

The Heart of Admiration

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/24341695) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/24341695>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Black Sails
Relationships:	Charles Vane/Reader , Charles Vane/Original Female Character(s)
Character:	Charles Vane
Additional Tags:	Slow Burn , Mutual Pining , Sharing a Bed , Fake Marriage , all the best tropes get worked in , no smut until the end
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-05-23 Completed: 2023-04-30 Words: 36,249 Chapters: 11/11

The Heart of Admiration

by [ifinkufreaky](#)

Summary

Captain Vane finds himself falling for a rival crew's mate, and does what he can to bring her closer. It will take more than that to win her heart, for trust must be earned, and cannot come easily.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

I was prompted to write: "one where Vane falls for a highly competent female pirate, maybe from a rival crew? Maybe some mutual pining before they get together? We know he's a big softy underneath it all, but he's also had his heart kicked around so how would he approach this?"

There it is. That way you bite your lip, when you pause to consider your next words. That plump little lip bounces free as you take a breath to answer Jack's question, and Vane feels his body warm. That must be the reason he's so drawn to you.

"But the manufactured items are harder to fence," you're telling Jack now, your fine brows knitting together adorably as you haggle with the *Ranger's* quartermaster. "So despite what you're saying about the division of the plunder, the value is not in fact equal, not in practice, because the factory stamps make them easier to trace. Especially the silverware. My contacts don't pay well for that sort of trouble, those that would even take them at all."

You're smart, too. Captain Fisher was quite fortunate to have landed you as his quartermaster, Vane muses as he nurses his ale, running his thumb back and forth across the edge of his cup. It's always a pleasure to listen to you negotiate. Perhaps you're even the reason why Vane agreed to work with your crew on this job in the first place.

Not that his own quartermaster isn't quick-witted, too. "Melt down the bloody silver then," Jack snaps at your quibbling.

"Another expense," you retort, "see what I mean?" You sit back, adjusting your coat. The brocade is quite fetching, and flatters you well as you lean arrogantly on one jaunty elbow. Just feminine enough to stir a man's loins, but there's nothing that looks weak about you. Vane knows that's something that draws him to you, too. "We'll take the tobacco, instead. Easy enough to 'damage' the customs stamps."

Jack scowls. Vane has half a mind to lift you into his lap right here, though he knows you'd strike him directly across the face for it. And probably try to call off the whole deal, at that.

Not that you're negotiating from a position of strength. "Why should we give you the more profitable portion of the take?" Vane asks, leaning forward and regarding you from under his brow. He sees your eyes widen for just a moment after they meet his. He's not sure what the reaction means, but it's something, and Vane thrills at having the power to shake you. "We were the ones that emptied our hold to haul it all back. A rushed job, that wasn't without loss of value."

You take a deep breath before answering him, your breasts swelling tight and high above your corset. God, his palms are just itching to cover them and then make you do that again. “That,” you arch one perfect brow, “is not my problem. You have the bigger ship, it made sense that you would carry the plunder back to Nassau, but we have just as many guns as you, and just as many fighters.”

“Is that a threat?” Vane growls. Not because he’s truly feeling belligerent, mostly just because he enjoys riling you up.

“Charles, please,” Jack interrupts with placating hands, before you can respond to the escalation with more than a dark flash of your eyes. “Two against one is hardly sporting, for a civilized negotiation such as the one we are having right here. Why don’t we just order another round, and wait for Captain Fisher to arrive.” One expressive eyebrow raised, he flashes a look at you. “Your captain is joining us, is he not?”

Vane barely suppresses a shark’s smile. Everyone here knows that your captain is currently otherwise engaged. Though, outmaneuvered little thing that you are, you do not know that Jack and Vane are already wise to the reason for your captain’s absence, and have already taken measures. All Vane is waiting for now is a signal from his men.

“Of course,” you say in a clipped tone. “I can’t imagine what the delay might be.” Your eyes flit from Jack to Vane and back again. “Shall I go fetch him?”

You start to rise and Vane’s hand shoots out, clamping your wrist into the table. “No need for that, love.” He holds on a little longer than is necessary, even as you sit back down. He finds that he is both aroused and ashamed at his ability to make you nervous. If he wants a woman, he wants to conquer her, but some small voice inside him is whispering that with you, this should not be the way. He lets your hand go. “We can negotiate without him.”

You fix him with a level look, gathering your confidence as your posture straightens before him again. You nod. “What I was saying was, regardless of the larger size of your ship and the logistical consequences on the cargo storage, we were equal partners in the take. I am simply making certain we are compensated as such. The Ranger would not have been able to subdue the merchant’s escort without us.” There’s that fire in your belly again. That, that’s what it really is, Vane muses as he watches your lips form hot words. The reason that he cannot stop thinking of you at night. “Which brings me to my next point: adjusting the shares based on my crew’s heavier losses.”

Jack’s brows knit together again. “Are you suggesting we should be creating something other than an equal split now, after the job is already done?” He looks to his captain for support.

Vane sits back, taking a long pull off his tankard of ale. None of this matters anyway, not if Jack’s hunch about Captain Fisher turns out to be right. And look, there’s his man now, giving him the high sign from the doorway of the tavern. Vane stands up abruptly, letting his body crowd your personal space. “Let’s take a walk, shall we? And then we’ll come back to the idea of what kind of shares your crew deserves.”

He looks down to see the blood draining from your face as you follow his eye to the ugly grin on his crewman’s face. He offers you his arm, and you have no choice but to take it.

“Don’t be afraid, dove,” he says as he marches you to the front door, though he regrets the condescension of the pet name instantly. You are much more than a shivering bird. “Jack and I are open to striking up new negotiations with you, personally. Your captain, however...” he trails off as the two of you step out into the street, Jack close behind. Several of the *Ranger’s* best men have your captain held between them, his bloodied head drooping in defeat.

“Caught ‘im and his crew sneaking onto the Ranger, Captain,” Vane’s man reports. “Just like you said.”

Captain Fisher coughs, a wet and ugly sound that suggest internal damage. Vane smirks at the justice of that, and turns to you.

You are scowling up at him, that delicious lip thrust out in a last defiant effort. “Couldn’t let you hold all the chips while we quibbled over how they’d be split up,” you explain. There is very little remorse in your voice. “The captain was only attempting to secure our fair share.”

Vane presses a hand to his heart, pretending to feel a wound. “You didn’t think you could trust me?” He had already told himself it didn’t hurt, hours ago when he had figured out what your crew was up to. Why should you behave any differently than anyone he had ever met? You were only protecting your own, as any good leader should. His grip on your arm tightens.

“We were, in point of fact, going to deal fairly with you,” Jack interposes. The anger is showing on his face as well. “But now...”

“Now you get the monster you were expecting,” Vane finishes for him, voice low, purring over the rage that always feels so good to indulge. He nods toward his men. “Kill everyone that was caught boarding our ship. Don’t make a scene, but don’t take too long with it. Then board the *Starling* and seize her. No one takes over Fisher’s crew. The men that are left will have to find work elsewhere.”

Vane sees real fear in your eyes now. You swallow it, and face him calmly. “Am I to die too?”

Your bravery. Your spirit. Perhaps that, that is what is at the heart of his admiration for you. Warmth tempers the high of Vane’s rage, the spiraling emotions conspiring into a rushing feeling he hopes will never end.

“I believe there is room to talk about that,” Jack says to you, stepping closer and making Vane realize you two have been locking eyes without speaking for a potentially awkward length of time. “Seeing as your attempt to distract us with a false negotiation here in this tavern did not, in fact, distract or mislead us at all, given that we were wise to the ploy all along, a case could be made that you have not, in fact, done us any ill that must be answered.”

You tear your eyes away from Vane’s to regard Jack with suspicion. “Why?” Your voice is sharp and true. Shrewd even when others would be begging and desperate. What a woman Vane has found in you.

“Join us,” Vane blurts, feeling like his tongue is tripping over his heavy need for you to say yes. “You deserve a better crew than that one.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This story is being told in a series of drabbles, so there will be varying time jumps between chapters. The prompt line for this one was "I thought they'd killed you. I lost my temper."

The sea spray leaves the taste of salt on your lips as the ship crashes through another unexpected wave. It feels good to be sailing again, even with a crew you were all but press-ganged to join, and even with the weather now threatening to turn dangerous.

You had pled for mercy for Captain Fisher's life, and those of his men. They had been your crew for going on five years, and though the plan to steal the cargo from Vane's ship had been a foolish one, you couldn't just let them die for it. That moment in which you watched Captain Vane's eyes smolder while he considered your plea had been the longest one of your life. "So long as they leave Nassau," he had finally said. "They leave, and you stay."

You watch your new captain now, down on the deck below, alternately barking orders at the men and peering up at the darkening clouds moving in from the southeast. His heavy brow and bold cheekbones give his face a rugged sort of handsomeness, like he was carved by gods more primal than the Christian one, out of tougher stuff than other men. No one in Nassau knew where Vane had come from, only that he rose through the ranks of Blackbeard's crew and barreled through the island like a storm.

He catches you looking at him, and responds only by calmly staring back. He looks at you too much. He has not yet been crude, but you fear you know what it means regardless.

It's hard for a woman to survive as a pirate without becoming somebody's woman. It would be safer that way, too. Easier. Anne Bonny may be an absolute hellcat, but surely the place she's carved out on this crew stays comfortable because everyone knows she's the quartermaster's woman. It would be easier to have that kind of protection yourself, too, but the idea rankles you. You joined the pirating life because you wanted independence. You made it on the last crew because of your quick wit, and because your skills with celestial navigation were unique and indispensable. Although it helped that the captain was married to your sister and treated you like kin.

You had assumed those skills were the reason Vane wanted you for his own crew, as well. Very few people in this life are educated enough to read the charts and almanacs, to decipher the celestial bodies and figure a precise location in the middle of the ocean. But he looks at you too much. This may be an uglier trap than you had thought.

A lock of hair that escaped your braid flies across your face. The prevailing winds are changing. Perhaps the only thing this particular long look signifies is Vane's awareness that this storm means the course you've been marking out for him will have to be corrected. The course that, if the weather doesn't blow you too far off from, will take you to meet the intended course of a merchant vessel, whose schedule just happened to fall into Vane's hands, much farther out from land than most pirating crews would ever hope to be able to find.

You're already up here to take the noon measurements, but the sun is not quite at its zenith. Once you have the number, a flurry of calculations will follow, and you'll give Vane your course corrections based on precisely where on the open ocean this ship is located right now, and where the other ship is most likely to be. But you're already feeling extra tension in your chest looking at those thick clouds; if they cover the sun before you're certain it has reached its apex, your faulty measurements could throw your course off by miles. And if that storm catches the *Ranger*, all you can do is wait for the skies to clear to figure where the hell it has blown you. Your chest tightens further when you see the captain mounting the steps to come up to your deck.

Even though you had intended to wait a little longer to take the next measurement, you find yourself lifting the backstaff toward the horizon again while you listen to Vane's boots approaching you from behind. It's careful work, to line up the sun's shadow as the deck rolls in the waves. And it's only getting more difficult as the nearby storm makes the sea choppier.

"Nineteen point three, and..." You mutter the numbers under your breath as you get them, not wanting to forget the figures before you have a chance to write them down. "Eighty-two point four."

"Is that what you were expecting?" Vane is standing so unexpectedly close behind you that you jump at the sound of his rumbling voice.

You step away from him, quite deliberately, as you answer his question. "I'm not certain that's the precise number we're looking for, but yes, I believe we are still on-course."

Vane closes a little of the space you had drawn between your bodies. But not enough to be worthy of further correction. "You look worried."

The last thing a woman trying to hold her own on a ship should do, is admit vulnerability. You roll your eyes at him. "Fuck off. This is not my first storm at sea."

A smile cracks the captain's stony face at your response. "Fair enough." He looks to the south. "We should be able to skirt the edge of that one without much difficulty." His heavy gaze falls back on you, a sudden gust of wind pulling at his long, twisted locks. "But it will take us off the course we've been plotting."

Usually you have no trouble looking a man in the eye; it's something particular to Vane that has you dropping your head. You draw your little notebook from its pocket to excuse the movement. "Now who's the one that's worried? It's no problem. I can correct for that just as soon as we get another sighting after it's passed." You flip to an open page, and lift your pencil. *19.3*, you write, and then... "Fuck me, what was that last number?" Normally you have a good memory. The captain is just being too damn distracting.

You hear Vane chuckle. You refuse to look up. “If I tell you, do I get to?”

It takes you a half a second to run back through the precise words you just said, and catch his meaning. Your voice turns acid. “If you are not going to be helpful, then get out of my way. I am attempting to do the very work you pressed me into service on this ship in order to perform.”

Vane rocks back on his heels. “Is that what I did.”

Your exhale is a sharp burst of irritation, on many, many levels. “You can’t say you gave me much of a choice, about joining this crew.”

You risk a glance directly at Vane’s face again. He looks pensive, behind the general air of aggressiveness that usually suffuses his features. “You’ll be happier here,” he growls out after completing his thought.

You arch an eyebrow at him, just about as high as it will go.

“You were wasted on the *Starling*.”

~*~

Every pirating crew hopes to avoid violence. They ready themselves for it, bristling with threat and menace as they wait for the ships to close tight enough for boarding, but the most preferable option is negotiation, always, with a prompt surrender on the part of their quarry before any blood is spilt.

That ideal outcome is not playing out today. This merchant vessel’s crew must have been largely made up of former naval soldiers, given the competence with which they are resisting Vane’s vanguard, and the discipline you are observing in their ranks from atop the *Ranger*’s quarter deck.

“Get belowdecks,” Jack Rakham, standing by your side and watching the battle just as closely, suddenly urges you.

“What? Why?” you bristle on reflex.

Jack interrupts himself to bark orders across the locked sides of the ships: “Watch those riflemen! Aft!” Three men peel off the main fighting to interrupt the knot of sailors that Jack had spied frantically reloading near the back of the other vessel.

You raise your chin as one of Vane’s crewmen severs a man’s arm at the elbow with a deft strike of his axe. “I assure you, I am not squeamish.” You are accustomed to observing the fighting from one of the higher decks with your old crew. On just about every run, unless... Jack’s fingers close tightly around your elbow. With a little shove, he directs your gaze.

A knot of enraged seamen are pushing through the *Ranger*'s men, dangerously close to one of the gangplanks connecting the ships. "If they get across, you're a target," Jack says sternly. "Seeing as you are not disguising your sex. Hide yourself. Now."

You'd been held hostage once before. It was not a pleasant experience, for you or for your crew. You forgive Jack for shoving you as you start to make your way down.

The fear starts to set in as you scramble toward the ladder that leads to the lower deck; enemy boots stomp onto the *Ranger* just before your head disappears down the hatch. You hope that Jack, or some of the other men still aboard, notice in time to resist them, but that officer's eyes landed on you with heavy interest as you scurried away. It seems likely they are indeed intent on a hostage.

The long knife you keep belted to your waist is in your hand as you scurry through the belly of the *Ranger*. You whip your head and turn back and forth in the muted light belowdecks, changing your course more than once in a way that you are dimly aware signifies panic. This is not your ship. This is not your home. You don't know where to hide in this unfamiliar place.

Booted feet are pounding somewhere behind you. No way to know if they are friend or foe. And would your new crewmen even care enough to defend you? You duck into the doorway ahead of you and then put your back to the wall beside it, clutching your knife to your chest and readying to ambush anyone that comes through after you.

Your eyes land on a bed, bolted into the bulkhead. You've somehow chosen the captain's cabin in which to hide. Not that it means much more than that you ran straight to the back of the ship. You're much more concerned with getting your breathing under control, until your great gasps are not making quite so much noise, so you can listen to the sounds of approaching feet.

A figure steps through the door, and your knife flashes out with barely any choice on your part. You bury it almost to the hilt in his chest. You may not be one to ever storm another ship in the vanguard, but you've been training to defend yourself for years. You wrench it out of him and blood flies as the startled man stares down at you, not even realizing he's already dead.

His last earthly act is to attempt to grab you about the arms, which unfortunately means that when his body sags into dead weight, he's falling directly into you. You had got the knife free to stab again, but that's not going to help you against his two hundred pounds of inertia. You have to twist with him in a macabre dance, his life's blood still spurting, in order to not be knocked directly to the floor.

Which, unfortunately, puts your back to his fellows, rushing into the room after him. You hear a couple of enraged voices screaming at you and then a sharp crack, which instantly creates a thundershock of pain reverberating up from the back of your skull before everything goes dark.

You wake to shouting, then screams. Ugly, ragged, tortured ones, of men too far gone in pain to retain either sense or hope. You feel your body, laying flat on the deck, and a splitting headache that rouses you quickly to consciousness. The sun is harsh against your eyes. Somehow you've gotten abovedeck again.

You lift your head; you don't quite feel ready to move anything else. Your eyes focus dully on a dead man's face in front of you, his cheek wet in a pool of blood that's slowly expanding. You don't know him.

Somewhere past your feet, you hear a voice call "Mercy." The only response is a bestial snarl and then the wet sound of something slamming over and over again into meat.

You know that snarl. There's only one voice in the West Indies pitched like that, rasping over blown-out vocal chords. You push up on your hands and look over at the men fighting less than two paces away from you.

The fight is over. Vane hacks once more with his cutlass and the head of the man who was just begging for his life drops to the deck and rolls.

It looks like most of the crew is back on the *Ranger*. How long had you been knocked out? "Captain..." comes the voice of Jack Rakham, and he's pointing at you.

Vane's face is feral as he turns, his long hair matted up with other men's blood, sweat glistening on his exposed chest. His eyes widen, and your name falls from his lips. He takes a long step toward you, and drops to his knees at your side.

"Are you wounded?" His voice is low, and you're surprised at the concern you see in his steady gaze.

You push with your hands so you can sit up on one hip, then reach up to the back of your head. "Quite a lump here," you report, wincing.

Vane reaches to your chest, pinching up a bit of the fabric of your shirt. The whole front of it is soaked red with blood.

"That's not mine."

Vane lifts one scarred brow.

"You'll find the first of the men that came after me belowdecks, with a hole in his chest."

Your captain nods, looking pleased.

You notice that several sprawling corpses surround you on the deck, each one a red ruin, hacked more brutally than would have been needed to kill them. The would-be hostage takers? You look back at Vane for answers.

"When I saw them dragging you up here, covered in blood, I thought they'd killed you." Now it's your turn to raise an eyebrow at him. "I lost my temper."

Your chest fills with some unexpected emotion that feels rather too complex for you to even attempt to sort out. “You can’t be losing the asset you just went to such lengths to attain for your crew,” you say wryly.

Captain Vane fixes you with eyes as blue and deep as the sea. “No one else could have guided us this far out to meet the prize,” he acknowledges. “But I have a feeling I’ve only barely begun to discover your worth.”

Chapter 3

The activity never ceases on a ship, but it does get a bit quieter at night; there are less crewmen out and about, and their voices are softer on a calm night like this one. You've got the highest deck to yourself, and the heavens are clear and brilliant with stars. The measurements will be easy tonight, the ocean rolling in only gentle swells beneath the ship. You take a breath and feel your tension melt away under the crystal light of the Milky Way, and the sliver of the crescent moon.

With one hand to steady yourself against the railing, you let your head fall back, looking straight up at the expanse of the sky. You'll start your measurements in a moment, but there is no rush. You've always loved looking at the stars; it's the reason you wanted to learn them, the passion that carried you through all the charts and figures and drier things that come with navigation. Somehow your profession cements your relationship with the awesomeness of the heavens. The calculations connect your place on earth to the celestial bodies, and make any place that you might find yourself in feel like home.

You hear boots on the stairs, and some sizzling spark inside you has already made a guess who it is. You allow your eyes to flit in his direction without altering your posture, refusing to appear flustered by him. Captain Vane ascends the steps. He has washed the blood from his face, his hair smoothed and half pulled back in its proper place again. He's got a clean shirt on, and so there's no reason at all for you to be thinking about the bloody horror he made on the deck not too many hours ago.

His momentum hesitates when you do not react to his approach. He strides across the deck to lean his back against the railing by your side. "Evening." The one word is said pleasantly enough, though the particular character of Vane's voice makes even an empty pleantry sound significant.

"Good evening to you, Captain." You speak formally, and wait for him to say more.

He doesn't. His nearness makes you vibrate with an unfamiliar tension, his silence making you notice the sensation all the more. It's not fear, not exactly, and it is not even entirely unpleasant, but it makes you feel restless and your hands seek your instruments. Time to get to work, your captain is watching.

And he does; he watches. You busy yourself lining up sights and marking down measurements, and in the colorless light of the moon and stars you try to read his face in the briefest of glances.

He looks about as calm as the seas that surround you on all sides, but there are hints that something is simmering underneath. He opens his mouth like he's about to say something, then draws a thick cigar from his pocket instead. He steps over to the hooded lantern you'd brought up to write your notes by, stealing a bit of the flame to get it lit. You hope he didn't think you watched him too long as he brought his face close to the flames, furrowing his brows in concentration. Then he steps back to lean against the railing, the very picture of a

man enjoying the night air. The captain puffs away contentedly as you track the movement of the stars.

“We on course?” he finally breaks the silence to ask.

“Appear to be,” you answer, running figures in your head. “Though we might want to adjust the heading a little more westerly.”

Smoke erupts from his mouth as he speaks. “You don’t need to consult the charts first? Some books full of tables, check your figures twice?”

Your hands come to rest on your hips. “That’s always better,” you agree, “but you are the one that asked what I thought at present.” You shrug. “I’ve basically got the tables memorized. I know what the numbers mean as I’m reading them.”

“Impressive.” Something about the way he says it makes you feel like a braggart, and you turn away from him awkwardly.

“I like the feeling of knowing exactly where I am,” you say, feeling some odd pressure to explain yourself now. You feel more than hear him coming closer behind you. The breeze shifts, carrying his warm tobacco smell over your shoulder. “Measuring the heavens... grounds me.”

“I can understand that.” He says it low, almost wistfully. You are struck all of a sudden by how very little you know about him. His reputation, yes, but the man himself... he seems to have layers deeper than what was spoken about in the streets and taverns of Nassau.

“It’s probably what brought me all the way to the West Indies,” you continue, “to see new stars, to see the same stars in different ways... what brought you here?” It’s a clumsy transition, but you’re curious. You turn to face your enigmatic leader.

He stiffens, a brief scowl darkening his features. “I have never not been here,” he says, frustratingly terse as ever, and takes another puff from his cigar. “How’s your head?” He reaches up while he says it, fingertips brushing just above the nape of your neck, to check the lump left by the attackers. You should say something sharp about him taking the liberty to touch you so boldly, but in this moment, alone under the stars, you’re too tantalized by the feel of his fingers in your hair. It doesn’t even hurt when he finds the knot that has risen at the back of your head. “It doesn’t seem too bad.”

“It’s not bothering me.”

His fingers trail away from your injury, his final touch along your scalp not feeling strictly diagnostic. Why is your heart suddenly racing? His hand falls back to his side, but he does not step away. There is a surprising uncertainty in his eyes, even as he continues to speak with confidence. “So now you find yourself under the West Indies stars. Have you found your place? Or do you miss your home?”

Is Vane curious about you too? You cross your arms as you contemplate your answer. “My home? My home is on the waves, now.” you look up at the glittering sky above, “my home is

under these stars.” Vane smiles. “My home is... apparently, with *your* crew.” You say it slowly, trying on how it tastes on your tongue.

Vane’s smile drops. “You still feel that I forced you.”

“You feel that you didn’t?”

He actually looks pained, the fearsome Charles Vane who has never hesitated to reach out and take exactly what he wants. The one who has earned, through his easy comfort with violence, the right to do exactly that around the port of Nassau and anywhere else where lawlessness and reputation were the only rules. He looks away from you, across the open water. “I never want anyone to feel caged.”

“A bargain... is different from a cage.” You’re not going to deny your own responsibility, the mess of Captain Fisher’s plan that led to your service on this vessel. It could have ended so much worse. “I am not ungrateful for your mercy,” you say, finding it difficult to meet Vane’s eyes as they smolder down at you now, “it was a price that I am glad to pay.”

“Sailing with us is a price?” He’s choking on that, somehow, though you fail to understand why. He was the one who set the terms. “Pirates have killed for the privilege of joining my crew. I liberated you, from a mediocre life.”

“You have a fine ship, Captain Vane. And a decent crew, with a fearsome reputation. But you took me from my family.”

His scarred brow arches skeptically. “Your brother-in-law? A captain with no vision, always going after the lowest-hanging fruit, the most convenient prizes. I understand that you have to make your start with the connections that you have, but”—he leans in, putting his face fully in the way of your gaze—“you can’t look me in the eye and say that you were satisfied by that.”

Vane might have a bit of a point, but he’s missing yours. You meet his eyes levelly, leaning in even closer toward him. Then you all but bite off each word. “You didn’t give me a choice.”

The wound reappears behind his eyes. He rocks back, blinks once. His cigar has stopped burning, forgotten between his fingers, and he contemplates it for a long moment before answering. “The prize you led us to today is rich,” he says, slower, softer. “Consider the bargain fulfilled.” He’s thinking about every word, as if he’s deciding each one only as he utters it. “If, when we get back in port at Nassau, you’d like to take your share and seek out other employment, I will not hold you.” He tucks the remainder of the cigar into his pocket, stepping past you toward the stairway. Before leaving the deck, he looks up at you though, eyes ferocious even while he’s backing down. “But you won’t find any crew better than mine.”

~*~

The prize was rich indeed. Eleanor Guthrie was furious that the *Ranger* was the crew turning it in, of course; apparently she had already assigned the lead on this particular ship to another captain, one more squarely under her thumb, but she paid out all the same. And then everyone stayed to drink their first round in her tavern, just on account of the look on her face.

You don't know this crew well enough to celebrate with them. They seemed amicable enough during the hunt, but with the reputation Vane's men have for carousing, drunkenness, and petty violence once their purses are full, you've deemed it wise to keep a little distance, and just observe what plays out on this evening.

You don't know if you're relieved or disappointed when the first man to take a seat on the bench beside you isn't Charles Vane, who appears to have taken up his own brooding, isolated little position at the other end of the hall. Instead it's Jack Rakham, your new quartermaster, who settles in with a flourish of his coattails beside you. "Cheers."

You clink your rim against his proffered mug and you both drink deep.

"Without your skill, we likely would not be celebrating this victory," he adds. "You have my thanks."

"We were only lucky that the storm pushed our prize off its course in the same direction as it did our own."

"And without your competence, we would not have been able to compensate so well even for that." Jack shakes his head with a conspiratorial smile. "What use is humility in a place such as this. Claim all the credit you are owed, I say. And then however much more you can get away with beyond that, too."

You give a thin smile to the cheerful bravado of his advice, a smile that sours when you see the look that Miss Guthrie is shooting you as she crosses the room.

"Speaking of owed," Jacks says, distracting you from wondering why she'd be singling you out for her ire so specifically, "the Captain asked me to write this out for you right away." He produces a slip of paper and presses it into your hand.

There's not much written on it, aside from an impressive sum of money and Rackham's flourishing signature. "Is this—"

"Charles was quite insistent that I calculate your share without delay."

You risk another look at the man in question, across the crowded room. Captain Vane is quite decidedly not looking at you, though his body is angled such that he could glance in your direction as often as he pleased. Right now, he seems pleased only by the barmaid, who is clearly attempting to make her excuses and move away from his table. Poor thing probably won't have a job for long if Eleanor Guthrie thinks she's flirting with her ex-lover. You look back down at the figure Jack had passed you. "It's generous."

Rakham shifts, making sure he's caught your eye before speaking. "There will be more prizes, rich as this one, should you choose to stay on with us."

You contemplate the man's earnest face. So he knows why Vane asked him to rush your share, or at least he has surmised it.

"Don't let Charles' rough edges turn you off to this crew before you get to know us. I don't know what he said to set you off, but I promise you, with time you will find his tendency to put his foot in his mouth quite endearing, really." His wide smile beckons an answering warmth in your own face.

Perhaps the matter is settled now, between you and Captain Vane. But that's not the only trouble you're having with your current position. "It's the crew I'm worried about, more than him," you admit. Jack just seems so easy to talk to; you can see why he's a good fit for Quartermaster. "It's hard for a woman to get respect."

Jack takes a long pull on his ale. "I know the reputation we've acquired. I can't even say we don't deserve it. But they've adjusted to Anne's presence on the crew just fine. it won't be as hard as you are thinking. All you need to do is find your niche. Which brings me back to my point about laying claim to all the credit that you can. Come." He tugs on the sleeve of your jacket, standing up from the bench and looking toward the main throng of the *Ranger's* crew, gathered around a group playing dice at one of the long tables. "It's high time I made a toast."

~*~

"That lead was not given to you."

Charles stares across the desk at Eleanor, her eyes flashing bright with indignation, her cheeks coloring already although she had only just got started in on him. "And yet," he squares his shoulders out of habit, "I took it first."

He watches her fume, just as prettily as ever, in exactly the way that he knew his flat tone would incite her. "Yes, and how exactly did you do that, Charles?"

He sits down in the chair in front of her desk, not because he wants this conversation to take a long time (he still has plenty of celebrating left to do) but because he knows so well the show that he is about to have to sit through. He figures he might as well be sitting down. "I outmaneuvered you."

Eleanor's head tilts sharply, her knuckles going white as she thinks of a suitable retort to his simple statement of fact. He used to think she looked so glorious when he got her this riled up. But today, she just looks... petty. "You went behind my back. And here I thought we were finally getting comfortable with the new arrangement."

“What, the one where you fuck my crew on leads and I don’t even get to fuck you back?” He feels just a simmer of the old rage, the one where she used to make his blood boil until he could think about nothing else, but it sputters and dies about as soon as the retort has left his lips. His fingers find the stump of a cigar in his pocket, the one he forgot he was smoking last night because he was so distracted by you.

Eleanor’s lips turn down into a scowl that’s truly ugly. “Or maybe, when I’m no longer playing favorites, coddling you, it’s just clear that you and your crew are an inferior operation.”

“Seems to me, the only thing that’s clear is that my crew got the prize.” He puts the cigar between his lips. Somehow, it’s easier tonight than it has ever been, to ignore her attempts at riling him. All she’s making him feel is...caged.

“Don’t smoke in here,” Eleanor snaps.

He lifts his brows, then sighs heavily and starts fiddling with it between his fingers instead.

“I don’t believe you can credit yourself or your crew for this one, anyway,” Eleanor says, sitting down primly with a smugness behind her eyes. “I know that you stole the *Starling’s* navigator. Who you absolutely needed, in order to pull this one off. How long have you been planning to undercut my wishes? And who do you think you are, anyway, disbanding crews, stealing ships, banishing people like you’re some sort of king?” Her composure hadn’t lasted long. Her eyes wide, she’s leaning over the desk at him again.

And yet Vane still finds he feels only annoyance. “The strong eat the weak.”

She barely acknowledges he spoke, and only with a roll of her eyes, before she barrels on to her next point. “And you think the other captains will stand for you poaching their talent at the end of a sword?”

He flits his hand through the air. “It isn’t like that. She made a deal.”

“Yes, a deal during which her sister’s husband was about to have his head parted from his shoulders. I interviewed Captain Fisher before he complied with your...request...that he leave Nassau.”

That irks him. Who does she think she is, “interviewing” people. Why did she have to talk like that, like she’s a goddamn queen. And painting him like a monster in *your* life, to boot. “He betrayed our partnership,” he growls. “No one on this island would say that he deserved any better than what he got, when I caught him red-handed sneaking onto my ship.”

“Fisher said you were holding out on splitting up that cargo fairly between you, and he was only intending to secure his fair share.” That smug look is returning to her scheming eyes. “If you had only turned it over to my warehouse as soon as you got in, as is the *usual* way business is done around here, I would have made sure that you were both paid fairly.”

“Because you have been nothing but fair to me and my men, of late.”

“Charles.” Her eyelids lower, just a fraction, just enough to not make him think she’s doing it intentionally, giving him an echo of her bedroom eyes. She draws herself up with a fluid grace in her movements that wasn’t there before. He can barely believe that this actually used to work on him. “I know it’s hard to accept that things are changing between us.” *And if you’re a good boy*, the roll of her hips says as she steps around the desk, *they might even change back for a night*. “But you are still one of my top earners.” She sits on the edge of the desk on his side now, close enough for him to reach out and grab, deliberately calling to mind those times that he pushed her right over that desk, just in that spot, and—“Do not give me any more reasons to cut you out of Nassau’s business completely.”

And although perhaps her threat even has teeth, Charles finds that he barely cares to even pay proper attention to what she has been saying. Ever since the first mention of you in this conversation, he’s been distracted by that damnable nagging doubt that perhaps he has not treated you fairly from the start. Even Eleanor seems to think so, and he finds that bothers him more than anything else the woman has said. And watching her try to work her seduction on him... he’s much more interested in pondering how you might go about trying to ensnare a man that you desired. Would you act like you could barely hide a wicked grin too, or would you be softer, more artless but nevertheless endearing...

Eleanor is still glaring at him, waiting for a response.

“We done here?”

Her frown deepens, with a cast of what might even be confusion at his lack of reaction.

“Excuse me?”

He climbs to his feet. “Have you said everything you wanted to say.”

“I’d like a promise.” She stands too, a little closer to him than she would have stepped to anyone else. She’d excluded him from her bed, but Charles can see now, clear as day, that she intends to keep controlling him by dangling the possibility he might one day get back in.

“That you won’t go against me again. This doesn’t have to get ugly, Charles.”

“Go ahead and keep tightening your fist around this island, Eleanor,” he says, stepping decisively toward the door. He hopes you haven’t left the tavern yet. “See what bends, and what breaks. There’s only so much free men will tolerate.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Prompt line: “I wonder what will get you killed first – your loyalty or your stubbornness?”

Chapter Notes

Since this story is getting so long, I’ve decided to convert it to a third person OC. She’s really acquired too much specific backstory to be a Reader insert already. Meet Hope Wickham, who hopefully feels like a natural extension of the same character! I’ve never done this before, hope I’m pulling it off gracefully.

The tavern is dark, and so thick with smoke that Hope’s eyes are burning around the edges. But the ale is strong, the company is spirited, and all she sees are wide grins around the table. That’s all that matters to her.

The *Ranger* crew is celebrating again. They’ve just taken port in Tortuga after their third successful hunt since finding themselves on Miss Guthrie’s shit list; the leads she had provided them since the night Captain Vane stormed out of her office had been more insulting than if she had given them none, and so they put their heads together and sought their prizes outside of the neighborhood of Nassau. The takes were smaller, so far, and not everyone here already knew their reputation, yet, but it was well worth it to keep on feeling free.

“This one’s for that Guthrie bitch,” Anne Bonny growls as she thrusts her tankard up for another toast. “Just ‘cause we all know she wouldn’t want us to have it.” Grunts and guffaws answer her around the long, creaking table that the *Ranger*’s officers and most sociable crewmen have crowded around. “Don’t matter if we can’t fence our prizes, so long as we can drink ‘em!”

That gets a round of cheers and splashing clinks of pewter tankards. Hope drinks deep to that one, short-sighted as she finds the sentiment to be. Because the real point is, with takes like these they’ve managed to keep the morale of the crew up, despite setbacks. They hadn’t lost one capable sailor over the humiliation Eleanor had tried to deal them. In fact, the experience appeared to be knitting the crew tighter together, with Hope right in there with them.

Her expertise helped, as Jack had predicted. The *Ranger*’s crew had a reputation for idiocy and belligerence once they got into the drink on shore, but every sailor respects the skill of a navigator that can not only lead them right to the richest prizes, but also point them straight

back towards a port where they can waste those riches as quickly as possible. It also helped that Hope had drunk a few of them under the table that first night, that her wit was only sharpened by liquor, and oh yes, that she had found a few choice words for Nassau's despot herself on that evening.

Shane, the *Ranger's* boatswain, elbows her deep in the ribs. "Tell us again," he slurs, drinking entirely too fast as he so often does on nights like these, "how you gave the Guthrie woman a piece of your mind last time we was in her joint."

Hope presses her lips together in a restrained sort of grin. She resists the urge to glance at Captain Vane; if she looks too worried about his reaction it will only set him off worse. But any mention of Eleanor tends to sour his mood, whether negative or neutral. (Positive mentions simply do not happen among this crew). Her eyes travel as far as Jack Rackham, seated beside the captain, and she can see he is checking on him already. When no flash of concern lights up the quartermaster's eyes, Hope feels safe to at least start telling the story. "I don't know what she was thinking, approaching me like that."

Even though she speaks quietly, many of the side conversations cease, heads up and down the long table swiveling around to pay attention to her tale. It seems like no matter how often this episode comes up, there is at least one crewman present that has not yet heard her tell it from her own mouth.

"She had already failed to perturb the Captain, with whatever she said in that private meeting she called him into after we cashed in her lead," Hope continues, setting the stage.

"Thought she could drag him in by his ear, like she was his fecking mum," one of the gunmen interrupts. Nods and grunts of agreement pass around the table. Hope just loves the way the men so gleefully rehash the same old stories when they're in their cups, loves even more that she's started to be in them.

"He's not fallin' for that shite anymore," Shane piles on, sending a look up the table at Vane that's half approval, half challenge.

As usual, Captain Vane chooses the path of least words. "Bitch can rot," he growls over the rim of his cup. His eyes simmer with more complicated feelings than those three words belie, but only to someone who's looking.

"Which is what he told her, more or less." Jack's melodious voice smooths the story along, taking the attention off the uneasy topic of the crew's feelings about their captain's... entanglements. "So on to Plan B, Miss Guthrie went." His eyes turn back to Hope, and most of the crew's follow.

"She comes by my table, just stands there at first, stiff as you please. Like I'm just going to jump up as soon as she notices me."

Anne rolls her eyes.

Hope remembers the way her stomach jumped at that point, her respect for Miss Guthrie not yet lost, but there is no reason to recount that part of the story. "Then she does this little

cough, when I keep on drinking, take my next turn throwing the dice.”

“It was a good throw, too,” someone pipes in from further down the table.

“It was,” Hope agrees, “and I had a stack of coin on it.” She takes a swig of ale. “But she just stares at me. And as soon as my hand is on my winnings—‘may I have a word with you, Miss Wickham.’” She does a passingly fair imitation of the woman’s voice, higher and snootier than her own.

“What did she want?”

“She told me she was going to get me on another ship.”

The room always gets quieter at this part of the story. A warm, tingling sort of feeling blooms in Hope’s chest, at the way her new crew takes such pride in this exchange. It reassures her more deeply each time, that she made the right call when she took Eleanor’s offer as an insult.

“‘It’s terrible, what Vane is doing to you,’ she has the nerve to say to me. ‘But the *Nightingale* is coming in tomorrow. And the *Walrus*.’” Groans all around the table. They always groan at the mention of the *Walrus*. “I’ll get you set up with a crew that’s more civilized.” And every time she repeats that line, there is less booing and more harsh, prideful laughter. Hope scoffs. “Like I’m already in her pocket, a piece to move around on her chessboard as she sees fit. She says to me: ‘Vane can’t force you to do anything.’ And I look right back at her, take the drink out of her hand, and say ‘no, he can’t. And neither can you.’” Her neck prickles at the way the men look at her when she tells this part. “I like his ship. I like his crew.” I lean in, sip a drink out of her own cup, and say, “I think I might even be starting to like him.”

More cheering, and fists hammer on the table. They love that part. Everything had felt so crystal-clear in that moment, when Eleanor Guthrie patronized to her like that. Hope didn’t want to be protected, didn’t want to be sheltered or assigned. She wanted to earn what she’d got; and here was a crew she was already bonding with, (drunkenly at least) and a captain who respected her skills so much that he’d gone out of his way to get her on his ship, and respected her mind so much that he’d rushed Jack to make sure she felt she could leave.

“So take your fake concern for my wellbeing, I said to her, and go fuck yourself with it. Since Vane’s not at your beck and call to take care of that for you anymore, either.” It wasn’t exactly what Hope had really said. But every story gets larger in the retelling of it, does it not?

Tankards are banging on tables, toasts are being raised, and Shane whacks Hope on the back in comradely approval. “And that’s the night you became one of us.”

She can’t read anything in Vane’s stillness as he regards her from the head of the table.

Hours later, Hope and Anne are staggering back into the tavern, arm in arm, coming back from a piss 'round the back of the building. In this town a woman's got to have someone right there watching her back before she can even think of squatting down. "Where's everyone?" Anne slurs, her brows furrowing as she inspects the corner where the *Ranger* crew used to be sitting. Her head swivels toward the other side of the room, Hope's following rapidly after.

Many of the crew appear to have moved along to some other establishment, or perhaps staggered down to their tents set up on the beach. Jack and Captain Vane are still here, though, sitting at a table with two men Hope doesn't recognize. All four of them are positively bristling.

Their Captain waves the women over when he spots them. Anne lets herself be tucked under Jack's arm, and Hope cautiously takes the open chair next to Vane. The strangers at the table look surly, one with long hair tied back into a disheveled tail, the other's brown locks cropped closer but no less messy. Their once-fine coats, stained and inexpertly repaired, mark them for fellow pirates.

"Captain Mackinaw," Vane introduces, wrapping a hand over the top of Hope's shoulder as he does, "meet Hope Wickham, my navigator."

She braces herself for the long-haired man to comment on her sex, as so many men do, but this Mackinaw is too preoccupied to do more than nod vaguely in her direction. "I can't just let this stand, Charles."

Vane nods. Hope has never known him to be a sloppy drunk, but she can feel his inebriation in the careful way he removes his hand from her shoulder and reaches out for the ale on the table. He lifts it for a long, contemplative sip as his fellow looks at him expectantly. "You want me to back you up?" he offers, in slow, measured tones.

Mackinaw looks relieved. "They're at the north end of the beach. If we make a show of numbers, I reckon they'll hand it back over without a fight." He takes another long pull of his own drink, the gesture much sloppier than how Vane had pulled off. Hope resists the urge to roll her eyes.

"And if they don't?" Jack asks.

Mackinaw smiles sharply. "Then they'll learn what it means to cross them that used to sail with Edward Teach."

"This is a terrible idea," Hope growls through her teeth, hefting the cudgel of broken wood she'd picked up on their way down the beach.

"Nonsense," Jack replies. "It appears they have things well in hand." Less than twenty paces away, Vane and Mackinaw square up against an even-scruffier captain and two of his largest crewmen. Vane's body language is bristling, and Mackinaw's looks mocking even from here.

“I don’t believe Charles Vane has ever been known for his ability to talk his way out of a fight,” Hope retorts. She shifts, squaring her hips, attempting to add to the impression that a full crew of violent, capable men is poised to storm down the moonlit beach at a moment’s notice.

“Good,” Anne hisses, sparing one contemptuous glance for Hope as she brandishes both her knives in the direction of the tents. Mackinaw’s rivals are rousing now, recognizing the threat. “I’ve an appetite for blood tonight.”

Hope’s not even sure why she’s here. This could get every bit as bloody as a vanguard charge, if someone says the wrong word, takes things a step too far down there. Violence is not in her skill set; if anything, she should be handling this part, the negotiations that so often stop swords from crossing. But she doesn’t know Mackinaw; barely even understands the grievance he has with the other man on the beach. Something about a horse, or a woman, or a horse that belonged to a woman... and now good men might get hurt, or even killed, because Vane feels loyalty to a man he once sailed with when they both served under the notorious Blackbeard.

An angry shout. Anne takes a step forward; most of the crew lined up behind follows suit. Vane hadn’t rounded up quite all of his men from their carousing around the town, but combined with Mackinaw’s crew they look like a veritable army ready to surround the other crew’s camp.

Said crew is forming up ranks of their own, however. Mackinaw’s rival does not appear ready to back down, puffing up his chest and speaking loudly enough for her to hear the tone of blustering confidence. Hope knows a failing negotiation when she sees one. “Blood it is,” she says wryly.

She doesn’t intend for anyone to hear it, but Jack cocks his head at her.

Vane’s hand has crept to his sword. Mackinaw’s head tilts; the shabby captain grimaces, glances back at his crew, and then throws himself at his rival. The two captains struggle in the sand, pummeling each other.

Is it going to stay between them, or is everyone about to brawl? Hope catches movement from one of the big men who had been backing that captain up. He takes a step that puts him more fully behind Captain Vane, who had turned to watch the men rolling on the ground. “Watch!” she roars, in inarticulate, impulsive warning.

The men behind her surge, evidently interpreting her shout as their signal to advance. They loose themselves down the beach, stampeding Hope along with them.

She grips her cudgel tight, keeping pace with her crew to avoid being trampled. Her face and limbs flush so hot they’re prickling. She managed to see Vane turn before his attacker could strike, ducking under the blow and knocking the man in the gut with the pommel of his sword as he drew it, but after that she loses him in the jumble of bodies rushing past the both of them, to engage the charging *Ranger* crew.

Hope runs until she's stopped, feeling like she's part of a wave crashing into a craggy shore. She sees the shape of a man, arms raised in threat, and she swats at it with her cudgel. The impact of it thudding into him throws her more off-balance than she expects. But the untampered momentum with which she had hit him is enough to knock the man to the ground.

Anne roars beside her, a ferocious sound, triumphant. She kicks that man across the jaw to keep him down, then thrusts her face close to Hope's. "Atta girl!"

And after that Anne's bloodlust is infectious, as Hope finds herself suddenly eager to pick her next target to bludgeon. Her crimson-haired crewmate keeps pace with her, seemingly amused by Hope's sudden spirit.

A man missing more than a few teeth looms up in front of her, and lands a blow that glances off Hope's head. She falls back, but Jack Rackham catches her from behind and heaves her right back onto her feet again. Her attacker wasn't expecting her to come up so fast; nor was he expecting her foot to land so heavy in his gut.

She wants to get to Vane. She doesn't have time to consider why, only knows that the direction that she should force her feet through this fray is over to where she saw him last. She ducks under fists and shoves bodies away from her. Anne and Jack appear to have the same idea, and they're better at it, too. Hope hears the crunch of a broken nose to her left, turns in time to see a man dropping to his knees, howling. Blood trickles down Anne Bonny's forehead, and she doesn't wipe it away when it reaches her open-mouthed grin.

The fighting ends just about as suddenly as it began. "Yield!" comes the voice of the enemy captain, and his men, for the most part, stand down. When the throng clears and Hope can see Charles Vane again, something in her chest loosens even though the side of his face is puffy and his hairline is stained with blood. He's holding the shabby captain from behind, sword under his throat, and Mackinaw is gloating in front of them.

And as far as the *Ranger* crew is concerned, that's the end of it. No loss of life, and not too many injuries to show for the impulsive brawl. It could have been so much worse. Hope still doesn't even understand what it was all about. She follows her captain back to their own beach camp. She follows him *through* the camp, settling the wounded, watching him check on every man without slowing down. Watching him favor his left leg the whole while, and otherwise ignoring his own obvious injury entirely.

When she notices that the size of the bloodstain suffusing the fabric of Vane's trousers has definitely been growing, Hope finally approaches him. "It's nothing," he grunts, waving her off. "Now where's Jensen? He came down with us, didn't he?"

"You're no good to him, or any of the men, if you pass out from blood loss," Hope scolds.

Vane looks down at himself, mouth set in an ornery line. He brings the lantern in his hand close to his thigh, and wet blood glitters. He grunts, then puts all his weight on that injured leg and gives her a pointed look, brows raised high. He's still drunk, she realizes. "It's fine."

His usual growl grinds tighter across the words, though. And when he tries to take a normal stride past her, the leg buckles.

She reaches out to steady him and finds herself wrapped firmly underneath his arm. He lets her support his weight for just a moment, their faces so close as he studies her expression. His jaw still has a stubborn set to it. Her palms feel hot against his body, particularly the right, which landed close to his heart. “Back to your tent,” she orders. “Let me tend to it.”

His brows furrow and she pushes him up the beach before he can argue further. He takes one step with his weight on her, then shakes off her support while muttering something about the men watching. “Jensen?” he roars, still looking around the maze of tents.

“Sleeping it off,” someone shouts in answer, and only then does Vane turn back to Hope, ready to cooperate.

She scowls, shaking her head a little as she accompanies his limping path toward his own tent. “I wonder what will get you killed first – your loyalty or your stubbornness?”

Vane doesn’t answer. He may not have even heard it. When they reach his tent, he pushes aside the flap and all but collapses inside. Hope pauses for one steadying breath before bending to follow him in. The captain seems the type to be a very difficult patient.

The lantern he had been carrying is set just inside the entryway. Vane settles onto his bedroll, a weary noise escaping his lips now that there’s no one left to observe him but Hope. She’s going to want more light, to examine that wound properly. She looks around for another lantern amongst the smattering of personal effects he’s brought to shore.

There’s rustling behind her as she gets another light blazing. When she turns around, Vane’s got his shirt off, resting back on his elbows and waiting for her.

“I’m glad to see you’ve gotten yourself more comfortable,” Hope says dryly, “but that’s not the half of your body that I need to take a look at.”

Vane grins, and Hope tries to stop herself from blushing. His sun-darkened skin glistens in the lamplight, creating an all-together different effect on her than all the other times she’s seen the man stripped to the waist while sailing. He dips his head in acknowledgment of her words and lifts his hips to remove his trousers.

Her eyes register a long line of pale white skin being revealed to her gaze before she whips her head away, belatedly realizing he’s not wearing anything underneath. The image of the side of his bare ass is going to be hard to get out of her mind now, and she makes an irritated noise at the man. “Cover yourself, please.”

She waits, probably longer than necessary, before turning herself back to face her entirely nude captain. He’s lying back against a cushion once she’s gathered her nerve, with a blanket pulled over only his uninjured leg, and his unmentionables. And is the bastard *smirking*? She should march herself right out of there.

But then Hope's eyes fall on the wound that's been revealed and she forgets her modesty. "Uglier than I was hoping to see," she mutters, worried, and drops to her knees beside his bedroll.

Vane makes an offended noise. Did he think she was talking about his body? How drunk is he? Hope is a little concerned that he doesn't seem concerned about the wound in his thigh, slashed down the outer edge about a foot up from his knee. She brings the lantern closer and pokes at the bright red edge. When he doesn't flinch, she presses a little harder, moving the flesh around to try and get a better idea of the depth of the wound.

"It's not too deep," she reports when she's completed her assessment, "but it could use some stitching."

"Told you it was fine," he says gruffly. When she glances up, he holds her eyes. He's given her many unreadable looks since she's come to know him. But this one, while he's laid out naked underneath her, with the flickering light so soft and warm, sends tingles through her body. "You good with a needle?"

Hope blinks. "Yes, yes," she stutters, searching her pockets for her sewing kit. It's another feminine role she's tried to avoid getting stuck in, being the one who mends, but for Captain Vane she'll make an exception. "Hold the lantern."

She marvels that his arm doesn't even waver as she cleans out the wound, holding the light up steady for her above his leg. His face remains almost serene, gaze already on her each time she glances up at him, as if watching her work is all he needs to ignore the pain. She pushes the errant thought away; more likely he's just drunk enough to feel numb.

She can see the entire length of his body, bare from the swell of his shoulder, down his sculpted waist, over his hip bone and all along his pale white leg. It's distracting, the way the eye is pulled to the crease where his thigh meets his belly, and—

And perhaps he's not the only one who's still a little drunk.

"Hold the lantern closer," she says, and squints in closer to where she'll begin her stitching. Tells herself not to think about the body that this leg attaches to.

She thinks she hears a little hiss of air the first time the needle goes in, but it might have just been the wind. When she dares look up again, Vane still has a straight face, contemplating hers.

"It was a foolish risk," she says as she slides the needle in a second time. "If you took this slash just a few inches in toward the artery, you could have been bleeding out."

His voice rasps only a little worse than normal. "But I didn't. And reputations are maintained. It was not an insult Mackinaw could let slide."

"And his name is worth our risk?"

Vane's eye narrow. "He would do the same for me."

“Are you sure?” The needle goes in again, and Hope feels the barest flinch in Vane’s limb. “I’ve known many that wouldn’t care a wit for the suffering of former crewmates.”

“Teach’s crew was different.”

Hope is the one to look levelly up at him, now. She’s heard tell of how Edward Teach came to leave Nassau’s harbor. “Perhaps so. But I would not expect they would still feel that way about Charles Vane.”

Her words cut him, she can see that. He flinches in a way that her prodding at his physical wound could not have caused. “Mackinaw had left before all that,” he says simply.

Hope nods, and drops her eyes back to her work. Just two more stitches ought to do it. Was he trying to make up for that betrayal, was he happy to sacrifice what he had in service to any member of that old crew that might forgive him for having helped Eleanor drive Blackbeard out of Nassau? These are questions she does not dare ask.

“Tonight was foolish,” she says again, after completing the last stitch. She bites off the end of the thread. “Foolish, but noble.” She still feels a small amount of shame when she thinks about the dispersed crew of the *Starling*, about being one of the handful who now serve under the very captain that had taken their ship and exiled her brother-in-law (although from the letters her sister sends, it seems that he is supporting her just fine pirating out of other cities). She can understand those complicated feelings, the ones that have no easy answer, when facing the fallout of one’s own choices. Any action that smacks of amends must feel like a breath of cool air. Now, exhausted and sobering up in the dim of Vane’s tent, brushing her arm over his lifted knee as she wraps his wound up tight, she finds that she may actually be admiring him.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I did decide to use the scene I developed in the drabble "Charles, Darling" as the opening of this chapter. If it feels familiar, just push on, the scene continues much longer here!

“Watch your hands. She’s mine.” Captain Vane’s arm wraps tight around Hope’s waist, pulling her in snug against his body.

She bites her tongue, trying not to display either surprise or displeasure, and forces her furrowing brow to smooth. Is he really doing this right now? She hadn’t even known he was in this tavern. Although, while she fervently resents being rescued from a man’s advances in in such a demeaning fashion, it is also true that she had no idea how she was going to handle her current predicament without ruining everything by resorting to violence.

The man crowding Hope at the bar, a Mr. Fellows, takes half a step back. Vane is a bared saber all on his own, his very presence and dark look just as threatening as a pistol in one’s hand. Hope supposes this is one of those times that he is worth wielding, and she wraps her hand over his thick wrist at her waist. Sinking into him the way a relieved wife ought to, she pats the back of his hand. “There you are, Charles darling.” His breath catches at her term of endearment, and she figures he is trying not to laugh at her. “Calm yourself, I’ve barely been out of your sight for ten minutes! I know how you fret, but please, don’t take it out on this poor man.”

The less rational part of her would like nothing more than to watch Vane smash Mr. Fellows’ face in, after the things he’d been saying to her, but she could not set loose his wrath for the same reason she hadn’t been reaching for her own belt-knife: Fellows had turned out to be the contact that the *Ranger*’s officers had been scouring the whole of Port Royal for. Without his cooperation, this entire voyage will have turned out to be for nothing. She couldn’t let the secret fortune he had reportedly stumbled upon slip away just because she felt offended.

Fellows clears his throat with a nervous noise.

Vane’s still staring down at Hope in his arms. She knows the mark in front of them is more important, can’t be allowed to slip away now that the game has been changed, but she also can’t quite tear her gaze away from Captain Vane’s face either. He’s never held her like this before; she’s never let him get so close. She becomes aware of how fast her heart is beating, and she’s not certain she can attribute the entirety of its pace to anger at Mr. Fellows’ bad behavior.

“N-newlyweds?” the man stutters, offering up a handy excuse. Oh, how quickly a man’s attitude can change, when a bigger dick walks into the room.

“Yes,” Vane smiles to him. It’s a false smile, wide and too cheerful, something Hope’s never seen spread across his face, but Fellows wouldn’t know that. Certainly the lopsided grin is fitting for the ruse. He hugs her even closer, his big hand spreading up the side of her bodice, and even leans in to press a kiss to the side of her forehead.

Shameless. His affection would be positively bawdy in the more respectable circles she once walked in, but it fits the dirty alehouse just fine.

She watches Fellows stiffen; Vane must have resumed his usual scowl abruptly above her head. “And I don’t take kindly to anyone bothering my wife. If—”

She cut him off before moods can sour any further. “Darling, it’s just a misunderstanding.” She turns her face up, willing him with the force of her eyes to pay attention. “This is Mr. Fellows. And he has some *very* interesting stories to tell.”

Vane’s brows crease; from the flash of annoyance in his face it’s apparent that at first he thinks she’s just trying to confound him. His embrace tightens, and then she sees it click. He gives the man another look. “Is that so. Well then. I’m Charles Vane, captain of the *Ranger*.” He extends his right hand for a friendly shake. “How about I buy us a round, and we’ll all sit and talk a while.” Even when he tries to sound gentlemanly, that scraping growl of a voice he has still sounds like a threat.

Fellows’ eyes shift back and forth in rapid thought, and Hope can see that he’s got an idea now what’s going on, that she had not started chatting him up by accident. His face starts to glower, but he’s not looking at the door so she doesn’t think she’s lost the chance at making a deal with him. She just has to change the stratagem, now, to incorporate Vane’s looming presence.

Vane signals the barmaid, and draws Hope toward an open table. His arm stays decidedly around her waist. While she doesn’t think it’s quite necessary to keep selling the marriage ruse this hard, she’s not going to ruin it by pushing him away.

It’s only after he plops down in a seat that she realizes the table he’s chosen only has two chairs. Fellows assumes the other, and to Hope’s surprise Vane tries to pull her down into his lap. He’s got a cheeky grin on his face and she realizes that all this is not just for Fellows’ benefit; Vane is having *fun* with her.

She decides not to make a scene by resisting physically. But as soon as she’s seated across his thighs, she looks down at him crossly. “Charles. Darling. Get me a chair.”

A boyish grin is tugging at the edges of his lips. “I thought you said my lap was the best seat in the house.”

Oh, how she wants to smack him. And yet she finds herself wanting to smile too. “Just because when we met, I was acting like an alehouse strumpet, does not mean you get the show every night.” His scarred brow raises, and she feels a thrill she doesn’t quite

understand. "I am a wife now. And a ranking member of your crew. And I will comport myself as such." She comes back to her feet imperiously, ignoring the feeling of Vane's fingers trailing reluctantly off her body. She grabs a chair from another table and turns it around, seating herself between the two men. She doesn't miss the knowing look that passes from Fellows to Vane. If Fellows thinks she's a veritable ball-buster, all the better.

"You still owe me the rest of that story," Hope says with a broad smile. She turns the charm back on, even though that's what had gotten her a little in over her head in the first place. She feels Vane looming over her shoulder. And ignores him. "Where was the galleon going?"

"What galleon?" Vane's rumble rips into the conversation, and his palm slides to rest upon her thigh, just above her knee.

Fellows's pockmarked cheek twitches, but Hope brightens her smile, and he focuses back on her. With Vane here, she realizes, posing as her husband, it's actually safer to keep pushing that edge, to continue to use Mr. Fellows's attraction to her to captivate him. "Be a dear and start the story over?" The barmaid slaps three mugs on the table and Hope lifts one to hand it directly to him herself. "Otherwise he'll never catch up." She jerks her shoulder at Vane without looking, still holding Fellows' eyes with a grin and a mischievous quirk to her brow.

Vane's fingers tighten on her thigh.

It's damned distracting, that hand. Hope does her best to just let it lie there, using it, an incongruous little reminder that however much Fellows might be enjoying her saucy remarks, her 'husband' is still in the room. Any possibility of dalliance that her eyes might be suggesting over the rim of her cup will have to wait for another time to be made plain. But the weight of Vane's palm never quite leaves her awareness, nor its warmth, especially not when his thumb starts stroking a line up and down the surprisingly sensitive edge of her knee.

Fellows is cautious, but Hope is ever tenacious. Vane plays his part by leaning back, oblivious at the times when he needs to be, listening to Fellows' tale of mysterious supply ships headed toward an unknown location. His stony face brings just enough skepticism to the table that Fellows works harder to impress, divulges more details than he meant to as he brags about his lead. And Hope is right there at his elbow, encouraging his tale, imploring Vane to take it seriously until it seems that her and Fellows are a team together, attempting to convince the captain of the *Ranger* to believe the man's story, and consider taking him on. Now that she'd found her angle on him, Fellows is proving to be an easy mark.

After all, they'd come to Port Royal because Fellows was not as coy as he thought he was. Rumors had spread that there was a fisherman who might have stumbled upon the location of a new British supply dump, some island so unknown and un-frequented that the Navy felt confident they could use it to stockpile munitions and other valuable sundries. This fisherman was supposedly a less-than-staunch loyalist to the Crown, and might possibly be open to leading a crew of privateers or pirates to plunder this secret location. But up to this date, no decent crew had managed to convince him, and no indecent crew had managed to find him.

"The *Ranger*," Fellows says over the rim of his fourth ale, "is that a gunship?"

Hope tries not to smile too wide. Captain Vane nods.

“Forgive me, but I don’t recognize the name.”

Vane’s eyes flash, like he’s only barely forgiving that slight. “We’re not Navy. Not privateers, either.”

Hope leans closer to the fisherman, blocking her captain just a little bit from view. “We used to sail out of Nassau.” This is it, time to lay all the cards on the table, and she can’t trust Vane not to botch it.

“Used to?”

She leans her elbow on the table, settling her cheek into her hand. “For a ‘free city,’ that place was accumulating quite a bit of overhead. Quite stifling, really, in the hands of the Guthries. We prefer to live truly free; to be accountable to no one but ourselves.” She leaves just enough pause between her words to imply there might be all kinds of ways she likes to be *free*. “It leaves us open to all sorts of amenable relationships. Partnerships, even.”

What man could resist twin appeals to both his greed and lust? And yet she had said nothing that would bind her to fulfilment of the latter, and Vane’s presence precluded any chance for Fellows to press her into a more concrete promise. He would be enticed by hope alone, that she might be planning to meet him for a more secret dalliance, and it would be too late by the time he realized that his dream was never going to come to pass.

Fellows grins back at her. “It almost sounds too good to be true.” Then his gaze floats over her shoulder. To Captain Vane.

Of course he’d need the man to confirm.

“Seems to me,” Vane says, leaning forward, putting more of his weight on Hope’s thigh, “that you’ve been sitting on this information for quite some time. Any of the pirate crews in the Caribbean would love to know the location of this cache. There must be a reason you haven’t already sold it.”

Fellows’ eyes shine with guile. “Just waiting for the right offer.” He nods his head, indicating a table under the window on the other side of the room. “Captain Black over there’s interested too.” He leans in conspiratorially. “But I think I deserve more than just a finder’s fee.”

Hope assesses the competition swiftly: two men in threadbare coats, with shifty eyes that betray a certain lack of confidence in their demeanor. One of their mugs lies on its side on the table, unrefilled; their coin might already be running out.

Vane spares only a glance in the direction of his rivals. They’re not even in his class. He summons an agreeable smile to his face for Fellows. “Seems only fair that the man whose careful eye caught the lead should get a larger share of the take.”

Hope smiles at him. He’s picked up on the need for flattery with this one, good.

“But have you ever gone a-pirating, Fellows?” He’s leaning in, looking at him from under heavy brows. “Faced down armed men, trained ones, try to take from them what they’re willing to give their lives to defend?” His face is only a hand’s breadth away from Hope’s, leaning over her the way he is, and she finds herself fascinated by a little muscle flexing in his jaw as he growls out his challenge. “Do you know that you have the stones not to run, not to sink to your knees when your back’s against the wall?”

Fellows licks his lips, but keeps his eyes on Vane’s hard stare. “I won’t run.”

Vane inclines his head, just a fraction. “On my ship, a man earns his share. If you fight alongside us, no matter how hairy it gets when we go in there, I can convince my crew you deserve a lion’s share.” He sits back, his hand traveling just an inch higher on Hope’s thigh. “Or you can stay on board and get your finder’s fee, let us be the ones that get our hands dirty. Your choice.”

Masterful, really. Now they aren’t talking about *if* Fellows will hire them, but what the terms of his own participation will be. Hope’s first impression of Captain Vane was not one of any formidable wit, but she can see in moments like this how he came to be a leader of men.

Fellows seems to have taken the bait. “Is your crew ready now?”

A long rumble of thunder, too loud to be very distant, interrupts everyone’s thoughts. A glance at the wide double doorway of the tavern shows nothing but roiling clouds, and Hope wonders how she could have missed the sudden darkening of the evening sky. She and Vane step to the door; a massive sheet of rain is sweeping across the bay, the wall of clouds stretching too far for this storm to be brief.

“Don’t think you’ll make it back to your ship before this hits,” Fellows remarks, coming up behind them. “Better to pass the night comfortably here. There’s rooms to let upstairs; I’m in one of ‘em. You two might as well see if there’s another still available. I can show you the island in the morning.”

Hours later, they thump through the narrow upstairs hallway, arm-in-arm and singing one last sea shanty as they see Fellows off to bed. Negotiations complete, there had been nothing else to do but keep drinking, and entertain their cash cow well enough to ensure he didn’t develop second thoughts. They couldn’t have him wandering over to that other table and seeking a counteroffer.

As Fellows pulls the door closed to his room he catches Hope’s eye, head cocked and an inviting smile on his face. Does he think she might sneak out after her “husband” has fallen asleep? Hope barely suppresses a shudder. Good thing they had bought the man so many rounds that he was certain to pass out as soon as his cheek hit the pillow in there. She waves him a bland, friendly goodnight as Vane’s arm about her shoulders drags her on down the hall.

Last door on the right. Hope and Vane had indeed acquired the only room that the inn had left to let for this night. And with the rain continuing unabated, they’re lucky to have it. “Here we

are,” Vane announces as he fumbles with the key given to them by the innkeeper while still trying to keep a hold on both her and the lantern, “time for our honeymoon, my sweet.”

Hope grins and slaps him on the chest. She takes the lantern from his hand so he can properly work the door. “I hope the bed is big, Charles, darling, because...” she trails off as her cheeks flush hot, simply unable to finish that line even in jest.

“Would it be too much if I carried you inside?”

Hope laughs and steps over the threshold before he can try it. She doesn’t want to have to face the way all his little physical affections have been making her feel. And yet, she can’t seem to make herself ask him to stop, either.

The door closes behind them and his arm is still around her. They’re leaning against each other more heavily than they would if they were sober, Hope is at least aware of that. And Vane most definitely outweighs her. “Get your legs under you before you topple us over,” she chides.

Instead of leaning away from her, Vane wraps his other arm around her body. “I’ll keep us steady, love.”

Hope tries to ignore the escalation of pet names, holding up the lantern to get a look at their abode for the night. It’s terribly small; there’s barely space for a chair beyond the foot of the modest-sized bed underneath a single window. It seems to be no more than a glorified closet, an alcove where they probably stick stumbling patrons to sleep off their overindulgences. If they’d taken one more step into the room they would have barked their shins on the edge of the furniture.

“Mmmm,” Vane murmurs into her neck, “What is this smell?” He inhales right against her skin, and Hope wonders how much the drink has actually gone to his head. Or hers, for that matter, as she finds herself melting just a little into his arms.

“Rosewater,” she answers, her voice coming out a bit thin, “from that cargo a few weeks ago.”

She can *feel* the rumbling sound of recognition he makes. A sudden throb between her legs makes Hope certain she’s had too much to drink herself. Her hands want to grasp the lapels of his jacket and pull him closer, but she pushes him away instead.

“What’s the matter?” His eyes look almost sleepy; more relaxed and cheerful than she’s ever seen from the man. A genuine smile pulls at the corner of his mouth as he gazes down at her across the small distance her half-hearted shove had put between their bodies. “We are husband and wife, after all.”

She wants to meet his gaze levelly, to give him the sort of plain, no-nonsense stare that usually keeps the men in line around her. As soon as she looks into his eyes, though, something catches at her, and she cannot summon her frown. How had she never noticed the sweet, boyish softness of Captain Vane’s eyes before? She swallows, and awkwardly realizes she should have said something by now, as his face looms almost imperceptibly closer. She

side-steps him, spying a nail beside the door to hang the lantern on. “Oh yes. You’ve yet to apologize to me for that.”

He pulls back. She wanted him to, didn’t she? And yet her heart dips a little as she watches him readjust his expectations. “For saving you?”

Hope just raises her brow and glares.

“He had a look about him,” Vane says defensively. “You wouldn’t like where that look was leading.” He crosses his arms and leans back against the door, which gives Hope just barely enough room to step between the bedframe and him to inspect the state of the linens the bed had been made up with.

“I had him handled.” The blanket is old, but appears unstained, and when Hope turns down the sheets they smell clean. At least there’s that.

“That you did. I was impressed, really, at the way you were able to work the man. It was a real pleasure to watch.”

She risks another glance at his face, checking for sarcasm, but his admiration seems sincere.

“I had no idea you could flirt like that.” He takes a step toward her, but it’s only so he can sit down at the foot of the bed and start working his boots off. “As good as any whore I’ve ever seen.”

Her breath sucks into her chest sharply. She doesn’t have anything against the women who make their living that way, really she doesn’t, but there’s a certain involuntary reaction that comes when that comparison is made.

Vane realizes his mistake almost immediately. “I didn’t mean—” he starts, penitent face turning up to her.

“Of course you didn’t,” Hope cuts him off matter-of-factly.

“I only meant to—”

“I know what you meant.”

Vane drops his head with a pained look and focuses intently on the laces of his boots.

And that’s about the moment when she realizes that not only is there only one bed in this room, there’s barely enough space between it and the walls for someone to sleep comfortably on the floor. A claim over the best sleeping spot would have to be made quickly, and right now it’s Vane’s butt that’s planted firmly on the mattress.

In a moment of almost childish intensity, Hope rushes to sit down next to him. Can’t have his claim appear uncontested.

From the corner of her eye, she sees him turn toward her in silent question, but she focuses firmly on unlacing her own boots. Vane finishes with his and places them carefully

underneath the rickety wooden chair past the foot of the bed. His jacket goes next, shrugged off and laid over the chair's seat.

When she gets her first boot off, he places it next to his own.

"I don't normally prefer to act like that," she admits, now feeling a bit embarrassed about her performance with Fellows.

"I know. It's why I was so surprised."

"To play that card..." she sucks in a deep breath. "It's simultaneously the most easy and the most difficult option for a lady. I generally prefer to keep a hand full of better plays. Fellows, unfortunately... I must be his type. He set the terms of the game rather early, and would not be distracted."

"Is this going to be a problem going forward? The poor chap seems intent on coming along tomorrow, playing pirate with us." It was in fact all he had wanted to talk about, through five more rounds before they called it a night.

Hope shakes her head. "I don't expect it to be. So long as he doesn't find out we *lied* to him for *hours* about our marriage."

Vane leans back, grinning. "It would break his little heart to know that we didn't force a voyaging missionary to marry us at gunpoint, while the men plundered his ship?"

Hope can't help but smile at that particular yarn they'd spun. "Honestly, I don't think he even wants to sleep with me anymore. I think he just wants to *be* you."

His eyes flash with glee. "Don't sell yourself short now, love. If he does, it's only because being me is the only way to get into *your* bed."

She can barely handle hearing him say such things, in the dim light of a single lantern, and close enough that she could reach out and stroke her finger against the stubble along his jaw. She smooths her palm across the sheets between them and changes the subject to a much more important one. "Yes, it is *my* bed, isn't it."

Vane frowns down at her hand, then the floor. He lifts his face with a cool look. "That's a bit presumptuous."

Hope cocks an eyebrow.

"I do outrank you. Unless you want to play one of those 'lady' cards you're not very fond of, the bed by rights goes to me."

"Any gentleman would—"

"I don't believe I have *ever* been accused of being a gentleman."

Hope can barely stand to keep meeting his eyes, not with the fire brewing behind those particular words, the way they're kindling an answering flame in her own core. But she also

can't show him even the least sign of submission on this matter.

Vane interrupts their staring match by shrugging his shirt up over his head.

Hope responds by turning down the sheet and blanket, swiveling on her hip, and shoving both her legs underneath as fast as she can. She fixes her gaze on his climbing eyebrows, *not* his bared chest, and tucks herself into bed, burrowing her feet behind him and pulling the blanket firmly up to her chin. "You might want to put that shirt back on; the floor's likely to be cold and none too clean."

For a moment, he looks like a great beast about to tear out her throat. Then his snarl cracks open into a peal of laughter. Hope giggles a bit too as Vane leans forward and inspects the floor a second time. "You really think my shoulders will even fit into that space down there?"

Hope tries not to blush as she appraises the breadth of her captain's impressive back. "It will be cozy."

Vane huffs, tosses his hair—and throws his body down onto the bed beside her. "Cozier here," he intones, settling his cheek on the pillow right beside hers.

She makes her face show as much affront as she can muster.

"Would you look at that," he continues, "there's plenty of room for the both of us."

"I'm not sleeping with you."

Vane settles in on his back and closes his eyes. "Suit yourself. I'll be asleep in about two minutes."

Playfulness aside, Hope knows that if she kept up her insistence Vane would respect her limits. She also knows that the heaviness in her limbs means she'll fall asleep soon too, and what does it matter if he's right beside her or down on the floor as she sleeps off all this ale, anyway. She can even admit that the heat of his body, the grounding presence of his weight in the bed, are somewhat comforting. Distracting, vexing even if she were to think too hard about things like that, but she's too drunk to think that hard, isn't she. "Put out the lantern before you pass out."

She holds up the covers for him when he climbs back into the bed. Their shoulders come to rest softly against each other's, and Hope falls asleep pondering what might be making Vane's hair smell vaguely of lemon and cedar.

Chapter 6

Hope dreams she's teetering on a great precipice, unable to pull herself back nor to find the courage to see what lies in the darkness below her feet. She wakes up to the realization that she is actually just about to fall out of bed.

She pulls herself back on the mattress, able to do no more than achieve a slightly more stable balance before hitting a solid wall behind her. A warm, toned, *breathing* sort of wall. Her sleeping captain had encroached upon her territory in the dead of night, and now her shoulder is jammed into his chest and he's softly snoring into her ear.

"Move it, you lunk," she hisses, nudging him firmly with her shoulder.

It accomplishes nothing. There's not even a hitch in his breathing.

"You're on—my—*side*," she growls, shoving against him harder with each word, bracing her feet against the mattress and throwing her back into him.

The snoring stops with a bit of a sigh, then resumes without any further acknowledgment of her disturbance.

Hope twists her body around with a few jerky movements, and stares down the bridge of his nose. His head is sharing her pillow. Unacceptable. "Captain." She grasps his shoulder and shakes it, tentatively at first and then more briskly. "I need more room."

He makes some sounds, half-words not recognizable in any language that Hope is familiar with. They sound both curious and exasperated. A few more brisk shakes get Vane to shift onto his back, but he remains soundly asleep.

At least she's not nestled between his pectorals anymore. But his immovable shoulder is still preventing her from getting comfortable without touching his body. The amount of space left in the bed would be no problem if she were inclined to embrace the man, to wrap the line of her body along the whole side of his. The thought makes her flush, both with unexpected craving and with the embarrassment that would suffuse her if her captain woke up to find his navigator spooning him.

The craving, and her exhausted need to just get a little more comfortable, win out. She lets her top leg relax until her shin falls against his; better, but not enough. She rolls forward on her hip into her favorite sleeping position, daring to stack her knee on top of his thigh. Instantly, her tight muscles relax. The move presses her belly comfortably against his waist. The warmth of him is lovely, as are the gentle waves of his breathing. A part of her cannot believe she is pressing her body against Captain Vane's in this way, while the rest of her is just too tired to care about propriety.

Her arm would be most comfortable draped across his chest. But did Hope dare to go that far? In the square of dim moonlight cast by the small window, she finds herself inspecting her captain's sleeping face.

She'd stopped pretending she didn't find him handsome. Her eyes follow the strong lines of his cheekbones down to his powerful jaw. When she'd first joined his crew, she'd been nervous about his intentions toward her, but the possibility that he found her attractive had never materialized into anything troubling to her. Despite the fact that Vane was now an inert mass in the center of her bed, he had never pushed her so far as to make her truly uncomfortable. In fact, his lack of direct advances have made her wonder if she's imagining the whole thing. It is still distinctly possible that he thinks of her simply as a trusted member of his crew, valued only for her skill.

His jawline is vexing her. The fine stubble on it, grown out through the course of the day, is practically beckoning her fingertips. It would not be at all appropriate for her to stroke him in the dark, whilst he sleeps, and yet what other chance does she have to explore the way Captain Vane makes her feel without him catching her at it?

Shoving him did not wake him up. Perhaps tickling would do the trick. She tells herself she is only reaching fingers up to his cheek in order to annoy him into waking, and that only for the purpose of rolling him over to a more reasonable share of the mattress.

There's nothing surprising about the texture of Vane's cheek, not technically. It's just skin and little bristles of hair. And yet something about it feels absolutely unique, infinitely fascinating to her fingertips. She feels she could enjoy doing this for hours, or conversely that this one moment of tactile pleasure is stretching out wider and more significant than any moment has any right to. How can something feel soft and rough at the same time?

Vane's breathing hitches, his great brows creasing as he seems to become aware of her touch. Hope's fingers retract as if burnt. She really shouldn't have been doing that. She no longer wants him to wake up.

With a rumbling little groan, Vane reaches his arm over and embraces her, gathering Hope against his chest and rolling into her until she is trapped with both arms curled up between their bodies.

There is nothing to do but admit defeat, and let sleep take her, cozy and warm in the arms of her captain.

~*~

He hadn't known exactly why he said it. *She's mine*. How Hope must have shuddered, listening to that. He knew she could handle herself. It just sort of came out of his mouth when he saw the way that fisherman was *leering* at her. But now here she is, curled up against his chest in the thin light of early morning.

He's grateful that he woke up so gently. Oftentimes unpleasant dreams haunt him in the early hours before dawn, and he does not always awake without a fight. This time, fleeting dreams melt into awareness of a warm weight at his side, and now Vane thinks he will just never move again. Her hand is on his chest. His heart beats strong and wild just beneath her palm. He stares at the ceiling, breathing carefully, only shallowly, and hopes this moment might stretch out forever.

His arm is around her. When did that happen? She fits so perfectly right there, tucked into his shoulder. If ever he had doubts about the depths of his feelings for the woman sleeping beside him, they were surely dispelled now. This is more than just desire, more than just skin craving skin. Her trusting little body anchors him, makes him feel as if heavens and earth are all turning as they should, with this bed at their absolute center. As if everything that exists had navigated his life right to this still point right here.

When she wakes, it will be over. If only they really were husband and wife, if the story they had spun in the tavern downstairs had magically come true overnight. But Vane would not risk losing her from his ship, not just to tell her how he feels. Better to see her every day, to hear her voice carry across the deck over the ocean winds, to take the smiles and tongue-lashings she throws in equal measure, and keep his heart concealed. At this point, not even his crew would forgive him if he drove her away.

She stirs. Oh, the cruelty of that soft sound that she makes as she wakes. Vane keeps himself still and unthreatening as he feels her body tense, as she lifts her head with a start and pulls her hand away from his heart.

Her hair is mussed and lovely, a lock of it falling across her face as she blinks at him in the warming light. She looks neither angry nor confused, so his worst fears recede. She looks . . . he can't quite put his finger on it. Distressed?

"I—" a nervous smile darts across Hope's face. "I'm sorry." She laughs, and pulls her body away. That's all she does, when she awakens to find herself entangled with his limbs at the center of a benevolent universe. She laughs.

She averts her eyes. She won't look at his face as she scrambles to sit all the way up. Carefully not letting any part of her body touch him again. What more evidence does he need that he's right to keep his heart locked away? "Mornin'," he growls, polite as he can. Then swivels away from her to set his feet firmly on the floor.

~*~

Somehow Hope had been sure that she'd awaken before her captain, that she would be able to pull away and hide the secret embrace she'd bestowed on him during the night. Instead, she'd found herself rousing to the face of a very much aware and awake Charles Vane. And he had just been letting her sleep on, curled up against him like that, with her palm *splayed* across his *bare chest*...

Heat rises again in her cheeks, and she keeps her back to him as they both straighten hair and clothing and prepare to look presentable enough to walk downstairs. She hopes she hadn't made him too uncomfortable. Poor thing was probably so shocked to wake up and find her like that that he was afraid to move. Probably thought she'd yell, accuse him of impropriety, trying to sneak something while she was asleep. But Hope knows she's the one at fault here. She was the one who had indulged secret desires, and the only one that should be feeling any shame today.

The right thing to do would be to say something. Clear the air. But what on earth is the proper etiquette for *I'm sorry that I took advantage of the warmth of your body last night? I*

apologize for testing the waters and liking it just a bit too much.

“You must think me silly,” she says to him. She’s not really certain where she’s going with that, but it’s a start.

Charles looks up at her abruptly, shirt in hand.

He’s listening. She has to say something more. “I promise that I’m not—” she cuts herself off. It’s imperative to reassure him that he doesn’t have to worry about her attraction to him, but equally important that she not even give him the idea that’s what this is about, if such thoughts had not already occurred to him. “I want to reassure you that my feelings aren’t—”

This time she’s cut off by a loud, thumping knock at the door. Both their heads swivel at the sound. “I hear congratulations are in order,” Jack Rackham’s cheery voice calls, emanating through the wood. “I was told the ‘newlyweds’ would be found in this room.”

Hope checks that her blouse is in order, then jumps to open the door. Their quartermaster’s face looms down at her, one amused eyebrow raised expectantly. “We didn’t get married, Jack. It’s all a misunderstanding.” She steps back into the corner, trying to create enough space to allow him entry into the tiny room.

Why is Vane looking at her like that?

Jack’s eyes float to find the captain as well.

Vane is gruff. “Told the mark she was my wife.” He pulls his hair out of the collar of the shirt he just finished shrugging on. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“So we’ve made contact, then.” Pleased, Jack sweeps fully into the room.

Hope closes the door behind him, mindful that Fellows might come walking up at any moment to begin their rendezvous. “More than contact,” she confirms, intent on filling Jack in quickly before another knock comes at the door. “He’s agreed to lead us right to it.”

Jack seems distracted. “A fine bit of news.” His eyes linger on the single bed, the two pairs of boots still standing side-by-side at its foot.

Something about the way he makes eye contact with Vane, directly after looking up from the rumpled bed, irks her. Hope stalks into his line of sight and crosses her arms. “Nothing untoward happened, Jack.”

Why do his eyes *keep* flitting back to Vane? Jack has nothing but a nod for her statement. Why on earth would *the captain’s* feelings be the ones anyone would be worried about right now?

“I promise you,” she says stubbornly, “he was a perfect gentleman.”

“That’s not what you called me last night,” Vane rumbles behind her.

She whirls on him. “Don’t make this worse,” she barks at the cheekiness she detects in his halfhearted smile. “The last thing you want today is an angry wife.”

“So we’re keeping up this little ruse, then?” Jack inquires. Judging by the impressive angle of his eyebrow, he’s realized Vane’s feelings aren’t the only ones that might require caution in this moment.

Vane’s big hand cups Hope’s elbow, guiding her in the direction of their boots. “No way around it. Our contact took a fancy to her.” He holds her eyes for a moment, measuring his next words. “Which she leveraged. Seems I’ve got a coquettish little wife on my hands. Fellows finds out we ain’t really married, now, and the only way to keep ‘im would be to send her to his bed instead of mine.”

Jack looks, frankly, flabbergasted at every word of this report. He turns wide eyes to Hope, for confirmation of such an extremely uncharacteristic story. “What—” he stops, screwing up his face in confusion, then tries again. “How much did you have to drink last night?”

Hope scowls at him. “It was a calculated play. Got us the deal, didn’t I?”

“So long as the man can get out of bed today,” Vane adds, helpfully. “We did attempt to drink him under the table by the end, there.”

Hope’s memories flash to that portion of the evening, to the fire ignited in her blood by the casual grip of the hands Vane kept resting on various areas of her body, the alluring spark nestled in the laughter behind her captain’s eyes. She can admit that the tittering, maddening, absolute uncertainty of these *new feelings*, she still tells herself they are new, led her to drink much more than was her usual habit.

“Perhaps we had best go knock on his door,” she says, forcing her mind back to the real business at hand, “before he gets away.”

~*~

She’s not sure how on earth she hadn’t thought to expect it. Hope considers herself an intelligent woman, extremely capable of thinking a plan through, anticipating the obstacles, the contingencies, and every flavor of unexpected consequences that might come from a particular course of action. It’s what makes her a damned good pirate, after all.

And still, it hits her like a blow to the stomach, knocking all other thoughts from her head for one long, unreasonable moment.

“You’re back,” the boatswain calls, waving as she and Vane accompany Fellows up the gangplank to board the *Ranger*. “Welcome aboard, Captain. Welcome aboard, Mrs. Vane.”

She almost stumbles. Which is especially embarrassing because the captain had his hand on her arm, and absolutely must have felt her composure crumble at those particular words.

“And who is this that you’ve brought with you, Mrs. Vane?” Oh, Shane is having fun with this. Hope can hear the subtle emphasis he has put on the honorific this time. They sent Jack

up to the ship ahead of them, to let everyone in on the need for a little subterfuge while Mr. Fellows leads them to the treasure. It seems clear now that the crew has decided to have fun with it.

She's not going to live this one down.

"This is Mr. Fellows," she introduces. "Please, meet Shane Rollins, our boatswain." Hope would like to remove her hand from Captain Vane's arm, now that they've attracted the attention of the crew, but his fingers have covered hers and she can't quite bring herself to recoil. She expects to find him laughing at her when she looks up at her "husband," but his squinted eyes are very carefully not looking at her. Perhaps there is a slight tilt to the chiseled line of his mouth. Bother. He probably finds this extra funny given the way he found her wrapped around his body this morning.

Quite a few more members of the crew are on deck than usual, watching them board. She could chalk it up to excitement over the treasure her guest was about to guide them towards, but the smiles are just a bit too sly for that, aren't they.

And it only gets worse as they get underway. Their guide turns out to be a gregarious, amiable fellow even when hungover. He, of course, stays close by the navigator's side, attending to his "important business" of advising their course while chatting up the various crewmen who continue to insert themselves into the conversation. And it seems that as long as Fellows is glued to her side, Captain Vane will be too. Which, while perhaps intimidating to Fellows, (perhaps), does absolutely nothing to dissuade the crewmen from attempting to fluster Hope as best they can.

"Such a handsome couple you two make."

"I confess I did tear up just a bit at your ceremony."

"Oh, I remember it like it was yesterday."

"That's because it was yesterday, wasn't it?"

"No, yer daft, it were a week ago."

"Ain't they been married for months now?"

"Nah, it only *feels* that way, on account o' how long they was makin' eyes at each other before that."

For her part, Hope mostly just stares resolutely out to sea. Despite Vane's uncharacteristic nearness, he himself does nothing to feed into the madness either.

"I just love seeing the two o' you so happy together. Oh, put your arm around her. Give her a kiss."

That last one is met with the flattest stare Hope can summon. There is no way that even an actual Captain's wife would ever put on a performance like that. "Reckon we're close?" she asks Fellows instead.

“Oh, might be a couple more hours. Plenty of time to keep trading stories.”

~*~

Eventually she reaches her limit, right about the time Jack starts spinning his own version of their false narrative, opening with “We had never thought our Captain here would be the marrying type...” Hastily, Hope excuses herself to go put on a fresh set of clothes, before her growing frustration blows the whole charade.

But when she gets to her bunk, she finds it stripped, her few meager belongings nowhere to be seen. Did they—?

Hope fumes. There’s only one logical explanation for this, isn’t there. The crew’s been quite thorough in their commitment to establishing the ruse. She stalks back out of the lower decks.

She finds her clothes in the Captain’s quarters. Of course. Her skin prickles as she disrobes in here, even though the room is empty. To be undressed inside Vane’s private space . . . to her horror, Hope realizes the main emotion it’s filling her with is a sense of *longing*.

This is so inappropriate. She dresses herself as quickly as she can, then gets hung up on deciding where to set her soiled clothes. She can’t have Vane returning to his cabin and seeing her shirt and breeches flung across his bed, where she just almost forgot them in her haste to exit. The impression of casual intimacy that would leave just wouldn’t do at all. They’re dirty, so she won’t tuck them away into a drawer... She settles on draping them carefully across the chest of her belongings that the crew had so helpfully moved into this cabin. With the most innocuous bits of each garment facing forward, neatly lined up, to minimize all possibility that they might create the impression they had been flung aside by a now-naked woman.

When she’s satisfied, Hope doesn’t return to the main deck. They’ve likely moved on in conversation up there, but her renewed appearance might only drag their wicked minds back to making fun. Instead, she finds a secluded section of railing from which to hide a little longer, while contemplating the sea.

The waves are mild this morning, and the blue expanse glitters in the brightness of the sun. She wishes she had her hat, but it was missing from her bunk and she was not going back to Vane’s cabin to search out where the crew may have stowed it. Wouldn’t be right to start rifling through his things, even if no one on this boat seems to have felt shame doing it to hers.

When she had awoken, so embarrassingly nestled against her captain’s chest, she had thought it would be easy to simply carry on and ignore what had happened. The way that lying with him had made her feel. But now it seems no one is willing to let her forget it. The feel of Vane’s arms around her... she has to press her eyes closed for a moment, against the sudden rush of heady emotion threatening to disperse all reason and good sense in its wake.

She opens them at the sound of boots approaching on the deck. It’s Jack, strutting toward her with a keen, wary look in his eye.

“What.”

He lifts his palms in a gesture of harmlessness, then takes a place leaning against the rail at her side. “Just making the rounds. Ascertaining that each man is at his post.”

Hope rolls her eyes at that. “Did you disperse the crowd around Fellows, then?”

Jack fixes her with a look out of the corner of his eye. “Eventually.”

Hope sighs, and sags a little deeper as she stares out across the water. “I hadn’t expected the crew to be quite so... enamored of this idea.”

“No?”

“Sure, it’s a little funny,” she grants, “but they were like a bunch of gossiping old biddies up there. What, I wonder, set that off?”

She rounds on Jack, preparing to accuse him of stirring up the crew’s expectations. But something in his flat, serious look stops her. “You really don’t know.”

“Know what?”

Jack presses his lips together, exhaling a little huff through his nose as he chooses his words. “Darling.” He leans in a little closer. “Everybody sees how you look at him.”

Hope tries not to let her eyes widen at the splash of nerves that rush through her body. “What? How do I look at him?”

“Like the secrets of the heavens might be written under his skin.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which some things are left unspoken that perhaps should be said, and others are uttered that definitely should not have been.

It's so much worse than she had thought. Bad enough that Captain Vane might now have the impression that she feels some romantic inclination towards him, but to learn that it's spread to the entire crew, too? Jack's words have set her to brooding all the more intently. Hope barely even noticed him depart.

Because . . . she doesn't feel that way about Charles Vane. Does she? What face could she be making, that Jack thinks he sees longing in her eyes when she contemplates their captain? A ridiculous notion.

And yet. Hope has never believed in lying to herself. A capable woman faces all of the facts head-on. To do otherwise would leave a lady trapped. Outmaneuvered. Society thrives on the soul-numbing lies it requires women to tell themselves. And Hope's most fervent promise to herself was to leave that sort of thing behind.

No self-deception, then. When she thinks of Charles Vane, her chest warms. His presence on deck sets her heart beating faster, and the effect is not solely due to his authority, is it. He doesn't speak much, but when he does she listens eagerly, interested in every rare glimpse into his mind.

Bother. Jack might be onto something. Those stray thoughts she suffered through in the wee hours last night may not only have been sparked by Vane's unusual proximity. The warmth in her body spreads lower.

When she turned to piracy, leaving Society, she abandoned its restrictions. This included a short period in which she satisfied certain curiosities. So her maidenhead is gone. Its passing was . . . anticlimactic. She hasn't thought much about sex since then. Pities the women required to perform that marital duty on a nightly basis, if she's being honest. And she's quite motivated to keep to her course now, a life of independence that will hopefully culminate in the acquisition of a small fortune sufficient to set up her own comfortable retirement by the time age starts to stiffen her joints.

She's surprised, then, to find the notion hidden in the depths of her mind that with Vane, such intimacy could be different. The way his hand had molded itself around her thigh last night, the feel of his arms around her and his breath against her neck when he'd smelled her perfume. Her body had responded so much more vigorously than expected.

But it was probably just the drink. And reactions such as those are always fleeting, aren't they. Such feelings are not an acceptable reason to risk her respectful place on this crew by tumbling into bed with its captain.

Hope turns away from the rail, puts her back to the sea and gathers her thoughts into a forceful summary of conclusions. Yes, it seems she is harboring a certain affection for Charles Vane. But it's manageable. Not something she is going to allow to interrupt her plans. If she can just figure out how to wipe the dreamy schoolgirl *look* off her face that certain perceptive members of the crew have apparently noticed, she should be fine. Because it's not like her feelings are returned. He would have made a move by now. She remembers her early suspicions, that Vane might be attracted to her, but things had settled, quite comfortably, between them since then. She's almost embarrassed to have been prideful enough to have thought it.

That issue being settled, she marches herself back up to the helm to adjust their course and sets her thoughts to things that are truly important.

~*~

Fellows pulls through; the cache is there, and no soldiers in sight. They make quick work of hauling it all onto the *Ranger*. The sun is slanting low by the time they're done; they've had to swing around the long way to avoid being spotted by anyone that could later connect their ship to the theft.

Days like these remind Vane why he's so grateful to have such a skilled navigator, who can locate their position so precisely that they can leave the sight of land and come back in at such an exact, advantageous angle. Swoop in on the cache from nowhere, and swoop right back out again. They're like ghosts today.

Rich ghosts. He'd never hear the end of it if he ever drove her away with his clumsy, misguided affections.

Vane knows he will have to be very careful tonight. Their ship could not be seen returning from the location of the cache, and there was not enough time to return Mr. Fellows home from a more roundabout angle before sundown. Which meant their guide was spending the night on the ship, bunking with the crew, and Hope . . . Hope would of course be sleeping in the captain's quarters with her "husband."

Vane exhales, fingers gripping the railing as if the wood might impart some of its steadfastness. To have had her unexpectedly in his arms was one thing. A pure, heavenly moment that had caught him by surprise. It was quite another to know that she was to spend the night with him again. How could he possibly stay calm, and feel her body just beside his, in his own narrow bed?

It would be a simple thing to sneak a hammock into his quarters, of course. He feels his face burn a bit as he becomes aware that he'd like to pretend that particular solution had just never occurred to him.

Hope's smart. She will definitely think of it herself, anyway.

Hope finds herself down by the guns. It's not her turn to help with the cleaning and re-setting, but she doesn't want to be anywhere near Fellows, or Vane, or the boisterous crew in the mess. Besides, she likes being seen doing extra work; helps combat many of the prejudices about a lady on board. She settles in next to Stevens, one of the handful of her old *Starling* crew that had been accepted with her into the *Ranger's* fold.

"Mrs. Vane," he says by way of greeting just as she starts the scrubbing. He doesn't say it like the other crewmen had. There's scorn in his voice, and perhaps a hint of a question.

Hope scowls. "Not you, too."

Stevens nods, as if she's passed his test. They work in companionable silence for a while, until the only other man on this deck stretches, stows his tools, and exits via the ladder. Probably sneaking off now that Hope has effectively taken his spot. Only then does Stevens speak. "Been hopin' you'd come talk to me."

Hope looks up, without pausing her work.

"Seem to be finding your place here."

"Everyone has use for a good navigator."

"More than that. Look like you're fitting in."

"Do I?"

"Or is this just what you do. Make people like you. Find your way to the top, the inner circle, even if you're just making the best of it."

There's a bitterness to the way he's speaking, but Hope doesn't feel like it's directed at her, necessarily. Stevens has always had friendly feelings for her, that's why he followed her to this crew. She decides to say very little, invite him to say a little more. "Can you blame me?"

"Guess not. You've always had a way with people." He glances at the hatch, though there's no one there. "Big take today," he comments.

Hope grunts in agreement.

"Biggest we've had, since leaving Nassau." He puts a little more oil on his rag. "Big enough to make up for the *Starling*."

Hope's hands stop moving. She forces them to continue. "I . . . hadn't thought of it that way."

Stevens sniffs, a sudden rush of nose-clearing air. "We have. Me and some of the boys."

He has to mean the rest of the *Starling* crew. There's four more of them, those that Vane hadn't seen a need to punish for her brother-in-law's stunt, fine seamen who hadn't seemed

like a mutiny risk to Jack when he recruited them out of the splinters of that disbanded crew. Hope had even vouched for them.

Apparently Jack can't be right about everything.

"With your help, Hope, it'd be easy."

~*~

Vane's quiet contemplation is interrupted by Jack's voice. "Looking for mermaids?" he asks, joining his captain on the deserted stretch of deck and staring down into the dark waters alongside him. The ship is safely hidden in a cove, and most of the crew are down in the mess for their nightly meal.

Vane replies with a rather rude gesture.

"No, there's only one maid you're interested in."

Vane looks up sharply.

"Has a nice ring to it, 'Mrs. Vane.' I suppose that's why the crew can't seem to stop saying it."

He grunts. "Torturing her."

"Maybe just a little."

Jack lapses into silence, but Vane is certain that won't last for long. Maybe he should walk away now, avoid the question that is sure to be coming next. However . . . Vane can't stop asking it of himself, either. So he may as well just let Jack say it.

"I'm out of more subtle advice," Jack says. "And you never were one for subtlety, anyway. So here's this: if you want her, just take her already."

Not exactly what Vane thought he'd hear. He shifts, looks more squarely at Jack, and plays dumb with his reply. "I have."

"Not onto your crew. It's obvious how much you want her in your bed." He's eying Vane closely.

Is this what Jack thinks of him? He'd always pegged Jack as a bit of a romantic, seeing how well he treats Anne. He'd been bracing himself for a conversation about deep feelings. Not this crassness. "And as a member of my crew," Vane growls in reply, "she's got full rights here. I can't have her by force."

"Who says you need to force her?"

This is not what Vane wanted to hear, either. The last thing he needs is to build up a false hope. "Lay off, Jack. You don't know what you're talking about." He turns squarely back toward the water.

“You really can’t tell.”

“I’ve tried flirting with her, Jack. When we first got her. She rejected me quite squarely.”

“Sometimes I wonder what it is you consider to be ‘flirting,’ Charles, when most of your experience is with whores who already know how your coin spends.” Or girls looking to yoke his power, but at least Jack was kind enough not to mention that part. “Is it possible your approach lacks a certain . . . art?”

“Don’t say you’re offering to teach me,” he growls.

Jack’s hand flutters in the air. “You’re a lost cause anyway.”

“I’ve already resolved to never try again.”

“But why?” Jack leans over the rail, seeking his eyes. “She’s as smitten as you are; I don’t see how you can’t see it.” He sighs. “You’re too much alike, too proud and too timid, both at once, to see what’s right in front of you.”

“I know what’s in front of me,” Vane retorts, choosing to ignore the accusation of cowardice. Because he likes Jack. He’s let him get away with worse without rearranging his face over it. He can let this one go too. He takes a deep breath, and feels himself scowling. “I’m not going to say anything to her. Leave it, Jack. You weren’t there this morning. When she woke up and found herself in bed with me . . . she made her lack of interest abundantly clear.”

Jack is shaking his head. “I can’t believe that. More likely you’ve scared her off with your extreme stoicism. How is she to know of your interest, if you’re not giving any signs of it?”

Vane looks over from the corner of his eye. “If I’m not giving any signs, then how can you be so certain that you know my heart?”

Jack claps him on the shoulder. “Because I know you too well, Charles. I know your tells. And you’ve gone through too much trouble to capture this bird.”

Vane growls his disagreement with that choice of phrasing.

Jack keeps barreling on. “Yes, yes. She’s a great value to the crew. But that’s not why you took her.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Is that not what you did? You saw what you wanted, and you got control of her. We didn’t have to come down so hard on the *Starling*. But you needed to stake your claim. Now I feel like we’re all just holding our breaths. I’ve never seen you like this. You took her, I don’t understand why now you won’t *take her*. Tough as she is, she’s too much a maid to be the one to take the initiative. She might even be a virgin still. In need of a strong, experienced hand like yours to guide the way.”

Vane grunts, he can’t help it. He’s been trying so hard not think this way, but Jack’s words bring unbidden images to his mind. Hope’s wide eyes, looking up at him from his pillow. The

softness of her flesh; the sounds she'd make if he—

Jack's still talking. "God knows you both could use it. And she won't be getting it anywhere else, not with you looming over her as you are. So why don't you get on with it? Scoop her up and throw her in your bed. Hope's not more than a bird you're keeping in a cage if you keep going on like this."

"Is that what I am." Hope Wickham herself materializes from the shadow at the end of the deck. How long had she been standing there, listening, fuming? Long enough, judging by the look on her face. Charles Vane feels his heart sink down to his knees.

Chapter 8

It's approaching midnight, and Hope's still pacing the deck. She'd already resolved she doesn't give a whit about keeping up the ruse for Mr. Fellows anymore; tonight she'll sleep in her rightful place among the crew. Now that she knows what awaits her in her captain's quarters.

The only thing that's stopping her from going down to her hammock right now is that she knows she won't sleep. Too many thoughts are swirling in her head. All she can do is pace, and take measurements she doesn't even need, and pace again.

Her worst fears realized. Hope feels sicker than she did when Charles Vane disbanded her crew, and she had to beg for her brother-in-law's life to be spared. Sicker now, because at that time she hadn't expected anything better from the fearsome brute. Everyone knew Captain Vane's reputation, and that of his whole crew for that matter. When had she let herself believe that him, and *Jack Rackham* for that matter, were somehow more noble than any other of the black-hearted men that turned pirate?

She forces herself to take a breath. If she's now maligning the entirety of her own profession, then certainly her emotions have taken away all rationality. And yet—had seducing her truly been his plan all along? And had Hope actually been *falling for it*?

Perhaps Stevens and the boys have it right. Something deep within her heart breaks to hear that thought, even if it is only resounding through the inside of her own skull. Avenge the *Starling* and run. There's a certain justice to it. The bird flies the cage, but takes everything with her on the way out? Marvelous. Hope feels her heart turning as black as the inky waters look this night, and allows herself to sink into that feeling a little deeper. If they got free with it, they could easily run right back to Nassau. Certainly Eleanor Guthrie would give them haven after they crossed Charles Vane, merely on principle.

Hope feels her guts sicken even more.

Just a few hours ago, she'd been pondering what had felt like the very real possibility that she was in love with Captain Vane. Distraught that her feelings weren't returned. Now all she can hear is that ugly edge in Jack's voice as he taunted their captain to *take her*. They don't see her any differently than the women back on shore, after all. Prizes to be captured, warm bodies to be used, the luckiest of whom could only hope to become a cherished object kept locked up and secreted away.

That would never be her. Hope simply would not allow it.

Should she go talk to Stevens? Her feet carry her to the ladder, and then away again. She remains furious, but she can't yet commit to that course of action. There is a difference between capturing a prize on open waters, and stealing a treasure right under the noses of men that trust you. Hope had only supported the scheme that ended the *Starling* because they had truly planned to hold the cargo safe until a beneficial, *fair* negotiation had been reached.

She would not want Vane to think her a liar, if she proved herself capable of turning around and doing just the thing he had accused her of.

And yet. What else is she to do? Carry on as if nothing had changed? This ache in her heart demands satisfaction. She could leave without causing any trouble; she could think of several other captains that would have her, but even that more reasonable thought leaves her feeling itchy. Slipping away without making some sort of statement just won't do.

~*~

She's on her way down to the berth deck, finally ready to set her swirling thoughts to rest, but she doesn't get very far. Stevens is coming up the other way. She's surprised; she thought this was his shift to sleep. His pace slows when he sees her, and his eyebrows raise in silent question.

She's leaning toward conspiring with him, but she has not yet made up her mind. A bolt of panic flashes through her. If she speaks with him, her hesitancy will show, and she may ruin her chances of playing this situation in either direction. Might not be able to help him or stop him.

He's almost reached her. His mouth opens to speak a greeting. Hope realizes they're right in front of the door to the captain's cabin. The one "Mrs. Vane" sleeps in too. To her own horror, Hope finds herself taking the coward's way out, giving Stevens an apologetic smile and stepping right in through that door as if this was her intention all along.

Vane is sitting on his bed, half-undressed, because of course he is. But what is she to do, step right back out into the hallway again? She shuts the door quickly behind herself, then whirls to face her captain so that she does not look the coward.

They stare at each other for a long moment. What is she to say? She didn't even plan to come in here. And she certainly can't explain why she did. "I'd given up on seeing you tonight," he rasps up at her. He eyes her and she says nothing and so he continues. "After you stormed away without giving me a chance to explain myself."

"I still don't want to hear it," she growls. How could she know what words to trust, coming out of his mouth? She doesn't want excuses. She doesn't want this smoothed over with half-truths. She can't bear to feel the crack in her heart widen.

His brows lift, then converge in an angry crease. "Then why did you come in."

A good question, Hope. She's not even certain why the sight of Stevens made her feel such panic in the first place. She had convinced herself up on deck of her new resolve, hadn't she?

And now Vane is sitting here right before her, looking up with poorly-disguised pain in his eyes. In *his* eyes? He growls again before she can formulate an answer. "You'd better not tell me that you intend to berate me without hearing my side. That's not how this is going to work."

"I have nothing to say to you."

She tries to turn away, but when her captain makes a scoffing sound she can't help but look back. "So you came in here, what, because 'Mrs. Vane' needs to go to bed?"

"It is late," she says. Too early to step back out again, and risk Stevens wondering why she ducked in here in the first place. She settles for an easy lie. "I thought I'd find you already asleep."

"The only time you're content to rest beside me," Vane says bitterly, looking away. "When I'm unconscious."

Hope barks a laugh. Does he really think she'd climb into bed with him after what she overheard? "This time, I will gladly sleep on the floor."

He flops back in the bed, turning on his side so all she can see is the broad expanse of his scarred back and his hair spilled across the pillow. "Suit yourself."

She tries to. Pacing across the short space to her trunk, she sits down on it and takes her boots off. Noisily. She doesn't want to talk, but she doesn't want to let the man rest, either. He shifts positions when she all but hurls the second one onto the decking beside her, but that's the only reaction she gets.

She looks around for anything soft to lie down upon, but it appears that the only blanket in the room is trapped underneath Vane's inert form.

She's not going to ask for it.

Instead, she puts out the light, loosens her belt, and lies down on her back, fully clothed, on the stretch of decking beside Vane's bed. A porthole lets in a little moonlight, just enough to outline the hulking form of his shoulder above her. She closes her eyes, tells herself she doesn't want to look at him. Now is the time for sleep.

Her mind won't rest. Now that the man is right here, willing to talk to her, she can't help but imagine what she might say to him were she inclined to let that conversation happen. *A bird in a cage*. That's what Jack had called her. She'd certainly felt that way when she got here; has she been lying to herself since then? Getting comfortable with the crew, becoming friends with Anne, and even with Vane himself. Was all that just gilding on the bars?

He was willing to let you go, she tells herself. *You just didn't take it*.

Still. The things she'd heard Jack say don't sit right. *We didn't have to come down so hard on the Starling*, he'd said. She'd been approaching them 'round the corner, and of course her feet had slowed when she heard them talking about her, and her "value." A part of her wishes she hadn't. It hurt to know this side of the story. That the dismantling of the *Starling* had been her fault, that she'd inspired a lustful eye just waiting for an excuse to crack that ship and steal her like a prize. Jack's words are burnt into her memory: *You saw what you wanted, and got control of her*.

Vane releases a heavy sigh above her, laced with the frustration of being unable to sleep.

It pisses Hope off. Why is she laying here blaming herself? Jack may have said it, and Vane may not have disagreed with it, but that doesn't mean it's true, that she's responsible for this man's brutish choices. She's glad he's still awake, glad he's just as troubled as she; if anything he should be the most troubled. He's not even offering to make any amends.

"The least you could do is give me that blanket," she barks into the darkness above her.

She hears more than sees Vane roll in her direction. "The least you could do is let me speak."

"Is this a negotiation? Withholding comfort until I consent to hear you out? Because if we're talking, you are the one who is going to listen to me."

"Fine."

But Hope doesn't know what to say. The silence stretches between them. As her eyes rove around in the dark, she realizes Vane is peering down off the side of the bed. The angle of the moonlight is likely illuminating her face more clearly than his. He's just watching, and waiting. But she doesn't know where to start.

"How much did you hear?" he asks softly. Is it defensive, or is he trying to give her a place to begin?

"Enough," she barks back.

Vane sighs. "Jack—" he begins, but Hope cuts him off quick.

"You think you can blame this on Jack? I didn't hear you disagreeing with him."

"That's not—"

"You said that I would talk first. I'm not going to lay here listening to you make excuses. The truth and a lie are so close, aren't they? So close," she seethes. "After all your talk about 'liberating' me from a crew that I was 'too good for.' I remember what you said, the last time this ship was likened to a cage around me." She glares up at the beams of said ship, although she can barely see them in the dim. "You did it for me, yes, but not for my own good. And not for my skills, apparently, either. After all we've been through, the truth comes out. I am only here because you want to sleep with me."

"I don't want to sleep with you," Vane grinds out through his teeth.

Hope is too surprised to interrupt him, this time. Even as the silence stretches out a little longer. She no longer knows what she wants him to say next. This morning she was disappointed at his lack of interest, and this evening she was enraged at the spectre of his lust. Which is it? What does she want from him?

"I want," Vane says slowly, words rumbling even deeper than usual, like rocks deep in the earth grinding together, "to share my life with you. I want you with me every morning when I wake. I want to work with you, seize prizes with you, and sometimes even be the reason that you smile." Every word is measured, thoughtful, and as true as the very roots of the earth.

"That is more important to me than anything else. Anything."

Hope wishes she could see his face better, as he confesses these words into the dark.

“So I hope that you can forget what you heard *Jack* say, because I already have everything that I want most.” Is that a stubborn set to his jaw? “And I would never want to lose it over the matter of lust. I was handling my feelings just fine before this,” he pauses, “and I will continue to do so, quietly, and respectfully. As you certainly must admit I have been doing so far. Do not let it trouble you.”

He stirs in the bed above her, and it takes her a moment to work out what he’s doing. His whole body lifts, and then settles, and then his arm extends silently down to her, proffering a fist full of the requested blanket.

In stunned silence, she takes it.

Chapter 9

Vane waits in silence, listening to Hope wrestle with the blanket on the floor beside him, seemingly settling in for the night. She has not spoken one word since his impulsive confession, and it feels like iron bars are clamping across his chest, squeezing tighter with every moment that passes in which she still remains silent.

He had meant to reassure her, to defend himself against her ugly accusation that he was no more than a brute with the basest of intentions. But she does not seem reassured, not judging by the frenetic little movements he hears as she adjusts and readjusts the blanket on the floor beneath him, and not judging by the oppressiveness of the silence settling between them.

Should he offer her the bed? Or would she only take that the wrong way, too.

“Did...?” Hope begins, but she does not finish. Vane’s heart swells against all his constricting doubts at even a single word from her. She starts again. “It almost sounded as though you confessed your undying love for me.”

Her tone is a touch wry, and Vane can’t tell if she’s mocking the very possibility of it. For fuck’s sake, he hates this. “Put it out of your mind,” he growls. “I had resolved never to tell you.” He stops himself from saying any more by vividly imagining splitting Jack’s lip as soon as he finds him in the morning. If only he had followed through on that earlier impulse up on deck, and shut him up before Hope could overhear those damning words.

She sighs on the floor beneath him, a heavy exhale that sets off further alarm bells between his ears. How can he undo this? He’s going to do more to Jack than just bloody his lip if she leaves. Her voice floats up through the dark again. “I could ask you ‘why,’ but I already know. I asked you not to keep me in a cage.” She rubs her hand across her face. “Does Jack have the right of it? Am I caged here anyway?”

“Of course not,” Vane says quickly, leaning further over the edge of the mattress although he can barely make out her wide eyes in the dark. “You are free to do as you please. I have no claim over you.”

“Haven’t you?” Her voice is soft, a faint little plea, and he wonders if she even meant to say it out loud.

His fearful heart swells again, and he forces himself to wait, wait, he can’t push her, like he pushed Eleanor, he will never again become entangled with a woman who’s only telling him what he wants to hear. Hope will come to him for her own reasons, or not at all. “I’ll not ask you for anything. Nor prevent you from doing anything you wish. My feelings are my own, and have no bearing on your freedom.”

Somehow this next silence is worse. Why is it worse? Only because every fresh word she wrestles out of him feels like further confirmation that he will never have what he wants. It’s one thing to nurture hope and never act. Quite another to have to speak it, and to *know* that the gloomy future he is preparing himself for is more certainly inevitable.

She just lays there. Hands tucked across her chest, staring at the ceiling. “I suppose I ought to inform you,” she finally says, “that I’ve been having similar feelings.”

There’s no describing what happens inside Charles Vane’s heart when he hears those words. But his stubborn mind catches on a snag. “Ought to?” he parrots.

Hope releases another burst of air. “It’s only fair, don’t you think?”

“Yes.”

“I found myself preparing a similar speech to give you, this morning. I’ve come to the same conclusion,” she says, so matter-of-factly. “That it would not be wise to jeopardize what’s working.” Her head turns, her eyes seeking his in the dark. “My place on this ship. The happiness we already have.”

There’s a rushing in his ears. “*Is it a risk, though? If both our hearts beat with the same passion?*”

“Your partnership with Eleanor started in love, and look how that turned out.”

It hurt even to Hope say her name. She shouldn’t compare herself to that woman. “I don’t think what I felt for her was ever love,” he says slowly. “And she certainly never loved me, I know that now.”

Hope’s gaze returns to the ceiling. “So I’ll ask you again. Charles.” Her voice is soft. “Do you love me?”

He lifts his chest, leaning out into the space between them, his hair spilling almost far enough to reach her face. “If this isn’t love, then I am certain I’ll never know the meaning of it.”

Hope believes him. Truly, she does, and while it sets her heart beating faster, her chest swelling with some answering feeling, she feels a restless in her limbs, a queasy apprehension in her gut. It is so easy for a man to love a woman. Not much changes in his life at the admission. But for a woman such as her to accept a man ... suddenly there are expectations involved. Roles, and duties. Every freedom she’s worked so hard for could be lost in an instant.

So while she marks the excitement in her chest, the flushing in her cheeks—enjoys them, even—she makes sure her voice comes out steady and measured. “Thank you. For answering so honestly.”

She swears she can hear his heart crack in the silence that she allows to follow. She can only imagine he expected a declaration with similar passion. She’s almost inclined to make one, thinking about the connections they’ve shared, the way she’s started to consider Charles Vane to be the only man on Earth that might see her for who she truly is. A man that might take her just as she stands, scars and quirks and unusual dreams and all. But she cannot be rash. Whatever she says tonight can never be taken back.

“Hope...”

The emotion in that one word, the way he says her name, nearly undoes her.

She does not speak and he continues. “You say you have similar feelings,” his voice rumbles down from the mattress above her. “Will you not give them voice?”

“I need time.” A simple truth. She can give him that much, at least. And perhaps, perhaps just a little bit more. “I didn’t dare let myself want something I never thought I could have,” she almost whispers into the dark.

He’s silent for a long time, gazing down at her, and his dimly-lit face seems to be at peace. As peaceful as that craggy brow and thin mouth can get, at least. Giving her the time that she asked for. When he does speak again, it’s not to push the issue any further. “Take the bed.”

She’s shaking her head, but he’s already lifting himself from the mattress.

“I’ll not make you sleep on the floor.”

“A gentleman after all,” she quips, pulling back to make space as Vane does not wait for her to argue, lowering his body to the deck beside her.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

They share a smile, their noses only inches apart in the dark. “Our respective ranks dictate that you should get the bed. I’m not some fragile Lady,” Hope chastises.

“I know that,” her captain replies. He settles his head against his arm. “Take the bed anyway.”

She can see his face so much better from this distance. It’s overwhelming, really, and perhaps she should let him win, and stand up now. She finds that she’s loathe to give up the view, not when she can see the guarded softness in his eyes. The affection that’s been lurking behind his long looks for some time, she realizes. Even shrouded in the dim light of the cabin at night, Hope feels as if she’s seeing the sun emerge from behind the clouds after days of stormy and shrouded skies.

They lie there in the dark, bodies stretched out together across the floor, not touching, but only barely, waiting for Hope to make a choice. She finds she cannot bring herself to leave his side and climb up onto that lonely bed.

If he kissed her now, she would welcome it. A thrill runs through Hope’s body at the very thought, a jolt from her toes to the roots of her hair.

If he kissed her now, he’d undo all the promises he’d just made to her.

She lies still, gazing at him.

Is she testing him?

Is she testing herself?

She lifts her chin, an almost imperceptible, involuntary contraction at the base of her skull. His eyes sharpen; the captain has spotted the prize. His focus shifts to her lips.

He does not move.

She lets her eyes rove across his face, remembering the caresses she'd stolen in the middle of the night. She knows exactly what it feels like to trace her fingers across his stubbled jaw. Her fingertips tingle now, even at the memory. What would he do if she reached up and did it again, now that he's fully conscious?

She remembers other things, too. The tight embrace of his arms for the rest of that night, his unconscious body bold to do the things she now knows he longed to do while waking.

A delightful warmth is pooling between her legs. When she'd been with men before she'd been curious, or bored and excited merely at the idea of daring to be so improper. This is different. Hope doesn't want excitement now, she wants *him*. She aches to feel this man's hands upon her body, his lips upon her skin.

Does she dare? Surely a kiss is as damning as the confession she had already chosen not to make. But she cannot tear herself away. Her gaze falls to his lips and his stoicism cracks, she watches them part, the tip of his tongue sliding quick and coy to wet them, but still he will not move toward her.

She lifts her head. Her eyes catch his and she can see the effort he's making to remain perfectly still. He will let her decide. There's a pull in her belly, in her *sex*, to close the distance between their bodies, and she wants to let it overwhelm her. Her fears bid her to rise, to push off the floor and retreat to the safety of that bed, to return to this topic on the morrow with clearer heads and a better negotiating position. And yet, when she tells her arms to press against the deck and lift her away from him, they only draw her closer to his face.

Hope's lips are hovering above Charles Vane's cheek. She feels her own breath bounce back to warm her face, that's how close she's come. And still the man does not move. He may even be holding his breath.

She lets her nose trace across his cheekbone, and hopes he cannot hear the tiny whimper that slips from her throat, at the tension of her indecision. But it's his stillness that is her undoing; the beauty of knowing that despite what he wants, he will wait; in the face of the most immediate temptation he will not take even an inch of advantage. He soothes all her fears by doing nothing, and the tension breaks as Hope lets her lips fall upon his mouth.

She gets one petal-soft swipe before Charles begins to move with her. At first it is only his lips, firming and pressing back against her own. She feels his breath against her face, he had been holding it, and he lifts his chin to deepen the kiss, just by a fraction.

There is a rushing sweetness coursing through Hope's body now, and it's making her want to move. She brings her fingertips to Charles' face, tracing that rugged cheek, and a moment

later she feels his arm moving cautiously up to mirror her. His callused fingers move almost reverently along her jaw.

His mouth opens beneath her own. The tip of his tongue traces her lip; an invitation, not an invasion. Hope feels her restraint begin to break and she presses in with her whole body. Charles is there to catch her, welcoming her to fit in against his firm, solid warmth as his tongue presses in to find her own.

She wraps herself around him, toe to knee to belly and chest all finding their perfect match against his larger frame, her fingers pressing past his braids to bury themselves in the roots of his hair, his scent and taste surrounding her as she gets lost in their kiss. Charles' arms embrace her firmly, anchoring her in as her body runs wild with a passion she has never before experienced, or even expected to be real.

The warmth is suffusing her, infusing her, but its very strangeness pulls her back. What is she doing on the floor with her captain in the dark? His lips are sweet and his arms feel like home, but this was not the message she intended to send tonight.

He must feel her sudden hesitation, because Charles pulls back from their kiss, although his embrace remains firm and warm. He looks into her eyes, searching for the truth of her.

Hope takes a deep, shaky breath, trying to gather her wits against these rushing feelings.

"Forgive me for taking such liberties," his voice rumbles into the tiny space between them. As if he was the one who took any of the initiative in that. "Perhaps I should not have." His arms remain snug around her.

Hope huffs a little. "As I keep telling you, I'm not a Lady."

Charles bends his forehead to touch hers. "In this respect, I'd rather treat you as one." His lips twitch in a little smile. "Ought we say 'goodnight,' for now?"

Relief and regret flood through Hope, both at once. "Yes," she agrees. She kisses him one last time, slow and sweet, but resists the urge to press her body wantonly against his once more. All that can wait, or perhaps never come to be at all. She needs time to cool her head and think clearly on this matter.

But when she's settled alone upon the bed, Hope finds her arm reaching down from off the edge, her fingers winding in the firm clasp of Charles Vane's until she falls asleep.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

I hope you're ready for another dose of Fake Marriage gooey temptations...

Hope marks the scent first; something heady yet familiar wafting up from the pillow her face is half-buried in. The smell of *him* pulls her consciousness out of sleep. Her eyes snap open to an empty cabin illuminated by golden morning light.

She checks the floor, but he's gone. She rolls onto her back, languid despite her annoyance that he would let her sleep in well past the dawn.

What if he left because he didn't want to face her?

It's a silly fear. She pushes it to the side. After what he said to her last night, and the way that he held her . . . of the two of them, it's not him that's having hesitations.

She'd kissed him. Oh, God, and what a kiss it was. She'd planned to leave herself room to make a careful, level-headed decision in the light of day, but now she can't think of anything but the press of his lips, the tender strength of his touch. If she just stayed here in his bed, how long would it take him to come back, looking for her? And what might happen after that?

Another silly thought. Hope's pride won't allow her to lay about in bed all day, no matter what the circumstances may be. She sits up, her eyes falling upon the chest of her belongings. She'd almost forgotten; she's still Mrs. Vane today, anyway. She freshens up, gets herself dressed, then heads down to the mess like a captain's wife would do. The same, except that she's wearing trousers and a jacket; she's a sailor just like any other member of this crew, planning to pull her weight today same as every day.

Could it really work like this? She uses the short walk to ponder the success of the ruse, the way Fellows, and even the crew, seemed so ready to accept the plausibility that Captain Vane might be married to his navigator, and not some soft woman he kisses goodbye and leaves on shore whenever he goes hunting. Warmth swells in Hope's chest, though she's not certain she can trust it. The men may only be tolerating the situation so that they can poke fun at how ridiculous they really find it.

She must not have slept in too late, for the mess is still busy, and there are Jack and Anne, breaking their fast with Mr. Fellows. And Charles is seated right there beside him. Hope doesn't think that she entered in any way that would call attention, but Charles' head snaps up, his eyes finding her like he has a sixth sense for her very presence.

A warm smile breaks across his face, and his arm lifts to beckon her to take her place at his side.

“Ah, there’s your lovely wife,” she hears Fellows saying as she walks across the room. “I was beginning to wonder how much you must have worn her out last night.” As false as the man’s notions are, Hope’s chest nearly bursts at the blooming joy of imagining herself as Charles’ newlywed bride, being teased for overindulging in marital pleasures.

She allows herself to be tucked under Charles’ arm. It seems she’s not the only one enjoying the liberties this ruse allows as he presses her into his side, snug and tight. Anne is glaring at Fellows for his lewdness, but Hope kicks her swiftly under the table and she stands down.

Jack seems distracted by the sight of Charles’ hand wrapped around Hope’s shoulder. Did Charles not already tell him, then, that his sins have been forgiven, and his poorly-chosen words have done no lasting damage?

Hope’s “husband” looks down at her, sharing one brief, knowing look before returning his attention to their company. “She’s tough,” he grunts back to Fellows, and so his ankle is the next one that Hope’s boot has to find. He exaggerates a wince at the sharpness of her kick, so Fellows knows she didn’t take such crassness lying down, then catches her face up with a soft knuckle under her chin. “Good morning, my love,” he rumbles down at her, and Hope knows he’s not merely playing the part with those words.

He leans in and brushes his lips across her cheek, right in front of all these people. Hope can barely squeak out an answering “Morning” as she feels a flush that starts somewhere below the waist and quickly travels up to redden her cheeks.

Jack has a better poker face than Anne. While he manages to catch himself before it looks like he’s staring, Anne is reading the flush in Hope’s cheeks with intense interest, bordering on shock. Hope doesn’t know how to respond to her friend other than shrug, which only makes more questions appear in Anne’s eyes.

However, Anne’s eyes are not the ones Hope is most interested in reading. Her gaze flits back to Charles, who has not yet turned from her. He seems almost affronted that Hope had looked away from him at all, just to check the reactions of their companions at the table. “I trust you slept well?” he murmurs.

“Indeed.” At the risk of scandalizing Anne further, she redoubles her decision to enjoy the marital ruse to its fullest while it’s lasting. She gives Charles her sunniest smile. “Thank you for asking, my darling.” The simple pleasure that opens up his expression when he hears that term of endearment is worth the bit of embarrassment. “And you? Is it hard to get used to sharing your cabin?” It’s a tease, but it’s a jab with purpose. Hope is not indulging in this playacting simply for her own fun; she’s much too practical for that. What better chance have they than this, to determine if their love can really face the cold light of day, and the facts of a life at sea such as theirs?

Charles doesn’t miss a beat. “It’s no burden when it means having *you* at my side.”

His words, combined with the depth in his eyes as he says them, set her fluttering and tingling all over again. What's worse, the effervescent joy results in a vibrant *giggle* that bursts regrettably from her throat.

Everyone stares at her. Even Fellows seems to sense this is violently out of character for her. Anne looks almost disgusted.

"Hope, darling, I've never seen you in such a good mood," Jack says, and then he looks at Charles and he looks too smug.

"No thanks to you," she says coolly.

That wipes the look off his face. His eyes shift between the two of them again, less certain. "I'll admit, some of my words were—"

Hope cuts him off with a wave of her hand. "We may need to have it out after breakfast, but let's not talk of it now." Let him squirm a little longer.

"All's well that ends well," Charles grunts, and his hand slides across her back, incredibly soothing. Any other choice words die on her tongue. She had no idea it would feel so good to be touched by him. Nor that such depths of affection would ever come so easily from the man she had once so easily dismissed as 'the brute.'

Anne is squirming in her seat now, just dying to know what happened last night, what exactly has so obviously changed between her captain and her friend.

Jack bumps Anne's elbow. "Is that all you're going to eat, darling?" he asks, with a meaningful look at Anne's bowl. He's spooning his own gruel into his mouth doubly fast, probably to stop his own tongue from wagging any further.

Anne turns her glare on Jack, and Hope realizes how healthy her own appetite is. Reading her mind, Charles pushes his own bowl in front of her, but Hope only glowers at him and rises. As reluctant as she is to pull herself away from the man, she is perfectly capable of fetching her own breakfast.

Otherwise, this may be the beginning of exactly the sort of changes she fears.

Hope steps into the chow line, passing Stevens where he sits with a knot of the old *Starling* crew, their heads pressed together in some quiet yet intense conversation. She returns his nod, then feels something tighten in her gut as he rises too casually and enters the queue behind her.

In the whirlwind of emotion that ended last night, she had entirely forgotten his murmurs of mutiny. What on earth should she say to him now?

"Today's a wonderful day, ain't it?" he says to her shoulder, just as the man in front of her has a bowl in his hand and his attention on the cookpot. There's a subtle emphasis on the word 'today,' and Hope fears she knows exactly what that means. She turns her head just enough to let him know she's listening; not far enough to make it look like they are engaged in more

than the slightest passing of pleasantries. He lowers his voice, crowding her as if he's eager to get to the food. "You won't have to be 'Mrs. Vane' much longer. Look for me in the hold an hour after we make port."

She nods. It's her turn to take a bowl, and she won't allow her hands to hesitate as she ladles up her serving. She's certainly not in a position to debate the issue with Stevens right now, not if she isn't prepared to turn him over immediately for mutiny, and she can't convey reluctance without spooking the men into changing their plan and leaving her in the dark, certainly. So she lets Stevens go on assuming what he's assuming. She'll deal with it later. Before they get to port.

Her mood has been dampened but she tries not to let it show as she resumes her place at Charles' side. He doesn't wrap her up in his arm this time, instead leaving her room to eat, but his fingertips dance up and down her spine. Is this what he's been wanting all this time, to constantly be touching her? She thrills at the very idea of it, even as it makes her worry. Can she really get away with this, happily ever after, with no sacrifice of freedom or respect?

"Your crew has such a family orientation," Mr. Fellows remarks, looking around at the paired faces of his breakfast companions. "I never thought a pirating crew could be soft enough for ladies."

"Say that again," Anne growls from under the brim of her hat.

Fellows has the grace to look chagrined, at least. "That didn't come out how I meant it." He raises his hands as if to fend her off. "I only meant that, while a pirating life always seemed rather exciting, I always thought it would be lonely, too. That it would naturally be without any comfort, any kind or friendly feelings at all, among a crew of cutthroats," he catches himself with a gulp, "again, no offense intended...."

Charles leans back, a smile pulling at his lips. "We certainly have cut a few throats in our day," he muses, catching Anne's eye in prideful reminiscence.

"And many more to come," she answers, as if making a promise.

"I don't know what I would do without Anne at my side," Jack agrees, leaning in. "Though I doubt I could be rid of her if I tried."

That earns him a whack. Fellows only nods solemnly, his eyes wide with envy.

"You never would, though," Charles suggests, staring levelly across the table at his friend. "Nor would I let you. She belongs here on my crew as much as you do."

"On some days, more, dare I say," Jack replies with a wry little grin. He tilts his head. "I feel sorry for those men who feel they must leave their wives behind on shore. Honestly. How can you truly know your partner in this world if you can't share your life with them? Your exploits, the triumphs, the bitter defeats?"

"I would never do that to Hope," Vane rumbles. He does not turn his head to her, but his grip settles around her waist. "We haven't been married long, but even if she said she wanted that

cottage by the sea, I'm not sure I could suffer it."

"I will never say that," Hope interjects. "My dreams all lie upon the waves. Not caged inside four walls in some anchored corner of the world."

He looks down at her then. His eyes teem with something wild and passionate and *true*.

"Are there more women like you in the world?" Fellows says forlornly, breaking their moment. "Perhaps you have an equally wild and courageous sister out there for me to meet?"

Charles' other hand finds hers beneath the table.

"Oh, my sister is decidedly the domestic sort," Hope dismisses. "Her husband captains a ship, but I'm not sure she has ever even set foot upon it." She shifts in her seat, suddenly uncomfortable. She's not certain Charles is aware that Fisher has a captaincy again, sailing a different ship out of ports other than Nassau and usually headed in a direction that the *Ranger* isn't. Would it displease him, to know that his revenge against the captain of the *Starling* had only been a setback, and the man who had crossed him was out there pirating again?

"At least tell me your secret, Captain Vane," Fellows continues, interrupting Hope's train of thought. "How do you get a woman like Hope?"

Charles leans back and considers. His eyes search her face as he composes his answer. "You have to be bold and patient in equal measure." He speaks slowly, thoughtfully, but with a certainty that gives her chills. "To love a woman like this takes both courage and restraint. It's never going to be simply 'your way.'"

"Even though you are her captain?"

"What's a captain without his officers? Her counsel is usually quite wise." He smirks, just a little. "And you have to be willing to be put in your place. Unexpectedly, and often."

Jack sloshes his canteen in a quick toast. "Hear, hear!"

Anne makes his point for him with another glare and another whack.

Vane never takes his heavy gaze off Hope. "Am I forgetting anything, love?"

Hope finds herself almost speechless, though she certainly doesn't want to be. It's as if he's using every turn in this conversation to continue the one they had been having last night. She wants to be able to believe that he's sincere. She's going to have to continue to test him until she can. "To never believe that you've tamed her," she adds. "And never to even try."

He doesn't say anything back. His eyes don't leave hers as he lifts her hand and kisses her fingers like a promise.

A clanging bell indicates the start of the next shift. An assortment of muted groans and curses flutter up from the men rising from their seats around them; cheerful ones, mostly, as the day's work will bring them to port with a prize soon to be converted to coin to line their

pockets quite handsomely. It's enough to break the moment, as Hope herself begins to rise on reflex.

"We setting out soon?" Jack inquires in their direction.

"Works for me," Hope shrugs. "I'll adjust our heading after we clear the bay. We can take all day swinging around wide, so no one thinks we returned to port coming from this direction."

"Truly magnificent," Fellows comments softly.

"Get us underway, Jack," Charles directs. He stands, looking down at Hope. "I'm going to my cabin."

"Now?" Jack asks.

"Unfinished business," he explains, curtly, and Hope feels pinpricks run all down her spine.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I'm a smut writer by trade, so this final chapter doesn't leave much to the imagination. I hope it feels well-earned. There is also resolution of the rest of the plot at the end, if you'd rather skip down past the dirty bits.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hope is fairly certain that Charles meant for her to follow. And the fire that his heavy look ignited in her core certainly is impelling her to rush after him, but she doesn't let her feet move. If she enters that cabin with him now, after everything that's been said, his touch still hot on her skin, there's only one thing that can happen.

And that thing will be irreversible.

"Hope," Jack calls across the table, interrupting her moment.

She turns to him, blinking, hoping any trace of moon-eyed girlishness has cleared before he can catch her throwing any more *looks* after their captain.

"I wanted to ask you to oversee the cargo when we get into port. Normally I'm not one to shirk my responsibility, you know that, but this time I absolutely must be off just as soon as we're docked. I've a business venture to attend to, one that's quite time-sensitive, you understand." He's talking fast, and flashes one of his charming smiles at her. Hope wonders if he knows they're not quite as charming as he thinks. "Since you were quartermaster on the *Starling*, I knew I could ask you. You know the drill. In fact, it's your old mates who have been assigned to this duty, I believe. Should be no trouble for you at all." He nods at someone, over Hope's shoulder.

She turns to see Stevens standing there, nodding back at Jack. He's clearly overheard that request. Hope knows he can only be thinking that the whole plan just got a hell of a lot easier to get away with.

She keeps her thoughts off her face as she turns back to Jack. "Sure. 'Course." Any other day, she'd be dying to know what sort of "time-sensitive business venture" Jack would be embarking on without bringing the rest of the crew into it, but her capacity for intrigue and complication have been entirely filled up today. For Stevens' sake, she needs to appear to be pleased about this chance as well, and not risk ruining it by sticking her heels in the mud, or her nose too deeply into Jack's business.

"Oh," Jack says, apparently thrown off by her lack of curiosity. Clearly he was expecting to meet resistance. "You have my thanks," he rallies. "I will, of course, rush back as soon as I am able."

Hope inclines her head at him, and Anne as well, making her move to escape. Anne is staring at her like she's about to ask approximately five thousand highly personal questions, or maybe just one really cutting one, and Hope suddenly can't bear to be stuck in the galley for one moment longer.

Not when he's out there.

She'd hesitated, a moment ago. That's true. But something about the look on Stevens' face, the realization of how easy it would be to betray her new friends' trust, to betray *Charles*, only solidifies her assurance that she wants to do no such thing, ever. The burning curiosity in Anne's eyes, the subtle beg for attention in Jack's, these things make her realize, ever so deeply, that she belongs here. This crew had become hers, in a way she had never quite experienced before. There is no choice at all. These are her friends. This is her place.

And Charles is waiting for her.

She sets the course first. Hope would never shirk her duties, not even to consummate a promise of true love. She makes certain their heading is correct once they've left all sight of land before heading down to see if Charles has run out of patience.

She reckons that he hasn't, given that he'd know exactly where to find her and hadn't come looking. So he's now either waiting in his cabin for her to be ready to talk (yes, they would talk again, in her mind Hope was insistent on that) or he's off brooding somewhere else in misguided despair just because she had kept him waiting for the better part of an hour. She hopes it isn't the latter; Hope had never found the sight of a man drowning himself in self-pity to be very alluring.

She pauses outside the door, but only for a moment, only to let the heady anticipation suffuse her with a rich, almost sense-addling rush. One momentous moment, before she embraces the possibility of everything she had been fearing, and dares to seize the even greater prize that might be waiting when fears dissolve.

She enters without knocking, a tingling already beginning at the base of her spine. The room looks the same as she left it, and yet somehow everything is different, too. Knowing she's about to drop her final guard, to lay her soul, and likely other things, bare, here in this room on their softly-rocking ship, sharpens the colors and changes the very flavor of the air. Charles is there, and when he turns to look up from the papers in his hands the sunlight streaming in through the porthole catches his face and lights him up like a vision.

He takes several steps toward her, papers forgotten. He doesn't say anything, just looks at her with an anticipation that's halfway between joyous and sick.

"Did you mean what you said?" she blurts, taking the initiative and speaking because it felt like he was about to close the distance and start kissing her again. And while she wants that, as much as she did last night . . . level heads must prevail. "Or were all those things you said about treating me—about treating your woman—as an equal, was that just a pretty speech for Mr. Fellows?"

Charles' eyes narrow. "Do you really need to ask?"

"It's just . . . hard to believe."

"Is it?"

The words hang there. She wants to rush on, keep spilling out a lifetime of bitterness. 'It's easy for a man to say those things,' and 'there isn't a man in the world that doesn't want an obedient, docile wife.' But when had Charles given her reason to believe those things about him? Every day on this ship was proof of the respect, the *admiration* he held for her, just as she was. In all her unladylike glory. Certainly, he could be boorish, stubborn and forceful and liable to push his will on everyone around him, but this was nothing she couldn't handle. He had never disparaged or dismissed her perspective, even when he never came to agree.

"Maybe not," she says softly.

He takes another step closer.

"So you won't put me ashore if I become your woman," she challenges, holding him back with her steady glare, "so everyone can see how you've tamed the wild pirate bitch?"

He answers her in a low rumble, steady and true. "Is that what you've been fearing?" It's as if he's meeting her sharp coldness with the comfort of a great bearskin mantle, smothering the chill of her doubt.

"It's all I've ever been taught love could mean."

He lifts his hand to the side of her face, warm and enveloping. "Then let me teach you something new."

He watches her, sapphire eyes glittering with careful, restrained passion as he bends slowly toward her lips. Hope actually feels her knees getting weak, as if more than just her fears are crumbling. She lifts her chin and surrenders.

His scent hits her just before she feels his lips merge with hers. It heightens the rush, but it's comforting, too. She knows him.

She wants to know more.

She pushes herself into the kiss. Charles responds by somehow softening and becoming more solid both at once. His arms envelop her, and the movements of his lips follow hers with a rising challenge as his confidence that she won't pull away, that she finally wants this too, grows.

Hope feels her body flushing, thrilling as she allows her chest and thighs to merge with his. His arms wrap around her lower back, palms stroking along her spine.

Charles Vane is kissing her, and she isn't going to stop him. A pleasant heaviness is settling into her limbs, and she no longer cares what day it is, whether the crew's following her directions correctly, or what's going to happen once they reach port. There is only the heat of

the man wrapped around her, the fascinating feel of his tongue against hers, his heady scent and the subtle pull of the bed on the other side of the room.

Her fingers bury themselves in his hair. Charles is making a low noise and wrapping her up tight, so tight. Then his hands move down, sculpting around the curve of her waist, over her hips and scooping under her bottom.

Her heart is beating so fast. She can feel it in her throat. She tells herself she's not nervous about this and covers the unwanted feeling over in the way she does best. She pulls back far enough to fix her captain with a saucy, challenging look. "Oh, you're going to teach me, are you? What lessons could you think I might need?"

Charles smiles down at her, a thick look brimming with anticipation. "You are accomplished at many things, love, but I suspect you've had little experience in matters such as these." He punctuates the statement with a tantalizing squeeze that separates her legs just a little wider.

Her breath catches. His words strike a nerve, however. "I suppose it likely that you will find my skills lacking," she sniffs, the posh accent of her youth creeping back into her voice, "in comparison to the impressive women you usually pass your time with." She's never accompanied her crewmen when they leave the taverns for the brothels, but she's seen Charles go.

His brow creases in compassion, though. "I wasn't talking about your ability to perform, love," he rumbles. "I was talking about teaching you how I can make you feel. I don't think you have any idea."

His hands are coaxing, irresistible. He draws her toward the bed with a promise in his eyes that more than matches his words. He sits down, pulling her, and Hope moves into his lap with a sudden boldness, straddling his thighs. She looks down at Charles Vane and revels in the power of this, leaving her hesitations behind and moving toward everything that she desires.

He looks up at her with surprise, and joy, and lust, too, all competing in his eyes. She feels a smirk twisting her lip. He didn't expect her to be timid, did he? She throws her arms around his neck and captures his lips. She hasn't the skills of a whore, but she has the boldness of a pirate and they have the heady spice of love between them.

She presses her body into his, needing to be closer, ever closer. Pleasure blossoms at the front of her hips, where she's rubbing herself against his belt. She moans into his mouth and grinds harder. His fingers climb her back, passion curling them until his grip is almost painful.

She's never felt such a fire in her core. His every movement stokes the flames, from the hungry nip of his lips to the way his hips rise to meet hers and the possessive scramble of his hands across her sides.

He growls a lustful noise into her mouth when her fingers tangle into his hair and pull. His palms cover her cheeks, then slide down to loosen her bodice. Hope's breath starts coming faster as Charles begins to free her of her clothes.

He palms one of her breasts, still covered by the thin blouse she wears beneath the corseted vest that now lies on the deck behind them. She likes the warmth of his appreciative yet gentle squeeze, which swiftly replaces the support of her discarded bodice.

His hand travels lower, sliding down the front of her trousers, stopping only when he reaches the spot that makes her arch her back and suck in air past her teeth. He lingers there, firm fingertips rocking against that nub of delight until she writhes and moans against his cheek. His other hand comes to her neglected breast, trapping the nipple between finger and thumb so he can roll it softly between them.

His attentions feel amazing. Every touch seems aimed at enhancing her pleasure, rather than satisfying his own. Charles is proving himself right; this is indeed nothing like what she expected from a man's love.

She finds herself increasingly self-conscious as his sweet and head-spinning touches continue, however. Perhaps she should be giving him pleasure in return. She thinks about the whores again, wondering what they'd do next to entice a man and enhance his pleasure.

Hope brushes her nose across his cheek, letting loose a soft moan into his ear before closing her teeth around his earlobe. She's rewarded with Charles's throaty growl, and a spasm of his hands.

"Are you enjoying yourself, love?" he rumbles, tilting his head until he can check the look in her eyes.

Hope nods and tries to show him a sultry smile. She runs her hands down his chest, teasing his belly and searching for the buckle of his belt.

His hands slow upon her body as he studies her expression. "Relax, Hope," he finally says. "You have nothing to prove to me. All I want from you is your pleasure." His eyes darken. "For now," he adds.

He shifts her in his lap, his hand making its way inside her trousers as he kisses her neck, until his thick fingers can brush through the curls between her thighs and find that hidden pearl that makes her gasp and swoon.

"Lean against me."

She does, dropping her brow to his shoulder. His touch is both tender and bold, and he has her panting before he pulls away.

"Let's get these trousers off." He shifts her until she's sitting across his lap rather than astride it, and she helps him shove the restrictive fabric down her hips, baring her thighs to him.

His fingers barely tease across her skin before they return to their business, sliding up and down the seam between her legs now that they have more room to work. From the way his fingertip slips between those lower lips, she can tell he's found her wet for him already.

She braces herself for force and greedy pressure, but Charles does not treat her as other men have when she's let them get this far. His fingertips coax and play, sliding between her folds enticingly. His lips return to her neck, teeth finding her ear between heavy breaths and little growling grunts of pleasure at what he's finding between her thighs.

Heat is building within Hope's core, her body opening to him, responding to his every stroke and slide. His fingertip circles her clit and it's all she can do to cling to his broad shoulders and moan at the wild, tantalizing pressure he's building inside her.

"That's it," he croons into her temple.

Hope starts to feel almost frantic, not certain what she wants, what she's searching for as her fingers dig into his arms and neck, her body writhing in time with his expert hands. Heat and pleasure are blooming, hotter than she's ever experienced, and she wants him to do something but she can't say what and can only sob his name into his chest.

His fingertips slide down to her entrance, slick and sure, and they open her up in a way that turns out to be everything she's been craving and more. She clenches around him, enjoying the thickness of his fingers, the delicious pressure that they bring as he pushes them all the way inside her.

"Yes," she breathes, and with that encouragement he starts a steady rhythm, pumping in and out of her. His other hand braces her body, and he's still rumbling low sounds of pleasure and enticement against the skin of her chest and neck.

Hope's legs start to clench and shake, entirely of their own accord. Charles' thumb finds her clit while his fingers continue to work deep inside her, and as he rocks it against that joyful nub she all but screams between her teeth.

"Just let go," her captain commands, soft voice vibrating the shell of her ear, and the next time his thumb bears down she feels some dam burst inside of her. A tidal wave of pleasure crashes through her, starting at her hips and spreading through all her limbs, flushing her face and cresting once, twice, three times, each wave peaking higher than the last. Hope goes absolutely helpless in his arms, keening her pleasure into Charles' neck, licking the salt from his skin.

When her legs stop shaking, his fingers slow, then gently move back to settle in a soft caress on her hip. Some part of her mind, which feels very distant at the moment, seeks to prepare a witty quip but finds absolutely nothing that feels worth breaking the perfect stillness between them. All Hope wants to do is bask in this feeling, like a cat in the sun.

Charles seems to understand her mood, drawing her gently to lay down across his bed. He settles in beside her, propped up on one elbow with his head in his hand. His long hair spills over her, mussed from her fingers, as he gazes down with a love in his eyes that makes her breath catch.

"That was—" Hope doesn't know what to say next, her mind still reeling.

Charles nods when she trails off, a smug sort of pride touching his features at the fact that he's left her speechless. If she had been in another mood, she'd need to wipe that look off his face in an instant. He lifts her hand to his lips and kisses it.

Hope finds the gesture much too formal for her, for him, for them, for what this moment means to her. She frees her fingers from his so she can grasp that strong bone of his cheek and pull his face down for a proper kiss.

Charles purrs into her mouth, and when her body turns towards his he presses himself along the length of her. His chest and belly and long stretch of thigh settle partly on top of her, his eager kiss pushing her head into the mattress. Hope realizes her current bliss is only the preamble for what he has in mind.

The thought reignites the fire that was only banked between her thighs. She presses her hips forward, noticing as she does that a hardness is growing against her at the front of his. While her legs are bare, Charles is still trapped inside his trousers, and from the feel of what's straining against that leather, they must be growing quite confining.

Hope smooths her hand along her lover's chest, reveling in the layers of toned muscle as her palm travels across his abdominals and down further, until she's stroking at the skin just above his belt. Her other hand finds the clasp, unbuckling him as an eager sigh slips past her lips. A different kind of lust is filling her now—one that brings a rush to her face and hands—as desire to see him, all of him, to touch and to taste him invigorates her body.

The obstacle of his wide belt removed, Hope begins to slide her hand down inside Charles Vane's trousers. She revels in the smoothness of his belly, then in the coarse hairs that she finds as her fingers sink lower.

Charles sucks in a breath. "Wait."

Hope freezes as his hand wraps around her wrist, halting her.

He lifts his head to look her in the eye, his face quite concerned. "Would you rather wait?"

Hope blinks at him. "For what?"

"Until we're married."

Hope doesn't know what expression flickers across her own face as she processes that comment. He doesn't seem to be teasing her; he's really quite solemn. Is this a proposal? Do they need to . . . talk about this now? Right now? In this particular moment, rituals and ceremonies don't mean shit to her. She knows her heart is already bound to his. "Do you?" she scoffs. He blinks, and she quickly clarifies, a sarcastic smile pulling at her cheek. "Want to wait?" She wasn't scoffing at the idea of marrying him, she wouldn't want him to think that.

Charles makes a huffing sound, a quick smile stretching across his face. He shakes his head softly. "Not if it isn't important to you."

She gazes up at him, the usually stony face so softened, warm even. She tries to picture herself making him wait for a wedding ceremony, standing at the altar in fancy clothes and listening to a priest drone on about duty. She suppresses a giggle at the very thought. That's not her. That's not him. If they ever make promises to each other (which she wants, she feels it down to her bones that she wants that) it won't be that way. "I don't need a priest to tell me how I feel about you. What we have between us needs no one's blessing. Man's, or God's."

Charles' smile is ferocious as he grins his agreement with her every word.

Hope's face mirrors his as she lifts her head to kiss him, and she's barely able to drop the smile in time to purse her lips against his, so powerful is her joy.

His hand is still around her wrist. He pushes her palm softly back on its path against his lower belly before releasing his grip and letting her roam as she pleases.

His skin is hot beneath his trousers. Hope's fingers don't slide very far before they bump against the object of their search – Charles' cock is large and eager, pointing straight up in anticipation of her touch. It's larger than what she's handled before, and she doesn't realize she's sucking in a loud breath as her fingers explore his girth until Charles murmurs an arrogant little attempt at reassurance.

"Don't worry, love, it will fit."

Her grip flexes in a reprimanding little squeeze, but it feels like a poor attempt at dominance when her fingers can barely make a circle all the way around him.

Charles threads both his hands into her hair as Hope runs her grip up and down across the smooth, stiff length of him. The skin is softer than his cheek, softer even than his lips.

She wants to see it. A hot thrill runs through her body as she thinks she would even like to kiss it, just to compare it to his lips. She knows the whores do such things, but she's never until now realized that with the right lover someone might actually *want* to do that.

In his eagerness, Charles is starting to roll on top of her, thrusting into her hand, but Hope pushes firmly against his chest until she's got him flat on his back.

"In the spirit of our equal partnership," she declares, keeping him reclined while she begins tugging off his trousers.

"I'm still your Captain," he grumbles.

"And you can captain me all you like in a moment," Hope declares, "but if we're to be even, I have a favor to return."

She bares his cock, and whatever argument Charles might have made dies on his lips. Or perhaps she just doesn't hear it. Hope stares at the length of his manhood, blushing pink and gleaming at the tip with the evidence of his need. She straddles one thigh and reaches down to grasp him. A shudder runs through her when she realizes she's got both fists around him

and his wide head still extends fairly far above her grip. It's more fascinating than intimidating, though, and she trusts him not to hurt her.

The urge to brush her lips against it is irresistible. From the edge of her vision Hope sees Charles' head rising off the mattress, his eyes widening as she lowers her face over his hips. She closes her eyes as she runs his velvet tip across her mouth. Charles makes a sound of pure pleasure and amazement, and it gets louder when she parts her lips and lets her tongue take a little taste.

Salty, like the ocean they both love. She swirls her tongue around his head and Charles groans as if she's just punched him in the gut. She feels his fingers against her scalp, gently attempting to pull her up.

"That's a lesson I will take great pleasure in sharing with you," he rumbles, "another time. Although it seems you're likely to be a natural." He grunts as Hope stubbornly licks at him again. "This isn't how I want to finish the first time I have you in my bed, love."

"No?" Hope asks, raising an eyebrow as she lifts her head just enough to look him in the eye.

"No," he says, the lust brimming in his eyes more than a match for the mischief in hers. That tight heat returns to her lower belly when he looks at her like that. He pulls her up to lie across the bed with him, and he brings his lips to her ear. "I want to find my pleasure buried deep inside of you, Hope. Like I've imagined every night you've been on board my ship."

What little clothing they had left between them lands quickly on the boards of the deck. Charles wraps her up in his arms, and Hope winds her legs around his hips. She presses her sex tight against his belly, savoring the feeling of being wrapped around him so close, skin to skin, before the mad riot of sensation and emotion she knows she'll feel when he finally sinks inside her.

"If you're not ready," Charles begins, voice low and gentle even when she can feel how his body is straining for her, but Hope cuts him off with a deep, passionate kiss. She moans as he uses that kiss to press her back into the pillow, his body rolling over hers until she's flat on her back with her ankles crossed behind his hips.

In her mind she claims him, just as he moves to start the act that is so anciently considered to be him claiming her.

"I'll go slow," he murmurs, and she remembers his size just before the pressure begins.

The ache is luxurious, the intensity better than the thrill of any hunt or the rush of the finest drink. Charles presses into her, stretching her until she can't even remember what this act felt like with anyone else. He feels impossibly large and yet her body does not resist, allowing him in deeper even as his length just keeps coming and coming.

He sighs above her when he finally stops moving, his hips flush against hers and his cock fully sheathed. Hope notes with surprise that his arms, bridged on either side of her head, might even be trembling. Charles opens his eyes above her and they are dazzling.

He opens his mouth, as if to speak, but no sound emerges. His hips move instead, pulling back slowly, so slowly. Hope is able to feel every inch of him recede, the ache of stretch replaced by the ache of need all along her inner walls.

A plaintive look must be growing on her face, for the overwhelmed awe in Charles' eyes fades into cocksure pride by the time he's all but out of her. He holds her gaze as he sinks back in, and all other emotions fade as passion begins to take them both.

Ache and need and sharp, hot pleasure take turns with Charles' every movement, drowning out Hope's thoughts, turning her into a being of pure instinct without any control over the motion of her limbs or the panting, wailing noises that keep escaping her throat.

Charles is moaning in time to his own thrusts, which are quickening now, the sound somewhere between a growl and a groan. Hope's fingers dig into his backside; Charles' teeth close around the top of her shoulder. The unexpected savagery of that sharp sensation lifts Hope out of the rhythm for a moment, arching her back and tightening her thighs around his roiling hips. The pain somehow only pushes her passion higher.

Her squeal is laden with too much obvious pleasure to slow Charles down. The low noise he emits in response is primal, and he fucks into her even deeper at their newly-adjusted angle.

Something elusive inside Hope simply explodes. The same feeling he had brought on with his fingers, but redoubled, making her see stars in a new constellation behind her eyelids as she squeezes them tight against the sheer intensity that's sending her mind, her body, her very *soul* reeling to the heavens.

The exquisite feeling fades slowly, aching slowly like the tide going out as Charles continues to fuck her right through it. When she's capable of opening her eyes she finds him staring down at her like he's witnessing the most sublime moment of his life.

There are creases at the corners of his eyes, and Hope realize that the mighty Charles Vane is feeling almost as overwhelmed as she. The steady pace of his body, against her, on top of her, inside her, begins to falter, and he breaks that rhythm with a strangled sigh as he plunges deep one last time and loses all control of his face. His arms flex around her and he drops his head to the crook of her neck, groaning with an indescribable sound that Hope hopes she remembers forever. Or, even better, will be able to summon repeatedly and often over the rest of her natural life.

His body shudders, and she can feel his girth spasming inside her. She squeezes her arms around him, letting him savor every moment of it like she had just done. Twice.

He clutches her, breathing heavy, like he wants to somehow bring her body even closer to his. She hears her name in one of his strangling gasps, and then his body collapses, crushing her in a decidedly satisfying manner.

She pushes him off only when she wants to be able to take a deep breath again. Again she considers a teasing remark, and again decides that's not what she wants from a moment like this one. Charles rolls onto his back, long hair splaying across the pillow, and Hope does not wish to disturb the languor evident in his limbs.

She's not sure how much time passes; their bodies find other, calmer ways to fit together as they embrace each other in the dim light of the shuttered windows. Some part of her is aware of the rest of the ship, sailing along her carefully-plotted heading, hopefully encountering no problems requiring their navigator nor their captain. The weather was clear when she came belowdecks and sought out her prize. The richest prize of her life, she thinks, but then quickly corrects herself. *Potentially* the richest. She refuses to lose her head, even if she is in love.

Madly in love, she thinks, as she gazes at Charles lying so blissfully beside her. The relief of finally allowing herself to embrace that fact almost makes her shiver.

He is meeting her gaze, staring back at her across the pillow with the most serene expression she has ever seen in his eyes. "Now there are no secrets between us."

She won't lie to him, now that they are to be sharing everything in this life. "There is one."

He quirks a brow, unperturbed; simply curious.

Hope feels tension building in her throat. A heavy sigh escapes her, trying to dispel it. "It's mine to resolve. Then I can tell you all about it."

It breaks her heart just a little to see his face grow wary, a door that had only just been opened already beginning to close. But she needs to settle things with her old crew on her own. She knows her own complicit silence has undoubtedly encouraged the impending treachery, and Hope Wickham would clean up her own messes.

~*~

The boys are hard at work when Hope catches up to them. The hold is full of barrels; those taken from the cache are military supplies and thus marked with the king's crest. They can't unload them like that; the goods have to be transferred to unmarked containers before they can even be delivered to a fence. Hope leans against the bulkhead and watches the ex-*Starling* men work for a moment. If one didn't pay too much attention, it even looked like they were doing their job.

An involuntary smirk tugs at the corner of her lip when she notices that the empty water barrels are out of their usual place. She had to give it to them, it was a pretty decent plan. No one would bat an eye when they took those barrels on shore to refill. So long as they managed to carry them as easily as if they had been truly empty. And no one would check their work and notice that both the marked and unmarked barrels in the hold were empty, until they were long gone.

She takes a deep breath, just as Stevens notices her standing there. His grin dies once he comprehends the low words she calls softly into the hold. "Put them back, boys."

"What?"

"I can't let you do this."

Stevens steps closer, face clouding, and Hope resists the urge to reach for the handle of the knife at her hip. They might not get to violence, if she handles this right. “I thought you was with us.” His voice is flat, disappointment curdling into anger right in front of her. The men behind him are pausing their work, now, catching on to what’s happening.

“Not like this.” She looks over Stevens’ shoulder, making sure to look each man in the eye. “Get everything out of those water barrels. Put it in the crates like you were told.”

Stevens turns his head, fixing his compatriots with his own pointed gaze. Not one of them complies with Hope’s order.

Another man, Potter, removes his hat, wringing it a bit between his hands. “And then what?” he asks Hope. At least he has the decency to show a little shame upon being caught.

“I thought you all wanted to be on this crew. I vouched for you.”

He shrugs, a tight, defensive gesture. “Don’t sit right, what they did to Captain Fisher.” He glances at his companions. “The more we thought about it, the more we couldn’t stand it.”

Hope resists the urge to roll her eyes. “He kept his head. Not sure another crew would have been as merciful, after what we did. I told him it was a terrible plan. As I recall, you even agreed with me at the time.”

Potter spits. “Don’t sit right,” he repeats.

Hope looks around at their hard stares, and sighs. “I won’t report this. But if you can’t let it go, then we have to let you go.”

Stevens cuts in. “Oh it’s ‘we’ now, is it? ‘Mrs. Vane’?”

“Yes,” she says through gritted teeth, “it is.”

She expected this moment to hurt. She’d sailed with these men a long time. But when she looks at them, with their fingers pilfering her hard-won prize, she sees only men betraying *her* crew, *her* family. Any loyalty she feels to them now is only nostalgia.

Though even nostalgia is worth something. “I’ll write my sister,” she offers. “Arrange for you to meet up with Fisher’s new ship.”

And that’s when Charles Vane steps up behind her.

“What’s this?” he growls.

Rationally, Hope knows there’s not a chance that Charles will think she’s taking part in this treachery, not after what they just shared, but she can’t help but feel a rush of panic as she remembers how he reacted to the last attempt to steal from him.

He strides over to the water barrels, which currently contain about half of yesterday’s treasure. His face reddens.

“These men are dismissed.” Hope declares it with all the confidence she can muster.

Charles looks up at her. “If this is what I think it is, they’ll be more than just dismissed.”

“I have no more patience for their incompetence,” Hope says. “Can’t even follow clear orders.” Her eyes seek the gaze of each one of her old crewmates. “The supplies go in the unmarked crates, not the fucking barrels.”

Charles is frowning at her.

“I made a mistake when I recommended these men,” she tells him, facing him squarely with a stubborn set to her hips. “I’m rectifying it now.” She raises her voice to address the sailors, but never takes her eyes off Captain Vane. “Get your things, and get off our ship.”

Charles is, thankfully, silent. His smoldering eyes remain locked on hers.

Potter has the gall to ask one more question. “What about our cut?”

Hope tears her eyes away from her lover to whirl on the sniveling man. “The only cut you’ll be getting is one from my blade, if you’re not off this vessel in ten minutes.”

All the would-be traitors leave the hold in a matter of moments.

Charles continues to stare at Hope.

She squares her shoulders. “Now we see if those pretty words about trusting my judgment were just words.”

“Were those men stealing from me?”

Hope moves her gaze deliberately around the hold. “Nothing is missing here.”

“If they were—”

“Back my play.”

“What?”

“I am asking you to back my play. We can’t trust them on our crew any longer, but I don’t want them harmed. Let them go, and let’s be done with it.”

“And you’re writing to your sister,” Charles growls, voice still low and dangerous, “so they can go join that double-crossing brother-in-law of yours, even after I disbanded their crew?”

“Yes.”

“And why should I accept that?”

“Because I’m asking you to.”

He grunts.

“I need to know you can accept my choices, even when they are not your own, when they are important to me.”

“And these men are important to you?”

Hope nods, resolute.

Charles continues to hold her eyes. “This was the last secret.” Her lack of response is the only confirmation he needs. “Hope. How did you know you would catch them at this?”

She’s not sure what to say. Her voice comes out almost a whisper. “I needed to be sure.”

She waits for him to ask more. Braces for the hurt, the resentment, as he forces her to admit that just yesterday, she was still considering a backup plan, still felt she might need to escape him. That she was keeping silent about this treachery in case she wanted to join it.

She’s sure he reads it all in her soul. He says nothing, but he nods, almost imperceptibly. Those scars on his back tell that he knows what it’s like to be powerless, and how hard it can be to trust. “And are you?” he rasps. “Sure?”

Hope takes a deep, steadying breath. She steps towards him. “It took me a long time to listen to my heart. But it knows. It’s yours.”

He puts his arms out, and Hope sinks into an embrace that feels like home.

They make love that night like two people that are drowning, and the only source of air is each others’ skin.

“I’ll never keep anything from you again,” Hope breathes, as Charles’ lips follow the curve of her hip.

“I’ll never give you a reason.”

Her fingers wind through the wild tresses of his hair.

“It’s you and me forever now, Mrs. Vane.”

Chapter End Notes

My heart is overflowing with gratitude to all those who took the time to encourage me with their feedback and enthusiasm, as well as endless patience. It didn't sit right that this fic was hanging out here unfinished, just because my life has changed so much in the past year and a half. I hope the ending has given you closure and joy.

Works inspired by this one

[A Matter of Some Urgency_\(Version\)](#) by [Navigatrix](#)

[A Matter of Some Urgency](#) by [Navigatrix](#)

[The Same Constellations](#) by [Navigatrix](#)

[Throw The Dice](#) by [Navigatrix](#)

[A Bad Dream](#) by [Navigatrix](#)

[Those Men Are Fools](#) by [Navigatrix](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!