smith looked confused - his eyes flicked to the Lord Admiral, who nodded slightly.

Smith made a puzzled face, but slowly took up a pen and crossed out something on the piece of paper before him; he scratched in a new note. “Tenacity sank with one member of the ship’s company killed,” he amended.

There was an awkward pause.

The captain leaned forward abruptly. “There is a lengthy list of charges for disobeying lawful instructions,” he said. “But shall we start with the obvious? Why were you in the vicinity of the battle with the kraken, Commander? Your orders returned you to Boralus.”
Fitz mind worked feverishly. There just didn’t seem any good way of telling the court she had diverted to follow a magic albatross.

“I had reason to believe that the fleet was in danger, sir,” she said finally. “It was necessary to warn them.”

He curled his lip. “And why, with no land or sail in sight, did you believe that the fleet was in danger?”

Fitz again paused; Conrad shifted uneasily next to her.

“Commander, do you have a Tidesage?” asked Forster. Her face and voice were stern, but her eyes held a hint of sympathy.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fitz. “Brother Gull.”

Conrad cleared his throat; his broad chest expanded, and he nodded. “You spotted an enemy fleet on your travel south. Did the Tidesage act unusually?”

“Yes, sir. He indicated that the Zandalari squadron was a danger to Kul Tiras, and I promised him Tenacity would deliver that warning to the Great Fleet.”

“And how did you find the fleet?” said Forster.

Fitz winced. “The ocean told me, ma’am.”

Both Smith and the stranger captain looked incredulous.

“Surely we cannot accept this.” The captain made a dismissive gesture, rocking back on his chair.

Forster, however, merely took a note on a piece of foolscap in front of her. “Lady Stormsong can be asked to confirm,” she said thoughtfully. “Until then, the word of one of the Lord Admiral’s officers is legally considered good.”

The three of them looked at the president of the Court.

Admiral Grey’s facial expression did not change - although her fingers did twitch. She nodded, just once, but her eyes burned like coals.

The captain’s mouth worked furiously, but he said nothing.

“As for returning to Boralus,” continued Conrad, sounding faintly pleased. “Who was the intended recipient of the information you were gathering, Commander?”

“The Lord Admiral, sir,” said Fitz. “My reports were placed into a gig for her before the Tenacity engaged the kraken.”

“Thus ensuring the completion of your mission,” said Conrad, with satisfaction. “Thank you.”

Grey leveled a look like thunder at Conrad; he seemed immune. Fitz prevented herself from flinching only with effort.

As the senior officers wrote their notes in silence, Fitz shifted slowly; the wooden chair was desperately uncomfortable, especially as the swell was deepening. The only pleasant part was that every time the ship pitched up, she could catch a glimpse of the blue ocean. Her heart lifted slightly at every sighting of it.
“On the matter of disobedience to Commodore Sagewood instructions, let us call the first witness,” said Smith, finally. “Mr Jonathan Sprocket, lately the First Lieutenant aboard Tenacity. Master-at-arms - please escort Mr Sprocket inside.”

The marine brought his musket to the salute smartly, then about-turned; he marched out of Fitz’s line of sight. There was the click of the door, voices, and footsteps. Then Sprocket appeared next to Fitz, short enough to not bother with stooping. Instead he stood straight and proud before his assembled seniors, briefly touching the brim of his hat.

“Mr Sprocket,” said Smith, nodding courteously. “Please detail the events leading to the destruction of the Tenacity.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Sprocket; he looked relaxed, hands loosely clasped behind his back. “We ran north to warn the screen of the danger, and informed Commodore Sagewood of the threat from the flagship. In turn, the Commodore ordered us to take station to windward; she then specifically excluded us from action against the Trollish squadron. It was clear she wished for us to engage the kraken.”

Smith, who was writing notes, nodded absently at this; Forster’s expression remained even.

Admiral Grey looked at Sprocket flatly. After a moment, she picked up her glass of water and took a sip.

“But what about the signal book from the Fires Rush Across the Grasslands?” said the captain, testily. “It indicates that Tenacity was queried twice about its intentions before the crew was evacuated into the water.”

“I don’t remember any such signals being logged, sir,” said Sprocket coolly. “Perhaps the wind was blowing them away from us.”

Admiral Grey placed her water carefully back on the table; she looked to be deliberately unclenching her jaw.

Smith was squinting, and tracing one finger across the piece of paper in front of him. “The signal book also seems to indicate the Tenacity was ordered to cease its actions. Actually there seems to be a lot of “cease” signals here.”

The Captain shuffled his own files, then he also picked up a piece of paper. “Seven attempts to recall the sloop,” he said with venom. “Goodness me. And here, the signal middy also reports that Tenacity hoisted a reply; ‘cannot comply.’”

Sprocket nodded. “The Tenacity was physically unable to comply when those signals were seen, that is correct,” he said in a faintly condescending tone. “The crew had been evacuated, and the ship was under a full press of sail. Commander Fitzwilliams could hardly be expected to tack the ship by herself.”

The captain positively fumed; his pen strokes were slashing out his notes. Admiral Grey’s eyebrow was twitching - Forster leaned forward casually to slide the glass of water away from her. But Smith was nodding again.

Next to Fitz, Conrad was suppressing a smile.

“Any more questions? No?” said Forster, looking about the table. “Thank you, Mr Sprocket. You are dismissed.”
Sprocket hesitated, but then touched the brim of his hat. He caught Fitz’s eye as he left, but his expression was unreadable.

“I also have a letter here from Commodore Sagewood about the action,” said Smith. “But considering the Commander’s personal circumstances, I will not move to enter it into evidence.”

There were nods of agreement around the cabin.

“Then we have no further questions,” Smith said. “Shall we move to the second set of charges then? The ones relating to reckless endangerment of the ship?”

“Reckless endangerment of the ship, causing death,” corrected Admiral Grey; one hand clenched into a white-knuckled grip around her pen, but her face stayed impassive. “One explicitly prohibited death.”

“Y-yes ma’am,” said Smith, looking at her oddly.

The captain leaned forward again. “Commander, did you not fly the signal ‘kraken controlled from enemy flagship’?”

“Yes, sir,” said Fitz; she drew a deep breath, touching her hat on her lap.

“Then why did you not ram the enemy flagship?” demanded the captain.

“As Mr Sprocket explained,” Conrad interjected smoothly. “Commander Fitzwilliams was ordered not to do so, and she was obedient to instructions.”

The captain glowered heavily; his fist clenched and unclenched where it rested on the table.

“But it says here Commodore Sagewood successfully destroyed the enemy flagship,” said Smith, musingly. He squinted at the papers in his hand. “Fires ignited the Zandalari’s magazine, and it exploded. Surely after that point the Fleet was safe?”

Fitz rocked slightly on her chair.

Smith read a few more laborious paragraphs of the report, looking for something specific. “Captain Conrad, could you tell me if the destruction was before, or after Fitzwilliams struck the kraken?”

“After,” said Conrad. For an instant his face slackened; he was staring into some space only he could see. “When Fitzwilliams launched her attack, the monster was still a clear and present danger to Kul Tiras. She saved us all. For that, you need only ask anyone currently sailing with the Great Fleet.”

Smith leaned back.

The captain leaned forward, however, a spark of something in his eye. “But if the flagship was destroyed, even if it was after Fitzwilliams struck the kraken, then Tenacity’s loss was still a pointless exercise.”

“Commander Fitzwilliam’s perspective is what matters here,” said Conrad, bitingly. “Commodore Sagewood’s victory was not certain - indeed it was highly improbable. Under the circumstances, Fitzwilliam’s actions were appropriate. It is not even clear now which officer actually drove away the beast.”

“And the sole casualty amongst the ship’s company?” said Forster, almost casually. “Was her death preventable?”

“One impossible to answer,” said Conrad briskly.

“Please bring in Ms Jackson,” said Forster to the Master-at-Arms. “She might be able to shed some light on that topic.”

The marine saluted again, and marched to the door. Fitz took a furtive glance behind her as Jackson shuffled inside; broad shoulders stooped under the low cabin ceiling, and she stopped well back from the assembled officers. She held her hat in her hands, turning it over and over.

Smith looked at her with interest. “Ms Jackson, you were the bosun aboard Tenacity, were you not?”

“Yessir,” Jackson mumbled; her eyes darted around the room.

“What orders did Commander Fitzwilliams give to explain the evacuation of the ship?”

“Abandon the hunt sir,” Jackson muttered; she shifted her weight from foot to foot. “And not die.”

Grey, leaned forward slowly. “The commander ordered you to cease your duties, specifically in order for you to not die? And so you removed yourself from danger in accordance with those instructions?”

“Yes’am,” said Jackson miserably.

“Your conduct is exemplary, Ms Jackson,” said Grey. “You are an example to us all.”

Forster gave Grey a reproachful look. The Admiral ignored this. Her fingers drummed the desk again. “A final thought. Could anyone else have sailed the ship in replacement of Fitzwilliams?”

Jackson stared at Grey in incomprehension. Conrad and Smith blinked, and even the hostile captain looked puzzled. Fitz struggled to understand the point as well; she had been the animating will of Tenacity. If anyone had to go down with the ship, it was properly its captain.

“Dunno, ma’am,” said Jackson at last. “No?”

Grey slowly leaned back, her eyes flashing. “I have no further questions.”

“Thank you, Ms Jackson; you are dismissed,” said Forster. Jackson knuckled her forehead again and fled from the room, fleet as the wind.

“Ahem,” said Smith. “Now we will move on to the final charge - the most serious one. You are charged with failing to do your utmost duty in the face of the enemy.”

Fitz knew a moment of cold temper; her hands fisted where they rested on her pants. The other charges only questioned her judgement. This charge questioned her honour.

Conrad’s eyes also narrowed. “As has been pointed out several times in this inquiry, Fitzwilliams died in the course of Tenacity’s loss. This charge would seem ridiculous.”

“It does not matter that she died,” said the captain, with satisfaction. “Only that she might have done more in service to her duty.”

“Arguably Fitzwilliams saved the entire Kul Tiran fleet,” said Conrad icily. “Surely that suffices.”

The captain smiled. “And possibly Fitzwilliams did nothing at all but wreck her ship for no purpose.
That is what we will have to decide.”

“I want to call a witness,” said Conrad flatly.

The captain waved dismissively. “That is your right.”

Conrad stood, and touched the brim of his hat towards the figures standing against the wall of the cabin. “Then I call the Lord Admiral, if she will consent.”

Fitz stilled. The board members all jerked, except for Forster; she smiled faintly, and continued to make notes.

Admiral Grey paused, then stood, stooping deeply under the low ceiling; she swept her tricorn hat from the table, and placed it over her heart. “Will you consent, my lady?”

The Lord Admiral looked considering. Ithedis brooded.


“This is most irregular,” spluttered the unnamed captain. “You can’t just ask the Lord Admiral to rule one way or the other in the middle of a Court Martial. It challenges the authority of the proceedings!”

The Lord Admiral looked amused. “Does it? How interesting. And from where does the court’s authority derive, Captain Buckland?”

The captain melted under her gaze.

Fitz struggled to keep the horror from her expression. She had been watching the hostile captain throughout the proceedings, wondering why he seemed so familiar; now she knew. The middle Buckland son strongly favoured his father.

“Ask your questions,” said the Lord Admiral again.

Conrad dropped his hand from the brim of his hat, and tucked it behind his back. “In your estimation, my Lady, did Fitzwilliams behave in accordance with her duty?”

The Lord Admiral looked around the cabin; Fitz managed to hold herself still when that gaze landed on her. It was like being flayed down to the bone, heavy and raw.

“Fitzwilliams behaved in a manner befitting the Commander of a sloop,” said the Lord Admiral at last. “It was an act of daring seamanship, which saved a large part of the Great Fleet.”

“No further questions,” said Conrad triumphantly.

The captain - Buckland - muttered something inaudible, but held still. Fitz felt like a warship had been lifted off her chest.

“It seems like we are finished here,” said Forster. “Thank you for your condescension, Lady Proudmoore. We will now adjourn; Master-at-Arms, please send a runner to the Lady Stormsong.”

The Lord Admiral inclined her head.

Smith cleared his throat. “Lieutenant Porter, please escort Commander Fitzwilliams back to the waiting area. If the Lord Admiral would also honour us by stepping outside?”
Everyone rose and touched the brims of their hats. The Lord Admiral departed first. Ithedis trailing along behind her - then it was Fitz’s turn to acknowledge the court, and walk outside.

Conrad clapped her on the back as the door swung shut; he gave her a bracing smile. “You did well.”

“Thank you, Captain, for your presence,” Fitz said. “I am in your debt.”

“Nonsense,” said Conrad. “No officer should be punished for doing as you did. The Lord Admiral’s magics were almost spent, and your intervention was decisive.”

“Ma’am?” said Porter. “I have been charged with escorting you to the waiting area. Would you come with me?”

Fitz nodded, and followed obediently; the marine marched along behind, his booted feet thumping loudly. Fitz reentered the little nook, and took her place among the sacks of ship’s biscuits; then the hanging cloth dropped back down.

Out of the sight of prying eyes, Fitz didn’t have to pretend anymore. She pressed her knuckles into her teeth, drawing in deep, silent breaths. Stress and fear mingled freely; her mind was clear and sharp, as if in battle - but there was nothing to be done but wait. The Thelassan uniform felt too hot and tight; the nook was stuffy. She involuntarily tugged at its high collar.

The loneliness was almost unbearable. She would have traded every copper piece of prize-money she’d won, or sunk Tenacity all over again, for just one second of Jess’s presence.

The bells rung out above her head; after an eternity of waiting in the darkness, they rang out again. Fitz gradually calmed, mostly from exhaustion; her stomach growled with hunger.

Finally, footsteps approached and the cloth twitched back. “The court is summoning you back, ma’am,” said Porter, motioning into the hallway.

Fitz wordlessly stepped back out into the corridor again, adjusting her cuffs. She knew her face must be pale; the red peacoat of Quel’Thalas would only emphasise that. But she firmed her stride and schooled her expression to impassivity; she even managed to touch the brim of her hat as Conrad opened the outer door for her.

The marine sentry inside snapped to attention as she approached, and knocked firmly on the door. Fitz walked inside, as straight as the low ceiling would allow, and stopped in the very centre of the carpet. The senior officers, in their fine blues and golds, sat waiting for her. The Lord Admiral was absent.

Fitz pulled her hat off and placed it over her heart - then she glanced down at the table.

In a little cleared space in front of Admiral Grey, the sword had been spun around. The glittering hilt was towards her - she had been exonerated. Fitz swallowed heavily, barely managing to control her shudder of relief.

“Commander Fitzwilliams,” said Admiral Grey, with an unreadable expression. “The Court has unanimously agreed; you are acquitted.”

Captain Buckland cleared his throat, looking like he had bitten into a lemon. “You are most honourably acquitted. The charges will not be brought again.”
Commodore Forster stood up and took the sword from the table. “Might I have the honour, Commander?”

Fitz stood shock still as Forster stepped around the table to buckle the blade back on; the Elvish belt loops posed no trouble. Fitz wanted desperately to say something to her, but didn’t entirely know what.

“I am proud of you,” Forster muttered. “You are everything I had hoped.” Then she straightened and stepped back, eyeing Fitz critically. “You will do,” she said aloud.

“Congratulations again,” said Grey, flatly. “And now if the court would disperse - I would like to speak to Commander Fitzwilliams alone.”

Smith and Buckland rose immediately, talking in low voices. They both nodded to Fitz as they passed her by; she remained still, and at attention on the carpet. Forster, however, didn’t move; instead she looked at Grey with a faintly chiding cast to her features.

Grey looked unaffected.

Forster paused a second before sighing lightly; she touched the brim of her hat to the Admiral. Then she nodded once more to Fitz, and strode out.

The door clicked shut.

Silence descended on the cabin; Fitz remained at attention. Grey was staring at one of the walls, drumming her fingers on the desk. Fitz waited for several seconds, before slowly moving to put her hat back on.

“Did I tell you to move, Fitzwilliams?” said Admiral Grey, dangerously.

Fitz dropped her hat back over her heart and stiffened.

“No, I didn’t;” continued Grey. “But you did it anyway.” Her head turned, and she skewered Fitz with burning eyes.

Fitz stood uncomfortably on the carpet. The warmth of the cabin, the thickness of the uniform, and the stress of the moment left her clammy with sweat; holding the hat over her heart for so long was causing her arm to burn.

“You do a lot of things without being told,” said Grey; she did not seem to need to blink. “And other things that you are told, you simply ignore.”

Silence fell over the little cabin again. Fitz surreptitiously tried to ease a cramp in one of her legs, but wasn’t overly successful. Grey had turned back to staring at one of the walls.

“Tell me, Fitzwilliams,” she said. “Do you remember the orders I gave you when you left Boralus?”

Fitz didn’t know if this was a rhetorical question or not; the arm holding her hat trembled. She stayed silent.

“Tides damn your eyes, Fitzwilliams!” exploded Grey, flinging down her pen; it bounced from the desk and rolled onto the floor. Her hand stabbed out to jab at Fitz - “Are you mute? Are you deaf? What orders were you given?”

Fitz flinched, and struggled to remember the exact wording. “Sail to Zan-”
Lady Grey slapped the table; her eyes flashed. “That is not what I ordered, and you know it!”

Fitz felt silent again; it was impossible to stand straighter under the wooden ceiling, but she tried anyway. It was also impossible to make herself smaller, but she tried that too.

“You were ordered to remain alive,” said Grey, coldly. “Entirely alive. You were to disengage from any danger and return to Boralus.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fitz. It seemed sensible to say either that or “aye aye ma’am” for the foreseeable future.

Admiral Grey put her head in her hands; her shoulders bunched up. She looked like a woman restraining herself. When she looked back up, her eyes were furious, but her face was once again calm. “You must learn more quickly, Fitzwilliams - Kul Tiras does not have the time to waste on your pointless heroics.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fitz hesitantly.

“Don’t speak,” snapped Grey. “Not another word from you. It is time for you to listen - listen very carefully, because the ocean won’t bullshit you out of your failures next time.”

Fitz’s back was on fire from stooping under the decking; above her head the noises of the watchstanders had stopped. She realised, uncomfortably, that if she could hear them, then they could probably hear everything inside the cabin.

“Anyone aboard that ship could have sailed Tenacity,” said Grey; her voice lowered to a harsh whisper. “It was wrong of you to do it yourself. It was wasteful, foolish, and self-indulgent. You abandoned your duty, because you couldn't bring yourself to order someone else to die.”

Fitz dropped her eyes to the floor. There was silence.

Grey’s voice was hard. “I would say your political incompetence wrought this situation, except I know better. You would have done it anyway. So mark me well, Fitzwilliams; if you had died permanently, then the consequences would have been catastrophic beyond your comprehension.”

Fitz kept her eyes on the ground; looking up seemed like an unwise move. Furious superior officers had not featured prominently in her life until this point; her ears burned - shame pooled in her belly, along with indignation. The silence stretched out. Finally, almost involuntarily, Fitz took a furtive glance.

Grey’s face was a picture of discontent; she was staring at the wall. Silence stretched out, broken only by the rhythmic rapping of Grey’s gloved fingertips. “Have I made a mistake?” she said at last. “Is this seriously the best the Proudmoores can give me? How far we have fallen.”

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Fitz’s back and arm were now screaming; her leg was still cramping. She could feel the splinters of the roof dig chunks of hair out of her plait.

“Congratulations on your engagement,” said Grey; she did not turn around. “Now, get out.”

Fitz eased her hat back on her head, turning to duck out the inner door. Once in the outer office, she stretched out her back and shook the pins and needles from her arm. Her mind was spinning; the relief and shock and anxiety of the last several hours had her trembling with reaction. She was suddenly ravenous with hunger - not even the smell of the ‘tweendecks could quell it.

“Ma’am?” said Lieutenant Porter. “I have been asked to escort you onto the main deck.”
Fitz could hardly stand the thought. “Who asked you that, Mr Porter?” she said tiredly. “Only I would appreciate returning to my cabin.”

“The Lord Admiral, ma’am,” said Porter; his face twitched in sympathy. “She asks you come without delay.”

“Of course she does,” said Fitz; she smiled mirthlessly. “Lord Admiral’s finest.”

“Before we step out, ma’am,” Porter said. “Admiral Grey asked me to give you this. She instructs that you are to put it on immediately.” He gestured to a coat-rack next to the Flag Lieutenant's desk; on it was a Kul Tiran uniform jacket.

Fitz shrugged, and began struggling with the red peacoat; finally, she gave up. “Could you send for my steward, please? I will require his assistance.”

As it happened, no one needed to send for Clyburn - he appeared through the outer door almost the instant his name was called. He must have been waiting outside, just in case.

“It’s quite big, ma’am,” said Clyburn, after he had scurried over to the coat-rack. He held up the Kul Tiran jacket. “Might be a bit of cloth to fold away somehow.

Fitz peered at it suspiciously; the fabric was rich and dark, and smelled like vanilla.

Clyburn neatly whipped the Lord Admiral’s epaulette off Jess’s coat; then he threw the new jacket around Fitz’s shoulders. There was so much extra fabric she felt like a girl playing in her mother’s clothes. Dutifully however, she twisted up the cuffs and turned down the collars. Doing up the buttons gave her special satisfaction.

Porter stood impatiently. “If you please ma’am?” he said, walking across to the door. “Are you ready to depart?”

Fitz took one quick pause to regroup; then with a few deep breaths, she settled her face into stern lines, and reset her shoulders.

She nodded. Porter pushed open the door. Fitz stepped through first.

The marine sentry standing next to it came to attention with a great crash. Fitz touched the brim of her hat to him, and began striding for the main hatchway. This was easier than it should have been; the ‘tweendecks was oddly quiet. Clyburn and Porter scuttled along behind her, but apart from them there wasn’t another soul below. Fitz couldn’t help but frown in puzzlement; normally the sounds of hundreds of crew would be echoing all around, and people shoving past one another between the narrow bulkheads.

Porter paused at the bottom of the ladder, and removed his hat, holding it over his heart. “Your servant, ma’am.”

Fitz eyed him in irritation; she wasn’t entirely certain what was going on, and his strange formality wasn’t helping matters. The bright sunshine shining down through the hatch promised both answers and air that wasn’t stale. Fitz straightened, and began to climb.

Someone began cheering as she reached the top of the ladder - actually, hundreds of voices were cheering. The Tiragarde’s deck heaved with people - all of them were roaring their approval and waving their arms, making a deafening racket. Fitz ducked out from under the hatch, and looked about her in confusion; over the water, the nearest ship was the Resilient; hands packed its yards, masts, and rails. Beyond it was Conqueror, Savage, and Warspite - figures crowded those rails as
Well, tiny with distance - but the sounds of their cheering also came faintly over the water.

Fitz looked around with consternation; there was no clear path towards the quarterdeck. Slowly, she took off her hat - the assembled crews of the Great Fleet cheered harder. Fitz swallowed heavily; it took every effort to keep her face still.

“The Lord Admiral’s after you, ma’am!” yelled Porter through the din; he had come up the ladder after her, and now stood at her shoulder. “We need to press forward!”

Fitz nodded, and took an experimental step; the crowd parted around her. She took another step - the crew surged forward, engulfing her like a wave. They were clapping her on the shoulder, shaking her hand, crowding in and pushing her onward. The cheering was full-throated and deep chested; it took a long time to wade through the wellwishers. Finally the little party made the quarterdeck; Fitz pressed on up the ladder and into the clear space.

The entire company of officers was standing on the leeward rail; they saluted her respectfully. Ithedis brooded nearby; he too inclined his head. Lady Stormsong was standing over by the helm. She waved with one hand - the other was curled around the wheel; she was running slender fingers over the spokes.

Fitz touched the brim of her hat to all of them. Then she walked respectfully to windward; the Lord Admiral stood there next to the forward rail. Fitz bowed deeply to her, mindful of the audience.

The Lord Admiral nodded back; she was looking out over the baying crowd, straight and tall, an unreadable expression on her face.

“Your servant, ma’am,” said Fitz. “You asked for me?”

“I did,” said the Lord Admiral; regret flashed across her face. “The moment must be seized. I am so sorry Fitz.”

Then she swept off her heavy greatcoat, and draped it around Fitz’s shoulders.

The crew exploded. The violence of their approval was like a physical force punching across the quarterdeck. Fitz jerked - she didn’t understand what was happening. The coat was heavy, too broad in the shoulders, and too warm under the bright sunlight; the golden embroidery on it gleamed like the sun. Up in the rigging, hands were shaking every one of the sails; the ones below were flinging cables and caps and other debris into the air. Warrants all over the deck were struggling and yelling, trying to restore order.

“I don’t understand,” said Fitz quietly.

The world seemed tilted and clawing - it was like she was drowning again. The Lord Admiral was looking at her mutely. At the signal locker, the middy was tearing through her code-book; in an instant, she sent a huge number of flags fluttering from the top of the halyard. Fitz watched them go up, but didn’t think she recognised any of them.

Fitz thought she should do something - so took off her hat once more, holding it over her heart. The cheering didn’t die down in the slightest; indeed it redoubled.

The Lord Admiral was watching her. Fitz cleared her throat; she had to shout to be heard. “I don’t understand what this means, ma’am.”

“It means I have done you a grave injury,” said the Lord Admiral, stepping closer. “And we must speak of it at once.”
“Of course, ma’am,” said Fitz, nodding; then she paused to think. “Can I have something to eat first?”

The Lord Admiral gave her a perturbed look. “I think it might be time to take you below, Fitz,” she said slowly. “All this must have been a terrific shock.”

Down below sounded excellent; Fitz placed her hat back on her head, touched the brim one more time to Lady Stormsong, then followed the Lord Admiral into the crowd. The cheering hands fell back around them, and a ripple of silence spread out, like ink in a drop of water. Everyone was knuckling their foreheads, grinning. Fitz stuck to the Lord Admiral’s wake, and was able to duck into the aft hatchway without serious impediment.

How they made it back into the cabin of the Tiragarde was a bit of a mystery. Fitz felt like she blinked, then suddenly was sitting in an armchair, a cup of tea being pressed into her hands. A tray of sandwiches was proffered; Fitz picked one up and stared at the filling uncomprehendingly. The sleeve of the greatcoat gaped open, falling down her arm slightly; the gold filigree twinkled. Fitz stared at that uncomprehendingly also.

“Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral. “Are you alright?”

Fitz turned her head. The Lord Admiral was kneeling beside the armchair, looking at her with concern. Fitz thought with some dismay that this picture wasn’t right; the Lord Admiral should be standing somewhere commandingly, or maybe striding about looking stern and confident.

“I don’t think so, ma’am,” said Fitz, bewildered. She took a sip of her tea - her other hand still held the sandwich.

The Lord Admiral’s voice was soft. “If you want, I can make this whole situation go away. You need only say the word. The greatcoat doesn’t have to mean anything. Just tell me what you want.”

Fitz put down her cup of tea on the coffee table, and looked around. The cabin was empty; not even Ithedis was there. The sky outside the window was darkening into evening. A thoughtful bite of the sandwich proved it to be blackberry jam.

Fitz hunched over; she put the sandwich down on top of the teacup, and used the free hand to grip the chair’s armrest. “What does it all mean?”

The Lord Admiral leaned back, rubbing her eyes. Her voice was low. “It means that you are my choice to be the next Lord Admiral of Kul Tiras.”

Fitz sat shock still, frozen for an instant in time. She desperately needed another sip of tea. “Lord Admiral of Kul Tiras.”

“Yes,” said the Lord Admiral. “It would involve adopting you.”

“I see,” said Fitz, clearing her throat. “A-adoption.”

“And a few other things.” The Lord Admiral shifted with a grimace; the floor couldn’t have been comfortable. “It is a little complicated.”

Fitz nodded jerkily. Her mind was beginning to churn; she took another bite of her sandwich - it really was delicious.

“There are actually elections for Lord Admiral,” said the Lord Admiral. She leaned forward and searched Fitz’s face. “One vote is cast from each of the great houses, and the Lord Admiral needs to
secure unanimous approval.”

“I see,” said Fitz.

“They could elect anyone, but they don’t,” said the Lord Admiral. “The great houses are jealous of the balance of power - they need a Proudmoore to maintain it.” She smiled weakly. “You, happily, have already secured all necessary votes.”

Fitz looked at her blankly. “W-when did I do that?” The greatcoat sleeve caught on the arm of the chair, and she almost dropped her teacup.

“During your adventures,” said the Lord Admiral; she reached forward and unhooked Fitz gently. “The Lady Stormsong is one; I am another. Lord Ashvane is the third. You haven’t met him yet, but he tells me you are acquaintances somehow with his son - he likes the idea of our two houses burying their resentments.”

Outside the window, dusk was rapidly falling. Fitz watched as the ocean slipped out of sight. “And the Lord or Lady of House Waycrest?”

“You actually know her fairly well,” said the Lord Admiral. “Sarah Grey.”

“Oh,” said Fitz. She frowned at her hands.

The Lord Admiral leaned her hand on the armchair, rocking forward; she was close, but careful not to actually touch. “The Greys have always been the sticking point. They have only approved of one other potential candidate in the last hundred years, and he died in an accident.”

Fitz finished her sandwich in quick, sharp bites. Shadows crept across her left shoulder; snaking across her mind’s eye - black whirls that twisted like vines.

The Lord Admiral made an abortive motion; her hand flinched back from where it had been about to rest on Fitz’s shoulder. “I know this is a shock, Fitz, but you need to concentrate.”

“I am sorry,” said Fitz. “I do understand every word you’re saying, but I haven’t eaten anything since this morning.”

The Lord Admiral looked desperately unhappy, but nodded. She nudged the tray of sandwiches closer to Fitz’s seat. A small pendant had worked its way out from under her shirt, but she didn’t seem to notice.

The original snack had actually had done a world of good. Fitz wasn’t slipping rudderless through the water anymore; instead she felt like she had a thousand questions boiling all at once. “Why would you vote for me?”

“Personality. Competence. A strong connection to Quel’Thalas,” said the Lord Admiral. “And the support of the Navy.”

Fitz paused. “I presume the ties to Quel’Thalas are through Jess?”

“And through the various Princes,” said the Lord Admiral. “Giramar has agreed to work with you. Galadin has too much diplomatic talent to keep him in the Navy - Sylvanas wants to assign him over to your civilian staff. And Kael’Thas seems to find you amusing at parties.”

Fitz hunched over slightly, and hid her face in her hands. The greatcoat restricted her every movement. “I don’t know how to run a country.”
The Lord Admiral was clambering back to her feet, looking torn; she took a while to answer. “No one does, for the first while. It is overwhelming, and difficult, and often thankless. But the transition would be slow - several years at least - and everyone around you would help you. Your… unusual nautical condition… would also be an asset.”

Fitz nodded again, not taking her face out of her hands. Silence fell over the cabin. When she glanced up, she saw the Lord Admiral was looking at her, stooped awkwardly under the low decking - her eyes had an almost anxious look about them.

“Will you accept?” said the Lord Admiral.

Fitz looked up, and stared into her cup of tea; the brown liquid didn’t really hold any answers. “This is madness,” she said. “I was being court-martialed two hours ago. It all seems like madness. Does Jess know?”

“She does,” said the Lord Admiral. “Jess is your fiercest partisan. She was the one who convinced Giramar that it had to be you.”

Fitz stood abruptly, and walked to the window. Outside was the dark ocean; around her was the sway of the deck, the footsteps from above, the sound of the hull straining in the wind. She took a deep breath. “You said that the transition would be slow?”

“Yes,” said Lord Admiral. “Several years, if I can give them to you.”

Fitz stared into the waters. “And you would help me find the right people to man the ship?”

“Of course,” said Lord Admiral. “Honestly, many are already yours.”

“Alright,” said Fitz slowly. “Then I will take my turn at the tillar. But only until someone else can be found.”

For a moment, the Lord Admiral said nothing in reply. Then she surprised Fitz with an exhalation of quiet, relieved laughter. Her smile was gentle. “Thank you. You set my mind at ease.”

Fitz turned from the window. “When will the paperwork be drawn up?”

“As soon as possible,” said the Lord Admiral, falling into an armchair; she looked a bit giddy. She even reached for a sandwich. “Possibly tomorrow; I will detach a sloop as a packet boat as soon as it is signed.”

Fitz made to touch the brim of her hat, but the Lord Admiral held out a hand to stop the gesture.

“Don’t do that to me anymore,” the Lord Admiral said.

Slowly Fitz lowered her hand. She tried to smile at the absurdity of the situation, but the muscles of her face felt stiff. Instead she nodded. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral's answering smile appeared wholly sympathetic. “You should get some rest.”

Fitz opened her mouth to speak, but instead simply nodded again. Then she turned and strode out.

The dimness of the ‘tweendecks was claustrophobic, but the last thing Fitz wanted was to go back up on deck; the normal sounds and smells of the ship had resumed, but a sense of strangeness still lay about the ship.

Without anywhere else to go, Fitz walked back to the purser’s cabin; she opened the door,
desperately hoping for privacy, and indeed the space was empty.

The door swung shut.

Fitz stopped. She looked around; four bare walls surrounded her. Her hammock was neatly rolled up, and her sea-chest packed - the oil lamp was set to low on the table, and shadows played across every timber. There was nothing to do;

She shrugged out of the Lord Admiral’s greatcoat, staring at it blankly; she pushed it under the table so she didn’t have to look at it. Then she unbuckled her belt. The Kul Tiran jacket came off last; this was carefully hung on the back of the chair. One dose of furious Vice-Admiral was quite enough for one career.

The high Elvish collar of Jess’s dress shirt felt like it was strangling her; she tugged it loose. Then she fiddled with the oil-lamp until it blazed, throwing light everywhere. The table was covered with little scars and marks; Fitz stared at them.

She had need to be alone with desperation, but now that was the last thing she wanted; the loneliness and confusion were overwhelming.

On the table was a sheaf of paper, a cheap pen, and ink.

Slumping into the chair was the work of a moment; she seized the pen, scrawling down the letter’s preliminaries. Then she paused - she re-read the words, frowning at them uneasily. Then she dragged over a fresh sheet of paper. Somehow everything seemed much more real once it had been written down, and also far less believable. Fitz didn’t know what to do. She carefully placed the pen back down, and pushed away the paper. The hammock looked inviting; Fitz got up and started trying to get it rigged properly. But it had been a long time since she had slung one herself; she cursed the stays and ties which bound it together. Eventually it was mostly up, such as she wouldn’t endanger herself by using it - she fell into it without even taking off her shoes.

When sleep claimed her moments later, she fell into the ocean’s depths with relief - the dark waters were the only thing in her life that still made any sense. They closed around her consciousness and dragged her under, before tossing her far away.

Fitz normally dreamed gentle dreams; this time it was like being some great, boundless being - Fitz swam through the depths, dark and powerful, full of menace. Occasionally Fitz would snap a smaller creature in half; sometimes she flung herself up, to hang suspended between the air and the ocean’s skin. Reality began to fragment. Black ships, red sky, dense heat. Danger. Hooks. The ward on her shoulder blazed to life, searing skin and bone-

- a touch on her other shoulder sent Fitz tumbling out of bed; the shock of hitting the floor crashed her awake.

“Ma’am!” said Clyburn, rushing to help.

“It’s alright, Clyburn.” Fitz scrambled to her feet, face alive with intent. “What’s the matter? Are we under attack?”

“N-no ma’am,” said Clyburn, looking at her oddly. “It’s four bells in the morning watch, and I’ve brought you breakfast.”

“Oh,” said Fitz, clearing her throat. “Of course.”

“Boiled pork, ma’am,” he said, slightly anxiously. “From one of the barrels over the back - I soaked
the brine out of it myself, just how you like it.”

“Because it’s better than anyone else’s,” said Fitz stoutly.

Clyburn looked gratified. “Just you tuck into this, ma’am, and I’ll get your formal’s ready. The Lord Admiral sent word that you are to report to her at your earliest convenience.”

He held out a fork; Fitz took it gratefully. Clyburn bustled around her as she finished the pork and gnawed absently on a biscuit; it continued to resist her teeth as she threw on a fresh shirt and tucked her arms into Jess’s resplendent peacoat; a quick check confirmed the letter and token were still inside. The Kul Tiran jacket she put aside to be returned.

“Ma’am?” said Clyburn; he was reverently holding the Lord Admiral’s greatcoat.

Fitz considered it with some dissatisfaction. “This is a very heavy greatcoat, Clyburn.”

“Yes it is ma’am,” said Clyburn happily. “Made from only the finest of Stormsong goat-hair.”

“The Elves make their sea-going clothes from layers of felt and wool,” Fitz said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Clyburn nodded sagely. “Thin blood, they have.”

Fitz paused. “And I’m going to have to wear this greatcoat all the time now.”

“Indeed, ma’am,” said Clyburn, smiling proudly. “Only what you deserve, begging your pardon.”

“Thank you Clyburn,” said Fitz, resigning herself. “I had best put it on then.”

Clyburn shook slightly with excitement as he arranged the greatcoat about her shoulders, and hung the green sash about her waist - the blue clashed horribly with the red of Quel’Thallas, but that couldn’t be helped.

To Fitz’s deep relief, the Tiragarde had gone back to normal social mores - sailors perhaps knuckled their foreheads to her a bit more vigorously than before, and made way a touch faster - but the ‘tweendecks teemed with regular work. The ship was a demanding mistress, and her routines couldn’t be disrupted for long - even by the announcement of a new heir.

There was once again the great line of people waiting for their turn in the Admiral’s sea cabin; many of them were wearing sashes and glittering accoutrements. Nervous faces abounded.

Fitz walked past them all, straight into the outer cabin.

The Lieutenant inside the outer office leapt to his feet. “My lady,” he said, touching the brim of his hat.

Fitz involuntarily glanced behind her - then casually turned the movement into a courteous nod.

“Good morning, Lieutenant Horner. Is the Lord Admiral free?”

“Please do go in, my lady,” he said, rushing around his desk. Fitz held up a hand, and he fell back respectfully.

Fitz deliberately checked her hat, then she adjusted her gleaming sword. Finally, a gloved hand was run over her immaculate hair. Everything was in order - barring that every single one of her clothes was several sizes too large. Fitz shook the pesky sleeve on the greatcoat back down her arm, then knocked firmly on the door.
“Come!”

Fitz pushed open the door and came to attention on the thick carpet.

“Fitzwilliams, Commander,” she said.

The Lord Admiral was standing next to a dozen people; she glanced up and immediately smiled, waving her forward. “Fitz - good to see you. I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of drafting most of the paperwork.”

Fitz walked towards the stacks of documents - and the assorted officers who stared at her avidly. Her wrist was already aching in anticipation.

“Everything is settled,” the Lord Admiral continued. “The witnesses are here to countersign. The arrangement itself is completely standard, but I suggest you have a read over it all. Here is the paperwork for your inheritance - this sheet is the document appointing you a colonel of marines - and here is a deed-poll changing your last name.”

Fitz stared at her. A part of her bulked at the idea of surrendering Fitzwilliams; it was a name with heavy burdens attached to it - generations of family, place, and traditions of service. It was woven into the very fabric of her identity. But another part of her realised that the name Proudmoore was no different - and that names had their own power.

She sat down at the desk and reached for a pen.

Her signature on the first document was firm and bold; she passed it on to the Lord Admiral, who scrawled down her own. The witnessing officers crowded around the end of the desk with pens, marking their names carefully in the little witness box, before sanding the ink.

It was done in less than a half-hour.

“Congratulations, Commander Proudmoore,” said one of the officers.

Fitz felt the weight of the name settle around her shoulders. “Thank you.”

“It is imperative these documents return to Boralus at once,” said the Lord Admiral, to one of the officers. “Commander Kerry of Activity has been on stand-by since last night; have her depart as soon as possible.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said the officer, touching the brim of her hat.

“Wait,” said Fitz.

The officers turned to stare at her, startled expressions on their faces.

“Please,” Fitz said belatedly. “You must allow me to write a letter to my mother and siblings. This news should come from me.”

The Lord Admiral grimaced. “You are quite right, Fitz. I apologise. Please take all the time you need for this matter - Activity will hold until you are done.” She gathered up the other officers, and walked them out the door; Fitz was left alone, apart from Ithedis.

Fitz found composing the letter a struggle - the pile of crumpled, rejected efforts grew larger. It was necessary to ease her mother into the idea of Fitz’s change in station, but it was also important to lay the complete truth out without sparing anything. The newspapers would publish the full story soon
enough; it was important to seize the narrative.

“Ser Sagewood,” Fitz said thoughtfully. “Should I tell my mother that I am engaged before, or after I mention the court-martial?”

He did not answer.

Fitz nodded. “You are right - good news first.”

She bent back down to write again - but not before she saw Ithedis smile, ever so slightly. The next section was the battle itself; Fitz jotted down a description of the kraken’s thrashing tentacles, and wondered if she should include a packet of smelling salts.

At five bells, the final page of her missive was signed - Fitz accidentally smudged the unfamiliar loops in the name ‘Proudmoore’, but she didn’t hesitate in writing it. She carefully sealed the letter with wax.

Ithedis detached himself from the wall to follow her as she walked towards the outer office; he slid through the door first. The Lord Admiral was holding court at the Flag Lieutenant’s desk - glittering officers were entering and exiting.

Fitz cleared her throat. “Thank you ma’am, for giving me the time.”

“Not at all, Commander Proudmoore,” said the Lord Admiral, walking towards her. “Are you ready to resume your duties? The heir of Kul Tiras has many.”

“Ready and willing, ma’am,” said Fitz promptly. “What do these duties entail?”

The Lord Admiral smiled at her. “You would have to tell me, Fitz. You’re the one who has been doing them for the last five months - I haven’t performed them in centuries.” She turned and gestured for Fitz to follow her. “Shall we adjourn to the quarterdeck?”

Fitz followed behind, one respectful half-step behind. Sailors pressed themselves against the bulkhead, knuckling their foreheads as they walked past - the Lord Admiral absently nodded her thanks. Fitz caught a flash of Jackson, silent and watching in the darkness - but just as fast as she had appeared she melted back into the shadows.

“I hope you’ll join me for dinner,” the Lord Admiral said. “It will be small - maybe just with Alex and Sarah. But I want to lay out a defence of Boralus.”

Fitz nodded. “I would be delighted.”

They emerged, both blinking in the strong sunshine. Around them the mighty ships of the line sailed; the sea-spray foamed over their heavy bows. Weathered sails billowed and flared; tiny figures moved about the rigging. The sea heaved, and the wind gusts whipped away the tops of the waves; Fitz could taste tomorrow’s gale, and anticipated it like a fine wine. In the distance, the frigates and sloops coursed, prowling for any enemy foolish enough to come close. Lady Stormsong’s ship was to the lee of the columns - dozens of blue-cowled figures stood motionless about the deck.

Fitz’s heart soared; she clasped her hands behind her back, and strode the weatherward rail towards the quarterdeck. The deck’s endless motion; the tang of salt and sodden wool; and above them all, the Lord Admiral’s pennant streamed out its warning to any fool who would challenge Kul Tiras. Fitz felt like laughing. The Tidesages were right - this was a blessing. What could be sweeter than roving the ocean forever?
The Lord Admiral began pacing the rail; Fitz joined her. The afternoon watch was peaceful - it was widely understood by those seeking audiences that the Admiral was not to be disturbed during her walks.

“How long have you been a Commander, Fitz?” the Lord Admiral said, staring out at the closest of the columns.

“Thirty-seven months actual, ma’am,” said Fitz.

The Lord Admiral stopped her pacing, turning to stare out to sea. “Long past time to promote you.”

Fitz had spent significant time with the Lord Admiral over the past several months, and she had grown better at spotting tension - there was a slight tightening around the eyes now, and a tightness that lay upon the shoulders.

“It is important to remain at your side and learn, ma’am,” Fitz kept her voice light. “Holding independent command would probably make that difficult.”

The rigidity of the Lord Admiral’s shoulders eased slightly. “That is true. Regardless, the promotion papers were included in the dispatch aboard Activity. We’ll hold the ceremony tomorrow afternoon.”

“Thank you ma’am,” said Fitz. Were she still in command of a lowly sloop, this moment would be one of the proudest in her life.

“You earned this, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral fiercely. “You deserve your frigate. But we do not have the time.”

Fitz nodded. Her heavy greatcoat hid her single epaulette, as it would also hide two. “I understand, ma’am. Permission to go below?”

“Granted,” said the Lord Admiral, holding her gaze.

Fitz quirked her lips into a smile, touched the brim of her hat - collected a scowl in return - then ducked down into the ‘tweedocks.

Dinner was at four bells; Clyburn used the entire length of time to fuss. Fitz had finally put her foot down when he had attempted to add more gold to the high collar of her Thalassian uniform - there was quite enough already, to her mind.

The door of the outer cabin had its usual line of aspirants; inside the first door, the Flag Lieutenant was talking in low voices with a ruddy-faced captain. Fitz didn’t disturb them - instead she knocked quietly on the second.

“Come!”

Fitz pushed inside; the canons had been moved back to their spots and lashed down. The desk had been pushed back - one of the tables was set with cutlery, and a white cloth. Ithedis stood broodingly in his corner. The Lord Admiral stood on the left-hand side, intently carving a lamb leg. Golden potatoes had been arranged around it, and pickled vegetables lay heaped in dishes alongside. “Hello, Fitz,” she said absently. “Sit down and have some of this.”

Commodore Forster sat in the next chair along, neat and spare. “Good to see you again, Miss Fitzwilliams,” she said, smiling lightly.

Admiral Grey sat in the right-hand seat; the only open chair was next to her. She looked up at Fitz
with sharp eyes - there was a flash of bright blue ribbon in her hair, and her uniform glittered under the oil-lamps. “Good evening, captain,” she said, coolly. “I hope you brought back my jacket back - you do go through so many of them.”

“Good evening ma’am,” said Fitz. “I must thank you for the loan - although you are too late. I have already thrown your jacket into the sea.” She sat without hesitation beside Grey, and picked up a random turren. “May I tempt you with peas, ma’am?”

Commodore Forster’s smile deepened; she ducked her head down to hide it.

Grey favoured them with an unimpressed look. “Peas sound everything charming.”

Fitz duly served them some.

The Lord Admiral chose that moment to look up in triumph; the lamb lay in neat slices below her. “Have some of this as well, you three - and try these potatoes. They are the last of the stock I had preserved.”

The first slice of lamb was transformative - the potatoes had been cooked to perfection - even the ship’s biscuit had somehow been rendered edible. Fitz had just picked up her fork when realisation dawned - the Lord Admiral ate like this every night. And she was the next Lord Admiral.

She suppressed a grin, and redoubted her assault on the lamb.

Beside her, Grey polished off her peas - she chewed her last bite, thoughtfully. Then, with a short gesture, she speared a potato from Forster’s plate.

Forster rolled her eyes, but said nothing. Grey ate it with every sign of enjoyment.

The servants brought desserts - meringues, macaroons, custards and fruits. Fitz had no emotional capacity to spare for Grey and her antics; her thoughts in their entirety were consumed by the meal.

When the remains of the food were finally cleared away, Forster took over pouring the whiskey. Grey swirled her tumbler absently as the Lord Admiral unrolled a small battle-chart. Fitz turned up the oil-lamp to see better - Ithedis retreated further into the shadows.

The map of Boralus - the one Fitz had been using to practice wargames on - was now covered with penciled marks and symbols. Forster and Grey leaned over it with intense interest - Fitz impatiently waited her turn.

“The Zandalari are not fools,” said the Lord Admiral, who was leaning back in her seat. “For Kul Tiras to fall, they must take Boralus.”

Grey traced an idle finger along the coastline. “What do you suggest to counter them?” she murmured.

“The Fleet guarding the approaches,” said Forster. “The frigates scout, and screen the sound.”

“That would seem the best option,” said the Lord Admiral.

Grey frowned. “It is the obvious thing to do, and the Trolls with expect it. It also leaves everywhere else exposed - Drustvar especially. Could we screen the Gullet instead?”

The Lord Admiral glanced deliberately at Fitz.

“No ma’am,” said Fitz, shaking her head. “The winds won’t favour us getting to the mouth before
spring. The ocean is colder in the south this year than previous years.”

Forster looked a bit startled.

“How useful,” said Grey, softly.

“But that means the winds will favour Zandalar,” said the Lord Admiral, briskly. “All the more important that the screen is set before the Trolls arrive.” She used her pencil to trace a line across the sound. “Alex, this will be your line.”

Forster slipped a battered journal from her pocket, jotting down coordinates.

“Sarah, you’ll take command of the second column,” said the Lord Admiral. “Are you happy keeping your flag aboard Kingfisher?”

Admiral Grey nodded, but she kept staring at the chart, and her fingers drummed absently. “Are we sure about Boralus?” She finally said. “The Trolls need only gain a foothold on Kul Tiras - they could do that anywhere. And once established they would be difficult to repulse.”

“They want to win,” said the Lord Admiral. “This war has dragged out for six years - even we are feeling the strain of it. If they are to defeat Kul Tiras, they must take Boralus.”

Admiral Grey nodded again, and leaned back; her face was set. “You are right,” she said. “With your permission, I will begin drilling the Fleet for shallow-water engagements immediately - the Zandalari will have to be pinned against the shore.”

Fitz looked with interest over the little board; Forster had been deployed almost evenly across the two lines of approach - she would have to appoint a subcommander. The Lord Admiral turned the chart so she could see better.

“How would you defend the Sound, Fitzwilliams?” said Grey, looking relaxed. “Would you defend the entrances heavily? Or keep a mobile force in reserve?”

The Lord Admiral smiled. “Now here is a good opportunity. Fitz has been playing me at wargames for the last five months - but you have a different style again, Sarah. Would you consent to let my heir sharpen her wits on you?” Casually, she tossed Fitz the bag of blue tokens.

“I am always happy to contribute to a young officer's education,” said Grey, putting aside her whiskey. She picked up the red pieces, and began deliberately deploying her forces.

Fitz kept her face impassive, she took another long glance at the chart, before rapidly placing out the Kul Tiran pieces.

There was a big difference between playing the Lord Admiral and playing Sarah Grey. The Lord Admiral was a teacher at heart - every game had a core lesson, and no game was so lopsided that Fitz became discouraged by her progress. Grey, however, was clearly of the mind that suffering built character. The Zandalari pieces were moved deliberately, suffocatingly - their advance was methodical and crushing.

Fitz began to sweat; she arranged some blue tokens in reserve. Then she placed the pieces representing the screening squadron to windward.

“Ah,” said Grey, tapping the chart with her finger. She flicked two red pieces over, revealing their value. “Unfortunately, you have found the Golden Fleet. And now, I believe, you have a decision to make.” Her eyes narrowed. The Lord Admiral and Forster, who had been chatting quietly by
themselves, drifted back over to look.

Grey had forced a dilemma; Fitz’s hand hovered over the leeward token, which represented the flagship. If she pushed it forward, then the twenty other tokens would be free to withdraw in safety. Conversely, if she pulled the flagship back, then that squadron would be utterly destroyed.

The choice was not really a choice - Grey hadn’t engineered it to be. But Fitz couldn’t help but grimace as the flagship was moved to safety, and the red tokens overwhelmed the screen.

“Very good, Fitz,” murmured Grey, neatly removing the offending pieces. “I see you can learn.” The red forces were pressed forward down the sound.

Fitz waited until Grey turned the sandtimer, before pushing forward some of the reserve tokens - then she flipped them over. Surrounding the Golden Fleet was the main body of the Kul Tiran navy.

Forster smiled.

“Very good indeed,” said Grey with satisfaction. “Although using your flagship as bait goes against the spirit of the lesson, I think.”

“War is risk, ma’am,” said Fitz.

“Indeed.” Grey looked almost cheerful; she jotted down some calculations on the notepad next to her, and nodded. “By my count, you will still tactically lose, but it would be a strategic calamity for the Zandalari; it is better for me to withdraw. Congratulations - you have forced stalemate.” She dragged the red tokens back down the sound and out of danger.

Fitz leaned back.

The Lord Admiral smiled, and started picking up whiskey glasses, putting them back on the sidetable.

“Time for bed, I think,” said Forster, getting up. “Thank you, Jaina, for the wonderful meal - and you Fitz, for the pleasure of your company.”

Grey smiled; she too climbed slowly out of her chair, bent almost double under the ceiling. “A most entertaining evening,” she said, putting on her hat. “I do hope we will repeat it.”

The Lord Admiral inclined her head graciously.

“Wait,” said Fitz.

The others looked at her in confusion, but Fitz paid them hardly any attention; some nameless anxiety was riding her. She stood and walked to the stern windows, staring out of them. “Someone is coming,” she said.

There was a moment of silence as the others digested this.

“Is it the Zandalari?” said the Lord Admiral. Ithedis adjusted his grip on his polearm and looked grim.

Fitz shook her head. “No, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral relaxed slightly. “Admiral Grey, Commodore Forster - my compliments to you both, and you are to join us on the quarterdeck, please.”
The ‘tweeddecks were full of swaying hammocks - it was late. Up on the deck, the crescent moon provided only a sliver of light across the waters. Fitz walked unerringly from the ladder towards the port quarter, staring out into the night. Grey strode up to stand at her elbow - Forster took her other side.

There was nothing but darkness - not even the lee columns could be seen. Grey glanced at her oddly, but Fitz paid it no mind. Around them the night crew huddled in their woolens, ducked down out of the wind.

Fitz peered out, saw nothing, then turned. “Ser Sagewood - can you see anything?”

“Yes,” he said. “There are two ships.”

Fitz nodded thanks, and turned back to the waters.

Forster stiffened, and leaned forward; Fitz saw it a moment after. It was a light - actually, two sets of lights - which resolved slowly into ship’s running lights. The four officers were silent as these sailed slowly closer.

Finally, an urgently flashing lamp stabbed out, identifying the first ship as the LAS Bolster, one of the fleet’s windward scouting frigates. The other ship also flashed out some signals - these made no sense.

The Lord Admiral stepped across the dimness of the deck, stopping at Fitz’s shoulder.

“Do you know who it is?” asked the Lord Admiral.

Fitz frowned. “No, ma’am.”

There were figures rushing across the deck of the second ship - they were carrying swaying lanterns, running to and fro in mad abandon. Suddenly, one of the figures started climbing the mast, still clutching the lantern - it reached the top and swung out over the yard. Reaching the end, it frantically waved the light in front of the signal halyard. The streaming flags were just discernible.

Fitz frowned. “She’s Thalassian, ma’am; look at the triangle-shape to her mizzen.”

“Midshipman of the watch!” called the Lord Admiral. “Get the Quel’Thalan code book please!”

A sailor dashed across the deck of the Tiragarde to fetch his warrant. Within two minutes a panting middy rushed up, holding a leather notebook. He pulled closer his own storm lantern, peering up from the pages of the book to the flags flying from the Elvish ship.

“Number 38, Frost Climbs the Northern Tree, ma’am. She’s signalling…” He paused, then swung up his eyeglass again for a second look. He swallowed.

“Out with it, man,” snapped Grey.

The middy looked up, and shadows played across his face. “Quel’Thalas to Kul Tiras: Silvermoon in peril.”

Chapter End Notes
Especial thanks to asterCrash, who was kind enough to read this before posting.

Especial, *special* thanks to QuickYoke, for being the light of my life, and also for reading this chapter as well (about sixty thousand times).
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

In which the author is determined to finish - even if that means this chapter is stupidly long.

QuickYoke - who hung the moon and stars - she drew Fitz. What author could ever hope to be so lucky as this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Lord Admiral looked at the Midshipmen. There was an eternal instant of silence.

Then she whirled away, the flags which spelled out danger still flapping behind her. “My compliments to you,” she said, striding towards the quarterdeck. “Make the night signal for ‘Fleet is to tack south-east,’ effective immediately. Lieutenant of the watch! Send below for Captain Conrad. Commodore Forster, Admiral Grey - remain on Tiragarde for the time being, if you please.”

The Lord Admiral’s face was bleached white as she passed under one of the rigged storm lanterns; the crows-feet around her eyes seemed deeper. Ithedis, faithfully shadowing her in his red lacquer-armour, looked as though he were washed with blood.

Fitz remained impassive only with effort; she stood silently at the port quarter. Beside her Forster was frowning, and Grey was staring after the Lord Admiral with a concerned expression.

Sailors were leaping up in response to the sudden flurry of orders. Some were swinging up the backstays in preparation for the Fleet’s evolutions - still others were hurrying below to feed the ship’s stock of scuttlebutt.

“What’s the breeze going to do, Fitz?” asked Forster quietly.

Fitz turned outwards. The dark ocean murmured against the side of the ship, and the winds played over the side of her face. “It will hold fair for the south, ma’am - we’ll be running before a gale.”

Grey leaned closer and dropped her voice. “Then the Lord Admiral has a decision to make. She could send the lighter units ahead, and hope to disrupt a landing - but breaking up the forces risks each part being defeated in detail. Or she could hold the fleet together and potentially not make it in time to save Silvermoon.”

Forster frowned, placing a gloved hand on the ship’s rail. “It might not be so desperate; Silvermoon has powerful defences, as well as the Ranger-General. Surely the garrison can hold out for a few weeks?”

“They could have,” said Grey. “Perhaps four hundred years ago, the Elves could have. But today Silvermoon has barely any garrison at all. After all, why would it need a militia, when the only possible invasion path lies over the sea?” She smiled mirthlessly. “The Quel’Thalan armies mainly deploy south, along the border with the Amani Trolls there - even a forced march would take
months.”

Jackson hurried up out of the gloom; she knuckled her forehead to them all. “Lord Admiral’s compliments, ma’ams,” she said nervously. “But she wants the Commodore to transport the Elvish captain over.”

“Right - I’d best be off then,” said Forster; she casually touched the brim of her hat to Grey before turning. “Ms Jackson, call away my gig, if you please.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Jackson.

“Come on, Fitz,” said Grey, looking towards the quarterdeck. “We’d best attend the Lord Admiral.” She strode off without waiting to see if she would be followed.

Fitz trailed after her, deep in thought. In the rigging above, the sailors hauled around the sails; there were the cries of dozens of people, as well as the creaking of blocks and ropes. A shouted order came from the bosun - then the mighty ship juddered, and the deck heeled over. There was the stippling groaning of timbers as the yards took up the strain.

Someone had pulled out more storm lanterns, and the quarterdeck blazed with light - groups of half-dressed officers, faces still muzzy with sleep, were huddling on the leeward rail. The Lord Admiral was glaring fiercely out to starboard, her hands clasped behind her back.

Admiral Grey stopped short of disturbing her. Instead she took up a station at the mid-deck, flanked by Ithedis and the helmsman; she flicked her eyes to Fitz, and jerked her head to starboard.

Fitz walked forward obediently. When she reached the Lord Admiral, however, there seemed nothing to say - she stood at the rail in silence.

To port somewhere, far off in the distance and lost to the night, was the coast of Sunstrider Isle.

The Lord Admiral lifted her head slightly, still staring out into the ocean. “I will take the frigates and sloops to Silvermoon. You will follow with the main body.”

“That isn’t a good idea, ma’am,” said Fitz.

The Lord Admiral turned. Her expression was cold, and her voice dangerously soft. “Excuse me?”

Fitz braced to attention; involuntarily, one hand dropped into the pocket of her jacket. “I am worried too, ma’am,” she said hastily. “We have been outmaneuvered, and the Trolls have the initiative. But every action the Zandalari have taken in this war has targeted you specifically, and it doesn’t seem like a good idea to give them what they want.”

“You gravely overestimate your influence, Fitzwilliams,” whispered the Lord Admiral; her eyes blazed. “You are my creature, and I can break you as easily as I have made you.”

“I am indeed your servant, ma’am,” said Fitz. “I submit to your will - but this is a trap. It was set for you and baited with your wife.”

The Lord Admiral’s lip curled. “And what would you suggest I do then, Captain Proudmoore? With your centuries of experience, and deep strategic knowledge? Tell me your wisdom.”

Fitz ignored her racing heart. “Trust the Ranger-General, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral’s eyes blazed, but she said nothing.
Fitz held her face impassive, but kept her hand in her pocket to hide its trembling. “The Zandalari cannot know we managed to combine our ships so quickly, or that we are so far north. Keep the Fleet together. If we all sail with you, then it doesn’t matter if the trap springs shut - the Navy will punch out its teeth.”

The Lord Admiral’s eyes were cycling through a variety of emotions, but her expression could have been carved from stone. “Hm.”

Fitz took a deep breath - opened her mouth to speak - then lapsed back into silence again.

The Lord Admiral looked at her for another long second, then turned back to the rail. The only sound was the ocean licking the sides of the ship.

“The screening squadron near Silvermoon is the one commanded by Commodore Sagewood,” said the Lord Admiral, finally.

“That had occurred to me, ma’am,” said Fitz. Her hand, tucked into her jacket pocket, closed gently around paper. “I can’t say it doesn’t bother me. But we all must do our duty.”

“So we must,” said the Lord Admiral, grasping the rail. “Duty rides us all. It is endless.” Her shoulders slumped for just an instant, before she straightened again.

Fitz kept her face impassive, but stepped closer, tall and steady.

The Lord Admiral didn’t seem to notice - instead she brooded for an instant more, and then shoved away from the rail. “Lady Grey!”

“Ma’am?” said Grey, walking across the deck and touching the brim of her hat.

The Lord Admiral didn’t turn. “Where is the Thalassian captain?”

“I believe Commodore Forster is bringing them aboard now, ma’am,” said Grey, also stepping closer. “Do you have further orders for the fleet?”

“None,” said the Lord Admiral shortly, staring out into the distance; her face was inscrutable. “We will all stay together.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Grey - a hint of relief played about her eyes.

The Lord Admiral finally turned; her eyes raked over the quarterdeck. “When the elf makes it aboard the Tiragarde, have Forster bring them to the after-cabin.”

“Aye aye, ma’am” said Grey again.

“Come on, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral grimly. “You are needed.” Then she turned and stalked her way below.

The Quel’Thalan captain, when she was led into the after cabin, turned out to be a grizzled merchantman; her clothes were rumpled, and blood had dried in splotches across them - the source seemed to be her nose, which had been flattened and improperly reset. She was eased gently into one of the armchairs, and blankets placed around her shoulders. Quel’Thalan-style tea was produced, and she sipped it gratefully.

Fitz had also gamely taken a cup, but one taste was enough; now it sat, steaming gently, on the coffee table. There were no more armchairs - as the most junior, Fitz was relegated to leaning against
the desk, one hand on an exposed deck beam to steady herself. The promised gale was blowing up, and the ship was beginning to pitch.

The Lord Admiral paced one side of the cabin, near the oil-lamp; every stride threw dancing shadows across every corner of the room. The freshening weather appeared to affect her not at all.

“*The Trolls appeared three weeks ago,*” said the Elf. Her broken nose ran a little, and she sopped it with her sleeve. “*The first sign of trouble was sloops sailing up the river near Sunsail. They fired the anchorage - the garrison wasn’t powerful enough to stop them. Once the Trolls occupied the rover crossings, they were able to cut the city off completely.*” One of the servants delivered her a bottle of seasickness potion; she downed it in one long pull.

“*But they are not attacking the city from the south?*” said Grey.

“No, Honourable Ocean-Ranger Lieutenant-General,” said the Elf. “*They landed their troops amphibiously instead, on the western beach.*”

“That bay is shallow,” said the Lord Admiral, continuing to pace. “*The walls of the city are lowest there. But the channel between Sunstrider and the main island is tidal - anything larger than a frigate would be lost. How did they even cross the sandbar?*”

“Barges,” said the Elf, simply. “*Big and flat, filled with soldiers and siege engines. They didn’t draw enough water to get stuck. The main body of the Golden Fleet couldn’t come near through; they are screening the invasion from seaward.*”

Fitz took a deep breath. “*And the fate of the Quel’Thalan Inshore Squadron?*”

“*Two sloops were lost, but the rest escaped south,*” said the captain. “*I lost sight of their masts on the third day.*”

Fitz sighed, quietly.

The Lord Admiral changed course and jerked open the door to the cabin. “Cut orders for a fast sloop to detach and find that squadron,” she said to the Lieutenant outside.

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said, touching the brim of his hat.

The Lord Admiral pulled the door closed again.

“And how did you personally escape, captain?” Grey said to the Elf, her eyes sharp. “*Surely there were a great number of skirmishing vessels.*”

The Quel’Thalan looked exhausted. “*I’m not sure,*” she said. “*I should have been sunk a dozen times - the Zandalari were everywhere. It seemed at one point like every time I turned south, another would appear.*”

Fitz’s eyes narrowed as well. “*But not when you turned north?*”

“Well…no.” The Elf suddenly looked thoughtful. “*I guess you’re right. There just weren’t any enemies to the north.*”

“She was herded here,” said Grey flatly.

Forster looked impatient. “*Could someone explain what is going on in common, please?*”

“It means Fitz was right,” said the Lord Admiral; her mouth pulled back into a snarl. “*The captain
was let go deliberately, in the hope she would find us. The Trolls are trying to goad me into attacking them.”

Forster nodded. “I see. Thank you.”

“Thank you, captain,” said the Lord Admiral. “You have been most helpful - and we know it is night-time, when you are not your best. It is no exaggeration to say this intelligence might save Quel’Thalas - in the meantime, please allow me to call for the surgeon to reset your nose.”

“Thank you, most excellent Grand Ocean-Lord Admiral,” said the Elf. “Death to your enemies.”

Servants ushered the captain out, still draped in the blanket and clutching the teacup. Above their heads, three bells rang out.

The Lord Admiral waited until the door swung closed again; she had stopped pacing, and now brooded out the stern window. “Get me maps.”

Forster rose and fetched them; they were unrolled onto the table. Ithedis moved from his corner to a place slightly closer. Fitz shifted the oil-lamp, and turned up its brightness.

The Lord Admiral walked over once these preparations were complete, and leaned over the table. She traced the mouth of the western bay with her finger, dragging it in a crescent shape. “I have sailed these waters often,” she said. “They are treacherous - the bar is unstable. Once you cross the entrance, however-” she slid her finger to the filigree representing the walls of Silvermoon. “-the waters are still.”

Forster pushed back from the table - she strode to the door and opened it. “Get the tide timetables for the western shores of Quel’Thalas - smartly now.”

There was the muffled acknowledgements of the Flag Lieutenant before the door was closed; Forster walked back again.

Grey frowned. “The Tidetables? Surely the wind will be blowing too strongly to attempt a bar crossing? It will be deep in winter.”

“I have sailed those waters also,” said Fitz, hesitantly. “Winter is when the swells from the Great Sea will be at their most intense; a crossing would seem unwise.”

“Mm,” said Forster.

“That is a topic for another time,” said the Lord Admiral. “We’ve done all we can for one evening. Return to your ships, and we will convene again tomorrow to commence preparations.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Grey.

Forster removed her hat, and placed it over her heart. Then she resettled it, and strode from the office. Grey followed her out.

Fitz was just making her own way to the door when the Lord Admiral cleared her throat, and half-held up a hand to stop her. Fitz halted awkwardly, stooped under the low deck.

“I need to apologise,” said the Lord Admiral. “You were right, and my fear is no excuse for my behaviour to you.”

Fitz felt the heat of embarrassment climbing her cheeks - she reflexively made to touch the brim of
her hat, but managed to catch herself just in time. “Nothing to apologise for, ma’am,” she mumbled. “I am your servant.”

There was silence for a little while.

“No, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral slowly. “You are not.”

Fitz opened her mouth to speak, then struggled to stifle a yawn.

The Lord Admiral looked at her, then smiled, turning away to hide her echoing yawn. “Off to bed with you,” she said, once she had recovered. “Tomorrow is another day.”

Fitz returned the smile, waved to Ithedis, and withdrew.

The purser’s cabin - which the purser had been quite unable to use for the previous five months - could be especially cold at night. Fitz opened the door, already stripping off her cravat - and found Clyburn asleep, slumped across the table. A cold cup of tea lay waiting on a tray. He had also rigged Fitz’s hammock - its slightly odd shape spoke to a hot brick waiting to warm her chilled feet.

Fitz looked at these efforts in fond exasperation, before shaking him gently awake.

“Wezzat?” he said blurrily - then he shot to his feet.

“That can’t be comfortable,” Fitz said, puzzled, waving for him to stay seated. “Why are you still up? I thought I sent word that I’d be back late?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thought I might wait up anyway,” he said, voice gravelly with sleep.

Fitz paused, then shook her head again. A small smile played across her lips. “Thank you, Clyburn. Have you rigged your own hammock as well?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Clyburn. “Just outside, right where I always am.” He smiled a gap-toothed smile.

“That sounds inviting; I wouldn’t keep it waiting.”

Clyburn snagged the tea tray, still smiling; then he knuckled his forehead and withdrew.

When the door closed, Fitz began to struggle out of her uniform again - the greatcoat was hung, the peacoat flung over a chair, and then she was free to flop into her hammock with a sigh.

For the first time in a long time, if she dreamed of something interesting, then she couldn’t remember it.

The next week was an anxious time. Fitz often stood with the Lord Admiral on the quarterdeck, watching the great ships crashing through the water. The gale continued to blow fair, and the Fleet made good time - but men o’ war were slow. Each day was another twenty-four hours that Silvermoon held out alone.

The Lord Admiral stalked the deck, staring at the Sunstrider shoreline - then she stared endlessly at charts. Finally, on the eighth day, she judged the Fleet close enough to send out the scouting sloops. Three fine ships flew like birds towards the western shore of Quel’Thalas; the Lord Admiral’s eyeglass watched them go until they dropped below the horizon. Dinner that night was especially grim.

When the two survivors returned, they only confirmed what the initial Elvish sloop had reported - the Golden Fleet had assembled at the mouth of the bay, safely off the bar. They shielded the invasion
barges from destruction. The sloops also reported heavy damage to the outer works of Silvermoon, and that a Zandalari banner had flown above the great western ravelin - but that the walls still stood. Tall and proud, they were lined with archers plying their trade.

It had been a month since the first landings, and the Elves still held their city.

Over the week following, the Lord Admiral continued to host dinners, but she seldom laughed - her plate was taken away full. Occasionally, during particular shanties, the Lord Admiral would stir; her quiet soprano would join in softly, almost drowned out by the sound of the rain on the deck above.

The Lord Admiral also continued her walks across the quarterdeck. Her grey hair made a fine sight against her dark blue coat, and she rode the deck easily despite the gale - although occasionally the rainwater would boil away around her in a rush of steam. The officers and crew took this to mean she wished for privacy, and began steering an even wider course to avoid her. Fitz found herself braving the weather and walking next to her just in case it meant she didn’t.

On the fourteenth day, Firedrake hoisted a series of signal-flags. The damp Midshipman squelched up to the quarterdeck to present Commodore Forster’s compliments, and relaying the message that she wished to beg an audience.

The Lord Admiral frowned. The waves were lashing all around, and it was much too rough for a gig to cross between ships - besides, the charging Ships of the Line were travelling much too swiftly to be intercepted by oars, no matter how stoutly pulled.

A few more priority signals, however, and eventually the Lord Admiral reluctantly agreed. The Firedrake maneuvered deftly, drawing up to within pistol-shot of the Tiragarde's deck. A small mortar was dragged up from below, and lashed firmly; with a bang and a puff of smoke it sent a rope hurtling across the gap.

Fitz watched anxiously as the Breeches buoy was strung - the thin ropes looked frail and inadequate next to the might of the ocean. The entire flagship gradually fell silent, until not a soul aboard either ship was making any noise; the spray and foam were worsening as the gale gathered power.

Jackson, who had pushed past the bosun’s mate in charge, now stood half-way up the mainmast; she was gesturing with jerky arm motions. Sailors took up the strain, then steadily begun hauling the rope. Slowly, carefully, a spare figure was pulled between the two main-masts, even as the two ships pitched widely with the sea.

The Lord Admiral watched with narrowed eyes as Forster was hauled safely into the crow’s nest. “Whatever this plan is,” she said. “I am going to hate it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Fitz. She clasped her hands behind her back and surreptitiously tried to shake the droplets of rainwater from her hair.

“Come along, Fitz,” the Lord Admiral called over the strengthening wind. “We’d best keep this short.” She strode down the deck towards midships, one hand steady on the rail. The deck heaved below them.

Ithedis struggled to follow them; his ears were red, and he had abandoned his shield to the ‘tweedens. For the first time, a hint of tiredness stooped his shoulders; Fitz wondered, out of nowhere, how long he too had held to his duty.

Forster swung inboard from the ratlines, drenched to the bone. Instead of asking to go below like a sensible person, she instead touched the brim of her soaked hat, face impassive. “Your servant,
“Tides preserve you, Alex,” said the Lord Admiral; her face melted into angry exasperation. “A line transfer! In this ocean, with this wind, at this time of year?”

“I have a plan,” said Forster, smiling faintly; her jacket was saturated. “It seemed prudent to convince you of it in person.”

“And how is that a good start?” muttered the Lord Admiral. Fitz was almost certain she wasn’t meant to hear it.

The ocean lashed and tossed below them; Jackson was shouting orders above, and the helmsman behind was battling to keep the two ships completely steady.

Forster ignored the drama all around, remaining fixed on the Lord Admiral; she clutched the rail to steady herself as the ship’s motion worsened. “The Trolls expect you to charge down to save Silvermoon with the frigates, ma’am.”

“Yes?” said the Lord Admiral; a particularly violent wave broke across the deck. With a casual hand, she shoved the water away, sending it flying back overboard. “For Tide’s sake Alex; this is madness - you can’t go back over there. Signal your Flag captain to take command of Firedrake, and come below!”

“That is one plan” said Forster, grabbing ahold of the ratlines again. “Alternatively, how about instead I depart immediately to Silvermoon?"

The Lord Admiral braced her stance wider, and rode out a heaving swell. “You want to do what?” She turned blazing eyes on Forster. “You want to go where? No! Permission denied!”

Fitz leaned forward curiously. “Why would you do that, ma’am?” she yelled against the wind; another wave broke over them, pattering across her torso. “What happens after you reach the bay?”

The Lord Admiral gave her an unimpressed glare

“I break through the screen and cross the bar!” Forster said, ignoring the look; her eyes were fierce. “Let them try to follow me; at least one Troll will wreck themselves - I guarantee it. Give me the Lord Admiral’s pennant above Firedrake, and I will deliver you two!”

The Lord Admiral’s face was a picture of consternation. “And what then?” she roared, taking her hand off her hat to gesture emphatically; the hat immediately threatened to fly off in the wind, and she grabbed its brim again. “You’d be trapped in a bay surrounded by Trolls! I won’t let you lose an entire squadron.”

“You follow behind me, ma’am!” said Forster. “Let me spring the trap closed, and drag the Trolls towards the lee shore after me. They don’t know the main fleet is this far north - once they are out of position, fall on them from the sea!”

Fitz wanted to leap up to the quarterdeck and begin pacing - but the Tiragarde in a storm was not the place. She settled for accidentally losing her footing, and staggering against the rail. The hungry ocean clawed below her, reaching up with spray and lashing-

-the Lord Admiral grabbed her shoulder and yanked her back. “Come away from there, Captain Proudmoore - I’m going to need you later.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Fitz gasped.
“As for you,” said the Lord Admiral, glowering at Forster. “What possible reason could you give me to justify the risk everyone will perish?”

Forster smiled, clinging grimly to the rail. “It is simple, ma’am. It would give you the element of surprise - the most valuable spice your seadogs could possibly deliver you.”

A midshipman dragged himself forward and broke into their circle, touching his hat. “Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he yelled. “But the bosun’s mate up in the mast says if the Commodore is going back over to Firedrake, then she’s got to go now.”

The Lord Admiral hung motionless for an eternal moment of deliberation. “I hate this plan, Alex.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” yelled Forster.

The Lord Admiral shook her head; drops of water beaded along her greatcoat. “Leave me eight frigates. And take Lady Stormsong!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” said Forster. She touched the brim of her hat, openly grinning, and swung up the ratlines again.

Fitz watched as Forster made it to the crow’s nest; the sailors on the opposite deck took up the line again. Jackson started making those jerky arm movements, and the block was pulled slowly out over the restless ocean.

The Lord Admiral stood, hands clamped around the rail, watching the procedure. Ithedis was bracing himself against the mainmast.

Fitz was anxious, she kept estimating how long it would take for Forster to be back aboard Firedrake, while keeping a sharp eye on the tossing sea.

At the midpoint of the transfer a wave broke under Tiragarde that passed straight under Firedrake; the masts swept apart, and the transfer line went taunt. There was the resonant twang of ropes parting, and the warning cries from aloft.

Fitz leapt for the rail, already looking for hammocks to drop into the water. The line began to rupture more quickly; thinner cords whipped away from the core, separating more and more from the main braid. Forster struggled to free herself of the harnesses - but she wasn’t quick enough. As the lines parted completely, she dropped, still entangled in the block.

A huge pillar of ice slashed from out of the water, scooping up Forster and tossing her bodily onto her own deck.

Ant-like figures from her crew rushed around her immediately, momentarily hiding the crumpled form from view - when they parted, someone was standing up, braced between them. The figure took off her hat and waved it at the Tiragarde.

Fitz breathed a sigh of relief.

“Tides save me from the boldness of my officers,” said the Lord Admiral, with an irritated expression on her face. “It is a wonder my hair lasted as long as four hundred years before it turned grey.”

Fitz grinned, despite the weather; the Lord Admiral looked more alive that she had in weeks.

“Don’t you start,” groused the Lord Admiral, as they started to make their way back towards the quarterdeck. “This type of thing is going to be your problem soon; the good ones always push it.”
“Looking forward to it, ma’am,” said Fitz, cheerfully.

The Lord Admiral glowered without heat, and kept walking; when they reached the aft entryway, two sailors touched the brims of their rain hats and pulled up the hatch for them.

“Is this your way of telling me you’re volunteering to tell Sarah?” said the Lord Admiral, before turning and heading down the ladder.

The smile fell off Fitz’s face; she cleared her throat, dropping down after the Lord Admiral - above, the hatch swung closed, cutting off the rain.

The Lord Admiral had waited for her, and now walked, stooped, through the corridors towards the great cabin. “Maybe we can just not tell her,” she said thoughtfully. “What are the odds Vice-Admiral Grey will simply not notice thirty ships are missing?”

“They’re not high, ma’am,” said Fitz ruefully, shucking her hat and shaking it free of water.

“You’re probably right.” The Lord Admiral sighed. “Besides which, Sarah is the Vice-Admiral of this Fleet - she probably should be told these things.”

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Fitz; her skin was pebbling from cold, and she was looking forward to her hot brick. They stepped into the brightly lit outer office of the cabin - Ithedis continued on through the other door and into the inner room. The stern of the ship heaved and pitched; both Fitz and the Lord Admiral were forced to use the roof-beams for support.

“Mr Horner,” said the Lord Admiral to the Flag Lieutenant. “My compliments to you. Draft orders to Commodore Forster, if you please - the Northern Squadron is to make all haste to Silvermoon, there to engage the enemy. Authorise her to fly my pennant.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said promptly; the desk had been fastened to the deck, and he had lashed the chair to it so that he could work. “Will you appoint a Commander into Sleuth before it departs?”

The Lord Admiral brightened, and turned to Fitz. “Your former First Lieutenant - how would he go in a brig-sloop?”

Fitz beamed. “Very well indeed, ma’am.”

“Good - it’s settled then.” The Lord Admiral turned back to the Flag. “And advise the Tidesages that the Navy would be grateful if they took their places aboard the ships, posthaste.”

The Flag Lieutenant touched the brim of his hat again, and carefully opened a drawer to pull out a piece of paper.

The Lord Admiral turned back to Fitz, and beckoned her into the inner cabin, “How far are we from the Western Bay?”

“Probably three days,” said Fitz, stumbling inside after her and kicking closed the door. “The Frigates will take two, if they leave now.”

Servants appeared from nowhere, moving around them with difficulty; the furniture had all been lashed away, but hammocks had been rigged to serve as crude chairs. Fitz had her wet weather gear stripped, and her jacket whisked away. A warm towel was proffered - she used this to dry her hair. Finally, a bottle of Elvish potion was produced; Fitz gulped it obediently. Even the Lord Admiral accepted a glass of the vile stuff - the weather really was rough.
“The frigates won’t leave right now, of course,” said the Lord Admiral, slumping in a hammock-chair. “It will take them a few hours to get organised, even with Forster spurring them on. It will probably be tomorrow morning before they are away - the main body of the fleet will be less than a few hours behind them.”

Fitz stood swaying under the deck-beams. “A stroke of luck, ma’am.”

“Either luck, or a very sneaky Commodore. Sit down before you fall down, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral, waving her into the other hammock. “You might as well stay - help me reduce this bottle of whiskey.”

The sea continued to pitch and heave all through that night. Fitz slept in the after cabin, and woke when the winds grew calmer, and the waves less churning. The early light of false-dawn shone through the stern windows. Fitz carefully rose to investigate the disposition of the fleet.

When she gained the quarterdeck, nothing had actually changed. The frigates and sloops still ploughed the waves all around the main columns - night had fallen before the orders could be issued. The sleek shapes of these smaller ships almost strained against being held to the pace of the First Rates.

Fitz watched this scene with interest as the sun properly rose; in the dim light of dawn, figures appeared on Firedrake’s deck, and the ship once again sailed to the side of the Flagship. A bulky, oil-wrapped packet was carefully winched over by cable - this was carried below.

The Firedrake sheared off again.

About fifteen minutes after, there was an eruption of activity. An entire team of people hurried to man the signal halyard of Firedrake - as the sun rose fully, so also did the colourful flags from the ship’s mizzen. The repeating frigates dipped their colours in acknowledgement, and began spreading the messages through the body of the Kul Tiran fleet, like a ripple spreading outwards.

“Ms Midshipman Prowse,” Fitz said, casually. “My compliments to you, and what signals are being flown by Firedrake?”

“Commodore to all subordinate ships; ‘form up to windward of columns’.”

“Thank you, Ms Prowse, carry on.”

Around the fleet, frigates and sloops hoisted their acknowledging signals, and threw their helms over, beating to windward. Fitz watched their speed and fury with envious eyes.

“Boralus to Northern: ‘Explain intentions,’” called Prowse.

Fitz glanced, startled, at the hulking shape of Kingfisher.

Around them, the frigates and sloops - and one skeletal Tidesage vessel - continued to sail out, falling into neat order around Firedrake. Commodore Forster was sending a stream of signals pouring into the air; the other frigates were hoisting a large number in reply - the sky was a forest of flags.

The poor signal middy was quite frantic; every single message needed to be captured, and the sudden frenzy had her jotting madly into her log. Assistants - all junior sailors - were calling out numbers as the flags appeared, helping her keep track. Another sailor was hurrying off - presumably to find a second midshipman to help.

Fitz glanced back over at Kingfisher - the flags fluttering from its mizzen were being lowered. Others
were sent up in their place.

Prowse called across the quarterdeck. “Boralus to Northern: ‘Explain intentions right now - priority.’”

Fitz turned back to Firedrake, which was loping easily across the grey sea. Over its mainmast, the commodore’s broad pennant dipped briefly in salute - but its signal-staff continued to raise nothing but Squadron orders. Finally, one last set of flags rose - ‘depart.’ The little flags flew proudly for five minutes - then they came down in the executive.

Thirty-one ships heeled over at once and ranged away, sending clouds of spray into the air, pulling past the fleet to leap strong and true into the open ocean. A single ship hung back; it would station itself midway between the two fleets, and ensure the frigates didn’t outpace its support.

More figures raced across the deck of Kingfisher - the previous signals came down. A new set went soaring up the mast.

Prowse cleared her throat. “Boralus to Flag: ‘I see you there F-I-T-Z; Tides will not save you; explain now.’” She looked hangdog. “I am sorry ma’am, I don’t understand what a f-i-t-z is, it isn’t in the codebook.”

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She cleared her throat. “Not to worry, Ms Prowse - I think I might know what it is.” She paced up and down a little, thinking rapidly, then turned back to the Midshipman. “Please make ready to hoist a reply, if you please.”

The harried Midshipman looked like this was the worst day of her life; she clutched her pencil, and held up a piece of paper.

“Flag to Boralus:” said Fitz firmly. “‘Northern Squadron gone fishing; Kul Tiras to secure the catch. Lord Admiral to explain.’”

The Midshipman gestured grimly to her assistant. The sailor hurried over to the signal locker, pulling out a whole case of flags. They began composing the letters, and hauling them up the signal-jack.

Around them, the signals soared in repeat up a hundred mizzen-masts. Kingfisher lowered its final signal, and made no more.

Fitz didn’t trust this sudden silence at all. She continued to walk the quarterdeck, a borrowed glass under her arm, eyes searching the horizon for any sign of the sloop sent out to find Jess - but no Quel’Thalan sails appeared. The sea was empty of all but the Great Fleet and its departing frigates.

By the time the sun fell again, the weather had blown itself out - the wind stayed steady, but the seething waters had subsided. The Northern Squadron was still in sight - but only barely; they would slip over the horizon shortly. The connecting frigate had already set its running lights.

Fitz watched the setting sun light up the ocean - the streaks of red and orange in the sky promised the wild weather was over and done. The Lord Admiral had come up on deck in the afternoon. They hadn’t paced, or spoken at all; instead they had simply stood together at the rail, and watched the frigates pull away.

At seven bells, the signal middy of the watch came walking across the deck. “Ma’ams?” he said. “Admiral Grey is signalling.”

A flicker of suspicion flashed through the Lord Admiral’s eyes. “What does she say?”
“Boralus to Flag: I am coming to dinner.”

The Lord Admiral sighed. “That’s fair. Perhaps you might like to eat in your own cabin, Fitz?”

Fitz nodded at this dismissal, and turned back to the waters; already the Kingfisher was moving closer.

Laying two First-rates alongside one-another was a much more delicate affair than with the nimble Firedrake. The latter was a powerful frigate of forty-four guns. The Kingfisher was a huge warship of one-hundred and twenty guns - its masts spread over an acre of sail. Sailors lined the sides to call instructions and watch the rigging. Others stood ready with poles to fend off the other if the ships looked like they were getting too close. Jackson once again took command - Fitz could see her judging the distance between the two yardarms, shouting orders to hands who scurried about in every direction.

Finally, a gig was swung overboard, and a glittering figure climbed down the Kingfisher’s side. Grey stood majestically in the sternsheets as the sailors began to row, helped along by cables being pulled from Tiragarde. Grey’s coat whipping behind her - the gold of her accouterments winked in the fading light.

Fitz watched as the bosun came puffing up onto the deck; a Vice-Admiral coming on board called for extensive ceremony. The bosun judged the gig’s speed, then called for his mates; they formed up in neat lines - except for Jackson, who was still busy maintaining separation. A dozen white-gloved sideboys also appeared, and a whole platoon of marines hurried up in neat ranks. They came to attention, all smart and gleaming in their blue jackets.

“Come on, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral, sighing again. “Into the breach.”

The ladder was unrolled down the side of the Flagship, and a couple of hands stood at the rail, holding it steady. One turned and gave a hurried gesture - then Grey’s hat appeared above the level of the deck. The bosun’s mates began the long-drawn twittering of the pipes; the sideboys saluted, and the Marines presented arms with a thump.

Grey ignored all of these compliments, flashing a quick salute to the quarterdeck before swaggering to the end of the line. “My ladies,” she said to Fitz and the Lord Admiral. “I notice that my entire screen has vanished - and what is this about fishing?” Her face was relaxed.

Behind them, the gig was already being pulled back to the Kingfisher; the lines of saluting men and women marched off neatly to return to their duties.

The Lord Admiral frowned. “Now, Sarah; don’t be alarmed. Everything is fine.”

Grey smiled. “Thirty-five years I have sailed for you, my Lady.” She folded her arms behind her back, and tilted her head, waiting.

“Hm,” said the Lord Admiral, looking uncomfortable. “Well - maybe everything is slightly less than fine. But Forster came up with a plan, which I have approved.”

“I see,” said Grey, thoughtfully. “That sounds extremely unpromising. Shall we discuss it over dinner and your alcohol?”

“Yes,” said the Lord Admiral. “My steward made Quel’Thalan chicken on a bed of rice.”

Grey began to walk aft. “If you’re making me my favourite dish then this must be a very special plan.”
Fitz watched them go, then turned back to take a last glance at the departing frigates - but they had disappeared into the gloaming. In the twilight, the running lights of the connecting frigate was the only clue anything was even out there. Fitz watched it for a long time.

The next day proved that Grey had spent the night onboard; this was beneficial. A large amount of planning was still needed. Fitz was directed to shadow Grey as she translated the Lord Admiral’s plans into specific orders with the ease of long practice. The signal midshipmen of each watch were kept busy - hundreds of messages criss-crossed the fleet.

The frigates were six hours hard sailing in front of the main body - they would engage at dawn of the next morning, an hour before high tide. The connecting frigate would watch from the horizon. When the Zandalari collapsed their screen, that frigate would signal using a bright red flag - then the main body of the fleet would charge down onto the unsuspecting Trolls at full press. Apart from this basic outline, the Lord Admiral was reluctant to give more orders than that.

Grey had no such compunction.

Fitz had never sailed into battle with the main body of a fleet before - indeed, the only fleet action she had ever participated in was as an outrider, during the battle with the Kraken. Now she strode the deck of the Flagship, being personally taught. Grey was a storied Admiral, and Fitz hung off her every word as she patiently explained various orders and preparations. Above Fitz’s head, the mighty sails billowed out, and in their wake followed a line of weathered, powerful warships. To the lee of them crashed four other columns, each with another twenty-five ships of the line.

The day crawled by. Night fell. The hands were dismissed below. Fitz was told in no uncertain terms to follow them down and go to bed.

Normally, sleep was quick to come for Fitz; tonight she stared at the canvas of her hammock with some unease. Clyburn had left her the warm brick, and the seas were gentle - but her belly churned with an unknown dread.

When she closed her eyes, the ocean surged up and seized her. It yanked her down and shoved her into the current. Fitz embraced the depths willingly, spiralling away. Rage trickled into her heart, and slowly pumped through her body with every new beat. The black ships were there, up in the air. Fitz flicked her arms lazily and rolled her eye upward; the pressure so close to the surface was unpleasant. Suddenly, vines twined over her, spreading out from her shoulder, trailing heat. Black ships - then ships golden and warm - then yet more, all salt and weathered timbers.

Fitz came awake with a start, sweating despite the chill. The brick had long-since gone cold; in the darkness, she couldn’t tell what time it was. She sat up, rubbing her left shoulder.

“Ma’am?” asked Clyburn quietly. The pursuer’s cabin was still shrouded in darkness.

“I’m awake, Clyburn.”

“The Lord Admiral’s compliments to you, and she’s requesting your presence up on deck, ma’am. It’s about time for dawn, begging your pardon.”

“Thank you, Clyburn. Will you find my greatcoat for me?”

Fitz pulled on Jess’s uniform mechanically - her limbs felt stiff. The heavy greatcoat was thrown around her shoulders; sometime during the night, Clyburn had polished the heavy gold threading until it glowed. Fitz eyed the shining sword Conrad had gifted her - then left it behind. Instead Clyburn found a heavy cutlass, and secured it in her wide green belt-sash. Finally, she was ready.
The cold chill sank into her bones as she walked up on deck; Grey was already there. A few dim storm-lanterns had been rigged, throwing light across the deck - Fitz watched her breath mist in their glow.

Over to one side stood a Tidesage; his clawed hands wrapped around a heavy staff, and his cowl covered his face - it was possibly Brother Gull. It was just as possibly any other Tidesage in the fleet.

Conrad appeared from the main deck; he strode over to the leeward side of the ship, and his lieutenants gathered around him.

“Won’t be long now,” said Grey thoughtfully. “With your consent Fitz, the Lord Admiral has asked that I remain aboard - she expects to be too busy to guide you through your first Fleet engagement.”

“I would be very pleased,” said Fitz, gratified. “But who will command the second column?”

Grey smiled. “My captain aboard Kingfisher knows what I like.”

They turned back to the rail. The Lord Admiral walked out of the aft hatchway, to the rippling of knuckled foreheads; Grey touched the brim of her hat, and Fitz nodded respectfully. They shuffled sideways, making a space.

The Lord Admiral slotted into it. “How’s the weather?”

“Fair - we will hold the gauge,” said Fitz; she tilted her head, and listened to the ocean whisper loving promises. “The seas are dying back as well; it says the Kul Tiran First-Rates will be able to fire from the lower gundecks without being swamped.”

“Good,” said the Lord Admiral; her face had an indecipherable expression. Grey was also looking at Fitz oddly.

The Lord Admiral turned back to the ocean, and snapped open her spyglass; she lookingsearchingly at the connecting frigate. “No signals yet; the Northern Squadron must be close though.”

Fitz dropped her hand into her pocket; the carved deer token was cold, and Jess’s letter rustled a little as she touched it.

Grey looked like she wanted to pace. Instead she stood still, hands clasped behind her back, head tilted, fine coat fluttering in the wind.

The Lord Admiral tucked her glass back under her arm, and gestured shortly. A servant hurried over, passing out cups of tea.

“The morning before battle,” Grey suddenly said, her hands wrapped around the china. “Nothing quite like it.”

“Hm,” said the Lord Admiral, sipping her tea.

Fitz held her cup, but didn’t drink - she was struggling to contain her own eagerness. The prickles of fear she felt were swamped by the desire to be in action again - and the Lord Admiral’s presence was a tonic against the light taste of uncertainty. It was a heady mixture; exciting and unstable. Her sword felt unnatural hanging at her side, rather than it being naked and in her hand.

The bells rang out. The teacups were collected and carried away. The first rays of sunlight lit the ocean. The Tidesage looked up, and raised his staff in salute of it.
To the port lay Sunstrider Isle; the ocean smashed up against its black cliffs. The heavy tower of Falthrien Academy was out off to stern - the dawn’s light showed the massive Quel'Thalan banner flying above it.

The Western Bay itself was not yet visible - between the bay and the Fleet lay a long, tall point of land, which blocked all sight. On the rocks below the highest point lay a broken Zandalari scouting ship; wreckage floated thickly on the water. The Kul Tiran frigates must have fallen on the picket during the night, and driven it ashore.

Grey fidgeted impatiently as she waited. Her face briefly showed strain. “If I am not very much mistaken, the Ranger is making signals, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral swept her glass up, staring at the connecting frigate. “So she is. Signal Midshipman! Please advise us of the message, if you please.”

The midshipman was frantically flipping through the codebooks, making notes as she went. “Ranger to Flag: Northern Squadron engaged.”

“Excellent,” said the Lord Admiral, impassively.

Admiral Grey looked away for a second, before turning back with a neutral expression. “Indeed.”

The coast of Sunstrider slipped away behind them; the tip of the spit of land grew nearer.

“Ranger to Flag,” said the Midshipman suddenly. “Northern Squadron attempting bar crossing. Zandalari screen in pursuit. There’s the red flag, ma’am.”

The Lord Admiral nodded, her eyes fierce. In the distance, the rolling of unnatural thunder began to echo - the sound of a First-Rate’s broadsides. Grey tugged her sword straight, before stilling. Fitz took her cues from those around her; she clasped her hands behind her back, and projected as much indifference as it was possible to fake.

“Make a general Fleet signal, if you please,” said the Lord Admiral. “‘Tack east.’”

The middy pointed at one of her assistants, and the sailor tied the flags to the halyard; they broke bravely at the mizzen. Around them, a forest of massive ships raised their acknowledgements.

Sunstrider Isle fell behind completely - the great city of the Elves appeared at last. Fitz clapped her glass to her eye immediately, unable to stop herself from looking.

The mighty defences of Silvermoon were a ruin. The outer bastions had fallen, and Zandalari flags rose over their battlements. In the main walls, a breach had been effected; through the gap, everything inside seemed to be on fire. Green-clad rangers surged against the danger, speckled throughout with the red peacoats of the Quel’Thalan Navy; the noise of the armies clashing, the cries of the dying and the wounded, was so terrible and tremendous that it carried faintly across the water.

“Tack the fleet!” called the Lord Admiral. The flag came down - one-hundred twenty ships of the line wore around, following each other in their five neat columns.

Ahead of them, the sea was seething with Zandalari ships. The main body of the Trollish fleet was sailing on a northward tack; massive columns of black ships, each precisely spaced from one another. They rove safely off the bar, blocking any escape. Smoke wreathed them all, billowing out in black clouds - the air crackled with arcane energy.

A Kul Tiran frigate lay dismasted in their wake, drifting and listing, its hull a battered wreckage
The smaller Trollish ships were pelting after the Northern Squadron, and were just crossing into the bay proper; the bow and stern-chasers of all parties were banging out angry compliments to each other. The bay itself teemed with Trollish barges of all sizes; their crews were panicking, and black oars were sweeping them awkwardly towards the shore and safety.

The Kul Tiran frigates were sailing proudly down the inner harbour; above their leader rode the massive, streaming pennant of the Lord Admiral. The bar crossing had been affected without loss, despite the treacherous conditions. Two massive Trollish second-rates had clearly attempted pursuit and been less successful; they lay aground against the sand. One had tipped on its side, and was now being battered by the waves. Another was totally capsized; atop its broken hulk, tusked figures clung to the timbers, struggling against the hungry waters.

Already the Kul Tiran Frigates were squaring their sails; some of the Commodore’s sloops broke away to harry the barges, but the bigger ships made a direct course for the landing beach. Chaser cannons boomed out - great heaps of earth and bodies were thrown high in the air. Stormsong’s black ship was moving with unnatural smoothness across the waters - one particularly unfortunate barge was run down by its slashing hull, with no effect on its progress.

On the shore, feathered figures rushed to turn artillery pieces away from the walls.

“So far so good,” said Grey. A flicker of relief flashed through her eyes, but her face remained relaxed. “It looks like the frig-”

Fitz cried out in pain, doubling over - her shoulder blazed with power. Her eyeglass had been tucked under her arm, and it dropped to deck with a brassy thump. A wash of frozen air blasted across the whole ship, punching straight through clothes and flesh - the sails cracked from sudden frost. This was followed by a huge flare of red light, which blasted heat just as quickly as everything had frozen.

Around her there were cries of confusion and pain, and the yelling of warrants - the massive blaze of light had blinded Fitz, and she blinked against the strobing flashes which pierced her eyes every time she opened them. The topmen all still clung to their rigging; one hung from a safety line. On other ships, sails heeled slightly, but noone collided; within a few minutes, the neat lines formed again, and the fleet continued to sail onward.

When Fitz’s vision cleared, the bay was domed by a massive shield; this shimmered like a polluted harbour. Inside, the faint shape of the frigate squadron could be seen - they drifted about, their sails in shreds. The massive pennant of the Lord Admiral still flew, and the hungry Trollish sloops were angling to fall upon it - Stormsong’s ship ignored the wind, turning to engage them.

The main Zandalari fleet tacked about outside the bay, sailing southward.

Grey cried out something wordless; her hands gripped the rail in front of her. The Lord Admiral yelled something back.

Fitz straightened, settling her expression - then she strode forward to the front of the quarterdeck. “Steady as she goes, Captain Conrad!” she said sharply. “Order the Fleet to beat to quarters!”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” came the automatic reply; then his face stiffened, and he straightened as well. “All hands! All hands beat to quarters!”

The marine standing nearby grabbed up his drum; the long, rumbling beat rattled out - and over the waters came the echo from more than one hundred other drums. Topmen streamed up three hundred and ninety masts, and out along more than twelve hundred separate yards. Across the deck of the
Tiragarde, Fitz watched Marines began loading their muskets, ripping the cartridges open with their teeth.

Grey stepped forward as well; her eyes were hard. “Conrad! Fly a general signal; ‘make way faster.’ She tugged her sword straight again from where she had knocked it askew. “The frigates are doomed without support.”

The Tidesage at the stern rail pointed up, his other hand still clenched around his staff. “Then they are doomed,” Brother Gull said.

Grey jerked, and looked up; Fitz also shot a glance towards the sky.

A massive black shadow was drifting slowly through the air; its edge caught the side of the sun, slowly sliding across it. The world darkened. Fitz looked at it in puzzlement; apart from perhaps forcing everyone to fight in darkness, it appeared to have no effect.

The Lord Admiral cried out in sudden rage - Fitz jerked her head back to the quarterdeck.

Ithedis had slumped, leaning heavily on his polearm. The Lord Admiral was standing over him, and magic poured from her in roiling, whispering waves.

“What is this eclipse?” demanded Grey, stepping forward - but the signal midshipman was closest; she rushed forward and took up Ithedis’s weight, lowering him gently to the deck.

Ithedis looked exhausted - his cheeks were gaunt; it was like the energy was flowing out of him.

Fitz snapped her glass back to the walls in sudden horror; her face tightened involuntarily. Through the lens she could see the defenders staggering, and the Trolls around the walls redoubling their efforts. Many in green were cut down, and the line of defenders began to fall back, haltingly, to the curtain wall - the feathers and helmets of the Zandalari pressed forward. Quel’Thalan banners began to be ripped down from off the outer walls, and thrown to the ground.

“You deal with the naval battle, Fitz,” said the Lord Admiral, lifting her arms. “I must deal with this before the city falls. The Fleet is yours, but listen to Grey closely. Your priority is to destroy whatever ship is doing this.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz firmly. “How else can I support you?”

“Does the Sun happen to love you, too?” said the Lord Admiral, eyes intense. “If you’ve got influence there, now is the time to use it. Otherwise, we’ll do this the old-fashioned way.” She turned to Brother Gull. “Attend me closely, Tidesage! I will need your help!” The Lord Admiral yanked off her necklace, and grasped it in one hand; with the other, she traced out some huge shapes. The downward strokes were definite and slashing.

Brother Gull watched for a second, then raised his staff.

A massive trail of power blazed; blue-lines criss-crossed along the ship. On the main deck, the crew ducked down involuntarily - all except Jackson. She looked at the quarterdeck, upright and curious. Black lines bloomed and twined, spreading like vines across her massive body; she smiled evenly.

The Lord Admiral shouted a blazing word, and threw the massive blue glyph into the sky. It lashed across the shadow, like wires around a fish; the sun seemed to shimmer - the darkness eased, then struggled to return. The blue lines grew taunt, straining.

Ithedis stirred weakly.
The Lord Admiral went to her knees on the deck, fists wrapped around the terminus of the blue wires, hauling on it like the strands of a net.

Cries of fear and alarm sprang up from eight hundred throats; Conrad rushed forward, propping her up. The Lord Admiral was snarling weakly, still grappling with her magic - and still clearly alive.

“Steady there!” Fitz roared; she paced the rail, letting her golden braid shine in the dim morning sunlight. With an effort of will, she did not glance at the Lord Admiral again.

The hands looked at her, and settled down - but the mood was still dangerous. Anxious faces kept glancing up at the quarterdeck.

“Should we turn back?” muttered Fitz lowly.

“We must stay this course,” said Grey in a terse whisper. Her face was impassive. “We will intercept the Zandalari soon; the wind is at our backs, and they cannot refuse battle. Just… keep walking around. I will attend the Lord Admiral.”

Fitz nodded grimly; she paced the deck impatiently. Behind her, Grey walked casually over to where the Lord Admiral continued locking wills with whatever massed shamans had been assembled for just that purpose.

Ahead of them, the Zandalari finally became aware of their danger. Lulled into complacency by their entrapment of the Lord Admiral’s streaming pennant, and soothed by the absence of warning rockets, they hadn’t noticed the Kul Tiran fleet riding down at them.

Fitz watched with satisfaction through her glass as the hundred Trollish ships attempted to prepare. A sudden mass of unfamiliar flags shot to the top of the multitude of masts; the Trolls came about, unevenly and gracelessly, onto a fighting tack. Their yards shivered, and their final line was ragged.

“Do you have any orders, ma’am?” said Conrad. Fitz glanced around to find Grey, but she was bent over the Lord Admiral. When Fitz turned back, Conrad was still looking at her expectantly.

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back, and nodded. “General signal; ‘Engage the enemy more closely.’”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Conrad, with a fierce expression; he turned away and began calling for the signal midshipman.

The sailors passed the message forward. A martial shanty spontaneously began, thin and warbling - within seconds another voice joined in. Soon eight hundred voices were roaring out some trite verse about freedom and glory.

Fitz schooled her face to impassivity, and set her feet slightly wider. Grey strode up, looking at the fluttering signal. She nodded faintly.

“We’ll make a Proudmoore of you yet,” she said. Fitz stood straighter.

The bows of the Kul Tirans crashed down towards the Zandalari on a collision course, the wind filling their sails. Fitz did some quick maths; the column the Tiragarde was leading would intercept the enemy just behind their van.

Fitz leaned forward, putting one hand on the rail. “Have you identified the Zandalari Flagship, Captain Conrad?”
“Yes, ma’am,” he called.

Fitz nodded firmly. “Mark it out firmly, if you please; I have a quarrel scheduled with it, and I do not wish to be late.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” called Conrad heartily. “We’ll get you there.”

Fitz casually put her hand into her breast pocket, and touched her letter; the light of the sun kept sharpening, and then dimming. Occasionally massive whipping blue cords would streak across the wide sea - the air smelled of burning tin. It was a struggle not to look over at the Lord Admiral, but Fitz forced herself to show no anxiety.

Grey also kept her eyes for’ard - her expression was hard.

The seas tossed around them; Fitz watched them break, then sent a loving, thankful prayer to the Tides - the waves were running down towards the bay. The Zandalari couldn’t open their lower gunports without being swamped. The lines of ships crept closer.

The domed shield still shimmered over the Western Bay. Inside that giant, ugly bubble, the Kul Tiran frigates fought a desperate action. Ships were locked together in mortal combat all over the bay, and the Kul Tirans were being shelled from both ship and shore. A giant, shimmering water elemental was raging, picking up Zandalari and shaking them like a dog with a bone. Above all the chaos, the Lord Admiral’s pennant still streamed proudly from the leading frigate; in response, the Trolls ignored all sense, and threw themselves against it. Lady Stormsong and Forster made remarkable doubles for the Lord Admiral herself; even the formation of the Zandalari First-Rates seemed to be deploying to prevent the Great Fleet from rescuing them.

Fitz walked towards the helm, leaving Grey by the rail. “Brother Gull.”

The Tidesage inclined his head - but he looked to be locked in effort. Fitz flicked a quick glance over near the stern; the Lord Admiral still battled with might and magic against the sky. Her face was gaunt and strained; she was sitting on the deck, braced against her own legs, her arms still raised. Blue wire wrapped around her whole torso, gathered together in clenched fists; they tore and clawed at the blackness, cutting off small pieces, and pulling the main mass away from the sun. Ithedis stood over her, face hard, weakly holding his polearm and shield.

Fitz tore her eyes away. “Brother Gull, what does the Trollish shield do? Can the Fleet help break it?”

“It traps magic,” hissed the Tidesage; strain was evident in his voice. “Anyone inside cannot get magic out.”

“Thank you, Brother Gull; carry on.” Fitz backed away.

From behind her came the boom of thunder - the main body of the Zandalari had opened fire too early. Fitz clasped her hands behind her back, and walked to the rail impassively. Cannonballs splashed well short. Fitz braced herself though, even as the sailors on the main deck cheered. The angle of the Great Fleet’s approach would give the main body of the Zandalari several minutes of fire straight down the vanguard’s throat - they wouldn’t stay untouched for long.

Again the Zandalari broadsides crashed out. There was a whistling whine before this volley struck true. Splinters erupted up and down the Tiragarde’s deck, as balls smashed through timbers and punched holes in rails. One piece of razor-sharp planking carried away Fitz’s Quel’Thalan hat - she flinched. The noise was stupendous; the smell of smoke was acrid, as well as the tang of white-hot.
iron. Screams rang out, and blood oozed across the deck.

“Loblolly boys!” roared Conrad. “Attend the main deck! And silence by the wounded there!”

Amazingly, the moans of the injured died away.

Fitz set her face into impassive lines, leaving her head uncovered. She took a quick glance at the Lord Admiral, and was relieved to see she was alive; the blue wires still lashed up, the tremendous effort of it carving lines into the Lord Admiral’s face. The light of the sun still shone down - Ithedis was panting with effort, but remained standing.

When Fitz looked back at the main deck, Jackson had picked her way aft. Her eyes gleamed reflectively in the dim light of the half-day. “Ma’am! Your orders for me?”

Fitz thought this was a strange thing for her to say - but then a lot of things were strange about Jackson. “Do as you think best,” Fitz said. “But find Clyburn - have him attend to the Lord Admiral.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

Jackson scrambled up the ladder - Fitz glanced around for Grey.

Grey was also still alive, but blood trickled down her arm. This didn’t seem to bother her; Fitz watched her pull a large splinter out with her teeth, then wrap her arm in a piece of torn sailcloth. She tossed the bloody wood overboard, and calmly walked over to Fitz’s side.

“A lovely morning for it,” Grey said lightly. “Shame about the sunshine.”

Fitz nodded in reply, baring her teeth. Then she turned back to the battle. They were committed now; in only a few more minutes, they would be inside the Trollish columns. Then it would be up to each Kul Tiran captain to fight their ship as they saw fit - but a Proudmoore was a useful symbol in the meantime.

Behind her the Lord Admiral was straining with all her might, too weak to even stand - the massive black shadow struggled against her power at every instant. Thin wires went taunt and snapped - only to be replaced by a dozen more. The sunlight flickered weirdly; darkness played across the face of the waters.

Another broadside roared out from the Zandalari line - the noise rolled across the ocean, and in the gloom, the bright flashes from the sparking gunpowder were readily apparent. This one largely missed; a number of splashes lifted water high into the air. Some cannonballs, however, did strike. In the column over, the Kingfisher’s fore-t’gallant came down - but it made little difference to its speed.

Fitz clasped her hands behind her back again, looking calm and unworried. “Did you know that cutting through columns of ships of the line is a hobby of mine? ” she said to Conrad. “It is a fine way to boast about one’s crew.”

Startled, Grey barked out a laugh.

Conrad grinned. “The Tiragarde will impress the Trolls soon enough.”

Underneath them, sailors grinned; all over the deck, hands heaved and sanded blood and dragged away the wounded.

The Zandalari were close now; close enough that Fitz could pick out officers, and individual faces.
The bridge of the enemy Flagship held a knot of gorgeously dressed Trolls, splendid in their feathers and bright fabrics. Fitz stared down her borrowed eyeglass, and counted them up. As she swept the deck, she noticed a particularly glorious Troll had her own eyeglass up, and was staring back. The Troll gave an ironic salute.

Fitz didn't deign to answer - she wasn't wearing a hat.

She dropped the glass, tucking it under her arm; then she made a short gesture for the middy of the watch. The middy rushed over a slate and some chalk; Fitz took it, and began to jot down figures. Wind, drift, speed all were estimated; then the triangle was calculated, and the angle - last came the application of the sine. Thirty seconds. Fitz nodded, and handed the slate back. “Thank you, Midshipman. Please make a general signal; ‘Two points to the sou-east,’ to be executed on my signal.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said the Midshipman, hurrying over to the locker.

Another crash of thunder came; there was another terrible whistling noise. It smashed into the Flagship like a giant's blow - the whole ship shuddered. Timbers ripped, lines parted with terrible resonance, and sailors screamed.

Fitz didn’t flinch this time; once again she glanced back and saw the Lord Admiral safely alive behind her - but the wheel had been shot away. The helmsman lay in a bloody heap on the quarterdeck.

Conrad started yelling orders; sailors began flooding below to spike the tiller rope. It was a blow, but not a serious one - the ship would be slow to respond, with orders having to be shouted down the hatchway. But steerage would be maintained.

The Trolls were so close now, Fitz could pick out the gold trimming around their stern windows. Grey figited impatiently, and gave her a level look - but didn’t say anything.

Fitz waited a beat more, counting in her head. Grey might have experience, but maths was a exact taskmistress. The number ticked to thirty. Fitz turned to the signal-Midshipman. “Execute!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” cried the middy. Down came the signal; around came the bows of the leading ship, and then every ship thereafter.

Startled, the Trolls misfired their last and most dangerous broadside; cannons went off in a staggering, rippling wave. Fully half the balls splashed into the waters - another quarter of them went soaring wide.

Then the Kul Tiran were in among them. To one side of the Flagship was the high stern of the fifth ship in the Zandalari line; it sailed slowly away. To the other side, the Trollish ship was frantically turning into the wind, trapped between the columns to its lee, and the Kul Tiran ship in front of it - as it came into the wind its sails luffed, and it rode helpless for a fraction of an instant.

“Fire!” yelled Conrad.

“FIRE!” roared the bosun.

Every cannon went off on Tiragade, on both sides: one-hundred and twenty of them all at once. A shiver went through its ancient timbers.

Massive cannonballs, fired at point blank range, went straight into the most vulnerable parts of the
Trollish ships - Fitz blinked away the smoke, and saw with amazement that the whole bow of the trailing ship had been stoved in completely. The waters rushed into the hole, and the ship sunk down by the head. The stern of the ship to starboard was a ruin; the windows were gone, and Fitz could see straight into one of the gundecks; it was filled with the dead and dying. Up on the deck, an officer was staggering towards its colours, presumably to haul them down.

Then Tiragarde was through the first column, and punching in towards the second; the ships of that line were panicking. Unable to fire - they would hit their own ships to windward - they were instead attempting to flee. One enemy ship turned the wrong way - with a terrible groaning sound, it grounded itself on the bar. It slewed sideways, tipping over - ant-like figures fell from the rigging into the ocean. The force of the waves began tearing its hull apart.

Fitz strode the quarterdeck - Jackson appeared, and took station at her shoulder. Fitz nodded to the bosun’s mate, but otherwise let her be. “General signal, Midshipman! All ships - engage at will!”

Grey stayed back by the rail, looking magnificent. She nodded in approval.

There were flashes and sparks and puffs of smoke from the masts of every side; musket balls buried themselves into the deck all around Fitz, but none hit. Grey staggered, but then stood back up straight and true, clasping her hands behind her back.

“Set up protection above the Lord Admiral,” Fitz ordered. Ithedis saluted, and dropped to his knees above her prone figure, his shield up. A musket ball clanged off the stout metal almost immediately. The Lord Admiral didn’t react at all. Instead she continued to trace patterns, sending masses of blue magic into the air; her eyes glowed with unnatural light.

Fitz started pacing slowly along the rail, wishing she were up the mast and above the smoke. Another musket ball creased her sleeve; she paid it no mind.

“For the sake of the Cycle, ma’am, take off your greatcoat,” begged Jackson. “They’re shooting at you!”

Fitz shook her head, turning to walk back along the rail. “It’s a warleader’s coat, Jackson. It should be worn in war.”

“Begging your pardon, but who wears that much gold to war?”

Jackson had a good point, but Fitz wasn’t going to admit this. Instead she mulishly turned and paced slowly back down the rail again.

Then the Tiragarde was inside the second Zandalari column, cutting through between the seventh and eighth ships; again the massive broadside of the Flagship went off. Again the Zandalari ships around them reeled from the massive blow; the huge thirty-two pounders of the lower gundeck smashed into timbers like a fist into a bowl of eggs.

“Hard a lee!” roared Conrad; the massive flagship swung around, cutting back down the column. In front of them, and behind them, other Kul Tiran ships were also cutting back northward. A Troll off the port quarter abruptly exploded - the masts of the two Trolls following it splintered from the force, and these came down with a crash. One reeled uncontrollably out of the line - the Zandalari behind it heeled over but couldn’t avoid collision. They crashed into each other with a terrible, splintering, tearing noise.

Fitz wanted to laugh; the van of the Trolls had sailed on, and the wind didn’t favour them coming back. The Kul Tirans had just achieved local superiority of two ships to every Zandalari one - and
around them, the fury of the Kul Tiran broadsides had already wrecked many those.

Above them, the darkness flickered slightly; the daylight shone brighter for just a minute as the blue wires gained the upper hand.

“Find me the Flagship, Conrad!” said Fitz, she pulled her cutlass free. “Find me the Flagship, and let’s finish this!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” said Conrad.

Fitz turned to Grey - only to find she had slumped down to the deck. The Admiral leaned heavily against the rail, holding herself up by one hand.

“Jackson,” spluttered Fitz, abandoning dignity and running over; she dropped to the deck, moving Grey’s other hand so she could see the damage.

A dark stain was spreading across her shirt from a wound in her stomach.

Fitz looked at it in horror - there was the faint smell of sewage that told her the intestine had been nicked. “Good Tides.”

Grey looked up with burning eyes. “That’s me done, I’m afraid. It’s up to you now, Fitz. Fight the fleet.” She winced, coughing.

“My lady,” said Jackson, tugging Fitz away and taking her place. “You are bound to the land - let me help.”

Grey groaned. “The Cycle is inescapable, Jackson. I know what a musket ball to the stomach means.”

“Where there is death, there is life,” said the bosun’s mate. “And there is so much death today.”

Fitz didn’t entirely know what was going on, but she knew enough not to stop it. A hand reached randomly into her pocket, and pulled out the carved deer. Fitz stared at it blankly, then pushed it towards Jackson. “Will this help?”

Jackson took it gently, then leaned over and pressed one gnarled hand onto the stomach wound. Grey grunted in pain. Jackson held her other hand palm up; the token lay in the middle of it. The carving slowly sank into Jackson’s palm - then its hardness dissolved, leaving behind a deer made of ink. This twitched - came alive - then galloped fleet and swift up Jackson’s arm, disappearing under her shirt, before running down the other arm and into Grey.

Jackson slumped against the rail, panting. Fitz’s jaw dropped open.

Slowly, Grey’s breathing evened out, and the wound stopped leaking fluids - but she still looked awful. “I told you to fight the fleet Fitz,” she wheezed. “Why are you still here?”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Fitz automatically, before feeling awkward. She stepped away, back towards the rail - behind her, the Lord Admiral still lashed out with her blue whips. Around her, the Kul Tiran Navy still punished its enemy. Fitz’s right hand still held her cutlass.

“Conrad!” she said, struggling to regain control over herself. “How goes finding me my enemy Flagship?”

“She’s around here somewhere, ma’am,” he said heartily. “T ragarde hasn’t let down a Proudmoore
“Glad to hear it, Captain,” she said. “I am going up the mast for a look at the Northern Squadron - in the meantime, continue the hunt.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he said.

Fitz shucked the heavy greatcoat; she left it on a conveniently splintered rail. The cutlass was carefully tucked down beside it. Then Fitz leapt forward, grabbing onto the backstays, climbing grimly. Some of the normal rigging had come away, leaving the going slightly more tricky than expected - at one point Fitz also had to jump sideways nimbly to avoid a sailor going the other way to fetch more powder. But the way became easier as she climbed up through the tops and into the royals - sailors manning the top yards stared at her in amazement. Her bright red peacoat stood out like fire in the rigging of the Kul Tiran ship; there could be no doubt as to who she was.

Below her, the Midshipman with her swivel gun yelled an order to her sharpshooters, and changed targets - they began sweeping the enemy tops for any Troll who thought she might make a fine target.

Thus secure, Fitz pulled up her spyglass and stared into the bay.

What she saw was horrifying. Most of the Kul Tiran frigates had suffered heavy damage, and timbers littered the waters. One Navy ship was on fire, sending black smoke billowing across the bay - it was only a matter of time before its magazine exploded.

Beyond the sea battle, however, the Quel’Thalans had rallied to the walls despite the partial eclipse. A ranger counterattack had swept into the Trolls, who now struggled to hold the ravelin. Fitz focused her glass on a particularly furious spot near the centre - above it waved the colours of the house of Windrunner.

The black tidesage ship had run itself close to shore, and water was lashing up the beach. These swallowed the Trolls who were running about with torches, trying to set it afire. Behind it, the water elemental had been ensnared in some sort of magic net; it surged and washed against its captivity, but with little success.

The Lord Admiral’s pennant still flew above Firedrake, but the frigate was battered beyond recognition - only madness could be preventing it from striking its colours. A dozen Zandalari ships were closing in for the death-blow, and these were opposed desperately by the remaining sloops and frigates of the Northern Squadron.

“Ma’am!” cried the midshipman below. “Look!” She pointed south-west, out to sea.

Fitz stared down at her for a long second, before turning her glass to windward.

There, riding on long rollers, almost lost in the half-light, were seven battered Elvish frigates - and one sloop with Kul Tiran rigging. Above the leader rode the broad pennant of a Commodore. Fitz couldn’t believe how swiftly they were sailing; a quick calculation left her recoiling. The stress of the sailplan on the ships must be straining every seam on every ship - the Elves would have to be pumping like madmen.

There was nothing to do but watch them come for a long several minutes; below her, the Flagship still bellowed out her fury. It became clear, however, that the Quel’Thalan squadron was cutting a path that avoided the battle developing around the main body, and was instead angling for the bar. Fitz pulled the glass down, puzzled.
“Where are they going, ma’am?” called the midshipman. “Don’t they know the frigates in the bay are just a decoy?”

Fitz took a great, shuddering breath; she tasted smoke and fire, death and destruction. “No, Midshipman. They don’t.”

The midshipman frowned, then looked horrified. Sagewood could only see the massive pennant of the Lord Admiral sailing in the bay - and that the frigate it flew from was about to be overwhelmed.

Fitz tucked her glass into her belt, and slid down the backstays so quickly it was like she had almost fallen out; she hit the deck with a bang, rushing forward to the signal locker. “Midshipman! Fly a signal to the Quel’Thalan Commodore - cease current activity! Tell her to join the Fleet to windward, immediately!”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” the middy said; the assistant rushed to the locker. Flags soared up the mizzenmast.

Signals soared up in reply. “Commodore to Flag: Cannot comply.”

Fitz felt like her breath had seized, and her heart was caught in a vice. It had been forty minutes since high-tide. The sandbar was not safe to cross.

“Signal her the Tidetable,” snapped Fitz. “Then raise the first set of signals again.” She peered through her glass for an answering signal - there was none. The Elvish frigates charged down towards the bar, utterly indifferent to the danger.

Fitz lurched back up to the quarterdeck; the Lord Admiral was wan, and her grip was weakening. A pool of vomit lay puddled nearby. Her efforts couldn’t hold out much more - the blue wires looked thinner, and their glow less intense. Ithedis was already struggling to hold up his shield again. Grey had been dragged back, tucked safely under a ledge; her head lay propped on her own greatcoat. Jackson was nowhere to be seen.

Fitz grabbed her Admiralty coat from where she had stashed it, and tugged it back on - her sword was thrust it back through the green sash that girded her waist. Then she walked over to Grey.

“I’ve heard the Quel’Thalans have arrived,” said Grey weakly, before Fitz could say anything. “And that Jess is serving you a taste of your own medicine. Good for her.”

“It is profoundly reckless to cross the bar now,” said Fitz grimly.

“Jess is a profoundly reckless kind of person,” gasped Grey. “And stubborn. Best resign yourself to that now. Now trot along, young Proudmoore; you have a battle to win.”

Fitz turned in frustration, stalking back across the quarterdeck. “Where is my Zandalari Flagship?”

“There, ma’am!” said Conrad, sounding triumphant.

Out of the gloom and smoke rose a magnificent First-rate, and its decks heaved with Trolls.

Fitz pulled out her blade. “Where is Jackson?”

“Here, ma’am,” said Jackson, appearing from out of the smoke.

“Find a dozen of your best people - that includes Clyburn,” ordered Fitz. “You are to guard the quarterdeck with your lives; when we board, the Lord Admiral will be left behind.”
Jackson stared at her with dark eyes. “I beg your pardon ma’am, but I don’t know if that’s true. But I will do as you say.”

Fitz had no time for this sophistry. “Conrad! Arm the deckhands for boarding, if you please!” She flourished her cutlass.

“D-do you intend to come with us, ma’am?” said Conrad hesitantly.

Fitz realised with a sinking sensation that he was treating her like an Admiral - indeed, had been treating her like an Admiral for the entire battle. And Admirals did not lead boarding actions against enemy Flagships.

“Well,” said Fitz, lowering her cutlass. “I had thought so, yes.”

“Perhaps you could command the ship while I take your place?” said Conrad. His expression was respectful, but worry lit his eyes.

Fitz frowned, thrusting her cutlass back into her sash. “Well. If I must.”

“Very good, ma’am,” said Conrad with relief. He turned and started roaring orders, pulling out his own sword and holding it up. “Come on, my bully boys and girls! The Lord Admirals have asked us for a Trollish Flagship, and I’ve a mind to gift them this one!”

A roar of approval surged across the deck; sailors lifted cutlasses and cheered the quarterdeck. The main deck heaved with figures, which surged towards the rail; some threw grappling hooks, and pushed out fending poles; yet more threw grenades onto the packed Trollish ship. These exploded with terrible effect.

Fitz watched them enviously; musket balls still splintered the deck all around her, but she was quite indifferent. Below her the Tiragrade thundered out one last broadside point-blank into the side of the Zandalari; then, with a snarling, ripping roar, the checked shirts of Kul Tiras launched themselves onto the enemy. Fitz could see that on the other side of the Zandalari, a second Kul Tiran ship had approached and had also locked riggings to board - the cannonades from that second ship were wreaking havoc across the enemy deck.

Fitz paced the deck again; then she shucked her greatcoat once more, and scrambled back up the mizzenmast. Being in command of a fleet was most disagreeable. Fitz groused at her misfortune as she climbed back up into the royals. The midshipman stationed there was bleeding, but touched her hat respectfully as Fitz climbed past.

Blue wires still crisscrossed the sky, but they were thready. The darkness, however, also seemed exhausted. It struggled weakly to block the light, but its pulsations were irregular. The sunlight now streaked down through it, bright beams piercing the sky.

Fitz wrapped her legs around the mast, and tilted out from it to get a view clear of the billowing sails. Her glass went anxiously to the Quel’Thalan squadron.

The smallest of the ships - the Kul Tiran sloop - had turned back from the bar, and was sailing parallel to the main line of battle. In the bay, dark figures floated everywhere across the waters, clinging to hammocks or bits of wood. Gigs and small cutters rowed frantically, hauling these to safety. Fitz swept over them, and focused on the battle itself.

Firedrake had been dismasted. It was drifting, helpless, under the guns of the Trollish ships - but its colours still flew from the stern. Sagewood had fallen on the Zandalari rear like a wolf on a flock of sheep; one had capsized - another was sunk. The rest were scattering in all directions, fleeing like the
prey they were; Jess held her squadron together, and didn’t pursue.

On the shore, the news was even better. The green of the rangers had gained back the gatehouse. From up on the wall, a recaptured gun had been dragged around, and was belching out grapeshot; the Trollish line recoiled back with blast. The banner of the Windrunners had also been carried forward, and was now planted on the outer wall; archers were once more going about their work around it. One figure was standing alone on one of the crenellations; her bow was sending massive jets of searing, blinding fire into the massed enemy. Fitz blinked away the afterimages - that had to be the Ranger-General.

The thunder of the guns was continuous; smoke billowed up and around everything. The waters were filled with burning wreckage and hulks. Fitz slid back down the mast, hoping Conrad had gained the day - but when she reached the deck, there was only a stream of wounded Kul Tiras dropping back onto the main deck.

“Well then,” said Fitz shortly - she grabbed her cutlass, and pointed it at the signal midshipmen. “Go below and tell the lower gundeck to muster at once; and tell every Jack and Jill to arm themselves - my seadogs will need sharp teeth.”

“Aye aye, ma’am!” stammered the middy. She touched the brim of her hat, and rushed towards the hatch. Fitz walked slowly up and down the rail, mentally following the chaos of the melee beside her; the center of the assault was hard-pressed, and the right flank was not much better. It looked like the Zandalari Flagship hadn’t let off a last broadside because the gundecks had been mustered to repel boarders.

The men and women of the Tiragarde’s lower gundeck were forming up - Fitz turned to see them looking at her with expectant faces. “Come on, shellbacks!” Fitz yelled, lifting her cutlass. “Who wants to live forever?” Then she turned and plunged onto the deck of the Zandalari. The guncrews shouted and leapt after her. As they cleared the rail, they rushed towards the left flank - the stern of the Zandalari - like a sack of good Kul Tiran bricks.

Fitz slashed and hacked her way towards the quarterdeck - the cutlass had a good weight to it. She chopped down one Troll - then grabbed a pistol off a dead body, and discharged it into the face of another. “To me!” she yelled. “Stand for Kul Tiras! Kul Tiras to me!”

Around her, the exhausted faces of the first wave turned to her - upon seeing who it was, they dropped back. The second wave flowed through them, crashing into their foes.

Fitz dropped back into a pocket of space, and collared one sailor. “What is the problem?” she yelled above the noise of the frantic melee. Beside her, a sailor hastily leveled a musket and killed a Troll about to stab her from behind.

“They’ve got about thirty shamans!” yelled back the sailor. “They’re behind some kind of barrier!”

“Show me!” yelled Fitz - the sailor pushed forward back into the press.

Once again Fitz’s sword rose and fell - she was living moment to moment, frantically parrying blows, and stabbing out at tusks and feathers. Fitz savagely backhanded one combatant - then slashed out. The troll screamed as her arm was taken off.

“There ma’am!” yelled the sailor.

Ahead was a kind of shield-wall. It was flat and milky, stretching across about twenty feet of space. Inside it, shamans were packed shoulder to shoulder, with a splendidly cloaked Zandalari woman in
Fitz watched them for a timeless instant. Some of the shamans were chanting at the sky - they looked utterly spent, and several were on their knees. Others were chanting with their arms linked together; these were probably holding the shield. Two more were working magic against the Kul Tiran borders - billowing clouds of green mist slinked across the deck, sucking sailors in, leaving behind twisted, crumpled forms.

Kul Tiran sailors were pressed all around the barrier, firing muskets and pistols at it with no effect; the balls were caught, white hot and spinning, stuck in the shield like studs. One sailor was pushed into the barrier by a troll - his arm melted off. The screams of his pain could be heard clear above the din.

Fitz had no idea what to do; she continued forward, trying to get closer, her mind working. “To me, Kul Tiras!”

The press became unmanageable; Fitz tried to push through, but bodies blocked her. She chopped and hacked at Trollish faces, struggling forward; her greatcoat flared out from where the buttons had ripped out, and her green sash grew dark with blood.

There was a shouted warning - Fitz turned to see a Troll rushing her like a bull. Then he hit her, crashing them both towards the milky-white barrier.

Fitz felt like the world slowed in motion. Around her, she watched sailors open their mouths in horror as she toppled towards the barrier - her shoulder seared with pain. Black ink erupted down her arm, and she felt it crawl across her torso, latticework flowing under her skin. The barrier passed her eyes like a flash, and she toppled to the deck, unharmed. The Troll who had shoved her through it was dead, blackened and cooked by his own passage. Above her, a chanting Trollish shaman looked down at her in horror.

Fitz rose, her cutlass fisted in her hand, running him through with one brutal stroke. His tusked mouth worked soundlessly as he looked into her face; then he slumped sideways. The barrier collapsed.

Kul Tiran sailors howled, then fell upon the shamans like the wrath of the sea; they snarled and snapped. Human fists grasped one of the Trolls who had been working death-magic; the cloth of his robes tore from a dozen sides, and twenty cutlasses hacked him to pieces. The other war-troll fared no better; her head was held up triumphantly, before it was thrown to the deck and trampled.

Fitz freed her cutlass from the body of the dead shaman, and chopped savagely at one of those chanting with their arms raised to the sky; the sword bit deep into the woman’s neck, and blood sprayed out.

There was a snap of blue wire, and the smell of charred flesh - several of the other chanting shamans kneeled over immediately, dead. Another screamed like he was on fire, tearing at his own skin - Fitz cut him down with a single swing.

The shadow fell from the sky, raining down into the waters and vanishing into nothingness. Full noon shone down, the sun clear and bright - Fitz took a stab at another troll, who stumbled back.

The Trollish woman in the centre of the circle had lowered her sword, and was holding the other hand up. “Quarter!” she was crying in common. “Quarter!” The cry was taken up by the huge Zandalari standing next to her; around the deck, suddenly it was echoing from a hundred trollish
throats.

“Cease fighting!” Fitz roared, dropping her own cutlass; it was heavy. Her arms burned. “Strike the colours! The Trolls have cried quarter!”

Around her sailors stumbled to a halt - a few with their blood up needed to be dragged back from attacking the suddenly unresisting trolls. The deck was washed with blood, and smoke lay thickly in the air - around the deck, Zandalari dropped their weapons, raising their hands. Kul Tiras began roughly pushing them to the centre of the deck, and tying them crudely with lines cut from the rigging.

Fitz glanced up towards the quarterdeck; an older troll, standing stiff and tall, was offering a Lieutenant his sword. Behind them both a midshipman was hauling down the Zandalari colours.

“You,” Fitz said, pointing randomly at a Kul Tiran midshipman. “Take charge here; collect the weapons and secure the prisoners below.”

“Aye aye ma’am,” panted the man.

“You- ” Fitz switched into half-remembered Zandalari, and pointed at the Trollish noblewoman. “Follow, please; questions with answers need me.”

“I speak common,” said the woman. “And I will follow you.”

The Trolls around her groaned with anguish as the woman stepped forward; she waved her hand, and they subsided.

Fitz ignored this byplay; she gestured shortly with her cutlass at the side of the Zandalari flagship. Beyond lay the deck of the Tiragarde. “Mind the gap, if you please; the ocean is cold this time of year, even in Quel’Thalas.”

The crash and roar of broadsides was still carrying on all around - but they were dying away. Fitz smiled grimly as the Zandalari woman stepped across. The Kul Tiran Fleet was mopping up the main body - Kul Tiras had gained the day. Fitz turned, and glanced out to the south, the Trollish van was still just visible, fleeing with all sail out into the open sea.

“A bloody day,” said the Troll, turning towards the Tiragarde’s quarterdeck.

“Indeed,” said Fitz, sword still drawn. “And it will be bloodier still at the walls of Silvermoon. Hold here, please; I am afraid you must give your parole to continue forward.”

The woman straightened, sighing. “I give it.”

“Your name and rank?” said Fitz.

“Talanji, Princess of Zandalar.” The woman watched closely for Fitz’s reaction.

Fitz was honestly too tired to care. “Thank you. That seems sufficient.”

The woman frowned; this had an impressive effect around her gilded tusks. There was silence for a long minute. Fitz was looking about for someone reliable to foist the woman off on - there was no possibly way she could be brought onto the quarterdeck.

“My father is afraid of your Lord Admiral,” said the woman, abruptly; her brows pulled down. “He says she is both sea and sky at once.”
Fitz looked at her, indifferently. “And do you now believe your father right?”

The Princess frowned, but did not reply.

Lieutenant Porter was hurrying across the deck - Fitz straightened with relief, and waved a hand to flag him down. “Lieutenant Porter, may I make your acquaintance of Ms Talanji, the Zandalari Princess? Ms Talanji, I pass you into Mr Porter’s hands. He will ensure your comfort. Mr Porter - I require your hat.”

Porter was looking at the towering Trollish woman with startled consternation - but he touched the brim of his fine cocked hat. Then he took it off and passed it over. “A pleasure, madam Princess,” he said, turning to the prisoner. “Will you follow me, please?” He took her arm gallantly, and led her off towards the foremast.

Fitz turned, and walked up the ladder to the quarterdeck, settling her ill-gotten hat in place. Her eyes went straight for the Lord Admiral; Jaina Proudmoore was lying prone, her head pulled into Grey’s lap. She was pale as ice, but was clearly still alive; she was muttering, and grasping at the air weakly. A necklace lay loosely in one hand.

Grey didn’t look much better; her stomach wound was closed, but her arm was bleeding sluggishly. She was propped up against the stern rail, coatless and hatless, curled around the Lord Admiral.

Ithedis was guarding them both, and glared at Fitz as she walked closer.

“Begging your leave to report, ma’ams,” said Fitz, exhausted.

Grey looked up, sighing at the sight of her blood-soaked uniform. “Oh, Fitz. Did you go forgetting your place again?”

“Conrad was losing,” said Fitz shortly. “And without taking the Zandalari flagship, Silvermoon was lost. War is risk.”

Grey nodded, looking resigned. “So be it then. Too late for recrimination now.”

Fitz walked forward; she let go of the cutlass. It fell to the deck with a clung, unheeded behind her. She dropped to her knees beside the Lord Admiral “Jaina. We won. Are you alright?”

“I can’t do it anymore, Fitz,” the Lord Admiral said, reaching up and grabbing Fitz’s collar. “I can’t. I just want to go home.”

“Alright,” said Fitz; she could feel her face crumple with worry. “We can do whatever you want. I’ll find a sloop.”

“No,” hissed Jaina, shaking Fitz gently. “Don’t do what I want - just let me go home; I can’t do this anymore. It’s too much. Five hundred years of this is - it’s -” She dropped her hand and raised it, shaking, to cover her own face - her palm and fingers were scored with angry red lines, like wires had burned into her skin.

“Hush now,” soothed Grey, stroking Jaina’s hair and rocking her slightly. “Lie still. It will be alright.”

Fitz stood, at a loss; she stared down at them. The thunder of the cannons had completely ceased; from every side came the sound of wild Kul Tiran cheering. Something would have to be done soon.

Ithedis rapped the deck with his polearm, catching her attention. “Lord Admiral; reform the Fleet.”
Fitz gave him an angry glare. “I think the Lord Admiral should be given some time to recover first, Ser Sagewood.” She gestured at the scene in front of her. “Perhaps, if you would be so good, you could restrict yourself to helpful suggestions only.”

He looked at her evenly.

Grey waved a lazy hand in Fitz’s direction. “It’s a bit sooner than we had planned, but I think he means you.”

Fitz looked at her in puzzlement, then her eyes widened. “Er.”

Blood was trickling from Jaina’s nose. She thrashed weakly, her hand convulsing around the necklace, then subsided. Grey looked down at her with concern, wiping away Jaina’s blood with her sleeve. “Go along now, Lord Admiral; the sooner this is cleaned up, the better.”

Fitz automatically touched the brim of her hat, immediately regretted it, and stalked off back towards the main deck. Her mind was racing, but her duty was clear. “Signal midshipman!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

Fitz clasped her hand behind her back, schooling her face to firmness. “Hoist the flags to reform the Fleet, if you please. Send a message to Rear-Admiral Parker; he is to repair aboard the Flagship with all haste.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the middy; two assistants began swiftly bending on the required flags.

“Which sloop is closest?”

“LAS Sleuth,” said the Midshipman.

“Direct Commander Sprocket to lay alongside the Flag,” Fitz said. “I will be there directly. Where is Captain Conrad?”

“For’ard, ma’am.”

Fitz nodded carefully. “Thank you. You may carry on.”

She stalked for’ard slowly. Jackson melted from nowhere, knuckling her forehead and taking up station on her left shoulder. Clyburn hurried up from the opposite side, and fell in at her right; Fitz nodded welcome to them both. Around her, sailors were pouring across the deck, yelling wildly; when they saw her, they raised a great cheer. Hands pushed and shoved all around her, but she was the eye of the storm, untouched.

Beside the Tiragarde rode the captured Zandalari Flagship - Kul Tiran sailors hurried across its decks as well, leading groups of bound Trolls down into the ‘tweendecks. The Trollish officers sat miserably in a huddle on the deck.

To starboard, the fighting in the bay had also stopped; Fitz crushed a frantic desire to rush up the mast and find out the situation - either Sagewood and Forster were still alive, or they were not. In the meantime, Fitz had to do her duty.

Conrad was standing by the mainmast; his clothes were rent, but he himself looked in fine fettle. He looked up at Fitz’s approach, then took his hat completely off, pressing it over his heart. The noise of the cheering sailors died away, but they pressed close, grinning.
“I am your man,” said Conrad reverently. “I don’t know by what miracle of the Tides you passed through that Trollish barrier, but if you had not then the entire day would have been lost. What words do you have for us?”

Fitz didn’t know if fancy words were her particular talent. But she also knew that this was a critical moment. She cleared her throat, and made sure to speak loudly. “That this was a fine day’s work, Mr Conrad,” she said - only to be drowned out by a storm of celebration again. Fitz nodded awkwardly, and waited for the noise to die back. “And now there is a storm coming;” she said looking around deliberately. “One the Trolls cannot weather, or stop. Our vengeance for this day!”

The deck exploded with approval; men and women bayed - muskets and cutlasses were waved in the air. Fitz straightened her shoulders and stood tall and proud.

“I desire the Fleet to seaward, Mr Conrad,” Fitz yelled through the din. “We are too close to the sandbar here - but I must also go and speak with the Elves.”

Conrad stepping closer in an effort to be heard. “Will you transfer your Flag away from Tiragarde, ma’am?”

“Temporarily,” shouted Fitz, who didn’t know if she actually had a flag. She cleared her throat. “Rear-Admiral Parker should be aboard soon; instruct him to see the prizes securely anchored, and the prisoners transferred to custody of the Elves. Then the Fleet is to be taken out to sea.”

The crew had begun three cheers for her - she swallowed her embarrassment, and held up her hand at the compliment. When she turned back, Conrad was bowing to her.

“My Lord Admiral,” he said. “I am your servant, and will see this done.”

Fitz kept herself from twitching away only with effort; her hand fluttered over her pocket, but she dropped her hand away. “Thank you, Captain - you do me honour.” She made an abortive motion to the brim of her hat, scowled, then turned quickly and began walking up the deck.

Most of the sailors fell back out of her path but Jackson and Clyburn had to move in and shove away others. Fitz was exhausted, bloody, and sore; she could show none of this on her face. Instead she strode confidently, keeping her hands folded behind her back.

Fitz once again itched to do something - anything. But the Fleet was secure for the next few hours at least. The Navy, with all its tradition and experience and expectations, would have the aftermath of the battle well in hand - her only job as Lord Admiral was to deal with the things the individual Captains could not.

The thought struck Fitz that this would be almost entirely political. Her head dropped, and she looked at her hands - blood had steeped under the nails, and stained the cuffs of her sleeve. Then she firmed, and straightened again. The Navy worked as a team. Fitz might be a Lord Admiral, but she wasn’t alone. Jess lay ahead of her, somewhere in the bay. So were Forster and Stormsong. The Windrunners were probably about as well - they tended to show up at convenient times. Surely one, or all of of these, would help plot a course through these waters. Fitz only needed to ask for aid, and it would be given.

Fitz turned to her left, nodding to Clyburn. “My compliments to you, and please ask the Lor… ask the Lady Proudmoore if she wishes to sail with us towards Silvermoon. Will you coordinate this with Lady Grey please?”

Clyburn knuckled his forehead and scuttled aft.
Fitz looked at Jackson, who looked placidly back; nothing remained of the swirling tattoos which had run across the sailor’s face during the battle. There was no trace of the leaping deer, or of the depths to her eyes. Fitz wasn’t fooled. But she also had nothing sensible to say - after a long moment, Fitz nodded respectfully, and continued to walk towards the waist of the ship.

Behind her, the crew of the Tiragarde had reformed, and were going about their duties. They sang and laughed as they methodically cleaned up the ship, warrants roaring orders.

A battered brig-sloop had sailed up to port; it hadn’t clewed up. Instead, sailors manned the yards and luffed the sails - clearly its Commander valued haste. Other sailors rushed across its deck, clearing away battle damage. Yet more sailors busied themselves around a cutter, which they swayed out and dropped into the water. The little boat was as neat as a new pin, except for the large round cannonball hole nicked out of one gunwale.

Fitz stood at the rail and watched its approach.

“Ma’am,” came the call behind her - Fitz turned.

Jaina was walking along the main deck, looking pale and wan. Her power had scorched black marks over her jacket, and her hair was escaping its braid - but her back was straight. She moved slowly towards the rail. Clyburn trotted after her - he was carrying a large bundle of cloth.

Ithedis trailed along behind them both, looking magnificent with his polearm and shield; his face was impassive, but was also deeply tired.

Jaina reached the rail, and leaned heavily against it. “Hello, Fitz.”

“Ma’am,” said Fitz, thrilled. “Good to see you up and about.”

“None of that,” said Jaina, waving her off. “The Lord Admiral doesn’t call anybody ‘ma’am’. It’s one of the perks.”

Fitz deflated slightly.

“No, I haven’t changed my mind,” said Jaina evenly. “I am sorry I couldn’t give you those five years - but Grey and Jess will help you. Which reminds me, actually. I have a gift for you.” She turned to Clyburn and placed a hand atop the bundle of cloth.

Clyburn looked like a man affecting quiet dignity, but who was also suffering from an excess of disbelieving excitement; this manifested as him quivering slightly. “Flag, ma’am,” he said. “Your flag.”

Fitz looked at him, then at the bundle of cloth.

“It’s the Lord Admiral’s pennant,” said Jaina - her lips quirked into a smile. “Actually it’s the small spare one. I believe you are transferring onto that brig-sloop?”

Fitz cleared her throat, and rocked her weight from foot to foot. “Begging your… If you please…” She staggered to a halt, and bent her head to scowl to herself. “My compliments to you, Lady Proudmoore,” she said firmly. “Would you find it convenient to be transported ashore?”

“I would be delighted, ma’am,” said Jaina lightly.

“Please don’t call me that,” said Fitz, alarmed.
Jaina just grinned wickedly at her.

Fitz grumped, and turned back to the rail. “Do you think we can get off this ship without the pipes?”

Jaina shook her head in mock sadness, still grinning. “I’m afraid five hundred years of holding the Admiralty has taught me that the pipes are eternal.”

Fitz sighed. “Very well. Jackson, will you find the bosun and have him unroll the ladder, please?”

Jackson knuckled her forehead. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

Jaina was right; there was indeed an excess of pipes - dozens of them - and far too many sideboys with white gloves to salute her over the side. The marines were mercifully absent; they were currently guarding the Trollish prisoners on the Zandalari Flagship, and couldn’t be spared. This omission to Fitz’s glory seemed to cause Captain Conrad physical pain, and she had been forced to console him before going over the side.

Climbing the second ladder onto the brig-sloop was a relief; Fitz saluted the quarterdeck, then turned to greet Sprocket, who shook her hand.

Sprocket then raced forward gallantly to help Jaina through the entry port.

Clyburn hopped up last, then hurried to the mainmast with the heavy flag. It soared up, and broke open proudly under the blue sky.

“Cross the bar if you please, Captain Sprocket,” said Fitz with satisfaction.

Sprocket saluted. “Aye aye, ma’am.”

Fitz walked forward to the bow of the sloop, and stared through Sprocket’s eyeglass at the inner harbour. The Kul Tiran frigates were in ruins. Firedrake had been beached to prevent it sinking; its shot-riddled hull lay half-in, half out of the water. Another frigate had completely capsized. A massive water elemental, with a small figure on its back, was racing around, snatching survivors from the water.

The butcher's bill was appalling; possibly five of the thirty or so lesser rates which had crossed the bar in the morning were still capable of war in the afternoon. Six Elvish ship floated at anchor, all brutally damaged, using captured barges to avoid sinking outright.

Fitz swept her glass around the bay for the most important Elvish frigate of them all - then, more frantically, she checked again. None of the ships were flying a Commodore’s broad pennant. Wreckage littered the water. Fitz’s hands tightened on the brass tube of the glass.

On the shore; the Trollish camp was well afire, and a small knot of figures in green stood watching it. Among them was was one solitary figure in the red of the Navy; this turned out to sea, and waved its arms when it saw the Sleuth. Fitz pointed the spyglass at the officer - it was a woman with golden hair, and she was pointing towards a small jetty.

Fitz’s heart started beating again.

As the Sleuth was nosing gently up to this little wharf, Jaina walked to the entry port, and stood waiting. Sylvanas was walking along the beach towards the dock; around her were Jess and Giramar, Elosai and Elodis.

Ithedis slipped off the deck almost before the lines had been thrown, and hurried down the planks.
towards his family - they huddled together. He removed his helm to press his forehead against his wife’s. It was as much as Elvish propriety would allow.

Sylvanas glanced at them, but kept walking forward; as she got closer, it was clear a dark bruise was blooming across her face, and her uniform was smeared with blood. Her eyes roved across the ship, before catching on her wife. Her ears canted forward, and her step quickened.

“I’m done,” Jaina said heavily, stepping out of the sloop and onto the jetty. Sylvanas started in surprise, then reached forward, clearly intending an embrace - something also in line with Elvish propriety.

Jaina, however, had other plans; she stepped in, seized Sylvanas by the collar, and pulled her down for a searing kiss.

Fitz cleared her throat and looked away - but the average sailor wasn’t so prudish. They whistled, cheering lustily, giving occasional suggestions. Some clapped.

Giramar also stalked up the pier, ears slanted back at precisely forty-five degrees; he passed right by the romance without so much as a glance, stopping directly opposite where Fitz was standing.

“Lord Admiral Proudmoore,” he said. “I understand you cannot come on land.”

Fitz nodded to him. “Ranger-General Windrunner; I understand you get horribly seasick. Shall we plan our next move?”

Behind them, continued cheering evidenced continued kissing.

Giramar grimaced - but his ears held still. He gestured shortly towards the walls. “The alliance has no next move. My city lies ruins; there is nothing to plan.”

A sudden madness took ahold of Fitz; she bared her teeth at him, closing her hands around the rail. “We’ve captured three hundred invasion barges and a Zandalari princess. Your army is intact to the South. We’ve completely destroyed the Golden Fleet, and the way to Zandalar is open.”

Giramar’s eyes narrowed; he looked thoughtful. For the first time, his ears twitched. “Interesting. I will send word to you on this.” He nodded respectfully, and walked back down the pier.

The crew had launched into a romantic shanty - specifically the one about Jaina and Sylvanas. They had also skipped the first few verses, and gone straight to the good part.

Fitz listened with half an ear - then turned. There had been a muffled thump - someone had vaulted the sloop’s rail.

Jess stood behind her, looking her up and down; she was smiling, and her ears were cocked at a rakish angle. Her red coat had clearly gone into the water at some point, but there was no blood. “Hello, Fitz.”

The wreckage of ships littered the bay. The walls of Silvermoon lay in crumbled ruins, and an army of surrendered Trolls still lay before it. There were legendary heroes standing on the dock, in full view of them. None of this mattered.

In the end, Fitz didn’t give a damn about Elvish propriety either.
EPILOGUE

A fine spring gale was blowing across the ocean; the wind picked up the tips of the waves, and dashed them joyfully against the breakwater of Boralus. Rain fell in great sheets across Tiragarde Sound, and its Tiragarde namesake rocked easily at anchor.

Fitz sat behind a desk. On the deck above her, she could hear the patter of the watch changing, and the faint bellowing of the warrants. The Captain’s cabin was dimly lit; it was also stuffy, freezing, and smelled faintly of wet wool.

Fitz sat on one side, resplendent in her greatcoat, and perched on a high-backed wooden chair. Flanking her were her five senior officers, each wearing their most glittering uniforms - the whole cabin seemed full of serious expressions, golden medals, bejeweled stars, and epaulettes of rank.

A Midshipman stood in front of Fitz, touching the brim of his hat. His face attempted to master his disappointment; finally he stepped forward to take back his amended certificates, and turned to leave. Captains and Admirals sat still and firm behind the long tables, faces impassive and set; they watched him go in silence.

The door closed.

A Captain at the end of the row promptly slumped with exhaustion. “How many is that now? Thirty?”

Another officer sighed heavily, flipping over some papers in front of her.

Seated at Fitz’s right hand, Grey lounged back in her chair; she gave the others a significant glance. They settled instantly. Grey’s looming presence on the promotions board had terrified the Midshipmen - now the deepening shadows softened the hard plains and angles of her face. The red ribbon threaded elegantly through her hair shone bravely in the light of the oil-lamps.

Fitz pulled a pocket watch out to check the time - she nodded thoughtfully to herself. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we will have one more. Please bring in our final candidate.”

One of the Captains groaned quietly; another other visibly steeled himself.

Admiral Grey rocked forward on her chair, dropping her head close. “My Lord Admiral,” she said softly. “Riveting as this is, we do have other places to be.”

“I remember waiting out there,” said Fitz, just as softly. “We have time for one more.”

Grey drummed her fingers impatiently on the desk, but settled back in her chair again. Around them both, Captains readied their notepads, and jotted down a few calculations. One of them tapped their pen against the paper; another sipped from a glass of water.

Fitz also picked up her pen, but put it back down again immediately - it had been a gift from some
foreign dignitary or another, and it was so encrusted with gold it might as well have been a crayon. She hadn’t made a single note all afternoon.

There was silence for a few minutes. Then came a firm knock came on the door.

A smartly dressed figure walked in - sword gleaming and straight, shoes shining, and red hair firmly in place. One of her hands was already at the brim of her hat, an intelligent gaze sweeping around the cabin. When her eyes caught on Fitz, she blanched.

Grey blinked slowly at the Midshipman, and then crinkled her eyes in amusement. “Make your report, if you please. Succinctly.”

"F-Fitzwilliams, Ma’am. F-Fitzherberta Fitzwilliams. Acting-Lieutenant of the Lord Admiral’s Ship Swiftsure.” Herbie kept her face still, and her shoulders set in determined lines - but her knuckles were white where she gripped her bundle of paperwork.


"Your certificates, please,” said the Flag Lieutenant - a hand was held out, and Herbie unclenched her hand enough to hand over the stack of papers. Up close it was clear her sister had gone quite pale; her freckles stood out in stark relief.

Around the table, Captains were shifting in their chairs - wood creaked. A couple of furtive, darting glances were thrown in the Lord Admiral’s direction; pens were picked up, then put down again. Fitz struggled not to grimace - Herbie hated exams, and her presence would be both unexpected and unwelcome in this context.

The board remained silent as the paperwork was checked.

Fitz thought for an instant more, then firmly pushed her chair back from the desk; she stood. “Ladies and gentleman, I believe my presence will only complicate this examination. I will take my leave of you all.”

Everyone around her leapt to their feet, pulling their hats from their heads; a chair tipped over. One Captain winced as he stood too fast and bumped his head on the low ceiling.

Grey accompanied her salute with a flat look.

Herbie, if such a thing was physically possible, came even more to attention. She stood stooped under the low deck, and her eyes shone with gratitude, even as her face remained still.

Fitz put on her fine cockaded hat; then she walked easily around her glittering subordinates, nodding to them individually in thanks. With the ship in harbour, the roll was practically non-existent. Herbie still looked pale, but there was nothing to be done for her. The marine turned the door-handle, and pushed the door open - Fitz walked out.

“So, Miss Fitzwilliams,” Grey said. “Tell me about your special relationship with the cosine.”

The door swung shut.

A Proudmoore Guardsman melted out of the shadows, grim-faced and heavily armed. Fitz begrudgingly ignored her, settling her hat more firmly, and ducking under the deck beam.

The only other souls in sight were a small pack of Midshipmen in the corridor. They pressed up
against the bulkheads, playing cards scattered across the deck, frantically removing hats. Fitz waved them back to their game. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” she said, stepping around their makeshift seating. Her own quarters weren’t far away.

The outer office area was empty and dark, but the living quarters were brightly lit. Golden lamplight played across tasteful furnishings, all soft blues and whites with tiny krakens in motif. Even the stern cannons had been lashed down elegantly; one had been turned into a coffee table. A footman materialised from the pantry, taking Fitz’s greatcoat and hat - he bowed, then vanished through one of the side doors.

Fitz stood by the coatrack and tugged ineffectually at her cravat; the temperature was bracing. “Anyone home?”

A pair of Elvish ears were peeking up over the back of one of the armchairs. At the sound of Fitz’s voice, these swiveled towards the door.

“I thought you might have forgotten,” came a voice from over the top of the furniture. “I was about to come fetch you.”

“The examination took all day,” said Fitz, wandering across the cabin. “Every Midshipman in the fleet must have come try their luck - we passed maybe five?” She leaned over the seatback to drop a kiss on her wife’s forehead, smiling down at her. “Are we ready to go?”

Jess’s ears fluttered, and she smiled softly. “We’re at least ten minutes away, I’m afraid.” She reached up, pushing away the thick blankets covering her to stroke the back of Fitz’s neck. “Clyburn’s off somewhere planning intensive fussing.”

Fitz groaned, slumping. “He must have found where I stashed that awful medal. Is it too late to run?” She pulled away, slipping around to drop gracelessly into the other armchair.

“It was probably always too late,” said Jess, picking up a teacup from the coffee table; it steamed gently. “Your mother would hunt us down. Do you think we could win a boarding action against that many party guests, or that much cake?”

“Hmm,” said Fitz, ruefully.

There was the click of the door being pushed open. Both Jess and Fitz craned around the chair backs curiously; it was Clyburn, dressed in an immaculate checked shirt. A hideous golden sunburst shone brightly in his hands, and a red sash was tossed carefully over his shoulder.

“Good evening, Ma’am,” he said, smiling cheerfully. “Begging your pardon, but your guests are coming aboard; it might be time for me to get you ready.”

“Thank you, Clyburn,” said Fitz. She gave Jess a resigned look, and stood up again.

Clyburn eyed her critically, brushing some lint away from her jacket - the sash was artfully draped over her shoulder. Finally, the sunburst was securely, and horribly, attached in the very center of her chest. Fitz struggled to keep her face impassive.

“Very dashing, Clyburn,” said Jess, still tucked under a half-dozen blankets. “Perhaps you should use another pin - we wouldn’t want it to come off.”

“Aye aye, ma’am,” said Clyburn happily.

“Betrayal,” said Fitz flatly, in elvish. “Raw, unadulterated, betrayal.”
“Hush, my dearest one,” laughed Jess. “You married a Quel’Thalan. Everyone knows we love gold.” She shot Fitz a deep-lidded, burning look; her ears slid forward rakishly. “And you are wearing an awful lot of gold today.”

Fitz’s mouth went dry - something hot erupted in her chest. She cleared her throat, and shifted from foot to foot.

Clyburn looked at them both with a hint of disapproval. “If you could just hold still for me, ma’am,” he said firmly.

“Hmm? Oh, yes,” said Fitz, embarrassed. “Yes, my apologies, Mr Clyburn.”

Jess turned back to her teacup, but she was smiling - a small, secret smile. Her ears twitched in self-satisfaction.

“That’s all done, ma’ams,” said Clyburn. “Let me just get your greatcoat. Begging your pardon, but you should probably also go up onto the main deck shortly; the sails have been rigged up.”

“Thank you, Clyburn,” said Fitz.

Jess rose smoothly, pushing the blankets away and settling her Qual’Thalan hat atop her head. Clyburn hurried her a cloak. Her eyes remained on Fitz though, and ears canted upwards, considering. “I’m not sure - I think you’re still missing something.” She looked thoughtful, then unhooked one of her collar dogs from her red peacoat. “Hold still for me, dear?” Quick fingers nimbly attached it to Fitz’s jacket. “There,” she said with satisfaction. “Now we are ready. Would the Lord Admiral consent to accompany me to the dance?”

Fitz offered her arm, smiling. “My compliments to the Rear-Admiral, and she would be delighted.”

Clyburn closed the door softly behind them.

They walked carefully under the low ceiling, picking carefully through the dim rankness of the ‘tween decks. The smell of damp was pervasive. Jess had to cant her ears to keep them from bumping into the beams; there was barely enough room for them to walk abreast. Above their heads, through the planking, came the drumming of rain, and the faint strains of a band. There was also the patter of feet, and the chatter of guests - occasionally even a bright peel of laughter.

They paused at the bottom of the aft ladder, and straightened with relief Fitz took a deep breath, hand dipping into her jacket pocket to touch tattered paper. Jess smiled, ears canting forward; she stepped in, and ran her hand slowly down Fitz’s arm.

“I…”

“Ho Jess and Fitz!”

Jess’s ears wriggled in delight, and she turned; Fitz sighed, then schooled her face into impassivity.

Striding down the corridor was Galadin, looking especially dashing in his pin-striped Kul Tiran suit. “You weren’t planning to party without me, were you?” His ears splayed out dramatically.

Fitz looked up and smiled, reaching forward to clap him on the shoulder. “How could there be a party without you? Especially when no one has briefed me on the battleplan.”

Galadin openly laughed, patting his decorative cutlass. “No battleplan this time, my friend; our only job is to look heroically decorative.”
“Mmm,” murmured Jess.

Fitz cleared her throat again. “Then I guess we’ll improvise.” She turned back to the ladder. “Wish me luck.”

She grabbed the first rung. In the square opening above her, a crew member’s face was watching - Fitz nodded to her. The woman knuckled her forehead, and quickly ducked back out of sight. Fitz began to climb. Above her, the music faded out, and the sounds of the gathering died away.

Fitz’s hat rose above the level of the deck. Bosun’s pipes split the air, echoing shrilly.

“PRESENT! ARMS!” roared the Marine Sergeant-Major; there was the crash of sixty boots, and thirty gleaming muskets sloped neatly. Sideboys saluted, their white gloves flanking a long green carpet laid out on the deck.

The chill washed over her, sinking its talons into the uniform which symbolised the Admiralty. Her greatcoat was uncomfortable, grand, and bulky - but it was designed for precisely this kind of weather, and exactly this situation. Fitz climbed completely out of the hatch, and stood at the top of it, looking down the deck.

Two hundred silent people were turned to face her. A wave of hats came off, to be pressed over two hundred hearts. Every guest bowed deeply.

Behind her, the pipes continued their wailing; Jess gained the deck as well - there was an ear-flick as the temperature hit her, but otherwise she stood firm and strong under the collective gaze of Kul Tiras. Fitz held out her arm, and Jess took it - their medals and decorations winked and gleamed in the light of the storm lanterns.

Jess leaned in close to her ear. “Shall we go?”

Fitz nodded, and took a deep breath. There was the salt tang of the ocean, and the cloying taste of tar. No clarity came to her in that moment; her ears didn’t ring, and her nerves didn’t sing of danger. There was only the rain, drumming down on the canvas above, and the ocean sweeping out its joy against the side of the Tiragarde. All was well.

Jess’s ears slanted back confidently, and she started forward.

Guests fell back around them as the pipes continued to shrill out their final compliments; it was only when Jess and Fitz reached the mizzenmast that the sound cut off. The marines shouldered their arms with another crash and thump of boots - the sergeant dropped his staff. Fitz inclined her head, touching the brim of her hat.

With a thump-pah-thump from the Tuba player, the band started back up again. Figures straightened, and hats of all descriptions were placed back on. People started walking purposefully towards her. One of them, Fitz could see, was her mother, who was ploughing through the crowd like a particularly majestic barque.

Jess cleared her throat, eyes firmly fixed on the approaching Mrs Fitzwilliams. Her ears twitched, and she flicked a glance at Fitz. “Can I grab you a lemonade?”

“That would be lovely,” said Fitz. “Although I think Lady Stormsong is around here somewhere; we might want to add a little whiskey?”

Galadin had been fending off the approach of a particularly ingratiating Countess; he turned, spotting Mrs Fitzwilliams almost too late. He went slightly pale under the lanterns. “Will you excuse me also,
Lord Admiral?” His ears slanted back.

Fitz smiled. “Go on, you two.”

Jess reached up and brushed her hands over one of Fitz’s lapels - her fingers lingered on her golden Quel’Thalan collar dog. Then she stepped back, nodding to Galadin - they both strode off towards the long table holding drinks.

Fitz took the chance to move towards the rail - Jess had led them straight over to one of the heavy iron braziers, and the heat was scorching through Fitz’s heavy jacket. The rail of the Tiragarde was much cooler - although something in the harbour below smelled especially fishy. Sheeting water falling from the rigged mainsail blocked her view out to sea; Fitz looked out into the darkness anyway.

“Willa?” came a sibilating voice from out of the shadows; Fitz turned.

Fitzrobin glided slowly along the rail towards her, hooded deeply; the ocean below seemed to lick up, eager to reach her. The gnarled staff of the Tidesages was gripped tightly in her hand, and the heavy metal belt girded her waist. Both were far too big for her.

Fitz brightened immediately. “Robin! You look different.”

“And you look the same,” hissed Robin; her eyes were filled with cold blue fire. “The ocean whispered to me of your many victories.”

“I see the ocean solved reading with the lights out as well,” said Fitz, blithely. “Could you stop with the glowing eyes? You look like an idiot.”

Fitzrobin clutched at her staff sheepishly. The glow dimmed; then there was her sister again, with her brown eyes and messy red hair. She somehow looked even more like a pile of elbows and knees, even shrouded in the blue robe. The belt clanked uneasily.

Fitz grinned at her, squashing the urge to harass her somehow - instead she tilted her head to the left, raising a single eyebrow. Robin glanced over, then nodded in solidarity - her face settled back into distant wisdom.

They both turned to wait for their mother.

Mrs Fitzwilliams had taken to high society like a duck to water. Today she was clothed in great quantities of blue and green lace; somehow all of it billowed. Her brown hair was twisted in an updo, and her bust heaved with the force of her pleasure; lesser mortals scattered before her advance upon her daughters. “My Dearest Willa!” she trilled. “And Sweet Little Robbie! Oh, my happiness is complete. Except… Robbie, why are you so thin? What are they feeding you at that ghastly monastery?”

Fitzrobin looked restlessly out towards the sea. “The mysteries of the ocean… the secrets of the infinite depths...”

“That’s no diet for a growing young woman,” Mrs Fitzwilliams tsked loudly. “I’ll make up a care package.” She looked about the deck regally. “And where is Jess? I was looking forward to telling her more about the proud line of Fitzwilliams Heroes she has joined.”

“I don’t think she saw you coming over,” Fitz lied smoothly. “She’ll be disappointed not to catch you though - I think she might have gone to get a drink.”
Mrs Fitzwilliams huffed again. “It is good to see you settled, but you’re just like your father. I had him wrapped around my little finger as well.”

Fitzrobin started sliding back into a patch of shadow; it seemed to rise up, flickering unnaturally, seeking to devour her.

Fitz cleared her throat, turning her body surreptitiously to cover this escape. “Speaking of Quel’Thalas, did you receive my latest parcel? I am sorry I cannot deliver them to you in person.”

“Nonsense dear,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, waving one hand airily. “The spices are beautiful - and so expensive! All the other ladies are green with envy. I haven’t opened a single one.”

“Ah,” said Fitz, hesitantly.

“But don’t you think you can bribe your way back into my good graces, my Maritime Hibiscus.” Mrs Fitzwilliams glared, her bosom heaving. “I am still very cross with you. My own daughter! Not inviting me to her own wedding!”

“We were invading Zandalar at the time, mother.” Fitz’s hand fluttered towards her jacket pocket, before letting it fall away. ”There were Trolls everywhere.”

Jess chose that moment to reenter the fray. Her face had only a slight, polite smile, but her ears were slanted forward in laughter; the tips were slightly pink from cold. “What’s this, my Lord Admiral? Are you talking about our wedding again?” She passed Fitz a glass of lemonade, and kept something steaming. “I could become quite concerned - did you not enjoy it?”

“It was the most romantic ten minutes of my life,” said Fitz firmly. “No woman could have been happier.”

Jess smiled. Her ears twitched up, then wriggled slightly.

“Hello, Admiral Sagewood,” said Mrs Fitzwilliams, looking pleased, but distracted. “Is that our Fitzjane down there? Fitzjane!” She waved enthusiastically, then peered down the deck. “I don’t think she can see me, my Entwined Swans - excuse me.”

Fitzjane was indeed standing for’ard, dutifully guarding the assembled nobles. Occasionally she would chivy them away back and away from the bow - it was one of the most dangerous parts of the ship, and had been placed off-limits to guests. Mrs Fitzwilliams was not dissuaded by this. Like a First-Rate until full press, she sailed off towards the bow, calling stridently for her daughter. Jess’s ears flickered in amusement; Fitz managed to catch her sister’s eye, flashing her a quick, malicious grin.

Jane’s impassive face briefly slipped into outrage, but this morphed into horror as Mrs Fitzwilliams reached her. From the set of Mrs Fitzwilliam’s body, she was settling in for a long session of fluttering and gossip. Trapped by the demands of her duty, Jane could neither flee, nor reply.

Fitz took another sip of her ice-cold lemonade, taking a moment to simply enjoy her sister’s discomfort - then Jess gently cleared her throat. Fitz found her arm taken. Together, they began walking slowly towards their guests, chatting about minor things. Galadin appeared from nowhere, holding a small wineglass; he placed one hand behind his back, following them a respectful half-step behind.

There was a large group of guests standing hard up against the lee-rail. Lady Stormsong was at its heart, holding court among a semi-circle of ranking Kul Tiran nobles; she seemed to be describing in detail a truly horrible monster that lived just outside Tiragarde Sound. One of her partners stood on
the right, looking proud. Another stood at her left - they kept turning away and tugging at their collar, like the depiction was leaving them bothered.

As Fitz walked closer the crowd fell back slightly to let her through; there was a ripple as hats were removed, and bows were performed. Some people were so engrossed in what Stormsong was saying that the appearance of the Lord Admiral was a startling surprise - those compliments were particularly jerky.

Stormsong broke off just as she was miming mandibles, turning the gesture into a twirling spin and a jaunty wave. “My Lord Admiral! And Jess - welcome, welcome. Have you met my consorts?” She waved at the two people flanking her.

“I haven’t had that pleasure,” said Fitz, turning to them and nodding. Jess inclined her head gracefully. They bowed deeply in return.

“Congratulations to you both!” said Stormsong, beaming. “Three years married! Such lucky sailors.” She leaned back against the rail, tapping a finger against her lips. “And industrious as well. The ocean told me you’re building it a new western lighthouse? - how delightful! It is very excited about trying to swallow it whole.”

Below them, the ocean crashed out its approval.

Fitz smiled. “Yes, it told me so as well. The Inspector of Lighthouses will issue the builders extra wet-weather gear.” She paused, tilting her head in puzzlement. “Speaking of shadows and water, how is Wobbles this evening?”

“Wobbles is such a good entity,” sang out Stormsong.

There was a splashy sound from overside.

Stormsong leaned a little over the rail and into the darkness. “Such a good entity,” she crooned. “One who is definitely behaving themselves by not wrecking Mariner’s Row.” She took out a piece of crystalline rock, flinging it at random over the side. There was another splashy sound.

The partner tugged at their collar again.

Behind them the band struck up a courtly tune; couples began pairing off.

“Ooooh,” said Stormsong appreciatively. “Will you excuse me, my Lord Admiral? Eli is going to invite me to dance.”

“I am,” the person on the left agreed happily.

Fitz glanced over at the dance floor, raising an eyebrow at Jess, who smiled but shook her head.

“Enjoy your dance, Lady Stormsong,” said Fitz, turning back to her. “If it is convenient for you, perhaps you could come back aboard Tiragrade tomorrow? We’ll organise this year’s Tidetithe then.”

Stormsong’s feet were already tapping; her arms moved languidly through the air. “Very good, my Lord Admiral. Enjoy your party.”

Fitz once again offered Jess her arm, walking towards another group of guests. Muted bosun’s whistles from the waist spoke of further important personages arriving; Fitz sighed softly - the night was still young. Everyone would have to been spoken with at least once over the course of the
evening, barring some catastrophe.

Beside her, Jess had been looking over the crowd, presumably to determine where best the Lord Admiral should walk next. Suddenly she stiffened - her ears flattened. “No,” she said, her face coldly furious. “He wouldn’t dare.” She straightened to her full height, her hand tightening on Fitz’s arm.

Fitz dropped her hand to her cutlass, looking around for trouble - her heartbeat sped up. But nothing seemed amiss. The mainsail was still holding off the rain, the dancing was sprightly, and no one was screaming, or running anywhere. Fitz let her hand fall back to her side, frowning in confusion. Out on the dance floor was Stormsong in her robes, dancing with Eli to whatever tune was playing in her head - over by the mast there was Galadin in his suit, cocking his ears at a laughing Captain Conrad - there walking over from the entry-port was Prince Kael’Thas, dressed in a Kul Tiran Navy cloak.

Jess’s face practically radiated ice; her ears slid down the closer Kael’Thas came, until they were entirely horizontal. Her posture, by contrast, grew taller and straighter with each oncoming step. Fitz looked between them in confusion; Jess ignored this, giving a short, perfunctory bow to her Sovereign Prince. The only sound was the band, the guests, and the rain.

If Prince Kael’Thas found this strange, he didn’t say so. Instead he smirked lightly, and inclined his head in acknowledgement. His long ears cocked forward. “My Lord Admiral. What a wonderful party - and so good of you to declare your ship a merchantman for the duration.”

Fitz nodded back, frowning. The ear gestures did not seem like a good sign. “Of course - a small enough token in return for your presence. How have you found the evening?”

“Most invigorating,” he purred, twitching his cloak. His ears fluttered.

Beside her, Jess’s face was a blank mask - except for her ears, which remained horizontal. Fitz carefully suppressed a wince; Jess’s hand was still on her arm, and her grip had tightened. Aside from this, she might as well have been made from stone. Every visible part of her was still.

Kael’Thalas smirked again; his ears twittered.

“Well, it’s good you’re having fun,” said Fitz, puzzled. “Do you…”

“Why, my Lord Admiral!” Kael’Thas gasped, twirling his cloak. “I am shocked - scandalised! - that you would offer to dance with me again in this exact moment! But yes, I accept.”

He reached forward, picked up her other arm, then took it. His ears cocked forward again.

Jess’s face was white under the pale light of the storm lanterns; her expression was neutral, aside from the fire which blazed in her eyes. The only thing that moved were her ears, which slowly swept back until they were pointing almost directly behind her. Finally, she carefully let go of Fitz’s other arm, tucking her hands behind her back.

For a single, breathlessly awkward moment, Kael’Thas and Jess just stood and stared at one another.

Then Kael’Thas tugged a little, and Jess stepped back. With a final confused look at them both, Fitz swept the Prince out onto the dance floor.

There wasn’t that much time for talking after that - Fitz engineered the dance that way specifically. Kael’Thas didn’t resist. Indeed, he seemed to delight in the slow whirls, the deep dips, and the splendid Z-shapes they traced along the floor - his cloak often trailed out, billowing in ways which suggested he had fastened it to do so. He caught her eye frequently, ears occasionally fluttering, smirking in a way Fitz deeply mistrusted.
Jess appeared at Fitz’s side almost before the end of the dance. Her face was hard; her ears were slanted back at precisely forty-five degrees. “Excuse me, my Prince. It is the minuet.”

“Do not let me stand between you,” Kael’Thas said smugly, backing away. He turned, his cloak flaring out again.

Jess picked up Fitz’s hands, and placed them firmly on her waist - then she deliberately stepped forward. Her ears flicked back and forward. When the music struck up, Fitz found herself dancing a lot more closely than she had anticipated - indeed, any closer would have been quite scandalous.

Jess muttered something inaudible in liquid Elvish, then took over the lead. Fitz followed gracefully, and moved easily through the dance; Jess’s ears were still moving in all directions. This seemed like a bad sign.

The first movement ended. The second began.

Fitz cleared her throat lowly, then moved close. “Are you angry with me?”

Jess started, missing a step; her ears flipped back up in surprise, then she caught herself, and smoothly drew back and away, plunging into the intricate roundels.

They came together, and Jess leaned forward. “You are wonderful and gallant.”

The dance took them away from each other again - when they reunited, Jess looked deeply into Fitz’s eyes. “My Prince is a jackanape and an arse.”

“I see,” said Fitz, relieved.

They spun away again.

When they came back together, Fitz clasped her wife firmly, and took back the lead. The footwork was complex - slowly, Jess’s ears relaxed and their combined steps became more smooth and intimate. When it came, Fitz ignored the music’s instructions for them to break apart, and Jess didn’t seem inclined to press the point.

The final movement ended with a sustained burr from the tuba. Fitz took her hat from her head, and pressed this over her heart. Jess bowed gravely in return, offering her arm. They left the floor together.

Fitz had moved them to the edge of the floor, anticipating they would only dance once; unfortunately, when it had become clear where she was going, the nearby area had filled with loitering nobles. Fitz hesitated to join any particular group of them - they had hungry expressions on their faces, like sharks looked at bait.

“Shall we go towards the mizzenmast?” asked Jess quietly. “Slowly, so they can get a look? Most of them only see us once a year.”

Fitz nodded, then tucked her hands deliberately behind her back. She began to walk. Around her, faces turned to stare in fascination. Paper fans fluttered, despite the icy air. Shoe-buckles shined, and the dance-floor slowly emptied as the guests sought to be available should the Lord Admiral wish to speak to them.

Fitz kept her her hands behind her back, nodding politely. “Sign up for the Navy,” she mumbled to herself. “Meet new people. See the world.”
Jess choked back a laugh; her ears twittered. She brought them to a halt by another brazier; the air around it shimmered with heat.

Fitz straightened her sash, placing one hand atop her cutlass, projecting strength and confidence. Around them, nobles began to queue up, chatting to one another casually, looking for all the world like that wasn’t what they were doing.

Galadin had been chatting to the Dowager Countess of Lorndale - he broke off that conversation with a smile, moving smoothly to begin the business of herding. The Baron of Westingham seemed to be first in the unofficial line; Fitz nodded her greetings, and tilted her head in attention. A few platitudes coupled to some stock phrases later, and he was walking away satisfied. Galadin quietly shuffled a Marquis over to take his place.

Fitz had no great talent at politics - but duty demanded her best efforts. She listened quietly to person after person, building a picture of the Admiralty from a hundred different competing viewpoints. Sometimes Jess would ask questions, or Galadin would flirt smoothly. At the end of the process, space was left for Fitz to think.

Often, Fitz wouldn’t say anything, and her silence was an end to the matter. For other petitioners, Fitz would nod thoughtfully, and Galadin would usher the person off to get more details. For a few - a very few - Fitz frowned, pulling out a stub of pencil and a tattered notebook.

None of the nobles stayed long. After a few minutes next to the brazier, sweat dotted many foreheads, and when they left it tended to be in the direction of the rail. Jess, golden and comfortable, graciously farewelled each as they departed. Fitz inclined her head steadily for each, also unruffled - after three years of marriage to an Elf, the boiling warmth from the briazer was as nothing.

The line of petitioners seemed endless though; Fitz’s silences grew longer, and her pencil appeared less and less. Finally, the splendidly dressed Lieutenant of the Watch flipped the sandtimer, and rang out two bells. Fitz’s feet were sore from standing, her coat was heavy, and her brain ached damnably from keeping everyone’s politics straight.

Jess smoothly turned away the next supplicant. “That’s quite enough of that for one evening.” She took Fitz’s arm, and pointed them towards the supper table. “Fancy a pie?”

“I will love you forever,” said Fitz, seriously.

They moved smoothly towards the waist; to reach the tables, however, they had to pass around the outside of the dance floor - the press of the crowd was thickest on that part of the deck. Guests did fall back, clearing space for their Lord Admiral - but their courtesy also displaced others. Fitz had to help pick up one woman from where she had backed over a decoratively rolled cable; a few steps later, and she spotted a baron sitting on one of the ship’s cannons - he’d hopped to prevent the crowd pushing him overside.

“My Lord Admiral?”

Fitz turned easily, wondering who was important enough to slip by Galadin - then smiled. “My Lord Ashvane.”

Robinson-Ashvane grinned at her, pushing through the crush; buffeted from every side, he doffed his hat and placed it over his heart. “It’s Graham, please. How are you, ma’am?”

“Hungry, I’m afraid,” said Fitz apologetically. “But Jess and I were just heading over to dinner. Would you like to join us?” She waved a hand, gesturing him into her patch of clear deck.
“I would be delighted,” grunted Ashvane, struggling to move forward.

Jess smiled, shaking her head slightly. “If you don’t mind, I might duck away and speak to my Flag Captain. Are you able to keep my wife out of trouble for a few minutes?”

Ashvane popped out of the crowd, hopping; he caught his balance, then laughed. “I’ll try.”

Fitz gave them both a flat look. Jess’s ears slanted forward; her eyes crinkled. With a jaunty touch to the brim of her hat, she plunged into the press, clearing a path off towards the stern.

“Congratulations to you on your wedding anniversary, my Lord Admiral,” said Ashvane, resettling his hat. “Father also sends his regards - and his thanks. The merchant-ship building programme has him very excited.”

“I’m glad Lord Ashvane is pleased,” said Fitz. “I am as well. We need to reestablish a strong merchant marine as soon as possible.” She resumed her walk towards the refreshments; the crowd once again began parting around her.

Ashvane hurried to stay in the bubble of her influence. “Father said this is why we need Proudmoores,” he said, trying to settle back his jacket. “For balance. Without the money made by the merchants there is no Navy - without the protection of the Navy, there could be no merchants.”

Fitz reached the table, and absentmindedly pondered the selection of food. “And Lady Stormsong would say that both need an ocean. Which pie contains the least pork, do you think?”

Ashvane blinked - smiled - then picked up a golden pie. Around them, guests were descending on the food like a flock of hungry seagulls. “Life holds many mysteries, my Lord Admiral.” He managed with difficult to snag a slice of bread, which he wrapped around his pie in the Quel’Thalan fashion. “This might well be one of them.”

Fitz frowned, and picked a pastry at random.

“I understand you are moving some of the First-Rates into Ordinary?” Ashvane managed to wrangle a sauce pot, stirring it with the teaspoon.

Fitz looked at her pie from every angle. “Keeping a First-Rate at sea is very expensive,” she said distractedly. “If we lay a few of them up, we can not only pay for the construction programme, we can also halt the current Press.” She took a bite - then sighed around a mouthful of ham.

“I know Admiral Grey has reservations,” Ashvane spread a thin layer of mustard.

“She’ll forgive me when the new-build frigates are delivered,” said Fitz, taking a step towards the rail. “Or perhaps at tax-time. Actually, is that her now?” Fitz pointed over his shoulder.

Ashvane turned to look - many standing around her turned to look as well. Fitz heaved the pie out into the night.

Overside, there was a pleased splashy sound.

Ashvane turned back to her.

“My mistake,” said Fitz contritely. “I was confused for a second.” She moved back towards the food table. “Anyway, we’re drafting the new peacetime Navigation Act, and I’d appreciate Ashvane eyes. Will you be free sometime this week?”
“Your servant, Lord Admiral,” Ashvane coughed. His voice was squeaky. Fitz looked at him evenly, then turned back to the food.

Ashvane swallowed what sounded suspiciously like a giggle, then turned; he made a large gesture towards the drinks table. The head steward standing over that way looked up, peered at them, then blanched. He turned, and pointed imperiously at two other white-clad servers - they rushed over, snatching up platters from the other end of the table, shoving through the crush of people.

“Would my Lord Admiral care for chicken?” one asked diffidently, sweeping the plate under her hand.

“I would be delighted - you are very kind.” Fitz snagged one of the pastries. “Thank you.” The server looked pleased, and relieved. The second server put a plate of sausage rolls down in strategic proximity to where she was standing - Ashvane brightened, and snaffled one for himself.

Fitz’s pie melted in her mouth, and she sighed in pleasure.

Out over the rail somewhere came a distant roar of approval. Fitz couldn’t see the source through the darkness, but undoubtedly it came from the great bulk of Proudmoore Keep. A full circus had been hired to lure people away - the deck of a man o’ war was extremely limited in size, and drastic measures had been deemed necessary.

Fitz contemplated her cousins with envy, eating her pie and staring out into the rain. “Did the Bucklands go to the circus, do you think? I’ve haven’t seen them here.”

“They actually sent their regrets, my Lord Admiral,” Ashvane said - then he scowled. “I believe they are holding their own gathering at Norwington.”

Fitz blinked, raising her eyebrows. “A bold move.”

“A stupid move,” muttered Ashvane. “At least the circus is meant to have clowns.” He glanced back over the dance floor, and his eyes widened - he suddenly stood very straight. “W-will excuse me, ma’am?”

Fitz looked round curiously. There was a woman she didn’t know, standing uncertainly by the mainmast; in contrast to the suits and glittering uniforms around her, she was dressed in a slightly battered merchant-navy uniform. Ashvane was transfixed; Fitz looked at his face, and smiled.

“Tides preserve you, Graham,” she said. “You should go - but might I make a suggestion? If you can, manufacture a slight delay.” She patted him on the back, genially. “The waltzes will start soon, and I have it on good authority they will be slow.”

Ashvane struggled to keep his face impassive. “Aye aye, ma’am.” He touched the brim of his hat, and strode away.

Fitz smiled again, wiping her greasy fingers with a towel. For the first time in the entire evening she found herself alone. The dance-floor was completely packed, and the crowd around the liquid refreshments had eased; space was still open around her, but because she wasn’t moving, no one was paying her much attention. The solitude wasn’t going to last long though - a few minor nobles were giving her considering looks again, and a couple were already starting to push through the crowd.

With a quick word of thanks to the stewards, Fitz hurried over to the drinks, and scooped up two glasses of rum. She then strode purposefully towards the stern.

The quarterdeck of the ship was blessedly devoid of guests - probably because it was fully exposed
to the weather - but the normal complement of watchstanders stood at the rail. The rain lashed down, and the wind drove the droplets across the deck. Without the carefully baffled hammock-stands, the warmth of the braziers, or the shelter of the rigged mainsail, it was freezing and unpleasant.

“All well, Lieutenant?” Fitz said, hopefully.

The Lieutenant in question touched the brim of her soggy hat, dropping respectfully back towards the wheel. Water dripped from her wet-weather gear. “A quiet night, ma’am.”

Fitz, who had no such wet-weather gear, deflated damply. “That is a shame. But we’ll be back at sea soon enough, I suppose - in the meantime, I’ll have some brandy sent down to the wardroom.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said the Lieutenant, touching the brim of her hat again.

“Carry on,” said Fitz. She headed further back, towards the stern.

There, in the darkness, was a hooded figure; it was stooped, shrouded, clutching a decorative staff. The sleet sprayed around him, and over him, and ran down towards the deck - but he stood inviolate amid the storm, completely dry.

“Brother Gull,” said Fitz; she placed her small offering of rum down at his feet. Then she straightened, and smiled at the other figure. “Ms. Jackson.”

“Ma’am,” said Jackson, knuckling her forehead. In her other hand she held a little whittling knife; wood-shavings littered the deck, and whirls splayed across the stern rail. Fitz passed her the second glass of rum, then joined in her huddling under a rigged tarp.

“How goes the night?” hissed Brother Gull; he leaned over, and picked up his glass. It disappeared under his hood.

“Tolerably well,” said Fitz. “I can’t stay long - the Emeritus Lady Proudmoore is due onboard any moment.”

“It’s pretty wet out today, ma’am,” said Jackson. She put down the rum, reached over, and gently took Fitz’s shoulder - blue lines flickered across them both. The water seeped out of the gorgeous formal uniform, sinking into Jackson’s hand. She casually tossed it overboard.

“Thank you, Jackson,” said Fitz gratefully. “That was a kindness - please send word if you wish for anything while you are here. And you also, Brother Gull.”

Jackson knuckled her forehead again - Brother Gull made no reply, just brooded into the ocean. Fitz bowed to them both, then took a moment to enjoy the salty smell of the sea and the crisp fresh air. When she left, her retreat back towards the main deck was a touch faster than dignity would normally allow - the rain really was fierce. When Fitz slipped back under the huge mainsail, she took a moment to shake herself dry - even then, water still dripped from her hems and cuffs.

The band, as promised, was playing a slow waltz - most people were dancing, and couples spread all the way to the mizzenmast. On the floor itself, Ashvane and his merchant mariner had eyes only on each other; by the mainmast, Captain Sprocket was dancing with Fitzstephanie, utterly dwarfed by her massive shoulders; over by the band, Mrs Fitzwilliams was leading Lady Stormsong; Galadin was somehow everywhere at once, moving between four partners in turn. Other familiar faces appeared, then disappeared back into the throng; the guests swept easily around the floor in a slow, deliberate maelstrom of colour.

Fitz stopped in the shadows at the top of the stairs, enjoying the peace and quiet of the night. Around
her the ocean boomed out. A flicker of movement caught her eye - Fitz leaned across the rail for a better look.

In a small nook, mostly hidden by shadows, Commodore Forster was limping slowly through the waltz’s steps - Grey was holding her gently. The darkness hid their expressions.

Fitz slowly leaned back again.

The party was going well; no danger threatened - no intrigue loomed - there was no need for desperate, reckless action. Any problems that had occurred were rightly being dealt with by the Flag Lieutenant, and Fitz was unaware of them.

It was all most unsatisfying. Fitz swallowed her frustration, suppressing the urge to pace; instead, she placed her hands on the rail, and looked out over the crowd.

“Surveying your Admiralty, my Lady?”

It was Galadin - he had somehow escaped his many admirers, and was climbing the stairs to meet her. He touched the brim of his hat.

“Not my Admiralty,” said Fitz, inclining her head in respect. “I’m just keeping it safe for a while.”

“Of course.” Galadin smiled, mounting the last few steps. “Derek must be what now, fifteen years of age?”

“Passed his Navy exams last week,” said Fitz proudly; she stood up straight. “I’m sending him out to the Western Station - five years at sea will do the trick. He’s going to be a fine sailor.”

Galadin’s ears laughed, and he gestured towards himself. “That boy is a quarter elf, you know. It might take him longer to mature than you think.”

Fitz ginned. “Just because it took you five hundred years. But the plan is foolproof - I’ll pack him off with only limited extra stores. He’ll learn patience once he runs out of jam.”

Galadin winked. “Being persuasive is also a useful skill.”

Fitz flashed him another grin. Galadin stepped up beside her, and together they turned to watched the guests dance in easy silence.

The pocket-watch was pulled back out from her pocket. Fitz nodded to herself. “The Lor… the Lady Proudmoore should be coming aboard soon.” Her other hand tightened on the rail.

“You are the Lord Admiral, ma’am,” said Galadin firmly. “And there is only one of those.”

“Hm,” said Fitz, quietly - her pocket-watch stayed open in her palm

They watched the party again, saying nothing. The hand of Fitz’s watch ticked slowly.

From down at the waist there was a sudden burst of excitement; a dozen sideboys assembled, as well as marines and bosun’s mates. The bosun bustled over, straightening their lines with a critical eye.

The guests started milling around, projecting indifference.

Then the pipes began to twitter, trilling madly. The indifference of the glittering throng grew more energetic.
Glorious and befeathered, Talanji, Princess of Zandalari, ascended to the deck at exactly eleven o’clock. The marines came to crashing attention; a small Zandalari flag broke under the Kul Tiran ensign. Guests looked anywhere but where she stood, studiously unimpressed.

Talanji ignored them all, watching her flag fly impassively; she then turned respectfully towards the quarterdeck and made a short gesture. Commander Porter stepped up to her, his hand on the brim of his hat. Talanji inclined her head, and took his arm - they walked down the aisle of saluting sideboys, in no great hurry.

Prince Kael’Thallas appeared like magic at the end of the line, Kul Tiran cloak swirling, sweeping her a bow. Talanji nodded, but kept walking. Two Tidesages followed her, honour-guards and jailors both.

“I see the Prince hasn’t given up hope of expanding the alliance in concrete ways,” said Fitz thoughtfully.

Galadin’s ears tilted ruefully. “That might be so, but he’s got an icicle’s chance in summer with her.”

They watched the Troll greet a few guests with graven dignity, before she passed behind the mainmast and out of sight.

The guests were in a pith of excitement now; the conversations could not have been more languidly casual. Some leaned against the rails - many faced exactly away from the entry-port - some even strolled towards the drinks table. The noise slowly died away, like the wind dying back beneath the tree boughs.

The bosun’s mates lined the rail, but their pipes were silent. They looked uncomfortable, but Fitz had given very specific orders. Beside them, the gleaming marines presented their arms, and the sideboys saluted. At a sharp gesture from the bosun, the band struck up the Kul Tiran anthem - the Tuba player carried the melody. Fitz took a deep breath.

Jaina Proudmoore ascended to the deck, dressed in a flowing robe; her iron-grey hair was neatly braided away from her face. Sylvanas jumped nimbly after her, sleek and dark in her Kul Tiran suit. Both gazed for a moment at the sulking bosun’s mates, then gathered themselves; the anthem continued as they walked down the line of sideboys. As they moved behind the mainmast, like Talanji, they passed out of sight.

The band slowly faded into silence again. The bosun’s lifted their pipes - then the shrill call of the Admiralty split the night again. Major-General Elodis Sagewood climbed up, then Elosai and Ithedis. A few other elves that Fitz didn’t recognise, some in uniforms. The group gathered itself together, then moved forward onto the crowded deck.

A flash of red and gold cut through the throng - then suddenly Jess was beside her family, touching the brim of her hat to her mother. There was the fluttering of multiple sets of delighted ears as the Sagewoods came together. Fitz watched fondly.

“Shall we greet our guests?” Galadin asked.

Fitz smiled, pushing back from the rail; Galadin dropped back a respectful half-pace. One last check of her attire was needed; Fitz went through the list automatically - sword straight, hat fashionably cocked, and her hair smoothed as much as it could be.

Then she was off, walking down the stairs and across the floor towards her most important guests.
Fitz was struggling to keep her pace to a stroll, and her face nonchalant - Jaina didn’t often come to sea anymore. Once again, the crowd parted for their Lord Admiral as she moved across the deck; Fitz was so distracted she didn’t notice she’d walked straight through the middle of the dance floor.

A clear space had formed naturally on the other side of the mizzenmast, mostly due to the scorching blaze of the brazier there; the Elves had taken station inside the warmth, laughing and talking. Jaina was standing well away from worst of the heat, hands behind her back; she was staring up into the rigging. Sylvanas watched her from the opposite site of the glowing coals - the expression on her face was indecipherable.

“Jaina,” said Fitz quietly, moving to her side. “I’m so glad you came.”

“My Lord Admiral,” said Jaina, looking her up and down - then she swept into a deep bow. Sylvanas didn’t hesitate either; she inclined her head, ears sweeping back. Over by the fire, ears cocked and heads turned - suddenly a variety of salutes and bows were being performed, and hats were coming off.

Fitz flinched, waving everyone up. “Please, please, please don’t do that.”

“There is an entire nation watching,” said Jaina, smiling faintly, remaining in her bow. “They are always watching.”

“Will it impress this nation if I die of embarrassment?” Fitz grumbled quietly; she held out both her hands, and Jaina took them, straightening.

“I guess we’ll find out.” Jaina smirked right into Fitz’s face.

Elvish ears all around them slanted forwards in amusement, and a few hands came up to hide smiles - all except those of Ithedis. Retirement clearly didn’t suit him; his eyes roved restlessly over the gathering, face impassive. His hand twitched, tapping his leg.

“My Lord Admiral?” Jess stepped forward, her eyes lingering. “You have something on your…” she reached over, brushing her hand over Fitz’s immaculate lapel - under her hand, the Quel’Thalan collar dog glinted.

Fitz smiled into twinkling grey eyes. Jaina was forgotten. Around them, ears fluttered, and faces crinkled in amusement.

“Ahem,” a steward said, venturing close. Fitz turned to him, and he paused, looking attentive; she nodded gratefully, and held up seven fingers.

The Quel’Thalans seemed sufficiently warmed by their brazier to start paying attention to the party around them - they chatted merrily, and occasionally they would wave, or call over friends. The maindeck was still packed with people, but the heat and the company provided a measure of space. They stared avidly when they believed Fitz wasn’t watching.

In turn, Ithedis was just as intently tracking the movements of the throng. Suddenly he stiffened, and leaned down to whisper something to his wife. Sylvanas jerked, and her ears shot up. Elosai glanced at him; ears sloping back, she peered out into the crowd as well. Then she whispered something to her daughter. Elodis gave the crowd a long, level look; her ears twitched.

“Jess?” asked Elodis, face smoothed into bland unconcern. “Is the Prince wearing…”

“Yes,” said Jess shortly, jerking her peacoat straight. “At my wedding anniversary. What a pillock.” Her ears pinned back for a quick second, before relaxing back into a deceptively casual angle.
Elodis’s face twitched; her ears also flattened briefly. The group was suddenly filled with stony faces, and ears waved stiffly. A low muttering rose, but it fell away.

Fitz was anxious; her most important guests did not seem to be enjoying themselves. Jaina was no help; indeed, she was paying no attention whatsoever to the world around her. Her gaze was focused up into the rigging again, looking wistful.

Thankfully at that moment the steward returned.

“My compliments to you all,” Fitz said hastily, taking the tray. “Mr Jones has brought a new whiskey to try - I was hoping you would indulge with me.”

Ears perked up, and faces brightened with interest. Fitz passed out the glasses carefully, then handed the tray back to the man with thanks. The new whiskey was a dark, golden colour. Two of the tumblers held a slightly paler whiskey - Fitz had given one of these to a still-distracted Jaina, and kept the other for herself.

Galadin sipped at his glass tentatively, staring deeply into space. He made a gasping sound - then his ears slowly started to wriggle. He took a longer, deeper sip.

Fitz gloated silently. The new whiskey was truly horrible. Bitter opening notes segued into a fruity-sweet flavour that was somehow also sour; it also had the harshest, most burning finish Fitz had ever had the misfortune to experience. As soon as she had spat out her only sip, she knew that Quel’Thalans would love it.

The group broke up into buzzing conversations, drinking contentedly - the tension which had previously infected the air appeared to have vanished.

Fitz tucked her hand into her pocket, casually walking up to her mother-in-law. “General Sagewood, I am glad your duty could spare you for tonight. How is the Zandalari occupation going?”

“It’s Elodis, please,” she replied, sipping appreciatively. “We’re family.”

Fitz nodded awkwardly, closing her hand around the paper in her pocket. Across the circle, Jess’s ears canted up, and she smiled brightly; she began making her slow way towards them both.

“Speaking of family,” Elodis continued. “Giramar sends his regrets; he has returned to Quel’Thalas. In his absence, Vereesa has assumed command of the occupying garrison, and so neither could make it today. She did tell me to carry how grateful her whole staff are for the engineers you sent.”

“The sooner we build it, the sooner we can use it,” said Fitz, putting her still-full glass back on a tray.

Sylvanas had also drifted closer, stopping next to Jess. “What are you building?”

“A port,” Fitz said. “We set fire to the port of Zandalar during the war - but now it’s peacetime. Trade has stopped, and importing supplies is a problem. Kul Tiras will rebuild the docks for civil use.”

Jess sipped her whiskey. “And add moorings for a permanent Kul Tiran squadron.”

Sylvanas looked intrigued.

“Giramar had the same idea, but for roads. Half the garrison is out rebuilding the highway network.” Elodis grimaced ruefully. “It turns out Zandalar is quite a large island - who knew? My dreams lately have featured a lot of paving stones.”
Sylvanas smiled.

“Enough shop-talk,” said Elodis, waving her hand. “What else has happened since last we spoke? Have Grey and Forster admitted they’re in love? Have the Bucklands stopped suing you yet?”

Fitz groaned. “Not a chance on either front.” She signalled to the steward to bring her back the whiskey.

A couple of ears swiveled towards them, and the scattered groups drifted closer again. Bright blue eyes stared at her avidly from a dozen directions - elves really were terrible gossips. Jaina had actually moved further away; now she was over by the food. A couple of acquaintances had caught her attention; they seemed to be having a lively discussion about gardening.

Sylvanas’s eyes slid across her, then returned to Fitz; they were bright with interest. Her ears twitched. “What’s the current suit?”

“They’re arguing my adoption was illegal,” said Fitz, shifting uneasily. The other topic seemed like dangerous waters. “The Admiralty Court dismissed the case with prejudice, and so they’ve appealed.”

The Quel’Thalans considered this - some frowned. Then ears began slanting every which way in confusion.

“Doesn’t the Lord Admiral rule on those types of appeals?” asked Elosai hesitantly.

“Yes,” sighed Fitz. “The paperwork was put on my desk this past week.”

Jess placed a hand on her arm, flashing a bright smile. “Do review it thoroughly, dear.”

“Hmm,” said Fitz, clasping her hands behind her back.

“Excuse me, my Lord Admiral,” said Jaina, from just over her shoulder. “Your pardon, but could I have a moment of your time?”

Fitz automatically moved to touch the brim of her hat, but caught herself just in time. She dropped her hand again, smoothly. “Of course, Lady Proudmoore.”

Like magic, the Sagewood’s dispersed: Elosai spotted Lady Stormsong across the deck, and hurried across to discuss library borrowings; Elodis vanished aft to talk to Captain Conrad. Ithedis simply stalked away without any excuse.

“I’ll just be over there,” said Jess, pointing towards a group of rowdy young nobles. They had found a keg of rum somewhere, and their red faces suggested they’d been enjoying themselves. The gathering was also the perfect distance away - far enough to hear nothing, close enough to return quickly.

Sylvanas hesitated, cocking her ears at Jaina.

“Will you fetch me my spectacles, beloved?” Jaina said calmly. “I believe Mr Clyburn found them after I had vacated the cabin - he said he would hold onto them for me.”

“Of course,” said Sylvanas, giving them both an unreadable look. She bowed to Fitz, then stalked aft towards the hatchway.

Jaina made a short gesture towards the rail - Fitz raised her brow, but moved gratefully away from
the brazier and towards the ocean. The breeze ruffled Fitz’s hair as they reached it.

Jaina also seemed to welcome the play of the wind across her face; the elves really did like the world uncomfortably warm. “How are you holding up?” she said, turning to look at Fitz.

Fitz put her hands lightly against the rail, considering. She stared down into the choppy waters of the harbour. Above them the rain beat down on the rigged sail, sluicing into a thick stream which poured from the edge.

“It’s different,” Fitz said, finally. “I’m still learning.”

Jaina leaned back against the rail, studying her face. “You are finding it difficult?”

“Yes,” said Fitz. “Very difficult.”

Jaina deliberately looked up into the rigging - Fitz followed her gaze. Across the great ship’s forest of yards spars, huddling under the sails, were the dark silhouettes of sailors. Some of them sat astride the yardarms, staring down at the party; others were methodically checking lines and fastenings, making sure the sail didn’t come down. Every single one of them was silent and disciplined, keen eyes watching everything around and below them.

“They have no doubts, you know,” said Jaina, softly. “Even if you do. The song they’re singing has already reached Quel’Thalas.”

There was a slight pause, and then Fitz slowly turned to Jaina - it was a struggle to keep the horror off her face. “Please tell me you’re joking?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” Jaina looked surprised - then smirked again, lounging back against the rail. “It’s an outward shanty - I’m told it was written sometime last year.”

Fitz stared blankly at her, then turned blindly out to sea. “How many Krakens?”

“Several,” said Jaina, still smirking. “It’s quite catchy.”

“Well,” Fitz sighed heavily, then glanced back up at the sailors in the rigging. “At least my shanty won’t have so much kissing.”

“How sad for you,” murmured Jaina, taking a sip of whiskey. Fitz contemplated this broodily.

There was a sudden, wooden crash, and a chorus of increasingly strident yelling, from many different voices. Jaina jerked around - Fitz stepped out in front of her, hand dropping to her cutlass.

Across the deck, the young men around the rum barrel had erupted into violence, and those around them had been pulled in. One had taken a wild swing at another - then friends on both sides had launched at one another. People were pushing and shoving, lashing out with fists and boots; people were on the ground; the rum-barrel had been knocked over, and the dregs washed across the deck. Some of the glittering guests were flinching back, moving hurriedly towards the stern - others were pressing up, yelling excitedly, or even joining in.

Jess had been standing right next to the rum barrel, at the heart of the conflict; she was attempting to push her way out of the mad scramble. But the way was blocked - Fitz could see her ears frantically waving above the melee. A man was shoved backwards into her - he turned with a snarl, grabbing her red jacket, and she jerked as he literally dragged her into the fray - then she repaid him with a truly vicious elbow hook. In an instant, she was engulfed in a dozen drunk Kul Tirisans. Heavy fists and blows rained down everywhere.
Fitz leapt forward, grabbing her sash and ripping it off with no regard for its value - she almost tripped over it as she lunged forward across the deck, peeling off her jacket and, dropping it headlessly to the ground. There was more shouting - Fitz was amazed to find it was from her own throat.

She’d made it six steps before arms wrapped around her waist, dragging her down with a crash onto the deck. A huge Proudmoore Guardsman was lying on top of her, yelling instructions to other uniformed figures. Fitz saw a flash of red hair streak forward towards the brawl. Whistles blew shrilly.

“Get off!” Fitz snarled; she kicked out. The Guardsman grunted, rolling away.

Fitz leapt up, looking for her cutlass before giving up on it and rushing forward again - but a line of Guardsmen now blocked her from the fight. Jess was standing in the middle of the fray. She pulled up a stool from the deck, bringing it down sharply on the head of a man trying to punch her; then she shoved another man away, tripping up a heavy-set woman rushing them both. She kicked another man, sending him backwards into the press - a fourth yelled something incomprehensible. Jess decked him with a massive haymaker.

For an instant, Jess stood in a circle of fallen figures, panting, jacket ripped and knuckles bloody. The men and women around her backed away, leaving her victorious.

Something hot and thick burned through Fitz’s viens; tearing her eyes away from Jess was quite impossible.

Whistles blew again - then the area was swamped by Guardsmen. Young men and women were dragged roughly away towards the prow to dry out, most protesting loudly. A loblolly boy was standing in the rain just beyond the for-mast, hurriedly laying out his tools.

Jaina was somewhere behind her. The guests were talking excitedly with each other. The Flag Lieutenant was standing at the mizzen, face completely white. Fitz didn’t care about any of that.

There was only Jess, who strode out of the confusion talking seriously to a Sergeant of the Guard; her uniform jacket was open, the stays torn, her chest heaved with exertion, and her face was flushed. She broke off as Fitz approached, and stepped closer cautiously. Her ears cocked forward.

Fitz still couldn’t speak - she could only stare - her hands fisted at her side so she wouldn’t do something rash.

“My Lord Admiral?” asked Jess, uncertainly.

It was the final straw. Fitz abruptly stepped forward, seized the ripped jacket, and pulled her into a kiss, full of teeth and fire. It was ruthless, inelegant, and clumsy. After a moment of pure confusion, Jess melted into it.

When they broke apart; Fitz was panting lightly. Jess looked totally bewildered - she stared into Fitz’s face for a few moments, before visibly taking ahold of herself. The guests were clapping politely, and a few people were nodding. A few of the less than sober of cousins were whistling and laughing - this was echoed from the rigging above.

Pushing through the press, the Sagewoods made their way to the front of the crowd. Fitz watched them come from the corner of her eye.

Elosai and Ithedis looked impassive, but Elodis stared at Fitz in confusion. She turned to her father, and whispered lowly. “Do… do all bar brawls end like this?”
“Yes,” said Ithedis just as lowly, nodding slightly. “The Lord Admiral is quite restrained.”

Fitz didn’t care about Elves and their underappreciation for such a wild barfight; she was Kul Tiran to the bone, and it was an effort of will to not pull Jess back in. Her hands were still tangled in Jess’s jacket - those fingers didn’t really want to leave. Fitz’s own jacket was lying somewhere behind her on the ground, with the large golden sunburst - some order or other from Quel’Thalas - probably dented. Fitz struggled to think through these facts, as she stared up into smokey grey eyes. She traced her fingers across Jess’s remaining stays.

“What the…?” said Sylvanas. “W-wha…”

Fitz gritted her teeth, dragging her eyes away, and looking back down the deck.

Sylvanas had come back up through the aft hatch and now stood by the mast, holding a bottle of wine and a pair of spectacles - these dangled from her hands. Jaina walked towards her - but Sylvanas barely paid any attention. Her ears slowly drooped. She was fixated by the wreckage, the groaning people lying across the deck, and the battered, scruffy Jess. Her face was incredulous.

“But… but…”

Jaina patted her arm, looking sympathetic. “There, there.”

“Five hundred years,” Sylvanas said, disbelievingly. “Five hundred years I’ve been waiting. And I missed it?”

Jaina patted her arm again. Then she slowly unhooked the glasses from Sylvanas’s unresisting grasp.

“My Lord Admiral,” Jess murmured, drawing Fitz’s attention back to the matter at hand. “Are we done for the evening?”

“No,” husked Fitz; she cleared her throat. “No. But I’m certainly done with having an audience.”

Jess started again - then her face brightened. Slowly, her ears slid forward into a particularly rakish angle.

“Galadin,” Fitz said flatly.

“Leave it to me, my Lord Admiral,” said Galadin, his ears flicking back and forth, already motioning to the Lieutenant. “I’ll clean up everything here.”

Fitz let go of Jess’s jacket, and offered her arm instead, eyes blazing. “Give my apologies to my guests. But I’m sure they will understand.”

Tomorrow would bring politics, and economics, and problems only the Lord Admiral could solve. The Fleet would sail, and the great pennant would stream above them all. Tomorrow the ocean would roar and the wind would blow; there would be action, and sailing, and adventure.

Tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

FIN.
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