This Tainted Love
by DarkObsessions

Summary

SPOILERS! I found the series' conclusion to the Vane/Eleanor arc to be anticlimactic and full of loose ends, so this is a blatant fix-it fic. After Eleanor tells Woodes that she visited Vane in the dungeons, she returns to his cell later that night. Things do not go as planned.
Her bloodied hands shook. Her breath wheezed out in shaky breaths. It had all happened so fast. She'd moved without thinking, acted without ever considering the severity of the consequences that were sure to follow.

This had not been her intention. But it was done. Too late to change things, too late to turn back.

The guard lay sprawled across the dirt floor at her feet, his own dagger still buried in the side of his neck. She watched with a bewildered sort of detachment as life oozed from the wound and seeped into the earth.

What the hell was she to do now?

She struggled to collect herself, to reclaim the prudence she so prided herself upon. She would handle this, as she did all other things.

After what felt like hours but could only have been minutes, she'd managed to drag the body into an alcove at the end of the hall, obscuring it from immediate view. Hopefully that would buy her some time should anyone come looking.

With unsteady hands she procured the cell keys from the dead guard's pocket, and returned to the space before the cell where she'd killed him. She quickly began kicking over the dry dirt, covering up the deep red scar that marked the sentry's death.

With that finished, she straightened and breathed deep.

Absently and more out of habit than anything else, she lifted hands to smooth out her skirts, consequently smearing crimson across the fabric.

Oblivious to the error of her action, she picked up the discarded torch and moved to press the large worn key into the rusted old chasm. She fumbled with three different keys before finally finding the one that fit. With a harsh clank, the latch flipped open and the door groaned obstreperously as she slipped through. Weary of attracting attention, she closed it swiftly behind her.

It was dark. So dark, that even with the light of the torch she could barely see ten feet in front of her. inching forward she could just make out the slouched form of a man. He lifted his head as she approached.

She drew closer and her flame made visible the state of his face. Her heart lurched in her chest.

He narrowed his eyes as he recognized his trespasser, but his expression barely registered in her mind. She saw only the wreckage she'd left upon what had previously been a bewitching set of sculpted features. Dried blood now crusted under his rose and in the corner of his mouth. The left side of his face was inflamed and bruised, one of his eyes swollen shut.
She had done this. In a fit of blind rage, she'd brought fists down upon a bound and defenseless man. A man she'd once claimed to love.

She had spent months mourning and hating; mourning the loss of a father she'd thought had changed, and hating the man who'd killed him. For extinguishing the fatherly affection she'd furtively yearned for all her life, she'd convinced herself that Charles deserved a fate worse than death.

But in the end, her retributive plans had been made without cause. She'd been deceived. The father she'd been so prepared to avenge, had again betrayed her. He'd once more proven less than worthy of her love, this time by offering her up in exchange for his own life.

Richard's murder had given her an excuse not to dwell on the treachery of her own actions. Even when it became apparent that Woodes' plans for Nassau differed from her own, and that she'd likely never be free of his restraints, she held fast to her warped ideals and paltry justifications. Instead of accepting the reality of her situation, she'd focused on Charles' sins, made him a scapegoat for her own myriad of transgressions.

Hating him had become a welcome alternative to hating herself. The fact that she had wanted so much to believe her father had changed, had made it all the easier. She had always hoped Richard would one day come to see her value, to finally acknowledge her for who she was and all she had accomplished.

She had clung to this fantastical notion for as long as she could remember. Never openly, as she'd have swallowed her own tongue before disclosing as much, but quietly and privately. Even knowing it was foolish, and that Richard would likely never truly see her, she had allowed herself the airy hope that he would come around.

Ergo, when Charles had declared her father's treachery and confirmed her fears, she'd lashed out. The wall of lies she'd been laboriously building around herself, began to crumble. Her shield cracked and her dreams went up in smoke. Months of carefully self-constructed fabrications and distortions of fact collapsed around her under the agonizing weight of truth.

Richard had never loved her.

The version of Nassau she sought, would never come to fruition.

Everyone and everything she'd ever loved was gone. She'd scorched her life in pursuit of an outcome that would never be realized. She'd sacrificed everything she had, and it was all for nothing.

She was the architect of her own destruction.

It was an excruciating revelation, and she'd raged against it. Fought to hang onto the tattered remains of her soul, and the fictions that had held it together. She'd used not only her fists, but the words she knew would cut him deepest. She had wanted to hurt him and she'd no doubt she'd succeeded.

But rumination had allowed remorse to slither in and settle. She'd found an uncomfortable acceptance of the truth in Charles's words. And with it, a deep and sudden understanding of all she had truly lost. It had left her feeling hollow and forlorn.

She'd come back here seeking some small measure of peace, a balm for the relentless gnawing of her own contrition. She didn't expect absolution, understood she might not even deserve it, but she needed something. She'd been compelled to return to this cell, and at the time it had seemed reasonable. She hadn't really thought to question it. Now she'd murdered a man in cold blood, stood before a man she both hated and loved, and had no real understanding of why she'd even come here.
Life was a funny thing.

Though faced with this reality, there were certain things that came to light. It pained her to admit, but Charles had been right about a number of things. Firstly, that she would never be able to hold on to Nassau with the English here, not in any real sense. She could hide behind Rogers' authority, but she would never have any real power of her own. And second, though she'd denied it for many years, she had always loved Charles. More than she cared to consider.

She hadn't meant it when she'd accused him of being incapable of love or compassion. She'd only been aiming to wound. Deep down she understood he'd risked both his life and his standing in her name. And that he'd done so more than once. Too often, she'd allowed her own suspicious nature to accuse him of having ulterior motives. But a part of her had always known his actions were often simply for the love of her. Even when he made a point of denying as much, it was usually painfully clear.

Yet she'd betrayed his love in favor of legitimacy in the eyes of the crown. A crown that would happily see her stripped of all but her womanhood. Confined to a gilded cage, and destined to live out her days as lesser to the men around her. It was a life she'd spent her entire existence trying to circumvent. But even knowing all of this, it was still exceedingly difficult to concede aloud. Admittance of fault, had never been her strong suit.

Even now as she stood in this dirty cell, confronted with the handiwork that marred his face, she found herself at a loss for words.

What could she really say at this point? What good would come of admitting her treason and failures now? Soon he would hang, regardless of her admissions of guilt and wrongdoing. How could this be enough?

The dry cracking of his voice snapped her from her inner contemplations. “Why are you here?” He sounded tired and exasperated, no doubt assuming she'd come to gloat or gut him further. He sat slouched against the pillar to which he was shackled, somehow managing to look indifferent and somewhat blasé even here.

“I...” She broke off, frowning at her own inarticulacy and shifting uncomfortably. She avoided eye contact and muttered. “This isn't what I thought it would be...”

He snorted. “No? And what exactly were you expecting?”

Her frown deepened, mildly chafed by his sarcastic tone. Despite her good intentions, there was still an innate urge to defend herself, to justify her actions even knowing she'd been wrong. It was a character flaw that had often carried adverse effects. But instead of catering to that desire, she remained silent and stepped further into the cell, securing the torch to a sconce on the wall not far from him.

With her movement he caught sight of her hands, and of the familiar substance that marred them. He sat up a little straighter, looked slightly more attentive. “Eleanor...” His voice sounded on edge, apprehensive and indignant. Almost as if he didn't actually want her to answer. “...What did you do?”

She followed his gaze downward. Her attention now drawn to the sticky crimson that had begun crusting between her fingers and under her nails. She splayed her palms, eying them quizzically as if only just noticing their fouled state. When she spoke it was barely above a whisper. “This time?...” She closed her eyes for the briefest of moments. “Nothing I'll regret...”
“What did you do, Eleanor?” He repeated, firmer this time.

When she opened her eyes there was a fire there, a stubborn determination he knew knew all too well. And he understood that whatever she said next wasn’t going to be anything he liked.

She began closing the distance between them. “The guard posted outside your cell is dead... He didn’t want to let me in.” Her tone was matter-of-fact, as if she were listing off what she’d had for breakfast and believed this to be explanation enough.

Lifting the ring of keys, she made a grab for the shackles that bound his wrists. But before she could touch him, he jerked his hands out of reach.

She paused and stepped back from him, clearly confused by his resistance. She looked up to find his eyes were narrowed and full of fury.

“What have you not toyed with me enough?” He hissed. “What more could you possibly want from me? What more could you take?” He leaned forward and gestured around the room, his shackles clanking with the movement. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but I’ve nothing left to give.” He still had is pride, and he intended to keep it.

Confusion and something akin to hurt clouded her eyes for only an instant before being replaced by anger of her own. “I have just risked everything!” She spat. “Do you not think I will be the first they turn to when they find that body? Rogers already knows I came to see you earlier, and it would not be a stretch to conclude I returned this night.”

He noted her agitation, the hint of panic that rode the outrage in her voice. And a part of him reveled in it.

After all she’d done, she deserved whatever heinous fate she got. But he could not deny that her sudden change of heart was both curious and unexpected. Somewhat intrigued and feeling a little schadenfreude, he slowly inclined backward against the pillar. His posture once again adopted a more relaxed bearing and when he spoke again it was with cool and placid composure. “Stings, doesn’t it? To have your sacrifice count for nothing...”

The laugh that crept unbidden from her throat was dry and sardonic. She threw up her hands and cast her eyes about the room in frustration. “You must be joking! I offer you your freedom, your life, and you refuse it simply to spite me? To have your death become some sort of ironic punishment?”

His brow lifted. “To spite you? Jesus, Eleanor, are you really so consumed by self-interest? Can you not consider there might be reason outside yourself?”

She shifted uncomfortably, having the decency to look somewhat shamed. “What then? What else could possibly be worth- ” She broke off, realization dawning in here eyes. “You intend to martyr yourself... To give them reason to turn against Rogers and the occupation...”

His silence was all the confirmation she needed.

For a moment she looked stricken and thoughtful, as though she were considering the possible outcomes of such a maneuver. He found himself wondering what exactly was going through her head, whether the thought of his death or the possibility of his plan’s success, would bother her more.

The night she’d taken Abigail, he’d watched tears streak down her stricken face. She was not a woman who wept easily or openly. And knowing as much, he was inclined to believe that the heartache he’d seen in her was genuine. Though his rage was palpable, he wasn’t entirely blinded by it. He knew she was not beyond feeling guilt, and not nearly as much the hardened bitch she would
have people believe.

But it wasn't enough. Neither the guilt nor the love had been enough to dissuade her. Presented with the choice between his life and the brave new world she had imagined, she had chosen Nassau. She had chosen Nassau repeatedly thereafter. And though it was a harrowing and excruciating truth to come to terms with, he had accepted it.

As such, it was difficult to believe that she would now turn from the payoff of those choices. The notion that she would abandon all she had sacrificed simply to see him freed, was ludicrous. And yet, a small, quiet and insane part of him still wondered if that was really why she'd come here.

If it was, he could think of few things that could have motivated her into such action. Not that it mattered; the dies had already been cast, their fates long since decided.

Decidedly obstinate, she reached again for his shackles. “No. That's idiotic.” Her tone was firm and final as it broke the silence of his inner musings.

“Eleanor...” He growled, his tone holding just enough of a warning to cause pause in her approach.

Frustrated and anxious, she huffed out a querulous breath. They didn't have time for this, the guard could be discovered at any moment. She needed to make him understand the folly in all of this. “It's a fool's errand.” She hissed. “Your death will solve nothing. You imagine it will rouse the masses into some kind of galvanized insurgency, but it will not. Your end will strike fear and acceptance into the hearts of too many. They will watch you die, and with you the age of piracy, everything you stand for.”

His brow furrowed, and she did not miss the look of consideration that had entered his eyes. She strove on, impassioned and inexplicably desperate to sway his perception. Her voice was low and forewarning, full of all the truth she could muster. “They will witness the end of an era in your demise, Charles... And it will not move them to resist the weight of England's chains. It will drive them to embrace it.”

He was eying her now with undisguised tension and suspicion. He stood. Staring down at her, his voice was quiet and firm. “And is that not exactly what you wish? Why tell me this? Why offer me my life now, after spending months trying to extinguish it?”

The candor of the question and the cautious tone in which he asked it, was like a knife to her gut. How could she explain her actions? How could she justify all she’d razed to get here, knowing it had likely all been for nothing? The truth was that she had been blinded by ambition, the promise of a world where she kept her kingdom through the legitimacy of the crown. But such a world did not exist. England had no intention of letting her keep anything, and certainly not of granting her any authority.

After all, she was but a woman, a criminal, the queen of thieves.

She had taken irrevocable steps to get here, committed unforgivable sins to reach an end that was never part of her design. Now alone, disenfranchised and contrite, she could think of little she would not do to take it all back. To simply return to that night and agree to his declaration of 'another day, another month, another year, a lifetime'.

But such fantasies were for children. Nothing she could do or say would change the past, she'd made her bed and now she had to lay in it. But if she could save Charles, perhaps that would be enough. Perhaps then she could still find some small measure of peace in the cage she'd built herself.
Her eyes met his, and she prayed he would believe her.

She swallowed, licked her dry lips, and spoke the only truth she could think to say without sounding a blubbing romantic. “Because Nassau is lost, and I fear she will remain so...” She didn't believe heartfelt apologies or excuses would move him after all she'd done. But she prayed the fate of Nassau would be enough to motivate him, to push him to accept what little she had left to offer him. “None of this is as I'd hoped...With this occupancy, she will gain legitimacy and a new governance,” She lifted desperate eyes to meet his heavy gaze. “but she will lose her heart...”

As I have...

The thought startled her, left her slightly shaken. She had believed Nassau to hold the largest piece of her soul, the only piece that truly mattered. Now, as she stood with his life in her hands, she was uncertain.

But she was not so foolish as to voice this thought. It was unlikely he would believe such an admission anyway, not all after she'd lain waste to. Instead she shoved down that inexorable little voice within, buried it among all the other whispers of doubt. Right now there were more important things to consider.

She stepped forward. Standing a mere foot before him, she could almost feel the heat of him. Steadying herself, she continued. “I expect no forgiveness, nor clemency. But I would have you know that I-”

He cut her off, turmoil and suspicion still evident in his features. “Save your breath, I've no use for excuses or apologies.” He knew that even considering an apology must have cost her dearly. And though something pulled in his chest when the look of hurt crossed her eyes with his words, he did his best to ignore it.

She nodded, reluctantly accepting the bitter taste of that particular truth. The urge to try and justify her actions was still present, but she knew nothing she could say would make a difference.

A moment of silence passed between them, and the air was heavy with understanding and regret. Her heart ached. Things would never be the same between them.

She fought to keep her voice steady and firm when next she spoke. She would not appear weak, not even here. “There were meant to be guards posted in pairs throughout the tunnels, but due to the sickness that's spread among the men, there is a shortage of available bodies. It was decided that the entrances and exits to the tunnels could still be guarded, but that patrols would be spread thin and most men would be without a partner.” She paused, trying to gauge his interest, but his expression remained guarded. She continued. “The southern tunnel should be mostly unguarded. It's only exit opens deep into the jungle. With any luck, you should be able to get through undetected. Without luck....” She shook her head. “There's a blade on the body I left in the alcove, I trust you can handle yourself.”

He said nothing, only continued to stare at her as though trying to decipher some elusive coded puzzle.

Slowly, with great hesitation and a muted prayer, she made a final attempt to remove his chains. This time, he did not pull away.

She did her best to hide the rush of relief that flooded through her.

With an eerie and quiet stillness, he allowed her to slide the key into the chamber and unclasp the
irons. He watched her closely as the first manacle clattered to the floor and she moved to unhinge the second.

The moment he was free of both restraints, he was upon her.

She made a startled sound as his right hand grabbed her throat and his left fisted in her hair at the base of her skull. The grip on her throat was just enough to make breathing arduous, but not quite impossible. With a tug on her hair, he angled her chin up so he could see her eyes. With brow knit and lips tight, he studied the plains of her face as though they were a map to some immeasurable fortune.

His gaze seared sharply into her own and she wondered if this was how she would meet her end. For if she looked just hard enough, she was almost certain she could find her death in those brilliant cerulean blues. That in it’s self, was not a vision entirely unexpected. He had made a promise to settle accounts, and she'd never doubted his ability to carry through on that threat. But what did take her by surprise, was that a part of her welcomed such a fate. She had no true wish to die, but conceded that if her time was to expire, she would prefer it be by his hand.

It was not as if she didn't owe him as much.

The heat of his focus was blistering, his eyes still searching for some invisible truth in her face. He looked both pained and furious, torn. She found herself wishing he would simply make a choice so she'd no longer have to bare the weight of that distressed expression.

“We are far from even...You're still a traitorous cunt...” He finally growled. There was a short pause in which he looked almost uncertain. “But today you leave here with your life...” He released her with a startling abruptness that had her stumbling backward. “Should we meet again, I cannot promise as much.”

He turned from her then, stalking from the cell and down the hall out of sight.

Her hands fisted. She fought to keep her breath even, to hold the well of conflicting emotion at bay. It was done. He was free. His death might yet still be nigh, but it would not be dealt by her hand.

She knew all too well, that every action had a price, a debt to be paid in full. Tonight she'd arranged his freedom, cheated death and all but asseverated a war within Nassau. The cost of which would be no small sum. It was likely that her actions had just secured her place among the very gallows from which she’d spared Charles.

Though if at all possible, that was a fate she intended to sidestep. She still had tools at her disposal, and adequate means of putting them to use.

She had never been one to take anything lying down. Whatever followed would simply have to be met with caution and shrewd vigilance, a bearing she was intimately familiar with.
Chapter 2

Moving quietly through the sparsely lit corridors, Eleanor hiked her skirts up further in order to prevent the rustling sound of her movement against the fabric. Her stomach churned with nerves. Her mind raced with the many consequences of her actions, none of which promised any pleasantries.

She quickened her pace. Thus far she had remained undetected. She was almost there. So close to being back in the quiet confines of her quarters. There she could gather her wits without prying eyes. There she would devise a plan of action, a means of remaining unexposed. Or at the very least, simply ensure her continued survival.

After narrowly missing being spotted by Mrs. Hudson, Eleanor managed to slip past and into her assigned quarters. The moment she was through the threshold, she made a beeline for the small wash basin the corner of the room. Scrubbing the blood from her hands and beneath her fingernails, the water quickly turned a rusted red.

The discovery of such evidence could be irrevocably damning.

Wasting no time, she turned and unlatched the nearest window, pushing it as far open as the hinge would allow. Carefully she lifted the small wash basin over to the sill, and promptly dumped it's crimson contents out into the chaparral of brush below.

Her hands were hardly what she'd call spotless, there was still some grime under her fingernails. It was certainly better than it had been only moments earlier, but she intended to do better. It was then that she noticed the crimson smears across the skirts of her dress. How in God's name had she overlooked such a incriminating detail?

She'd just begun unclasping the hooks of her corset, when door hinges sounded behind her. Her blood ran cold.

Seeing no other option, and steeling herself for the possibility of exposure, she slipped behind her dressing screen just before the door opened entirely.

Mrs. Hudson trotted into the room holding a pile of linen.

Had she not known better, Eleanor might have wondered what on earth Ms. Hudson was doing changing linen at such an ungodly hour. But as it was, she knew very well why the chambermaid had chosen this hour of the night to intrude. The bitch was always trying to catch Eleanor doing something prohibited by the perimeters of her commutation of sentencing.

It was a miracle Ms. Hudson hadn't chosen to come barging in while she'd been down in the dungeons. The discovery of her absence during Vane's escape would have forced her to scramble for a credible alibi. No such alibi existed, and that likely would have been clear. So, as precarious as her current situation was, it was better than the alternative.

From her position behind the dressing screen, Eleanor peeked through the crack between the screen's panels. Her heart racing, she watched Mrs. Hudson tsk and lay the linen down on the dresser, then head towards the open window. As Mrs. Hudson fought to get the window closed again, Eleanor
racked her brain for a way to rid herself of the soiled garments and properly clean up without arising suspicion or eluding to the fact that she’d ever left her room this evening. With so few options at her disposal, she did all she could think to do.

She yelled Mrs. Hudson’s name.

Like a startled cat, Mrs. Hudson jumped and whirled around. “What is it?” She hissed, clearly irritated by Eleanor’s method of summoning. “What in God’s name has you creeping about, hollering like some churlish heathen?” She stormed toward the dressing screen in an indignant fluster.

Just as Mrs. Hudson made a move to step behind the screens and confront Eleanor, her advance was halted by loud and angry words.

“Do not take another step! My wash basin was filthy, just filthy!” Eleanor spat. She prayed Mrs. Hudson would simply accept her behaviour as that of a spoiled woman of means, and do as she was told. “You’ll turn around right this instant and procure me some fresh water...”

Eleanor’s demand was met with quiet.

Panic rose in her throat.

If Mrs. Hudson decided to step behind the screens, there was little Eleanor would be able to do to hide her disarray. “In fact, fill me a bath while you’re at it. It’s far too hot tonight...” She did her best to steel her voice with authority and annoyance.

For another moment there was silence, and Eleanor began to fear Mrs. Hudson would question or deny her. As such, she was filled with relief when Mrs. Hudson’s irritated voice sounded. “Be grateful Captain Rogers has taken a shine to you, girl... Not many here have.”

With that, Mrs. Hudson turned, snatched up the empty wash basin, and stalked from the room. Eleanor let out a breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding. That was too close. Far too close.

But at least now it had been established that Eleanor was indeed in her room, and the bloody garments remained undiscovered.

Over the next thirty minutes, Mrs. Hudson came and went from the room with buckets of cool water for the tub. Eleanor spent that time peeling out of the soiled garments and folding them in such a way as to not display the stains unless opened, just in case the impertinent chambermaid decided to surprise her. When Mrs. Hudson begrudgingly asked if Eleanor needed help removing the garments, Eleanor claimed she’d rather Mrs. Hudson hurry and finish with the tub. She was perfectly capable to undressing on her own.

When the tub was full, and the basin replenished, Eleanor was more than happy to dismiss the snippy little shrew. “You may take your leave. I’ll have no more need of you tonight.” She stated flippantly as she stepped out from behind the screen, wearing only her shift and heading towards the tub.

Ms. Hudson scowled. She had more than once implied it was improper for a lady of noble blood to perform the tasks of chambermaids. Bathing, dressing, hairstyling, and the like, were the tasks of handmaidens. It was more than apparent that Mrs. Hudson disapproved of both Eleanor and her propensity towards self sufficiency. Not to mention the goings on she suspected Eleanor was having with Woodes Rogers, a married man.

It was well understood that Mrs. Hudson followed Eleanor out of duty and respect for Rogers, not out of any affection toward Eleanor. In her eyes, Eleanor’s criminality, promiscuity and insubordinate
nature made her unworthy of any real measure of respect.

Eleanor knew very well that Mrs. Hudson had a strong distaste for her. She also knew that Mrs. Hudson had worked for Rogers’ family for years prior to their voyage to Nassau. He had designated Mrs. Hudson not only as Eleanor's chambermaid, but as her de facto jailor. She was meant to keep a close eye on Eleanor.

So it wasn't surprising when the glowering woman seemed somewhat disgruntled with the idea of being dismissed so casually. But much to Eleanor's relief, Mrs. Hudson came to terms with the relegation rather quickly. She certainly didn't enjoy spending time with the Queen of Thieves, so perhaps she only conceded to the command out of a desire to gain reprieve from her assigned mistress.

In all honesty, Eleanor couldn't care less about the woman's reasoning; she was only glad she was leaving.

“Very well. I'll be just on the other side of that wall, should you require my assistance.” Stone faced, Mrs. Hudson gestured towards the wall on the right of the room. Her words wore the guise of helpful attendant, but there was warning in the subtext. The true meaning was clear.

I am not far. You are not free. I am still watching.

Eleanor nodded. “Understood.”

Mrs. Hudson gave a curt nod and turned swiftly on her heel, stalking from the room and closing the door behind her.

The moment the door was closed, Eleanor rushed over to the fireplace and set about lighting some kindling. It took a few minutes, but her time among the pirate campsites paid off; the log above her kindling finally caught fire.

With the fire lit, she rushed back behind the dressing screen to retrieve the bloodied skirts. Without delay, she tossed the skirts into the flame. For a moment she watched the flames dance across the fabric, eating up the woven threads, blackening where it touched.

Was this what her life had come to? Creeping about and burning evidence of yet another betrayal. This betrayal had been borne of the heart and not ambition. She could not have watched Vane die. A part of her still loved him. She suspected there would always be a part of her that did. But did that really make it any better? Woodes was a good man, a decent man. She had sworn allegiance to him. Yet here she stood, having killed a man to free a pirate that would very likely insight a war.

What made it worse, was that she hoped it would. She needed war to weaken the English hold on the island, to regain some small measure of control of her life and her place within Nassau.

After she'd spirited Abigail away from the fort and abandoned Vane to his men, she'd been consumed by guilt. Her father's murder and her following quest for revenge had been a welcome respite from that guilt. But it had still pained her to come to terms with the fact that she'd been capable of such a betrayal. She had loved him more than she had ever loved another. And yet still she had fed him to the wolves.

“You will turn on absolutely anyone, won't you?”

Those words had haunted her day and night. She didn't want to be that person. That person made her sick. She had done what she believed was necessary to secure Nassau's future and her own. But it had been at a terrible cost. A cost she wasn't sure had ever been worth it. Especially not now, with
her plans for Nassau in ruins and her future so uncertain.

It was why she had slept with Rogers. She'd desperately wanted to believe she could change. That, despite what everyone thought, she was indeed still capable of love and loyalty. Rogers was prestigious, kind and honorable. His position even offered her a measure of power on his arm. He was exactly the type of man she should want.

But she didn't want him. Not really.

She'd tried to convince herself she did. That it was the right thing to do. That Rogers was the answer to all her prayers. A legitimate Nassau and a decent man as her partner, lover, and diplomat.

But she hadn't been able to make herself forget. She'd tasted real passion, real love, power and acceptance. And what Rogers offered her, paled in comparison. Perhaps she could have convinced him to marry her and then pulled strings from the sidelines, played the doting wife. But it would have left her feeling hollow. She would never be more than his wife, a woman with no real power or position. She would live out the rest of her life under the shadows of men; a fate she had been desperately trying to avoid her entire life.

Perhaps Vane had been right. Perhaps it was better to die fighting and clinging to what was yours, than to live a life submerged in submissions and half truths.

She did not love Rogers, but she did respect him. She bore him no ill will. But should it come down to it, she would turn on him. Not because she wanted to, but because it needed to be done. Because while it was unlikely Nassau could remain free indefinitely, she was going to help ensure it lasted as long as possible.

She'd brought England down upon Nassau, and now she would help cast it out.

She could let herself be that monster one more time. This new betrayal would eclipse the others, perhaps even grant her some small measure of absolution from those she had left burning in her wake.

Whether she lived or died in all of this, she would have Charles know where her loyalties had finally taken root. Charles and Nassau were the only things she'd ever truly cared for. There had been others that she'd coveted, even loved, but none quite so fiercely.

She doubted any of it would change things between them, she'd burned too many bridges to expect as much, but this was all she had left to offer him.

The sound of shouting and many feet booming through the hall, broke her train of thought.

They must have found the body and empty cell. There was no running now. They would come for her.

So be it.

She scrambled over to the tub, shucked out of her shift, and clamored into the water. She gasped as the cold hit the heat of her skin. Ignoring it, she reached up and unpinned her hair, tossed the clip to the floor and dunked her head underwater. Just as she rose from beneath the surface, the door to her chambers crashed open.

Woodes Rogers stood in the doorway. Flush with the remnants of tropical sickness and the exertion it must have taken to make it to her chambers.
Eleanor feigned ignorance, concern flooding her features. “Woodes, what are you doing out of bed?” She made a move to stand from the tub but Woodes rose a hand, gesturing for her to remain seated. His expression was somber, perhaps angry, but it was difficult to tell with the sickness still riding him. He waved off the helping hands of the two men behind him and closed the door.

Alone with her, the only sound was the slosh of the water in the tub as she shifted to grip it’s edge. He asked one simple question. “Was it you?”

She frowned. Again she tried to rise and again he motioned for her to stay put.

“Tell me it wasn't you, Eleanor.” Woodes pressed again.

Her mind flashed back to similar plea, a different man.

“Tell me right now you had nothing to do with this. Tell me this isn't part of your plan to push me into the sea. “

The familiarity of the situation was striking and painful. But where she had been honest with Vane, swearing her ignorance of of Flint's schemes and meaning it, here she would lie. She would do what was necessary, just as she always had. “What are you talking about?” She demanded.”What's happened?”

He eyed her with both suspicion and something indiscernible. He moved away from the door to come to stand before the tub. His eyes burned across her face as he spoke again. He studied her features for a reaction as a simplistic explanation tumbled from his lips. “Charles Vane is gone. The guard posted outside his cell is dead.”

She stood abruptly, letting anger and disbelief filter through her features. She stepped from the tub in all her naked glory, and if she was at all bothered by her lack of dress, it didn't show. “That's impossible.” She snapped, reaching for her discarded shift. “There are men posted all over the fort. He can't have left the building. Find him.”

She caught him glance down at her body as she moved to pull the shift over her head. Good, his distraction could only benefit her.

He recovered quickly, speaking with haste and frustration. “My men are searching the tunnels. But that man did not escape all on his own. He had to have had help, Eleanor.” His words were riddled with accusation and suspicion.

She scoffed. “And you think that help was me?” She stalked toward him, maneuvering her body so that he would be forced to turn his back on the fireplace to remain facing her. The burning garment was still somewhat visible amongst the wood and flame, and she'd rather he didn't notice it. She didn't need more questions. “What good would that do me? After all I've sacrificed, when we're so close to seeing this through, you think I'd turn now?” She gave a wry laugh. “You must think me stupid.”

His lips pursed. He seemed to be struggling with whether or not to place any trust in her denial. He needed another push, she needed him to believe.

“He killed my father!” She spat. She knew it was a low card to play, but she was out of options. Woodes knew she'd spent months trying to ensure Vane's capture, and that once she'd succeeded, she'd beaten Vane bloody while he sat chained in his cell. Hopefully a reminder of this would be enough to convince him of her innocence.

He studied her, clearly somewhat moved by her outburst, but unsure of exactly what to do with it.
Finally, he nodded but his tone was still somewhat skeptical. “I understand your relationship with Captain Vane to have been... complicated.”

*Jesus, if he only knew.*

Her eyes narrowed. “Not that complicated.”

He eyed her for another moment before sighing and plopping down in a nearby wing chair. He rested his elbows on his knees and shook his head. “No, I suppose not...” His flushed face came to rest in his clammy palms for a moment, exasperation and exhaustion weighting his voice. “Forgive my mistrust, would you? I find my myself too weary as of late...”

Her face softened, and it was not entirely a deception. She was sorry for the pain all of this would cause him, but it was not enough to change things. She was stubborn and determined, and she could not afford to falter.

She knelt before him, gripped his knees and spoke softly. “You are right to be suspicious. To hold a position of power, you can trust no one...” The best lies were ones laced with truths. He lifted his head to eye her quizzically and she reached out to stroke the sickly dampness of his cheek. An action that spoke of affection but lacked real weight in her heart. She dropped her hand and lowered her head to rest on his knee, her wet hair leaving a damp patch on his breeches. She hoped the intimacy of the action would soften his resolve, but regretted having to resort to toying with his affections. Her voice was gentle but firm when she spoke again.”But I did not conspire against you. I did not free my father's murderer...”

There was a moment of silence, a quiet acceptance of her words. Then his hand came up to rest gently in her hair. “I believe you.”

She closed her eyes, let that truth roll over her, and steeled herself to be the traitor one last time. She could only pray Woodes had not been foolish enough to truly love her.

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“You aren’t fooling anyone, you know. Least of all me.” Jack Rackham tsked, leaning over to slosh rum into his friend’s cup as well as his own.

He was met only by a scathing glare from Charles.

Seemingly unfazed by his companion's obvious irritation with the subject matter, Rackham continued. “I was there when you first laid eyes on that damnable woman. For years I watched you all but sell your soul for the sake of her. I was there through all of it, I was there when it all went to hell... But never once did I call you out on the shit storm we both knew she would bring.” He lifted his glass, nodding toward Charles for confirmation of the statement's truth.

Charles scoffed. “Seems to me that if you had, it might have saved me a fuck-load of headache.” He threw back the contents of his cup and reached for the bottle.

Jack gave a wry laugh. “Lets not pretend you would have listened if I had. That kind of love, it's...” He paused, looking sincere and thoughtful. “It's unrelenting, all consuming... It doesn't just go away because you want it to.”
Charles rolled his eyes and continued to look murderous. There was little doubt in his mind that Jack's thoughts had drifted toward a certain cantankerous redhead.

The moment passed, and Jack shook his head, returning readily to the point he'd previously been trying to make. “Nothing I could have said would have made a lick of difference. You knew she was trouble, but you wanted her anyway.”

Jack was met only with a sneer, but continued as if he'd received some kind of enthusiastic encouragement. He never did know when to shut up. “Not that I blame you, I've a penchant for difficult women myself. Anne is...” Jack frowned, waving off the thought of Anne with another shake of his head. “Well, you know how Anne is. My point is, while I understand you harbor a labyrinthine of paradoxical emotion in regards to Miss Guthrie, it is important to remember that she's...” Jack paused, searching for a delicate manner in which to voice his opinion on the woman mentioned.

When no such nicety presented it's self, he settled for blunt honesty. “Well, she's a ungrateful, traitorous cunt.”

Vane arched a brow. The mirroring of his own words was uncanny, he'd called her the same thing only days ago.

He might have found this amusing, were he not being given the third degree on a topic to which he was already too well versed. His inflection was void of any underlying emotion when he spoke, but a hint of a warning lined the edges of his tone. “And you believe me to have forgotten this?”

Jack immediately began verbally backtracking. It was almost humorous. His face scrunched as though the mere suggestion had left a bitter taste on his tongue. “Forgotten? No.” His hand rose to wave off the notion as nonsense. “I believe you've been well versed in the duplicities of Eleanor Guthrie.” He shook his head and leaned back in his chair, drink in hand.

Charles eyed him expectantly, assuming he would elaborate.

With a sigh, Jack began running his forefinger along the rim of his cup. It was an absent and contemplative habit he'd been prone to for as long as Charles had known him. So before he spoke, Charles already knew he wasn't going to like hearing whatever it was Jack was about to say.

“However, I am inclined to consider the possibility that recent events may have... muddied the waters a bit... Her decision to free you from death and bondage, seemingly at her own peril, appears a brave and altruistic move...” With his head inclined to the side and his brows lifted, Jack attempted to gauge his friend's expression. To measure the probability of a fist connecting with his jaw should he fail to choose his next words carefully. Deciding it was worth the risk, he carried on. “A move that might perhaps be misconstrued as deserving of some measure of clemency?”

Vane's eyes narrowed. His lip twitched up in disgust. “You think I've forgiven her? That I would consider this one foolish act, likely only borne of guilt and self-pity, to be deserving of as much?”

Jack's face was somber, his tone serious and unapologetic. “Do you?”

The muscle in Vane's jaw clenched. His voice ground out through closed teeth. “Fuck you, Jack.”

“Good.” Jack nodded, standing to collect his coat from the back of his chair. After a brief and considering look at his friend, he turned an made for the door. “Put the bottle away and get some rest. I'll see you in the morning.”

Charles sneered, calling out just as Jack made it to the doorway. “I threatened to kill her.”
With his hand still holding open the cloth that hung as a make-shift door, Jack paused. He didn't turn around, but stood there for another moment to see if Charles would clarify. He didn't wait long.

“She freed me, and in return I swore to kill her next we meet.” His words dripped with venom and indignation, clearly insulted by Jack's insinuation. “Does that answer your question?”

There was a brief silence between them. Standing in the doorway, Jack still hadn't turned around, but he nodded solemnly. He knew all too well the pain this pledge must have caused Charles. Some fires were more difficult to extinguish than others, but Charles had tried nonetheless. That was worth a fair bit of credit.

Jack's voice was low and somewhat gentle as he next spoke. “It does... Goodnight, Charles.” With that, he slipped from the tent and disappeared into the camp.

Vane closed his eyes. Tilting his head back and breathing deep through his nose, he tried to reconcile the madness burning within him. But the attempt brought little comfort. With an animalistic bray, he stood, upturning the chair beneath him as he flung the open bottle of rum across the tent.

He was met not with the satisfying smash of glass upon impact, but rather with the disappointing thunk of the bottle hitting the material of the wall and bouncing to the floor. Where it steadily emptied the remainder of it's contents.

*Figures.*

He huffed out an irritated breath, raking his fingers through unruly hair.

He wanted to blame this sullen mood on Jack and his ludicrous ramblings. But truthfully, he was more angry with himself than anyone else.

Because Jack hadn't been entirely wrong.

Not about forgiving her, because he certainly hadn't. He wasn't sure he'd be capable of as much, even if he wanted to. Which he didn't.

But he still felt it. That virulent love, toxic and heady and determined to destroy him. It was infuriating. After all she'd done, whatever affection he'd held for her should have been extinguished with the onslaught of her many betrayals. And with the rage and pain driving him, he had thought such a thing possible.

Yet it hadn't happened.

Standing in that cell, confronted with her troubled countenance, he'd reluctantly understood the problem. No matter what that woman did, he would always want her. Even as he hated her, he would love her. Whatever they had shared, had left a bloody branding on his very soul.

But this ceaseless, boundless feeling for a woman who'd done nothing but slight and betray him, was dangerous. He felt it to be no more than weakness, an unfortunate remnant of a life that could never have been his. He had no intention of succumbing to it's wiles.

He told himself he'd spared her life that night to repay a debt, and that was partly true. She'd made apparent the potential folly of his martyrdom, saved his life, and might have changed the fate of Nassau. That was worth something.

But it wasn't the only reason she still breathed.
In her face he'd seen anguish and panic, perhaps even something resembling regret. And he found himself inclined to believe her disturbance to be genuine. It wasn't enough to make him forgive her, or even move him to sympathy. For she'd wrought this fate upon herself. But it was a difficult thing to ignore. Perhaps it was all an act, some new ploy to get under his skin. He wouldn't have put such a thing past her, but his gut was claiming otherwise. A fact that irked him to no end.

But genuine or not, he would not grant her yet another opportunity to leave him gutted.

He was no fool. Though she may well still own a very real piece of him, he would not be so daft as to offer her more. He'd gifted her her life in spite of her sins, he'd been merciful. But he would make good on his word. Should he find himself again in the presence of Eleanor Guthrie, he'd shelve whatever affection her still held for her.

He would kill her.
Chapter 3

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'd just like to toss out a quick thank you to all the lovely people who've been commenting and sticking with this story. I really appreciate all the feedback you guys have left on both AO3 & FF.net, and I'm so glad that so many of you have enjoyed it thus far. All the encouragement helps to stave off writer's block and is much appreciated. Thanks everyone!:

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Impatient and unnerved, Eleanor sat poised before her chamber's open window. Her gaze cast out across the terrain beyond the window. But lost in vigorous thought, her eyes saw nothing in particular. A prepared embroidery hoop lay untouched in her lap, the crewel needle resting loosely in her fingers. It was a ridiculous pastime Mrs. Hudson had insisted she learn, claiming it to be a skill every proper lady should know.

As Eleanor knew very well that Mrs. Hudson thought her no proper lady at all, she suspected this foolishness to be little more than an attempt to drive her mad. Surely this was not an activity women actually enjoyed. There were far better uses for one's time than spending hours stitching patterns in cloth.

The only reason she was participating in this nonsensical waste of time, was because Woodes had been present when Mrs. Hudson had suggested Eleanor learn the skill. And before Eleanor had had a chance to object, Woodes had enthusiastically encouraged the trivial undertaking. Which left her with little choice but to begrudgingly accept, reluctantly allowing herself to temporarily assume the maidenly role she was certain they expected her to adopt.

She could no longer afford to be seen as anything but cooperative.

Eleanor cast a glance, wrought with barely restrained bitterness, at her smug keeper. Sitting across from her in a chair facing hers, Mrs. Hudson returned the look with a self-satisfied smirk and nodded toward the untouched hoop in Eleanor's lap. It was clear she wished for Eleanor to return to the task at hand.
Barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Eleanor lifted the foreign objects and set about stitching. The thought of granting that pompous twat any dominion over her actions left Eleanor feeling chafed and resentful.

And that chaffing resentment gave way to the consideration that perhaps she could afford to be just a little uncooperative. Only a touch recalcitrant.

Being forever of an insolent and obstinate nature, Eleanor diligently began an attempt to embroider the perfect design. A design from which she was certain Mrs. Hudson's delicate sensibilities would be adequately offended.

With any luck, Mrs. Hudson's offence would be followed closely by an end to this senseless lesson.

As she worked, her mind wandered back to more immediate problems. It had been almost a month since Vane's escape. There had been no sign as to where he'd gone or whether or not been he'd been able to reunite with Rackham and the others. For all Eleanor knew, he could be laying dead in the jungle somewhere, poisoned or mauled by some Bahamian critter. His fate remained uncertain and with it the fate of Nassau.

Uncertainty did not sit well with Eleanor.

Flint would no doubt be a formidable force against the English. She had no doubt he had by now concocted some manner of plan to burden and frustrate the occupation. But his name did not quite carry the weight of Vane's. It would not garner the same support from the masses. Flint was well feared but not so well respected. He was not regarded as a man of honour, but as a clever, devious and manipulative man.

Not unlike herself.

Vane on the other hand, was known to be a man of his word. A man who was vicious and brutal, but also candid and ruled by a code of his own principles. He was both feared and revered, a king among pirates.

Even setting aside her feelings for him, she understood they needed a such a man. If they were ever...
to have any hope of reclaiming Nassau, Charles Vane had to live.

Yet his whereabouts remained unknown. Through Woodes, she had received word that Flint and his crew had been chased by Hornigold to the banks of an uninhabited isle called Maroon Island. There, a small army of escaped slaves had amassed on the beach and forced Hornigold to abandon his pursuit of the Walrus. But there had been no word since. She had no way of knowing if they were still on Maroon Island, or if they'd since moved on.

It was possible they'd returned to sea. But even so, they would have needed a base of operations. A place to replenish and revitalise, appease their men. To Eleanor's knowledge, Maroon Island was a small and uncharted isle with no real source of resupply. This made it an unlikely place to permit an extended stay, but not impossible if they had been planning such a visit beforehand.

It was also possible that they'd returned to the waters near Nassau. There were many smaller islands in the vicinity in which they could hide without being too far from much needed supply caches. Their ship could hide in the flares of the sun if need be, as it had done in the past. Or perhaps they'd anchored in one of the nearby bays on New Providence Island, just outside of Nassau's boarders. The island was large enough, and just uninhabited enough, to have sections that were unoccupied and ideal for remaining hidden. Such places would serve as decent campsites as long as they were smart about it.

There were too many possibilities to be certain of anything, but she hoped they'd chosen the latter. Perhaps it was only wishful thinking, but their being on the island would make it more probable that Charles had found his way back to them. If they weren't far off, it would also mean they had easier access to the supplies and information that resided here in the heart of Nassau.

But all of this was speculation. She needed answers and concrete evidence if she was to effectively plan her next move. She would not enter any further into this endeavour blind.

Decided, she rose from the patterned wing chair in which she'd been sitting. As she stood, Mrs. Hudson sent her a disapproving and questioning look.

With a self-satisfied mannerism that closely resembled Mrs. Hudson’s earlier expression, Eleanor spoke. Her tone held a careful touch of feigned innocence and confusion despite the brazen countenance of her face. “What? I've finished.”

When Mrs. Hudson lifted a speculative brow, Eleanor offered sweetly. “Would you like to see?”
With a huff, Mrs. Hudson grumbled. “In such a short time spent, I doubt it could be anything remarkable. But very well, give it here.” She held out her hand to receive the embroidery hoop.

Eleanor handed it over without complaint.

The moment Mrs. Hudson looked upon the carelessly stitched monstrosity, her eyes widened. Her mouth curved down in disdain and a disgusted grunt rose from her throat as she slapped the embroidered hoop face down in her lap; as if trying spare her delicate eyes from being subjected to a second viewing.

Eleanor scarcely managed to suppress her grin. Her creation was a barely recognisable, hastily stitched representation of a naked woman from neck to knee. She was no artist, but the outline was clear enough to interpret it’s intended likeness. And just as she’d expected, Mrs. Hudson's delicate sensibilities had been thoroughly offended. Strange, that something so simple and meaningless could rile this woman so effectively.

“This is unseemly.” Mrs. Hudson scolded. “Completely salacious and indecent. You should be ashamed of yourself, a lady should never be so lewd.”

“Apologies.” Eleanor lied. Though still her expression did not quite match the meaning of the statement.

Mrs. Hudson shook her head, revulsion and bewilderment clear in her disposition. “Your lack of propriety continues to astound me.”

Eleanor shrugged. She only needed this session to be over. She'd been aiming to rile Mrs. Hudson into a fit of self righteousness in an attempt to facilitate a means of ending this ridiculous practice. If she could get that far, perhaps she could convince the puritanical chaperone to accompany her into town and then loose her in the crowds. Hopefully the disunion would last long enough for Eleanor to garner some information on Charles and his associates.

It was likely she would later be reprimanded for venturing off alone, but she would deal with that complication when it arose. If worse came to worse, she would claim to have lost Mrs. Hudson in the crowded market. It wasn't foolproof and it was reasonable to assume she would still receive some form of punishment. But she was banking on the hope that if Woodes believed the separation to be unintentional, he would not allow her punishment to be overly severe.
“Is our session finished, then?” Eleanor questioned innocently.

“It certainly is.” Mrs. Hudson asserted, clearly unwilling to further besmirch her virtuous decorum.

Eleanor nodded. “Then fetch your cloak and an adequate escort. I’d like to get some air.”

Mrs. Hudson's eyes narrowed. She was clearly unhappy with the idea. But after giving Eleanor a sufficiently chiding look, she rose and set about retrieving her cloak. “We've not long before sundown, it'll be a short jaunt.” When Eleanor simply nodded and gave a dismissive wave of her hand, Mrs. Hudson sighed and turned to go acquire the escort. “I'll be but a moment.”

Mrs. Hudson vanished down the hall while Eleanor dawned her own cloak and fought to urge to pace as she waited for Mrs. Hudson's return.

After what felt like ages, Mrs. Hudson finally reappeared in the doorway. She was flanked by two brawny men in uniform. Eleanor maintained an air of stoic indifference, but inwardly resisted the urge to groan. One escort would have been bad enough, now there were two. Ditching them both would be significantly more difficult; which she assumed was Mrs. Hudson's mindset when seeking them out.

Gritting her teeth, she decided that the additional man would make no difference. She would still rise to the challenge. Resolved, she emboldened a look of indomitable poise, lifted her chin and strode past them toward the hall.

The three followed her without complaint, though she did receive a haughty look from Mrs. Hudson as she passed.

No matter, she would be rid of them soon enough anyway.

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The trio trailed a few feet behind Eleanor as she wandered through the market, pretending to peruse the various shops and vendors.
Glancing to her left, Eleanor spotted a bedraggled looking beggar sitting on the corner. With the sight of this unfortunate man, a feasible method of departure occurred to Eleanor. Slowly she sauntered over to the vagrant and crouched down before him.

Mrs. Hudson and the escort stopped and stood a few feet in her wake, watching her closely.

“What are you doing?” Mrs. Hudson called out from behind her. Eleanor wasn't surprised they'd kept their distance, the impoverished were the affluent's plague. It was as though they feared the mere proximity of mendicancy would contaminate their immaculate souls and inevitably lead to their own destitution.

Having spent much time on an island wrought with the unkempt and flagitious, she knew this ideology to be moronic.

But right now it served her purposes and she intended to take advantage. In this instance, taking advantage meant playing on Mrs. Hudson's religious predilections.

Eleanor's tone was honeyed, if not a little patronising, when she answered. “Is it not the Christian thing to do? To offer assistance to those in need?” Her right had made an outward display of producing a single piece of eight and holding it out towards the dishevelled man.

Mrs. Hudson huffed, clearly uncomfortable with the idea but trapped by the doctrine of her own faith. She continued to look displeased and uneasy, but made no move to approach or argue against the matter.

Her back remained turned on her entourage and the attention of the trio rested upon the coin she still held in her right hand. They probably wanted to make sure she wasn't engaging in anything suspicious or handing over some form of intel.

And that was fine. She was more than capable of a little subterfuge.

While they obsequiously watched the movement of Eleanor's right hand, her left discreetly drew the beggar's attention toward the hefty coin purse she held under the edge of her cloak. For a moment he eyed the purse with undisguised interest, then he lifted his eyes to meet hers. The look on Eleanor's face clearly requested subtlety and the beggar did not disappoint. He simply gave her a look that plainly asked what it was she wanted from him.
She answered quickly and in hushed whispers. “Distract the woman and two escorts standing behind me. Keep at it long enough for me to slip away and the purse is yours.”

Going along with the ruse more readily than she’d expected, the man nodded and held his hand out for the single coin she still had grasped between her fingers. With the corners of her mouth turning up, she dropped the lone coin into his palm and muttered. “Not now. Wait until we make our way back this way.”

The man nodded and gave a lopsided grin, made a show of thanking her for her exorbitant generosity.

*Clever man.*

She covertly dropped the coin purse into his upturned hat as she rose and turned back to rejoin her security detail. Mrs. Hudson eyed her warily but said nothing.

Sometime later, Mrs. Hudson commented on the approaching dusk and suggested returning to the fort. Eleanor complied.

A few more minutes of walking and the quartet was nearing the corner on which the beggar had previously been sitting. Eleanor’s skin tingled with the anticipation, with the adrenaline that warmed her blood and accompanied the knowledge that soon she would need to make her move.

But the corner came and went with no sign of the beggar and Eleanor began to worry. What if the canny little man had no intention of returning? What if he’d simply taken her coin and scampered off? It was a risk she’d known she was taking when she’d handed over the purse beforehand, but she’d seen no other option. Now she was faced with the very real possibility that her opportunity for fading into the masses had passed.

Just as she’d begun to lose hope, a scream sounded behind her.

Eleanor whirled around to see that very same beggar snatch the bonnet from atop Mrs. Hudson’s head. Ever the damsels, Mrs. Hudson began screaming. Yet the man seemed undiscouraged by the racket. He danced around the trio shouting unintelligible gibberish and waving Mrs. Hudson’s bonnet around like some kind of banner.
If he was intending to appear mad, he was doing a fine job of it.

As one of the escorts moved to intervene and retrieve the bonnet, the apparent lunatic ducked out of reach. Each time the escort would attempt to catch the man, he would skitter away or slither out of grasp, often using the distressed Mrs. Hudson as a human shield.

Eleanor grinned. This scrawny wee vagabond proved quite the agile little fellow.

Eventually the second escort joined the pursuit, perhaps believing his partner to be either incompetent or in dire need of assistance. But still, the limber little man continued to flail and gibber and flit around them. This couldn't last much longer though. Sooner or later, her mad little helper would be forced to either retreat or be seized.

When she'd asked for a distraction, this was hardly what she'd imagined. But a small crowd had finally begun to form around the bizarre little spectacle and Eleanor wasted no time in using it. Warily she slipped into the throng of spectators and began working her way past them, back towards the centre of town.

She didn't have much time. It wouldn't be long before they noticed her absence and began searching. She needed information and she need to find it quickly.

Luckily, she knew exactly where such information was likely to be found. The whorehouse was the centre hub for all the goings on within Nassau.

She hastened through the streets with her head down, cloak closed and hood up. She had no intention of attracting any unwanted attention.

The sun had begun to set and the lights of the tavern and connecting whorehouse were within sight.

She closed the remaining distance quickly, carefully, and without incident, slowing her pace as she approached the entrance to the brothel. Cautious of what might be awaiting her in or around the structure, she took a moment to surveil her surroundings.
When no one seemed to pay any mind to her presence, she began to move towards the doorway.

Just as she was about to enter the noisy bustle of the establishment, she caught sight of a familiar face across the street. The man leaned against the neighbouring building in a seemingly drunken stupor. His name presently eluded her, but she recognised him as one of Rackham's men.

For a few minutes she inclined against the side of the building, watching to see if the man remained unattended. When no one came to his side, she decided it was sufficiently probable he was alone.

With a steadying breath, she wiped her damp palms across her skirts and readied herself to take control of the situation. She didn't have time to formulate a plan of great detail or brilliance, so she settled for the first plausible one that came to mind.

She would be as shrewd, merciless and uncompromising as was necessary. She had to be.

Keeping the movement of her hands obscured, she slipped a small dagger from the lining of her cloak as she advanced toward the man.

As she approached, the man gave her a drunken leer. His eyes flitted from her chest to face with shameless interest. “Hey there, Sweetheart.” He slurred.

One of the few benefits to being a woman was that men often overlooked you as a threat.

Eleanor forced a smile onto the curvature of her lips and stepped forward to lean into the man. Her left arm came up to encircle his neck as she lowered her face to rest above his shoulder, her breath fanning gently against his ear. His hands came up to grip her waist and her right hand moved to press the dagger firmly against his groin.

His body stiffened and stilled.

Briefly it occurred to her that this method of resolution to a problem was more characteristic of Charles or Anne, than of herself. In the past, she'd often employed others to distribute her violence, but rarely engaged in it herself.
Strange that such a thought would occur to her now.

“Where is Rackham?” She breathed against his ear.

To the average onlooker, she would appear to be simply another whore. With their proximity and position, it would seem as though she were fondling him, perhaps trying to convince him to agree to more expensive services.

The man swallowed roughly, his breath quickening. “I don't know.” He croaked.

“If you've any attachment to your balls, you'll reconsider that statement...” She whispered.

When he remained silent for another moment, she pressed the dagger more firmly against him, eliciting a quiet yelp followed immediately by a string of curses. “Fuck! Okay, okay, easy! He came back to the island only a few days ago. He's holed up not far from here, set up camp in the jungle on the North-Eastern side of the island.”

“Why? Is Charles Vane with him?” She demanded.

The man nodded. “Yes, yes, that's why Rackham's here. Billy and two of Flint's crew ran into Vane a couple days after they were supposed to have rescued him from the English. I don't know how he got away from them, but he did.”

She closed her eyes, fought to bury the relief that rose with the mention of Vane's survival. Steadied, she asked. “Why did they stay here? Why not take Vane and head back to the safety of Maroon Island?”

The man shifted uncomfortably. “How do you know about Maroon Island?” He rasped.

“Answer the question.” She hissed.

“Billy is trying to rally support for an uprising. He wants to incite animosity towards the English and
that Guthrie bitch. Vane stuck around to help him and Rackham showed up when he got word of Vane's escape.”

It was a good thing her face still remained hidden in his shoulder because that last bit had stung a little and it showed on her face. Vane was actively helping to not only turn the island against the occupation, but against her as well. The island had never been particularly fond of her in the first place, but it was still an uncomfortable revelation.

She should not have been surprised that he would seek to retaliate, given the hell she'd put him through. But somehow the knowledge still cut deeper than it should have. Perhaps some wishful part of her had hoped that freeing him might soften some of his disdain for her. But it was a foolish and unrealistic hope. One that would bring her nothing but grief.

She inwardly shook herself, trying to free herself of that particular train of thought. At this point, dwelling on his feelings towards her was a pointless waste of time. There were more important things to consider than her keening heart.

She'd gotten lucky tonight. Even having seen her face, this idiot still didn't recognise who she was. She could work that to her advantage. She simply needed to ensure that he kept his mouth shut about this encounter all together.

“Anything else you'd like to share?” She questioned softly. Her voice was light and encouraging, as though she were asking him to disclose his favourite colour and not the whereabouts of men who would kill him for such admissions.

“No…” He whispered.

For a moment she said nothing, then finally nodded. “Fine. Now... Your aware of what happens if you mention this encounter to anyone, yes?”

When he kept silent, she clarified. “You spilled your guts, gave away the whereabouts and intentions of men who are thieves and murders by trade. You did so with very little encouragement. If you tell Rackham, or Vane, or any of your little friends about what transpired here tonight, they'll kill you... They've done worse for less, no?”

The man nodded with reluctant acceptance.
Tone sardonic, she asked. “So we understand each other then? This cozy little encounter remains between us?”

Again he nodded. “Yeah, yeah, it's our little secret.” He muttered with dejection and fear.

“Good.” With that, she released him, stepping away from him abruptly. He bent over, his hand grasping his knees. He looked as though he might be sick.

Anne Bonnie would have been proud. Well, if she didn't hate Eleanor's guts, that is.

She backed away from him until she was sufficiently satisfied with the distance between them before she turned and hurried back in the direction of the fort.

Now that she knew Vane was alive and that there were already plans set in motion, there were arrangements she needed to attend to herself.
Chapter 4

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

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She had not been wrong about the probability of receiving punishment. Upon learning of Eleanor's solitary excursion from a none too happy Mrs. Hudson, Woodes had seen fit to up her security detail. It had been decided that a guard was now to be posted outside her chambers whenever she was not in the company of Woodes or Mrs. Hudson.

Eleanor had attempted to argue against this development but had been rebuffed. While Woodes did seem to believe the segregation from her entourage to have been unintentional, he was not so stupid as to ignore the possibility that he may be wrong. He had not gotten as far as he had in life with imprudence or blind trust, he was a cautious man. Hence the increase in her surveillance.

She wasn't completely demoralized by the security increase, but it certainly did put a damper on her plans. It would complicate matters far more than she would like, forcing her to come up with some kind of work around.

But it would not dissuade her from her goals. Few things ever did.

She spent the next few weeks never far from Woodes' side. Whatever decisions he made, she wanted input. Whatever intel he received, she wanted to hear about it. Whatever doubts he still had about her allegiance, she wanted them squelched.

If he so much as sneezed, she would be capable of ascertaining exactly what had caused it. She would not be excluded from any procedure, proposal or strategic planning. Everything Woodes knew, Eleanor would know just as well or better.

This was how she'd prove her value. This was how she'd levy the tides in her favor.

Information was currency. And of that, she'd amassed a hefty sum.

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In a room full of squabbling men, Eleanor stood calm and collected.

This was it, this was the moment. In this moment, she had the will and ability to deal the occupation a potentially devastating blow.

Approximately three weeks prior, Hornigold had informed Woodes of his discovery of the escaped slaves amassed on Maroon Island with the Walrus' crew and stolen cache. They needed to retrieve that cache to avoid a war with Spain. Ignoring such a force, especially one led by Flint, was a mistake the occupation could not afford to make. So now, after much negotiation and debate, Woodes and his associates had finally decided to put an end to their little islet rebellion.

Eleanor had managed to inject her fair share of opinions and concerns into the planning of this matter. She believed that Flint had likely shown Hornigold the Maroon's force as a means of provoking the English into an attempted siege. As such, she had encouraged the attack. She did so with the hope
that she'd manage to goad the English into falling prey to whatever trap she was sure had been set.

If Flint wanted the English to press onto the shores of Maroon Island, she trusted he had good reason. He was one of the most devious and clever men she'd ever known.

With this in mind, she had set about involving herself in every plan associated with the taking of Maroon Island. She had learned of each and every ship that would be involved. Every supply, weapon, and skilled man aboard, was mentally cataloged. There was no part of this plan that had escaped her attention.

Now, with all of the details finally settled, there was only one question left to ask.

“When?” Eleanor demanded. “When does all of this take place?”

“Three days time.” Woodes answered, looking to Hornigold for confirmation of the achievability of such a time frame.

Hornigold nodded. “It can be done.”

And there it was. The final bit of knowledge, the missing puzzle piece in the interlocking of her plans.

The tracks had been lain, she'd done all she could from here. The next step was to abscond from this place, endeavor to share her knowledge and insight of the occupation, with rebels and felons. And pray none of them would see fit to dispatch her before she could disclose all the information she'd learned.

If she succeeded, by dawn tomorrow she'd be preparing for a slaughter for which she both longed and dreaded. She'd once again stand among pirates and thieves.

If she failed, she'd simply be dead.

If she fell tonight, it would be by either her own hand or Charles'. For if Charles refused her, he would surely kill her. And if she was captured by Woodes' men before departing, she would end it herself. She would not give them the chance to return her to England and that godforsaken tower.

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Some time later, Eleanor began stuffing supplies into a small satchel within her chambers. She hadn't entirely worked out how she would get past the guards or avoid detection long enough to withdraw from the fort and find a skiff. But it was a work in progress, she was making it up as she went along. Shoving a pair of apples into the bag, her mind began running through her limited options.

A voice sounded behind her.

Eleanor whirled around with panic in her chest. She stood frozen in place, her mind screaming through possible excuses and escape routes.

No viable options sprung to mind.

“I tried knocking but there was no answer, so I -” Max's voice trailed off as she stepped into the room uninvited. Her eyes drifted from Eleanor's face to the satchel still gripped in her hand. Some of the bag's intended contents were still strewn over the bed. She studied Eleanor's face for a moment longer before closing the door behind her and taking a few cautious steps into the room.
Max wasn't stupid. The scene before her indicted Eleanor's clear desire to depart. But what Max didn't understand, was why she would want such a thing. Nassau was so close to achieving the legitimacy Eleanor had so fiercely fought toward. Yet now she wished to abandon the only means she had of seeing that dream come to fruition?

It didn't make any sense.

The look Eleanor cast in Max's direction was pleading, a desperate appeal for silence and feigned ignorance. It was a look that urged Max to simply turn around and pretend this scene had never unfolded.

Max would do no such thing. Not without an explanation.

“Eleanor... What are you doing?” Max asked gently.

Eleanor swallowed hard and returned to filling the satchel. There was no point in denying what was already painfully apparent. When she spoke, her tone was firm and determined but not without agitation or distress. “I'm leaving...” She stated obviously.

While Max was empathetic to her friend's evident upset, she could not ignore the ramifications such a decision might bring. “Why? What is there left out there for you?” Max demanded. Her tone was not harsh, but there was still a clear implication that she believed such a course of action to be foolish.

Eleanor met her gaze, wild emotion swimming in the depths of her eyes. “I can't stay here, Max... I can't breathe. This is not how things were supposed to happen. I wanted Nassau's legitimacy to free her, to make her strong. But I didn't understand what that would cost, what both she and I would loose in the process.”

Eleanor came forward, reaching out to grasp Max's hands in her own. “What they want from me, who they expect me to become... I'm not capable of conforming to it.”

Max's face was wrought with sympathy, concern and uncertainty.

Eleanor had long believed that she would always do whatever it took to survive. That as long as she still lived, there would be ample opportunity to rise above whatever circumstances had impeded her progress. But what she'd realized all too late, what she'd never truly understood, was that death was sometimes kinder than survival. Some things were not worth enduring.

She would not spend the rest of her life exemplifying docility and submission.

Eleanor continued, her voice desperate and pleading. “It isn't enough, it never could have been enough. I need more than this...”

She always had.

Max understood this. She understood it better than than she would have liked. She'd once begged Eleanor to flee by her side and abandon Nassau, and she'd been denied. A simplistic life had never been something Eleanor had been interested in. She'd always striven for greatness, been drawn towards power and fire. Her ambition had always been her greatest weakness.

Perhaps it was why she'd been so hopelessly enamoured with Vane. He was so much like her, so fiercely devoted and relentlessly zealous, never willing to relinquish his freedoms or control. Even before she'd fallen in love Eleanor, Max had known of the pair's past and of Eleanor's continued affection for the man. But Max had hoped that Eleanor's knowledge of the futility of such affection would deter her from indulging in it. She had also hoped that the love she and Eleanor had shared
would be enough to outweigh both Eleanor's ties to Vane and her own ambitions.

It had not been.

And Max had paid dearly for harbouring such hopes.

But that was a long time ago. And while she was no longer in love with Eleanor, she did still care for her. She wished her no ill will. Which was why she was against the idea of allowing her to abandon her commitments at the fort. For such a breach of contract, Eleanor would be returned to the tower. Perhaps even put to death. She would spare Eleanor that fate if she could.

“There is no future for you beyond these walls, Eleanor.” Max persuaded softly. “If you leave here now you'll be killed or captured and returned to England. Does that sound like an outcome worthwhile? Is ruling from behind the throne, rather than atop it, truly so unappealing that you would risk such a fate?”

“Yes...” Eleanor whispered. “Here I'll never be anything more than a powerless woman with questionable morals. At best, I'd be mistress and crony to a governor intent on remodelling everything I've spent my life building.”

Max knew Eleanor well enough to know that that was probably true. With what this place would become, it was unlikely Eleanor would ever rise much higher than she already had; not without conforming to the roles that civilized society demanded of the fairer sex.

But still, Max was inclined to strive to convince Eleanor otherwise. To Max's thinking, being the clandestine voice behind the throne was far better than being caged or dead. As such, Max made a last ditch attempt to convince her friend of the folly of her plans. “Mon cher, that is not a completely ineffectual role in which to be cast. It's a position that could wield considerable power if handled correctly...” Max argued with empathy. “Do not risk all you have achieved simply to pursue a position this world will never allow you keep.”

Eleanor shook her head. Both she and Max were women who had garnered considerable power in a world that had offered them little opportunity to do so. But where Max was content to operate from the shadows, ensuring those around her saw her as less than threatening, Eleanor craved that sense of recognition and authority.

Max sought power as a means of securing safety and security in life, it was a means to an end.

Eleanor sought power because it was in her very nature to do so.

Eleanor released Max's hands and stepped back from her. Frustrated, Eleanor raked her fingers through her loosened hair. “I did this, I brought this down upon all of us. I did it because I thought it would ensure Nassau's survival, safeguard my position and expand my agency. But it didn't.”

Max shook her head. “You always knew civilization would seek to claim this place, you said it yourself. If England hadn't come, Spain or another nation would have. A place like this was never meant to last. What you did saved many who otherwise would have been massacred in the instance of a raid.”

She didn't have time for this. She wanted to make Max understand, needed to ensure Max would not take steps to hinder her progress. Eleanor knew how invested in this new world Max had become and she feared what would happen if Max chose to stand against her.

“What I did was selfish.” Eleanor spat, growing impatient with the conversations lack of progression.
Max sighed, saddened and somewhat irritated by Eleanor's stubborn determination. “D'accord. But where will you go? What do you expect to achieve once you leave here?”

Eleanor shifted uncomfortably, uncertain of whether to disclose her true motives. She wanted Max to understand the importance this held for her. To grasp the concept that simple survival was not enough to live on.

She wanted Max to let her go.

“Charles...” Eleanor said softly, deciding Max deserved to know the truth. “Through him, I've a means of offsetting at least some of the destruction I've caused...”

Understanding finally shone in Max's face. “So it was you, then?” She paused, inclining her head thoughtfully. “You freed him?” Peering into the eyes of the woman she'd once loved with everything she'd had, Max knew the answer to that question even before Eleanor voiced it.

Eleanor looked away. She didn't relish admitting yet another betrayal of trust, but she saw no other way around it. “Yes...” She said quietly. “And I think he was right... It might have been better to stand against them, fight to keep our freedom and Nassau's. Even if it couldn't have lasted forever, we might have held on to this place a little longer, made it that much harder on them...” She lifted her eyes to meet Max's once again. “I would prefer such an outcome over the mockery of life they'd have me submit to...”

Max gave a sad smile. “Even if it gets you killed? Is it worth so much to you? Is he?”

Pained, anxious and uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken, Eleanor spoke quickly on an exhalation of breath. “I think so, yes.”

Max nodded solemnly, toying with one of the rings on her right forefinger. When her eyes lifted to meet Eleanor's, her expression was earnest and firm. “Bien, what do you need?”

Eleanor frowned. “What?”

“To leave this place, what do you need?” Max questioned honestly.

Eleanor's face softened. “Max... You don't have to...”

“Tell me and you'll have it.” Max pressed. “This venture is a fool's errand. You cannot stop what is coming, no one can. You'll perish in this undertaking. The least I can do is ensure it's not sooner than later.” By the time she finished, her eyes swam with emotion and the misting of unshed tears.

Eleanor's expression was forlorn. After everything she'd put Max through, Max was still trying to help her. She hadn't expected it, nor did she deserve it. With damp eyes of her own, Eleanor pushed forward wrapping her arms around Max. She was sorry for all the pain and suffering she'd caused this beautiful woman, sorry for having never been able to love her as well as she deserved. “Thank you...” Eleanor whispered hoarsely.

Rubbing soothing circles over Eleanor's back, Max whispered back. “De rien...”

Eleanor didn't know how Max had done it, but she'd managed to arrange Eleanor's departure. With her position as Madam at the whorehouse, Max had a wide variety of connections and intricate relations. Eleanor assumed that Max had somehow employed those ties to procure both a skiff and a
suitable setting from which Eleanor could disappear.

Max hadn’t elaborated on the details of the plan, she’d only promised to come though in a few hours time. And boy had she ever.

When Eleanor had stepped from her chambers, the posted guard was gone. When she’d crept through the halls toward the tunnels, there had been no one there to stop her. She’d slipped into the tunnels and through the corridors without incident. And having studied the routed patrols of the tunnels, she’d been able to avoid coming into contact with the guards down there. She ended up escaping through the very jungle exit she’d sent Vane through only six weeks prior.

*Oh, the irony.*

After trekking through quite a bit of unwelcoming jungle brush, Eleanor had managed to make her way down to the designated spot in which Max had promised there would be an unattended skiff.

Now with the moon and stars as her only light source, she sat with oar gripped in hand. Struggling to direct the little skiff through the rough open water, she pushed the paddles through the waves toward the North-Eastern side of the island. Max had informed Eleanor that she'd gained intel from one of the girls at the whorehouse. The whore had learned from one of the crewmen that the pirate camp was located only a few miles inland of a large and decrepit shipwreck. Without this information Eleanor would have wasted hours, if not days, scouring the North-Eastern side of the island for some sign of life.

She prayed Max's involvement in her escape would not be discovered and that Max would not disclose her plans to Woodes. Max was a clever and resourceful woman, surely she would take measures to ensure her own safety. But Eleanor's disappearance would raise a lot of unwanted questions, a lot of mistrust, anger and assumptions. She could only hope that Max would escape that scrutiny without having to disclose her entanglement in this matter.

After what felt like hours, her arms began to scream with the unfamiliar effort it took to maneuver the uncooperative skiff. Just when she'd begun to worry that she'd somehow missed the landmark and gone too far, she spotted it. There, shrouded in the darkness about a mile out, was the dim figure of a beached and broken brigantine ship.

She nearly wept with the joy of the discovery.

She directed the skiff inland towards the shore. As the skiff hit shallow waters, she finally set down the ores. The muscles in her arms quivered with relief as she stumbled out into the surf and began dragging the skiff up onto the beach. Panting and weighted down by her now waterlogged skirts, she towed the heavy little boat across the sand and up into the cover of the jungle. It would do her no good to have the skiff spotted on the beach before she ever found the camp.

After using a few large leaves and branches to camouflage the skiff, she sat down on a nearby rock to catch her breath. The wind and trek through the jungle had left her looking completely dishevelled. What the wind and brush hadn't accomplished, the sea had. There were small pieces of debris tangled in the tousled hair that had partially escaped restraint. Her skirts and shawl were riddled with small tears and patches of dirt. And her shoes and skirts were soaked to the knee.

Sore and exhausted didn't begin to cover it.

But still she rose. She rung out her skirts and emptied her shoes as best she could before tugging the shawl tightly around her shoulders and securing its hood over her unruly locks. With a steadying breath, she began a precarious trek into unknown territory. She needed to hurry, the cover of
darkness would only last so long. Walking into the camp in broad daylight would attract far more attention than she was looking to invite. She simply wanted to slip into camp, find out where Charles was, and convince him to hear her out before he decided to kill her.

Easier said than done.

Tramping through the brush in as straight a line as she could manage, she began contemplating the likelihood of her untimely demise. Charles had never been a particularly lenient or merciful man. He did want what he wanted, when he wanted and rarely concerned himself with the inconvenience it might cause others. But there were a few favoured individuals who's welfare he'd been known to place above his own. She had once been one of them, perhaps even his most coveted. But she'd turned on him, traded his love and fealty to hold on to rocks and sand.

Her transgressions were vast and many, a fact he was unlikely to forget. He'd spared her life because she'd freed him, but that benevolence only extended so far. He'd still promised to end her life and it was reasonable to assume he would not hesitate to follow through on that promise.

Charles Vane was a man of his word.

She could only hope that he'd listen long enough for her to share with him what she'd learned. If he still wanted to kill her after that, so be it. At least he'd have the information he need to give the English all manner of hell.

Stomping through the darkness, Eleanor stumbled awkwardly over a protruding tree root. She let loose a stream of vehement curses as she inelegantly fumbled to regain her balance and avoid an outright fall. Her hand struck out to brace against a nearby tree but she missed the mark by inches and toppled forward into an undignified heap.

“Fuck!” She snarled angrily, clamouring up from her crumpled position on the jungle floor and giving the undergrowth a swift kick for her troubles. As she straightened to brush the hair from her face and readjust her satchel, she spotted something glimmering in the distance.

It looked like it could be a fire. Perhaps the kind that accompanied an encampment.

Encouraged, she began making her way toward the small flickering glow. This time her movements were slower and more cautious. If that really was the camp, it wouldn't do her any good to get caught lumbering around in the bush.

As she neared the light source it became apparent that the glimmer was indeed a campfire. Closer still, makeshift tents came into view. She nearly whooped with the delight and relief of it. She hadn't truly believed she would find it. A part of her had feared she'd wander the island for days and achieve nothing. But here she was, right where she needed to be.

However, whatever joy she'd felt upon finding the encampment quickly faded with the reminder of why she'd come. She wasn't even sure what she expected to say to him. She knew the information she held was valuable, but she wasn't certain it would be enough to dissuade him from killing her. She wasn’t even sure he'd trust the information was valid.

Eleanor's guilt and anguish regarding her decisions and Vane's consequent capture would need to be set aside. Ever the pragmatist, she attempted to stifle those regrets and focus on the task at hand. She needed to find a way into that camp and find Charles. She'd worry about what to say to him later. It wasn't the most attractive course of action, but she couldn't afford to waste anymore time lurking around in the shadows waiting to get caught.
Trying to get a better understanding of the camp's layout and numbers, Eleanor began quietly creeping along the outskirts of the camp. As she moved along the camps edge, she overheard two men deliberating the recent erection of the infamous fuck tent. She spotted the owners of these crude articulations not twelve feet from where she was crouched in the brush.

“I thought the new Madame had all them whores dancing to an English tune? How’d we get her to agree to give us a whore for the tent? ” The stouter of the two men confusedly queried.

The taller man shook his head. “She does and we didn't. She don't know we got one of her bawds, or even that we're here; probably figures she just up and ran off like Charlotte did.”

The stout man frowned. “But how’d the broad get here? Who told her where to find us?”

“Featherstone's got relations with one of the Madame's girls, convinced her to defect and inform on English goings on.”

_Idelle._

Idelle was a turncoat. Eleanor hadn't seen that one coming. To Eleanor's knowledge, Idelle had always been fiercely loyal toward Max, they were friends. Though considering Idelle's marked feelings of enmity towards Mrs. Mapleton and Max's recent rehiring of the old battleaxe, Eleanor could appreciate how Idelle might have been swayed.

Eleanor hunkered down lower into the brush to listen more closely.

“She sent us Alice –” The taller man broke off and rolled his eyes at the look of confusion on the stout man's face. “– Alice, the tent whore's name is Alice.” The tall man clarified.

His companion nodded and gestured for him to continue explaining. Slightly exasperated, the tall man complied. “Alice is a sort of go-between. Featherstone's gal paid her to come out here and deliver some information since Featherstone weren’t around to do it for her.”

Again, the stout man frowned. “Then why’d this Alice bother stick around? Won't she be expected back at the brothel?”

The tall man shrugged. “Apparently Alice ain't too fond of the Madame, weren’t too keen on hurrying back. Besides, she's the only snatch for miles. I imagine she reckons that means there's fair coin to be earned out here, markedly so if she ain't gotta hand over half those earnings to the Madame.”

The stout one grinned. “She ain't wrong about that.”

The tall one nodded and laughed in agreement. “No, she sure ain't.” He slapped a hand down on the stout one's shoulder in comradely affection. “What do ya say, mate? Should we go let the greedy little tart show us what we're paying for?”

Their barking laughter and salacious buffoonery continued as they wandered off in the direction of what Eleanor assumed was the fuck tent.

“Men.” Eleanor muttered, shaking her head.

Just as she began moving again, she caught sight of a painfully familiar figure stalking across the open area in the distance.

_Charles._
Her chest tightened. She stopped moving, almost didn't breathe. This was it. This was the flash in
time that would decide both her fate and Nassau's. She didn't know what she was going to say or
how she'd convince him to hear her out, but she knew she didn't want to turn back now. Not for
anything.

She watched silently as Charles approached an unfamiliar crew member who was sitting on the
ground against a large rock. Charles crouched down before the man and they began discussing
something. She couldn't hear exactly what was being said from this distance, but she could tell the
man was receiving some sort of instruction or reprimand. After another moment or two the crew man
nodded vigorously, scrambled up and hurried away in the opposite direction. Charles stood, turned
around and stomped off toward a nearby tent. He disappeared into the folds of that tent a few
seconds later.

Eleanor swallowed back the sick feeling in her throat. Her mind kept flashing back to the anguish
and anger she'd seen in his face when he'd promised to kill her. She didn't want to see that look
again. That look had forced her to relive the destruction she'd wrought. It coerced her into
acknowledging that he'd never once given her reason to doubt his feelings towards her, and yet still
she had doubted them. Still she had cast him aside and left him for dead.

She mentally shook off that train of thought and scolded herself for getting lost in such a futile
thought process. There was no changing what had already come to pass, she couldn't take back
anything she'd said or done. There was no point in wishing that she could.

All she could do now was move forward. She wasn't looking for forgiveness or absolution, she
knew she was far beyond such redemption. What she sought now was merely a salve, a balm to ease
her own guilt and despair. Eleanor knew she could not save Nassau from civilization, that Max was
right; eventually there would be no stopping Nassau's edification. But she could damn well prolong
the transition, ensure Nassau's heart remained intact for just a little longer. She'd make sure the
English were given something to fear, a reason to hesitate.

It was a doomed undertaking; but one she would willingly die for. She finally understood what
Charles had meant. She understood now why he could not fathom the notion of accepting the
subjugation of the crown. To live under the dictatorship of another was not to live at all. There was
no freedom in it, no capacity for sovereignty or independence. It demanded absolute obedience and
seamless assimilation.

Eleanor was neither obedient nor assimilative and she did not wish to be.

...I will be no slave again. And as I am free, I hereby claim the same for Nassau. She is free today,
and so long as I draw breath, she shall remain free.

She closed her eyes against the unbidden memory of another of Charles' uncompromising
declarations. His voice was a constant echo in her mind, colouring her daily decisions, compromising
her every thought. The man had wedged himself so far under her skin that trying to remove him had
done nothing but leave her scarred and bloody. She'd tried to cut him out more than once and each
time it had left her feeling less than whole. He was as much a part of her as blood and bone. There
was no fighting it, no denying the reality of the marks they'd left on each others lives.

But she was stubborn and she'd given it one hell of a shot.

Now whatever rapport they'd shared lay in ruins, so far beyond salvage or repair that the mere
thought of trying left her feeling choked and overwhelmed. She knew he'd never trust her again,
gone were the days in which he'd look at her with anything resembling warmth. Her actions had
assured as much.
Despite the suffering this comprehension caused her, she told herself it was something she'd no choice but to come to terms with. It was the only way to get through this, to do what needed to be done. Steeling herself against the heartbreak she was sure this task would inevitably bring, she readied herself to ascend from the underbrush.

There were too many crew mulling about for her to have any chance of creeping into the middle of the camp unnoticed. So she stepped clear of the leaves and branches, straightened and began striding through the camp as though she belonged there.

She could only pray no one would recognize her, hope desperately that they would simply assume she had some sort of business here.

She hadn't gotten very far before a voice sounded behind her. “Hey, you!”

She tried to ignore it, pretend she hadn't heard whoever had spoken. But the voice persisted, determined to catch her attention. When she continued walking, a firm hand grasped her wrist and ceased her movement. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face her assailant with feigned confusion plastered across her features.

“Who the fuck are you?” The large and nearly toothless troglodyte barked.

She recognized this man as one of the tavern's occasional patrons, but to her knowledge he had not been previously affiliated with Rackham, Charles, or Flint. Which meant that Billy's incitable speeches and Silver's growing infamy might actually be drawing recruits. That was relevant information, information she quickly filed away.

Taking on as meek and gentle a disposition as she could manage, Eleanor confusedly imparted. “Excuse me?” Panic rose uncomfortably in her chest, but her face remained impassive. The question was only intended to give her an extra moment to come up with an excuse for her presence here. Whatever she was going to say, she knew she needed to say it fast if she was to have any hope of diffusing this situation before someone noticed the commotion and recognized her.

The toothless wonder tightened his grip on her wrist and seethed. “I said, who the fuck are you?”

After a closer look at her he added. “You look awfully familiar...”

She said the only thing she thought would make any sense. “Idelle sent me!”

The big oaf frowned and proceeded to look thoughtful. “Featherstone's girl?” He questioned.

Eleanor nodded.

He continued to frown and consider this possibility for a moment longer. But then he seemed to find something agreeable in her statement. He began leering down at her. “Then you're headed the wrong way, Lass, fuck tents that way.” He said, pointing toward the dingy makeshift tent in the opposite direction from where she'd been headed.

Cretinous ape.

Eleanor shook her head. “I'm not here for that, Alice is here for that. I'm here for Captain Vane...”

She chanced.

The man's eyes narrowed. “And what would you want with our good Captain, then eh?” He skeptically inquired.

Eleanor swallowed the dread that rose with his query. She responded as though the answer to the
question was obvious. “Well, I’m to be a gift, of course.”

*God, how degrading.*

“A gift?” He probed doubtfully.

She nodded and arched a brow at the meaty fist still clenched around her wrist. “Yes, a gift. The fuckable kind, you understand?” She quipped.

He chuckled and shook his head. “And what's wrong with our pretty little Alice? She ain't gift enough?”

Eleanor rolled eyes, her fear slowly being overridden by her loss of patience for the primate's interrogation. She elaborated on the lie. “Alice wasn't meant to be a gift, she was meant to be an informant. But she's outlasted her usefulness in that role as she was supposed to have returned days ago. Instead, she chose to linger and line her pockets with your crew's coin. Her prolonged absence has made it impossible for her to return without rising question as to where she's been. I'm to inform Captain Vane that Alice is no longer expected to return to the brothel and that the crew may keep her. I am to be gifted to the Captain as compensation for Alice's continued safety and upkeep.”

She watched his brow furrow and hoped his brain capacity was further evolved than his primitive exterior. Surely such an explanation would lead him to at least consider the possibility that she was telling the truth.

After scrutinizing her for another moment, he finally huffed out a frustrated breath. “Ugh, alright, fine.” He yanked on the wrist he was still holding and began dragging her off toward the tent in which Charles had previously entered.

This was hardly the reunion she'd imagined. This bumbling oaf was complicating everything. “I could do without the manhandling.” She hissed. “It's completely unnecessary.”

He only grunted and continued his bovine lumbering, towing her reluctant form along behind him. *Outstanding...*

They came to an abrupt halt just outside of Charles's tent and the burly clod yanked her forward to readjust his grip on her wrist. “Captain?” He called out but made no move to enter the tent.

A shuffling was heard from behind the enclosure but there was no response. *Typical.*

“Captain, I've a woman out here, says she's a friend of Idelle. Says she's got words and a ripe cunny for ya” He explained, glancing down blithely at the irritated woman in his grasp.

Eleanor couldn't help the scathing glare that marred her features with his words. “Bloody mongrel...” she muttered. There was a sharp and somewhat painful jerking of her arm in response to her insolence comment, but he said nothing.

An exacerbated curse was heard from within the confines of the tent. “Jesus!” Charles barked. “If she keeps sending whores out here, the whole damn island's going to know we're here.” There was a moment of silence followed by a few more rustling sounds. Then his gruff voice sounded again with irritated acquiescence. “Send the bitch in.”

The neanderthal sent Eleanor a deplorable grin.
She barely had time to brace herself before he released her wrist and gave her shoulders a solid shove, sending her stumbling right through the swaying tent flap.
Chapter 5

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Sorry it's been so long since my last update! I usually try to post a chapter every week or so, but this particular chap ended up being more of a challenge than I'd originally anticipated. But the chapter's finally finished now, so I hope you readers enjoy it :) Thanks again to all the wonderful people who've been sticking with this story and taking the time to leave such encouraging comments.

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She stumbled into his tent and straightened quickly, her eyes darting around to find him standing across the space with his back to her. Seemingly unconcerned by her arrival, he continued to rinse his hands and forearms in a small wash basin that sat atop a battered old campaign chest. His shirt and double barreled flintlock pistol lay in a heap on the floor to his left.

The whole room smelled of him; of gun smoke, cigars and something that was subtle and uniquely his own. Her throat constricted. A tight knot curled in the pit of her stomach and her heart raced madly in her chest, left her feeling addled and numb.

“Charles...” She breathed.

It took her a moment to even realize the vocalization had been her own. The name had sprung unbidden from her lips without reason or conscious consent. Now she watched his body tense and still with her utterance. She didn't need to see his face to know he'd recognized the sound of her voice.

His head made a slow, slight turn to the left but he didn't outright look at her, didn't turn around to face her. Only the partial profile of his face was visible over the curve of his shoulder, but she could see the muscle in his jaw clench. She felt the tension in his body almost as if it were her own.

For a moment the world stood still. She didn't breathe, could hear nothing but the beat of her own blood drumming in her ears. He turned around slowly and his eyes met hers. Whatever words she had intended to speak fled with the sight of his eyes.
The haze of the moment shattered with the gruff growl of his voice, low and laced with the promise of death. “I warned you...” He breathed. “You should never have come here...”

Her eyes followed his hand as it drifted down to the dagger on his hip.

Before she could think to respond, he was already rapidly closing the distance between them. He moved with such a savage grace; beautiful and deadly all at once. She'd forgotten how quickly he could shift into motion, how effortless he could make it all seem.

“Charles–” she started, but her words were cut off as his body made contact with hers. The impact was jarring, throwing her slightly off balance and causing her cloak to slip from her shoulders and pool in the sand. He took advantage of her brief instability; one of his hands fisting in her hair and yanking her head back while the other pressed the sharp edge of blade to her throat. His face hovered inches from her own, fury burning in his cobalt eyes.

She didn't move, barely breathed as his head cocked to the side. He studied her countenance as though he would find answers in her visage alone. She swallowed delicately and made an attempt to explain her motives. “I came here knowing you've no reason to trust me, that you would likely kill me before accepting anything I had to offer...”

“And yet here you stand...” There was both a threat and a questioning lilt to the statement.

Steeling her resolve, she resigned herself to what would almost certainly be her death. She closed her eyes against the well of her own ill-processed emotions and spoke gently, barely above a whisper. “I offer my allegiance.”

Anger flared through him. The dagger pressed harder against her throat, drawing a trickle of blood. The small, dark red rivulet contrasted starkly against her alabaster skin.

“Your allegiance?” He growled and her eyes snapped open. “Your allegiance is worthless!”

“It is all I have left!” She hissed, allowing a glimmer of her own resentment to surface in response to his affront. “I’ve information regarding Woodes Rogers. I'm privy to his plans, his advantages and weakness. All of it.”

He gave a bitter and acerbic laugh, his following words laced with sardonicism. “And I wonder how
you managed to convince him to share as much.” From his tone and manner of scrutiny, it was clear Charles was suggesting she'd used more than keen intellect and simple charm to encourage Woodes' confidence.

He was implying she'd fucked him.

Despite the fact that there was truth to that accusation, she found herself vexed and insulted by how quick he'd been to assume she'd used her body as a bargaining chip. She had slept with Rogers, yes, but it hadn't been in an attempt to beguile him. She'd been desperate to convince herself she was more than just a traitorous wretch. She'd wanted to prove to both herself and Woodes that love and loyalty were not foreign concepts to this new version of herself.

She'd been trying to persuade her covetous heart to see reason.

Not that it had helped her any. In spite of all her efforts, her heart was still a cruel and unrepentant traitor to her mind. The mawkish little organ was still hopelessly determined to pine after everything it couldn't have.

It was true that she'd often used sex as a outlet for frustration or to convey emotion she was uncomfortable with voicing, but she'd never traded sex for favor. It was both degrading and infuriating to have Charles accuse her of as much. She'd spent a lifetime striving to achieve through ingenuity, intelligence and tenacity. To use sex in the manner he was suggesting would only have cheapened and diminished her efforts to be seen as more than just the ineffectual female that most expected her to be.

Glaring up at him with anger and defiance, her reason for coming here was temporarily forgotten as she rode out the contumacious fire he'd stoked in her. She'd never been a terribly patient or temperate woman and he'd always seemed to know exactly which of her buttons to press in order to incite a reaction. It was an infuriating talent of his, one she suspected he'd always enjoyed utilizing.

“Tell me I'm wrong.” He challenged venomously.

Her eyes narrowed. She wanted to lie, to tell him he was full of shit and that he didn't know a thing about her. But it wasn't true; he knew her too well. Apparently well enough to know that she had indeed slept with Rogers. He'd misinterpreted the context and reasoning for the encounter, but not the fact that it had happened.
He took her silence as the confirmation that it was, and the corner of his mouth twitched up into a knowing sneer. “That's what I thought...”

It would do her no good to deny it, so instead she settled for a seething “Fuck you, Charles.”

His grip in her hair tightened and he jerked her head back further, exposing more of her neck and causing her to stumble backward. Her hands rose instinctively to his forearms to try and catch herself. He followed her steps backward, stepping into her and bringing his thigh to settle between her legs in an attempt to keep their balance. He was so close now that she could feel his breath on her face. Were it not for the blade pressed against her throat and the fury in his eyes, she might have attributed an entirely different context to this encounter.

His jaw twitched, his words slipping through clenched teeth. “I could kill you...”

“You could.” She rasped in firm agreement.

“You would deserve it.” He snarled.

Her face softened slightly with the truth of his words, with the weight of the guilt she still carried. He wasn't wrong. The indignation that his goading accusation had incited within her faltered slightly. Her purpose in this place began once more bleeding through her pride and the red haze of anger.

A moment earlier she'd been furious. Now he'd all but disarmed her, forced her to recall the worst of her betrayals and the guilt that had followed.

*I'd hoped you and I shared a love to make such a thing unthinkable...*

His words echoed in her mind and her chest tightened. She stared into the enmity of his eyes and lamented the suffering she'd caused him. She understood rage could be an effective defense mechanism; because she knew it to be preferable to pain, it was often her chosen tactical approach.

And Charles' mindset was no different in this respect, he was just as inclined toward acerbity and brutality as she was. This had never really bothered her because she'd understood the necessity of avoiding outward expressions of weakness; anger was a viable alternative to disclosing vulnerability. Usually his ire had been met equally by her own, followed quickly by fierce altercation or fervent sex, sometimes both. And that method had suited them both just fine, even if it hadn't always been the most healthy or productive.
But this was different, this was more than one of their petty arguments. He'd never looked at her the way he was looking at her now. She'd hurt him in the past, but he'd never afforded her a look so full of misery and violence. She knew too well that that kind of rage could only be borne of heartache. It was a bitterness that threatened to smother and consume, to pollute and disfigure everything that you were. Coupled with grief, that kind of rage had the potential to carve away at you, take piece after piece until there was nothing recognizable left.

She knew because she'd felt it herself; she'd allowed that same acrimonious emotion to dominate her existence after the death of her father.

And it had led to some of the most regrettable decisions of her life.

To know that she herself had been the one to invoke in him such a profound state of anguished lividity left her heartsick and contrite. She did not wish upon Charles such a deplorable fate.

With that thought, she was suddenly struck with the irrational urge to comfort the furious man before her. Of course the notion was ridiculous, given that he now held her fate in his hands. With a flick of his wrist he could extinguish both her life and Nassau's chances to rise above her circumstances. She understood that he would likely reject any attempt of hers to comfort or mollify, but the compulsion to do so was present nonetheless.

Without thought, her fingers rose to gently encircle the wrist of the hand that still held the dagger to her throat.

“'I would...’” Her tone and expression took on a gentler bearing. Her thumb slid gently back and forth across the back of his hand, as if condoning whatever decision he would ultimately make. She watched something akin to grief and surprise flicker across his features an instant before he schooled his expression into something more neutral.

He still held the dagger to her throat but the pressure had lessened slightly. With an indignant huff, he released his grip on her hair and moved his hand to roughly cup the side of her jaw. She swallowed and watched his eyes drift down to her mouth, her mind involuntarily conjuring up images of a less than pious nature.

He didn't look up from her mouth when he spoke. His voice was somewhat apathetic and somber. “I told you how this would end...” Frowning, he shifted his thumb to trace a line across her bottom lip. “I warned you, there would be no coming back...”
She nodded softly and he lifted his gaze to meet hers. Some indeterminate emotion that he couldn't quite identify was lain bare in her eyes.

Her free hand came up to rest atop the hand that still cupped her jaw. “I know... But I came anyway.” She whispered.

He snarled, his lip twitching up with anger and disgust as he pulled his hand free of the covering of hers. Backing her into the nearby table, he gripped her chin and glared down at her. The intimacy of her gesture had given rise to the softer feelings he still harbored for her. It stirred up a yearning within him that was far too familiar, far too facile for comfort. It left him suddenly all too aware of the proximity of their bodies.

It was pathetic.

He was so angry with himself, with her, with everything. Even now, she still maintained a firm grip on the tattered fragments of his soul and there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it. He didn't handle powerlessness well, he never had. It was one of the reasons he'd understood Eleanor so well, she was just as unwilling to suffer infirmity as he was. This contemptible lack of dominion over his own psyche was ludicrous, this seemingly inextinguishable flame of affection both baffling and maddening.

It might have been the anguish he felt from her, or perhaps her apparent compliance with the prospect of death; but despite knowing she'd more than earned her fate, he found himself reluctant to administer it. He knew he could, that he was capable of the physical act itself, but somehow that knowledge was not enough to drive his hand.

It was foolish and weak and he hated himself for it. This woman was poison, the very bane of his existence. She had already proven to be his most potent vice, his Achilles heel, and yet still he was compelled to spare her.

He fought against it, struggled to compel himself to finish what she'd started. “You are poison!” He seethed, leaning into her and reapplying the previous pressure of the blade. It wasn't completely clear whether he was trying harder to convince himself or Eleanor of the veracity of the statement.

She wasn't altogether certain how to respond, mostly because it wasn't entirely untrue. It felt as though she'd lain waste to everything she'd touched as of late, and as such she figured the comparison wasn't wholly inaccurate.
So she said nothing, simply watched him seethe and burn above her.

His thigh was pressed between her legs, the weight of his body keeping hers pinned against the table. It was painfully reminiscent of far more enjoyable encounters. Her lower back dug into the edge of the table and she couldn't help but notice the familiar rigidity of his groin against her lower abdomen. It was clear he wasn't entirely unaffected by the close proximity of their interaction.

But he seemed vehemently intent on ignoring that particular aspect of this exchange. And if he wasn't going to acknowledge it, neither would she. There were more important matters to attend to anyhow.

“I know you've no reason to trust me.” She stated as calmly as she could manage. They could deal with their personal issues later but for now she needed him to listen, to understand what was at stake. “But I came here tonight because what I offer you is of far greater value than my life... What I offer you could deal the English substantial damage, perhaps even cause them to reevaluate their position here on the island.”

He still looked angry, but now there was a glimmer of skeptical interest in his face as well.

He'd believed what she'd said back in the dungeons of the fort; that she'd realized the English would force Nassau through a fatal metamorphosis, strip the island of everything and everyone that had made it such a remarkable place. He imagined that with that realization, had come the knowledge that they would never allow her to hold onto any significant measure of power or self-governance.

If that power and self-governance had been threatened, if she'd finally come to understand all that legitimacy entailed, it would explain her sudden change in heart. It would explain her desire to play informer to the very rebels she'd been trying to crush.

He understood too well that Eleanor was not a woman who could sit quiet or still for very long. Abiding by the restrictions and regulations of others had never been her strong suit. In fact, it had often seemed to him as though she garnered significant satisfaction from acting in direct opposition to what was expected of her; a trait he'd often found as appealing as it was endlessly vexing.

He'd always known she could never be satisfied with a simple or subjugated existence, and he'd loved her for it. He'd tried to make her see the subversion the English would bring to this place; that their notion of legitimacy was one-sided and arbitrary, demanding unquestioning compliance and cohesion without equitable indemnity. He'd tried to show her there was no middle ground, no manner in which both civilization and Nassau could survive. But she'd been desperate to save this place, to salvage some piece of the life she'd spent nearly two decades building. Blinded by ambition
and the fictitious notion of a peaceful colonization, she'd begun chasing an unattainable dream.

He hadn't been able to sway her, couldn't make her understand all that bringing the English would entail. And as a result she'd betrayed him, condemned him to die for her sins and aspirations.

But then she'd turned around and freed him, risked both her own freedom and her life to see him loosed. She'd claimed to have done so in an attempt to liberate Nassau from the English plague; a reasoning that would make sense only if she'd finally realized there was no future for her among the civilized, at least not one that extended beyond the exemplification of her muliebrity.

It was a fact he'd been trying to convince her of from the very beginning. The English brought nothing but chains, false promises and hypocrisy.

The most irritating part of knowing all of this was that if he set aside his plethora of emotion towards this woman, an important component presented itself as worth considering; given Eleanor's circumstance and insubordinate nature, there was a good chance she was telling him the truth.

And if she was telling the truth, he'd be an idiot not to try and take advantage of whatever information she had acquired. But even as he recognized the potential benefit of such an alliance, he hesitated.

This woman was like an infection, a sickness running rampant in his very blood. She'd taken so much of him already; if he spared her now, how could he be certain she wouldn't find a way to contaminate what little was left of him?

He couldn't, not really.

But he couldn't risk refusing this information and losing Nassau, either.

It could only have been seconds, but to Eleanor his silence seemed to last an eternity. Licking her dry lips, she tried again to entice his cooperation. "Nassau's edification is little more than an organized extermination of those unwilling to submit to English primacy. Her emancipation is all that matters now." She paused to study his contemplative countenance. "Let me help you..."

His eyes narrowed. "Have you not helped me enough?" He reputed sarcastically.
She frowned, a touch of irritation marring her tone. “Enough, Charles. You know as well as I do that the English outnumber us ten to one. They’ve finer ships, superior artillery and the financial backing of a king. They hold over you a distinct advantage; what I offer is the chance to gain some advantage of your own. I can give you numbers, stratagems, names and the reason Woodes is in such a rush to take this place.” Her expression was one of fierce determination and resolve, passion shone madly in her eyes. “I can give you all of it... With it, you can give them pause, a reason to reevaluate the worth of this place.”

Her words held noteworthy appeal and that only served to irk him further. With an irritated growl, he spat. “And what stops me from killing you once you’ve given me all these things?”

She almost flinched. She’d considered that possibility already, finding it reasonably probable but worth the risk. It wasn’t an outcome she hoped for, but it was one she could accept if it meant he’d take her words as truths and swear to act upon them.

She breathed deep and met his eyes with steely conviction. “Nothing.”

He arched a brow and hissed. “Then you’re a fool.”

She gave an unconcerned shrug. “It hardly matters now. With my defection, I’m likely a dead woman regardless. Take the information and allow me to assist, or take it and kill me; either way, Nassau still benefits.”

He grit his teeth. He always hated it when she was right. Simply to spite her, he was half tempted to deny her the chance to spill her secrets. But he didn’t. Instead he huffed and shook his head with reluctant resignation. “I’ll offer no guarantee your secrets will spare you.” He growled. The blade still hadn’t left the curve of her throat despite his supposed willingness to comply.

“I expected no such guarantee.” Her mouth lifted into a sad and acidic sort of smile, and his eyes instinctively followed the movement.

As she watched his eyes drift to the curvature of her lips, it occurred to her that this may well be the last time she would be this close to him. The thought pained more than it should have. She wanted him to know she had regrets, that she understood what she had lost and what she’d taken from him in the process. It wasn’t something she could give back, it was a thing of immeasurable value, and he had every right to hate her for it.
But displays of such a maudlin nature had never come easily to her. She wasn't one to weep or swoon, or beg. Perhaps she had too much pride, or perhaps she was simply too jaded to believe that such conduct could make any difference. Regardless, she wasn't about to spill her guts and await decimation.

If these truly were their last moments in such contiguity, she didn't want to spend them like this. At this point, there was nothing left for her to lose. Her life was already his, should he choose to take it. But he'd agreed to hear her out, making it unlikely he'd kill her without first learning of the secrets she still held.

So, Fuck it.

Her free hand slid down between them, moving slowly to cup him firmly through the fabric of his trousers. Her movement was somewhat hesitant and cautious, but steady.

As her palm slid over him, his gaze flung back to hers. Something akin to surprise registered on his face a second before his mouth set in a firm, thin line, his eyes narrowing. The hand that had been gripping her chin shot downward to grasp the wrist of her wandering hand.

Her expression was somewhat difficult to read, he wasn't certain if the look in her eyes was a question or a plea.

His frown deepened. This was a tactic she'd used against him in the past. Sex was a multifaceted mechanism for Eleanor. He'd known her use it for pleasure and distraction, or as a simple outlet for frustration; sometimes to avoid having conversations she was uncomfortable with, and other times to convey emotions or sentiment she wouldn't voice.

He knew this better than anyone, and he hadn't usually been bothered by it. He'd generally been quite good at deciphering her catalysts for intimacy and most of them had suited him just fine. Frequently being on the receiving end of her ministrations, he hadn't often been stupid enough to complain.

But things were different now, they were different now.

He would not allow her to cloud his judgment here. He couldn't. There was too much at stake to allow his penchant for her to override all other things. “You'll not fuck your way out of this,
Eleanor...” He rasped.

She shook her head softly as not to jostle the dagger still pressed against her throat. “I've no intention of getting out...” His hand was still gripping the wrist of her seeking hand, so her free hand cautiously lowered to join in her deviant quest. Her fingers delicately slid along the underside of his waistband, her eyes shiny and supplicating. When he didn't move the blade in order to stop her other hand, she glanced down to struggle with the front of his trousers. Her voice was barely above a whisper when she spoke again. “My loyalties have found anchor.” She licked her lips and swallowed her vacillation. Her eyes shone with the wild emotion of everything she'd left unsaid. “I'll not turn from you again...”

It wasn't an outright apology, but it was damn close. And for Eleanor, that was significant.

He looked pained, as though she'd just condemned him to a life of servitude rather than declared her devotion.

*Perhaps she had.*

He leaned further into her, resting the scruff of his cheek against hers so that his mouth was almost against her ear. She smelled balmy and damp, a mix of the earth and sea. His jaw tightened and he closed his eyes against the habitual pull that her proximity always brought to his gut. It was too familiar, too easy to lose himself in her. She was his fixation, an addiction, the one inoperable vulnerability in his composition.

She was both toxin and cure.

She was everything.

And he hated her for it; almost as much as he hated himself for still wanting her, for still loving something that would only bring more pain. His feelings for this woman were beyond complicated. Before her, he hadn't even realized that such love and loathing could be so tightly intertwined. It shouldn't have been plausible.

But it was.

And despite what he knew was good for him, he wanted this, wanted it more than he cared to admit.
But this time he would not give her everything. This time he could keep her at a distance, offer her no space to take advantage. He would not allow himself to be consumed so wholly by her again. They would do things his way, or not at all.

He could take what she was offering, and still stand against her.

“I hate you...” He rasped just before his teeth grazed the side of her neck and his hand released her wrist to clench at the base of her skull in her disheveled hair.

He didn't really believe the words even as he said them, but he wanted to. God, did he want to.

His admission stung, but she found she only half believed it. Steadfast, she continued her pursuit; her fingers numbly battling the many clasps on the front of his trousers. “Show me.” She panted breathlessly against the side of his throat.

He needed no further encouragement. The knife abandoned her throat and slipped from his hand to anchor in the sand by their feet.

Even if it was true, even if she had finally driven him to hate her, she would not put a stop to this moment. She needed this, needed to feel him moving against her, to revel in the touch of his skin, the bite of his teeth, all of it.

For she might never get this chance again. The thought shouldn't have terrified her, but it did. She nearly laughed at the irony; to realize how much you loved something only after you'd burnt it to ash.

How depressingly fitting.

She gave a quiet cry of victory as she finally managed to loose the front of his trousers. She felt his sharp intake of breath against the side of her neck as she pulled him free and slid her hand along the length of him. He lifted his head and gripped her cheeks roughly in one of his hands as he smashed his mouth down upon hers.

She didn't care if it was rushed and rough or messy or desperate, only that it happened, that she touch and be touched. She arched against him, pulling him closer as one of her hands raked fingernails
over his shoulder and down his spine.

Rough hands reached down to carelessly swoop under her skirts so that he could grip her thighs and boost her onto the tabletop. She had to grip his shoulders to keep from falling back as he lifted her. As he set her down, she hastily began popping open the hooks on the front of her corset. She'd only just unclasped the last of them when he shoved her backward, forcing her to lay flat. The corset hung open on either side of her, baring her breasts as she propped herself up on her elbows to give him frustrated and eager look. He only took a second to admire the view before he yanked her thighs toward him, scooting her a few inches over the table.

She fought to help him keep her skirts out of the way as he sought out her center, his calloused fingers slipped between her thighs and found her slick with need. Something resembling a groan left his throat and he didn't waste time priming her, he didn't need to.

In one swift motion, he slammed himself into her. Her back arched, a silent cry leaving her lips. She'd missed this, craved this, that blissful teetering between pleasure and pain. That exquisite pinching fullness that came just before her body could fully stretch to accommodate for his size.

He didn't give her time to adjust, pulling back and slamming back into her with desperate urgency. She propped up slightly in an attempt to watch him slide in and out of her, but the mass of her skirts were too much of a hindrance. Instead she laid back and reached up behind her head to grip the edge of the table, anchoring herself against the jolting slap of their bodies. She fought to keep pace with him, to school her hips in tandem with his.

She bit her lip, stifling a moan as she brought one of her hands down to join the friction between their bodies. She watched new craving lite in his eyes as his gaze followed the movement of her fingers. His grip on her legs tightened, the blunt edge of nails biting into the soft flesh of her thighs as he quickened his pace. There was an almost violent undertone to their coupling and she'd forgotten how good it could be, how wildly uninhibited and deliciously primitive. This kind of ecstasy was fervid and frenzied, unmatched. It was a heat she yearned for, hadn't realized she'd needed until she'd been forced to settle for something less.

It wasn't like this with Woodes, not ever. He'd always handled her as though he thought she might break. It was always predictable, very polite and especially proper, subdued and unimaginative. While not always entirely unpleasant, it wasn't anything toe-curling either.

But this, this was something else entirely. Charles never handled her like she was fragile or weak, neither in life nor in bed. He challenged her to give as well as she got, to push back, never settle. It was something she needed, something she craved.
Her fingers sped their pace as she met his eyes. He watched her begin to come undone, his eyes flicking from her face to her chest, watching her breasts jump and jerk with each of his thrusts.

Her face was flushed, her mouth hanging open in that telltale fashion that spoke of pleasure and exertion. Her fingers were working furiously now, her body quaking with upcoming release. He shifted slightly, lifting one of her legs to deepen his angle. Her body arched, his name leaving her lips on a breathy cry.

He closed his eyes against the sight of her. Ramming his body against hers, he tried not to think about the way she'd said his name. He didn't want to think about the way she looked sprawled across that table half naked and panting his name. Nor about the heady rush of lust and emotion that accompanied the erogeneity of such a sight. This wasn't meant to be about her, it was meant to be about release, plain and simple; about scratching an itch that only she seemed to satisfy.

He fought not to open his eyes as he felt her walls begin to contract and flutter around him. He couldn't watch her come apart. It was something he'd always enjoyed far too much, something that had always tightened both chest and groin. He was afraid to see it now, afraid to lose yet another piece of himself to the guile of this succubus.

But as she arched and twitched against him, her body stiffening and her mouth opening in a silent cry of release, he looked.

God help him, but he looked.

She writhed and throbbed below him and he felt another small piece of himself slip away. He wanted to care, he wanted to be angry about it, but as she clenched around him he lost the ability to think clearly.

He ground his hips into hers with new vigor, chasing after that impending release. Her legs tightened around him, her heels digging into his ass. She propped herself up on her elbows, trying again to get a better view of the union of the bodies. This time the view was slightly better, but still irritatingly inconvenient. She found herself wishing she'd bothered to remove the stupid skirt before they'd started. But it hadn't occurred to her at the time, she'd been fixated on the objectionable obstruction that his trousers presented.

Now she pressed the skirts as flatly against her stomach as she could manage. She watched him move against her, her head lolling back every so often with the onslaught of a particularly well accentuated thrust. As she made yet another breathy feminine sound, he tried not to pay attention to how unabashedly interested she was in the junction between their bodies.
But something so provocative was a difficult thing to ignore.

With his release hastening ever closer, he pressed forward so that he was leaning over her, his hands supported on the table on either side of her. She inclined upward, lifting her chin to capture his mouth with hers as his hips began to lose their cadency and take on a more jerky form of movement.

He was close, and they both knew it.

“Come.” She panted breathlessly, rocking her hips and leaning forward to scrape her teeth and tongue along the length of his jaw.

If he could have denied her the demand, he would have. But with her words came that familiar pressure, a tensing of muscles. Heat seared through him and he drove home once more, filling her with fire. She groaned with him, rode out the last of his solidity with a wanton rocking of hips.

He dropped his body atop hers, his forehead resting against her sternum as they shuddered and panted together. She reveled in the familiar weight of him, the heat of his skin and the tickle of his hair against her chest.

They lay like that for another moment, lost in the tranquil aftershock of exceptional sex. Absently she lifted her hand to stroke over his hair, an almost unconscious habit she'd acquired long ago. He stiffened under her touch, and she realized her mistake too late. He abruptly sat up and pulled away from her, standing to yank up his trousers and cram himself back into the front of them.

His movement was steady and controlled, giving no hint as to the turmoil rolling within him.

The tenderness of her gesture had brought reality screaming back into the moment. She should have known better than to try to touch him as though nothing had changed. She'd lost the right to that intimacy when she'd left him standing on the other side of that gate.

But her hand had risen of it's own accord, driven by affection and the afterglow of their joining. It had shattered the spell and cost her precious moments.

She didn't bother sitting up, simply lay there on her back with her knees hanging off the edge of the
table, and mentally chided herself. She watched him as he closed the last of the clasps on his trousers.

He didn't turn to face her as he leaned his posterior against the table. Wearily, he scrubbed the heels of his hands over his face before raking his fingers over his scalp, brushing back his unruly hair. Though his countenance was fairly relaxed, she knew him well enough to know there was more bubbling under the surface of that placid facade than he cared to let on.

The silence stretched between them, the air heavy enough to choke upon. She closed her eyes, sensing he was going to speak even before he did.

He didn't turn to face her. He remained leaning against the table, focused on something inanimate on the opposite side of the tent. His hands loosely gripped the edge of the table on either side of him, and she didn't miss the tenseness in his shoulders. His voice was quiet and low when he spoke, almost rueful. “This can never be what it was, Eleanor...”

She'd known that even before she'd come here. His voicing it aloud shouldn't have made any difference, but it did. It stung, reopened a wound she'd convinced herself had scabbed over.

But that pain changed nothing.

She'd still meant what she said, she would not turn from him again. She had no intention of abandoning either him nor Nassau. Whether he wanted her or not, they would take back what was theirs or die trying.

To reduce herself to a pathetic, quivering mass of salt and snot, was not even a remotely viable option. She would not weep or wail or buckle under the weight of her circumstance. She would rise to the occasion as she always had, stand fast against whatever came next.

She steeled her heart, steadied her breathing and willed her eyes to remain dry.

“I know...” Though her voice was quiet and somewhat strained, the words left her lips steady and true, without the detestable quiver of tears.

He straightened and nodded solemnly, ignoring both the ache in his chest and the grief he was almost certain he'd caught in her tone. They had more important business to discuss. “Then tell me about the English.”
Chapter 6

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Ugh, this chapter is even more delayed than the last, sorry guys! I had some serious issues with writers-block and dialog. I ended up writing, trashing and rewriting half the chapter at least three times before I ended up with something decent. Anyways, hope you guys enjoy. Thanks again to everyone who's been following this story & leaving comments/kudos, you guys are great :)

Eleanor was only vaguely aware of the fact that she looked an unsightly mess. Her dress was still damp, dirty and full of snags and her hair remained wildly unrestrained, doubtlessly wrought with tangles and odd bits of debris. But honestly, she couldn't bring herself to give a damn. A little dirt and grime had never been something she'd worried herself over, and she wasn't about to start now.

Fluidly, she reclasped her remaining corset hooks before standing to smooth out her skirts and straighten her spine. It was an almost unconscious affectation that helped steady her nerves, more a habitual idiosyncrasy than anything else.

Charles moved away from the table to sprawl laggardly in the Spanish colonial armchair across the tent. He leaned back, producing a cigar from a small hinged box that rested upon an unmarked crate next to his chair. She watched him closely as he placed the butt between his teeth, struck a match, and languidly brought the flame up to kiss the smoke's tip.

His eyes lifted to meet hers over the smoldering cherry.

In general, she'd never considered the act of smoking to be terribly attractive. But Charles had a way of making even the mundane look somehow sensual. It was something that had always baffled her; how such a wildly unrefined individual could somehow still exude such grace and lasciviousness all at once.

It was a talent of which she was sometime secretly jealous.

It was also something she would never openly disclose. He didn't need to know how easily he could affect her. The last thing she needed was to inflate his ego any further. As far as she was concerned, he already had more than enough pride and arrogance.

She watched his cheeks sink inward with the pull of his breath, a steady stream of smoke slipping from his lips and curling up past his predatory eyes. It was irritating, and she tried to ignore it, but God help her if watching him didn’t leave her just a little addled.

Somewhat weak kneed.

Just a tad capriciously inclined.

It was safer to avoid such thoughts, to pass off such feelings as the direct results of phenomenal sex.

Those very inclinations towards weakness were what always drove her to resist the pull of him. The desire and emotion he could conjure so easily within her was a dangerous thing, it was why she'd so
often pushed him away. He made her feel uncontrolled, unable to govern her own unbridled heart, incomprehensibly inclined towards irrational cravings and the taking of foolish risks.

And if there was one thing Eleanor Guthrie truly hated, it was the lack of control.

She was a rational woman, governed by logic and efficiency. But there was nothing logical or efficient about the way she felt about Charles. Those feelings were complicated and messy, totally unfounded and senseless. She'd tried so hard to rule her heart with the same iron fist with which she'd ruled all other things, and it had blown up in her face, brought her nothing but pain and contrition.

But even knowing this, a lifelong pattern of emotional self-preservation was a difficult habit to curb.

He arched a brow and eyed her expectantly. Smoke twisted and curled up along behind the movement of his arm as he gestured for her to get on with what she'd come here to say. “Well?” He questioned promptly.

She licked her lips. He was right. She'd come here with a purpose, and it was not to dwell upon her own weaknesses and trivial fixations.

She stepped forward, lifting her chin and resisting the puerile urge to wring her hands. “They're coming.” Her voice was regal and admonishing. “The English, they're going to storm the shores of Maroon Island.”

He frowned. This wasn't anything he didn't already know. Flint and Silver had intentionally baited Hornigold into finding that island and the dissonant men who inhabited it; an invasion was exactly what they'd been trying to encourage. He studied her quizzically as he took another slow drag. “Yes, I'm aware.” He exhaled lazily, his eyes never leaving her face.

She huffed and shook her head, his easy nonchalance creeping under her skin to vex her as it often did. “No, you're not. He has an entire fleet, Charles. You have, what, a hundred men?”

His eyes narrowed. He had a hell of a lot more than that, but he wasn't about to tell her that. He still didn't trust her as far as he could throw her. “More or less…” He grunted, shrugging lackadaisically.

She rolled her eyes. “I'm afraid that isn't going to cut it.”

He sighed and glanced down to flick ash into an empty rum bottle resting atop the crate. “Rogers isn't going to send an entire fleet after a hundred slaves and a handful of pirates. He'll send one gunship, two at best. And when he does, we'll be waiting.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and sent him a biting look. “Four.” She corrected hotly.

His eyes narrowed. He had a hell of a lot more than that, but he wasn't about to tell her that. He still didn't trust her as far as he could throw her. “More or less…” He grunted, shrugging lackadaisically.

She rolled her eyes. “I'm afraid that isn't going to cut it.”

He crossed her arms over her chest and sent him a biting look. “Four.” She corrected hotly.

He frowned, his gaze sliding back to hers with inclining interest. “What?”

It was a physical effort not to look too satisfied by the sudden pique in the level of his attention. “Four gunships.” She clarified with only the slightest of smug undertones. “maybe more once Woodes realizes I've defected with what I know.”

He shifted, leaning forward in the chair to rest his elbows on his knees and regard her with apprehensive scrutiny. “That's a lot of artillery.”

She nodded. “It is...One Man-O-War, two Brigs and a Brigantine; one-hundred and seventy-six guns between them...”
And that was partly her fault. During the time she'd spent seeking vengeance for her father's death, she'd made a point of painting Charles as the one true obstacle to English sovereignty. She'd succeeded in convincing Woodes that this man was more than just another pirate. He was the heart of the rebellion, the key to everything. It was unlikely Woodes had forgotten this, especially not now that she'd fled into enemy arms. As a result, it was more than likely that the English force approaching Maroon would be substantially heavier than was originally planned.

“They'll launch an attack in two days time.” She stated with gravity. It was a time frame that gave them very little opportunity to prepare. But she knew one thing for certain, she needed to discourage any notion of a sea to land battle. To attempt an offensive position from the beach was suicide, English cannon fire would lay waste to their little army in a matter of hours.

She uncrossed her arms and took another step towards him, her expression fierce and imploring reason. “You cannot allow them to wage this battle from the sea, they must be forced inland. Without their ships they are only men; no more resistant to lead and steel, than you or I.” There was a harshness in her tone, an unrepentant demand for a calculated approach towards ruthless bloodshed.

Something in his gut pulled harshly with the fire in her eyes, with the conviction in which she spoke. Her strong willed ferocity and fearless nature had always appealed to him far more than it should have. She possessed an uncanny ability to evoke in him a multitude of conflicting emotions at once. He should not have been impressed by the acuity of her understanding of battle strategy, or by the perfervid manner in which she advised such merciless initiative.

But a part of him still was.

Which of course, was less than helpful and equally irritating.

She was a passionate and brilliant woman, highly perceptive and extremely resourceful. It was unfortunate that the very same traits he so admired in her, were also the ones that had assisted in her betrayal. “And how would you propose we convince them to abandon the safety of their ships?” He questioned cynically.

“Well think they're winning. Let them decimate a portion of your forces on the beach...” Her voice was resolved but somewhat wary. She wasn't entirely sure he'd take kindly to the suggestion of sacrificing his men, but it was the only outcome she could think of that held any real chance of success. “Convince them they've got your men cornered, and they'll follow a retreat into the jungle. Within the cover of trees, we've a far better chance of standing against them.”

He watched her with fastidious scrutiny, his expression guarded and indiscernible. It wasn't a bad plan, better with the inclusion of the additional forces he'd yet to tell her existed. He wasn't thrilled with the idea of sacrificing free men, but their losses would be heavier if they stuck to the plans already in place.

If he ignored his natural inclination to disoblige her, he could see the potential in her stratagem.

However, convincing Flint and the others of this would be a whole other challenge of its own. They'd all sooner kill her than agree to any scheme of her making. He wasn't even sure he didn't still want to kill her himself. The whole thing was a mess, a cluster-fuck of astronomical proportions. It would have been simpler to just gut her and be done with it. It wasn't as if she didn't deserve it.

But he understood her knowledge could be a considerable asset if handled judiciously. If she held even half the information she claimed to possess, she was a resource they could not afford to overlook. That understanding was both disheartening and encouraging, a combination that only served to annoy him.
Why couldn't anything with this woman ever just be simple?

His silence unnerved her, left her feeling uncertain and anxious. “Have you a better plan, then? Some superior method of dealing with this situation?” She challenged, needing to fill the silence with something other than her own discomfort.

His eyes narrowed. He certainly didn't like the way she presented as though he had no other choice but to comply, but more so, he didn't like that she was right. He didn't have any better ideas.

“Watch yourself, Eleanor.” He growled.

She ignored his warning, stomping towards him to tower over the chair in which he sat. “Stop it.”

She hissed. “We don't have time for this, Flint and the others need to know what they're up against. We need to move now, and it needs to be quickly.”

Her tone sounded a little too commanding for his liking, but her words held merit. He still didn't trust her, but he believed she sought to be rid of the English. For now, that would have to be enough.

But he wanted his position in this agreement to be made very clear.

His hand snaked out to grip her wrist, yanking it downward and causing her to bend forward to avoid further damage. He didn't move to stand, but leaned upward so that his face was inches from hers. “You have no authority here. Not over me, and not over my men.” He growled. “If you're lying, if anything you tell me proves even remotely untrue, you won't live long enough to regret it.”

The words bore a striking similarity to the ones Woodes had issued her upon release from the tower. That uncanny parallel left her feeling guilty and unsettled, tormented by the seemingly endless collection of lies and betrayals that had come to define her life. She'd never wanted to become this person, never intended for things to veer so drastically off course.

Staring into the pained and angry image of his countenance, she was inclined to believe he meant what he said. In all honesty, she was a little surprised her actions hadn't already driven him to move against her.

She studied the glowering contours of his face; the furrowed set of his brow and tight curve of jaw, the firm line of his mouth and bow of his upper lip. His face was one she knew almost as well as her own. It had haunted her nights and harassed her days for almost half the entirety of her life. Though now, as she scanned over the familiar plains of his features, there were fragments she did not recognize. There was a new weariness, a tired senescence to his eyes. It didn't match his years and it had not been present in the months prior to all of this.

She didn't need to wonder what had caused it. She already knew. She'd taken from him far more than she could restore.

She wanted to wipe that look from his face, cleanse her betrayals from his mind and have him understand. She wanted him to look at her and see more than just the traitor she'd made herself. She understood that there was nothing she could say that would erase the damage she'd already inflicted, but there was one thing she wanted him to grasp with unwavering certainty; her fealty was now immovable, rooted firmly with him and his.

There was no cost she would not pay to make him see it.

But she was not so foolish as to push him. She would not hope for anything more than what he'd already given her. She was still alive, he'd agreed to hear her out. She'd confessed her desire to stand at his side and see the English brought to heel. They'd fucked. All this was already more than she
could have hoped for, certainly far more than she deserved. She would not press for more.

This would have to be enough, no matter how much it pained.

“Understood.” She whispered softly, and it was all she could do to keep the dejection from her voice.

He examined her with a somewhat incredulous expression, puzzled by the indiscernible look that now rode her features. He watched her eyes dance across his face and wondered what sort of disquiet had entered her mind to give her such an odd affectation.

The seconds passed between them, and neither of them moved. She continued to wear an expression that conveyed something between overt distress and assented resignation. He continued to look somewhat perplexed and annoyed.

He recognized her worth and the insight she could grant their rebellion, that much wasn't the problem. The problem was that he didn't have any idea what the hell to do with her. He was caught in an infinite loop, never quite sure of exactly what he wanted from her. His heart, mind and dick were perpetually at odds when it came to this damnable woman. It was an abhorrent aberration of reason and good sense, one he'd never quite managed to rectify but longed to be free of.

Her mouth opened, and she looked as though she might say something further. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

But then a rustling sounded behind her and Charles dropped her wrist, flinging it away from him with more force than was actually necessary. She straightened abruptly, frowning at the excessive velocity of his action. Whatever she'd been about to say was prudently stifled as she stepped away from him and turned to face the source of their interruption.

Jack Rackham now stood just inside the tent, his eyes wide and darting back and forth between Charles and Eleanor. Disbelief and dismay contorted his features as his head tilted to the side and his gaze finally settled with Charles.

“You've got to be fucking kidding me.” Jack exclaimed incredulously.

Eleanor sent Charles a wary glace but he ignored her. He didn't need her to inform him of the situation's potential for volatility, he was already acutely aware of it. As such, his gaze remained carefully fixed upon his disgruntled cohort. But Charles said nothing, made no move to explain his actions or motives. He simply eyed Jack with a quiet stillness and an expression that held both challenge and warning.

Tread carefully.

Had Jack been anyone else, perhaps such a look might have been enough to discourage any further pressing of the subject. But Jack was Jack, and he didn't even consider being heedful of the threat. “What happened to killing her?” He queried aporetically.

“You...” Charles growled admonishingly. He had no desire to discuss this at all, let alone in front of Eleanor.

“No.” Jack contested, holding up a hand in protest. He knew damn well why Eleanor wasn't dead, Charles had allowed her yet another foothold. Eleanor triggered in Charles some hopeless vulnerability, an incurable affliction. Jack knew what that was like, he himself experienced a similar affectation in regard to Anne. He understood how just one person could turn your life upside down and inside out, this understanding was the only thing that kept Jack from demanding Eleanor's death right then and there. “I don't want to hear it. Whatever it is, I don't care. She leaves now, before the
men or Anne discover she's here.”

Charles gave an exasperated sigh. “She breathes because she has information, information we can't afford to ignore.”

Jack shook his head and sent Charles a skeptical and chiding look. “Oh really? Is that why this room smells of smoke and sex?”

Eleanor had the decency to look somewhat startled by the audacity of the comment, but Charles only sneered and narrowed his eyes. His frustration and impatience with the situation outweighed any discomfort the discovery of his weakness might have incited.

“That woman has been nothing but trouble from the very beginning.” Jack roused. “For Christ sake, Charles, she's been trying to kill you for months! She's a backstabbing, tyrannical harpy!”

Insulted and tired of having them speak as though she wasn't standing in the same room with them, Eleanor chose that moment to interject. “I'll have you know –”

“You,” Jack growled, stabbing a finger in her direction. “you'll have me know nothing. I know all I need to know with regard to you.”

“You don't understand.” Eleanor hissed, her own anger rising up to combat the shame and regret that Jack's words roused within her. This man had once been someone she might have hesitantly called friend. They'd never been close, but she'd always harbored a certain fondness for him. They'd each shared a mutual respect and appreciation for the other's keen intellect. But that was before she'd sent men to have Jack and his associates murdered, before she'd tried to sabotage his plans and his very way of life. It was before she'd tried to have his closest friend hanged. Now, she was quite certain he hated her at least half as much as she hated herself. Perhaps more, given his unwavering devotion to Charles.

Jack gave a dry snap of laughter. “Oh, I understand perfectly.”

“Enough!” Charles barked, stamping out his cigar and rising from his chair to stand between them and address Jack. “She's not going anywhere, and you're going to shut up and listen.” He didn't relish the notion of placing any trust in her. He still loathed the idea of being forced to cooperate with her at all. But he could see the bigger picture, the possibilities that rose with the insights she could offer them.

Now he needed to make Jack see it too.

This was about more than just he and Eleanor, this was about holding off the rise of civilization.

Jack turned his attention from Eleanor towards Charles. “You can't possibly trust her.” He exclaimed with frustration.

Charles shook his head. “No, I don't. She's a duplicitous bitch. But in this instance, I believe she's telling the truth.”

The name calling ruffled her feathers a little, had her frowning and crossing her arms. Charles' anger and mistrust was not unexpected nor undeserved, but it still gnawed at her. The urge to retaliate and defend herself was immediate, but his claim of belief kept her from acting upon it.


“Because she's lost everything.” Charles stated with calm and serious sincerity.
Eleanor shot a startled look at the back of Charles' head. That was more true than he could possibly know. It was unsettling to hear him voice such an accurate understanding of her circumstance when all she'd told him was that she feared for Nassau's future in the hands of the English.

“Desperation makes people less trustworthy, not more.” Jack countered.

“Her desperation is irrelevant.” Charles explained. “She is without power or position, all that was hers was forfeited when she sided with the English. I believe she's come to realize the restrictions of that particular alliance.” He resisted the urge to turn around and look at her as he discerned the cause of her departure from the English. When she remained silent and made no move to dispute his reasoning, he took her reticence as a confirmation of truth. He continued tensely. “Conformity is no longer a viable option, and she's no other means of standing against what's coming. We're the only choice she has left.”

She shifted uncomfortably. Was she truly so easily read, or did he simply possess an uncanny insight into the depths of her soul? Neither option sat well with her, both left her feeling vulnerable and exposed. He hadn't discerned the entire truth of why she'd come here, but he'd come damn close. He'd touched on her ambition and desire for autonomy but left out the possibility that her heart had had anything to do with it, likely because he didn't believe it did. She understood why he would assume as much, she hadn't given him much reason not to, but it still left a sick feeling in her gut.

It suddenly occurred to her that Charles might well doubt that she'd ever loved him at all. The thought bothered her, added to her feelings of unease. She prayed that it wasn't the case, that even if he doubted her current feelings, he would not doubt what they'd shared in the past. The past was all that was left of them, she didn't want it tainted.

It was an odd thing to consider, an odd thing to have matter to her at all. What good would it do her to agonize over whether or not he placed any stock in her past or present feelings for him? It was a waste of time, unimportant in the grad scheme of things. But that didn't stop her from hoping he understood her as well as he often seemed to.

While Eleanor battled her inner musings, Jack had begun to look somewhat contemplative. It was no secret that Eleanor had worked tirelessly to make something of Nassau. She'd lorded over that place like a sovereign queen would her promised kingdom. It had afforded her a freedom and authority that no one else on the island had possessed. It would make sense to conclude that once that position had been taken from her, she would strive to replace it. But nothing England was willing to offer her would ever come close to equaling what she'd had. A woman of Eleanor's avid initiative and unorthodox nature, would not be easily reconciled with that loss or the chastened and diluted existence that would have to replace it.

“And you think that's enough to keep her allegiant?” Jack queried with an arch of brow.

“I can assure you that it is.” Eleanor interjected crisply. “They're destroying everything I've built down there. This occupation is... less amicable than I'd anticipated.”

Jack sent her a weary look before turning back to Charles for confirmation. Charles nodded gently in the affirmative. “And what's to stop her from turning on us the moment something more profitable comes along?” Jack asked honestly.

Charles turned his head to meet Eleanor's eyes for a heavy moment. For a time, he said nothing. But then his attention shifted back towards Jack and his voice sounded with firm conviction and unyielding resolve. “If she moves against us, she dies.”

Jack wasn't entirely sure Charles could follow through on such a threat, but he or Anne certainly
could.
With a heavy and irritant sigh, Jack tried once more to make Charles see reason. “What information
could possibly be worth making any more deals with the devil?”

“The English invade Maroon in two days time.” Vane stated gravely.

Jack frowned and arched a brow. “That's hardly information worth selling your soul for.” He chided
Charles.

“No,” Eleanor interrupted and ignored the vexed look she got from Charles. “but I'd wager that four
gunships yielding one-hundred and seventy-six guns, probably is.”

Jack’s eyes widened only a fraction, but his interest had clearly been seized. With no small amount of
skepticism, he inquired. “You're certain of this?”

Eleanor nodded. “Positive. But it's possible they'll send additional ships and men once they realize
I've withdrawn my support.”

Charles scoffed. “That's a delicate way of saying she fucked them.” He quipped sardonically, as if
her statement had required some kind of translation.

Eleanor fixed Charles with a scathing glare. “Yes, and I'd say thats benefited you rather well, has it
not?”

The vividly prurient memory of her sprawled half naked across his table, flashed through Charles'
mind. He doubted that particular benefit was what she'd been referring to, and he'd no desire to admit
such a thought had sprung to mind ahead of all the other vital information. So he schooled his
features into as blank a mask as he could manage, shrugged and moved to return to his chair. “Well
enough.” He rumbled flippantly as he reached over to produce another cigar.

Eleanor's frown deepened.

Those damn smokes...

Jack fought the urge to roll his eyes. If what she was spewing held any truth, they didn't have time to
waste squabbling. “Can we please try to concentrate?” Both of them sent him a withering look but
Jack was determined to steer the conversation in a more informative direction. “What else are we
dealing with here?”

“She says waging battle from the shore will be a massacre.” Charles grunted.

Jack pursed his lips and gestured in the affirmative. “With that many guns, it would be.”

Charles sighed. “I was inclined to agree.” He took a long drag and blew out a steady stream of
smoke on a slow exhale.

Eleanor tried to ignore the fact that they were talking around her. She ignored it about as well as she
ignored the appeal his movements held for her. With a less than cordial expression, she watched the
pull of his mouth as he expelled the cloud from his lungs.

Charles was aware of the hostile look Eleanor was giving him, but he didn't give her that satisfaction
of acknowledging he'd noticed her inimical attention.

Jack frowned. “We'd have to get them to move inland, but that's unlikely. They won't be eager to
leave the relative safety of their ships, they'll keep their distance if they can.”.
No longer willing to hold her tongue, Eleanor moved to express her own assessment of the situation. “Yes, I've already stated that it can't be done without sacrifice.” She declared boldly.

Jack gave her a critical and questioning look but Charles' expression was sober and considering. She suspected Charles could see the merit and necessity of her plan, even if he didn't actually like it. As if he'd read her mind, he glanced in her direction and gave her the slightest of reluctant nods.

She wasn't sure whether to be irritated that he thought himself entitled enough to offer her permission, or just grateful he'd agreed to her plan. As he watched her expectantly, she decided she could be both.

She told Rackham of her plan to allow a portion of their forces to be massacred as a means of provoking the English into chasing their remaining forces into the jungle where the rebels would have the upper hand. Albeit a bit hesitant at first, Jack did seem fairly intrigued by the idea. After further deliberation, he finally seemed reasonably willing to consider the plan as a viable option.

“If we were to honestly entertain the notion of a coalition between you and us, it would be with strict perimeters.” Jack stated firmly, glancing cautiously between Eleanor and Charles.

“Go on...” Eleanor prompted hesitantly. She was fairly certain she would not be fond of whatever perimeters he was about to suggest, but she wasn't exactly flush with options. At the moment, cooperation was her most reasonable choice.

“Your presence here will remain undisclosed.” Jack declared firmly.

Confusion and suspicion lit in Eleanor's face. She could hardly spend all her time hiding from the rest of the camp. How was she supposed to get anything done? She glanced toward Charles. He said nothing and made no move to object, which was irritating. It was clear that the wheels in his head were already spinning, but she wasn't sure in which direction. Uncertainty was uncomfortable, and quite frankly unacceptable. But at the moment there wasn't a whole lot she could do about it.

“The men won't tolerate the notion of your involvement. They want you dead.” Jack clarified. “The moment they realize your here, they'll expect you to receive due punishment. If we were to deny them as much, there's a good chance they'd turn on us.”

Eleanor scoffed. “Surely you've the ability to control your own men. Make them see reason.” She necessitated.

“You underestimate the hatred you've earned here for yourself, Miss Guthrie.” Jack chided. “At this point, I doubt there's much of anything that could be said to change their minds.” He paused briefly before continuing with a firm and serious tone. “They remember your treacherous and tyrannical reign, and they'll not soon forget it”

Her jaw clenched. Intellectually, she could see his point. She hadn't exactly radiated benevolence in her time as de facto queen, she'd made her fair share if mistakes. But intellect aside, she'd never taken criticism well; it tended make her defensive. Overwhelmingly, she was inclined to oppose his biting assessment with one of her own.

She was working on holding her tongue and formulating a more diplomatic response when Charles grumbled. “He's right.”

Through narrowed eyes she watched Charles flick more ash into the rum bottle. “They'd sooner kill you than listen to anything have to say. Your involvement stays quiet.” He grunted with finality.

“I hardly think that's wise” Eleanor argued.
“Well then it's a damn good thing I don't give a fuck what you think.” Charles replied irritably.

“Good, then it's settled.” Jack interrupted as he turned to address Charles. “She's stays with you.”

Charles' head snapped up. The startled look he sent Jack was almost identical to the one that had marred his face when Flint had demanded a compensation of ten-thousand pounds for the death of Mosiah.

“Like fuck.” Charles growled.

“Well, none of the men can be trusted not to fuck or kill her, and I'm sure as hell not going to be the one to watch her.” Jack declared. Truth be told, he wasn't entirely sure Charles could be trusted not to fuck or kill her either, but he didn't see another alternative.

“I require no overseer” Eleanor hissed.

Jack spared her an irritated glace, but Charles ignored her comment entirely.

“Have her stay with Anne.” Charles barked, waving his hand dismissively. Even as he said it, he knew it was an unreasonable demand. Anne was about as likely to chaperone Eleanor as she was to take up knitting and child rearing.

Jack snorted. “You know as well as I do, that that is a ridiculous proposition. Anne is more likely to kill her than the men are. This is your mess, Charles.” Jack said, gesturing towards Eleanor. “Mind it.”

Eleanor grit her teeth. To remain silent after that particular comment was challenging. She was not a child in need of supervision. The desire to have this matter resolved so they could move onto Maroon, was the only thing that kept her from saying as much.

Charles' jaw remained tight, his glower firmly fixed. This was a terrible idea, he knew it was. But Jack was right; given the circumstance, this was their most reasonable option. Shaking his head and cursing under his breath, he rose from his chair and began issuing orders in Jack's direction. “Ready the ships and prepare the men, we leave for Maroon before daybreak.”

Jack nodded in sober agreement and moved toward the tent's exit.

Before pulling back the flap, Charles called Jack's name causing Jack to crane his neck round to look at his friend quizzically.

“Make sure Anne understands what's at stake.” Charles demanded.

Both he and Jack knew what was meant by the statement. Anne was not one inclined towards forgiveness, she was inclined towards reprisal by the way of bloodshed. She would not take kindly to Eleanor's reappearance. Anne had never been fond of the Queen of Thieves, but after Jack's capture she'd discovered a new tier of hatred for the woman.

“Anne will be fine, she always is.” Jack replied calmly and slipped from the tent. It was true, she would be fine. But he was not looking forward to initiating that particular conversation.
Chapter 7

**DISCLAIMER:** I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Again, sorry! Apparently I've lost the ability to update within anything resembling a timely fashion. I'm still having some issues with writers-block, but I have a better idea of where I want things to go now, so bear with me. Thanks again to all the lovelies who've been following & commenting, it's what's kept this story going.

**PS:** I've used some 1700's clothing terminology in this chapter that may need deciphering, so I included some simplified definitions below.

A *justacorp* is a coat. Here's an example of Black Sails' Anne Bonny wearing one: 
https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/fe/10/4e/fe104ebf86997c243d2cc2a19d5a5915.jpg

A *bastian shirt* is the loose and flowy type of shirt that we see most of the pirates wearing. It's the stereotypical pirate shirt. An example is this: 
http://www.medievalcollectibles.com/images/Product/large/MY100105.png

And I'm pretty sure most of you know what breeches and trousers are, so I won't bother with defining those ones.

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The camp was bustling with movement and voices. The men had been informed of their impending departure and had consequently begun scrambling to make the appropriate preparations. That was good, that was progress, but Eleanor was in no mood to appreciate it. She was too busy imagining all of her careful planning being rendered meaningless by this ridiculous notion of secrecy. She feared the whole thing was all about to blow up in her face. Again.

Unfortunately, Eleanor's worries had a way of manifesting themselves under a cloak of irritation and impatience. For her, a heated resentment towards the source of her apprehension and her own inability to silence it, was a common fallout of experiencing such emotion.

As such, she now sat seething in a disgruntled heap. She watched Charles move calmly and quickly about the tent, seemingly without a care in the world. He was busily stuffing various items into a large, darkly stained traveling trunk made of solid oak and adorned with a myriad of ornate geometric carvings. It was no doubt a prize he'd procured on one of his hunts, as she couldn't imagine Charles waltzing into a carpenter's shop and requesting such an embellished piece. He was a man of simpler tastes, inclined more towards items of necessity and function than to anything quite so florid.
Which was why she couldn't fathom his agreement with this nonsensical plan.

As she continued to stew, Charles continued to appear ostensibly indifferent to her surly disposition. She wasn't certain if he was intentionally pretending he hadn't noticed her agitation, or if he just didn't care. Either way, she decided she was quite through with this taxing practice of remaining reticent.

“You can't possibly believe this is going to work.” She grumbled.

He continued gathering up essentials and depositing them into the trunk, not bothering to turn around as he answered her. “As long as you keep your mouth shut, head down and hood up, it'll work just fine.” He stated evenly.

Her frown intensified. “You're just going to march me out into that camp and straight on up to your ship?” She glared out at him through questioning and contentious eyes as she gestured sharply toward the camp outside the tent flap. “How do you think that's going to look? You think none of those men are going to question such an abnormal turn of events?” She inquired acerbically.

He sighed. He wasn't a fool, he knew there would be questions and whispers and suspicion. There was no way her presence here was going to remain undiscovered for very long. But they didn't need it to last forever, they only needed two days. “No.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. He calmly continued packing, as though he believed this one austerely word to be answer enough.

It wasn't.

She waited in the choleric silence for another half second before throwing her hands up in frustration. “No?” She exclaimed hotly. “How am I to be of any use to you, if you tell me nothing of your plans? Hiding me away indefinitely is neither practical nor even remotely feasible.”

Leaning forward over the truck and bracing his hands on it's lip, he closed his eyes and breathed deep through his nose. Jack claimed such exercises were supposed to be calming. But as the seconds ticked by, Charles became quite certain Jack was full of shit.

He still didn't turn around or straighten, but his words slipped through clenched teeth. “Your identity
is not yet in question here, you and Lou have seen to that. As long as you keep quiet and out of the way, no one should dig too deep.”

“Lou? Who the fuck is Lou?” Eleanor questioned sharply.

Huffing out a frustrated breath, Charles finally turned to face her. Irritation and impatience were clear in both his expression and tone. “Well I assume he's the idiot you duped getting in here.” He scoffed.

*Right, the toothless cretin.*

As he watched understanding light in her eyes, he continued. “According to Jack, Lou's already told half the camp that the Madam's presented me with a shiny new gift, assuagement for Alice's upkeep. Claims she sent this consolation in the form of a private whore.”

Eleanor shifted uneasily and it occurred to him that her bearing and expression held a suspicious resemblance to embarrassment, which wasn't something one found very often in Eleanor Guthrie. After all, this was the same women who'd stood in her tavern and boldly announced to all it's occupants that earners made her pussy wet. Not exactly a statement made by the modest or demure.

He wasn't entirely sure, but knowing her as well as he did, he was inclined to believe that her discomfort stemmed from the fact that she'd realized he was aware she'd declared herself his whore. Given the generally disadvantaged circumstances and subordinate connotations of being a whore, he'd little doubt that such a declaration had stung her her pride. Which he could admit he found somewhat amusing despite his irritation with the situation.

It was a rare thing to happen upon something that genuinely embarrassed this woman. And as such, his first instinct was to see if he could push the matter, rile more of a reaction out of her just for the hell of it. But as soon as he thought it, he regretted it. That course of action was too dangerously familiar, too appealing. He didn't need to entangle himself any further with her.

Instead, he shook his head and returned to packing the truck. “Regardless, Lou has the camp thinking I've got an off-limits whore in here. You're presence won't be too heavily questioned as long as you keep your head down.” At least he hoped it wouldn't, they had a lot banking on this precarious little contingency.

She rolled her eyes. “That's hardly reassuring.”

“It wasn't meant to be.” He retorted evenly. “You want to come with us? This is how it gets done.”
Her arms folded across her chest. “You can't keep me hidden away forever, you'll be lucky if it lasts a week.” She stated reasonably. He sent her an odd sideways look, suggesting to her that he already knew as much.

*Again, not exactly reassuring.*

Closing the trunk, he turned to scoop up her discarded cloak from the floor. She watched him with scrupulous attention as he shook the sand from the garment, rolled it up and tossed it haphazardly in her direction. The garment thunked against her chest, her arms instinctively coming up to catch it as she sent him a disapproving look.

Deadpan, he nodded towards the garment in her arms and stated. “Put it on.”

Her eyes narrowed and she made no move to comply. She held no love for the demanding tone in which he'd spoken to her, nor for this ill-conceived notion of a plan. Both rose her hackles and ruffled her feathers, left her feeling decidedly irascible and disturbingly inhibited.

She looked as though she might say something scathing, but he curtly cut her off. “You can leave here by my side...” He extended his hand palm up for her to take and watched as she glanced warily from his face to his palm, then back again. He jerked his head back and to the side, gesturing towards the trunk behind him. “Or you can leave here in that trunk...” He declared stoically.

She gave him a somewhat startled and skeptical look. Surely he wouldn't dare. He had to know she wouldn’t make such an attempt easy on him. But then again, perhaps that was the point. He'd always enjoyed challenging her, often seemed to revel in his own ability to provoke and best her.

His face remained impassive. “Your choice.” He offered tightly, his palm remaining upturned and extended towards her.

He knew damn well that she would find neither decision appealing. He understood that ultimatums were something she loathed, that she was far more accustomed to issuing the orders than to adhering to them. Which was why he'd offered her the choice at all. Mostly, he was hoping she'd have the good sense to choose the more amicable option. But another less reasonable part of him was hoping she'd choose the latter, that she'd give him an excuse to lay hands on her again.

He ignored that part of himself as best he could.
Her jaw set as he watched her battle with herself. She studied his palm for another moment before glancing toward the trunk and back to his face. Whatever she read there must have given reasonable credence to his threat, because she calmly lifted the cloak to cover her shoulders and moved to clasp its front. She stubbornly refused to break the sullen eye contact as she slowly adorned her hood.

Though defiance still shone in her eyes, she lifted her hand to reach for his extended one. Her hand hovered above his open palm and for just a moment, she inexplicably hesitated in making the connection. She wasn't even sure why, but something had given her pause.

He arched a brow at the delay, his expression clearly questioning.

Confused and irritated by her own hesitation, she swiftly dropped her hand into his, wrapping her fingers solidly around his. Before he'd thought to stop it, his own fingers had moved unbidden to close over hers, his thumb resting idly on the back of her middle finger.

The gesture of extending his hand had only been meant to facilitate her cooperation. But now it suddenly seemed too intimate. Her hand was soft and warm in his, so much smaller than his own. It brought forth a wash of impromptu emotion, memories he had no business reliving. He wanted to pull his hand from hers, to shut down this idiocy before it led to something worse. But he also didn't want her to realize that such a simple touch had unnerved him.

She felt it too, wondered if the look that rode his features was anything she shouldn't read too much into. Her irritation ebbed, faded momentarily into the background as she struggled to decipher this moment. A similar look had graced his face hours earlier, just before Jack had interrupted them. It was a look that spoke far too many volumes to interpret clearly, but there was something about it. Something that tugged at her gut and moved a small part of her to question the finality of their relationship. She knew it was insane, a totally irrational hope to harbor. But she couldn't quite seem to squash it, not entirely. A part of her still clung to that mad hope with fevered desperation.

She was giving him another strange look, and he wasn't sure he liked it. The muscle in his jaw ticked as he strove to ignore the pull of her, to remind himself of who she was and what she'd done.

His frown deepened as he watched her features soften slightly. Her thumb slid hesitantly and feather-light across the back of his fingers, and he knew before she moved that she was going to try to close the distance between them. The fact that he both dreaded and longed for such a happening, made things all the more irksome and confusing.
At this rate she would still be the death of him, a proceeding he had every intention of taking steps to avoid.

She took a slow and cautious step toward him, her eyes cast upward and studying his face. The intelligent part of him screamed for movement, demanded he get a hold on himself before the situation got completely out of hand.

Finally his brain clicked into motion, commanding his limbs to move at his behest. He stepped away from her abruptly, but their hands remained entwined. She frowned and gave him a confused look, her gaze oscillating between his face and their linked hands.

With an exasperated grunt, he tightened his grip on her hand and gave it a sharp yank, hastily tugging her along behind him as he began moving toward the exit. “Should've just tossed you in the trunk...” He grumbled as he dragged her unceremoniously through the tent flap and out toward the Ranger.

If it weren’t for the fact that she was trying to remain as inconspicuous and uninteresting as possible, she would have railed against him. She had more than a few choice words on the ridiculousness of this course of action and the manner in which it was executed. But as it was, there was little she could do without drawing more attention to herself.

Instead she cursed under her breath and readjusted her hood to better hide her face, struggled to keep her footing and his pace as they tramped swiftly through the camp.

_Bloody boorish brute._

In the captain’s quarters of the Colonial Dawn, Jack sat brooding behind his desk. He'd been agonizing over how to break the news of Eleanor to Anne. He'd decided it was probably best to wait until they were at sea, that way Anne would be less likely to storm off with murderous intent.

Anne had always been a moody woman, as dangerous and volatile as she was beautiful. And Jack had always been fine with that. He'd enjoyed the fact that she was a woman who said what she meant and meant what she said. It left less for him to have to wonder about. If she was unhappy about something, she was generally quite quick to make as much clear. She didn't always use words,
as she tended to favor action over lengthy articulation. But regardless, she usually got her points across well enough.

However, lately she'd been acting strange around him. She'd been even more short-tempered and touchy than usual, and Jack couldn't seem to get a handle on why. He'd tried asking her about it, but she'd dismissed the inquiry with a healthy helping of 'Fuck you, Jack.'

The only other time she'd been even half this confusing was when she'd first started running on with Max. But that he'd come to understand; she'd been questioning who she was, finding a part of herself she hadn't been aware existed. That had warranted some confusion and upset.

This was different. This he didn't understand.

If Jack had to put a pinpoint on when the behavior had started, he'd say it was after she and Charles had engineered his extrication from English chains. In the rescue attempt, they'd been forced to abandon Charles and he'd been captured as a result. Had Charles been executed instead of being freed by Eleanor, Jack would've passed Anne's behavior off as a complicated expression of grief. But Charles wasn't dead, he was very much alive and Anne knew as much. Her behaviour was a mysterious to him as it was vexing.

Alternatively, Jack had briefly considered that the shift in her attitude might have had something to do with their relationship. Months prior to Jack's confinement, Anne had confessed to him that she felt she owed him an unpayable debt, that the burden of that debt weighed heavily on her soul. She'd told him she couldn't be his, that she'd needed to stand alone on her own two feet.

It had broken his heart, but he'd been willing to accept it. He understood what is was to need your name to be your own, knew the importance of feeling as though you were your own person. He hadn't wanted to take that from her, so he'd let her go. She'd still been around, never too far away when he needed her, but she'd ultimately chosen Max's bed over his own.

His relationship with Anne had remained steadfast, as no one could take away their history or what they meant to one another. But she no longer shared his bed, they no longer brushed lips or bodies. That aspect of their rapport had all but faded away.

It pained him because he still loved her, still craved that level of intimacy from her. But he'd managed to come to terms with that particular deprivation, to bury the ache and let her just be. She didn't want to leave his side entirely, she'd told him as much and he'd convinced himself that this could be enough for him.
But then she'd gone and kissed him.

It was action that existed in direct opposition to what she'd told him she wanted, and it had given rise to more than a few questions within him. But as the weeks went by and she made no further attempts to reestablish that sort of connection with him, he reluctantly wrote off the kiss as having been little more than a result of the intensity of the situation. He concluded she'd simply been grateful not to have lost him, that in the heat of that moment she'd reverted into old habits.

That's what he'd been telling himself since it had happened, and he actually had himself pretty well persuaded of it. But he was still bothered by the knowledge that Anne's odd behavior had started directly afterward. He couldn't help feeling that he was somehow to blame for her discomfort. Perhaps it was possible he'd done something to piss her off, but it wasn't like her not to just tell him when she thought he was being a prick.

As if on cue, the door to his quarters opened and in walked Anne. Clad in her signature beaten hat, men's breeches, bastian Shirt and justacorp, she looked her usual sullen self. But there was a tightness to her shoulders, an agitated air to her movements.

He watched her curiously as she closed the door behind her and turned to face him. Her brow was knit, jaw tight and lips pursed. Whatever was bothering her hadn't gone away.

For a moment she just stood there in the silence. He waited expectantly for her to say something, but she only continued to regard him with a quiet and intense scrutiny. He lifted his brow speculatively, giving her a small smile in an attempt to prompt her onward.

But still she made no move to shift or speak.

As he began to grow somewhat concerned, he opted to break the silence. “What is it?” He asked tentatively, unsure if he really wanted the answer. “What's happened?”

She'd come here looking to set things straight. She'd told him she couldn't be with him, at least not in the way she'd always known he wanted her to be. And when she'd said it, she'd truly believed it. She'd needed to set herself apart from him, to find out who she was without him and who she ultimately wanted to be. Max had allowed her to do that, she'd shown Anne there was more to who she was than just Jack and the sum of her own transgressions.
But then something had changed.

When she'd come up to that overturned carriage and seen Jack laying prone in the rubble and dirt, her heart had ceased to beat. The dread that had welled up inside her was near suffocating. For a moment she'd thought him dead, and in that moment nothing else had mattered.

Not Nassau, not the English, not Charles or the rebellion. Not even Max. Nothing.

And when he'd stirred, the relief that flooded through her was with an intensity so fierce that it nearly buckled her knees. She'd scrambled into that carriage towards him with an uncharacteristic whimper, completely unconcerned with upholding appearances.

In that instant, she'd no other thought than the need to touch him, to assure herself he was truly still breathing. She didn't think about what compelled her to press her mouth against his, or of what such a compulsion might mean. She'd simply done it. She'd needed to. At the time, it had felt the most natural and reasonable reaction in the world.

Though later, she'd begun to question things. She had thought she needed to separate herself from the wifely aspects of their relationship, that those things were a part of the obligation she felt towards him. But now she wasn't certain that was true.

Yes, she'd discovered an interest in women and it had been pivotal, a life changing event. But much to her surprise, this discovery hadn't entirely turned her away from the appeal that men could also hold. Though she did sometimes wonder if it wasn't so much men as a whole that she enjoyed, but rather just Jack.

Eventually she'd concluded that she didn't really give two shits about why Jack still held her interest, only that he did. She didn't need to put any labels or restrictions on any of this. It simply was.

It was true that she loved Max, that a part of her always would. Max had given her something she'd been searching for her whole life; a sense of self, one that existed outside the circumstances that life had cast her in. Anne would always be grateful for that.

But thinking she'd lost Jack had changed things, put things in a more crystal perspective.

Nothing that had happened had changed how she felt about Jack. She loved him, more than anyone and anything else. There was a reason people said his name after hearing hers, and it wasn't because
she was any lesser. It was because they came as a pair. Being two halves of the same thing wasn't nearly the burden she'd thought it was. To find someone who understood you better than you understood yourself and loved you regardless, was no small thing.

She'd discovered who she was without him, forged her own identity, and still found herself to be better off with him than without him.

She took an awkward step forward into the room. She wasn't well versed in all this touchy-feely crap. She was a woman of very few words. What she did say was usually very to the point. She preferred things blunt and concise, didn't see the point in dragging things out or pulling her punches.

But Jack was just the opposite, he loved all those damned fancy words.

“You and me, we got things that oughta be discussed.” She said frowning.

He tilted his head to the side quizzically, sending her a concerned and somewhat uneasy look before nodding. “Alright.” God help him if she'd somehow gotten news of Eleanor through anyone but him. She'd have his hide for such a slight.

She shifted, irritated by her own lack of skill in this area. Another moment passed and she cursed vehemently, pulling the hat from her head and tossing into the corner as she began stalking across the cabin towards him. She shrugged out of her justacorp along the way, leaving it heaped on the floor in her wake.

To hell with fancy words.

Upon reaching him, she leaned down and gripped the arms of his chair, swiveling it to face her. She ignored the shock and confusion that registered in his face as she proceeded to climb into his lap. Straddling him, she gripped the sides of his face and firmly pressed her mouth against his.

His hands instinctively came up to grip her thighs, but his mind screamed for answers. She hadn't tried to touch him since the rescue and this sudden coupling seemed unprompted and abrupt. He wanted to know what had caused it, what had changed.

He awkwardly pulled away from her mouth. “Wait, wait, wait.” He sputtered breathlessly, his hands waving gawkily for her to stop. It was clear she didn't appreciate the interruption but she did as he
asked, leaning back with a frown and a resigned sigh.

“What is this? What are you doing?” He questioned with a jittery confoundedness.

*Words, always so many words with him.*

“That much ain't obvious?” She gibed sarcastically, gesturing plainly between their two bodies.

She watched him roll his eyes, his expression caught somewhere between bewildered amusement and troubled curiosity. It was a very sincere look, one that oozed with honest candor and pleaded for the same.

“You know that isn't what I meant.” He stated with gentle insistence.

Why couldn't he just let it be? Her intention had been plain enough. Some things just shouldn't need explaining.

He needed to know what this was about, whether this was to be a singular event or a prelude to something more familiar and lasting. “What you told me when I asked why you came back... I understood you to mean it. You did mean it, yes?” Jack probed.

Her face took on a softer, more sympathetic inflection as his query brought with it a memory of the conversation in question.

*I can't be your wife, Jack... But you and I are gonna be partners till they put us in the fucking ground.*

At the time, she'd believed it. She'd thought that distancing herself from the romantic aspects of their relationship would make things easier, make her feelings of indenture less palpable and more manageable. And for a time, it had. But thinking he'd died had made her realize that things between them were more complicated than that. After she'd heedlessly pressed her mouth to his, she'd become aware of the possibility that she may have misjudged the depths of her own feelings.

That kiss had caused her to question herself, to consider the possibility that partnership wasn't the only thing she still wanted from Jack. And finally, after an extended and infuriating bout of self reflection, she'd come to the conclusion that she and Jack were indeed more than just partners. They
always had been, and they always would be.

Her love of women hadn't changed her love for Jack. There was no real reason she couldn't love them both.

Her face was a mask of frowning sincerity as she watched him study her perplexedly. Finally she reached up to grip the sides of his face, her voice gentle but firm. “I did mean it. But I mean this too.”

He gave her a pained expression. “And Max?” He asked gingerly. He didn't miss the flash of hurt that crossed her eyes before she spoke.

“Max chose her own path.” She stated with soft but emphatic insistence. “So have I.” Loosing Max had been painful, but necessary. She and Max had chosen to part ways with a mutual understanding and acceptance of the situation. It was the only reasonable and realistic conclusion to their relationship given that they’d chosen opposing sides to defend. Max wanted safety and security through cooperation with the English, whereas Anne had no desire to turn from either Jack nor piracy. And though she and Max had never openly discussed it, both women had always known who Anne would choose if ever she was forced into a corner. It would always be Jack. He was too much a part of her, too tightly interwoven into the very fiber of her being.

“I'm sorry...” Jack said gently, staring back into her pained and frowning expression.

She shook her head. “Don't be. You and I...” She pursed her lips, frowning as she rethought her wording. “What I owe you, it ain't nothing I could ever repay. But this,” She gestured between the two of them emphatically. “this ain't got nothing to do with debts. I thought it did, but it don't.”

His face was still riddled with worry and pain, but his features had softened with her declaration. Her hands were still gripping the sides of his face and his rose to gently encircle her wrists. “You're certain?” He questioned seriously, searching her eyes for answers she hadn't spoken.

Her lip twitched up in an irritated scowl. “I look uncertain?” She asked sarcastically.

He almost smiled, but mostly kept looking bewildered and confused. “I don't think so, no?” He shrugged in that antsy way of his, scrunched up his face and gave her a look that suggested he had no idea. “Honestly? You're like some insoluble riddle, a total fucking mystery to me. Every time I think I understand what it is you want, you prove me mistaken and I've got to start all over again.”
Her eyes narrowed as she paused and eyed him for a long and heated moment. “That mean you're done trying?” She asked acrimoniously. Her face was guarded, but the thought had left her chest tight. She'd been certain he'd want her back. She'd never really considered the possibility of an alternative.

As she asked him, he watched the insecurity flit through her eyes. It pulled at his heart and left him frowning. Surely she knew better. He would follow this woman into the bowels of hell if only she'd ask him to. He lifted his hand to cup her jaw as he shook his head. “No...” He muttered and gave her a small, lopsided smile. “Never.”

She returned his lopsided smile with a soft grin of her own before leaning forward to press her mouth against his. As the kiss intensified, she muttered against his mouth. “I want this, but it don't mean I'm giving up on snatch... Don't ask me to do that...” She needed to be sure he understood there would still be women, that there needed to be women.

He laughed, his breath sliding across her lips. Her interest in women had never been a problem, it had only begun to bother him when she'd started distancing herself from him. But if she was truly done pushing him away, if she honestly still wanted him, he couldn't care less if she needed to throw some pussy into the mix. “I wouldn't dream of it.” He grinned, tangling his hands in her unbound hair. “Bring on the pussy.” He quipped playfully.

She snorted and shook her head amusedly before shifting to deepen the kiss, her hands slipping downward to tug his shirt from beneath his waistband. “Idiot...” She muttered.

Perhaps the disclosure of Eleanor's current whereabouts could wait just a little while longer.

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Chapter 8

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Again, I apologize for the super delayed update. It's coming along painfully slowly, but I swear it's still coming. Don't give up on me just yet. As always, a huge thanks to those of you who continue to follow and comment on this story, it's a big help and encouragement to keep it going.

On a side note, this chapter mentions a few period-specific types of furniture that have some weird names. I've an fondness for pre-1800 furniture and got a little carried away :p For those of you who might be interested, below I've left some definitions and links to examples of the pieces I've mentioned.

1. **Farthingale chair**: A plain and simple wide seated wooden chair. Usually has an upholstered seat & backrest, straight rectangular legs and straight back. It's English in origin, and was common in the 16th century. Example: [http://p1.la-img.com/1894/50170/23571695_2_l.jpg](http://p1.la-img.com/1894/50170/23571695_2_l.jpg)

2. **Wainscot chair**: A heavy wooden chair that was popular in the 17th-century. It has turned front legs, square-sectioned back legs, arms, a simple, unupholstered seat, and a slightly raked panel back. It commonly has incising and is sometimes topped with a carved cresting. It's usually made of oak and also called a panel chair or joined chair. Example: [http://www.periodoakantiques.co.uk/images_up/a-large-and-handsome-early-17th-century-carved-oak-wainscot-armchair-circa-1640-811-1.JPG](http://www.periodoakantiques.co.uk/images_up/a-large-and-handsome-early-17th-century-carved-oak-wainscot-armchair-circa-1640-811-1.JPG)

3. **Loo Table**: A small table often used for playing cards or other games on. It was popular throughout the 18th and 19th century. It usually has an oval or round top. There is a hinged mechanism fitted to the underside, enabling the tabletop to fold down for easy storage. It is often also called a tilt-top table. Example: [http://southstreetantiques.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/images/790.3741421_std.jpg](http://southstreetantiques.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/images/790.3741421_std.jpg)

Sweaty, naked and spent, Anne rolled heavily off of Jack and on to her back beside him. For some time they simply laid there, panting in companionable silence.

When he shifted to face her, she didn't need to look at him to know he was grinning like an idiot.
She'd always found that self-satisfied grin of his to be ridiculously impish and silly. Though despite herself, she'd also always found it inexplicably charming. Not that she'd ever told him as much. She knew he'd never doubted her affection for him and that was good enough; she didn't need to stroke his ego or bother with sugarcoating. It was one of the main reasons they worked so well together.

“Good God, woman.” He chuckled lightheartedly. “You have no idea how long I've been waiting to do that.” Ever since she'd started running with Max he'd suffered an almost compulsive need for the touch of her, as if it were a means of reassuring himself she was still his despite her frequent absence from his bed. That need had only intensified after she'd put an end to the romantic aspect of their relationship, and grown stronger still after she'd kissed him in the wreckage of that overturned carriage. But now there was no reason to suppress that need. She still wanted him, and she'd spent the last hour or so proving it.

She only half stifled her own grin. “I think I've a pretty decent idea.” She smirkingly jived as she rolled over and sat up.

Still wearing that silly grin of his, he eyed her backside as she set about retrieving her discarded clothes and redressing. As she bent to wiggle back into her pants, he suddenly remembered what he was actually supposed to be doing. His grin faltered slightly, souring his good mood. Leave it to Eleanor Guthrie, destroyer of the sublime.

He sighed. Perhaps it was better to just say it, tear the band-aid off with one quick yank. “I hate to spoil the moment, but...” He trailed off, elongating the ‘U’ in his last word. He still wasn't entirely certain she wouldn't just run off on a blind and murderous rampage the moment the words left his mouth. But he had to tell her, regardless. He would attempt to stem the tide of her fury if it arose, but he'd really prefer it just didn't.

She snorted and shook her head, sitting down on the side of his cot as she shrugged into her bastian shirt. “So don't.” She offered airily.

He gave the back of her head a somewhat apologetic look as he continued. “I'm afraid that isn't an option. This matter is... Somewhat time sensitive.”

She shifted again to pull her hair from her collar. “Alright then, so tell me.”

*Make up your damn mind, already.*
He sat up, his face contorted with worry. He spoke hesitantly, as if she were a wounded animal he didn't wish to spook. “Now I know the situation isn't ideal, but I'm going to need you to consider the bigger picture. I need you to keep a cool head, a restrained hand, a -”

She shot him an impatient look over her shoulder as she cut him off. “All this damn pussyfooting...” She grumbled, shaking her head as she reached down to shove a foot into one of her boots. If he had something to say, she'd prefer he just say it. Nonsensically dancing around topics always made her antsy. “Cut the crap, would ya? Just spit it out.” She urged as she set about donning her other boot.

The words tumbled from his lips in an apprehensive rush of syllables, as if he believed saying them quickly might somehow lessen the fallout of the disclosure. “Eleanor Guthrie is here. On the Ranger, with Charles.”

He caught the stiffening of her spine a split second before she whipped around to face him, her face twisting with fury and disgust.

“The fuck was that?” Her question was straightforward, but it hissed from her lips like poison.

He waved his hands out in front of him, clearly attempting to ward off whatever murderous thoughts she was entertaining. “Now hold on, just hold on. We need her help, we-” He broke off as she stood abruptly and stormed across the cabin towards the door.

In an attempt to halt her departure, he scrambled off the cot in a tangle of sheets and limbs, nearly tripping himself up in the process.

“The fuck we do.” She snarled rancorously as she yanked open the door.

“Anne, wait! Anne, please!” He hollered as she strode through the doorway and out onto the deck with deadly purpose. “Goddammit.” He cursed fiercely, tossing the sheet aside and clambering into his breeches to hasten after her.

This was hardly the reunion he'd been hoping for.
Charles had been right about the trek through camp; no one had questioned her company. For once, she'd done as she'd been told. She'd kept close to him, her gaze cast groundward and her hood donned low to hide her face. She'd received numerous whistles and catcalls from the men along the way, but little else.

She'd put up with lewd propositions and suggestions all her life, a few more were of little concern to her. But whereas usually such remarks were simply an inconvenient and trivial annoyance, today they'd been a blessing. She'd never thought she'd see the day, but being a faceless whore had its advantages.

Strange, how a simple change in context could so drastically alter one's perception.

Now within the Captain's quarters of the Ranger, she sat poised and restless upon a simple leather bound Farthingale chair. Her elbow rested atop the small loo table beside her, her temple propped on her fist, legs crossed and foot fidgeting restively. She'd angled her chair so that she could keep an eye on Charles, who was currently seated across the room in a beautiful and boldly carved wainscot chair. He was hunched over his desk, busily attending to the ship's logs.

He claimed to be making sure they were adequately prepared for what was coming; checking their weapons, ammunition, provision stores and whatnot. Which sounded perfectly reasonable and completely necessary. Yet despite that reasonable necessity, she had the distinct impression he wasn't half as interested in those logs as he was letting on. She was inclined to believe that those logs were merely a means of distraction, a method of ignoring her questions and demands.

The only thing that kept her from voicing this belief, was the fact that such an accusation would make her look petty. Regardless of his reasons for spending so much time on those logs, checking them really was a precaution worth taking. If she tried to argue otherwise, she'd only end up looking foolish and juvenile. Both of which she was neither.

So there she was, loafing about like some lazy laggard. For all she was accomplishing, she may as well have been sitting on her hands. She was going stir crazy. They'd only been at sea a couple of hours and she was already anxious and apprehensive, unable to hold still. There was too much at risk, too much she was still in the dark about.

Charles was still refusing to give her much insight into anything they were planning. Which was ridiculous, considering it was her damn plan to begin with. She was still oblivious to what waited for them on Maroon Island. She didn't know their numbers, their camp's location, or much of anything about what munitions they were packing. And she still didn't like the idea of having to remain cooped up and out of sight. These were all things that needed dealing with if she was going to be of
any use.

But each time she'd tried to question his intentions or discuss their strategies, he'd found an excuse to busy himself with something that wasn't her. It was near enough to drive her mad.

“You're going to have to speak to me sometime, you know.” She grumbled exasperatedly.

“I'm sure that's true.” He answered impassively without looking up from his papers. “But that time isn't now.”

She huffed out an agitated breath and crossed her arms over her chest, her head tilting slightly to the right. “And just when exactly would you estimate that time to be?”

He shrugged. “I'd wager sometime after we reach the island.”

Her eyebrows nearly shot into her hairline. “Excuse me?” She sputtered disbelievingly. He could not possibly be serious. Surely they needed to discuss some sort of plan before they reached Flint and the others.

He didn't acknowledge her outburst, simply continued examining the papers strewn across his desk. He didn't want her knowing anything about the village or their true numbers, not until he was absolutely certain there was nothing she could do to fuck things up. He still didn't trust her, not really. For all he knew, she was only waiting for him to show his hand so she could stack her deck accordingly.

He didn't think it was likely, considering he was almost certain her desire to overthrow the English was genuine. But the fact that a foolish part of him still yearned to blindly place his faith with her, irritated him enough to have him resisting. It was only his weakness, that ever-present addiction rearing its ugly head and threatening to consume. It could be ignored.

He would not trade another piece of himself simply to stand near the heat of her fire, he'd already tasted of the flames that licked her skin. For the simple assurance of her hand in his, he'd stood in that blaze and let it blister a char.

And yet still she'd left him scared and empty handed.
He'd sworn never to make that mistake again. He was not a stupid man. It wasn't worth the risk.

She rose from her chair and came to stand in front of his desk. She leaned forward and placed her hands atop the desk's surface, her face troubled and serious. He didn't move or look up at her, but his eyes slid briefly over the hands she'd placed before him. Her voice was ardent and firm, but there was also a lacing of something else; something gentler, more sympathetic. “Charles, listen to me. This is madness. I'll be of no use to you this way... You know this, you must know this.” She waited a laden beat, worry churning in her chest. She needed to make him understand. “Let me prove my worth...” She implored.

He finally lifted his eyes to meet hers, his features impassive and guarded. He studied her, considering closely the intensity of her expression and avidity of her attestation. She sounded strong and resolute, unflinching in the face of this uncertainty. But he could still see the desperation spilling through the cracks of her beautifully constructed facade, knew well the hidden insecurities of the arduous woman beneath. She was afraid.

Of what, he couldn't be entirely certain. But if he had to guess, he'd wager that fear rose from her inability to control the situation, from the lack of assurances and cooperation. Unfortunately for her, he had no intention of relinquishing control. It was true he believed she'd arrived here looking to liberate herself, that she'd come to understand the restrictions of civility and found them to be distasteful. But that didn't mean he trusted she wouldn't turn coat the moment it became more convenient or beneficial for her to do so.

There had once been a time when he'd believed such a thing unthinkable. But she had quashed that belief, strangled the life from it with her bare hands. And he'd garnered an invaluable lesson from it.

He told himself it didn't matter how badly a part of him still yearned to ease her pain. It didn't matter that she still held fast to the most vital parts of him. Or that her simple presence still elicited from him such indomitable and fervent vulnerability. All that mattered was that he stood against it, concentrated on the task at hand, took what he needed from her.

Something in that shielded expression of his pulled harshly at her gut, once again leaving her guilty and uncomfortable. She knew why he hadn't told her much of anything. He didn't trust her, and he had every reason not to. But there was a part of her that needed him to believe, to know with definitive certainty that she would not defect again. It was a silly notion, given that this plan didn't actually require his trust, only his cooperation. But she wanted it nonetheless, despite the fact that his trust was something she'd forfeited long ago.

She couldn't explain it because it wasn't logical, but the thought of his continued dubiety left a
hollow feeling in her chest. She needed him to understand why she was here, what she'd risked and would continue to risk. She was devoted to this cause, she'd die for it. And whether she was keen to admit it or not, he was a large part of that, a heavily defining factor.

She leaned over the desk a little further, her expression somber and intense. “I've given up everything, risked more than you know... Tell me it hasn't all been for nothing, tell me you believe me.” She asserted with earnest severity. “I want this, Charles. I need it. Give me something, anything...”

With her words he'd gone very still. A heaviness hung in the air, and suddenly neither of them was entirely certain she was still only speaking of the English and Nassau.

He wondered briefly if the irony of her words was lost on her, or if the parallel had been intentional. For in the months past, he'd made a similar plea, similarly questioned her belief in his convictions.

_Side with me and we will show England that this place has never been stronger, and we'll keep our freedom for another day, another month, another year, a lifetime. Hey... Do you believe me?_

She waited for the throaty sound of his voice to break the silence, but it didn't come. “I am not your enemy...” She finally rasped, longing to assuage his doubts and affirm her allegiance.

The look of pained conviction that rode across his face allowed the cold edge of fear to slip under her skin. He wasn't going to yield. Whatever he said next was going to pain, leave her bleeding. She knew before he spoke that she hadn't gotten through, hadn't eased a damn thing. Perhaps she never would. Perhaps that bridge was truly burned beyond repair.

The thought left her sick to her stomach.

Finally his gravelly inflection sounded, low and thick and laced with something akin to regret. “No...” He said softly. “Today, you're not.”

She gave him a concerned and quizzical look as the uneasy feeling in her gut intensified.

“But it's not today that concerns me.” He stated gravely, his tone almost apologetic. “Tomorrow concerns me, the days after concern me.”
“Charles...” She said softly. With the slightest edge of panic riding her voice, her eyes quietly begging him to see reason. There was dread now, an angry knot twisting in the pit of her stomach and tightening her throat. She didn't even know what exactly had caused such a feeling. He'd done nothing but voice what she'd already suspected would be the case, and that shouldn't have garnered such an effect. But his words had felt sickeningly final, dangerously conclusive.

Despite her best efforts and all that self-persuasion and careful rationalization, she hadn't been prepared for finality. She'd been ready for rage, pain, mistrust, even hate. But not finality.

He began to straighten, his hands sliding back across the desk toward himself as if he were about to stand. Driven by wild emotion and panicked desperation, she didn't think. She simply acted. Her hand shot out across the desk and closed over one of his. Her voice sounded on a breathy whisper, taut and weighty. “Charles, please...” She wasn't even sure what she was pleading for, she just knew she couldn't let him leave.

His eyes shot downward to the hand that covered his. She watched his brow furrow further. His teeth clenched, the muscle in his jaw working with the movement. He looked torn, angry and injured all at once.

He swallowed thickly, inwardly cursing this wretched woman. She was an affliction, an addiction, a ceaseless threat to his resolve. Her simple touch may as well have been the solid blow of a battleaxe. For the grip of her hand, combined with the stricken inflection of her tone and countenance, had left him with a distinctive chink in his carefully constructed walls.

Chinks left you vulnerable, partially exposed. Chinks were a problem.

He needed a moment to collect his wits, to remind himself of the trouble this woman always managed to usher in. Because with the fear and desperation riding her so clearly, he could feel himself falling victim to that horribly familiar urge.

The urge to comfort and soothe, to mitigate her pain, wash away her worries in a sea of blood and fire.

But this wasn't a pain he could vanquish with violence. Even if it were, she wouldn't have deserved to find salvation at his hands. He'd offered her as much before, and had it thrown back in his face. The fact that he even still felt such a ludicrous compulsion at all, was pathetic. He knew as much, but somehow that knowledge just wasn't enough to see the feeling vanquished.
Perhaps if he gave her something, some small and less significant tidbit, she'd leave well enough alone.

So he resigned himself to sharing something paltry. Keeping it from her had been mostly out of spite anyway. “It's not indefinite...” He grumbled.

Her eyes flickered with confusion, her brow furrowing perplexedly. “What?” She questioned.

“Keeping you tucked away. It isn't indefinite.” He clarified gruffly.

He’d turned the conversation so quickly and blatantly away from their personal issues, that she was left with a feeling of unbalance. Now in addition to her unease, she suddenly felt too exposed, unarmed and awkward for having displayed such emotional instability. What the hell was wrong with her? This was hardly the time for a meltdown.

She looked away from him, pulled her hand free of his and smoothed them down over her skirts. She composed herself quickly, meeting his eyes again with the straightening of her spine. Her expression demanded he elaborate.

He rose from his desk and began shrugging into his coat. “This ends in less than forty-eight hours. If by then we're still alive, it'll be because Woodes' men aren't. With that kind of win under our belt,” He began heading for the cabin door. “the men might be less inclined to slit your throat when we tell them it was all your idea.”

“Might be?” She inquired incredulously.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “Might be.” He confirmed without turning around. God, he just needed a moment away from her. She was making him feel things he had no business feeling, and it was making him irritable. “If you're lucky, maybe then we can sell them on the notion of your worth.” He pulled the door ajar.

She frowned. “With what I can offer them, they'd be mad to refuse me. Our success at Maroon would prove as much...” She stated evenly.

“I agree.” He sighed before slipping through the door and closing it behind him.
Alone in his cabin, she folded down into the chair by his desk with a shuttering breath. Closing her eyes and propping her elbows on the desk, she dropped her head down into her hands. Inhaling deeply through her nose, she willed her traitorous body to compose itself, her stubborn heart to harden.

She was better than this, so much more than a quivering, helpless woman. She was someone who got things done, someone who could take a beating and come up swinging. She was Eleanor Guthrie, for Christ's sake.

She was not a woman to weep, or moan, or howl. She wasn't going to start now.
Chapter 9

**DISCLAIMER:** I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** Ok, so the holidays kicked my ass and RL and writer's block helped administer the beating. But I'm not dead, so hurray! :p Anyways, I finally managed to hunker down and write something postable and it's way longer than average, so hopefully that makes up for the crazy wait.

As usual, I apologize for the horrendous delay in updates. I'm attempting to keep it up to at least one update per month. Thanks to everyone who's still following and commenting, you guys are the best!

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It was incredible. She'd no idea such a place existed, especially not so close to New Providence. She'd heard tales of such escaped slave communities being scattered all over the Caribbean. The English often spun ghastly fables of the Godless heathens residing within these uncharted isles, their stories designed to spread fear and enmity among the civilized masses.

But Eleanor had never paid those childish tales much mind.

While she had believed it plausible that such colonies existed, she hadn't bought into the whole Godless heathen angle. And she'd just assumed that such places would be fairly small and scattered, mostly insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Through her time with the English, she'd learned that there were at least a handful of insurgents residing on Maroon Island. But she'd never imagined there would be so many of them, that it would be something so grand and organized.

They'd created an entire civilization for themselves. Thousands of escaped slaves living free and independent, right under everyone's noses. Eleanor was not a woman easily impressed. But this? This was remarkable.

It took a significant cache of willpower to keep her head down and her mouth shut as Charles guided her quickly through the bustling village, his hand gripping her shoulder. She wanted to stop in the middle of it all, throw her hood back and gawk. Though she was aware that such an action would be less than productive and likely disastrous, it was still terribly tempting. After all, she'd never really been one for self-restraint.
However, here she conceded. There were larger things at stake.

“Charles.” She exclaimed breathlessly as finally ushered her into a nearby empty hut. She lowered her hood and turned to face him once the door was closed. A look of elated excitement colored her features as she spoke. “This place,” She flung her arms out for emphasis. “this place is incredible! There are so many of them. Why didn't you tell me?”

“It wasn't necessary.” He grunted. Her elation had tightened his gut, caused a tender, gooey and unwelcome warmth to spread through his chest. He didn't like it.

Her grin faltered slightly. “Necessary? This changes everything. You've got at least a thousand able bodied men out there, maybe more. That's a force to be reckoned with.”

“I know.” He said gruffly. He stood just inside the door, debating whether or not it was safe to leave her here in the hut while he went to speak with Flint and the others. She wouldn't like being left out of the loop and he wouldn't put it past her to try and follow him out.

She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest, a look of mild irritation sliding across her face. “Then why don't you look pleased?” She questioned haughtily.

Already exasperated, he sighed and raked a hand through his unruly hair. “Honestly? I'm still trying to work out what the hell to do with you between now and tomorrow.” He growled, taking a menacing step towards her. “I don't imagine you'd concede to staying put while I go convince Flint not to shoot you on sight.”

Her eyes narrowed. She wasn't sure what had crawled up his ass, but whatever it was had set him on edge. Her hackles rose with his obvious desire to quarrel. Were they not on such a tight schedule, she might have been inclined to indulge him. Instead, she made a valiant attempt to remain calm and reasonable.

“No, I wouldn't.” She said firmly. “And you're about as persuasive as a pile of rocks. So unless you're planning on bludgeoning him into submission, I doubt you'll get very far. Flint and I are of a like mind, I can make him see reason.” She insisted. “Bring him here.”

He made an irritated sound somewhere between a scoff and a snarl. He stood only about a foot from her now, his fists balled at his sides and a murderous look in his eyes. He'd had quite enough of this. He could feel her inching deeper under his skin with every moment he spent forced to further endure
her company. It was infuriating, to be so bluntly confronted with his own deficiency and yet still so unable to overcome it.

“We were getting on just fine before you decided to throw your lot back in with us.” He growled. Who did she think she was, making assumptions and barking demands? She was hardly in a position to dictate anything. She was lucky he'd decided to let her keep breathing. God knew she hadn't deserved it.

“And now you'll get on even better.” She hissed. Getting on just fine, her ass. Being captured and nearly hung from the gallows was hardly fine. Martyring himself was not fine. A beach assault was not fine. None of it was fine. He needed her, whether he liked it or not. And she had no intention of letting him forget it.

His eyes narrowed to slits as he closed the last foot between them, his face a mask of barely restrained fury. She lifted her chin defiantly, daring him to make a move.

They didn't have time for this. He knew they didn't. But when she'd lowered that hood all smiles and giddy excitement, his traitorous heart had shivered in his chest. And frankly, it had pissed him off. When was he ever going to learn? Was he simply doomed to thrash around in this tangled web forever, never truly being free of her?

He opened his mouth to say something sufficiently scathing, but was cut off by a voice calling from outside the hut.

“Captain Vane?” A pause. “Captain Vane, are ya in there? I've a message from Captain Rackham, says it's urgent.”

For a moment neither Charles nor Eleanor made any move to part or speak. They stood inches from each other, she with stubborn defiance shining in her eyes, and he with a rage still bubbling just below the surface.

After another moment Charles finally broke their standoff. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and stepped away from her, reigning in his temper. “What is it?” He barked, stomping over to the door and yanking it open.

Standing a few feet behind Charles, Eleanor peered over his shoulder at the man outside the hut. She frowned as she recognized the disheveled looking man.
Lou caught her gaze over Charles’ shoulder and gave her a hesitantly gummy grin, greeting her with a slight wave of his hand.

Eleanor sneered.

_Not so bold now, are you, Lou?_ She thought bitterly. He’d been all mouth and manhandling before he’d realized who's property she was supposed to be. Now, suddenly, he was all manners.

Charles arched a brow. He cast a look over his shoulder and found Eleanor frowning, then glanced back at Lou, who looked uncomfortable. With an irritated huff, Charles gestured Lou inside. “Get in here.” He grumbled.

Lou didn't waste any time complying.

It wouldn’t do them any good to stand in the open doorway giving everyone a view of who was residing inside. The only reason Charles was letting Lou in at all was because he knew Lou had already seen Eleanor and hadn’t been any the wiser.

Once inside, Charles crossed his arms and turned to face Lou. When Lou did nothing but glance charily between Charles and Eleanor, he was given an expectant and impatient look from both parties.

“Well?” Charles finally coaxed.

“Sorry, Sir. Captain Rackham wanted me to give ya this.” He held out a crumpled looking sheet of folded paper toward Charles.

“What's this about?” Charles asked, reaching for the paper.

Lou shrugged, letting Charles take the paper from him. “He didn't say.”
“And you didn't read it?” Charles asked obliquely.

Lou looked a little baffled by the question. “No, Sir. I can't read.”

Charles gave Lou a solemn nod before gesturing absently for him to leave. Lou gave Eleanor a final once over, his eyes lingering just a moment too long before he turned to hurry from the hut. Eleanor rolled her eyes. If Charles noticed the man's interest in her at all, he ignored it. He unfolded the paper and began to read.

She watched his frown deepen as his eyes scanned the page, and her stomach twisted with dread. “What is it?” She asked apprehensively.

He lifted his eyes to meet hers, his expression serious. “Anne is less than thrilled with our little arrangement. She's more inclined to meet your offer with the edge of a blade than with reason. Jack's held her off thus far, but he's not convinced he can keep her leashed much longer.”

“He has to.” Eleanor stated firmly, her brows knit together with worry and frustration. “We can't afford to fuck this up.”

His face remained serious, impassive. “I know.” He breathed. “If she shows up, it'll be dealt with. Until then, we carry on as planned.” In all honesty, he wasn't sure what the fuck he was supposed to do with this information. It wasn't as if getting rid of Anne was an option, and he wasn't about to let her murder their best chance at besting the English either.

For a moment she only watched him, her face a mask of concerned uncertainty. Finally, she nodded. She'd little choice but to trust that he wouldn't just let Anne kill her. There was too much at stake and she was certain he understood that. For now, that would just have to be enough.

“Alright,” She sighed, crossing her arms and nodding resignedly. “where would you like to start?”

Convincing Flint had actually taken far less effort than she'd expected. His thirst for vengeance had far outweighed any residual hatred he may have been harboring in regards to Eleanor's betrayal. And
Silver, who had apparently become Flint's new right hand, had been quick to see the merit in her plan.

They were a strange pair, Silver and Flint. The two of them operated in an almost symbiotic fashion, a mutually beneficial understanding between them. Though Eleanor couldn't help but notice how well Silver had taken to managing Flint's moods. He seemed to know exactly what to say and just how to say it. He had a way of manipulating the situation and the people around him, of planting ideas.

She got the distinct impression that Silver spent a fair bit of time implementing those skills in the management of Flint. Which was something Flint probably needed, given that he'd become increasingly reckless and volatile since the death of Mrs. Barlow.

But it was also somewhat unnerving.

Flint was one of the most devious and clever men she'd ever met. If Silver could maneuver him, then Silver was not a man she had any interest of making an enemy of. As far as she was concerned, a clever man could be just as dangerously fatal as any brutish one. Sometimes, more so.

She'd have to keep a close eye on him.

Overall though, things had gone quite well. They'd conducted the meeting without too much blow back. An agreement had been reached and plans had finally been set in motion. Currently, there were at least a hundred men setting traps in the jungle. It would be crude, given that they had very little time, but effective as long as all went as planned.

Another small drove of men, approximately another hundred, would be waiting on the beach for the English's assault. After the bombardment, most of the beach's forces would be decimated. And after taking such a seemingly heavy beating, the men would be commanded to fall back, retreating into the jungle. With any luck, the English would follow. If there was any doubt that the pursuit might not occur, a man named Dobbs would be dispatched to expedite the move inland by surrendering to the English under the guise of having turned on Flint, Charles and Silver.

If all went well, the English would charge head long into a hail of bullets, blades, and near a thousand more fighting men. It would be a massacre, a devastating loss for Woodes' forces.

Though anxious and antsy, Eleanor couldn't help but feel a little smug about that. It was finally
happening. They were almost there, finally making some progress. They might actually pull it all off. There was a certain thrill that came with that knowledge. A thrill laced with worry and fear, but still a thrill nonetheless.

Consumed by her thoughts, she didn't even notice when Charles slipped back into the hut. She nearly hit the ceiling when he noisily dropped his shirt and sword into a pile on the floor just behind her chair. “Jesus Christ!” She hissed, her hand involuntarily flying up to press against her heart as she whipped around to face him.

He smirked, taking a somewhat juvenile pleasure in the obvious discomfort he'd just caused her.

She found him standing about six feet from her; topless, sweaty, and full of dirt and grime. He was holding a damp rag with which he was swiping his grubby hands on. His mouth was turned up in one corner, visibly amused by her agitated reaction. She had every intention of telling him just where he could shove that stupid smirk, but she was momentarily distracted by his bedraggled state of undress.

She couldn't help but notice the way the candlelight glistened across his damp skin. A heat pooled low in her abdomen with the sight of him, temporarily sidetracking her. Which was ridiculous considering she'd seen him far more naked and in far more appealing circumstances, without ever so much as batting an eye.

It made her feel foolish and callow, like some hormone-ruled adolescent.

As such, she was quick to shove down that initial wave of lust, drag her eyes from his body to his face, and school her features into something less compromising. She didn't want to give him anything else to smirk about. She wanted an update on where they were with the trap setting.

But it was too late, he'd already seen it. He'd watched her eyes darken, witnessed the prurience that flit briefly across her face before she'd schooled it. He knew that look. He'd spent years living for that look. It was a look that both pleased and irritated him, tightened his groin and sent his mind reeling into less than virtuous places.

He told himself it didn't matter that she still wanted him. It didn't matter that he still wanted her. None of it mattered. But that scolding little inner monologue didn't stop him from experiencing a sliver of male pride, an arrogance that left him feeling rather pleased with himself.
If she wanted him, then he wasn't the only one suffering. And that knowledge brought with it the most ridiculous touch of comfort. It didn't make a lick of sense, but it eased the pain just ever so slightly.

Her voice broke the silence, snapping him from his thoughts. “I take it your being here means the traps have been set?” She asked, her voice smooth and austere.

No trace of the lust he'd seen in her eyes only moments before. She'd always been quite good at that; at forcing an outward appearance, burying her emotions behind whatever mask best suited her goals.

He nodded, tossing the sullied rag into the pile with his shirt and blade. “Almost. What can be done, has been. The men are just finishing up.” He moved to sit at the foot of the bed, bending to pry off his boots and toss them haphazardly the floor. “We move out to the beach just before daybreak. In a few hours, Silver will take you and the other women and children further inland into hiding. Best to get in a few hours sleep before then.”

Her faced twisted into a look of startled disbelief. “You think I'm going to scurry off and hide with the women and children?” She asked incredulously, insult clear in her tone.

He gave her a look, like she'd finally lost her mind. “Yes. Why? Did you figure you were going to march into battle at our side, guns blazing?” He grunted, his tone facetious and grating.

“No.” She hissed. “But I'll not cower in a hole with the women and children either.”

He looked up at her with a tired sort of frustration in his face. “And what would you suggest?”

She frowned, looking thoughtful for another moment before responding. “I've brandished weaponry out of necessity in the past. I'm well aware I'm no swordsman or gunslinger, but I handle myself well enough when I have to. Leave me here among the men meant to hold the village. Let me find something of use to do here.”

Her tone was testy, but he didn't miss the edge of desperation in it. She needed to feel productive, useful, like she was doing something worthwhile instead of sitting on her hands. He understood that need, often felt the pull of it himself. Idle hands, and whatnot.

“And if If the English make it past our lines?” Charles asked sternly.
She lifted her chin, her eyes full of fire. “Then we're all dead anyway.” She declared seriously.

He studied her with a scrupulous intensity, something unreadable in his eyes. “The most useful information in our possession resides inside your head. Should you remain here and become captured, they'll do what it takes to pry that from you.” His tone was grave, cautionary. He wanted to know if she really understood what she was asking for, if she'd really lay down her life for this even knowing what it might cost her. “After all you've done, the fact that you're a woman won't matter to them. They'll be quiet about it, but they'll handle you as they would any treasonist.”

She nodded solemnly. She knew what he was saying; she'd be locked away, likely tortured and eventually executed. They'd want what information she had in regards to their rebel plans, resources and remaining forces. But she had no intention of ever allowing things to get that far. She wouldn't go back to the tower or her gilded cage, nor would she face the humiliation of a public execution.

If she had to, she'd end it all long before things came to that.

He could see her face was still wrought with stubborn determination. But now there was something almost sad in her eyes as well. He wondered briefly which thought she mourned more; her own death, or the death of Nassau. He imagined she likely held both in near equal contempt.

When she spoke it was quiet and firm, laced with a somber acceptance and resolve. “I know... But I can't go back to that kind of reticence,” Honestly, she didn't even understand why she'd ever thought she could endure it in the first place. “and I won't go back to that tower...” That tower had been hell, a filthy and isolated, destitute hole where she'd only her thoughts for comfort. “You leave me a pistol, and I'll make sure there's nothing left for them to take.”

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he met her eyes. His gaze was heavy, evaluating and intense. There was a silence between them, then a quiet understanding.

He believed her. It might have been foolish of him, but he did. She wouldn't allow herself to be taken, whether it was back to Woodes or back to London. She'd rather fall by her own hand, eat a bullet, go out with a final 'fuck you'.

He could appreciate that, even understand it.

The silence between them stretched on, and she watched as his eyes dropped briefly to her throat.
when she swallowed the lump that resided there.

She stepped forward, movement cautious and hesitant. He eyed her quizzically.

There was a good chance they'd all be dead by this time tomorrow. She hoped that wasn't the case, that they'd instead massacre the English and move on to retake Nassau. She wanted to give the civilized world a reason to reconsider the consequences of this invasion, to understand who they were fucking with. But none of it came with a guarantee. There was no certainty in this undertaking, no assurance of success.

They were diving head long into shallow water with little more than a desperate prayer.

But that uncertainty wasn't quite enough to deter her, she'd no intention of backing down. She knew what she wanted out of life and she intended to do her damnedest to make sure she got it. But if this was to be her last night, she'd spend it how she wanted, no regrets.

She had enough regrets, she wouldn't add tonight to the list.

She feared he might refuse her, but she still needed to try, needed to know she'd done all she could. She couldn't bring herself to say what needed to be said, but she could try to show him. She stepped closer to him, her proximity forcing him to sit upright and crane his neck up to keep looking at her. Still there was silence.

She stepped between his open knees.

He said nothing, made no move to touch or stop her.

The tightness in her chest eased ever so slightly as his lack of movement emboldened her, made her reasonably confident he wasn't going to deny her. She lifted her hands to cup either side of his face, her thumbs stroking gently across the stubble along his jaw. He still didn't move, just continued to stare up at her with brows drawn and something indiscernible clouding his eyes.

He knew he should stop her, that every time she touched him he sunk a little further into madness. But she looked so forlorn, so resigned and determined. He saw the reasoning behind her actions, knew she’d closed the distance between them because she feared they'd both be dead tomorrow.
He wasn't stupid. He understood she still had feelings for him, that she always had. Her affections hadn't been enough to shield him from her ambition, but they had still been present. It was why she'd been so furious when he'd killed her father, why she'd beaten him to a pulp when he'd told her the truth about Richard.

He knew she still cared for him, even if she hated herself for it.

But he wasn't sure that should make a difference. It obviously wasn't enough. She'd made her choice when she'd left him standing on the other side of that gate. She'd chosen Nassau. That should have been the end of things. It should have been enough to make him hate her, to make him want to turn from her touch.

But it wasn't, and he didn't. He still loved her, still wanted her. And he feared he always would.

Fighting it was onerous and taxing, downright exhausting. And it all felt so Goddamned futile. But he couldn't seem let it go. Logically he knew that surrender wasn't an option. He couldn't allow her to crawl inside him again because he might not survive her next assault, figuratively or literally.

But in that moment, right then, he couldn't bring himself to care. He could see the reflection of his own pain in her countenance, a desperate desire to make the next few hours count for something, anything.

She needed this.

Maybe he did too.

Fuck it. If they were dead tomorrow, it wouldn't matter anyway.

His eyes searching hers, he lifted his hands to grip the backs of her thighs through her skirts, urging her slightly forward. He watched something akin to relief flicker across her face as he did so. She must have taken his movement for the go-ahead that it was because she bent forward, gently brushing her mouth across his.

The kiss started off slow. Tender and warm, full of words left unspoken. But as his grip tightened on
her thighs, her hands moved from his jaw to fist in the hair at the base of his neck. The kiss deepened, became more desperate and heady as her tongue slid across the seam of his lips, demanding entry. He opened for her as she angled his head back with her grip in his hair.

He pulled her more firmly against him, the movement forcing her to bend somewhat awkwardly to keep their lips joined. Suddenly impatient, she pulled away from him. Releasing his hair, she hastily bent to scoop up her skirts, bunching them around her thighs as she climbed into his lap to straddle his hips.

He made a low sound in the back of his throat as she adjusted herself atop him. The sound sent a delicious shiver down her spine, and she almost smiled. It was something she'd always reveled in, the ability to evoke such base and primal reactions from him. It gave her an inexplicable rush, made her feel unburdened and alive.

Her breath quickened as her hands tangled once more in his hair, her mouth crashing back down upon his. His hands found her rear, tugging her forward so that her pelvis ground against him through the front of his trousers.

*There were too many clothes, not enough skin, never enough skin.*

He broke away from her mouth to have his teeth and tongue trail fire across her jaw, down the side of her neck and over the junction between neck and shoulder. She arched in his arms, grinding against him as she drug her nails down over his shoulders and biceps.

His hands pressed between them to tug deftly at the clasps on the front of her corset. He grunted, mildly irritated when the last clasp proved more stubborn than it's predecessors. When the clasp finally slipped open he cast the garment haphazardly to the floor before helping her struggle free from her chemise, yanking it up over her head and tossing it aside. With her upper half bare, one of his calloused hands grasped firmly at her breast, his thumb rubbing roughly over the taut nipple. His other hand gripped her hip, holding the heat of her core against him as she squirmed.

She looked down at him through hooded eyes, lips parted and breath heaving. She was beautiful, potent and toxic. Lascivious and heady. Virulent and irresistible.

She would be his end. He was as sure of it now as he'd ever been.

She leaned down, pressing her her cheek against his as her breath tickled his ear. One of her hands
gripped the back of his neck, keeping him close. The other slipped low, popping open the front of his trousers with a practiced ease that had his breath catching.

She pulled him free, stroked her hand over the length of him. Her teeth caught the shell of his ear, her tongue sending shivers straight to his groin. He growled.

Needing to regain control of the situation, he fist his hand in her hair at the base of her skull, jerking her head back and causing her body to arch backward. “Enough.” He grunted, his voice rough and heavy with desire.

His manhandling spiked her arousal, lit a fire low in her belly that had her thighs clenching. But she'd never been the submissive sort, and she had every intention of reasserting her intractability, of putting up some kind of fight. She knew he liked the challenge as much as she did.

At least, that had been the plan. But then his hand had slithered up her thigh, nimbly seeking out the apex of her thighs. He found her warm and wet, his fingers gliding along her slippery folds to roll expertly over that exquisite little bundle of nerves.

At that point, any plans for resistance became muddled, fled her mind in a hungry, hedonistic rush.

He hadn't released her hair. She was still bent slightly backward, her body arched against him, breasts thrust forward as she continued to roll her hips against his hand. She gripped his shoulders like a lifeline, her fingers digging harshly into taut muscle. The angle no longer bothered her, any discomfort she might have felt was drowned beneath his ministrations.

He shifted her atop him, retracting his hand from between her legs. She started to object, but fell silent as she felt him guiding himself toward her entrance. He slid along her folds, coating himself in the sticky heat of her.

She rolled her hips, trying to force him inside, all but begging him to make that final push, frustrated by his lack of obedience. He didn't need half so much convincing, but he enjoyed watching her squirm. However his patience was waning and he'd had his fill of games.

Without warning he snapped his hips upward, slamming into her abruptly.

Her mouth dropped open, a startled and enraptured mewl jumping from her throat before she could
think to stop it. She wasn't about to admit it, but a part of her lived for these moments. The torridity, the blind and mindless ecstasy. In those moments, little else mattered, the world would fall away. She could drown herself in the feel of him. The taste, the heat, that inexplicable impression of totality; an irrational sense of wholeness. For a time, it would be only the two of them, each hopelessly lost in the carnality of the other.

Of course, she knew it was all temporary. When it finally ended, the world would come crashing back in, spoiling that beautiful, worry-free sense of euphoria. But for now, while she rode this wave of bliss, none of that held any weight.

Her hands hastened blindly across his chest and shoulders, her nails biting into his skin as as she mindlessly sought for something to cling to. She strained her eyes downward, fighting to look at him despite the fact that he was still gripping her hair, still angling her neck and body backward. She needed to see his face, bear witness to the raw and animalistic salacity she knew she would find in his eyes.

“Let go.” She growled breathlessly, reaching up behind her head to grasp at the wrist of the hand he’d fisted in her hair. Despite the firmness of her demand, her hips didn't break rhythm, still struggled to keep pace with the snapping of his own.

He grit his teeth, watching her writhe and pant through hooded eyes. He was half inclined to deny her, to defy her demand simply to spite her. But as her hand left his wrist to join her other upon his shoulders, she suddenly yanked him forward. She pressed herself against his chest, soft breasts and hardened nipples rubbing against him with each heaving breath and fevered stroke of hips. And in that moment he reconsidered, leaving go of her hair in favor of grasping her ass, pulling her more fiercely into every thrust. He buried his face in her neck, silently reveling in the heady scent of her, the salty taste of her skin.

Able to move more freely, she leaned forward, grasping the sides of his face in her hands and pulling him away from her throat. His eyes flicked up toward hers with the movement and she peered down at him through glazed eyes, her body ablaze.

There it was, that deliciously carnal look. An expression that spoke of unbridled craving, of intimacy and rapture. It was a look that promised unimaginable pleasure, even as it selfishly sought self-gratification. And just as expected, that look set her on fire, sent a thrill straight into the pit of her stomach and curled her toes.

She kissed him then, smashing her mouth against his in a wild gnashing of tongues, lips and teeth. When she finally broke away she shoved him back hard, forcing him to lay flat against the bed's rumpled linen with his knees still hanging off the mattress and his feet on the floor.
He grunted, not even sure himself whether it was in protest or pleasure. She splayed her palms flat against his chest, leaning her weight slightly forward as she readjusted herself and began to move.

This, this was what was always missing. The feel of her, the heat. The wild and reckless abandon with which she moved above him. This woman was ruthless, wanton, a force to be reckoned with. He craved her, even as he knew he shouldn’t. Even as he reveled in the feel of her, he knew it was a mistake. Every time he drank of her, he risked another piece of himself, but something always kept him coming back. Despite his protest, his soul remained tightly tethered with hers.

She was a witch, an enchantress of the deadliest kind. Yet he couldn't get enough of her. He was marching happily to his own demise, and he hadn't even the will to stop himself.

Her breath was heaving, her breasts jumping lightly with every fevered roll of her pelvis. Bewitched, he watched her bounce and jerk atop him. She set her own frenzied pace, seeking out that ideal angle; the one he knew would send her toppling over the edge into oblivion. With just the right amount of patience and pressure, she’d fall apart in his hands, a quivering mass of sticky heat and damp flesh.

He longed to see it, ached for her release almost as much as his own. But not because he was concerned about her enjoyment, his reasoning was more selfish than that. He wanted to watch her come apart because it thrilled him, set his blood boiling with an inexplicable rush. But this desire was a double edged blade, it took from him as much as it gave. With the rapture that came with watching her loose herself, came unwelcome emotion, a reminder of his feelings for her.

Yet even still, he couldn't bring himself to look away. She was his sickness, a plague that eradicated his ability to reason, to think clearly.

She consumed everything, and he let her.

She pressed forward, finally finding the angle that allowed her to generate the most exquisite friction between her clit and his pelvis. She let loose a breathy sigh as she rocked against him, her lips parting as her eyes closed. She quickened her pace, chasing madly after that building crest.

One of his hands trailed up her stomach to grasp roughly at her breast, the other slipped under her skirts to grip bruisingly at her thigh. Something resembling a moan tumbled raspily from her chest. Her breath shuttered and his blood boiled, heat spreading low in his abdomen. He grit his teeth, fought to keep pace with her movements as she climbed that beautiful ridge.
She let loose a throaty sound, her mouth opening in that classic 'O' shape as her hips lost their cadency and her body trembled.

“Charles, I—” Whatever she'd been about to say, died on her lips with a strangled sound as she came. Her body fell forward, her fingernails digging desperately into his shoulders as she buried her face in the crook of his neck, her breath hot on his skin.

He made it last, lifting and angling her slightly in order to get the leverage he needed to batter his hips up into hers. Her breathy groans, those almost whimpers, they drove him mad. She twitched and quivered around him, her walls clenching, demanding he give up what was left of himself.

His muscles bunched and trembled with the effort to keep moving. She continued to shudder and jerk above him, wantonly riding out what was left of her release.

As the intensity of her climax dulled, she sat up. Leaning backward as she moved, she reached up to roughly fondle her own chest. Her body bore down on him, squeezing him mercilessly as her hips rolled frantically against him.

“Come.” She rasped breathlessly. She'd meant for it to sound more demanding, but it came off more like a plea, a desperate solicitation.

He loved it when she did that, both begged and ordered him to spill himself in one single syllabled breath. Her timing was always perfect, demanding a response. It was mind-boggling how she could utter that one word and have his body react as if she'd actually reached inside him and flipped a switch.

His muscles tensed, his hips snapping furiously into hers before he shuddered and body stiffened on a throaty growl as her filled her with a searing heat.

She arched, rolling her hips with his on a breathy cry before she collapsed bonelessly atop him. She lay sprawled across him, his softening member still cached snugly inside her. Neither of them moved, no one spoke. In a tangled heap, they simply panted and convalesced, rode out that post-coital bliss.

The moment was shattered as Jack's distressed and exasperated voice carried into the hut from outside it. “Anne! Anne, listen to me. Goddammit, woman, take a moment to consider this!”
Eleanor shot Charles a concerned look before quickly rolling off of him. An involuntary shiver coursed through her as he slipped free of her, their mixed fluids running down the inside of her thighs. She ignored it, hastily shrugging into her discarded chemise before trying to stuff the hem of it back into the waist of her skirts. She cast Charles an irritated look when she realized he seemed completely unconcerned with the knowledge that a whirlwind of shit was about to come hurling through the door not ten feet from them.

Seemingly at ease, he dragged himself up into a sitting position and lazily reached for his dirty shirt. But instead of putting it back on, he began using it to clear the evidence of their coupling from between his thighs.

She huffed, his composure irking her. Did he think that flaunting the fact that they'd fucked was going to make this encounter with Anne any easier? Because it certainly wasn't. It was only going to further enrage that cantankerous little brute, make her assume Charles was simply being led round by his dick.

Which wasn't helpful at all.

He'd just tossed the soiled shirt into the corner and begun shrugging into his trousers, when the door to the hut crashed open. Eleanor was still working on the last few clasps of her corset as Anne flew into the room, Jack hot on her heels.

Anne stopped just inside the door, hand on the hilt of her sheathed blade as she scrutinized the scene before her. She sneered, eyeing the space between Charles, the end of the bed, and where Eleanor was standing behind it. She was no doubt gauging the likelihood of getting past Charles and around the bed to Eleanor before anyone could stop her.

Jack came into the room behind Anne, closing the door swiftly behind him. He gave Charles an incredulous look as Charles casually stuffed himself back into his trousers. Jack's eyes flicked from Charles to Eleanor then back again. “Really?” Jack exclaimed aporetically, clearly referring to the intercourse which had so obviously just been had. “Christ almighty, Charles…” He shook his head in bewildered frustration.

Charles merely arched a brow and continued to look unimpressed. He'd no intention of trying to justify himself. He didn't have to. Who he fucked was none of their concern. At least that's what he told himself, how he mentally rationalized his own behaviour.
“Don't make this difficult.” Anne hissed at Charles. Moving slowly with the tense agility of a seasoned predator, she tried to circle around him. When Charles merely stepped in front of her, a silent warning in his face, her eyes narrowed. “You wanted her here because she's got information on the island's siege, yeah? Well, now we have it too. She's served her purpose. What's the use in keeping the traitorous bitch?” She reasoned venomously.

“I already told you.” Jack huffed toilsomely, obviously flustered and impatient with the whole situation. “She'll likely prove useful. She's been a part of both worlds, played both sides. She can give us an insight we wouldn't have otherwise.”

Eleanor sent Jack a look, something teetering between surprise and gratitude.

Anne scoffed. “Only if she doesn't fuck us first.” She spat.

With that comment, Eleanor's temper spiked and she decided she'd had quite enough of remaining quietly passive. Logically, she knew Anne's mistrust was a valid response. But it was difficult to remain level headed while Anne hurled accusations with no real knowledge of what she'd sacrificed to get here. “Do you even know what the fuck you're on about? Do you know what I've risked to bring all this about? If tomorrow pans out it will be because of me, because of what I'm offering.”

Charles eyed Anne wearily, his body tensing in preparation for what he assumed would be an inevitable bout of violence. Even if Anne made a move, he wouldn't kill her. He wouldn't do that to Jack. But he wasn't above putting her in her place.

The muscle in Anne's jaw twitched and her eyes burned as she digested Eleanor's words. “I don't give a shit what you've risked, and I'm not interested in anything you got to offer. I know what you nearly cost me. That's reason enough all on it's own.”

Eleanor frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?” She asked candidly.

Realization dawned in Charles' eyes. He stared into the fury of Anne's face before glancing over at Jack briefly. His gaze settled back on Anne. “Jack...” Charles concluded firmly. “She's talking about Jack.”

Anne shot Charles a dirty look but made no attempt to correct him.
Jack looked startled, momentarily baffled. Then his face softened, something sympathetic stirred in his features. But he made no move to try and comfort her or even address the issue. He knew better than to attempt to coddle her. Anne processed things in her own way.

Jack had been trying to talk Anne down with all the reasons this plan was good for Nassau, good for their new pirate republic. But he'd been reasoning with the wrong logic. She hadn't given a damn about their plans or their brave new world. She'd only been thinking about what Eleanor had almost taken from her, what she'd very nearly lost. Now, she sought blood to settle the debt.

Jack. It had always been about Jack.

Anne would have been fine with taking their share of the pearls and going into hiding with him. But he'd needed to come back, make a name for himself, leave a legacy. She'd called him crazy, cursed his stupidity, then she'd followed him straight into hell. She'd sworn to liberate him when she'd learned of his incarceration, and she'd bloody well succeeded. But only to come face to face with the same accursed woman who'd seen him put there in the first place. It was enough to make her see red. Anne just couldn't understand how either of them could even consider trusting this devious little wretch. Lies dripped from her lips like honey.

Though Eleanor's next words carried a firm and unyielding tone, they still came off sounding genuine. She straightened, lifting her chin and bracing herself against whatever came next. Her eyes shone with steely determination as she spoke. “I can't change what's already come and passed, but I can sure as fuck help hinder what's coming. I'll be damned if I'm going to let them take everything I've built without a fight.”

Anne looked skeptical. “You brought them here.” She growled. “Gave them the means to take Nassau's beach, forced us out and put a target on Charles' back.”

Eleanor nodded, not bothering to deny any of it. It wouldn't do her any good anyhow. “I did.”

“And now you expect us to trust you?” Anne seethed, her fingers twitching against the hilt of her blade.

Jack tensed, knowing Anne well enough to know where this was likely headed.

Charles hadn't overlooked the movement either. His face was blank, controlled. But he was watching Anne like he expected a detonation at any given moment, his muscles coiled in anticipation.
Eleanor stood firm. Staring into Anne's furious eyes with a troubled and serious expression, her patience waned just a little. “You don't have to trust me. You just have to think.”

Anne's eyes narrowed and Jack chose that moment to intervene. “She's right, you know…” Jack said softly, coming to stand between Anne and Charles. “I don't like it any more than you do, but this is bigger than us, bigger than all of us. We have a chance to write history here. To make a name for ourselves, create something totally unique and completely extraordinary.” He reasoned.

Anne continued to frown, the anger still riding her. “You know I don't give a damn about any of that.” She hissed.

Jack nodded, looking somewhat apologetic about it. He stepped closer to her. “I know…” He said gently. “You're here because I am…” It was true, he knew it was. She wasn't in this fight because she wanted a new world, or because she cared about the creation of any legacy. She was in it because this was where he was, where he needed to be. He needed it, so she allowed it.

That knowledge warmed Jack's heart, filled him with an inexplicable wave of gratitude and affection. But it also left him feeling guilty, sorry that he'd dragged her into a fight he knew she had so little interest in.

Anne glowered up at Jack for another tense moment before looking away, averting her gaze to glare down at the hand she still had gripping at her blade. She didn't favor the notion of having this discussion at all, let alone in front of Charles and the cunt.

When she said nothing, Jack softly tossed her own words back at her, a part of him needing to know those words still rang true. “Partners till they put us in the ground, right?” He asked her gently, a small smile tugging at his lips as he nudged the back of her hand with his.

Anne's head snapped up at that. Her eyes burned into his, searching for any sign of sarcasm or insincerity. When she found nothing but an open and apologetic face, she huffed out an angry breath and resigned herself to the doomed folly of this venture. This ill-fated war meant too much to him. He was determined to have his name carried through the ages at almost any cost. He needed this, and she hadn't the right nor the heart to try and take it from him.

Anne grit her teeth, letting go of her weapon and adopting a slightly less threatening stance. All she could do now was try to make sure he lived long enough to see this mad plan through. “Yeah.” She muttered sorely, turning from Jack to gesture bitterly towards Eleanor. “But she fucks us, and she
“She fucks us, and I'll kill her myself.” Charles growled, irritated by the notion that she seemed to believe that, in the face of such betrayal, he wouldn't be inclined to do the same.

“Oh please,” Anne hissed. “you're about as likely to kill that cunt as I am to fuck her.”

At that, Jack made a small sound of agreement that was met with a seething glare from Charles.

Eleanor simply arched a brow, crossing her arms over her chest. “Are we quite finished here?” She asked dryly.

“Quite.” Jack conceded, eyeing Eleanor leerily. After a considering moment, he turned from her to face Charles, giving him a chiding look. “Do try to keep it in your pants, will you?” He pleaded, his face scrunching up in distaste.

Charles sneered. Recognizing the threat as diffused, he turned from the lot of them to drop onto the bed and rummage through his pocket for a smoke.

“Fuck off, Jack.” Charles grunted as he retrieved a battered looking smoke from his pants and brought it to his lips, setting about lighting it and looking disinterested.

Jack rolled his eyes, a small bewildered smile playing on his lips as he shook his head resignedly. He turned to retrieve Anne and noticed the dark look she was casting in Eleanor's direction. Hoping to avoid any further conflict, he placed a hand on the small of Anne's back, tried to gently usher her from the hut.

“Come along, Anne.” Jack said coaxingly.

Though Eleanor couldn't help but think it sounded more like a plea. Anne always had had quite the hold over Jack. Obviously that hadn't changed, Eleanor mused.

Anne shrugged off his offending hand and sent him a loaded look before turning on her heel and stalking from the hut. Just because she'd agreed to go along with this insanity, didn't mean she had to
“Oh, come now, Anne.” Jack called after her, his face scrunching up in haggard frustration as he moved to follow. “Be reasonable!” He cried, hurrying instinctively after her.

As he watched Jack scurry off after Anne, Charles stifled a small grin into the butt of his smoke. Poor Jack was going to have a hell of a time dealing with that one. The grin died slowly on his lips as the irony of the thought was not lost on him. His eyes flicked up to Eleanor, who was still standing by the bed, eyeing him with an intense and troubled expression.

Anne wasn’t half as much trouble as this one.

After another quiet moment, Eleanor sighed. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked him over with careful consideration. She watched the muscles in his forearm shift under his skin as he brought the cigar up to his lips to take another heady pull. He exhaled and the smoke streamed from his lungs, lazily billowing up around him before dispersing into the air above. She ignored the avid ache in her chest, the bawdy twitch of her lower abdomen. She focused instead on the problem at hand.

“Is she going to be a problem?” Eleanor asked, worry straining across her brow.

Charles frowned. He didn’t want Eleanor getting any funny ideas. Jack would handle Anne, he always did. “No. Now go to sleep.” Charles growled.

With that, he rolled over and stamped out his smoke on the bedside table. He then licked his thumb and forefinger and abruptly extinguished the flame on the candle beside him.

The hut fell dark and silent.

He turned his back to her, not wanting to think about the fact that she was going to be lain out beside him for the next few hours. Fucking her was one thing, it was something he could still assert a certain level of control over. But just sleeping beside her? That was a different story. It felt too intimate, too achingly familiar.

He was half tempted to just get up and leave, go wander the village until sunrise. But that too would make him feel weak. He wouldn’t indulge the childish desire to flee. It would feel too much like a
retreat, an open acknowledgment of the fact that she unsettled him. And that wasn't something he intended to share with her. He didn't want to give her the impression that she still held any power over him.

Even if she did, it wasn't something he was keen to have advertised.

So he stayed right where he was, stubbornly getting comfortable and doing his best to ignore her presence. Regardless of how he felt about it, sleep was a necessary obligation. They'd been up for nearly twenty-four hours already, and they needed whatever rest they could find before sunrise.

She considered trying to get more out of him, a clearer understanding of the situation. But she decided against it. If they got through tomorrow, then they'd worry about what came afterward. For now, it was a relatively moot point.

She sat there on the bed for another moment, staring idly at the back of his dark silhouette. Her frown deepened as she chewed absently on her bottom lip. He was stretched along the left of the bed, completely prone and seemingly unbothered by the notion of sharing the bed with her. And if he was so unperturbed by the idea, then she sure as hell wasn't about to let on that the idea did anything for her either.

She latched on to the sliver of irritation that came with his flippant dismissal, clung to it with an almost frantic desperation. If she could hang on to that feeling, then she wouldn't have to think about the fact that this could very well be the last night they spent breathing. The last night she spent this close to him, and she still hadn't said any of the things that needed saying. She wasn't even sure she could. Fear and pride effectively prevented her from even considering it.

Not that it really mattered, he'd probably never accept any of it even if she did.

Anxious, restless and exhausted, she moved to retrieve his dirty shirt from the corner and used it to clean up the mess still lingering between her thighs. With that finished, she wandered back over to the bed and crawled into the space beside him. When he'd climbed into the bed earlier, he'd lain down on top of the bed covering, not bothering to pull it back and get beneath it. This now prevented her from getting under it herself. For a moment, she considered simply trying to yank it out from under him. But ultimately she decided it wasn't worth the effort, it was a fairly hot night anyway.

Sighing, she set about removing her corset and tossing it to the floor. The stupid thing was far too restricting to try sleeping in. She left on the skirts and chemise, deciding that stripping down any further probably wasn't a good idea. She lay down next to him, facing his back.
She lay like that for what felt like forever, with her eyes fixed to the back of his head and a good foot of space laying between them. Amidst the chirp and buzz of nightly insects, she could hear him breathing, noticed when the sound slowed and evened out as he found sleep.

He could practically feel her eyes burning into the back of his skull. It was irritating, unsettling. What was she hoping to accomplish? Whatever it was, he wasn't interested in giving it to her. Determined to ignore her, he rolled onto his back and tossed an arm up over his head. Getting comfortable, he evened out his breathing in the hopes that she'd leave him alone if she assumed he'd fallen asleep.

Eventually, he managed to find a state relatively close to actual sleep, a light doze on just this side of consciousness.

She listened to the steady rhythm of his breath, the easy and predictable pattern of it. It was almost cathartic, irrationally comforting. As she listened, the irritation she'd been attempting to cling to slipped away, got lost in a sea of calm that flowed through her with his quiet proximity. She was suddenly struck with the urge to touch him, to reach out and run her hand across his chest, tangle her legs with his and curl into the side of him.

That ridiculous urge brought reality screaming back into the moment. It hit her like a ton of bricks, a harsh and resounding slap to the face. Guilt flooded her chest, swirled in her gut, brutally reminding her of all she'd cast aside.

She tried to reason with herself, convince herself that such tender desires were pointless and unimportant. After all she'd done to him, she knew things between them could never go back to what they'd been. He'd even told her as much.

But the desire for contact was still there, her hands itching to simply rest against his skin. It wasn't a feeling that could be sated with logic or reason. It felt desperate and needy, unreasonably sentimental and saccharine.


Her fists clenched as her mind began to churn, dredging up thoughts and memories she'd rather not be reminded of.

As much as she'd tried to deny it, Charles had always been the one constant in her life, even when
she hadn't wanted him to be. She'd pushed him away more times than she could count, tried to rid herself of the weakness he elicited from her. But no matter how hard she'd pushed, he'd always come back to her, and despite herself, she'd loved him for it. He'd never abandoned her.

But then she'd finally pushed too hard.

*I killed him for you. Low and his crew. I killed them all to protect you...*

She'd known it to be true. She'd known it when she'd sought him out after finding his letter in the square, and she'd known it when she'd locked that gate and left him to die. Yet still she'd striven to deny it, to convince herself his motives couldn't possibly have been so altruistic. It had been the only way she could justify her actions, do what she'd believed needed doing.

Her throat tightened with the memory, her chest constricting.

Now it all lay in ruins. Now she'd no more lies to hide behind. She finally understood what she had lost, what she'd taken from him in the process. It wasn't something she could give back, a thing of immeasurable value. And he had every right to hate her for it.

She hated herself for it.

Emotion welled in her throat and before she could think to stop herself, she'd drifted closer to him. Her trembling hand fluttered softly across his chest to press gingerly over the space above his heart. She could feel the solid beat of his heart under her hand, the steady, rhythmic rise and fall of his breath.

Almost immediately, she felt fractionally calmer. Not much, but enough.

It was silly, and it made little sense, but she didn't question it. She was simply grateful for the distraction from her thoughts, relieved by the fact that he hadn't stirred with the touch of her hand. She wasn't sure how she would have explained herself had he borne witness to it.

She forced her breathing to slow and even out as she wrestled closed the lid on that tumultuous well of emotion. She wasn't sure where the hell such a powerful surge of sentiment had come from, but she'd be doing no one any favors by letting herself fall apart.
Eleanor Guthrie was not a woman who fell apart.

Distantly, for just a second, he thought he'd heard a sudden hitch in her breathing. But he made no move to acknowledge it. He wasn't even entirely certain he'd really heard anything at all. And for the next few quiet moments, his sleep-muddled brain tried to discern whether or not he'd imagined the sound all together.

But then he'd felt it. Her hand lay across his chest, her feather light touch dragging him from his semi-conscious state. He almost stiffened, almost turned away from her touch. But something about the way she kept her distance, her touch light and wary, stopped him. It convinced him to remain quiet and still, his breath even.

He listened closely as she loosed a softly shuddering breath before quietly steadying herself, and something resembling sympathy welled in his chest. He knew she didn't deserve it but there it was, regardless. It was vexing, because he understood that tenderness to be little more than a manifestation of his weakness for her. But even still, he didn't pull away. He allowed her to maintain that minute measure of contact.

She was still both the bane and boon of his very existence, and it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore.
Chapter 10

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This update came a little sooner than expected, so yay!

Also, some of the terminology used here references things in the time period and might be unfamiliar, so I included some definitions below and a nifty little diagram of a flintlock mechanism for anyone who's interested. Here is the link:

**Swivel Gun:** A small cannon mounted on a swiveling stand or fork which allows a very wide arc of movement.

**Royalist:** A person who supports the principle of monarchy or a particular monarchy. Most often, the term is applied to a supporter of a current regime or one that has been recently overthrown to form a republic. Term originated in the 1640's.

**Flotilla:** A group of small naval vessels, especially a naval unit containing two or more squadrons.

Charles woke to find her curled into him. Her arm still lay across his chest, her hand never having shifted too far from its place above his heart. But now she was also tucked tightly against his side, her head on his shoulder, her left leg bent and lying transversely over his in a tangle of skirts.

Before he was fully conscious, before he'd actually begun to process the situation, those first few waking moments had held a sickening sort of serenity. Laying there against her had felt natural, all too comfortable and reminiscent of simpler, more affable times.

It left him feeling almost panicked, angry with himself for once again allowing her mere proximity to lull him into a state of heedless placidity. He repeatedly fell victim to her gravitational pull; finding himself perpetually caught up in her orbit, as though she were the Goddamned sun.

It was near nauseating. Moronic. Pathetic.

But there it was, staring him in the face like a patch of rancid flesh that he couldn't quite bring himself to cut away. Without making that cut the infection would only spread, consume him, eventually kill him. But every time he tried to cleave her out, it seemed she only burrowed deeper. She ran rampant in his very blood, poisoning him from the inside out. Perhaps it was already too late,
perhaps he was too far gone to have her removal make any discernible difference.

The thought was almost as irksome as it was depressing.

He gently and swiftly untangled his limbs from hers, slipping free of her grasp as he swung his legs off the edge of the bed. She made a small and unintelligible sound of irritated protest as she shifted with his loss, but otherwise did not rouse to consciousness.

He sat there watching her for a moment, frowning down at her prone silhouette and cursing himself for this loathsome and interminable adulation. Even as the irritation and distaste rolled heavy in his gut, his chest still tightened with the sight of her. His mind drifted extemporaneously back to the hours prior; to the way he'd heard her breath hitch before she'd reached across the bed to lay her open palm over his chest.

She hadn't tried to get closer, hadn't tried to rouse him or draw attention to the contact. Her touch had been light and hesitant, almost apprehensive. It hadn't felt as though the contact had been initiated out of any desire to manipulate or subdue him; he was quite certain she'd assumed he was asleep and none the wiser. And that made it all the worse. It caused his resolve to waver, to weaken just ever so slightly. For in that moment, he'd longed to offer her the comfort of his arms.

And that was dangerous. Foolish and dangerous.

With a frustrated sigh, he turned from her and quietly set about donning a new shirt. A part of him hoped to sneak out of there before she woke. He could have one of the men rouse her and give her instruction after he was gone. He didn't want to give her the chance to impair him any further. He needed a clear head for what was coming.

She opened her eyes to find him dressed and moving about the hut. For a moment she didn't move to sit up or say anything, she just watched him. It was still just dark enough that it was unlikely he'd catch her gaze even if he turned around. As he collected his weapons and a few other essentials, it occurred to her that he intended to leave, to slink off toward the beach without a word.

What made him think he had the right? Was she not as entitled to these last few moments as he was? Who was he to make this decision for the both of them?

Fuck that, and fuck him.
The thought was selfish and irrational, she knew it. But she didn't bother fighting it. It was easier to ride that wave of indignant rage than it was to face the burning in her throat, the ache in her chest. She wasn't quite sure how to react, how to process the onslaught of conflicting emotion. On one hand, the desire to lash out was present; to scream and kick and slap at him. Whether he deserved it or not wasn't really a factor in play, it was just a simple, base reaction. On the other hand was the desire to simply take hold of him and prevent his inevitable departure with sheer force of will. But both of these were childish notions, and neither was really a viable option. This plan had to be carried out with haste and precision. It was the only real chance they had at making any headway in this coming war.

Getting emotional was not an option. It rarely was.

She clung to that rationale, used it to steady herself. She watched him as he approached the bed, stopped beside it. She held her breath, waiting to see why he'd wandered back over here. A part of her wanted him to say something, touch her, anything. Anything to indicate she wasn't the only one feeling so damn compromised.

He reached out and laid his double barreled flintlock pistol down on the table next to the bed.

She swallowed hard, reality dealing her a considerable fist to the gut. That gun was for her. He was leaving her that pistol as a means of ensuring her freedom, a way out should everything go south. Her heart lurched. This was real. It was all really happening.

He moved to turn away from the bed.

She sat up then, his name tumbling from her lips without a plan or even conscious consent. Her hand once again snaked out on its own accord and her fingers curled, desperately fisting at the cuff of his sleeve. At the tug on his arm, he turned to face her and the room was just light enough to see that he wasn't looking at her face, but rather at the hand still clutching his sleeve.

*Why did this keep happening? Was she not in control of her own Goddamned limbs?*

A heavy silence hung in the air. A sickly panic and dread rolled in her gut. She hadn't meant to say anything, hadn't meant to grab hold of him. She knew such action to be futile, that nothing she could say or do would make a difference. What was between them was fractured, maimed beyond repair by virtue of her own ambitions. What they were trying to accomplish here and now was monumental, held the potential to insight a revolution. It wouldn't last forever, but it could make a difference, give people a reason to resist acquiescence for at least a little while longer.
She shouldn't have been allowing emotion to cloud her judgment. There was too much at stake, too much still left to accomplish. Yet she still felt compelled to halt his departure. She was still plagued with these ineffectual thoughts and desires. There were so many things she could have tried to say in that moment.

*Godspeed.*

*Give no quarter.*

*Come back.*

*I love you.*

*I'm sorry.*

But she found herself at a loss for any of it. The words caught, refused to form around the crippling knot in the base of her throat. There was so much to say that just couldn't be said. There was no way to convey into words what laid between them. How effectively he'd wormed his way inside her. How thoroughly they'd both loved and destroyed each other.

But perhaps he already knew. Perhaps it was better this way. Perhaps they didn't need a sappy goodbye; no tender words or comforting lies. They didn't need those things. They never had.

So instead she said nothing. She just sat there on the bed, her hand gripping his sleeve and the silence stretching painfully onward. Slowly and with great hesitation, she unfurled her fingers and slid them down his wrist to grasp at his hand.

He still didn't move or look at her, just continued to stare at her hand as though it were somehow offensive.

She struggled to make out the expression on his face in the fading darkness. From the angle of his head, she assumed he was still eyeing their joined hands, but she longed for him to lift his face and meet her gaze. She might not even be able to see it clearly, but she still wanted it anyway.
She swallowed thickly, her chest tight as she moved to brush her thumb lightly across the back of his knuckles. It was a subtle but expressive gesture, one that caused him to lift his eyes to find hers in the ill-lit room. She could just make out the furrow of his brow, his tightness of jaw and stiffness of shoulders. She didn't need to see the look in his eyes to know he was torn.

That was fine, he had every right to be. She just wanted him to know that this had mattered, that all of it had mattered. Regardless of what happened later today, this had all meant something.

Another quiet moment passed before she finally felt his fingers tighten around hers. He gave her hand a brief but heartening squeeze before his fingers slipped gently free of hers. Her arm dropped heavily to her lap as his hand slid from hers and he turned to move away from her without a word.

His retreating form drifted across the room and wrenched open the door.

With muted grief, she watched his broad shouldered silhouette disappear out into the nautical dawn. As the door latched behind him, she closed her eyes and fought the urge to curl into herself.

This was enough. It had to be enough.

But Jesus, it was so much harder being left behind than it was to be the one to leave.

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Charles' body hummed, tingled with an edgy anticipation. His blood raced through his veins like wildfire, setting his nerve endings ablaze. His muscles tensed, screaming for action, demanding an outlet for this jacked up energy. But he didn't move, not yet.

Not until they were closer.

These moments always held a certain bitter sweetness. There was always an agitation, a strange kind of trepidation stemming from a hyper awareness that the next few moments could potentially be his last. It wasn’t fear per se, but something of a kindred spirit. And while that feeling advised caution and precision, it also served as a rush, a high that nothing else came close to.
Well, except sex. It was a close second to sex.

He watched tensely as English skiffs nudged the shoreline, Redcoats clamoring quickly from their vessels and out onto the burning sand. They began to advance, pushing forward in a line spread out across the beach, no doubt with the intention of getting close enough to effectively form a line of volley fire.

“Hold!” Charles heard Flint bellow down the rigid line of free slaves and pirates.

It was a command to delay their fire until the enemy was more assuredly within range. The closer they were, the harder they’d be to miss; such a tactic helped account for a weapon’s inaccuracy and propensity to misfire.

The air thrummed with tension, a wild and impatient apprehension. As the sweat trickled down his spine, Charles found himself once again grateful for the sea. If not for the breeze coming off the water the heat would have been even worse, stifling. Which wouldn't have helped the men any; they were already twitchy, aching to act. It was a compulsion Charles understood, one he was intimately familiar with.

But instead of catering to that compulsion, he echoed Flint's command. “Hold!”

A jittery little man crouched behind the barricade beside Charles, shifting uncomfortably. He steadied his flintlock musket against his shoulder, flicking his eyes nervously between Charles and the oncoming soldiers. Charles sent the man an admonitory look.

“Easy...” Charles mumbled waringly. “Wait till that musket's liable to actually hit its mark...”

The man swallowed thickly, nodding his understanding and readjusting the weapon on his shoulder.

As the English advanced a few more feet inland, Flint's voice boomed. “Fire!”

The sound that followed was vociferous; a riotous free firing of weapons and the screaming of men. The sound roared across the beach, blending with the chorus of the waves against the sand. The simultaneous discharging of firearms brought with it a thick haze of gun smoke that burned the eyes,
tasted bitter and astringent on the tongue.

But none of that mattered. The bloodshed still progressed; the struggle for dominion and survival provoking both sides and pushing for the endorsement of brutality.

The thrill of the fight rushed through Charles' veins, set his blood ringing in his ears and his mind straining to keep up. His breath quickened as his senses heightened with the slew of chaos erupting around him. In these moments there was no pain, only strength and a wildly sharpened focus. He knew enough not to let the feeling rule him. He was all too aware that the impression of invulnerability was little more than a sensory illusion, that a bullet could still leave him just as dead.

But that didn't mean that there wasn't still a part of him which enjoyed that hair-raising stimulation, the mad rush of it all.

This was what they'd come for. They believed destruction would be the harbinger to their new world. The English thought they'd ferry in a civilized refinement, orchestrate the tidy removal of piracy and the notion of free thought. They thought they'd do so with little resistance.

They were about to be shown just how very wrong that notion was, how dangerous it was to demand fealty where fealty wasn't due.

After firing off another round, Charles crouched low behind the barricade, hands moving quickly and efficiently as he set about reloading a battered old musket. His leather powder flask hung from its cord in his teeth as he pulled back the gun's trigger mechanism to the half-cocked position and sprinkled powder into the flashpan. Closing the frizzen, he moved to shake more powder down into the gun's muzzle before using the ramrod to force the cloth-wrapped lead shot down the barrel to the breech. Setting down his powder flask, he moved to shoulder the weapon. He raised himself to kneel behind the cover, turning his body toward the fray and preparing to take aim.

“Mortars!” He heard Flint roar. “Concentrate on the mortars!”

_They had mortars. Of course they did. Why wouldn't they? Fucking Royalists._

Charles picked a target and took aim. But an explosion to his left rocked him backward, splinters of wooden shrapnel from the barricade slicing into his shoulder and bicep. His ears rung as the world spun for a moment. He turned his head and caught sight of the jittery man from earlier. He was sprawled across the sand not six feet from Charles, a large portion of the side of his skull missing and
the sand beneath him stained nearly black with gore.

If there was a twinge of pity for that man, it was swiftly overlooked, buried under the importance of the task at hand. Charles forced himself to roll over and back into the cover of the barricade. He sat up as his fingers began nimbly prodding at his wounds, quickly assessing the damage. A little shrapnel, some lacerations that would likely need stitches, but overall nothing too serious.

Scooping up the musket he’d dropped, Charles took a quick moment to survey the field. The English had begun forming another line of two ranks, clearly intent on releasing another onslaught of volley fire. The newly formed line obscured the men manning the mortars, allowing them the time to prepare another set of rounds.

Perhaps it was time to show these bastards that pistols, muskets and a few swivel guns weren’t the only weapons at their disposal. “Fire the cannons!” Charles barked above the noise, praying the men manning the ties to the half-buried cannons would be able to hear him.

Charles didn’t know if Flint had heard him, or if he’d simply recognized the coming threat and the time to act. But it was a relief to see Flint raise his arm and give the command to fire the obscured cannons. A second later hidden ties were being pulled from the sand, setting off a chain reaction of cannon fire. The first couple shots went off perfectly but the last cannon failed to fire, its tie caught on something indistinguishable. A nameless pirate vaulted over the barricade in an attempt to clear the obstruction, but was felled by musket fire almost before his feet hit the sand.

Their men were dropping like flies. The English artillery was proving more than they could withstand. It seemed that for as many Redcoats that were downed, more rolled up from the sea. They were an endless barrage of locus, a plague upon the free world.

The English unleashed another devastating round of volley fire, quickly followed by more mortars. The mortars dropped behind what was left of the barricade, ripping men apart and tearing holes in their defensive ranks. It was quickly becoming apparent that they would need to fall back far sooner than they’d originally anticipated. They couldn’t last much longer here on the beach.

Charles stood up and fired once more into the fracas before hurrying down the barricade line towards Flint. Upon reaching him, Charles found another man already trying to convince Flint to give the order for retreat.

“Captain, it’s time.” The man insisted.
“Not yet.” Flint asserted sternly, stubbornly turning his attention back towards the English.

Another blast of mortars rocked the barricade. It sent more shrapnel and debris flying and forced the trio to drop for cover. Men were shouting, others screaming. Bodies lay broken, dead and dying in most every direction. The massacre aspect of this plan had certainly been achieved; they’d decimated their own forces in an attempt to embolden the enemy with a false sense of superiority, and Charles was certain they’d been successful in at least that much.

All that was left now was to coax the English into doing something stupid.

“Captain, we need to fall back!” The man reiterated more firmly, though an edge of panic was now evident in his voice.

Flint ignored the man.

Charles finally intervened, shuffling closer to Flint so that he could be heard above the noise. “We can't take much more of this.” He growled. “If we don't fall back soon, there won't be any of us left to lead them into that jungle.”

Flint gave no indication that he'd even heard him, but Charles knew damn well that he had. Flint's brows were knit with stubborn determination as he continued to observe the English, quietly assessing the damage to both sides and no doubt weighing his options.

“If you don't give the order,” Charles hissed, leaning menacingly closer to Flint. “I will.”

Flint turned his head then, fixing Charles with a grave and dangerous look. Charles simply stared back, his palm resting heavily against the hilt of the blade fixed to his hip. He watched Flint's jaw set as he glanced toward the English and then back at Charles. Flint must have decided they weren’t wrong, because he finally gave Charles a small nod.

They needed no further exchange of words.

“Smoke!” Flint bellowed, turning away from Charles dismissively.
The men began echoing Flint's command down the line and within seconds the order was carried out, gas bombs being swiftly tossed over the barricade. Suddenly the air was thick with the haze of smoke. The fumes acted as a kind of shield, preventing the English from getting a clear line of sight and allowing for the opportunity to retreat with less chance of being shot in the back.

“Fall back!” Flint shouted. “Fall back!”

Charles and every other man who'd heard it began hollering out the order, making sure it was well understood by both their own men and the English. They were retreating.

The English ordered a hold fire. It wasn't entirely clear whether they'd done so because they couldn't see what they were shooting at, or because they intended to prepare to follow the retreat and finish what they'd started. Charles could only pray it was the latter. They had near another hundred men waiting in the jungle to ambush, and more hanging back to guard the outskirts of the village.

Eleanor was going mad, absolutely stir-crazy. She huffed out a restless breath and raked her fingers through unbound and disheveled hair, pacing the hut like a caged animal. She was not a creature fashioned for patience or passivity. She needed a purpose, a task, something productive with which to occupy her mind.

How could she possibly have thought that tarrying about this hut was a good idea? She was as useless here as she would have been cowering with the women and children. Initially, she'd thought maybe she could be useful here; perhaps allocate her time to going through their ship's logs or planning their next move. But after she finished sifting through the logs and tallying inventory, she'd run out of things to busy herself with. She'd tried to occupy herself with formulating a cohesive plan for future action should they manage to survive this encounter, but she found herself terribly distracted.

She could hear the cannon blasts and gunfire echoing up from the beach, and it was a less than comforting acoustic. If she wasn't mistaken, those sounds were getting closer, more aggressive and pronounced. She was inclined to believe that meant they'd managed to lure those royalist bastards into the jungle, but that didn't mean there wasn't still a chance things could go south. She had little doubt that Hornigold was among the men sent here, and he was a cautious man. He knew Flint just a little too well, and Eleanor was concerned that he might be inclined to somehow throw a wrench into things.

The fact that the gunfire seemed to be getting closer and closer to the village was unsettling. If things had gone exactly as planned, the English should have been completely massacred in the jungle, a
considerable distance still from the village. But the sounds appeared to still be advancing, and that was disconcerting.

A single gunshot sounded loudly from within the village and Eleanor jumped. Without much forethought, she rushed towards the door and yanked it open. Lou stood before her, his back turned to her and a musket in his grip. She stood frozen in the doorway with a frown as he turned his head to glance at her over his shoulder.

“Ma'am?” He asked with an arch of brow.

Ma'am? Really?

She continued to frown but attempted to ignore the fact that she'd so obviously been assigned a prison guard. There were more important things to be concerned about at the moment. “The gunfire, where is it coming from? Have they breached our perimeter?” She asked seriously, her tone regal and demanding.

He gave her a strange look, and it occurred to her that he was probably wondering why a whore sounded so refined, demanding and authoritative. She reeled herself in a little, tossed a lacing of fear into her voice and asked “Should we be concerned?”

He stared at her for another considering moment before answering. Eleanor got the distinct impression that perhaps Lou wasn't quite the utter moron he made himself out to be. She'd have to be more careful around him if that was really the case.

“Seen movement in the trees and one of the men fired on it.” Lou clarified, somewhat warily. “Fighting still sounds far enough off, but it coulda been a scout.”

Her frowned deepened. “It doesn't sound very far off.”

Lou shrugged but his face remained serious. “Far enough.”

She wasn't quite sure how to respond to this. It was clear that Lou wasn't going to be of much help to her, and if she berated him like she wanted to it would draw unwanted attention. It was also clear that leaving the hut wasn't a viable option either. So instead, she simply turned around and headed back inside, closing the door firmly behind her.
She paced and fret and cursed all over that hut for what felt like an eternity. And all the while the cannon and gunfire continued in the distance, the sound of it seeming only to further mock and harass her. Just when she'd finally begun to consider throwing caution to the wind in favor of storming from that hut in a blaze pent up restless energy, gunfire erupted from within the village. It sounded too close to have been coming from anywhere else.

Immediately, her heart leapt into her throat and she suddenly found herself clutching at the flintlock pistol Charles had left for her. Her chest heaved as she retreated to the back of the room, leaning her back against the far wall so that she could face the door.

If their perimeter had been breached and the English were inside, then there was a good chance they'd failed, that this was the end. And if that was the case, then everyone who mattered worth a damn to both her and the cause was likely already dead. The thought had her chest tightening and her throat burning. She would not go back to that life. She would not cower or beg or submit. She would not give them the satisfaction.

She swallowed hard, listening past the pounding in her ears to the commotion outside. The shouting and gunfire had died down a little, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing. The lack of gunfire just meant one side had been subdued, it didn't specify which side. Her hands shook as she raised the pistol, pressing its barrel into the soft flesh of her temple. Her eyes remained fixed to the door.

Let them come. Let them try to take her alive. They wouldn't succeed. She'd spatter her own brains across this hut before she ever gave them the chance. Her only regret, aside from her betrayal of Charles, would be that she hadn't found a way to take more of these pompous pricks out with her when she went.

She cocked back her weapon, prepared herself for what was almost certainly the inevitable outcome.

And the door crashed open.

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_Earlier That Day..._

“What the fuck is that?” Dooley inquired, pointing out toward a small fleet of English ships who'd
seemingly opened fire upon their own. “Why are they shooting each other?” He said frowning.

Flint and Charles moved to stand on either side of Dooley, squinting and shielding their eyes from the sun as they took in the fight still taking place across the water.

“That’s the Walrus firing along side the smaller fleet…” Flint said frowning.

Charles arched a brow, a dry and bemused laugh slipping from slightly curved lips. “How the fuck did they manage that?” He stated incredulously and to no one in particular. The question was rhetorical, more a outward musing than anything else.

“They didn’t.” Flint protested. “Annexing six warships in a matter of hours with that few men? It’s impossible. Get me a spyglass.” He called to one of his men.

Charles shrugged, face blank as he turned his gaze back out to sea. Jack was a clever man, but Charles was inclined to agree with Flint. Such a feat was unlikely.

A few seconds later, a spyglass was being pressed into Flint’s hand and a disbelieving bark of laughter burst from his throat as he raised the device to his eye. “They’re flying the black. They’re ours.” Flint said with an aporetic sort of awe.

Charles held his handout for the spyglass and Flint handed it over, watching Charles silently and perhaps a little expectantly as he brought the glass up.

“Not just any black…” Charles muttered as he lowered the glass from his face, a slight smugness pulling at the corner of this mouth. “That's Teach's flag.”
AN: Ok, so I'm pretty behind on the whole monthly update thing... Sorry! There's still more coming, I promise! Seriously though, all your reviews, positive feedback & constructive crits are what's kept this story going for as long as it has. I love hearing from you guys. It's totally helpful and encouraging. So, thanks again! You guys are awesome!

Also, I am aware that historically Henry Morgan was a privateer and not an actual pirate. But for the purposes of furthering this story I'm insinuating that he was a corrupt privateer. Meaning that even though he was raiding under the legal sanction of England, he was also fraternizing with pirates in Nassau and engaging in shady deals with Richard Guthrie. The time line for his life and the life of Alexandre Exquemelin are also slightly off, as they lived in the late 1600's and early 1700's. But as the show has taken a few liberties with the time lines, I figure it's alright if I do too.

On a side note, at the end of this chapter I've posted some random info about the time period in regards to the things I needed to research in order to write this chapter with any decent accuracy. Feel free to skip over it, but I thought it was pretty interesting so I tossed it in there at the end.

**Period Specific Terminology:**

- **Barber-Surgeon**: A doctor who acquired their skills through an apprenticeship instead of through a formal schooling education. These doctors treated and operated on their patients, but the law prohibited them from writing prescriptions. Most of their money was made by performing amputations, boil lancing, bloodletting, and teeth pulling.

- **Physician**: A doctor who graduated from university. If a patient fell ill or was injured, the physician prescribed medicines to assist in the patient’s recovery, but he rarely examined, or even saw any patients.

- **Spill**: A spill is a rolled paper taper or very thin wood stick that is used to transfer fire from one place to another. They’re often used to light candles, lamps, pipes and cigars.

**Mentioned Historical Figures:**

- **Henry Morgan**: A famous welsh privateer (sanctioned by England) who sacked Panama City in 1671. From his base in Port Royal, Jamaica, he raided settlements and shipping on the Spanish Main, becoming wealthy as he did so. He owned a warship called The Oxford. But after the Oxford was sunk, he captured a French privateer flagship and renamed it Satisfaction.

- **Alexandre Exquemelin**: An indentured servant who was sold to a barber-surgeon, to whom he later became an apprentice. The barber-surgeon ended up setting Exquemelin free, and Exquemelin went on to sail with Henry Morgan as his sea-surgeon. He was present at the sacking of Panama City. In 1697 he returned to the West Indies aboard the Sceptre, commanded by Admiral Bernard de Pointis, and participated in the sack of Cartagena. He went on to write one of the most important source books of 17th-century piracy, *Buccaneers of America*, in 1678.
Previously...

Let them come. Let them try to take her alive. They wouldn't succeed. She'd spatter her own brains across this hut before she ever gave them the chance. Her only regret, aside from her betrayal of Charles, would be that she hadn't found a way to take more of these pompous pricks out with her when she went.

She cocked back her weapon, prepared herself for what was almost certainly the inevitable outcome.

And the door crashed open...

Her heart lurched in her chest as her breath caught stiffly in her lungs. Charles stood partially silhouetted in the the open doorway. The light filtering through behind him made him look almost celestial, surreal. Or perhaps that was simply due to the release of tension that rushed through her with the sight of him.

He stood there filthy, tousled and bloody, but he still stood.

Relief flooded through her veins, left her hands shaking and her throat tight. Distantly she recognized that his presence didn't necessarily mean they'd won, but he was alive and that was something. She realized suddenly and with a bit of a start, that she hadn't truly expected him to be. She'd expected them both to die in this place. But even in expecting death, she still she hadn't said half the things that needed saying.

Stupid.

Cowardly.

Breath shuddered from her lips on a tremulous exhale as she numbly lowered the pistol from it's
place against her temple. The weapon hung limply in her hand for another moment before slipping from her grasp and landing with a thud in the sand at her feet. His eyes flicked briefly toward the discarded weapon before returning to her face, and somewhere in the back of her mind it occurred to her that she was lucky the thing hadn't gone off when she'd dropped it. She'd left it cocked.

*Again, stupid.*

They stood there for another moment. The only sounds being their own heavy breathing and the ruckus from whatever commotion was still going on outside.

Before she even realized what she was doing, her feet were carrying her across the hut towards him. Somehow she managed not to tear across the room in an undignified, hurtling blur, like was her initial instinct. And she didn't quite fling herself heedlessly into his arms, either. But her pace was still brisk and desperate, not quite as controlled as she would have liked.

When she reached the space directly before him, she didn't allow herself the time to consider her own actions or desires, she simply acted upon them. Her arms snaked up and around him in a bruising embrace, her cheek pressed firmly against his shoulder. With her brow creased and her eyes squeezed shut, she allowed herself the briefest of moments to indulge this weakness.

She didn't cry or quiver or speak, she simply clung.

She didn't expect him to return the embrace, so she wasn't surprised when she was met with the stiffening of his body beneath hers. Honestly, she didn't really care. She'd needed to touch him, and so she had. That was all. It didn't need to make sense, and she didn't need him to understand.

But then he sighed and his arms slowly lifted from his sides to encircle her waist. She knew as he did so, that she'd been foolish to think he wouldn't understand. Of course he did. He always did. His perceptivity had often been as irritating as it was comforting.

He tried to remain impassive, detached. But he'd already seen the look on her face, witnessed the relief that had shuddered through her as she'd recognized him standing in the doorway. She was shaken, he could plainly see as much. But still she had held firm to her composure, that sheer strength of will that made her who she was.

Despite himself, he was once again moved by her passion and resolve. She was a force of nature, a force to be reckoned with. And in that moment prior, as he'd watched her standing there with his
pistol pressed against her temple, he felt absolutely certain that had anyone other than himself walked through this door, she'd have pulled that trigger.

The thought had his gut clenching.

It was one thing to concede to her deserved death at his own hand. That had felt justified; her betrayals had earned her such a fate. It was something she was owed. And that knowledge had served to soothe his ego, to dampen some of the rage that coursed through his veins with the thought of her. But it was somehow something entirely different to imagine her death unfolding in a manner such as this. He was struck by the image of her lifeless, bloody body. He envisioned her slumped against the wall of this dirty hut and surrounded by sanctimonious English bastards.

And it did something very unpleasant to his insides.

So when she dropped that pistol and closed the distance between them, he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. Her arms came up around him and she held on. Her breath came just quickly enough to betray emotion, but not so much as to make a cloying spectacle of herself. For a moment he just stood there, wholly uncertain of what it would cost him to give her this moment.

But when her hands fisted in the back of his shirt, his fastness wavered. With a relinquished sigh, his arms folded around her to return the embrace. He rested his cheek briefly against the crown of her head and resigned himself to whatever this moment was going to cost him. Hopefully it wouldn't be anything too crucial, certainly nothing he couldn't live without. Surely he could afford just this one brief moment in the grand scheme of things.

The hug was brief, the reality of it lasting only seconds at best. But it was enough. She was steadier now, more clear headed, composed. She opened her eyes and stepped back from him, but she didn't meet his eyes.

His hands lingered upon her waist just a second too long before slipping away, and she felt the loss of that contact far more keenly than was comfortably admitted. When she finally lifted her face to look into his, her frowned deepened with the sight of him. It was as though she were only just now noticing his unsettling state of injured disarray.

He was a mess; filthy and covered in blood and bits of dirt and sand. His bottom lip was split and there was a nasty looking gash above his left eyebrow, from which there was a slow but steady flow of blood. His shirt was tattered along his left shoulder and there was a considerable measure of blood soaking through it's material. Most of it seemed to be coming from the shoulder and bicep area.
“You're bleeding.” She stated it almost absently, more to herself than to anyone else as she stepped forward again with new purpose. Her hand stretched out to pull the material away from his shoulder for a better look. He hissed as the bloody fabric stuck to his skin and pulled at the wounds.

Frowning, he reached up to snatch her hands away at the wrists and halt any continued movement.

Her breath had snagged as she caught sight of what was quite obviously shrapnel damage speckled along his skin. But she adjusted rather quickly, letting reason and necessity outweigh any possible emotion. There was a lot of blood, but the wounds themselves seemed small and mostly superficial. She was more grateful for that than she cared to analyze.

With her eyes still fixed upon his wounds she opened her mouth, presumably to tell him he needed medical attention. But his next words distracted her, caused her gaze to dart confusedly back up to his.

“We won.” He ground out quietly, trying to ignore the concern he could still see plainly etched across her face. He wanted to gauge her reaction, witness her understanding of the situation. He wanted further confirmation that she was really on his side, that this wasn't all somehow just another elaborate ploy. It was somewhat irrational, considering he had almost just witnessed her suicide. But the doubt was still there. It still lingered just under his skin, itching and burning and planting seeds. He wondered briefly if it would always be there, or if she'd find a way to snuff it out and crawl back inside him to replace it.

He wasn't entirely sure which scenario sounded worse.

“What?” She asked disjointedly, her expression conveying clearly that she didn't quite believe him. Or maybe just that she didn't think she'd heard him right. Either way, the reaction was warranted. Hell, he barely believed it himself.

“We won.” He repeated clearly, studying her face like the answers to life's greatest mysteries might be carved along her skin.

“We won?” She echoed numbly through furrowed brows, as if she was almost afraid to believe the words were true. When he nodded, her face softened slightly, a slow and involuntary grin creeping steadily across her mouth. “We won.” She parroted again, though this time sounding far more convinced and enthused.
Before he could think to stop it, he found himself grinning along with her. Her delighted enthusiasm was rare and apparently contagious. She was practically glowing, all gleeful exultation and prideful excitement. In the back of his mind he recognized the familiar warmth spreading through his gut, and knew it to be dangerous. He was distantly aware of how close she was standing, and of how problematic that could become. But these dangers felt secondary, almost wholly drowned out by the way she stood so jittery and thrilled before him.

Still grinning, she slipped her wrists free of the loose hold he still had on them. She brought her hands up to tightly grip either side of his face. “Charles, we won!” She exclaimed with a fierce and spirited glee as she gave his head a little shake. She sounded as if she was trying to convince him of something he didn't already know.

He gave a soft chuckle and agreed simply. “We did.”

He watched on as the look in her eyes shifted. The edges of those eyes were still crinkled by her smile, but something else now shone in them as well. And once again, he knew what she was going to do even before she did it. But in the raw and jubilant triumph of the moment, he didn't bother trying to stop it. For the first time in months, he actually welcomed the crash of her mouth against his.

Their accomplishment was worth a little celebration. They'd defied the odds, conquered a force who's firepower had far outmatched their own. It was only the beginning of a long and bloody battle, that much was true, but they'd made one hell of a start. A few free men had dealt a catastrophic blow to the established order, a bloody reminder of exactly what it would cost them to try and claim what wasn't theirs to take.

Such a feat deserved reward. Though admittedly, this form of reward was likely not the wisest choice. But if the far off voice of reason whispered anything at all, it was lost in the heavy rush of hands and teeth.

He kicked the door closed behind him as one of her hands smeared through the crimson staining the side of his face. If either of them noticed, they didn't let on. She moved to tangle her hands in his hair, pulling herself closer as she fought for dominance. His hands fixed themselves to her hips, fingers digging almost painfully as he pressed against her. The high that coursed through her was wild, all consuming. She hadn't truly expected them to live through today, let alone to triumph. This victory had given her new hope, a renewed sense of faith.

In this moment, the world was bright and wrought with endless possibility.
As was so often the case with Eleanor, she responded to this onslaught of emotion with action rather than discussion. She fell back on old habits, allowed herself to act on impulse and without concern for consequence. And when he didn't pull away, she was encouraged, further emboldened.

It was only when her hand slid down over his wounded shoulder that he flinched, and reality dealt her a vicious slap to the face. He hadn't exactly recoiled, the movement had only been fractional and likely only instinctual. It was probably something he'd have been willing to ignore, as he'd never been one to yield to notion of pain. But it was still enough to make her reconsider.

Breathless, she pulled away from him to examine the state of his shoulder. He gave a low grunt of protest, but otherwise made no move to stop her. She didn't overlook the way his hands remained on her hips even as she moved to place a good few inches between them. The continued contact warmed her heart even as she reminded herself not to be foolish.

She glanced from his wounded flesh back up to his face. His eyes were hooded and dark, his lips slightly parted as he watched her. She knew exactly what he was thinking because she'd been thinking it herself, but now was hardly the time for a tumble. Even if she had been the one to start it.

He'd suffered some considerable bleeding. And from the looks of it, he was going to need stitches. The last thing they needed was to get his blood pumping any faster. Though the look on his face suggested he might disagree with that assessment.

With another steadying breath, she stepped back and out of his grasp. “Sit.” She ordered softly, gesturing towards a rickety looking chair from which his coat hung on the back of. It sat next to a sturdy looking table on the opposite end of the room. “Take your shirt off.”

When he only arched a brow and made no move to obey, she rolled her eyes. “Would you prefer to stand there and bleed out?” She asked sarcastically.

It was his turn to roll his eyes. “If I were going to bleed out, I would've done it already.” He growled. Now that the heat of the moment had passed, he was kicking himself for being so compliant. His hands were still itching to roam across her skin and a good portion of his blood was still residing below his belt, but his head was clear enough now to see the folly in such action. There were presently more pressing matters to attend to, more important discussions to be had.

“And that sounds to you like a good enough reason to refuse stitches, does it?” Her inquiry was unmistakably satirical, but she arched a speculative brow at him anyway. Just in case he'd missed the derision in her tone.
He was half inclined to tell her it did, just to spite her. The flustered irritation it would no doubt cause her, almost felt worth it. But the fact of the matter was that he really did need stitches, as satisfying as denying he might be. So he bit his tongue, choked back whatever scathing remark laid waiting upon it, and shrugged out of his shirt. Without another word, he stalked over to the indicated chair and sat. Better just to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“There's a needle and some waxed silk thread in the trunk by the bed.” He divulged bitterly. “Should be a bottle of rum in there as well.”

She gave him a look that bordered on smug, no doubt pleased with his acquiescence despite his bitter tone. However, she must have known enough not to push the matter any further because she said nothing more as she moved to collect said items from the trunk.

Having gathered those items as well as a few scraps of relatively clean linen and a pair of scissors, she returned to his side and laid her haul down on the table beside him. He watched her as she uncorked the rum, his eyes narrowed and mildly suspicious. He wondered idly if she even knew what she was doing. Given the sureness of her movements, he decided she must. But he was still wary. Nothing with this woman was ever quite as straightforward as it seemed.

Relatively unfazed by his scrutiny, she ignored it and reached for his arm. “This is going to sting.” She warned coolly as she lifted the bottle.

He only grunted in response. As if he didn't already know that. As if he hadn't already endured this a thousand times and come away from it with enough scars for the both of them.

In the next moment, she tipped the bottle and coated his wounds in liquid fire. His muscles tensed and there was a sharp intake of breath, but he made no other sound, never moved to flinch away. She chanced a glance at his face and found him glaring intently at the opposite end of the room, jaw tight and browns drawn but otherwise unmoved. A small smile tugged at her lips. He always had been stubborn.

There was a part of her that couldn't help but admire him for that. He didn't tolerate weakness, wouldn't allow the room for it. It didn't matter how big or small it felt, weakness was still weakness and he'd no more taste for it than she did. Perhaps that was why they'd so rarely seen eye to eye. They'd both been so consumed with the notion of remaining unconquered, with the projection of an air of invulnerability. They'd spent too much time trying to convince one another to concede rather than to seek compromise.
It was why loving him had been so devastating. She loved him like she'd loved no another. But that very love had also been a weakness, a near crippling vulnerability. And as a result, she'd eventually began trying to cut away the liability that came with that affection. She hadn't actually succeeded, of course. But she had given it one hell of a try, all the while doing her very best to ignore the progressively mangled state of her own heart. In the end, all she'd truly succeeded in doing was destroying them both. She'd ultimately done little more than alienate herself and hasten the lot of them towards the very end she'd been trying so desperately to avoid.

Despite her melancholy musings, her face remained impassive as she focused on the task at hand. She set down the bottle and reached for a piece of linen. “Tilt your head back. I've still this one to douse.” She stated collectedly, gesturing towards the lazily oozing fissure above his brow.

He turned his head to stare at her again, his expression stoical and searching. For a moment she thought he might try to make things more difficult, but then he slowly tilted his head back and she released a soft breath of relief. His eyes remained fixed upon her face as she leaned over him and tipped up the bottle.

After she'd sloshed rum over the wound and watched his chest expand with the sharp pull of his breath, she made quick work of patting away any excess alcohol with a piece of linen. She then moved to set about threading the needle. The room was silent as she slipped the thread through the needle's eye, tied off it's end, and ignored the fact that he was still staring at her. She wanted desperately to ask him about the battle in vivid detail. But at the moment she decided tending to his injuries as more imperative. She could grill him for details afterward.

In all honesty, he was wondering how the hell she knew what to do with lacerated flesh and a pointed needle. Suturing and bandages weren't exactly the hallmarks of womanly learning. Not that much of anything she said or did would fit into that category. But this sort of thing wasn't generally a part of owning a tavern or running a business, either. Which left him at a curious and reluctantly intrigued loss.

He surmised that when in frequent proximity to violence, one might eventually acquire some basic skill with patch work, if only as a direct consequence and means of necessity. However, to his knowledge, that had not been the case with Eleanor. Up until recently, the closest she'd come to first-hand violence had been her run in with Ned Low. There had also been the incident in which she'd struck Charles and had him retaliate in kind. But neither of those singular instances would explain where she'd acquired this unusual know-how.

Having finished prepping the needle, she stepped up to him again. Reaching out she tipped up his chin, aiming for a better angle of work. Her lips were pursed in concentration as she leaned forward to touch the metal faintly to his flesh. There was a moment of pause before she flicked her eyes to his, a silent query as to his readiness. It was an unnecessary nicety, given that she saw the go-ahead in his eyes almost as soon as she looked up, but she still felt better having offered it.
She held his gaze for just a moment longer. Once again she noticed that the only sound between them was their respiration coupled with the bustling and muffled voices beyond the hut. On a deep and steady exhale she broke eye contact and shoved the needle through, breaching flesh and drawing together the center edges of the wound.

Again his jaw tightened, but he still seemed otherwise indifferent. So she set to work, moving with a quick and steady efficiency. Her stitches weren't particularly beautiful, looking a touch uneven and perhaps a little hasty, but they were effective. She'd taken care to ensure she hadn't drawn the lips of the wound together too tightly, as she wanted to avoid any further inflammation and allow for the possibility of drainage. She'd started from the middle of the wound at it's widest point and worked her way outward, then repeated the maneuver on the opposite end of the wound. She was just starting on closing up the last few stitches when his voice broke through the silence.

"Where did you learn to do this?" He inquired plainly.

His tone was low and relatively bland. Had she not known him as well as she did, she might have wondered if he was just trying to fill the silence with idle conversation. As it was though, she knew he wasn't one for pointless pleasantry. He rarely bothered asking questions unless he was genuinely interested in knowing the answers.

She sent him a knowing look before responding in a tone just as airy and mild as his own had been, though a touch of sarcasm was still apparent in the quirk of her brow. "Stitching is a woman's skill, is it not?" She quipped.

He scoffed. "Only in the minds of halfwits." He almost accompanied the comment with a disapproving shake of his head, but thought better of it when her needle moved to perforate more flesh. Instead, he just added to his thought. "It ought to be taught to anyone with half a mind to listen. Who should give a shit what's between your legs if you've willing and able hands?" He ground out.

His tone sounded clipped, a little testy. She wondered if that was due to the subject matter or the fact that she'd been shoving sharp metal into his skin for the past few minutes. Knowing Charles, it was probably a bit of both. Not that he'd ever admit he wasn't perfectly comfortable with all her poking and prodding.

She smiled a little at that. What he'd said was true enough. Stitching, whether it be a tear in your shirt or a tear in your flesh, was a considerably useful skill for anyone to have. Though many would be quick to disagree, claiming such bloody work to be distasteful and undesirable of a woman, Charles had always been of a freer mindset. As far as he was concerned, if you were strong enough or smart enough to get something you wanted done, there was little reason not to do it. He'd never cared
much for the dogma of the civilized world, didn't give two shits about social discourse or governing statutes. He lived by his own rules, his own decree.

It was one of the very first things that had attracted her to him in the first place. He'd been so powerful, free and dangerous, the very incarnation of everything she herself had wanted out of life. She'd been drawn to him, begrudgingly envious even as she was awed and privately enamored. As a young girl, it had been a heady mix.

Who was she kidding? Even with her envy long abandoned and forgotten, the rest of what she felt for him was still a heady enough mix. Everything about him was as infuriating as it was beautiful and intoxicating. She'd never taken very well to that truth. She'd never really stopped fighting against it.

“Well?” He prodded gruffly when the silence stretched between them and she still hadn't answered his question.

He doubted she'd learned to suture skin simply from stitching quilts. Sure, there was a element of transferable skill between the two tasks, but skin wasn't nearly the same as fabric. He also found it genuinely implausible that she'd ever actually sat still long enough to learn to sew anything of the like.

There was still a slight smirk to her mouth as she tied off the last stitch in his brow and shrugged. “Perhaps I like to read.”

His lip twitched even as he released a skeptical grunt. Tangled in bemused curiosity and mild irritation, he rebutted. “Bullshit. Theory and practice are two different things.”

She said nothing as she stepped back from him and turned to face the table and the instruments still atop it. “Have you anything I can use to remove the shrapnel?” She asked, momentarily avoiding answering him as she casually laid the needle down on the table beside him. “As small pair of forceps, perhaps?”

He gave her another skeptical look. “And you would know what to do with forceps, if I did?”

She snorted, caught between being amused by his curiosity and annoyed at his obvious skepticism. “I don't imagine yanking a few splinters out of you would be terribly complicated.” She knew his injuries to be more serious than a few splinters, but it made her feel better to claim otherwise. It certainly didn't hurt her pride any to do so, either. So a win-win.

He stared at her through narrowed eyes for moment longer before gesturing back towards the trunk
again. “If it's there, it would be in the trunk with the rest.”

She nodded, returning to the trunk and rummaging around in it. After a couple more minutes of digging, she glided back towards him with thumb forceps in hand. In all honesty, she was surprised he even had such a thing. It wasn't exactly something the average pirate would even know what to do with, let alone have stowed away in their traveling trunk. Then again, so little about this man had ever been average.

Without another word, she began prying the pieces of wooded shrapnel from his flesh. As she began to work, he turned his face down to watch the process. He studied the movements of her hands as she picked and prodded at the holes in his skin, tossing the offending fragments down into the sand as they were removed. For the most part, he appeared to remain focused, mostly unaffected by her digging around. But she didn't missed the way he ground his teeth whenever she'd excavate a particularly well bedded fragment.

She decided that distraction, in this instance, was a kindness she could afford to offer. So, with a soft and steady timbre, she gave him an honest answer to his earlier question. “Spend enough time mulling about a camp wrought with murders and thieves, and you pick up a few things.”

He snickered at that. They both knew who's camp she was referring to. In those first few years, she'd spent almost as much time in Charles' tent and camp as she had in her own bar. “And this iatric know-how was just one of those things?” He asked with a quirk of brow. How was it that she had picked up such a thing without his knowledge? And during a time in which they'd spent countless hours together?

She shrugged, frowning in concentration as she wedged free a particularly deep rooted piece of debris. “Among other things...” She answered a little distractedly. The wound oozed red with the removal and she moved to retrieve the discarded needle. She began knitting it closed as she continued. “A ship is a place in which injury and death are commonplace. It wasn't irregular to happen upon survivors of such injuries receiving treatment in camp after docking. I took an interest.”

So she'd just, what, spotted a barber-surgeon and begun following him around taking notes? Unlikely. “How exactly did that work?” He asked. “I don't imagine the barber-surgeon was too keen on the tutelage of some wayward girl.” The words themselves were a little harsh, but they were spoken without any real malice. He was honestly just curious. The conversation was a welcome distraction from her poking and prodding, anyway.

She smirked. “Oh, he wasn't. But after I informed him of who my father was, he was considerably more cooperative. An added flash of coin to that knowledge, and suddenly he was happy to assist.”
He arched a brow at that. “Why should a barber-surgeon be concerned with what pleases Richard Guthrie? He wouldn't have been reliant on Richard for his livelihood. Physicians are always in high demand. They've no trouble finding work, especially not in a place like Nassau.”

She nodded in agreement, but a small and self-satisfied smirk pulled at the edges of her mouth just before she continued with the explanation. She was clearly pleased with herself in regards to this particular matter, he thought. And why shouldn't she be? She'd acquired a valuable skill, one that was generally not afforded to women at all. She always had been a clever and resourceful woman. She never had concerned herself much with the social expectations that accompanied her sex. She preferred to do as she pleased, and he'd always loved that about her. Despite the trouble it so often caused him, he wouldn't have ever asked her to change.

“Because he wasn't just a barber-surgeon, but a pirate as well.” She went on. “And it seemed my father was a rather important benefactor of the crew on which he served as sea-surgeon.”

Intrigued, Charles asked “And what crew was that?”

“Henry Morgan's. The flagship, Satisfaction.” She replied, glancing up briefly to gauge his reaction.

Charles frowned. Henry Morgan was a Welsh privateer employed by the English crown. Ordinarily, a man of such allegiances would not have been so well received in Nassau. However Morgan was a man with many fingers in many pots. He'd had regular dealings with Richard Guthrie, often using the man as a go-between for the sale of goods he'd failed to report as commandeered. Morgan was also rumored to be a particularly ruthless man, cruel and callous and often prone toward the practices of torture and brutality. The men among his crew were little better. They ran with him more for the coin and glory than for any real sense of honor or loyalty to the crown. These privateer shits were hypocrites, the lot of them.

Men were being hung left and right for giving off the mere whiff of piracy. While privateers, who were essentially just glorified pirates themselves, were celebrated and deigned honorable heroes by the civilized world. All because a slip of a paper had proclaimed to grant them legal sanction. Theft, rape and murder were all fine and well, so long as it was all done in the name of some fat fuck of a monarch. To act in one's own self-interest, simply because you could, was apparently a heinous offense.

The whole thing was a mockery that churned his stomach, a sanctimonious farce that claimed to be one thing publicly while practicing something entirely different in private.

In reality, a privateer was no better than any pirate. They were all just as selfish and corrupt as the rest of the world, they just used the crown as a means of pretending to be civilized about it. In the end, all that separated a pirate from a privateer was the privateer's willingness serve on bended knee
beneath a colored flag. It was essentially just a man's willingness to submit below the boot of another. Nothing more and nothing less.

“What was this sea-surgeon's name?” Charles asked, wondering idly if he knew the sea-surgeon she spoke of.

“Alexandre Exquemelin” She frowned a little as she fumbled slightly with the pronunciation of the man's last name. She plucked free the final piece of shrapnel and began stitching up the last wound deep enough to need sutures. “Do you remember all that hubbub with Morgan and his crew a few years back?”

Charles nodded and she continued. “A memoir published by a crew member of Morgan's accused him of widespread torture and criminal offenses, implied he was a traitor to the crown. It painted him more pirate than privateer, and brought into question the verity of his supposed allegiance to England.”

“I remember.” Charles interjected a little impatiently. “Morgan shucked the whole thing off as slander and sued for damages. But instead of the noose, they knighted him and appointed him the position of lieutenant governor over in Port Royal. What of it?”

She shrugged and replied evenly. “Exquemelin was the man who published the memoir.”

“Hmm.” He grunted, considering her words before muttering “Small world.”

“I suppose.” She agreed, tying off her last stitch and reaching for a clean stretch of rolled linen to wrap his shoulder and arm in. A silence spanned between them as she dressed the lesions and she finally decided there had been enough small talk. She wanted to know the details of what had transpired down on the beach and in the jungle.

“There.” She stated conclusively as she covered up the last patch of broken skin, secured the bandage and patted his arm to signal the completion of the task. “Finished.”

He simply grunted and stood, making his way over to the bedside table to fish out a cigar and prop it between his teeth. Mildly irritated by his apparent lack of appreciation, she crossed her arms and leaned against the table behind her. For few moments she watched him set about looking for something to light the smoke with, but the silence didn't last long before she interjected. “Now that I'm certain you're not about to bleed to death, would you care to apprise me on the details of today's
He ignored her question and continued searching for a method of ignition. As the seconds ticked by and he still hadn't found one, she rolled her eyes and straightened up. “Oh, for Christ's sake.” She grumbled, moving to retrieve a light from the pocket of the coat he'd left hanging on the back of his chair.

He turned around to find her standing directly in front of him with a lit wood spill extended out towards him, her hand cupping the flame. She had an impatient look on her face, but he pretended not to notice as he leaned forward to touch the smoke's tip to the flame and inhale. His eyes flicked back to hers as he straightened and exhaled a lazy stream of smoke into the air around them. She held his gaze for another impatient moment before blowing out the wood spill and arching her brow at his continued silence.

“Well?” She inquired with exasperation. “What happened?”

After another brief moment of silence, it seemed he decided to grace her with an answer. “Teach happened.” He stated smoothly, as though he hadn't just declared the impossible.

For a heartbeat, she simply stared.

Teach. Teach had made an appearance here on Maroon Island. That had the potential to be either a blessing or a curse. Perhaps even both. Teach had been a thorn in her side for years before she'd managed to convince Charles to side with her and have Teach pushed from Nassau. He had been the one thing that had stood between her and the ruling of Nassau. He had also been standing between her and Charles. Teach had never liked her, and he'd made no secret of it. He'd made a habit of undermining her at every turn. And back then, she hadn't yet possessed the strength or backing to stand against him. So she'd used Charles to achieve those goals, to remove that hairy man-shaped obstruction from her path. In doing so she'd attained both Charles and Nassau in one fell swoop, the two things she'd wanted most out of life at the time.

And for a while that had been enough, she'd been happy. At least until she started to notice that she'd never be who she needed to be while under Charles' arm. So she'd cut out her own heart, moved on to ensure her place in Nassau, and later Nassau's legitimacy.

Neither of those decisions had been wise or without regret, but at the time she had been convinced they were necessary. Done was done. There was no going back, and thus no point in dwelling.
But the day she and Charles had cast Teach out was the day she'd hoped to have seen the last of Teach. Apparently, she'd no such luck. She'd known of Teach's return and of Charles' reunion with him, but she'd been under the impression that Teach had no desire to involve himself in the war with England. It was her understanding that Teach had refused Flint's request for an alliance even as Charles had accepted it. So why was he here? What had changed his mind?

“Teach?” She echoed, her voice laced with disbelieve. “Teach came to our aid?”

“He did.” Charles moved to seat himself upon the corner of the bed and take in another drag of smoke. “Brought six warships along with him too.” Smoke billowed up around him on another exhale, dancing through the air in rich, delicate swirls.

Her eyes widened a fraction. Six, she reflected astoundedly. That was a fair bit of firepower. Perhaps even enough to make a considerable difference in the long run, to tip the scales a little more in their favor. Suddenly very intrigued, she moved to drop down onto the bed beside Charles, angling her body to face him. He gave her a curious and leery look, but she opted to ignore it in favor of attaining this new information.

Tone laced with a hesitant and wary excitement, she demanded “Tell me everything.”

Some random knowledge tidbits for those who are interested in the time period (Feel free to skip ahead, haha)

- According to various histories, pirates used rum in two ways in regard to wounds. First, since many pirate wounds involved shrapnel of one kind or another, rum was used to clean those wounds. The alcohol acted as a disinfectant as well as an astringent which helped to cause capillaries to shrink and reduce the rate of blood loss. Second, they drank it as an anesthetic to dull the pain. This is pretty impressive considering the concept of germ theory, while theorized upon in the 1600's, wasn't actually fully accepted as valid until the 1800's. They might not have known why using alcohol on a wound helped prevent infection, but it's cool that they made the connection it did.

- Sutures were not often used in the 18th century because it was widely believed that wounds needed to be left open to allow for drainage, possibly due in part to humor theory. But when sutures were used it was often with threads that were less likely to rot in the body. One such material was silk thread, which was often waxed to further protect the silk from deterioration.
Having a doctor/surgeon on board a pirate ship was a rare luxury. Usually a crew would simply use the ship’s carpenter as their doctor because a surgeon and carpenter had similar tools. On the occasion that a doctor was found aboard a raided ship, he would be recruited (willing or not) and given a $1\frac{1}{4}$ share of any plundered booty. Which was far more money than any legitimate ship’s surgeon might have been able to earn in a month. Because these doctors had either received a formal medical education or served as apprentices to those who did, they were generally the more literate and learned men aboard a ship. This, and their medical know-how, made them highly valued and sought after members of any crew.
Chapter 12

**DISCLAIMER:** I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

**AN:** Finally, another chapter! Took me long enough, right? I figured I'd better post something before people started loosing hope that I'd ever get around to updating again lol. As always, I offer my apologies and assurances that I still haven’t abandoned this work. It's just that I've once again been struck with a terrible case of writer's block, so it's been taking me forever to produce anything remotely postable. I've powered through it and come up with something that is hopefully relatively decent, so enjoy! Also, I apologize in advance for the shortness of this chapter. I know my chapters are usually a fair bit longer and equipped with more historical information and detail, but this one seriously kicked my ass so it's considerably shorter and less historically informative. Anyways, onwards!

As always, a big sloppy thank you to everyone still following and reviewing! Those reviews mean a lot to me as a writer. They're super motivating and encouraging and I really appreciate them. You guys are the best :)

**DEFINITIONS (Not necessarily period specific, but I threw them in anyways):**

**Pundit:** A learned person, expert, or authority. A person who makes comments or judgments, especially in an authoritative manner; critic or commentator.

**Lad:** A boy or youth

**Harrier:** A person or thing who harries. Which is to harass, annoy, or prove a nuisance to by or as if by repeated attacks

**Hirsute:** Hairy; shaggy

As Eleanor had expected, Teach's assistance had not been granted out of the goodness of his heart or any sudden burst of conscience. Nor had it been given out of fear or anything as simple as a strong distaste for civilized society. Ultimately, Teach had brought those ships to their aid for only one simple reason.

Revenge.
Apparently he hadn't taken too kindly to the English raiding of Ocracoke, the island on which Teach and his fellow racketeers had taken up residence after Nassau's occupation. According to Charles, the English had assailed Teach's camp under the cover of night. The silent vermin had crept in and set fire to many of the tents and lodgings along the beach before anyone had noticed they were there. With the advantage of surprise and the desire to quickly and quietly eradicate the infamous threat known as Blackbeard, the cowards had executed a covert and calculated incursion.

Perhaps Woodes had learned something from her after all.

“Ugh.” Eleanor groaned disgustedly to herself and muttered “Yes, that would be just my luck…”

Perhaps all she'd really been doing during all her scheming and plotting was offering all the men in her life new and inventive ways to fuck her over. She might as well have been writing them a Goddamned handbook on shrouded scheming and treachery.

Lovely.

Snapping herself away from those bitter and paranoid thoughts, Eleanor returned to mentally assessing the situation.

The unexpectedness of the attack on Ocracoke meant Teach had lost a considerable number of men and effects in the raid. And after sending a good few of his aggressors into early graves, he'd been forced to flee the island with six ships and the remainder of his men. To Teach's mind, this attack had been entirely unprovoked. Not to mention wholly unnecessary as he'd already decided against participating in the futility of this nonsensical war. Yet the attack had occurred nonetheless, and Teach was not a man to allow such egregious slights to go unpunished.

Add to this the fact that Teach had gotten wind of Charles' capture and subsequent near hanging, and Eleanor began to piece together the situation in it's entirety. The dies had been cast, and Teach had thrown in his chips. The English would pay dearly for their transgressions, and they'd do so with as much blood as they would coin. Victory might not be assured, but replete bloodshed certainly was.

Of this, she was certain.

Teach had rather bluntly informed Charles that if accomplishing such a feat meant siding with a thankless son (presumably Charles), a gangly milksop (no doubt Rackham), an insufferable
blowhard (Arguably either Flint or Silver), and a bunch more incompetent nitwits (apparently everyone else), then so be it. If necessary, Teach would bite the bullet and throw in with the whole useless lot of them.

This might have been good news if it weren't for the fact that Teach had yet to be informed of Eleanor's involvement in this endeavor. While that hirsute pain in the ass might well find an alliance with Charles and Flint to be agreeable, Eleanor doubted he would be quite so amicable when it came to her own immersion in all of this. Working alongside the woman who had all but single-handedly cast him from Nassau, turned his would-be son against him, nearly got said son hanged, and then turned around and claimed to want to take it all back?

It wasn't likely to be a notion Teach would welcome with open arms.

It was far more likely Teach would demand blood. More specifically, her blood. The thought was as unsettling as it was credible. Her only salvation would come with the off chance that Flint, Charles and Jack managed to convince Teach and the men of her worth. Surely he could set aside past hostilities in favor of this noble cause. Surely he could be made to see reason and act accordingly.

Yeah. Right. Because Teach is so very reasonable a man.

Eleanor muttered another few choice curses as she raked her fingers through her tangled hair and continued pacing the corridor in which she had been waiting for the past fifteen to twenty minutes. She knew exactly where Charles had learned that infuriating streak of single-minded obdurateness that had so often plagued her.

Fucking Teach.

She tried to tell herself this wasn't the time to dwell on such matters, that it was more important to focus on the task at hand than her resentment towards that bearded harrier. But the fact was, that not twenty feet from her, there sat a room full of men – and one Anne Bonnie – discussing her fate and supposed worth. This fact was more than a little nerve racking. She wasn't accustomed to allowing others to speak for her. She didn't relish the notion of not being present in that room. She wanted to speak for herself. She wanted to storm into that room and demand they see reason, acknowledge the advantages of her involvement and move forward with a plan. She wanted her worth to be plain, universally understood. She was in this and she was in it deep, to the very end. No exceptions.

They needed to believe that. They had to. This was no passing fancy. She would willingly die for this cause.
She just wasn’t certain anyone in that room would be able to properly convey that truth. Hence, the desire to get in there and make certain the right things were being said. She needed some control. She never had been much for patience or the allotment of power. She had a tendency to want to take hold of the reigns, to steer things in her own preferred direction as quickly and efficiently as possible. This desire had often proved to be as problematic as it was occasionally beneficial. But the urge was still present, nonetheless.

The only thing stopping her from barreling into that room head first was the fact that she'd sworn she wouldn't. She'd promised Charles that she'd try to let them handle it. He'd said that Flint, Silver and he would argue on her behalf. She didn't want to renege on any more promises, especially not ones she'd made with Charles. And as irrational and unlikely as it was, she still desperately wanted him to trust her, to know without question where her loyalties had finally been lain.

So here she stood; pacing, cursing and wildly uncomfortable with her circumstance.

Hopefully, their supposed argument would be enough to sway Teach and the other crews away from the notion of her immediate demise. But residing on this side of the door, oblivious to the room’s inner workings, she could only pray their argument would be adequately convincing.

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“It pains me to say it, but we owe this victory to someone quite unexpected.” Jack declared from his standing position near the edge of the table. Seated around the table were Teach, Silver, Madi, Flint and Charles. Anne stood guarding the door against the invasion of any unwanted visitors. No one had asked it of her and it probably wasn't necessary, but she'd done it of her own accord anyway. With a hand resting idly on the hilt of her blade, she leaned incuriously against the wall next to the closed door and equipped her signature scowl.

Jack hadn't offered her a seat at the table because he'd known she'd refuse it. She was far more comfortable ensuring their exits and entries were adequately covered than she was at attempting to exude an air diplomacy she did not actually possess. The possibility that she might actually get to take a shot at Eleanor should she decide to barrel through that door, was likely also an influencing factor in her strategic positioning.

“Without this person's intel,” Jack continued. “there is a good chance that many of us would, right now, be laying face down on that beach rather than sitting here enjoying one another's good company. I dare say that—”
“Enough with the circle jerking, Boy.” Teach barked impatiently. “Everyone here already knows
why I’ve come, and it's got nothing to do with watching you bootlick.”

Jack’s face twisted up into the most condescending and falsely cordial expression he could manage. When he spoke, calm and precise, his voice held a tone that perfectly matched the condescension of his face. “Actually, I wasn't referring to you. But of course we very much appreciate you're support. Truly.”

Teach’s eyes narrowed and Jack had the distinct impression he was envisioning a detailed infliction of bodily harm. As Jack eyed him somewhat wearily, Teach’s brow slowly lifted and he spoke with an irritated and sarcastic intone. “Really? Why, did someone else bring in another flotilla? More guns, perhaps? Additional men?”

“Not exactly, no.” Jack admitted freely. “They brought numbers, logs, insight into enemy operations. Weapons of a more covert and underhanded nature, yes? In a manner of speaking, I supposed we have ourselves a spy.”

When Teach's expression shifted slightly away from irritation and towards interest, Jack quickly elaborated with at twitchy flutter of his hands. “Well, perhaps spy is too strong a word. We had a spy... Sort of.” For a moment he looked to be considering his own words, rolling his eyes upward in thought before shaking his head and shrugging dismissively. “Never mind.” He corrected as he animatedly waved off the whole ‘spy' notion and ignored the incredulous looks he was receiving from just about everyone at the table. “Regardless of past occupations, what we now have is a comprised informant who cannot return to the fray without being hung or imprisoned for their loyalty to us.”

Loyalty was a strong word.

Jack glanced toward Charles, who was calmly reclined in his chair and indulging in yet another of his smokes. He maintained the most leisurely outward appearance, a look of total repose and indifference even as Jack was certain he had heard the bullshit statement he’d just spewed. Jack knew damn well that Charles had strong opinions in regards to the woman being discussed, but one would never have guessed that looking at him now. Jack wondered sometimes how a man of such a volatile nature could so effortlessly muster up and maintain an expression of such utter blankness, of total nonchalant unreadability. It was a versatile expression, used as often as a scare tacit as it was as a display of detached disinterest or a method of reading the room and biding his time. Admittedly, it was a talent of which Jack was occasionally envious.

But back to the matters at hand.
The Guthrie bitch was anything but loyal, Jack knew that almost as well as Charles did. But if Teach could be convinced otherwise, there was a good chance they could get the rest of the crews to fall in line. With Flint and Charles already backing the alliance with Miss Guthrie, Teach was the last big name that could carry enough influence to possibly sway the crews in their favor. Silver was an added bonus, the crews liked him and he'd begun building a considerable name for himself as of late.

Teach grunted and picked up his drink, seemingly having already lost interest at the mention of the spy having been compromised, but Jack undauntedly carried on. “But this informant could still prove useful to us. This unlikely partnership can potentially offer us an insight we wouldn't otherwise have had. This person went to great lengths and at no small risk to themselves, to get us the information that allowed us to lure the enemy to slaughter. Having worked so closely with Rogers, this informant gives us an uncanny advantage, a better understanding of the workings of his mind. I don't think —”

“Yes, yes, you're in favor of the partnership. We understand.” Teach clipped impatiently. “Get to the point. Who is this person? Where are they now and what, specifically, can they offer us?”

“Here, in camp.” Flint interjected plainly, his voice taking on that well read Machiavellian lilt that so often irritated those who knew well enough to smell bullshit. “We thought it best that this individual remain sequestered and nameless until an agreement could be formally reached.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” Teach quipped with facetious causticity and a derisive grin.

As Flint narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to retort, Silver abruptly stepped in. “What my intractable captain is trying to say, is that our actions were necessary on account of our source being a target of a rather intense animosity among the men. Had we not been adamant in the concealment of this matter, it is more than likely our little defector would already have met a particularly gruesome end. And, as I'm sure you would agree, a dead informant is hardly an effective informant.”

For a moment Teach said nothing, only eyed Silver with the evaluative scrutiny of a pundit sizing up a wayward child. Then he leaned back in his chair and adopted an amused sort of smirk. “Eloquent.” He mused. “You've quite the silver tongue, don't you, Lad?”

Silver's mouth quirked up into a somewhat boyish grin as he shrugged and adopted an appropriately demure expression. “I'll take that as a compliment.” He decided genially.

“It wasn't.” Teach deadpanned.
The smile dropped off Silver's face as quickly as it had come, being swiftly replaced with a look that was far more disgruntled. Clearly, witty charm was not the way to Teach’s heart.

Apparently done with the notion of enduring what was undoubtedly a pissing contest, Madi spoke up. Completely ignoring the recently hurled insults, she dove right in and redirected the discussion back to the problem at hand. “This informant of yours has proven a reliable source of information, yes?” She was met with nods from various heads around the table. She went on. “And despite the obvious peril that accompanied sharing this information with us, the role this person played in all of this was an integral aspect of our recent victory. Am I correct?”

“You are.” Jack agreed.

Madi shrugged. “Then I see no reason not to continue on with whatever arrangement we have in place. So long as this source continues to deliver, we will continue to secure valuable information.”

Charles quirked a brow and held a hand out in Madi's direction. Without words, the gesture clearly stated “See? She gets it.”

Jack sighed and nodded. “Yes, that does appear to be true. However, it's unlikely we'll be able to keep all of this hush-hush for much longer. And the moment this gets out among the men, they're going to want blood. Without the unanimous support of everyone in this room, it's unlikely we'll be able to sway the men to see reason. We need –”

“Christ, that's enough.” Teach growled. “Do away with all this cloak and dagger nonsense, and bring the bastard here. You're going to tell us who it is anyway, aren't you? What good is all this jabbering if we've no bloody idea who you're on about?”

It was really only Teach and Madi who didn't already know the source was Eleanor Guthrie, but Jack opted to let that little tidbit go. What Teach didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

“He's right, you know.” Charles added on a steady exhale of smoke. “This pussyfooting is getting us nowhere.”

“Well?” Teach questioned after another tense moment of silence. “Are you just going to sit there looking dumb struck, or are you going to go fetch him?” He asked Jack.
Jack sent Charles one last wary look but was met only with a subtle nod. Resigned, Jack turned towards Anne and whatever look he gave her had her smirking and turning on her heel. She yanked the door open and stormed through it. Seconds after she'd disappeared, an agitated female voice exclaimed “Christ! There's no need to manhandle me, I've got two working legs of my own. I can walk, dammit!”

Teach's eyes widened at the sound of that familiar voice before snapping from Jack to Charles and back again. “You're joking.” He grunted with blatant incredulity.

Jack shook his head and muttered dejectedly. “Afraid not.”

Charles' face remained a blank slate, offering Teach little more than a steely determined gaze.

The exclamation from outside the door was quickly followed by a grunted “Shut up, Cunt.” and a second later Anne reappeared in the doorway dragging behind her a very disgruntled but otherwise unharmed Eleanor Guthrie.
Chapter 13

**DISCLAIMER:** I don’t own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

**AN:** Ok, so the delay really isn't my fault this time. I was hospitalized due to some chest pain which turned out to be an actual, honest-to-God heart attack. Yep, you read right, turns out 27 year olds can have heart attacks too. I didn't think that was a thing, but apparently it is. Anyways, after a procedure called an angioplasty I'm feeling much better and I'm finally ready to get back to my writing! Yey!

As always, a huge thanks to everyone still following and reviewing this story. Words can't accurately express how much all your feedback means to me. I really appreciate it :)

Now, on with the chapter! I certainly hope it's worth the brutal wait. Don't forget to review! :D

**DEFINITIONS AND/OR PERIOD SPECIFIC NOTES:**

- **Perfidious:** Deliberately faithless; deceitful; treacherous

- **Peisinoe:** In Greek mythology, Peisinoë (the name means persuading mind) is one of thirteen sister sirens. Sirens were thought to be gorgeous half-fish half-woman temptresses who's beautiful singing voices bewitched sailors into leaping from their ships and into the sea. The men would then either drown in the rough waters or die of starvation due to a refusal to leave the siren’s side. One of the most famous tales involving sirens is from Homer's *the Odyssey* (an ancient Greek epic poem). In this story, a trio of sirens sing to Odysseus and his men, attempting to lure them to their deaths. Odysseus saves everyone by filling their ears with wax and binding them to the mast so that following after the sirens is impossible. Later, in the story of the Argonauts, a man named Orpheus saves his crew by playing music louder than the siren’s call.

- **Cunt rolled:** Basically just another term for pussy whipped. It's a derogatory term used to describe being at the beck and call of a woman, making your decisions based on the incentive of receiving sex from said woman. Essentially it's the accusation that you do whatever that woman wants because her awesome sex has you brainwashed.

- **King George I:** The king of Great Britain and Ireland from 1714-1698. He's the one who sent Woodes Rogers to take back Nassau.
“Can you truly blame me?” Teach spat as he rose from his chair and gestured emphatically toward Eleanor. “That paltry pair of tits has been poisoning your mind from the very first moment you laid eyes on her. She makes you weak, Charles. And now, just as always, the perfidious Peisinoë has got you well and truly cunt rolled.”

He wasn't entirely wrong, and most everyone in the room knew it. Which only made the statement that much more caustic and biting.

It grated at Charles, left him feeling instinctively defensive and irascible. He did not appreciate the suggestion that he was anything but wholly apathetic, shrewd and calculating. He did not relish the notion of being perceived as anything less than an absolute force to be reckoned with, an overtly formidable individual that wasn't fucked with lightly. That was who he was, who he'd built himself up into with blood, sweat and tears. This hard earned persona was meant to be indisputable, leaving no room for deniability. Those who'd been foolish enough to challenge the viability of this persona had usually been quick to bleed. And those bleeders served their purpose, they operated as unwilling and public reminders of Charles' formidability.

It was usually quite an effective approach.

That being said, if Charles were speaking to anyone other than the people in this room, that method of reminder would likely have already been employed. But alas, this room's occupants had all been deemed friends and allies, taking murder and maiming off the table.

Though he did find himself considering that, should the need arise, he probably wasn't above administering a modest beating. Some reasonably tempered battery never killed anybody, right?

Charles' expression remained relatively unchanged as Teach spoke, but his expression darkened considerably with unspoken threats as he glowered through the haze of what was left of his cigar. He didn’t straighten up from his relaxed position, but his lip did curl up slightly into something resembling a snarl. His voice came out sounding low and dangerous when he finally did speak. “Careful, old man...”

Teach outright laughed, a bitter and grating sound. “Or what? You'll put me in my place? Don't flatter yourself, Charles. Old or not, I'm hardly past giving you a thorough thrashing.” The threat was uttered casually and with a contemptuously dismissive inflection, as if Teach knew well enough that Charles would do no such thing.
If there was a verbal equivalent to an eye roll, this was it.

Charles still didn't bother yelling or moving from his chair, but his eyes did flash dangerously as they narrowed. Eleanor would swear she could almost hear his teeth grinding from across the table, and she knew it wouldn't be much longer before this situation deteriorated entirely. It wouldn't do them any good to start frothing at the mouth. Teach was doing enough of that on his own already. They had more important things to discuss than Charles' affinity for the slit between her thighs and whether or not he had the ability to pummel his mentor. And if someone didn't voice as much soon, she was going to do it herself.

Promises be damned.

To Eleanor's relief, Jack pointedly interrupted. “Forgive me for saying so, but I hardly think the solution to this discord lies in beating each other to a pulp. So, perhaps we could move on?”

This comment earned Jack a scathing look from both Teach and Charles. Jack was used to such looks coming from Charles, but the one being hurled at him from Teach's direction had him shifting rather uncomfortably. This unease stemmed chiefly from the fact that Jack wasn't entirely certain Teach didn't consider cheeky comments to be worthy of stray bullets. The man might be a hard one to read, but it was quite clear he held no love for Jack. Wisely, Jack decided it would probably be best not to press his luck.

“Err... What I mean to say is...” Jack continued. “Perhaps a civilized discussion might be more productive than...” Jack paused and gestured emphatically between Charles and Teach. “Whatever this is.”

“Oh, really?” Teach inquired with an arch of brow. “And have you any other helpful suggestions you've an inclination to share?”

Jack narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, weighing the probability of of bloodshed should he continue with his line of thought. Teach shifted in his chair and from the corner of his eye, Jack caught sight of the way Anne subtly shifted her stance. She looked casual enough, but her eyes remained fixed upon Teach and Jack knew her well enough to know that despite her outward appearance, she'd begun anticipating a possible threat. She wouldn't outright attack Teach unless he moved on them first, but she understood that the tension in the room was high enough to warrant erring on the side of caution. And if Anne was concerned, things were definitely not going well. A bloody confrontation wasn't something they could afford right now.
In a blatant attempt to placate and avoid the shit storm that would erupt should this escalate much further, Jack opted to back down and pursue subtler approach. “Uh, no. I suppose not...”

“Good.” Teach asserted with an air of superior finality.

“Mr. Rackham is correct.” Madi abruptly professed, drawing the complete attention of the room. Eleanor was staring at her as though she'd only just now noticed her presence in the room.

Madi had again had quite enough of the constant dick swinging, and decided it was high time someone put a stop to it. Regal and determined, she turned to directly address Teach. The look he was giving her was less than friendly but she opted to ignore it, her voice taking on an air of calm and collected rationality. “You're here seeking vengeance, retribution against a nation that walked into your home and set it ablaze. They were foolish enough not to fear you, and now you intend to reminded them of why they should have. I understand that. I can even respect it. But you cannot deny that the likelihood of your success without our help is nil.”

“The same could be said of your lot without mine.” Teach countered.

“Exactly.” Madi agreed. “That's my point. Is it not in your best interest to consider all your options? If I understand correctly, you are not the only person in this room harboring a strong distaste for Miss Guthrie. And yet the rest of the room has agreed to hear her out. Does whatever quarrel you have with Captain Vane and the Guthrie woman take precedence over avenging your name, your home and the men you lost there?” She asked candidly.

For a moment Teach was silent, watching Madi through narrowed and considering eyes. It wasn't entirely clear whether he was mulling over the merit of her words or preparing to tell her where she could shove all that calm rationality of hers.

But after another tense moment, Teach finally sighed and gestured to be handed the nearest bottle of rum. “No. It's not.” He grumbled bitterly as Silver passed him the bottle and he sloshed some of its contents into his mug. “The woman is a cunt, but she isn't worth my reputation.” He took a swig from his mug and set it down as his eye lifted to meet Madi’s. “There's a good reason people fear my name. George’s men seem to have forgotten that... I'm going to make sure they remember it.”

Madi's only response was a curt and respectful nod, acknowledging her understanding and agreement.
“Right then, now that that's settled –” Silver began cheerfully but was cut off by Eleanor.

“I take it this place is yours, then?” Eleanor inquired, ignoring Silver and addressing Madi. She guessed, judging by the regal air about this woman, that she was the reason they'd acquired all these new bodies for their cause.

“It is.” Madi stated simply, raising her chin.

Silver spoke up again. “Oh, yes. This is Madi, Scott's daughter. She's queen in this place and she's lent us her support.”

The correct response to this statement should have been 'why?' Because it mattered what this woman wanted. Deals could be made and plans struck when you understood the wants and needs of your associates. Situations could be tailored in your favor when you understood a person's motives. But instead, what came out of Eleanor's mouth was a sputtered utterance of Scott's name. She trailed off before finding her words again and asked, “Where is he? Is he here? It's important I speak with him.”

“You're in no position to make demands.” Teach snapped.

Madi held up her hand for silence and while Teach sent her a scathing look, he reluctantly complied. A heavy silence hung in the air following Teach's words, and Eleanor's stomach filled with dread. Her eyes snapped towards Charles, who seemed to be actively avoiding her gaze.

“Charles!” Eleanor hissed, her tone full of impatient irritation and a lacing of panic.

He looked up at her then, his brow furrowed and his lips pressed into a firm line. “I'm sorry, Eleanor.” he stated grimly.

Eleanor's stomach dropped. He couldn't possibly be saying what she thought he was saying. Someone would have told her if Scott was dead. She would have been informed. It wasn't possible.

“He'd dead.” Madi announced plainly. Her tone wasn't altogether cold, but it wasn't exactly gentle either. “Slaves were being used to complete the repairs on Nassau's fort. My father was helping pockets of them escape the island. Months ago, two English patrolmen happened upon him ushering a handful of slaves into a skiff destined for our village. The patrolmen opened fire and my father was wounded. The men he was helping managed to drag him aboard and bring him home to us, but his
wounds were beyond helping. He lingered for a time, but ultimately succumbed to his injuries.”

The pain that blossomed in her breast with Madi's words was unfathomable. How had she not been informed? How had this escaped her knowledge? The man that had been more a father to her than her own blood ever had was dead, and she hadn't even known. She hadn't been permitted a proper farewell. She hadn't been able to express to him her regret or apologize for the trust she'd betrayed in him.

She'd loved him like a father and she'd never got to tell him as much. She felt faint, nauseous. Her hand fluttered to her stomach. She swallowed, fought to regain herself knowing that this was no time to express weakness, no time to fall apart. Not when so much depended on this one meeting. Her feelings needed to be secondary. They had to be.

Despite Eleanor's lack of tears or emotional outburst, Madi must have picked up on the depth of her distress because her face softened and she added softly, “You were blessed with many years by his side. That is a gift not even his own family can claim. And from what I understand, he cared for you very deeply... Take solace in that.”

Despite the guilt and sorrow still riding her, Madi's words steadied Eleanor. She was grateful for those words and the look she cast in Madi's direction said as much. There was a brief moment of understanding between the two women before Flint cleared his throat.

“With Nassau's incursion, Scott was no longer able to send this place the supplies necessary for its continued survival. A deal was struck between us and Madi's people to ensure their livelihood and freedom, and our reclaiming of Nassau. Our deal with you,” Flint gestured towards Eleanor. “has already allowed us to deal a substantial blow to Rogers' forces. How is that deal going to continue to benefit us? What more have you got to offer us?”

Expectant eyes turned toward Eleanor and she instinctually straightened up, lifting her chin and standing just a little taller. Like a blow-fish puffing outward in an attempt to ward off potential enemies. “I can offer you insight into the way Rogers thinks, help anticipate his actions and reactions to whatever comes next. I also have a detailed knowledge and understanding of his stockpiles. Weapons, numbers, ships, money, all of it.”

“So no specific plans, then? No intel on Rogers' future plans?” Teach asked bluntly. He sounded unimpressed and unconvinced.

Eleanor frowned. “I've given you that already. I told you Rogers' ships where coming. I gave you the when and the where and their numbers. I even handed over the specifics on their cannons and attack
strategy. If that isn't enough to –”

“The Spanish.” Charles interrupted. “She says they're threatening to invade England if every coin taken from that beach isn't returned in full. They know about the gold being exchanged for pearls and they've given Rogers a deadline on returning all of it.”

Teach quirked a brow, his face taking on a look of mild interest as he sent Eleanor a questioning look.

“It's true.” Eleanor confirmed. “That's why he was so desperate to get his hands of Rackham. We couldn't find Anne and the pearls, so we were going to try and offer up Rackham as compensation.”

“We?” Teach sneered.

Eleanor had the decency to look somewhat shamed. “Yes, we. I helped ensure that a second squadron of men were sent after Rackham's carriage. We knew there was no keeping Anne from coming after Rackham, regardless of how seemingly lost that cause appeared...”

It was also the reason Charles had been captured and imprisoned. He'd almost been hung. He hadn't even been planning on putting up a fight. The though had Eleanor swallowing down a knot of guilt as her stomach churned. God, the things she would change if she could go back.

Anne scoffed from behind Eleanor, a deep scowl marring her sharp features as her lip curled up in disgust. “Bitch.” She grunted.

Rackham shrugged, waving a hand through the air dismissively. It wouldn't do to get Teach all riled up again. Best to shut that topic down and move on. “That's hardly surprising. We'd already assumed you were involved in my apprehension. But this deadline Charles mentioned? That's far more interesting.”

Flint laughed, the sound more grating and bitter than a laugh should be. “And wouldn't that be something? Two wars for the price of one.” He lifted his drink in salute of this notion.

Silver's mouth twitched up, his expression one of thoughtful intrigue. “Yes. That would be quite the strain on England, wouldn't it? What hurts England can only help us.”
Eleanor watched Silver with a wary sort of apprehension. She was well aware he was dangerous. Not so much in a physical sense, but in an intellectual one. He was a schemer, and schemers were dangerous. She ought to know, seeing as she was one.

The manner in which Silver manged to maneuver Flint and their crew was proof enough of this. The wheels were turning in his head and Eleanor got the distinct impression that he'd already begun to set his mind upon something. She wasn't entirely certain what that something was, or whether it could ultimately be beneficial to her in any way, but for now their interests seemed to be aligned. And for the time being, that would have to be good enough.

“I agree.” Madi supplied. “Miss Guthrie's intel has supplied us with a remarkable victory. I see no reason not to move forward with our current arrangement. If her future assistance proves even half as constructive as it has thus far, she's an asset we cannot afford to ignore.”

Silver watched Madi speak before nodding and turning his gaze toward Eleanor. “I second that opinion.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor supplied sturdily.

“It might be wise to hold off on that sentiment.” Madi replied calmly. “While I do support your involvement in this venture, it has not escaped my attention that no one at this table trusts you. I understand there's a good reason for that.”

Eleanor looked a little disgruntled, perhaps even a tad insulted, but she knew enough to hold her tongue. She crossed her arms over her chest, considering Madi with a calculating gaze. Madi certainly wasn't wrong. Eleanor had more than earned the scorn she'd received from the people seated at this table. She probably even deserved worse than what she'd gotten. But somehow that knowledge didn't prevent her from feeling defensive or bitter. Her instinct was to defend herself, to claim she'd had no choice. But she knew what little that would accomplish. So instead she opted for a cold acceptance, a blatant stating of facts. When she spoke it was with a tone void of emotion, completely deadpan. “They do.”

Madi nodded, satisfied with Eleanor's open admittance of fault.

“Well good, then.” Jack chirped. “That's two in favor, mine and Charles' vote makes four.”
If Charles was at all bothered by Jack’s assumption of his favor in the matter, he didn't show it. Instead he simply remained silent. Eleanor couldn't help but find it unnerving. He was usually quick to disagree with most anything he didn't consider his own idea. Then again, Elanor mused, perhaps he considered this to be something of his own making.

“I don't see a way around her involvement.” Flint said, speaking up. “As things stand, it would be foolish to squander what she can offer us.” His attention shifted toward Eleanor. “You have my vote. But you fuck this up, and I swear to Christ I'll kill you myself.”

“So everyone keeps telling me...” Eleanor mumbled.

“Excellent.” Jack purred, clapping his hand together and turning to address Anne, who was still standing against the wall a few feet behind Eleanor. “And what say you, love?”

Anne scoffed, sneering like he'd just asked her to dance some merry jig. “The fuck you asking me for? You already know I've agreed to follow you into this cocked up mess. What more d'ya want?”

“Quite right.” Jack backpedaled, moving on quickly. His mouth twitched and his hand fluttered about as if to bat the notion right out of the air before he swiftly turned his attention back toward Teach. “And you?”

For a moment Teach said nothing. He simply sat there running his thumb back and forth across the handle of his mug, his eyes narrowed and shrewd. It was clear he didn't like the idea, but at least he seemed to be considering it.

An awkward and apprehensive silence hung in the air. Everyone knew that without Teach's influence, things would be considerably more difficult. The last thing they needed was for Teach to decide to oppose them and start some sort of internal uprising that called for Eleanor's head.

In the quiet tension of the room, Eleanor cast her eyes toward Charles. He hadn't said much throughout the entire meeting other than to issue a vague threat in Teach's direction and mention the Spanish. It was odd, considering he was usually quick to voice his opinion. Yet he'd remained relatively passive, allowing Jack to speak for him. It brought to mind another instance in which he'd allowed Jack to speak on his behalf, which in turn brought back a rush of unwarranted memories and emotion.

*Are you as surprised as I am... That I'm the only one here behaving myself?*
Her chest tightened. The memory seemed like a lifetime ago. So much had happened since then. At the time, it really had surprised her that he'd held his tongue for as long as he had. And when he'd pointed out his good behaviour, she hadn't been able to help feeling amused.

The terms are fine... Her word's good enough for me...

Those words had struck her, grabbed hold of something deep inside that she'd long thought buried. Those words had been significant. They meant something. Despite all she'd put him through at that point, he'd still trusted her at her word. He'd placed in her a confidence that she didn't deserve. It moved her, caressed some half-smothered part of her. It was ridiculous, but it made her want to prove he was right to trust her, that she wouldn't fail him.

That wasn't how things had ultimately turned out, but it had originally been her intent. At least, before her life had started crumbling down around her.

He'd had no reason to place any sort of faith in her. And yet he had, time and time again.

She'd betrayed that trust on more than one occasion. It was never what she'd set out to do, but it so often seemed inevitable. They spent so much time on opposing sides, it had felt so impossible. But on that day, as he'd shook her hand, he'd allowed his touch to slide across her palm and down the length of her fingers. The contact was lingering, his hand slipping from hers far more slowly than was necessary. And in that moment, something shifted between them. Something inside of her stuttered and balked.

She wasn't a romantic. She didn't fancy herself a whimsical or idealistic woman. Her heart was not one to flutter at the mere prospect of affection. But as he'd turned away from her to stalk from that room, she'd understood the risk he'd taken for her. And much to her dismay, she'd understood that decision had not been made without emotion. As was so often the case between them, their actions were far more explicit than anything that could have been said out loud.

She'd mulled over his actions for an hour or so after that. She'd tried quite hard to convince herself his decision had had nothing to do with what still lay between them. But she'd failed. She knew damn well that he'd made that deal for her. And it touched her.

Perhaps more than it should have.
After that her actions had been impulsive. She'd stalked out of that bar and marched straight into his camp with every intention of fucking him stupid. Which, to her most pleasant surprise, had been just as phenomenal as she'd remembered it being.

Afterward there had been another moment. As she'd began preparing to leave, he'd placed his hand over hers as she'd been re-clasping her corset. There had been no words, no whispered promises or explanations. He'd simply taken her hand in his, traced his thumb across her knuckles and brought their joined hands down to rest just over his heart.

For a moment, she hadn't been sure how to respond. It was sickeningly familiar, so achingly reminiscent of the life they'd shared before she'd cast him off in favor of establishing her autonomy. But as she'd glanced down at him to find him watching her with a soft look of awe and affection, the decision was made for her. Her face softened and her thumb traced gently across the skin of his chest.

No one had ever made her feel quite like he could. Even when she didn't want to. Even when she knew it was foolish. He put her at peace as often as he drove her mad.

He'd lifted his free hand to brush the hair from her face, and what little resolve she'd been clinging to fractured. She'd bent forward to press her mouth to his, her fingers grasping softly at his jaw. As she'd pressed against him, she'd wondered idly as to whether it was completely foolish to think they might be able to try again.

But almost as quickly as the thought had formed, the moment had been shattered. Max's desperate cries had torn her away from him, sent her cursing off into the camp. Whatever beautiful lies his touch had been evoking from her fled and she'd cursed her stupidity. After that she was consumed by rage, blinded by the desire for revenge.

Not unlike the way she'd felt after the death of her father, though less intense.

That sort of rage was indulgent and impulsive, dangerous. It made her careless and stupid. It was exactly the sort of thing that had gotten her into this mess in the first place. She wouldn't make those mistakes again. She wouldn't be blinded by wild emotion or twisted ambitions.

Teach's voice broke through the silence then, abruptly shaking her from the memories. She came back to reality to find Charles had begun eyeing her. His expression was perturbed and curious, as though he'd tried to read her thoughts and found the content of her mind to be less than pleasing. It put her on edge. What was he stewing about now?
“Very well, the bitch stays. But mark my words...” Teach leaned forward in his chair, his expression as deadly serious as his tone was menacing. “That bitch is going to prove more trouble than she'd worth. And when she does, we'll be revisiting this little chat. I'd be willing to bet that before this thing ends, the lot of you will be wishing we'd just shot her.”

Anne grumbled. “We don't already?”

Jack sent Anne a gently chiding look that clearly stated something along the lines of 'Now, now, Anne.'

Anne promptly ignored him.

“I can assure you I am well worth the effort.” Eleanor snapped. “I've no intention of allowing those pretentious prats to remain on my island and I'll do what I must to ensure they are removed.”

“Your island?” Teach balked, glancing about the room and arching an eyebrow that wordlessly asked, 'you see what I'm talking about?'

“Enough.” Charles growled. “You've made your point. Her involvement isn't ideal but it is necessary. I'm no more fond of it than you are, but there's little to be done about it now. So, do we have a deal or not?” He asked seriously, standing from his chair and reaching his hand out toward Teach.

Teach stared hard at the offered hand before huffing out an irritated breath and clasping Charles' hand. “Yes, fine, we have a deal.” Teach grumbled as they shook hands.

“Good. Now come help me convince the crews.” Charles stated plainly as he turned on his heel and stormed from the room. A moment later the rest of the room followed in his wake.

As they walked through the hall, Madi leaned towards Silver and discreetly asked, “Are they always that way?”

Silver shook his head. “To my understanding, no. But Teach is still smarting over the fact that Vane chose Flint and our cause over the man who essentially raised him. Apparently the betrayal was
reminiscent of a past incident involving Miss Guthrie.”

“I see…” Madi muttered, nodding her understanding and mulling over the facts. “I take it she and Vane have a history, then?”

Silver chuckled and tilted his head to the side, considering the question. “I suppose you could call it that. Though I doubt there's any one word that accurately sums up that miserable cluster-fuck. Those two are about as likely to claw each other's eyes out as they are to start fucking.”

Madi gave him a strange and questioning look, implying such a notion was completely foreign to her.

Silver sent her a bemused look. He liked watching her think. “Sounds healthy, doesn't it?” He asked sarcastically.

She arched a brow at that. “No, not at all.”
Chapter 14

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AN: I know, I know, I'm a terrible slacker! It's been months since my last update! I admit it, I've been procrastinating... a little. Ok, maybe more than a little... Yeahhh, pretty much all the time. I'm sorry! I have terrible writer's block! I have a general idea of where I want this fic to go, but I'm having a helluva time getting it there. Also, I'm not gonna lie, the lack of reviews in the last couple chapters have been a little discouraging. Hearing from you guys is usually just the kick in the butt I need to get things moving along again. Knowing people are waiting for the next chapter usually helps spark some much needed motivation and inspiration. I still have every intention of finishing this story, but I'd really love some feedback as it helps me soldier on through the black hole of terrible plot points and bad dialog that always try to rise with writer's block. So, send me some love!

Thanks to everyone still following & reviewing! Despite my horrible delays, I hope you guys continue to enjoy!

DEFINITIONS & PERIOD-SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY:

Swash: The turbulent layer of water that washes up onto the beach after an incoming wave has broken. Swash consists of two phases: uprush (onshore flow) and backwash (offshore flow).

Cyclicity: Revolving or recurring in cycles; characterized by recurrence in cycles.

Palliative: To relieve or lessen without curing; mitigate; alleviate.

Anodynic: Anything that relieves stress or pain.

Seeking a moment's peace and quiet reflection, Eleanor sought the amenity of the seaside. Standing alone by the water's edge, the surf lapped softly against the sand, barely grazing the toes of her boots upon each uprush. The roar of the sea married cordially with the whispers of the breeze and the distant cries of gulls overhead. Turning her face toward the surf as the sun began its decent behind the horizon, she watched with quiet and pensive austerity as the waves rolled in. They rose and broke against themselves, sliding up along the sands of the shore in a delicate foamy wash before receding softly back into the sea.

She loved the sea. She always had. The constant ebb and flow of the tide was steady and consistent. The waves would always come in and they'd always wash out, such was the nature of things. It was strange but the solid and steady predictability of that cyclicity had always been a source of comfort for Eleanor. She'd often sought out its palliative influence after particularly grueling or painful days. Sometimes it was because of an exceptionally onerous argument with Charles, her father, or some other blissfully ignorant fuck. Other times it was just to think. But regardless of the cause, time spent
by the water had always felt somewhat anodynic.

She was seeking that comfort now. Too much had transpired today. So much had changed in what felt like the blink of an eye. It was difficult to wrap her head around it all.

In all honesty, relations with the men had gone quite a bit better than she'd expected. The crews had all been informed of her presence, involvement and continued engagement in their future plans. And lone behold, she still wasn't dead.

Though admittedly, there were points in which it had come close.

The men had been outraged and raucous at first, gunning for her head at the mere mention of her name. The tyranny of her rule over Nassau and subsequent betrayals were still fresh in all their minds. This was hardly shocking, as they had never much cared for her in the first place. After all, she had been a woman in power, and females in such positions were rarely smiled upon. But it had been about more than that. After everything she'd done to both those men and Nassau, she couldn't really blame them for hating her. She'd basically handed Nassau to the English on a silver platter.

So yes, at first they'd seen no reasonable reason to allow her continued existence. They'd been understandably incensed by the notion of her return and they'd called for her blood as a result. It hadn't been surprising, and it certainly wasn't libel to change anytime soon. But that lack of love wasn't really an issue. She didn't need the men to love her, she only needed them to accept her immersion in all of this and layoff the pursuit of her imminent demise.

Luckily, between the promise of bountiful coin, uninhibited freedom, and the wagging of silver tongues, the men had been convinced to mellow. They still hated her, and she doubted even one among them truly trusted her, but they had been swayed to tolerate her existence. Flint, Silver, Charles and Teach had made one hell of a fearsome, charismatic and deviously persuasive coalition.

But she was not so foolish as to believe that all their grievances had been quelled. She knew there was still a very real threat to her life while she walked among the men. But for the most part, things had settled down. Most of them had accepted her involvement like a bitter pill; unsavory and repellant but necessary.

However, she did understand that each of them likely followed along only for their own reasons. And people's motives tended to be fickle and ever changing when placed in the face of danger and adversity.
Some men followed out of fear, for power or for greed. A few perhaps for loyalty, honor or a misplaced sense of justice. Others sought freedom, vengeance or a simple adherence to their own twisted set of personal ideals. And for some, just the rush of blood and battle was enough. There were also those who complied simply out of convenience or cowardice.

It didn't really matter why they'd decided to comply, only that they had and that they'd continue to do so. But being aware of the diversity in their reasoning was important. When you knew what people wanted and why, they were easier to understand and manipulate. It wasn't always necessary, but sometimes it was the crux, the one thing that would make all the difference. So she'd pay attention. She'd stay one step ahead of the game, just like always. Only this time, she and Charles wouldn't be standing on opposite ends of the board. This time it would be different.

She'd come this far and she wasn't about to let it all fall apart now. She'd lost too much. God help her, she'd lost Scott. Scott, the man who had essentially raised her. The man who'd loved and cared for her far better than her own blood ever had. Legally, he'd been chattel property of the Guthrie estate, merely a favored slave assigned to her care by her father to avoid the inconvenient burden of child rearing. But Eleanor had never thought of Scott in that way. She'd never considered him as anything less than family.

For a very long time he'd been the closest thing she had to a true friend and confidant. She'd valued and respected his opinions and advice, even if she hadn't always agreed with him or taken his words to heart. She'd gone to him for all manner of things; from skinned knees and the cruelty of other children, to the budding desire for unorthodox teachings and ambitions unbefitting of the fairer sex. From the ignorance of pigheaded men and her dealings in Richard's business, to the trials and tribulations of ruling an island wrought with murders and thieves.

Of course, that wasn't to say that they'd always gotten along. She'd been a particularly stubborn and unruly child. Even then she'd had no use for the delicate teachings of young ladies. Propriety and tradition had never held much value for her. She'd much preferred pants to any sort of frock, roughhousing over tea time, and skirting lines rather than following them. And it had only got worse as she got older. Pants had returned to skirts, but only to make a point of the fact that she was indeed a woman successfully awash in the business of men. Roughhousing had turned into drinking and cussing and colluding with pirates. And eventually, she'd forgone skirting lines in favor of abandoning them entirely.

It was around this time that she'd begun her shameless affiliations with Charles.

And by God, she'd nearly driven poor Scott mad. He'd probably spent more time trying to corral and caution her than he did much of anything else. And when he wasn't trying to reign her in, he was covering for her, acting as a buffer between her and her father's rigid expectations.
The man had been a Goddamned saint.

Her gut churned and for a moment she closed her eyes, fearing she might be sick. How could he be dead? How had she not known about this? She opened her eyes again, deep breaths having momentarily warded off the threat of retching. Her gaze remained fixed upon the horizon, eyes misted but refusing to weep.

Scott had been the one and only person she'd ever allowed herself to trust explicitly. Even Charles, a man who'd possessed her heart for nearly a decade, had never managed to pry such unequivocal trust from her. She'd always been so markedly guarded, always wary and suspicious of others. She'd learned very early on that a woman in her position couldn't afford not to be. If she was to be taken seriously, she needed to be twice as ruthless, stringent and clever as any man ever would need to be. But Scott had slipped under her defenses too early in life, before she'd properly fortified her walls and while she was still too young to know any better.

She'd let him in, grown too accustomed to his support and guidance. Now he was gone, and she felt adrift. She wasn't quite certain what she was meant to do without him.

True, he'd left her side many months before his death and she'd survived. But death wasn't the same as simple distance.

His departure from Nassau had been a direct result of her own careless action. She'd lied to him, betrayed his trust by attempting to bully Bryson into handing over the cannons. And while she certainly hadn't appreciated Scott's conspiring with her father to capsize her plans, she did understand why he'd done it.

He'd only been trying to protect her, aiming to save her from herself. He'd told her as much upon returning from the slave ship. And upon learning this, she'd forgiven him his indiscretions. She'd even requested that he remain at her side as her adviser. But he'd claimed that staying would only tempt him to continue running interference in her misguided plans. He was convinced that she was marching brazenly toward her own death, and he'd chosen not to watch her do it.

So he'd left, abandoned her to head off to sea with Hornigold's crew.

And in his leaving, she'd never felt quite so alone. By that point she'd already alienated Max, discarded Charles and inadvertently chased Scott off to sea. As a result, there had been months in which she'd had no one left to turn to, no one left to blame but herself. And while she'd been loathe to admit it and convinced she knew exactly what she was doing, she was still terribly lonely. She'd endured, of course. She always did. But those losses had been keenly felt, her mistakes too plainly
lain out before her.

Now she stood on the shores of an island not her own, with her life in tatters and only her regrets to keep her company. How could one woman have fallen so far? How could she have been so foolish and blind? She should have told Scott she was sorry. She should have told him he'd been right. She should have told him that she loved him.

Now she'd never tell him anything.

The thought burned and stung, like salt in an open wound. But still, the tears didn't come. She didn't curl up in the sand to quiver and shake and wail. She wasn't even sure she could have if she'd wanted to. Instead she simply stood there, breathing slow and deep.

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When Eleanor had left the village square, Charles assumed she'd been headed back to their hut and resisted the misguided desire to trail after her. He understood what Scott had meant to her and that this loss would no doubt torture and pang. But he also understood that her pain should no longer have been his problem. It shouldn't have been any of his concern.

She wasn't his. She didn't need the comfort of his arms or his shoulder to cry on. He wasn't even entirely sure that she ever had. And so despite his irrational and erroneous desire to offer solace where solace most certainly wasn't deserved, he'd opted to give her space instead.

That is, until he'd eventually gone back to the hut and found it empty. Then he was angry. Angry and just a little afraid. What was she thinking wandering off without a word? Walking alone among the men was a dangerous undertaking. Despite whatever deals they'd agreed to, those men still very much hated her. And just because they'd agreed not to kill her, didn't mean they couldn't still change their minds on a whim. It didn't mean there weren't many other things they could still decide to do to her.

With a curse, he'd stomped from their hut and back out into the village to look for her. They couldn't afford any more mishaps or setbacks. He told himself that that explained his current state of unease. He told himself the knot in his gut had nothing to do with the thought of possibly finding her broken and bloodied in the sand somewhere. He told himself that he was only looking to secure their victory in Nassau and needed her to do it.
But even as he thought it, he knew it wasn't entirely true.

That woman was just as deeply wedged beneath his skin as she'd ever been. He'd just learned to better manage it, to ignore the voice that whispered of loyalty and devotion and a life by her side. Placing any stock in that voice only ever fucked him over. He'd learned that lesson good and well, more times than he could count.

But still, that knot persisted just the same.

After a brief search of the village, Charles had almost instinctively began heading for the beach. Half way there his mind caught up with his feet, and quickly he realized just where he was headed and why. He should have thought of it sooner, but he'd gotten caught up in that initial rush of dread that had reared up with her sudden disappearance.

In the past, she'd often gone to the shore when she was angry or upset. He would commonly find her sulking or seething or mulling about by the water's edge, and it hadn't been terribly uncommon for him to occasionally meander over to her side during such occasions. Sometimes he'd simply sat there with her in the sand and silence, offering only a quiet understanding or wordless consort. Other times he'd listened to her rant and rave and curse. Occasionally he'd call bullshit and attempt to talk slivers of sense into her, and now and then they'd just settle for trying to fuck each other stupid. He had countless memories of these occasions, most of them more wistful and nostalgic than he'd ever care to admit.

But regardless of the feelings those memories stirred up, he still recognized that for her the waterfront had always been a place of placidity and contemplation. And so it was not unprecedented that she might well have gone down to the beach after the matter with the men had been settled.

As he pushed past the treeline and spotted her standing by the water, a rush of relief that he'd prefer not to analyze washed over him. For a moment he simply stood by the treeline and watched her. Much to his dismay, he could practically feel her anguish from here. Despite the steady gale coming off the sea, the air seemed thick and stifled with it.

She wasn't weeping.

She hadn't curled into herself to wail and quiver or wallow in her obvious heartbreak.

Instead she stood pale and regal and composed, spine straight and hands clasped firmly against her
stomach. Ever the pillar of unequivocal fortitude.

And yet still, her sorrow was near palpable.

He knew what it was to loose someone so close to you. One didn't live the sort of life he did without having had experienced that sort of thing at one time or another. He understood it, and he understood her need to cling to those last tenuous scraps of composed endurance.

That was the problem, he understood it. He understood her. And that understanding brought with it an uncomfortable poignancy. He knew damn well he should leave her be, that getting much closer to her in this state could very well be the mistake that pushed him right back over that dubious edge.

But something nameless and sickeningly familiar prevented his departure. Despite knowing it was likely a terrible idea, he found himself making his way towards her. He wasn't even entirely certain why. He shouldn't have bothered, because he knew damn well there wasn't anything that could be said or done to ease her pain. Nothing could alleviate that sort of grief. You just had to ride it out, wait for it to fade into something reasonably bearable.

And yet still he crossed those sands to stand beside her, all the while anticipating the loss of another tenuously clutched shard of his self control.

Some people just never learned.

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Eleanor didn't need to turn around to know he was standing just behind and a few feet to the right of her. She couldn't have said how she knew, but she did.

For some time, neither of them spoke. They simply stood there in a strangely easy and companionable silence. The only sounds came from the surge of the waves and squall of gulls as they watched the sun crawl leisurely toward the sea. Several more minutes passed between them before Eleanor finally spoke, her eyes still trained upon the horizon.

“How did you know I'd be down here?” She asked with quiet composure and without bothering to turn and look at him.
He shrugged, heedless to the fact that with her back to him she couldn't see the careless motion. “You've always liked the water...” His tone was soft and matter-of-fact, as if the statement wasn't an obvious admittance of his understanding.

She closed her eyes at his words, pulling a slow and steady breath in through her nose. Of course he would know. How could he not? They'd stood like this on countless occasions. He knew exactly why she'd felt the need to come here. And somehow, she couldn't decide whether his understanding made things easier or harder.

There was another stretch of silence, neither of them really feeling the need for further elaboration.

As the sun began to creep into the sea, there was a shuffle of movement that indicated her was sitting himself down on the beach behind her, dropping his weapons in the sand with a muted plunk beside him. She still didn't bother opening her eyes or turning to look at him. She wasn't entirely sure why exactly he'd come, and she didn't want to dwell too much on the wondering. She feared she'd stubble across something she didn't want to find. So instead she remained where she was, eyes closed and with the fleeting rays of the sun still warming her face.

Eventually there was some more shuffling, and his voice finally sounded over the waves.

“Eleanor...” His tone was at first gentle, somewhat low and coaxing. But when she failed to respond, he repeated himself. This time sounding more gravelly and less patient. “Eleanor.”

With a somewhat exasperated sigh, she finally opened her eyes and turned her head enough to cast an irritated sideways look over her shoulder at him.

He was sitting in the sand a few feet from her. His legs were drawn up with one elbow resting causally upon a knee while his other arm hovered outstretched in her direction. In his extended hand he offered a flask of what promised to be an intoxicant both pungent and strong.

When she only stared at his outstretched hand, he lifted an inquisitive brow and gave the flask a little shake, as if to say 'well? Do you want it or not?'

At that she huffed out another frustrated breath and gave a halfhearted roll of her eyes before turning and tramping through the sand toward him. Not terribly concerned with looking graceful, she plopped down in the sand to the left of him, fighting her skirts for a moment before snatching the
flask from his fist. In one smooth movement she'd uncapped it and tipped it back against her lips, taking a good few solid gulps of fire and scowling with the burn before recapping the thing and thrusting it back into his hands.

He watched her wipe her mouth on the back of her hand before he spoke. “Your welcome.”

She sent him a look at suggested he'd have had better luck trying to pry gratitude from the shrubbery behind them. His mouth twitched with what might have been a smile, but never quite evolved into anything substantial. Removing the flask's lid and shoving it into is pocket, he lifted the drink to his own lips.

They sat sharing that bitter flask for some time, neither one feeling overly compelled to press the other with conversation. It was strange but comfortable, and almost painfully nostalgic. After they'd finished off the drink, Eleanor was grateful for the delicate fog that had settled over her mind in the alcohol's wake. She wasn't drunk, but the liquor had left her feeling warm and considerably less on edge. Her chest still ached and she still felt miserable, but she appreciated what Charles had tried to do for her.

She wasn't stupid. He hadn't had to stay here and finish off that flask with her, he'd done it because he'd assumed it was what she needed. Despite all she'd done to him, he'd still offered her the quiet solace of his presence. He was more than she deserved, more perceptive and compassionate than was likely good for him.

Which was a funny thought, considering the notorious Charles Vane had gained a reputation for cruelty and was one of the most feared and respected pirates in the Bahamas. It was a strange contrast to witness, and she couldn't help but be touched by it. She knew full well that it was a very select few who ever saw this side of him.

Perhaps it was the melancholy of the moment or perhaps simply the influence of alcohol, but when the urge to lean into him presented itself, she didn't bother fighting it. Before he could protest, she'd shuffled closer to his side, closed her eyes and lowered her head to rest against his left shoulder. As she felt him tense beneath her, it occurred to her that this probably hadn't been the wisest of actions. But in this particular moment, she couldn't quite muster up the strength of will to give a damn.

She just wanted the contact. She needed it.

“Eleanor.” His voice sounded cautious, almost regretfully admonitory. And when she tried to ignore the warning in his tone and fact that he obviously didn't want to encourage this level of intimacy, he tried to shift away from her.
With his movement, her left hand shot up to grip the front of his shirt and his right moved to grip her offending wrist. But she didn’t relent, only pressed her temple more firmly into the side of his shoulder and whispered harshly, “Don’t.”

He took a breath as if to say something, shifting like he was going to try and pull away again and a part of her welled up with an irrational panic. The word left her lips before she could think to stop them, its whispered timbre sounding desperate and pathetic even to her own ears. “Please...”

She almost pulled away from him then, feeling somewhat mortified by the melodrama of her own display. But he’d stilled beneath her and his grip on her wrist had loosened into something less rigid. For a moment there was an utter stillness. So much so, that she barely dared to breathe for fear of disrupting the tenuous stability of the moment. But as the moments ticked by and neither of them tried to move, it became clear that he’d conceded to her commiserable plea and a delicate sort of repose was established between them.

He might not have pulled her close or slung an arm around her waist, but he hadn’t pulled away either. The grip he still had on her wrist had become something more tender and comforting, even if the thumb resting idly against the back of her hand never lapsed into the gentle stroking motion that he used to be so fond of. The grip itself was anchor enough.

And she was grateful for that.

Though she did understand that this allowance had likely cost him. And knowing this, she felt an unusual desire to offer up some sort of condolence for her behaviour, a compensation of sorts. It was silly, and perhaps a little irrational. But then again, emotions were rarely grounded in sensibility and reason.

So there, in the soft fading of the light, she murmured two words that scarcely ever passed her lips. “Thank you...”

He offered only a muted grunt in response, but she knew enough to take it for the acceptance of gratitude that it was.

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Chapter 15

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AN: Surprise, I'm not dead! I know, I know; FOUR MONTHS?! Yeah, I suck. Pretty sure this is the longest and most painful delay yet... Sorry! But omg, you guys, the response for the last chapter was phenomenal! Reviews are sustenance & I'll admit I was dying a little, so thank you! You guys are awesome & I swear I'm still not done with this story! You really kicked up my spirits and sent me into this next chapter with more enthusiasm & incentive than I've had for writing in a while. So now I present to you the fruit of your labors: An extra long chapter with loads of smut! XD It doubles as a huge thank you & as compensation for my terrible delay. Enjoy & keep letting me know what you think!

DEFINITIONS:
Besotted: Intoxicated; Infatuated; Obsessed. Akin to the phrase Lovesick.
Prostration: Extreme mental or emotional depression or dejection
Tacit: Understood without being openly expressed; implied. Silent/Unspoken awareness.
Pandora’s Box: Pandora’s box is an artifact in Greek mythology, taken from the myth of Pandora’s creation in Hesiod’s Works and Days. The box was said to contain all the evils of the world. Pandora opened the box out of curiosity, unwittingly unleashing those evils upon the world. By the time she managed to finally get the box closed again, only Hope was left trapped in the bottom of the box.
Burgeoning: To grow or develop quickly
Indurated: To make hard; harden
Equanimity: Mental or emotional stability/composure, especially under tension or strain
Palaver: Conference/discussion; long parlay with profuse and idle talk
Perturbation: Cause of mental disquiet, disturbance or irritation
Immedicable: Something that cannot be cured, remedied or corrected
masochistic: Gratified by pain, degradation, deprivation, etc., inflicted upon oneself either by one’s own hand or the hand of others.
Rapaciously: Greedy; predatory; extortionate

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He should never have let her get so close. He’d given up too much ground, offered up far more than he’d ever intended. He could practically feel her grip round his neck tightening. She was squeezing the air from his lungs, stealing his breath and replacing it with her own. She was peeling back his
skin, clearing up space so she could crawl inside and spread her poison.

This was how it always went. He'd never managed to keep free of her for very long. He should have
known. He should have put a stop to all of this before this destructive cycle could repeat itself.

But even when the opportunity had presented itself, his mind screaming that she was too close and
that her proximity left him vulnerable, he'd allowed her to remain where she sat pressed against him.
It was a mistake. He'd known it was even as he'd done it, but that hadn't been enough to stop to it.
He hadn't pushed her away. He'd given her an inch, and she'd taken a Goddamned mile. Now she
had a foothold. A precarious foothold, but a foothold nonetheless.

It was stupid and weak. She'd made him stupid and weak. Just as she always had.

It was near nauseating to realize that despite all his efforts to remain unmoved, she'd still managed to
chip away at all his hard earned resolve. All she'd needed to do was crack a little, show him a
glimpse of the desperate and devastated woman he knew she hid beneath the surface, and he'd rolled
over like a cheap whore. She may as well have just held out her hands expectantly, because he'd
willfully handed her a weapon. Though metaphorical in nature, that weapon held dangerous
potential. He knew all too well she'd find a way to have it carve the very heart from his chest.

It wasn't that he thought there had been any actual malicious intent on her part. Not in those
moments, anyway. He understood that the emotionality of her prostration had been genuine, she'd
loved Scott and his loss had been a grievous blow. But that knowledge only made it all the worse,
her naked vulnerability in those moments had all but gutted him.

Quite frankly, it pissed him off that her distress had bothered him at all.

He shouldn't have felt inclined to comfort her in the first place. But as was so often the case in his
dealings with Eleanor, his rationality had all but taken flight with the very sight of her. It wouldn't be
seen of heard from again until she'd been properly removed from his proximity.

_Fucking ridiculous._

She'd needed him to offer what she'd never openly ask for. And being the besotted moron that he
was, he'd felt foolishly inclined to supply her with it. When he'd seen her standing on that beach,
he'd acted without fully considering the consequence. He'd offered her silence and a flask and the
implicit understanding that words weren't required. But he hadn’t been aiming to position himself as
her shoulder to cry on. There was an tacit implication of trust and intimacy in such positions of consolation, and he'd no desire to regress into anything of the sort.

Fucking her was one thing, and sleeping beside had become a necessary evil, but holding her while she mourned the loss of her surrogate father was something else entirely.

And yet even knowing this, he still hadn’t pulled from her. He’d made a halfhearted attempt, sure, but ultimately he’d knuckled under. She’d croaked out a single desperate plea, only two simple words. They hadn't even been anything profound. It was just: “Don’t... Please.”

And he hadn’t. Because Goddamn her, he understood.

He understood exactly what that moment had meant. She’d needed him to stay where he was. And for as much as she'd deserved his refusal, he hadn’t had the heart to kick her while she was already so clearly laid up and bleeding. Though God only knew why. It wasn't as if she wouldn’t have deserved it if he had denied her.

But that was how it had always been with Eleanor. With her he’d always found himself irrationally moved by whatever passion consumed her in the moment. Joy, pain, rage, lust; it didn’t matter. The intensity with which she experienced emotion was bewitching. Her fervor was infectious, often inexplicably poignant and stirring. She roused to life in him things that, before her, he’d simply assumed were long dead or just entirely non-existent.

She made him feel alive, made him want things a man in his position could not afford to want. Women in general were complicated creatures in and of themselves, but this woman gave new meaning to the statement. Regrettably, he suspected that was half the reason he’d fallen so hard for her.

*Christ, he was sick.*

What kind of idiot willingly submerged himself into that sort of emotional chaos? Even knowing that doing so was essentially prying open Pandora's Box, he'd still dove right in.

He was defective, completely fucking mental. It was the only viable explanation. Either that, or he was just a straight up masochist. He knew she was a risk. He knew she was dangerous and he always had. But he'd always wanted her anyway. If he was being perfectly honest, a part of him still did.
That was precisely the problem.

She was like a drug, blithely showing him new and incredible heights only to batter him bloody with the comedown. It was always one hell of a crash and a nearly impossible detox, but he was an addict. He'd said it before, she'd been his drug of choice for almost as long as he could remember. He'd kicked the habit a few times, sure, but never for very long. He'd fallen off the wagon and into her arms more times than he could count. He could admit that, but this time was supposed to have been different. He'd convinced himself that this time she'd gone too far and that there was no going back. He'd never let her back in, he couldn't. Not without getting himself killed.

Yet here he was, splaying himself open for her again. He could feel it; his tenuous grip on control slipping idly through grasping fingers. He could practically taste the defeat. She was slithering past his defenses and into his bloodstream, and it seemed there was little to be done about it.

He was starting to think he couldn't stop it, that she was getting back inside whether he liked it or not.

But that didn’t mean he was willing to go down without a fight. Even if a backslide was inevitable and he could feel her coursing through his veins, he wouldn't make this easy on her. Perhaps he might be able slow the process, limit their interaction to the bare minimum necessity. Surely less exposure would, at the very least, hinder his decent into this self-deprecating madness.

He might not be able to talk himself out of love with her, but he sure as hell wouldn't submit to it laying down. He’d given her enough of himself already. If she wanted what was left, she’d damn well have to pry it from his cold, dead fingers.

He’d been ignoring her for days now, avoiding her when he could and only bothering to speak to her when communication was absolutely essential. Though even then, his responses generally ranged from affirmative grunts and negatory growls to simple one liners spoken only out of necessity. It was as though he’d perceived her to have committed some sort of heinous crime, an unforgivable atrocity for which he had deemed himself worthy of administering this juvenile punishment.

And she was quickly loosing patience.
The stretching silences and short winded conversations were less than stimulating, and quite honestly a little painful. Coupled with the fairly frequent glaring and occasionally snide comments she'd been enduring, it was getting to be a little much.

It wasn’t as though she considered herself innocent. She had indeed committed her fair share of atrocities. However, none of these slights had taken place overly recently. At least not recently enough to warrant his sudden decent into relative mutism.

While she'd never have described him as exuberant or chatty to begin with, he certainly hadn’t been this reticently glaring time bomb. Well, at least not to such an extent as this. If he’d something to say, then he should just bloody say it. Like he usually did. But if he was too stubborn to bother removing whatever had gotten so stuck up in his craw, then she’d happily step in and tear it out herself.

Anything to break the monotony.

She was itching for something beyond this endless planning and skulking about anyhow. She'd had enough of all this closemouthed bullshit. Who had the patience for all this passive aggressive nonsense? And since when did Charles bother with anything passive-aggressive? He was generally far more inclined towards the loud, outward sort of aggression. Clean. Simple.

This wasn’t like him. He was usually more than happy to tell her where she could stuff it. And perhaps that was what was really bothering her; the fact that he hadn’t just lain into her like she knew he wanted to. She could guess why he was so angry. He didn't like the way things had played out down by the beach.

She could sympathize with that, because neither did she. Her little meltdown had been emotionally exorbitant and embarrassing.

She understood that her demand had cost him something too, something that he hadn't been willing to offer her just yet, if even ever again. He might not have been willing to coddle her by delivering soothing reassurances and gentle touches, but that was good. She wouldn't have allowed herself to be cosseted in such a way anyway. The point was that, in his own way, he'd still made a genuine effort to console her. He’d known that words were neither important nor necessary, and may well have made things worse. He'd offered drink, the simple comfort of his presence and the amenity of an understanding silence. Which was far better than what they both knew she’d earned.

She loved him all the more for that.
Looking back, she considered that had that drink and silence been the end of it, it might have been enough. Had that quiet companionship not felt so horridly comfortable and achingly familiar, she might have managed to better pull herself together. But that comfort had fractured the delicate semblance of control she'd been clinging to and to her horror, she'd felt herself unraveling. It was all she could do not to dissolve into a blubbering mess. So suddenly she was pressed against the side of him, desperate to hold on to those last tattered pieces of composure.

She hadn't needed him to speak. She hadn't required him to hold her or stroke her hair. She'd only needed him to stay right where he was, just for a moment. Just until she felt like she could breathe again. He was an anchor of sorts, her port in the storm. He always had been, even when neither of them had wanted him to be. Even when she'd thrashed against the notion, fighting against it tooth and nail.

But for all her rabid brawling, she hadn't changed a thing. Apparently, old habits died hard.

For as soon as he'd tried to pull away, a part of her had irrationally panicked. It was silly and childish and she knew it, but for whatever reason, she couldn't bear the thought of allowing the tears to start. The heat of his body next to hers had been the only thing holding her together. If he'd moved, she was sure the loss of contact would've been her undoing. She knew those tears would've been justified, understandable even, given who she'd just learned she lost.

However, she'd been almost certain that if she started, she might never stop.

Logically, she knew such a fear to be ridiculous. She'd survive Scott's death. She'd come through it on the other side, just like she always did. But that logic hadn't been enough to quell the inner storm. And so, in a moment's weakness, she'd demanded far more from him than she knew he was willing to give.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she'd known she was pushing too hard, asking for too much, but she'd pressed on all the same. She'd demanded that he stay.

And with those two words, she'd snatched from him any hope of denying her. Though admittedly, she hadn't meant for those words to sound half as desperate, broken and pathetic as they had. That bit was unexpected, mortifying and absolutely loathsome. It had almost been enough to make her pull away, make her say something biting or overly nonchalant just to counteract the near crippling vulnerability that accompanied that level of emotional exposure.
But as he sat stiffly clutching at her wrist, so quiet and unmoving, it became clear he'd no intention of leaving. At least not right then and there. So as the seconds stretched into minutes and the tenuous silence shifted into a more relaxed one, relief flooded through her veins and her anxious misery quieted into something more manageable.

Feeling somewhat disproportionately grateful, she'd thanked him and he'd acknowledged her gratitude in his usual gruff, non-verbal way. So why couldn't that just be the end of it? Why the hell was he now wasting both their time behaving like a disgruntled child?

Today, just as he'd been doing for the last few days, he was avoiding her like the Goddamned plague. How helpful was that? How were they supposed to get anything done? They were sharing a twelve by fifteen room together, but for how often he was actually there one wouldn't have known it.

Currently he was out on a supposed patrol. Not that they needed him on those runs, they had more than enough men to tend such things. But he'd taken to going out with the men all the same. She suspected he did it more to get away from her than for anything else, but perhaps that was simply her irritation talking. It was entirely possible he was just getting antsy with all the planning and lack of action. She knew keeping busy made him feel more useful, productive.

She could certainly relate to that. She was going fucking stir crazy in this stuffy, little hut.

Restlessly mulling over the paperwork she'd been given, she sat bowed over the crude but sensibly crafted table in their hut. If she had to sit here tasked with administrative work, she supposed she should at least be grateful she got to do it in a fresh set of clothing, even if they were a touch too large.

After parading around for days in the same two bedraggled skirts she'd brought with her, she'd been more than happy to accept the ill-fitting but far more practical outfit. The large linen blouse was a faded bluish-grey and the dark canvas breeches were more than a little worn, but she could hardly be bothered to care. She was simply glad to be rid of the hindrance of that skirt and corset. She never had cared for the cramped restrictions of female attire. It was why, whenever she thought she could get away with it, she'd favored buttoned blouses over corsets and simple full skirts over those ridiculous hooped monstrosities. When she did bother to don a corset, it was generally clasped rather than laced. And on the odd occasion it actually did lace, it usually wasn't pulled half as tight as it technically should have been. Honestly, she only ever bothered with them at all because she liked highlighting the fact that she was indeed a woman in a position of authority. But seeing as how said position of authority had all but evaporated, she didn't see the point in suffering the discomfort.

Unfortunately, despite the much appreciated change of clothing, she felt no more settled than she had prior. She was still itchy with agitation, a crawling impatience and burning irascibility. She wasn't a prisoner per se, but by God it sure as fuck felt that way. After her little beach excursion, Lou had
suddenly seemed never to be too far away. The cur was constantly meandering around outside her door like some kind of nosy little watchdog. She had the sneaking suspicion that he'd been assigned to keep tabs on her. Likely by her dear, ever crotchety Captain Vane.

*The contemptuous ass.*

With a huff, she returned her attention to the papers sprawled across the surface of the table before her. A few hours earlier she'd been assigned the task of going over Charles' scribbled blueprints of the fort's tunnel system, the idea being that there might be something there they could take advantage of. Despite the fact that she suspected a good deal of the reason she'd been given this task was because it was busywork, she'd still agreed to look it over. She'd done so only because having played in those tunnels as a child, she knew them like the back of her hand. It made sense for her to make sure nothing had gone unnoticed or forgotten.

Unfortunately, that didn't make the task any less tedious. It didn't stave off her restlessness nor ease the growing sense of irritation and impatience with her situation and Charles' behaviour. If anything, it only served to keep her hands busy while she fantasized about letting her temper fly the moment he waltzed back through that door.

So she simply stewed, haughtily adding in hidden passages he'd overlooked and searching for ones he might have forgotten or mislabeled. Though admittedly and much to her chagrin, he'd done a fairly decent job of documenting it all. He must have started committing those tunnels to memory the moment he'd taken control of the fort, carefully cataloging all their secrets for future use. Because despite the hastily scribbled hand with which the plans were drawn, they were still meticulous and surprisingly well detailed, too detailed to be something he just happened to remember and haphazardly jot down. It was clear he'd studied them rather closely in the time he'd spent there.

With an irritated sigh, she reflected that he always had been far more clever and calculated than he bothered to let on. She supposed it was far easier to play the impulsive, single minded brute and reap the benefits of being underestimated than it was to show your hand and allow people the chance to become suspicious. Though admittedly, the role suited him as well as it did only because he truly did embody many of the traits associated with it. He really was an impulsive, single minded brute. But the catch was that he was also shrewd, dogged and resourceful. Sure, he was wasn't above using brute force and violence to get what he wanted, he even preferred it that way most of the time. But he was also capable of utilizing approaches of a more subtle and tactical nature.

He was multifaceted.

It was a fact that had often irritated her as much as it impressed her. She'd even learned a thing or two from him; like the occasional value of allowing testosterone addled minds to perceive her as less than what she was. It was a subtle but effective manipulation tactic that had often worked in her favor.
But right now, none of that really mattered. Right now, she was far too concentrated on the burgeoning fury unfurling in the pit of her stomach. All this prolonged semi-confinement and distant, closemouthed foolishness had to end. They were never going to get anything accomplished if he kept treating her like she was Judas incarnated.

Just because they'd shared a few brief moments of understanding down on that beach did not mean she was gunning for shared secrets and maudlin heart to hearts. So he could just relax. She understood he was uncomfortable with the fact that he'd allowed those moments to occur in the first place and that their relationship was strained at best.

But enough was enough.

He wanted to keep hating her? Fine, that was a crux she'd been expecting to have to bear anyway. But the least he could do was look her in the face and tell her as much. She'd rather he fume and yell and curse at her than subject her to this painfully fraudulent silence. It was somehow worse, somehow so much more impersonal, hurtful and insulting.

She needed him to react. To give her something, anything.

He was making her insane. She spent half her time drowning in guilt, and the other half blistering with fury. She closed her eyes, setting down the pen as a wave of sorrow bubbled up to mingle with the rage that rolled beneath her skin. She longed for the days when after a quarrel she could simply slide into the space beside him and burrow close, certain that he understood that tenderness to be her version of apology. But her sins had grown too great, her past betrayals too destructive and untenable to warrant such easy forgiveness. She'd tainted things, buried within him a blade she wasn't certain she'd ever be able to remove.

Christ, who was she kidding? She probably deserved this.

With a tired and frustrated huff, she decided a drink was in order. Shoving her chair back from the table, she rose to rummage around in the trunk by the bed for the rum she was almost certain it contained. After a few unfruitful moments and a considerable number of muted curses, she emerged with prize in hand. Not bothering to hunt down a cup, she wrenched the cork from its resting place and tossed back a healthy swig straight from the bottle.

She was still antsy and frustrated, but the brunt of her temper had been somewhat impaired by the weight of her regrets. She stood by the opinion that his behaviour was childish and unhelpful, but she
couldn't deny that there was a certain degree of cause for it. She shouldn't have pushed him on the beach. He’d been sitting with her already and that should have been enough. But she'd pushed for more, just like she always did. The fact that she'd done so in a moment of utter emotional frailty only made things worse.

With a growl of self disgust, she threw back another shot of the foul smelling alcohol, relishing the burn as it slid down her esophagus. Did he really have to keep punishing her for that embarrassing display? It wasn't as if it had been entirely intentional, she'd barely been holding herself together for Christ sake. Among her many sins, there were certainly ones more deserving of punishment than this paltry fuck up. For this particular slight, hadn't that horrid display of emotional infirmity been punishment enough for the both of them?

*It sure a hell felt like it.*

As if in response to her questioning, the door swung open with a rather resounding bang. Her eyes snapped up to find Charles – still sullen and surly – tramping petulantly through the door and into the room. He barely spared her a glance as he moved toward the trunk she'd been digging through only minutes prior. Jerking it open, he began ransacking its contents in search of something.

She watched with mild irritation as he continued hunting through the trunk – seemingly without any progress if his increasingly frustrated demeanor was any indication. After observing the mess he was making for a few moments longer, she sighed.

“Just what is it you're looking for?” She asked brusquely.

He paused, placing his hands on the edges of the open trunk. Without bothering to turn around, he ground out, “Rum.”

Her eyes narrowed in aggravation. “You mean other than the one in my hands?”

He sent her a scathing look over his right shoulder before turning back to the trunk. “Yes.”

*Petulant child.*

She rolled her eyes, an exasperated growl tumbling from her lips as she stood and strode towards him. He turned around at the sound of her approach with his eyes narrowed suspiciously, as though
he suspected there was a good chance she was up to something underhanded.

Undeterred, she thrust the bottle out in his direction, holding it out in front of her for him to take. When he only continued to glare at her, she resisted the urge to scream. Hoping the movement would both highlight the stupidity of his behaviour and adequately convey her impatience with the whole matter, she gave the bottle a jerkily coaxing shake in his direction.

He merely cast that irascible gaze from her face to the bottle and back again. Aside from the distasteful look in his eyes, the rest of his face remained almost entirely impassive. It was infuriating.

Fine. Two could play that game.

“What, concerned I might be trying to poison you?” She quipped with sneering sarcasm. “Tell me, how exactly would I benefit from that, hm?” She knew that wasn't why he'd refused, he was just being stubborn and disagreeable. But the implication that he feared her wily ways would piss him off, and right now that suited her just fine. She'd rather get him riled up and angry than sit a moment longer in this stifling, acerbic quiet.

His eyes narrowed even further at her bating. She watched his jaw tighten tellingly just a second before his hand shot out towards her. He snatched the bottle from her hand and attempted to move past her, but she wasn't having it.

“Christ, Charles! What is it?!” She snapped, stepping into his path and effectively blocking his most direct route of escape.

The look he was giving her darkened, the muscle in his jaw twitching as he studied her. “Move.” He growled.

“No.” She hissed defiantly.

He stepped towards her, towering over her in a blatant attempt to appear threatening. “Move, or I'll make you move.” He breathed menacingly.

At this she lifted her chin, her eyes screaming with brazen audacity as she remained markedly unfazed by his threat. “No. Talk to me.”
Something dangerous flashed behind his eyes just a heartbeat before he shifted into motion. She barely had time to react before her feet were leaving the ground. She let out a remarkably unladylike shriek as he hoisted her up and over his shoulder. Instantly she began struggling and spewing curses, demanding her set her down and stop behaving like a boar. Who the hell did he think he was? What the fuck did he think he was doing? And so on and so on.

No one could say he hadn't warned her. He'd been very clear; move or get moved. It was her decision. He should have figured she'd choose the most adversarial option available. She always did. That bullheaded woman refused to do anything the easy way. If there was, at all, any possible way to make things more difficult, Eleanor Guthrie would find it.

_Fucking women._

Fueled by shock and outraged by the audacity of his display, she continued to thrash and blaspheme, all the while scrambling for some kind of purchase. The angle was awkward, but she managed to twist her arm back and get hold of his hair. The sudden, hard yank of her arm threw him slightly off balance and forced him to readjust his grip but it didn't deter him overly much. When she finally managed to land a decently solid blow to the middle of his spine with her elbow, he let out a growl of annoyance and bowed slightly with the impact. But much to her dismay, he still seemed – for the most part – wholly unaffected by her struggles. He continued carting her the rest of the way across the room as though she were little more than a particularly unruly sack of potatoes.

It was downright insulting, really. So, with a sound caught somewhere between a battle cry and wounded animal, she brought her knee up. Hard.

As her knee made a solid connection with his upper stomach, she was rewarded with the satisfying sound of air leaving his lungs, a distinctly audible 'oomph' that felt insanely gratifying. Unfortunately, she hardly had time to revel in her triumph before she was flung backwards, landing hard and rather unceremoniously on their ramshackle excuse for a bed. Hardly finished and assuming he was about to try to leave, she scrambled upright, fully prepared to stop him by whatever means necessary.

If she'd stopped to consider how ridiculous that sounded, she might have been more inclined toward a more civil resolution. However, riding that rush of adrenaline and indignant animosity, she hardly noticed the absurdity of it all. He'd poured fuel all over the fire and lit a match. Now she was more than happy to make sure he caught some of the flame.

At this point she'd let them both burn. She was too keyed up to care.
He'd started to turn away from her towards the door when she launched out her arm to catch his sleeve. He rounded on her instinctively, immediately attempting to shove her off. But as she toppled back toward the mattress she flung her legs out, wielding those flailing limbs like long, boney weapons. In an attempt to still her thrashing and avoid her landing a blow to his more sensitive bits, he was forced to follow her down onto the bed, pin her wriggling form with his own.

This was absolutely not how he'd intended his evening to go. All he'd been trying to do was distance himself, take a much needed breather from her disturbingly heady presence. And yet somehow he'd ended up here. Pinning her to the mattress.

Someone up there must really hate him.

He held her down for another minute or so, eying her with a somewhat bewildered and exasperated expression as she squirmed and seethed beneath him. It wasn't necessarily that he'd assumed she'd go quietly. He'd known she wouldn't, it wasn't her nature. He'd expected her to fight and she had. However, he hadn't thought it'd be this difficult. He hadn't expected to have to wrestle her to the bed just to keep her from slapping the shit out of him. He'd assumed that subduing her would be relatively simple. After all, he had nearly fifty pounds on her and at least five inches in height.

It should have been easy.

Then again, there was very little about this infuriating woman that had ever been easy. He should have known this wouldn’t be any different. The feral little shrew had actually managed to land a few decent blows before he'd finally gotten her subdued and he was admittedly half inclined to slap her back. But now that she'd already been restrained, it seemed somewhat ineffectual. So he settled for glaring daggers at her instead.

If only looks could kill.

When she finally stopped thrashing about and spitting profanities, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was because she'd seen the futility in continuing or if she was simply anticipating the possibility of an opportunity to strike out with more efficiency. Weary of getting socked again, he maintained his grip on her wrists, keeping them pinned by either side of her head as he studied her. She was panting, her face flushed and chest heaving with the exertion of it all. And even as the contrary little witch glared up at him, the familiar intimacy of their positioning was not lost on him. He had no intention of acting on the physical or emotional response the contact evoked, but he was aware of the presence of that knee-jerk pulsation nonetheless.

“Are you finished?” He growled down at her with the most scolding and borderline sarcastic tone he
could manage.

Oh, what she wouldn't give to wipe that look of his face. The arrogant ass.

Utterly heedless of her less than invulnerable position, she snapped, “That depends. Are you going to
tell me what's crawled up your ass?” Despite the fact that she knew full well that the origins of his
peturbation resided with what had happened on the beach, she was mad enough to want to make him
say it.

They always had been rather good at rubbing salt in each other's wounds.

He let loose an irritated snarl, his discomfort with her line of questioning urging him to lash out.
“What difference does that make now, Eleanor? What good might heartfelt palavers do us now, hm?
Is it going to change things? Will it absolve you of your sins? Me of mine?”

For a split second she looked startled, almost as though he'd landed that reciprocal slap after all. For a
brief moment the air stood stagnant between them while she swallowed down the emotion his
statement had conjured and schooled her features into something more neutral. When she spoke
again, her voice was quiet but strong and steady. “No. But I'd like to have it anyway...”

The moment he'd snarled those questions, the mood had changed. The interaction no longer felt
fueled by fury and indignation. Those emotions were still present but they'd been dampened
somehow, taking the backseat to a discussion far too long in the making. Things had taken a more
candid and personal turn and now that they had, neither one of them seemed entirely sure of the
footing.

He peered down at her through weary and suspicious eyes. “Why?” He asked simply.

Did he really have to ask? Was it not clear that she was drowning? That she felt near suffocated,
crushed under the weight of all the guilt, pain and countless regrets? She knew he was aware she
preferred anger over the perceptibly weaker emotions and often favored lashing out over wallowing
in her own self pity. She knew this because he'd spitefully pointed it out to her more than once over
the years, and it had pissed her off every time. Mostly because she knew he was right.

So why the hell couldn't he put two and two together now, when she actually needed him to?
She stared up at him, determinedly trying to read past the anger and suspicion in search of something even remotely receptive to what she knew needed to be said. “Because I need you to understand.” She declared with hard and quiet inflection.

The scrutiny of his gaze only intensified. “Understand what, exactly?”

She took a slow and steady breath, willing herself to remain calm despite the both literal and figurative vulnerability of her position. She wasn't quite certain how she was going to go about getting her point across, but it seemed too late to turn back now. “I'm in this, Charles. I'm really in it. I've worked too hard and lost too much to settle for anything less. I –”

“Everything you lost, you lost due to misplaced hubris and blind ambition.” He hissed into her face. “You paved the way to your own destruction as surely as you did mine.”

Her eyes flashed at that, a familiar anger trickling back into her gaze. “You think I don't know that?” She snapped. “That I don't have regrets?”

“I think you realized the futility of aligning yourself with the English and went looking for the next best thing. I think you're here because you're out of options that don't involve grovelling or conceding what little power you perceive yourself to have left, and you figure I'm the most convenient avenue towards reclaiming some semblance of what you've lost.” He seethed.

She would have preferred he deliver a fist to her gut, it would have hurt less. But she wasn't about to tell him that. Instead, her lips twisted up into a snarl. “Fuck you, Charles.”

He scoffed, releasing her wrists and rolling off of her. “Yeah, fuck me.” He muttered disdainfully. She sat up as he moved off the bed and went to stand by the table, leaning over it and placing his palms down flat on its surface. She imagined he meant for it to appear as though he were examining the blueprints she'd left lying there. But if he was even half as rattled as she felt, he likely wasn't seeing any of it.

She hoped he was, because she herself felt gutted. The silence that followed was deafening, a sickly stillness wrought with tension and misery.

Still sitting on the edge of that bed, she closed her eyes and willed the hurt and anger to subside. How had things escalated so quickly? Hadn't she been trying to smooth things over? How could he think so little of her? Wasn't he supposed to know her?
It was true that once she'd recognized her gilded cage for what it was, she hadn't had many options. But that wasn't the only reason she'd come back to him. She'd risked everything she had left just to get here. Life, limb and dignity included.

He had to know she'd come for more than just herself. She needed him to know she understood the gravity of her mistakes. She needed him to know that the decisions she'd made all those months ago had not been made lightly. It truly had broken her heart to lock that gate between them. But she'd done it because, at the time, she'd truly believed it to be the only path to Nassau's continued survival. When the thought of moving on without him had pained her, she'd tried to sway him to see her side of things. She'd asked him to side with her. But he'd been just as determined to refuse English rule as she'd been on collaborating with it. She'd believed Nassau to hold the largest piece of her heart; that its destruction would be the end of her and everything she'd spent her life trying to achieve. At the time, she hadn't realized that losing him would leave a wound so virulent and immedicable.

She'd thought herself capable of rising above such things for the greater good.

She'd tried, she really had. She'd wrapped fury and hate around herself like a blanketing shield, allowed a misguided quest for vengeance and sovereignty to rule her actions and numb the pain of her own self hatred.

And for a time, it had felt like it was working.

But she'd been mistaken. Nothing she'd done since taking Abigail had been worth a damn thing. Nassau was neither free nor legitimate, merely superseded and overwhelmed by a cruel and domineering empire masquerading under a guise of civility and moral superiority. Woodes may have been kind to her, more lenient and accepting than most men would have been toward a woman of her circumstances, but his vision of Nassau would never be her own. Left in English hands, Nassau was simply to become another insignificant and unremarkable island, merely an additional extension upon England's ever growing reach. She could see that now.

She could see that she'd burned all she had ever loved in search of an outcome that could never have truly been. It didn't exist. It never had. Those misguided beliefs and wayward ambitions had cost her everything.

And Charles had paid dearly for it.

She needed to say something to make him understand she knew the severity of her failings. Nothing
she'd done had been without misery or regret. Turning from him that night had been the most painful and difficult thing she'd ever done. She told herself she'd done it to save Nassau and all she'd built there, and there was truth to that, but not in its entirety.

She'd been afraid. Confronted with how much she cared for him and her inability to convince him to see what – at the time – she'd believed to be reason, she'd panicked and taken measures to remove the source of that fear. A part of her had sabotaged everything simply because she was frightened. Not just of what would become of she and Nassau, but of how the love she held for Charles might influence her better judgment.

It was a thing she was loathe to admit. She was not a woman who ran. Typically, she was more likely to throw a punch than turn and flee. But in this instance she had tucked tail and ran. Even if she had wrapped it up with reason and rationale, there had been a touch of blatant cowardice in her actions.

She hated knowing that, much preferred being consumed with rage and imagined justifications.

With a furrowed brow and pursed lips, she shifted to the edge of the bed. She sat there with her feet planted on the floor and her eyes burrowing into the back of his skull. As the quiet carried ever onward, she took a slow breath in through her nose. Speaking quiet, slow and steady on the exhale, she said, “The night you asked me to side with you, to show the English that Nassau was ours.... I wanted to say yes...”

There. She'd said it. It was out there even though she wasn't sure it was the right thing to say. Hell, she wasn't even certain he'd grasp the significance of the admission or the explanation behind it. But she'd thrown it out there. So there it was; her messy, screwed up truth in all its fucked up glory.

He scoffed. The bastard actually scoffed.

“Bullshit.” He barked as he whirled to face her.

How dare she try this now. He didn't want to hear her heartfelt woes, couldn't bear to stomach another machination. Or even worse, an apology. Nothing she could say would change what she'd done. Nothing could take away the heartache she'd caused, the inexplicable grief that had come with the realization that she'd taken the girl right out from under his nose after he'd offered her everything he had to give. She'd let him believe she understood, that she believed him. Then she'd buried a knife in his back and left him for dead, later compacting her betrayal by actively seeking out his capture and extermination after his crew hadn't opted to murder him.
So no, he didn't want to hear her ardent tales of heartache and regret. He wasn't interested in her apologies, regardless of whether or not they were authentic. She didn't deserve it. If there was a part of him that whispered about his reasoning being born of the fear he might be moved by her narratives, he ignored it. This wasn't about fear, it was about the refusal to surrender, a desire to keep her from getting the upper hand. At least that's what he told himself.

The next words shot up from his chest as if they'd been waiting to escape from the very start. “You said what you said and did what you did because you wanted to, because your plans for that place mattered more to you than anything we'd shared.” He spat acerbically. His voice was dangerously low and biting, honest and unapologetic. He took one quick and impulsive step forward, months of pent up bitterness and pain culminating in a hateful burst of blurted truths. “You came up to that fort with every intention of swaying me toward your perception of things, to have me swallow your words as undisputed truths. And when it became apparent that your argument would fail to convert me, you endeavored to exploit my affection for you. You used it to rob me of what was rightfully mine. To destroy me. You condemned me to death.”

A bullet might have been kinder. For in that moment she was quite certain she would have preferred one to the pain that blossomed through her chest with his words. It had been hard enough for her to simply admit that she'd been wrong, she wasn't one who apologized often or easily. Such admissions stung and left you at the mercy of others, which was something Eleanor detested almost above all things. As a result, his disbelieving and accusatory response to a painfully genuine admission did little more than pour salt into open wounds.

But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was that he was right. It damn near killed her to admit, but there was truth to his words. She had gone there looking to sway him to her side of things, and she had turned on him when that proved impossible. But it hadn't been near as simple as he was making it sound.

She could remember his words from that night almost as clearly as if he'd just spoken them.

“Eleanor, when I take something from a man, his ship, his money, his life, I don't hide behind a clerk. I don't hide behind the law. I don't hide behind anything. I look him in his eye and I give him every chance to deny me. That is legitimate.”

“I know what he wants you to believe, but he's wrong. England's return isn't inevitable. England has no more appetite for taking this place back today than it did yesterday, or last month, or last year, because they know it is inhabited by too many men like me, men who would die before being another man's slave again.”

“Side with Flint, beg them to let you keep what is already yours, show them that weakness, and you'll invite the very outcome you wish to avoid. Side with me and we will show England that this
place has never been stronger, and we'll keep our freedom for another day, another month, another year, a lifetime."

“Hey... Do you believe me?”

She'd known he was wrong. She'd known England was coming and that compliance was not nearly as optional as he seemed to believe it to be. But she'd still been moved by his passion, so horribly and inexplicably touched by his perception of what love, freedom and legitimacy truly were. It was such an honest declaration, a beautiful and powerful diction that spoke to her most coveted values and desires. In that moment she'd thought she truly understood him, felt closer to him than she ever had before.

And for a spit second, she'd almost believed the fairytale. She'd genuinely wanted to to say yes. She'd wanted to throw it all away and side with a plan she knew would fail. All because she loved him.

And that was terrifying.

It had suddenly become agonizingly apparent that her love of him was clouding her better judgment, putting everything she'd worked so hard for at dire risk. It was with that realization that she'd made the decision to rescue Abigail, though she hadn't yet worked out the how of it.

When he'd asked her if she believed him, she hadn't had the heart to tell him no. She didn't even truly want to. So she'd kissed him instead. She kissed him because she wanted to, because she was heartbroken, terrified and resolved all at once. She hadn't been aiming to use his affection for her against him, it truly hadn't occurred to her in that moment. When she'd lain down with him, it hadn’t been with plans to deceive him.

She'd only been thinking of saying goodbye.

The plans for deceit had come later, as she'd lain beside him denying the sting in her nose and dampness of her eyes. When she'd spotted those keys laying on the dresser across the room, she hadn't given herself time to second guess the decision. Even as her heart bled and her mind screamed, she'd reached for those keys and fled.

How dare he stand before her now and presume to know what she'd been feeling in those moments? He'd no idea what it had cost her to refuse him. To lay with him knowing it was the last time. To
abandon him to a fate she hadn't been certain he'd be able to overcome. When she'd turned that key in its chamber, a part of her had died with him down there in those tunnels.

And he hadn't a fucking clue.

Eleanor wasn't a woman who handled hurt feelings particularly well. She tended to lash out when wounded, and today was no different.

Her eyes clouded with the hurt and fury of it all, with the careless ignorance of his accusation. Just because she'd been capable of separating her heart from her mind, didn't mean she hadn't cared. It didn't negate or abjure the validity and worth of everything they'd shared. And it sure as fuck didn't mean she hadn't loved him. How could he possibly think so little of her? To say she'd placed Nassau above him was one thing, it was true for the most part. She'd been blinded by ambition and a dream that could never be actualized. She'd made mistakes, yes. But to imply that he'd meant so little to her, or that what they'd shared hadn't held any real meaning for her?

It was bullshit. Infuriating, idiotic bullshit.

For a moment, the aching fury that his accusation had evoked rendered her silent. As her hands fisted around the edges of the mattress on either side of her, she could barely see past the rage, hardly breathe past the choking pain. Such a blinding, aching anger probably wasn't the most rational or constructive reaction to his slander. And a small and distant part of her still recognized that, but it was all she could do to keep from melting down or hurling herself across the room to claw his eyes out. Possibly both.

The quiet stretched on and she'd still said nothing to refute or deny his accusation. He figured she must have assumed the glare she was giving him was answer enough. It wasn't, but it was clear she hadn't appreciated his allegation and obviously disagreed with either the statement itself or at least the sentiment behind it. Which was ridiculous, considering every decision she'd made prior to coming here had been indicative of exactly what he'd just claimed.

The fact that she'd yet to say anything only exasperated him further. She'd made him edgy, left him revved up and looking for a fight. The least she could do now was give it to him. She'd never been one to back down from the fray before, so why clam up now? He still wasn't much interested in hearing about her excuses or regrets, but he had to admit he was somewhat curious. If he could get some affirmation on what her motives and mindset had been that night, then maybe he still had a shot at avoiding another inevitable slip. Maybe it would be enough to convince his foolish heart of what his mind already knew. Maybe with time, he could be free of her influence.
He narrowed his eyes and probed further anyway. “Why, then? Hm? If not only for wanton selfishness and childish disillusion, then what?”

Again, if she had stopped to consider his behaviour, his wording and the implications behind them, she might have been able to take something more constructive away from the discussion. If she’d taken a moment to process, she might have remembered that he had little reason to trust anything that left her mouth. But riding that wave of emotion and regret, she didn’t stop to consider anything.

She simply reacted.

“Because I actually considered it!” She shrieked, flinging her body up to stand. “Because even as I knew your plan was foolish, as I knew it was doomed and saw that you were blinded to the truth of what would become of our home,” She slapped a hand over her chest with fervor, eyes damp and face filled with anguish and rage. “I still wanted to say yes!”

She was wild, near trembling with the raging torment of an inner conflict he knew too well. It was too familiar not to recognize. The trepidation and distress, that bitter fury? They were telling enough. She wasn't lying, not right now. She'd inadvertently dropped all pretense of control. She was acting on impulse, free falling as her temper took hold of the reins and forced her to ride out the affliction of feeling.

“I wanted to say yes!” She repeated with frenzied passion. “Do you understand how dangerous that is? How stupid?!” She turned away from him then, her chest heaving with the exertion of it all. The room had gone painfully quiet, her heartbeat thudding in her ears like thunder as she fought to refashion some semblance of her equanimity. When she spoke again her voice was indurated, more quiet and composed. “I'd no place in my heart for that kind of weakness... So I found means of guarding against it...”

There was a moment of deafening silence, the only sound being the slight heaving of her breath. He'd gone so sickeningly reticent, so impossibly still. She knew even without turning to look, that his eyes were scorching holes into the back of her head.

She suddenly wished she could take it all back, that she hadn't shared that particular insight into her motives. Because she'd never felt quite so naked, so utterly exposed and helpless. Her skin was crawling, her mind reeling. The urge to flee was present, but she'd not reduce herself any further by
doing so. With that thought she willed herself to turn around, hoping that the look on his face would offer some impression as to what he was thinking.

She turned with her chin held high and her eyes level and focused despite their telling dampness. She met his gaze as the silence extended for a few more heavy beats of her heart, but neither of them moved. As they stared each other down, she found herself thinking that the expression he wore was not unlike the one that had ridden his face the night she'd left him. It was wrought with anger, pain and betrayal. It was an expression that had haunted her endlessly from the moment she'd twisted that key into the locked position.

How could she keep doing this to him? What right did she have? He'd been looking for an excuse to push her away, to create some much needed distance. Instead, she'd further fractured the foundations of his resolve. Her confession had carved deep, left him raw and damn near eviscerated all over again. He'd originally chalked up her betrayal solely to childish ambition and a thirst for substantiation, power and self-governance. He'd assumed the fear of loosing Nassau and all she'd spent her life trying to achieve had only further galvanized her efforts. But if her outburst was to believed, there was more to it than that.

He didn't want there to be more to it. He wanted to write her off as a lost cause; a manipulative, bloodthirsty harpy. But now she'd lain herself open, bared her insides and dared him to look away.

He wanted to look away. God, he'd never wanted anything so badly in his life. But he couldn't. He just stood there, eyes and mind meticulously cataloging, sifting through the emotional wreckage she'd just haphazardly exposed.

Instead he found himself drawn into all that familiar, swirling chaos. She was a walking catastrophe, a beautiful disaster leaving blood and ruin in her wake. But it didn't matter. It never really had. That had always been the problem. Even staring into that void and knowing there was nothing but woe behind it, he still felt its pull. Despite the pain, there were pieces of him that still yearned to stand amongst the devastation by her side.

Had he been able to go on believing the motives for her betrayal were grounded solely in selfish ambition and naïve notions of equality and legitimacy, he may have been able to dismiss her more easily. But now it was clear that while such things had certainly played a role in her treachery, there had been something more intimate at play. It hadn't only been about Nassau and the preservation of her authority and position. A significant portion of it had been about him and what he'd meant to her, the vulnerability that that affection presented in her.

That night in the fort, she'd caught herself considering his offer despite the fact that she believed it to be mad. With this discovery, she'd panicked. She believed her affection for him had compromised her judgment, that it had left her vulnerable and torn between two opposing sides. She'd seen a
weakness, a flaw in her carefully constructed defenses and a threat to Nassau's future.

And she'd acted to patch the breach.

She'd done something similar in the years past, when she'd first come to realize that she'd never be seen as anything more than Charles Vane's woman if she didn't break from him. It was why she'd ended things back then, and it was why she'd ended things that night in the tunnels.

Having some of the blame fall on the insecurities she'd always had surrounding love and weakness shouldn't have lessened the blow. It shouldn't have mattered, as her insecurities were no longer relevant. Her fears of abandonment and the vulnerability that accompanied getting close to someone had always been present. He'd always known those fears to be burdens she carried.

None of this should have made any difference to him but it did, and that was maddening. This woman was maddening, infuriating. Not a damned simple bone in her body. With her, everything had to be twisted up, gnarled and complicated.

When he finally shifted into motion she simply watched as he stalked towards her. His body was wrought with tension and his eyes full of anger and something far less decipherable. He looked baleful, as though he might be inclined to strike her, or worse. Perhaps he didn't believe her, or maybe he'd just finally had enough of all this. Either way, he looked ready to reach out and strangle her.

Her body tensed as the distance between them quickly shrunk, but ego had her spine straightening and her chin lifting. She stood her ground and watched his approach in slow motion, as though time had substantially abated while she herself remained unaffected by the change. He was seconds away and her body screamed for movement, pulsing with the instinct to flee. But her mind demanded stillness, a dignified acceptance of whatever happened next.

As he closed the distance between them, his hand shot forward to reach around and grip the back of her neck. He jerked her forward and hovered just inches from her face, his eyes still blazing with contempt.

“Do you think that makes a difference? That it justifies your actions?” He growled as her hands flew up to grasp tightly at his forearms. She didn't struggle, but she held on.

His eyes burned into hers, full of a desperate sort of inquest. She wanted to tell him she was sorry, that she'd been foolish and blind. But she still felt raw, marred by the accusation in his claims. So instead, she settled for another truth. “No. But I think it should count for something...” Her answer
was soft but curt, straightforward and honest.

It did. As much as he wished it didn't, it did count for something. It tore at something in his chest and demanded he move closer. Annoyed with himself, he yanked her even closer. He was still angry with her, and this didn't absolve her of her sins. But it did earn her a little understanding, even if he'd rather it didn't. His forehead rested against hers as his grip on the nape of her neck tightened. He spoke in low and graveled tones, now more woefully resigned to his fate than ever. “You're infuriating.” He ground out heatedly.

She didn't respond but held his gaze searchingly, needing to know if he understood she'd been telling the truth. He must have known because there was no sting of blade or brunt of fist as he shifted closer and ducked his head. There was only the sudden pressure of his mouth against hers, followed quickly by the prickling scrape of stubble against her cheek as his teeth and tongue worked their way across her jaw and down the side of her neck. Instinctively her hands came up to grip the sides of his head. Leaning into him, she released a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding.

It wasn't exactly an outright apology, but that wasn't their way and it never had been. It wasn't forgiveness either, he wasn't sure he was even capable of offering her as much. But it was a patch of common ground, a familiar and dependable outlet for expression without the drawback of relinquishing too much control or getting unduly verbose. This was their own version of redress, and was it more than she deserved. He'd been moved by her admission, drawn to her side by it, yes. But he wouldn't give voice to any deeper fears or vulnerabilities by allowing for a more assiduous examination of what had just transpired. His actions were also a means of avoiding any more overly emotive confessions, of evading the possibility of being subjected to the discomfort of taking this discussion any further.

He didn't want to delve too deep into the way her confession had only exacerbated the mad cravings he still had for her. He had no interest in exploring the extent to which it had effected him. He was certain he wouldn't like what he found. He was quite positive that if he allowed her to say much more, he might not be able to withstand the onslaught. She'd disarm and cripple him, force him to relinquish what little was left of himself to kneel at her feet.

The thought was an irascible one, one he was unwilling to cede to. He might not be able escape the way he felt about her, but that didn't mean he had to go along with it cordially. He'd pulled back only slightly when one of his hands rushed down between them as he breathed against her mouth.“Nothing you do makes any Goddamned sense.” He declared bitterly as his hand slipped hastily into the loose waistband of her borrowed breeches.

Deep down he knew that wasn't altogether true, but it made him feel better to say it. In actuality, she made a little too much sense. Eleanor-sense, but it was still sense nonetheless. He just spent most of his time trying to ignore it.
Her mouth opened in a small, surprised gasp as his fingers found that familiar little bundle of nerves between her thighs. He took advantage of her surprise by leaning into her again, slipping his tongue into her mouth as his fingers continued working against her.

Never content to act the passive lover, Eleanor hastily began yanking his shirt free of the waist of his trousers. She'd just begun trying to jerk it up over his head when he took a step forward, forcing her back towards the bed. She barely manged to maneuver his shirt up over his head and toss it to the floor before he pushed her back another step. She toppled backward onto the shoddy mattress with little more than a grunt on impact, too caught up in the task at hand to bother with any discomfort it might have caused. His hand parted from her center only long enough to account for his body landing firmly atop hers and readjusting himself above her, his fingers swiftly resumed their torturous circular motion. She arched against him, her neck craning back as his mouth trailed along the junction of her neck and shoulder.

Whoever said apologies needed to be verbal was an idiot. This was far better, far more enjoyable and far less compromising. She fisted her hands in his hair as he moved against her, her breath coming quickly in his ear as his teeth grazed her shoulder.

It briefly occurred to him that he probably should have removed her breeches before he'd knocked her onto the bed, but he wasn't keen on climbing off her long enough to remove them just yet. Abandoning her clit momentarily in search of better maneuverability, he moved to pop open the front of her breeches. A moment later he'd slid his index finger inside her, pumping twice before withdrawing and repeating the motion with his middle finger. With the two digits slickened, he pressed both against her entrance, reveling in the way her breath hitched as he pushed inside. She was too wet for there to be much resistance as his fingers slid home but he found himself marveling at her tightness, the way her muscles bore down on his fingers as he worked them inside her.

He'd always enjoyed watching her. She'd always been so unabashedly responsive, so unrepentantly wanton and demanding regardless of whether she was on the giving or receiving end of things. That had always riled him up, had his head fogging and his crotch tightening. She was never passive, and she'd reduced him to puddy in her hands more times than he could count. The woman had a way about her; a succubus-incarnate.

As if on cue her nails found purchase in his back and shoulders as she moved against his hand, and he wouldn't deny there was a perverse sort of pleasure in knowing there would be marks there tomorrow. When he moved his thumb up to brush against her clit, her hips jerked as a soft cry fled her lips seemingly unbidden.

He couldn't help but smirk with the sound of it. Toying with her had always been more fun than it should have been. There was a certain degree of power and satisfaction in the act, in watching her
quiver and sigh beneath him. In knowing he'd the skill to turn her into this needy, quivering mess of sticky heat and skin. Right now he needed that power, that control. He wanted her trembling, wet and desperate. There was much he couldn't control in regards to her, but he could control this. He could dictate this moment.

God, she could live forever and never get enough of him. The man was ruthlessly adept with his hands. Sometimes she thought he might be more attuned to her needs than even she was. She was impatient, drowning and burning all at once. She lived for these moments; the reckless abandon and unbridled desire, a savage and all consuming lust. The rest of the world fell away. Nothing else mattered.

She reached down to rub her palm against the strain of his trousers as his free hand worked her shirt up over her breasts. As his mouth closed over her left nipple she groaned, her hand leaving his crotch to fumble with the ties of his trousers. But much to her chagrin, he shifted away from her hand. Sliding down her body to work his mouth briskly across her flesh from breast to belly, where he pulled his hand from between her thighs in favor of finally tugging at the waist of her breeches. Which, in all honesty, were becoming a rather irritating hindrance that she was all too happy to be rid of.

Not needing further persuasion, she lifted her hips to make their removal easier. He'd gotten them down to her knees before she sat up on her elbows and kicked herself free of the rest of them, her boots getting discarded in the same frantic motion. The moment she was free of the ill fitting garment, she reached for him, scraping her teeth across his bottom lip as she once again reached for the ties of his trousers.

He returned the kiss for only a moment before pulling free of her grasp to crawl back down her body. Fully intent on telling him to stop mucking about and fuck her, she propped herself up on her elbows to frown down at him. She only got as far as his name. “Charles, if you – ”

“Sheat up.” He grunted.

He dropped to kneel by the side of the bed, and she gave a surprised and fairly undignified yelp as he hooked his hands under the back of her knees and jerked her forward a few inches so that her rear lay just at the edge of the bed. Propping up on her elbows again, she narrowed her eyes and prepared to try again. “If you – ”

He cut her off again, though this time it wasn't with words. He slid down between her thighs, his shoulders bumping against the insides of her legs as he lowered his face toward her center. When his mouth closed over her, any objections she might have voiced were quickly forgotten.
Christ, she'd almost forgotten how good he was at this. She'd always wondered if one of the whores at the inn had been giving him tips. She suspected that after her time with Max had ended and he'd found his way back into her bed, he hadn't wanted there to be any doubt as to which of them was better equipped to handle her needs. The thought made her smile. The image of the notorious and fearsome Captain Charles Vane taking pointers from a whore on the art of cunnilingus just to impress her; it was priceless. She had no proof, of course and she was almost certain he'd deny it if she asked him outright. But she kind of hoped it was true.

The thought was a pleasant one.

Her inner musings were cut short as his tongue swirled over her again and her hand shot out to fist in his hair, pressing him more firmly against her. When he moved to lift her right leg up onto his shoulder, she eagerly shifted to comply. With the new position granting him better access, his free hand glided up the inside of her thigh and across the dampness of her sex. With teeth and tongue still working tirelessly across her clit, he slid his fingers across the aperture of her folds, gathering wetness as he went before sliding those same two fingers inside.

With practiced ease, he curled his fingers, repeatedly bumping against that extraordinary little spot just inside. All the while his mouth moved against her, working her into a frenzied mess.

She writhed and groaned beneath him, her fingers pulling roughly at his hair as she fought to get closer. Her left leg came up to join her right on his shoulders, her thighs tightening against the sides of his head and her heels digging into his back as her hips began rolling frantically against his face. He smirked against her. She was close and he knew it. The shift in position somewhat diminished his mobility and made things more difficult, but he made due. Placing his free hand against her hip and lower abdomen in an attempt to restrict her movement, he doubled the efforts of his tongue, sucking mercilessly upon the tiny pearl that had her writhing. He was rewarded with an unintelligible sound that he might have called a whimper were she anyone else.

“Oh...” She gasped, mouth opening wordlessly as her thighs twitched and trembled around him. Her spine stiffened as she arched back and the muscles in her abdomen jerked and fluttered against his palm. She let loose a breathy, barely audible mewling of the words “Oh, Christ!” before she came apart in his hands. He didn't bother letting up his ministrations as she rode out her release, he milked it for all she was worth, dragging it on for as long as he could.

If a flutter of sentimentality shot through his chest as he watched her come undone, he ignored it in favor of the thrill of heat and pride that burned low in his gut with the sight of her twitching beneath him.

When the shocks of pleasure subsided and he finally slid away from her to drop her legs from his shoulders, she felt limp and deliciously used. For a moment she lay there with her eyes closed,
panting and trying to decelerate her heart rate. With the sound of movement, she glanced down to
where he was still kneeling. Enthralled by the scene unfolding before her, her gaze caught his as he
popped his fingers into his mouth and sucked them clean before casually swiping the remainder of
her arousal from his chin with the back of his hand.

Sweet baby Jesus, if that wasn't the most provocative thing she'd ever seen. When he finally stood up
and began tugging his belt from the loops of his trousers, she sat up and yanked her shirt up and off
as reached for him, hastily helping him along with his trousers. She suddenly felt it crucial that he be
rid of the rest of those clothes. She wanted him inside, yearned for that heady, aching fullness.

His boots were discarded and his trousers halfway down his thighs when he decided he didn't want
to waste time removing them completely. When he pressed her back against the mattress, she took
the hint and scooted backward, yanking him along with her. Settled, she pulled him down on top of
her and spread her thighs, hooking one of her legs up over his hip.

Wasting little time, he reached down to position himself at her opening and she pressed her hips
upward, urging him forward. She wriggled against him encouragingly, but he held off on pressing
into her just yet. He liked watching her squirm, liked knowing he could work her into such wanton
state of needy primitivity. All that sweat and sticky heat was because of him. Every breathy
whimper, cry and sigh was his doing. The high and mighty Eleanor Guthrie shuddered and throbbed
beneath his touch.

That knowledge had always been just a little more satisfying than it probably should have been.

Feeling rather smug and pleased that he'd finally gained the upper hand, he pressed a little further
into her. Just barely inside, he leaned forward to nip at her left breast, rolling his eyes upward to
watch her reaction. She hissed something unintelligible before raking her nails down the front of his
chest. His gaze followed the movement of her hands as they traveled down between their bodies, and
he knew what she was doing before she did it.

The backs of her knuckles brushed against him as she began toying with herself. “I swear to Christ,
Charles...” She hissed breathlessly as his eyes snapped up to find hers burning. “If you don't fuck
me, I’m going to finish the job myself.”

His body throbbed with her words, a heated thrill shooting through his belly and straight into his
groin. The things this woman said, the way she said them... She was going to be the death of him.
Her voice was impatient and brusque, but it was obvious she was attempting to goad him into action
without having to engage in any outright pleading. He knew she wouldn't beg him, regardless of
how desperate she was. That would be a blatant submission, and she didn't submit to anyone. But it
didn't matter because he'd heard the edge of needy desperation in her tone, and it was enough. He
almost grinned at the sound of it. Almost.
She would have sworn that was almost a smile. His lips did that odd little quivery twitch thing, like they wanted to curve upward but he wouldn't quite let them. Beneath that self-satisfied and hungry gaze of his, she thought she saw a flicker of amusement. He looked almost as though he was going to say something, almost certainly something smartassed and salacious.

But as quickly as the expression had surfaced, it vanished. She might have tried to analyze the look a little further if she'd had more time, but he chose that particular moment to distract her. She barely managed to stifle the startled yelp that dove up from her chest as he slammed into her. In one swift motion, he'd thrust home, burying himself to the hilt. That first initial shove was always breathtaking, deliciously painful and pleasurable all at once. She knew some women didn't like it, but she loved the feeling of that stretching fullness as her body fought to adjust for the size of him. It was why she didn't always mind skipping over an excess of foreplay.

He didn't bother giving her much time to adjust to his invasion, he already knew she wouldn't need him to. Instead he watched her face contort agreeably as he leisurely slid out of her before brutally ramming back in. He reveled in the way she cried out, the way her spine arched and her nails dug into his shoulders as he found that perfect rhythm.

Loose stresses of his hair tickled against the side of her face and shoulder as he leaned over her. His palms lay flat on the mattress by either side of her head, supporting his upper half as he battered his hips against her own. That familiar heat was building again, prickling across her skin and pooling low in the base of her stomach. It was there, burning away under her skin but just out of reach, maddeningly elusive so soon after her previous release.

Her nails pressed tiny crescent shaped marks into the flesh on either side of his hips as she reached out to seized hold of them, jerking him against her in an unabashed demand to hasten their pace. The heel of her left foot dug into his lower back as she rolled her hips against him, emphasizing her insistence and urging him to comply. He only rolled his own in response and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth in an attempt to muffle the sound that threatened to surge up.

“Faster.” She demanded breathlessly, frustrated that she'd had to vocalize the demand at all.

It was something he'd been planning on anyways, but the fact that she'd given order for it gave him pause. He had no intention of allowing her to take the reigns. He needed to retain some measure of dominion over this encounter. With that thought he withdrew from her body, enjoying her frustrated grunt of annoyance as he did so.

She opened her mouth to say something he'd no doubt would be scathing, but he cut her off. He had orders of his own to make. “Turn over.” He grumbled rapaciously, his hand tapping once against her
right thigh in reiteration.

She thought about denying him, of refusing simply because he so clearly wanted her to conform to the demand. It was a compromising position after all, one that provided him with far more mobility and control than it did her. But something about the way he was eying her stopped her, compelled her to accede without further complaint. She got the distinct impression there was more to her acquiescence than it's surface value. Something in his face spoke of a quiet desperation, an explicit need for authority over this moment.

A silent sort of understanding flickered between them before she turned over without another word. She rolled onto her stomach and rose up on her elbows and knees, presenting herself like a offering. Shifting to peer over her shoulder at him, she tipped her hips toward him. With heat still churning in her belly, she watched him as he knelt behind her taking in the view. And when he shifted that heavy lidded gaze up to meet hers, the torridity of that look set her ablaze.

She leaned back against his groin and felt him bump against her backside. When she spoke it was in a eager and sultry tone. “Well?” She pressed inquisitively.

He needed no further coaxing. He'd taken hold of hips and crammed himself back inside almost before the words had left her mouth. The groaning sigh that left his lips upon reentry had her pressing back against him, her skin crawling with need as she silently plead for movement. One of his hands clutched at her hip while the other seized her opposite shoulder and he used the position as leverage to pull her into every thrust. She didn't have to wait long before he was pounding into her again, the wet slap of skin on skin echoing through the room to mingle with heavy breath and quiet moans.

Soon enough that heat was surging up again. She could feel it spreading low in her abdomen, tingling and burning along her skin as he hammered into her. She just needed a little more, a final push to send her reeling over that jagged edge into oblivion. She shifted her weight slightly to her left arm, intending to bring her right hand down between her thighs and chase that high to the finish line. But the jolting force of his body driving into hers kept throwing her off balance. She couldn't hold the position and manipulate herself all at once, but she didn't want to tell him to let up either.

As if sensing her dilemma, he slid his hand away from her shoulder and around to the front of her throat. His grip was firm but not quite stifling as he used the hold to angle her up and backward into a kneeling position. His hips moved with brutally efficiency as his other hand snaked across her abdomen and down between the spread of her legs.

Her spine bowed as his fingers found her, her arms failing out in search of purchase. Her left hand reached up and over her shoulder to fist in the hair at the back of his neck while her right shot backward to grasp desperately at the back of his thigh as he moved against her. She could feel his
breath flitting across her skin, the wet scrape of his teeth and tongue across her shoulder as his hips and fingers achieved a painfully adept pattern of synchronized movement.

It was too much.

Her body began to shake, her muscles trembling and tightening as she finally ascended that peak. He had her. This was where his certainty of control was solidified. He leaned into her then, growling an echo of her own words back at her. “Come.” He commanded hungrily.

She might have laughed at the circularity of the situation, at how he'd turned things around on her in such a blatant fashion. But she was lost, too consumed by rapture to really care. She couldn't have stepped back from that ledge even if she'd wanted to, she was too far gone and his timing was exquisite.

She clenched and throbbed around him, her mouth dropping open in a wordless cry as her body jerked wildly against his continued thrusting. Her nails dug into the flesh of his thigh as she writhed, and his thrusts began to loose their cadency. He grunted as he struggled to hold his own against the pulsing compression of her release, the rippling heat of her. But as her body contracted once more around him, he lost all semblance of restraint.

With several more frenzied thrusts, he buried himself deep as his body stiffened and shuttered. His face pressed into her hair at the back of her neck as he followed her over that edge, emptying himself with a muffled groan. She shivered and let loose something close to a whimper as the searing heat of him spurt across her insides. Leaning back against him, she rode out the remaining aftershocks of her release with a gentle rocking of the hips.

His forehead rested against her shoulder and his grip on her hips slackened as she continued with that lazy, satisfied undulation. Her movement gradually slowed as he softened, finally coming to a complete stop as he reached a flaccidity that wouldn't allow them to remain joined. She shivered as he slid from her body and the world began to bleed back into focus.

With a laggard sort of interest, he watched her flop down onto the mattress in front of him. He studied her for only a split second before flopping down laggardly beside her, but it was long enough to take note of the state of her. She was laying there with her eyes closed and chest heaving, still trying to catch her breath. Her hair was damp and clinging to the edges of her face in a wild sort of disarray. Her skin was slick with sweat and various fluids, and there were numerous pinkish discolorations streaked across her body by virtue of his overzealous handling.

He should have thought her a disheveled mess. But Goddamn it, she was stunning; absolutely
gorgeous.

He knew the thought was born of a deadly combination of his continually misguided affections and the languid haze of post coital activity, but that didn't stop him from thinking it. He hadn't looked at her again since he'd dropped down beside her, but the outline of her body in his peripherals indicated she hadn't moved much. From what he could tell, she hadn't even opened her eyes or turned to face him and he found himself relieved. He wasn't certain if she was as eager to avoid a discussion as he was or if she'd simply dozed off, but either way he was grateful.

There was too much going on in his head right now, too much he didn't want to contemplate. Everything and nothing had changed all at once. None of it should have made any Goddamned difference, but he was disturbed by the notion that perhaps it had. Such a consideration had him feeling weak and stupid, two emotions that only served to further irritate.

Frustrated, he tilted his head to the left to study her subtly. Finding that her eyes were still closed and that her breathing had slowed and evened out, he decided she must have nodded off. He considered getting up and slipping away to roam the beach, but decided against it when he realized it wasn't late enough to ensure he wouldn't run into anyone. Normally that wouldn't have troubled him much, but he didn't feel like being bothered with anyone right now. So with a reigned sigh, her returned his gaze to the ceiling to ponder bitterly over the night's events.

It felt as though no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't escape her. It was like being bound to a runaway carriage she insisted on driving. They were always destined for the edge of a cliff.

She was the instrument of his repeated downfall, a lethal force that continually drove them over the brink. She was always pushing, always pressing ever forward even as there was no ground left to give. He could always see that crumbling ledge in the distance, always fought in vain to take control of the reins, to right their course before they fell.

But it never made any difference. They always dove, always crashed mercilessly into jagged rocks below. Over and over, they rushed towards the very same disaster, each time the crater coming up faster and more mercilessly than before. That drop just kept on growing, widening and stretching down deeper into the darkness.

And whenever he'd manage to crawl broken and bloodied from that pit, he'd find her waiting at the top. She'd look at him, reach for him, whisper things he longed to hear. She'd evoke from him unfathomable weakness, profound emotion; the likes of which no one else had ever managed to conjure from him.
And like a love sick fool, he'd climb right back up into that carriage. It seemed that no matter how hard he fought her, no matter how furious she made him, he always found himself bound for the edge of that damned cliff.

Now as he lay there in the dark with heavy eyes and fatigue clouding his mind, he had the maddest of thoughts; perhaps he just needed to stop fighting. If he was going to inevitably crash and burn, he ought to find away to ensure she smoldered right along with him.
DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AN: Aaaaaand I'm back! Yeesh, almost 4 months this time, I know, I'm sorry! I really had intended to have it up sooner. Most of it was even written less than a month after my last update but it took me ages to get around to editing and adding in the last page or so. This chapter is mostly internal angst, relationship introspection from Charles' POV & some Jack/Charles bonding time. Not much plot progression here but I promise that's coming next chapter. I'm just trying to work up to Charles' acceptance of this whole thing and don't want it to feel rushed or disingenuous.

Also, I noticed that a few chapters back I accidentally claimed the floor of Charles & Eleanor's hut was sand. It's not, it's supposed to be planks of wood. Charles' tent floor in the camp on New Providence was sand, but the hut on Maroon Island is not. My mistake. I'll eventually get around to going back and re-posting corrected chapters, but for now just please bear with me & my inconsistency.

Hope you all enjoy the chapter despite it's relative briefness and lack of larger plot progression. Please don't forget to drop me a comment. I love hearing from you guys, it always makes my day! :)

DEFINITIONS/PERIOD SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY/FACTS:

Squat Bottle: A type of liquor bottle that has a wide, moderate height body, and a moderate length neck. It's similar to an onion bottle, which was also popular at the time, but it's a little less stout looking. We've seen both types displayed quite often on the show. I did some research & the one I referenced here was being manufactured between 1700 and 1730 and is Dutch or Belgian in origin.

English Units: Are the historical units of measurement used in England pre-1826 (Post-1826 it was replaced with the imperial system.)

A Pace: A measure of distance. A pace is equal to one natural step, which is about 30 inches (2 ½ feet or 76.2 centimeters). So when Charles says 50 paces it's about 240 inches (20 feet or 6.096 meters).

Freeboot: To act as a freebooter; plundering; looting. Basically just another word for pirate.

Phoenix: In Greek mythology a phoenix is a legendary long-lived bird who is cyclically regenerated/born again in flame. The phoenix dies in a show of flames and combustion, and then rises from the ashes regenerated and new. The bird was also said to regenerate when hurt or wounded by a foe, thus making it almost immortal and invincible – a symbol of fire and divinity.

Phlegmatic: Self-possessed, calm, composed.

Repine: To be fretfully discontented.

Mastiff: A large and ancient breed of dog known for being strong, courageous and fiercely loyal. So much so that they have often been used in wars, as palace protectors, and as guardians of homes and livestock. They were also used heavily in blood sports such as bear, lion & bull-baiting, as well as in dog fighting. So much so, that there was a period in the 1800's where there were legitimate concerns about extinction. These concerns played a role in the Parliament of the United Kingdom
implementing the 1835 Cruelty to Animals Act, which prohibited the baiting of animals.

**Insensible:** Without or not subject to a particular feeling or sensation

The sheer insanity of the thought jolted him free of the encroaching haze of sleep. Slapped abruptly into full consciousness by his own twisted logic, he immediately began repining. It didn't take more than a few stiflingly airless seconds to determine that the reality of his situation was nothing less than downright deplorable. He sat up quickly and slung his legs over the edge of the bed so that his bare feet lay flat against the floor's wide, worn wooden planking.

An aggravated sigh left his lips as he dropped elbows to knees and warily scrubbed his palms over his face. In the dim flicker of a candle neither of them had bothered to put out, he lowered his hands and let them droop from his knees. His eyes traced blindly over the many furrows and widening cracks in the floorboards as his mind wandered.

He'd been down this road before. Regardless of whether or not he was set to crash and burn himself, there was no ensuring she smoldered along with him. No matter how badly he wanted it. He'd tried it before, more times than he could count. It never made any difference. Even when he was sure it had finally caught up with her, she never fully lost herself to the blaze.

Instead, she took to those flames like a Goddamn phoenix. She'd always basked in the heat of them with a shameless sort of heedlessness, a reckless and wild abandon. Too often left her either blinded or indifferent to the devastation that would follow in her wake.

Each time he'd been foolish enough to believe her just as consumed and charred as he was, she'd sprung from the ashes anew. As if the flames had never truly touched her. Every ascent rendered her more heady and toxic than before, more magnificent and inexorably beguiling. Even as she gutted him, he remained enthralled.

There was no strong arming her. She wouldn't bend to any will but her own.

She was the most resilient and tenacious creature he'd ever known. Once she'd set her mind to something there was little anyone could do to dissuade her from it. Regardless of the blows she was dealt or who it pissed off, she just kept on coming. It was as much an accredited strength as it was a detrimental instability.

He wasn't always keen on acknowledging it, but she reminded him of himself. They shared that very same stubbornly resilient tenacity. More often than not, they operated on parallel paths that were so achingly similar and yet always at odds. They never seemed to be traveling in the same direction at the same pace, but their paths always met regardless. They always intertwined.

And fuck, wasn't that a kicker? A real piss off, really.

How exactly did one go about successfully reconciling the notion of hating and loving someone both because of and in spite of their own similarities to yourself? How could one remove something they were so hopelessly entangled with without cutting away vital parts of themselves?

The whole thing wasn't normal, and it certainly wasn't healthy. He could see that much for himself.

He hated the fragility she evoked, that unrelenting ache she could so easily conjure in his chest.
Looking back on everything he'd done in her name churned his stomach. Not because he regretted his decisions, but because he could see the infirmity in his own reasoning. Despite knowing her shortcomings, he had still been willing to concede to compromise and sacrifice, to risk everything for her. He'd have lain the world down at her feet if only she'd have asked for it.

And that was the worst part of it; he'd been willing to risk both his life and his reputation – both of which were vital pieces of who and what he was – for her. But she'd only been willing to leave him to die. It wasn't that he didn't believe she'd loved him, he knew that she had. It was rather the fact that he'd have done near anything for her, but the same couldn't have been said of her for him. The dynamic of that power discrepancy gnawed at him. The disparity of it had left him with one too many scars.

He was not a man who bent to the will of others anymore than she was. But she'd always held more influence over him than he was comfortable with, and in the past that influence had lead him to trust her when he shouldn't have. It had only ever left him entangled and exposed.

He'd be a fool to let it happen again.

He shifted to peer over his shoulder wearily at the sleeping form behind him. There was no making that woman do anything she wasn't already intending on doing. You couldn't push her anywhere she didn't want to go, at least not without receiving considerable reprisal. It had always been a trait he'd found to be both endearingly admirable and maddeningly incensing. The point was that regardless of how he felt about her, there was no trusting her. Not entirely.

Her allegiance had proven fickle, and he couldn't afford to forget that.

No matter how badly he wanted to believe she wouldn't turn on him again, he couldn't place faith in her word alone. He'd allowed that to be enough for him in the past, and look where that had gotten him.

With a prostrated sigh, he rose from the bed and yanked his trousers up over his thighs. He'd decided that a walk down to the beach didn't sound so awful after all. His discomfort with the notion of being bothered by anyone he ran into was substantially outweighed by the sudden and potent need to be outside this hut. If he ran into anyone he didn't feel like talking to, he could always just tell them to fuck off.

After retrieving his shirt from the floor and pulling it over his head, he shoved his feet into his boots. He was about a foot away from the door when her voice sounded from the bed behind him.

"Charles?" Her voice was husky with sleep, but there was a clear question in that one articulation. He didn't need to look at her to know she was frowning. There was brief moment of quiet stillness between them before he answered.

"Go back to sleep." He adjured quietly. Then without another word, he turned the knob and slipped out, closing the door quietly behind him.

She lay there propped up on her elbows for a moment longer. She considered ignoring his instruction and obstinately following him out into the dark. The idea appealed in part because she was curious, but more so simply because she didn't appreciate being given orders. It was only the phlegmatic and apathetic manner in which he'd given the command that kept her ass in that bed. Something about the way he'd spoken made it clear he needed to be left alone.
With a huff, she flopped back in the bed and raked a hand through the unruly mess of hair she dreamed of washing. Fine. This was fine. She could let him skulk for a few hours. She was still tired anyway. Stubbornly decided, she rolled over with adamant intention toward sleep and buried her face in the scratchy fabric of the pillow beside her. But when the smell of him wafted up from that pillow to meet her, she was struck with the absurd compulsion to pull it closer and breathe deep. For a moment she lay impossibly still, curiously torn between the desire to surrender to the absurdity of that compulsion and the knowledge that doing so would be childish and sickeningly saccharine.

Ultimately, she decided the fallout for either action would be entirely inconsequential. There would be no witnesses to her cloying display even if she did choose to indulge. And so, even though it made her feel just a little ridiculous, she closed her eyes and yanked that pillow to her chest. The scent of him rolled through her, and she allowed it to drape a thin and all too familiar layer of calm over her weary bones.

It was just enough to welcome sleep.

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Charles had been sitting in the sand just beyond the edge of the surf for what felt like an eternity. There was a part of him that yearned to simply stand up, board his ship, sail away and never look back. But that yearning was easily dwarfed by the need to extricate his home, to lift chains and spill blood in the name of freedom and autonomy. Nassau was theirs; a place where the only laws that presided over a man were the ones they set upon themselves. It was a place for free men, and he'd sworn both he and Nassau would never be anything but free again.

That was what mattered. That was why they were all here. He should be furthering plans for Nassau's deliverance and the coming war, not sitting here brooding over an impossible woman and his woeful inability to disentangle himself from her. There were more important things he ought to be focusing on right now.

So called civilized society had been stomping on the necks of freemen for too long. He, like so many others, had refused the weight of that boot. He'd cast yoke from shoulder and boot from neck in exchange for a life exempt from laws and etiquettes imposed by the ostensibly civilized. He'd declared himself free, and he'd gladly perish in a sea of blood and viscera before ever considering the renouncement of that freedom.

Nassau was a symbol, a representation of hope and defiance for the silenced and subdued. Civilization might be coming, but it wouldn't be arriving without significant obstruction. So long as men like him still breathed there would always be resistance.

He knew how to bleed for what was his, and so did Eleanor. If for nothing else, he could at least respect her for that.

It was with this thought that he tried to come to terms with his situation. In his last couple hours of brooding, he'd begrudgingly accepted the reality that he was likely well and truly stuck with her. He honestly believed she wanted to take back Nassau just as badly as he did. Though he was certain her reasoning differed quite drastically from his own, her devotion to the cause was authentic regardless. He might not trust her entirely, but the understanding and intelligence she could bring to the table would be vital in the coming days.

However, despite the knowledge that her involvement was undoubtedly a necessary evil, his mind
still reeled objectionably. The question that remained burning in his head was whether or not he was truly willing to surrender what was left of himself. Because he knew now, without a doubt, that if she stayed that was exactly what would happen. The longer he spent in her presence, the more eroded his fortifications would become.

She'd proven this time and time again. Why he'd ever thought things could be different this time was beyond him now.

He'd originally thought himself wounded and angry enough to have developed a certain amount of immunity to her poison. But after tonight it had become painfully clear that he was still just as susceptible as he'd ever been. She'd be getting back inside regardless of how he felt about it or what he did to try and stop it. He had the sinking feeling she was already half way there, and it would only be a matter of time before he lost himself completely. He was drawn to her in the same irrational manner that moths were drawn to flame; sooner or later he'd get too close and his wings would crackle and burn.

It was a hard pill to swallow, but if it meant withstanding the subjugation that civilization would impose, perhaps it was one he might be willing to consider.

A rustling sounded somewhere in the trees behind him.

He made no outward indication he'd heard a thing, but his muscles tensed beneath his skin as one of his hands discreetly palmed the hilt of a favored knife. He'd left his gun back at the hut in his haste to leave. Which, in retrospect, probably hadn't been terribly intelligent. The privacy that accompanied straying this far from the village had it's advantages, but it also made him a more easily accessible target without the security of numbers.

Seclusion meant no witnesses.

A small part of him actually thrilled a little at the idea of such an altercation. With the day he'd had he could really use a good fight, an outlet actually outside of the woman at the source of all his problems. If someone really was foolish enough to try and take him here, that person was going to get more than they'd bargained for. He'd worry about questioning them after they'd been bloodied.

Just as he was warming to the idea, there was a shuffling followed immediately by a muted curse and a grumbled, “Fucking rocks...”

Charles recognized the voice immediately. It looked as though he wouldn't be getting that altercation after all. With a somewhat disappointed sigh, his shoulders relaxed and he cached away his blade to resume watching the waves slide in.

Booze sloshed mildly from the neck of it's olive green squat bottle and over Jack's hand as he plopped down in the sand next to Charles. They sat in a companionable silence for another minute or so before Charles spoke.

“You know, I heard you coming from near fifty paces off...” He remarked casually.

Jack snorted. “Of course you did. I'm a freeboot intellectual, not a damn cat.” he quipped dramatically.

They both knew Jack's lack of stealth had more to do with the lanky awkwardness his movements perpetually exuded than it did the fact he wasn't feline. Charles sent him an amused sideways glace, the corner of his mouth curving upwards. “You're drunk.” he pointed out plainly.

Jack shrugged. “Perhaps a tad.” he admitted flippantly as he brought the bottle up to his lips for
another swig. Then his face scrunched up like he wanted to say something, and he was speaking again almost before the bottle had left his lips. His free hand waved as he carried on composedly. “And I reckon we'd both be better off if you were as well.” he added as he held the bottle out in Charles’ direction.

Taking the bottle with a bemused expression, Charles asked, “Anne?”

Jack rolled his eyes and leaned back on his hands. “Yes, well, Anne's experiencing another one of her... moods...”. He didn't say it with any real malice or disdain, just a tired sort of frustrated acceptance.

It made Charles laugh. Sometimes he thought poor Jack spent more time trying to understand and accommodate that woman than he did breathing. Not that Charles had anything against Anne, she was a hell of a woman; strong as fuck and more loyal than a mastiff. Wicked with a sword and a decent marksman too. He'd happily take her at his back any damn day of the week.

Anne had been running with Jack for as long as Charles had known him. She and Jack were the closest thing he had to family. But it had always been very clear as to which of the two wore the pants in that relationship. It was, without a shadow of doubt, Anne. She wore those pants and she wore them well, Jack left with his balls in the wind. Not that he seemed to mind overly much.

Deciding he was enjoying this brief distraction from his own problems, Charles asked, “What did you do to piss her off?”

Jack shot Charles a scandalized look as he sat up and took back the bottle Charles was offering. “Nothing! I didn't do a bloody thing!”

Charles arched a brow, the side of his mouth curling slightly upwards again. “Doubtful.”

Jack groaned and shook his head. “I'm serious. She's been moody as all hell ever since I informed her of Miss Guthrie's... unfortunate involvement. She's angry with me for keeping it from her as long as I did.”

At the mention of her name, Charles' expression sobered considerably. He turned his head back toward the sea. “She'll come around...” He said softly.

“Will she, though?” Jack grumbled, “Have you met our Anne? She isn't exactly the most amicable of creatures.”

“No, she's not, but that woman would follow you into fire. She'd kill and die for you without a second's thought. She won't stay angry forever, Jack... She'll come around.” Charles' tone had dampened along with his expression, his words coming out with an even and placid inflection that obscured any underlying emotion he might be experiencing.

With anyone else it might have slipped by unnoticed, but Jack had known Charles a long time. He hadn't missed the latent misery in the words. He didn't have to ask to know that Charles' thoughts had shifted over to a certain blonde she-devil. He knew the position that Charles described Anne as having, was one Charles himself had once been in. His burly brute of a friend would have done near anything for that high-handed bitch, and just about everyone this side of the Caribbean Sea knew it. It had been the source of a lot of animosity and tension between he and his crew, not to mention anyone else in the isles who'd figured Charles’ affections to be a potential weakness.

Case in point; Ned Low.

For a moment Jack wondered if he should even try broaching the subject again. Charles wasn't
exactly known for his heart to hearts and stunning conversational skills. And Jack had already stated
his opinion of the woman more than once. Reiterating his feelings on the matter wasn't likely to
change anything. He wouldn't be telling Charles anything he didn't already know. Knowing the
woman was poison hadn't stopped Charles from loving her, and that wasn't likely to change anytime
soon. Certainly not so long as he was being forced to spend so much time in her close proximity.

Jack knew the risk Charles was taking. He knew what this was costing him. He also knew that
despite Charles' adamant objections, the Guthrie woman was undoubtedly trying to worm her way
back under his skin. He figured it was unlikely Charles would be out here brooding in the middle of
the night if she hadn't been succeeding. He just hoped Charles had enough sense not to trust her even
if he did still love her. Certainly fucking her hadn't helped Charles' predicament so much as
complicated things further.

So instead of offering up another lecture, Jack offered up the bottle. Opting for a more understanding
approach, he stated, “No, I suppose not...”

After sharing another few moments of drink and companionable silence, Jack added, “It's alright,
you know... That you still love her.” His tone was careful and plain, unassuming.

Ignoring the sharp look of warning sent in his direction, Jack continued. “Because it isn't about what
you still feel for her. As I'm sure you've already surmised, how you feel is irrelevant because we
need her.”

Charles' eyes narrowed, burning with something just short of blatant irritation. “A fact I'm well aware
of.” He drew the words out with an uncomfortable sort of calm, a placidity that was almost biting.

Jack continued as if he hadn't been interrupted, pushing through the moderate awkwardness that
always accompanied discussing emotion with this man. “But that doesn't mean you can't still feel it.”

The look Charles was pulling was both mildly threatening and curious. As if he was trying to decide
whether to tell Jack to fuck off, or inquire as to where this train of thought was headed.

Jack sighed. “I'm just suggesting that maybe you ought to stop beating yourself up over the fact that
she's still in possession of a very real piece of you. As I've said before, that sort of love leaves a
brand. It isn't something easily forgotten.”

Charles studied his friend for another virulent and probing few seconds before again turning back to
the sea. Aside from a mildly furrowed brow, his face remained relatively impassive as he shut down
the discussion with a curt and insensible, “Shut up, Jack.”

Jack shrugged. Seemingly unbothered by Charles' terseness, he took another swig from his bottle.
“It's alright to feel it, is all I'm saying. It's alright just so long as you don't let it blind you...”

But that was just the problem, wasn't it? How would he be able to tell if he'd gone blind, while it still
seemed as if he could see?
Chapter 17

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Black Sails. It is not my intellectual property. There is no financial gain made from this nor will any be sought. This is for entertainment purposes only.

AN: A while back, one of you lovely reviewers pointed out that I had claimed Charles' ship was still the Ranger, this was an oversight error on my part. I had somehow managed to forget that the ranger had been destroyed after Eleanor deposed Charles of its captaincy and gave the ship to Flint & Gates. I've yet to go back and edit the mistake, but just to be clear, Charles' current ship is the Fancy (Which he liberated after murdering its captain Ned Low.)

Also, if there are still people following this story, all I can say is that I'm awed you are still reading even after my repeatedly long delays in updates. I'd apologize again, but I imagine that by now you're all probably pretty sick of hearing it. I truly appreciate the interest and it's honestly what keeps this fic going, even with my horrible lack of consistent updates x.x So thank you! Please keep reviewing! I love the feedback & you guys are the best!

DEFINITIONS/PERIOD SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY/FACTS:

Factious: Given to faction; dissentious; quarrelsome
Brusqueness: Abrupt in manner; blunt; rough
Pewter: A malleable gray metal alloy made of tin, copper and antimony. Pewter was used to make tableware as far back as 1450 BC, but was gradually replaced by the more common use of porcelain and pottery. In the late 17th & 18th centuries pewter came back into style & was used for unlidded mugs, lidded tankards & many other types of tableware.

Top Rail: The highest horizontal piece of the back rest of a chair

The next few weeks passed in the usual frenetic hustle that accompanies the engineering of conspiracy and warfare. Among the men, the sweeping rebel victory on Maroon Island had lent credence to the notion of a more encompassing and overarching triumph against the English. This notion had in turn granted a considerable boost to their confidence, courage and morale. Which was good, but it wouldn't do to allow them to get too cocky. Too complacent.

Many men had a tendency toward misguided hubris wherever women or violence were concerned. Whether it be about sex or bloodshed, they tended to attribute to themselves more clout and prowess
than was often warranted, especially shortly after experiencing a perceived victory. Such propensities made people careless and vulnerable.

Eleanor was not about to allow such an avoidable mishap to occur.

There would no doubt be enough mishap of the unavoidable variety as it was. Nothing ever plays out just exactly as one plans and there must always be a plan of contingency. Eleanor thought she knew this better than anyone. She held firm to the opinion that it was far better to overestimate an enemy and be proven wrong, than it was to underestimate them and be crushed beneath their weight.

Hence why she'd insisted on being so heavily involved in the planning of this upcoming battle. She had every intention of quashing any brash notions borne of inflated egos and impatience. Not that she wasn't feeling impatient herself, of course she was. Such rural living was hardly her preferred lifestyle choice, and being so far removed from Nassau and it's workings had proven more agitating and galling than even she'd expected.

She missed her home, her tavern, the ever present noise and lawlessness... The hold she'd had over it all. Christ, everything that had been hers. She missed all of it.

And though she intended to go about things very differently this time around, she was no more willing to abandon her claim to Nassau than she'd ever been. At the cost of her soul, she'd dragged that place up out of the mud and forged it into something entirely innovational, unique and unabashedly factious. It was beautiful in its own right, and she knew now that she never should have tried to shackle it. Charles had always been right about that; it was far better to live free and die fighting than it was to live trussed up and complacent. Figuratively or otherwise.

At this point, after everything that had happened, she'd honestly prefer to watch Nassau burn than calmly agree to cede it to the crown. Unfortunatley, if Nassau was to burn, she and all her pirate conspirators would likely be burning right along with it. They were pitting themselves against the entire English Navy, after all. The goal was indeed to take back Nassau and declare her independent freedom, but Eleanor more than understood there was only a bleak possibility of success and that the consequence to their probable failure would be dire.

Nassau would be free, or they'd all perish in the attempt to deliver her. These terms were bitter, but agreeable. The odds didn't matter so much as the cause itself, what it meant.

And so here she was, once again among among pirates and cutthroats, discussing the terms of their latest invasion. Unfortunately, and much to Eleanor's frustration, these pirates and cutthroats were no more reasonable or agreeable now than they ever were.
“And if that isn't the case? What's to stop them from simply opening fire on our ships? How do we know they haven't already made the necessary repairs to the fort?” Eleanor attests staunchly and with no small level of frustration. From her seat at the long stretch of table, the wide-eyed glare she casts across the room's other occupants is caustic, though none of them seem terribly phased by it.

“We've received no more word on the completion of the fort's repairs.” Teach snaps, clearly loosing patience with the long-winded and circular nature of this discussion.

Flint interjects, seemingly only slightly less agitated than Teach “The last we heard from Billy, the fort was still in disrepair. If we're going to move, it has to be before they're able to utilize the fort's offenses.”

“That was weeks ago!” Eleanor argues exasperatedly. “The repairs could well be finished by now. If we sail into port with our gunships armed to the teeth, and that fort is operational–”

“We'll take heavy damages.” Charles interrupts, finishing her thought with an edge of irritated brusqueness. Though it doesn't sound so much like he's agreeing with her as it does that he's just stating the obvious and being disgusted by it.

“Exactly!” Eleanor cries, grateful for at least the acknowledgment of potential catastrophe, even if it wasn't an outright backing.

Jack sighs. “Yes, but what choice do we have? The longer we wait for word, the more likely it is they finish the repairs. The men are ready. Perhaps this is a risk we ought to consider taking.”

“If the Fort was operational, I'm sure Billy would have sent word.” Silver appeals genially, no doubt hoping to allay the room's rising tension. “He's as invested in this war as any one of us.”

Teach scoffs. “Agreed. From what I hear, he's about the only one among you – aside Charles, I suppose – who's worth a Goddamn thing.”

At the mention of Charles, Eleanor glaces over at him. But judging by the tight-jawed look of him, it appears he intends to do little more than cast dangerous and withering looks about the room. He's probably concerned with how it might look if he supports her argument. Which admittedly, is probably wise but no less aggravating. With a irritated huff, Eleanor turns back to the fray. Flint looks as though he might be inclined to retaliate against Teach's jibe and Silver has subtly begun
trying to deter him. Jack looks mildly insulted, though otherwise unmoved, and Maddi has simply been watching the proceedings with a keen eye and tight lips.

“This is hardly the time to be hurling insults.” Eleanor concludes haughtily. “We need to make a decision.”

“Right,” Silver agrees immediately, apparently having finished dissuading Flint from violence. “while I do admit there is considerable risk involved, I think it’s probably best we move ahead. Billy has assured us that the danger from the fort is minimal, and if we wait much longer that might not remain the case.” He turns his attention to Flint, obviously waiting for some sign of approval or agreement, and after a moment of contemplative staring, he gets it.

“I agree.” Flint intones firmly. “We can't afford to ignore this opportunity, we've no guarantee we'll be granted another.”

Jack gives a slow nod. “I don't particularly like it, but I think there's a necessity to it. We can't afford to give them the chance to heighten their defenses.” He looks toward Anne. Who as usual, is standing by the door wearing her signature scowl. The look he's giving her must strike a cord in some way, because her face shift ever so slightly before she gives him a curt nod. He grins and she rolls her eyes before redirecting her attention to the table.

For a brief second, Eleanor closes her eyes and takes a deep and steadying breath. Upon reopening them, she cautions, “This is an unnecessary risk. Send for word from Billy, get confirmation that our information still holds up.”

Flint sighs. “Your opposition is duly noted, Miss Guthrie,” His formality stings a little, given that he and Eleanor used to be fairly close, but she isn't about to let her discomfort show. “but we don't have the luxury of time right now. If we're going to move, it has to be now. Everything is in place.” Flint concludes with that potent sort of self-assured certitude that so often makes even his maddest of plans seem almost reasonable.

Madi chooses then to finally speak up. “Flint is right. We are not equipped to take on the gunships in the bay in addition to the fort's guns. If there's a chance we can avoid the fort's offenses, we should take it.” She paused, a somewhat troubled but decisive expression drawing her forehead into a considering frown. “However, I can't say I'm fond of the notion of going into this blind...”

Latching onto Madi's expressed doubt and rapidly switching tactics, Eleanor adds, “Fine, so we haven’t the time to acquire certainty, but might I suggest we at least consider ensuring our losses will be less substantial in the event of failure?”
“We fail, and we're all dead anyway.” Teach deadpans with an arch of brow.

Certain that Teach is being obstinate simply for the sake of being obstinate, Eleanor sends him a withering look.

_Oh, Thank you, that's so very helpful._

Eleanor stands, ignoring Teach's uncooperative comment and pointing down at the map splayed on the table before them. “We take only three of our ships rather than six. If the fort isn't operational, a Man O' War and two gunships should be plenty to take the bay. If it is operational, then we're going to take some heavy damage and I'd feel better knowing we had other options should this one go awry.”

“This is sensible.” Madi comments. “Eggs in separate baskets, yes?”

Silver's bottom lip juts out in consideration before he nods and sends Madi a wry sort of grin. “Divvying up our investments allows us to cut our losses if we have to, but we still keep from total ruin. It's a decent strategy.” Madi doesn't quite smile back, but the look in her eyes conveys her agreement well enough.

Jack looks wary. “Are we sure that's wise? Dividing our forces like that?”

“The Man O' War and two Frigates should be adequate enough.” Teach declares definitively as he pushes away from the table and stands with the obvious intent of leaving. “Ready your men and we should be underway in a day's time. Now, I need to take a piss.” He gestures dismissively as he heads toward the door and swiftly disappears through it.

“I suppose we are...” Jack mutters resignedly. He glaces at Charles, who offers a subtle nod full of what Eleanor imagines to be a form of reassurance, then Jack shifts his gaze to meet Anne's. After a moment or so of weighty eye contact that may as well be a whole serious conversation, Anne abruptly turns and leaves the room. Jack stands and calmly follows her, no more at ease with the whole situation than he was going into it but apparently willing to roll with the punches.

“Well at least that's something.” Eleanor grumbles and turns to glare pointedly at Charles. The look she's casting conveys her question clearly.
Where were you during all that?

“It's plenty.” Charles remarks casually, ignoring her unspoken question as he stands and moves to follow Teach, Jack and Anne.

Eleanor sighs. While she might have found some relatively civil ground with Charles over the last few weeks—*civil* might be kind of a generous term, but at least he'd lain off threatening to kill her—she could hardly say as much about her relationships with the rest of them. The rest of them watched her like a hawk watches a snake; wary of its strike, but not above going in for the kill should the opportunity present itself. She supposed she couldn't very well blame them, but it didn't make their mistrust any less irritating or inconvenient.

Flint seemed especially put out by her.

Thinking of Flint, Eleanor turned her attention from the door Charles had slipped though and back towards the table. As if he'd been reading her thoughts, she found herself already caught under Flint's hard gaze. His face is relatively blank aside from slightly narrowed eyes and a mild crease of brow, but the expression is still full of suspicious scrutiny and a keen sort of probing inspection. Almost as though he's hoping that if he stares just long and hard enough, her skull might simply spit open to spill countless secrets he's sure she's been holding back from them.

If Flint meant for that stare to rattle or intimidate her, it wasn't going to work. He ought to know better by now, she wasn't one to advertise fear and fragility. Not even when doing so might prove the wiser option. Case in point: Ned Low.

She simply stared back.

For the most part, Flint had avoided her almost entirely since she'd come here. But whenever interaction did occur, it was usually quite bitter and resentful in nature. Eleanor knew well enough why; the two of them had been friends. Or at least, as close to friends as two people of their position and dispositions could be. They'd trusted one another, which wasn't something that came easily to either of them, and she'd betrayed that trust.

She was sorry for it of course, but that hardly mattered now. Flint wasn't a man disposed to forgiving and forgetting, he was far more inclined towards grudge holding. Grudge holding that, more often than not, was eventually followed by some sort of blood-soaked reprisal.
Eleanor was not looking forward to that reprisal. For she was certain that, alliance or not, there would be reprisal. What she wasn't certain of, was when. She trusted he'd enough sense to hold off until Nassau was within their grasp, but it was the afterward that concerned her. When he decided her usefulness had run its course.

On that note, Flint wasn't the only one she found herself needing to be wary of. Near everyone she'd aligned herself with here was just as likely to stick her with a blade as the enemy they were united against. Though enduring this was a necessary hardship, the thought was hardly a comforting one.

The stare down ended unexpectedly when the pewter pitcher that had been sitting a ways down the table from them, was abruptly knocked to the floor with a loud and startling clatter. All eyes turned to Madi, who had apparently been the one to upset the pitcher.

“Apologies.” Madi stated with that cool sort of calculated composure of hers.

The word itself was polite enough, though her tone and expression looked anything but apologetic. Eleanor suspected the pitcher’s downfall was little more than a diversionary tactic intended to end her and Flint's little pissing contest. Madi didn't seem terribly fond of those.

And if the amused glint in Silver's eye was any indication, Eleanor would bet that her suspicion was right on the money. Eleanor was quite certain that no one really believed it had been an accident, but no one moved to voice that opinion either. The tension of the moment had passed, and Flint was already moving to stand. Silver shifted to retrieve the pitcher from the floor and place it back on the table as Flint left the room without another word. Madi rose.

“You'd do well not to antagonize him, you know.” Madi advised, eying Eleanor with an analytic tilt of her head and crossed arms. Silver arched a brow, standing between the door and table regarding Madi with a curious sort of interest.

Eleanor only scoffed, leaning back in her chair to look up at Madi. Eleanor knew Flint better than most, and she was well aware that being on his shit list was a less than pleasant place to be. He was one of the most devious and cunning men she’d ever met. It was one of the reasons she'd been so damned fond of him in the first place. But at this point, there wasn't a whole lot she could do about getting off of it. She certainly wasn't about to start begging or grovelling, and she doubted such things would've made a difference to him even if she had been willing to stoop so low.

“He's dangerous.” Madi countered bluntly.
Eleanor gave a wry smile. “Aren’t we all?”

Madi snickered, a minute smirk pulling up at the corners of her mouth. “Perhaps... But I’m sure you're aware he is not a man to be trifled with. He is...” Madi looked toward Silver, holding eye contact as she concluded, “a serpent.”

Silver chuckled, making no attempted to correct Madi's assessment of his friend and Captain's character. Likely because he knew it to be true, and knew Eleanor knew it too. She wasn't telling Eleanor anything she didn't already know. Regardless of whatever affections they might hold towards Flint, neither of them was likely to forget who he was or where his ambitions lay.

Seemingly satisfied with Silver's reaction, Madi’s attention slid back to Eleanor, who's brow was arched incredulously.

“I know what he is,” Eleanor declared gently. Her tone was steady and affable enough, but it left no room for argument. “and I've proven no better myself. So why are you so interested in convincing me of his nature? Am I to be trusted any more than he is?” She wasn't exactly making a good case for herself, but she wanted insight into this woman's angle.

After what seemed like a moment's consideration on Madi's part, she shook her head. “No, I don't trust you, but my father loved you. My father was a wise man, a good man. And he spoke very highly of you despite your short comings. So I implore you to take heed of Flint's nature. Not because I've any particular care for you myself, but because I think my father would have wished it.”

At the mention of Scott, Eleanor's chest tightened. Her throat constricted harshly with Madi's words, silently threatening to choke and stifle. Outwardly she remained relatively composed, the only indication of her discomfort being in the brief flicker of her eyes and the stiffness of her stature. Those words had meant more than Madi could possibly know. She hadn't needed to share them with Eleanor, hadn't needed to offer warning simply because Scott would have, but she'd done it anyway.

And that meant something. If Eleanor hadn't respected this woman before, she certainly did now.

Swallowing down a well of emotion, Eleanor nodded, holding eye contact with Madi as she pushed away from the table and rose. “I appreciate that. Truly...” She took another steadying breath, pushing past the sudden tiredness that that had crept up on her out of nowhere, and frowning softly as she chose her next words carefully. “I'm well aware of the threat he poses, and that in the future he may well become a problem, but as of yet he needs me as much as I need him and the rest of you.”
The two women stood in quiet consideration of one another for a moment longer, a strange and mutual sort of esteemed understanding hovering between them. Then Madi nodded and turned toward Silver and the door.

All the while, Silver had remained between the door and table observing the encounter, and Eleanor couldn't help but suspect that his continued presence was due more to being curious and nosy than it was because he was simply awaiting Madi's departure. It was likely he was just looking to garner whatever information he could, wherever her could. She knew that he knew as well as she did that information was power, and she hadn't forgotten his propensity towards cleverness and managing people.

But right now, she couldn't quite bring herself to dwell on it too much. She watched idly as Madi reached Silver's side and his hand came up to rest against the small of her back as they exited the room. Filing the intimacy of that simple touch away for possible later use, Eleanor huffed out another tired breath and headed outside.

There was still a lot to do.

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The discussion he'd had with Jack a few weeks back hadn't done much to ease Charles' qualms regarding the issue of Eleanor, but that didn't mean he couldn't see Jack's point. Trying to rid himself of the dominion Eleanor held over his heart had proven little more than a waste of time and energy. It would be better to just accept the inevitability of his condition, and move on. Jack was right; it didn't matter that he still loved her. It only mattered that he not let it rule him.

Admittedly, this information wasn't exactly revolutionary. He'd had similar thoughts himself. But however disagreeable he'd considered discussing such things to be, having this reiterated out loud by someone outside of himself had been helpful. It was somewhat validating, a moderate relief to be assured he wasn't simply mad for still feeling what he felt.

While he might not be capable of ever fully extricating his soul from hers, he had found a relatively comfortable middle ground. It wasn't perfect and there were still moments he was convinced he'd be better off if he just did away with her, but after her admission and their subsequent pairing, things had been different. He'd by no means forgiven her and things were still fairly strained between them, but the tension had eased to some degree. Her poignant confession had moved him, shifted something between them because it had been an admittance of frailty, one he knew had cost her considerably.
He knew this shouldn't have made any difference after all she'd done, but he'd come to terms with the fact that it did. While he didn't regard the suffering she'd caused herself to be commensurate with the suffering she'd caused him, he wasn't blind to the fact that she did indeed suffer. That she was still suffering, and it had more to do with her feelings towards him than she would prefer to admit. He believed she'd been telling him the truth.

That held value, an emotional weight. Even if it wasn't the sole reason for her treachery, it still mattered. Even if he wished it didn't.

That said, this little revelation hadn't caused him to forget where he stood. Where they stood. Things between them could never return to how they'd been. Too much had occurred between them. While he'd stopped trying to convince himself he didn't want her, he wasn't looking to forgive and forget either. He had no intention of falling into step with her again. He wasn't hers, and nor was she his. They'd simply found some common ground, some mutual miseries on which they could commiserate.

When this was all over, they'd go their separate ways. Or they'd die, whichever came first.

Regardless, whatever they did share would inevitably be something entirely new; achingly familiar and dangerously analogous, but still distinctly disparate from what they'd originally shared. And although he wasn't entirely sure he liked the idea of that either, he was willing to accept it.

Because really, what difference would it make? If they were inevitably going to collide, it may as well be on his own terms.

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The following day had been spent preparing the ships, informing the men, and gathering up what supplies would be needed for the upcoming battle. It had been a day filled with productivity, summation and necessary groundwork, but it had also been taxing, tedious and exhausting. They'd gone over everything an innumerable number of times, checked and re-checked every ship, man and weapon. Every detail had been rehearsed, every man knew their role. Whatever could be done, had been and by the time the sun had begun setting, most everything was in place.

However, this did nothing to ease the tension rolling through Eleanor. She'd been terribly restless, unable to quiet her mind even as she lay beside Charles' sleeping form in the dark. Tomorrow
was a turning point, a day that would decide the direction of the war. They would take Nassau, or they wouldn’t. Either way, there were demons she was going to have to face. She’d tried to command her body to relax, to muffle the insistent whispering of her mind by concentrating on Charles’ breathing. She lay there in the dark with the muted sounds of the night chirping and buzzing softly outside their hut, and listened to the slow and steady sound of his breath beside her.

It was usually somewhat of a comfort. To know that he was close enough to touch, alive and free and stretched out beside her. It had often eased her suffering in the past, if only just enough to find the solace of unconsciousness. But lately she'd been having more and more trouble sleeping. Each night she grew more and more troubled and restless. The closer they came to retaking Nassau, the more uneasy she felt.

She couldn’t explain it, it didn't make any sense. She wanted Nassau back. She wanted her home and her life back, even if she was going to be met with ample setback and considerable change. She should be excited, enthusiastic even. She was dedicated to this cause, after all. And yet still she felt anxious, uncomfortable despite the fact at all that could be done, had been.

It confounded her, left her rolling softly from their bed to pad across the room and fold herself into the rickety wooden chair by the only window. She considered lighting a candle, as the only light was that of the moon through the open shutters, but decided against it for not wanting to disturb Charles. Just because she couldn't find the sweet relief of sleep, didn't mean she ought to disrupt his. Besides, her eyes had adjusted to the dark quite some time ago anyway.

She didn't know how long she sat in that chair, it somehow felt like only an instant and an eternity all at once. She thought about Charles and Nassau, about the past and the future. She thought about everything and nothing. Her mistakes and the entirety of her life's choices, the good and the bad, they had all led her here and she was determined to see things through. Regardless of how things played out, she’d be in this until the end. Discomfort and anxiety be damned, she wasn't going anywhere. Sleep or no sleep.

She stared into the dark almost blankly, eyes fixed upon the shadowed silhouette of the man she'd been in love with nearly her entire life. She'd been merely a child when she’d first lain eyes on him, a mule-headed girl of only thirteen with a wild heart and callow dreams of dominion and a father's resulting affection. She’d hated Charles at first, was convinced he was the very type of man that would threaten her rise to authority, and had done her very best to appear as authoritative and unconcerned with him as was humanly possible for a girl her age.

It wasn't until she was sixteen that she realized most of that hate was grounded in attraction. By then she'd begun noticing the the looks he occasionally gave her. She'd become aware of the insinuation behind all the inciting harassment, banter and flirtation that they were both too guilty of. And she had come to enjoy those encounters. As time went on, she'd discovered something even more interesting; she generally held the advantage in these games they played. She wasn't stupid, she'd known she
was attractive and that he had no doubt noticed. She'd also become aware of the fact that he wanted her, even if she'd didn't quite fully grasp the entirety of what that want consisted of. Like the foolish child she'd been, she'd begun finding excuses to be near him without ever admitting she was there because of him. She'd pushed and pulled at his buttons nearly every chance she got, took advantage where she could and dished out just as much vexation as she got from him.

They'd danced around any real form of physical contact for years before she'd finally gotten tired of it. She'd been eighteen when she'd finally decided to put an end to all the figurative foreplay. She'd crept through his camp full of hard determination and butterflies, then slipped in through the open the flap of his tent, climbed into his lap and fucked him stupid.

She smiled fondly at the memory. He'd been so keen to appear unmoved as she'd settled into his lap, but she'd put an end to that with little more than a firm tug at his belt and a few simple words brushed against the shell of his ear.

They'd been nearly inseparable after that, at least whenever he wasn't out at sea or she neck-deep in her father's business. They were together nearly three years before she'd realized her original assessment had been correct; he was indeed a hindrance to her rise in Nassau. She'd cut him out and spent the next year and a half trying to cauterize the bleeding. There were even a number of times she'd been convinced she'd succeeded, but he'd always found a way back inside. And in the end, she'd always caved. Even if it was sometimes only in a carnal sense.

They'd spent the next couple years being on and off again, culminating with her ultimate betrayal at the fort, her father's murder, her consequent attempt on Charles' life, and her sudden change of heart. Christ, she'd made a mess of things.

She closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair, tipping her head back against its top rail. With a gentle sigh, she wondered if the distance between them was perhaps a key source of her discomfort. Save for the three oddly sublime years they'd spent together after their initial coupling, they had always been on opposite sides of just about everything. They'd always spent almost as much time aggravating one another as they did doing anything else. And yet she'd never felt closer or more connected to any other person. He'd always been the one constant, the one thing she could always count on being there despite her frequent and desperate desire to believe otherwise.

And so here she was, having abandoned all her dreams and everything she'd thought she wanted, to sail off into a war she didn't truly believe they could win. All because she'd come to realize her dreams of legitimacy were just that; dreams. With legitimacy came servitude, a surrender of autonomy and any real form of power. And as it turned out, autonomy and power were the entire reason she'd been willing to cede Nassau to the crown in the first place. Without those things, Nassau wasn't worth giving up. She wasn't even sure they'd ever been worth giving up Charles for.
Nassau and Charles had been the only two things to ever truly reach in and touch her. There had been other people, other hopes and dreams, like Max and her father's unattainable affection. But those had been more like something of a consolatory blanket; a surface coating that warmed and comforted, but never quite managed to reach inside to take hold of your heart and squeeze.

Nassau and Charles had always known just how to squeeze.

She wasn't quite so sure that all this reminiscing and guilty wallowing was doing her any good, but she was too restless to stay in bed, and it felt necessary in some way. Like hashing it all out in her head might make things clearer somehow. Sitting up again, she reached up to rub at the back of her neck and readdress the notion that Charles might be at the center of all this discomfort.

Hell, he usually was. The troublesome bastard...

What more could she possibly do to ease this guilt? To make him understand? To return them to something that at least remotely resembled a kinship before one or both of them ended up dead or worse? She'd already bared her soul, admitted to him a weakness that she hadn't even wanted to admit to herself. He had to know already that she loved him, he'd insinuated as much more than once. What more was there to say?

Nothing. There wasn't anything, and that was the problem. She realized it with a sudden jolt of unadulterated mourning. She didn't understand why this felt like a revelation. She'd already known there wasn't anything she could have done or said to return them to what they'd been. She'd known there was no going back and while the knowledge had pained her, she'd accounted for it. But some small, stupid part of her must have been hoping, holding out for some kind of miracle.

How stupid was that? How impossibly out of touch with one's own feelings could a person possibly be? She needed a drink.

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He woke long before dawn, while the air was still heavy with darkness and the chirp of insects, to find himself alone. She no longer occupied the expanse of lumpy mattress to his left, and with her absence his blood ran cold.

His first thought was that she'd fled, turned on him yet again in favor of some unknown scheme she
coveted more than anything they'd ever shared. He fought the urge to bolt upright, to fling the blanket from his thighs and onto the floor. Instead he sat up slowly, forcing himself to orientate and let his eyes adjust to the dark.

"Eleanor?" He called out gruffly, his voice holding a curious mix of anger and panic.

His call was met with a painful silence that made his gut clench. This could not be happening. He knew better. He could not have fallen victim to her again. He moved to push the blanket from his thighs, robotically scanning the darkness of the room for his boots in anticipation of a search.

"I'm here..." A soft voice intoned wearily from the opposite end of the room.

His head snapped toward the sound, his body inadvertently relaxing with the sight of her. He found her sitting in the rickety chair that faced the bed across the room. The moonlight filtered through the window behind her left her gently silhouetted in the darkness. Her legs were folded up under her in the chair. Her elbows rested on the chair's arms and there was a mug of what he assumed was rum cupped between her hands. He wondered how he hadn't woken when she'd gone to acquire it. It was still too dark to see her expression, but he was quite certain she was watching him. He tried to ignore the wash of relief that flooded though him with the knowledge that she hadn't left.

He sat there, half covered by the thin blanket and waiting for her to say something, but she didn't. Finally, he decided he'd had enough.

"What are you doing?" He grunted, annoyed with himself for getting so flustered by her absence so quickly.

She shifted in the chair and readjusted her legs as she rested back a little. Her voice was uncharacteristically soft and contemplative. "Thinking." She breathed.

There was another beat of quiet between them as he considered whether or not to ask her what about. She was unusually quiet, and there had been an almost mournful sort of lilt to the one word she'd spoken. Whatever it was, it had clearly upset her at least somewhat. Apparently enough to pull her from their bed to drink alone, quietly in the dark.

After another few seconds of contemplative staring at her silhouette, he pulled back the blanket beside him in reticent invitation. "Come back to bed." He grunted softly.
He heard her swallow from across the room, the sound confirming his suspicion that she was feeling less than tip-top. He didn't know what had moved her and knew he shouldn't care, but as usual, the slightest display of weakness from this woman had his gut tightening. She took another second to compose herself, and he let her.

She didn't make a sound as she set down her mug and stood, padding back toward the bed and climbing in without a word. He rolled onto his back and pulled the blanket upwards as she settled down about a foot from him. It was only another minute or so before before she suddenly rolled towards him, curling into his side and coiling an arm around his torso. One of her legs quickly followed suit by tangling up with his. He stiffened briefly with the initial contact, but relaxed almost as quickly as he'd seized up. Surprising them both, he shifted to slide an arm beneath and up around behind her to rest a comforting hand against her hip, then readjusted the blanket to accommodate their positioning.

He ignored the casual intimacy of the gesture and the fact that her shift had bunched just high enough to have his fingers skimming the bare skin of her thigh. He told himself it was because he'd decided he wasn't going to fight the small things anymore. He felt how he felt, but he didn't need to let it rule him. He told himself that it was better this way, better that she was here beside him rather than running off into the night to do God knows what. At lest this way, he could keep a closer eye on her.

Tangled up together, neither of them spoke another word before daybreak.

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**AN2:** I hope this longish chapter made up somewhat for my horrible delay! The next chapter is already mostly plotted out and it's gonna be action-packed, so hold on to your hats, folks! Please remember to review! Your comments feed my soul and brighten my days, thank you!!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!