A Rose by Any Other Name

by code_name_baron

Summary

Ross Poldark comes home to find that his father had died, his estate is in ruins, and his sweetheart married his cousin. All he has now is Nampara with its lazy servants - Prudie, Judd and Danny, a scrawny teen his father felt sorry for. - AU, in which Demelza is in fact cross-dressing to hide her identity.

Notes

I debated putting this story up. It seems like a silly plot, but I could not get it out of my head. In my mind, Demelza looks like Eleanor Tomlinson, but is much shorter. I think in books, Ross was supposed to tower over her.
"Damnation!" an exclamation pierced the quiet of the house as Ross Poldark, the young master of Nampara and the offspring of an ancient Cornwall family, stumbled over the rug in the darkened parlor. He drunk so much his vision was doubled, but at least he was still standing on his feet. Almost. On cue his tall frame started to list to the side and he braced himself on the nearby sidetable - a delicate and old piece - that creaked under the pressure of his weight.

"Do you need anything, Sir?"

Ross turned at the sound of the soft voice. In the dark he vaguely discerned the smallish silhouette of the servant.

"Where is everyone?" he asked unpleasantly.

"Abed already. It is late now..." the voice trailed as if sensing the master's stormy mood.

"And why are you still awake?"

The young teen shrugged indifferently. Immediately Ross felt, despite his intoxication, the usual wave of irritation rise in him whenever he dealt with the boy. Ross could not tell why, could not explain the genesis of this most implacable dislike that he harbored for the young servant. The boy was always quiet and quick to provide any service required; always tried to avoid being seen and never looked Ross directly in the eye. Yet, Ross never felt comfortable around the boy.

No one ever caused him to have such an immediate discomfort. Well, aside from George Warleggan and the tongue-wagging ladies of the county. But the boy was a mere servant. Young, woefully thin, with always messy ginger hair that fell over his face. A few times when Ross was particularly grouchy the boy shot him sideways glances and his eyes were blue-green; piercing and changeable like the sea. And that voice - clear and soft, almost like a girl's... Something wasn't right with the boy. Something did not make sense to Ross. Not that he spent too much time on those notions.

"Take off my boots," Ross fell onto the settee and put his foot on the nearby tea table. "Come on, pull harder. What am I feeding you for if you can't even pull one boot off? For all the time you spend in the kitchen..." Ross talked sarcastically as he watched the young boy struggle with the boot. He bend his other leg and gave the boy a slight nudge. It wasn't that strong, but the boy stumbled and fell with the boot in his hands. The same thing happened with another boot.

"Anything else, Sir?" the boy put the boots near settee and was looking at Ross from under the fringe.

"Clean those boots. I want them to shine when morning comes."

"Yes, Sir," the boy grabbed the boots and went to the door.

Ross got up, but almost immediately his head spun and he listed again, nearly crashing into the tea table. He caught his balance and, irritably, barked, "Danny!"

"Yes, Sir," the boy turned at the door.

"Come here. Drop those boots. You can do them later," the boy approached him and Ross used the bony shoulder as a walking aid. The boy was thin and much shorter than him, but it was better than nothing. Slowly they made their way to the master bedroom. Ross was shedding his clothes as he
stumbled towards the bed.

"Can I go now, Sir?" Ross only nodded and fell into the bed face down.

His awakening was painful even in the relative semi-darkness of the room. Ross carefully lifted himself, trying to avoid any jerky moves. Every heartbeat was echoed by a thunderous pounding in his head and he was thirsty as hell. He looked around the room bleary taking stock of things. His clothes were collected and on the side table stood a jug of water and a glass. Gratefully Ross filled the glass and drank the cold water in one long gulp. He almost immediately felt better.

Habitually, he washed up and got dressed, not paying attention to his movements. As the haze of intoxication lifted, his usual gloomy mood set in. It has been a while since he came back to find his father has died, his estate in ruins, his servants all gone, save for the two lazy drunks. Well, not young Danny, who was a new addition to the household. If one were to believe Jud and Prudie, his father felt particularly sorry for the young orphan boy and took him in. Ross cared little about it as he was nursing his own grief over loss of a parent and a burden of disappointed love. His own remaining family seemingly conspired against him with cousin Frances marrying his sweetheart and uncle wishing him to leave Cornwall. Well, maybe not Verity. She was still on his side.

But he had ties to this place, to this home, to the people in the village. Cornwall was in his blood and while he was disillusioned in the rest of the Poldarks and the gentle folks, his people - the miners, tenant’s children he grew up with, even his household servants - were loyal to him and he could not fail them. The usual stubbornness and pride that caused him so much trouble, raised their heads and he dug his heels and persisted. Now he could honestly say that he was not cut out for melancholy, but the early disappointments and war made him less inclined to laugh and trust.

Especially women. Although, it wasn't as if there were many who tried to assail the thorny heart of Ross Poldark. Perhaps it was another thing that made him resent Elizabeth so much. Everyone knew of their mutual regard. Everyone. So much so that everyone expected some spectacular drama between him, Elizabeth and Frances, when he came back from the dead so unexpectedly. He was hurt by the marriage, but even he could understand that there wasn't a betrayal. Everyone thought him dead; he could hardly expect a young woman as beautiful as Elizabeth - as desirable as her - to remain unmarried. What hurt him was perhaps his own foolish expectations. Three years that he held on to her image in the mundane horror that was war... She was a dream and an escape. The war was awful, the death - unnecessary. His presence there only made him sympathetic to the American cause. And he desperately wanted to remember, to hope, that in Cornwall life would be different. Peaceful, purposeful, with Elizabeth by his side...

Instead he found himself nearly destitute and at odds with that way of life that he thought was peaceful. Ironically, he found it stifling and the gentry out of touch with the very people, who ensured their elevated status. He knew that his attitude was too liberal and put him at odds with most people of his rank, but as usual he stubbornly did not care. In that he saw the wisdom of Elizabeth's choice. She was better off with someone like Frances. She would not have fared well being his wife.

He was only now climbing out of the financial hole that his father's demise left him in. The Wheal Leisure was progressing well and they were close to striking copper. The news must have traveled throughout the county as he hosted a few enterprising ladies with daughters of marriageable age. He supposed the ancient name of Poldark held some attraction yet.

Still, occasionally, the mood would strike him, especially when he was crossed by George Warleggan or reminded of what could have been, and he would try and forget his troubles for a little bit. Last night, he and Frances imbibed too much and Ross could only feel marginally better because
he managed to leave the tavern and travel to Nampara without falling off the horse. He didn't know if Frances was able to leave considering the state he's been in. Not that Ross was much better - he ended up needing help of that boy to get to the bed. He still could not figure out what made his father take the boy in. Danny was skinny and not very strong. But at least he was not lazy: Ross saw that his boots were clean and shined and left standing by the door.

Once again he wondered what made him dislike the boy so much. But he shook off these thoughts as he had the mine to inspect and make productive. He went downstairs, finding the house empty again, but at least the food was on the table. Plentiful, if cold; and he enjoyed his belated breakfast in silence.

Outside he went to the stables to find Danny minding horses and his relative equilibrium was disturbed again. Why was the boy always under foot? The uncharitable thought lingered and he stayed his tongue only because he knew it to be untrue. How could the boy have known that Ross would go to the stables? Still, when he made himself known his voice was gruff.

"Danny! Saddle Suleiman. I am going to Wheal Leisure," the boy jumped a foot in the air, but obediently nodded his head.

"Yes, Sir! Of course, sir!"

Ross stood back and prepared to observe - with some amount of amusement - how the scrawny boy would handle the large black stallion that was temperamental at best and only listened to Ross himself. To his surprise the horse calmly followed the boy out and allowed to be harnessed. The saddle was heavy and Suleiman was a tall horse, so Danny had to climb an upturned bucket to put the saddle on horse's back. Ross still expected, with a grin of anticipation, that Suleiman would kick the boy, but his stallion stood patiently and every now and then would look at the boy as if to plead him to be faster.

"He is ready, Sir," the boy tightened the last strap and turned.

"Good job," his voice was still gruff and he eyed the saddle with suspicion. "Next time I would appreciate if you were more expedient."

"Of course, Sir. I will try, Sir," the teen said as his head dropped down.

Somehow it made Ross feel a prick of guilt and he ruffled the boy's hair as he passed him. Danny twisted to get from under Ross' hand and his eyes stared at Ross directly for a second too long.

But Ross did not notice it, shocked as he was by his own sensations. Danny's hair was soft like the spun silk and the touch made Ross' fingers tingle. These tingles travelled through him, forming a warm wave of something that made his heart throb in his chest and his cheeks warm.

Unsettled, Ross quickly mounted the horse and, grabbing the reins, sent the horse forward.

Something was happening to him. Something he could not name.

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"Why ye so down?" Jinni asked when Danny came into the kitchen. "Capt'n Ross be mad at ye?"

"I have to leave, Jinni," the boy answered in a suddenly melodic and beautiful voice.

"An' where ye go, ducky? Straigh'ta hell, tha's where! You uncle be mad at ye wors' tha' Capt'n Ross!"
"Anywhere but here. Mr. Poldark dislikes me so. Although I don't know the reason, but life could be difficult for me here," Danny hid his face in hands and sighed deeply.

"Shh, shh... Calm ye'self," Jinni hesitantly run her hand over boy's hair and, feeling generous, pulled him to her chest. "He be marrying soon. New mistress be minding us and he be minding the mines. He be lonely al'redy. Drinkin' an' whorin' Jus' ye wait. Tis ye fault ye got to 'im las' night. He be mad when he be drinkin'. Nes' time stay away."

"He did not yell. Not really."

"An' today? Ye been in stables, when ye'kno tha' Jimmy's job."

Danny shrugged his shoulders, "I thought I'd avoid him if I was in the stables and not at home. I did not think he'd go to Wheal Leisure after yesterday... No, I definitely have to leave. Especially if he marries," he repeated.

"Maybe ye tell 'im, huh? How long ye be hidin'?"

"I am afraid. Deathly afraid. I don't know how to even broach this subject."

"Tell 'im, like ye tol' me. Tis easy."

"'Tis easy'... I can't even imagine such a conversation and it went on long enough, he would be livid. Mad. And I am afraid that my father will find out as well," Danny shuddered delicately.

"'ow? 'ow he find out? No one knows ye here. Three year' passed," Jinni took a long look at Danny, "Ye be grown now, ducky. Soo' ye cannae hide no more."

"Jinni, you must keep my secret, please," the wide blue-green eyes shined with unshed tears. "Just a little longer, until I am old enough."

"Ye better tell Capt'n Ross. He be quick to yell, but he be kind too. He coulda help ye."

Danny smiled sadly in response, "He maybe kind, but what would he say when finds out that he was unwittingly hiding me in his house?"

"Lord, ye back to tha'!" Jinni fluttered her hands. "No one ta blame ye."

"But who would believe me? Only late Mr. Poldark believed me. But it was impossible to prove anything and all he could do was help me hide!" tears sprang freely from the blue-green eyes. "No, I cannot live like this any longer."

"Stop ye cryin'. Or people be knowin' for sures. If my Jimmy be stayin' round house, ye better tell ever' in'. He be lookin' at ye a lot. Ye don' look like tha' boy no more. Stop ye cryin'."

Danny immediately stopped crying and wiped his face clean with a towel, "You are right, of course. If Jimmy continues working around the house, then I have to come clean. Oh, I so hoped that Mr. Poldark would leave Cornwall after the wedding."

"Don' show ye face to Capt' Ross and stay away from Jimmy," Jinni ran a gentle finger over Danny's soft and pale skin. "Ye be notnin' like a boy."

"It's the habit. Everyone thinks I am a boy and they don't question it too much."

"Tell Capt'n Ross, ducky."
"And what if he sends me back?"

"I tell ye, he be kind."

"He might not have a choice, you know. I can't expect him to defy the law for someone who lied to him all this time. I just have to hold out a little longer and then, when I am of age, I shall leave," Danny sighed deeply and resolutely raised his head high.

Jinni only hugged him one more time in commiseration.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

I will use some plot points from canon but my goal is development of Romelza in this changed circumstances.

Ross urged Suleiman to a fast canter trying to dispel the strange sensations that occurred when he touched Danny's hair. Now he figured what was bothering him so much about this boy; what made him feel discomfort. The boy made him feel things that he could not, should not have for a boy. At least, he never noticed those kind of proclivities in himself before. And he spent three years in the army with nary a woman in sight.

Danny appeared in Nampara when Ross was still in the army. He still did not understand the reasons his father decided to bother with another servant. Danny was scrawny now, therefore he must have been a mere child before. And, if his father needed someone quick to do various chores around the house - Ross did not doubt that his father knew all about the industriousness of the Paynter couple - he could have found someone from the village. Any of the village boys would have been faster and better than Danny.

When Ross first stepped into Nampara after he came back injured, kitchen was the only place that was clean. He figured it was because the Paynters used it a lot, but Prudie's cooking was abysmal and he revised that opinion. Later, he realized that it was because Danny spent a lot of time in the kitchen and had maintained it to a degree. He did not pay too much attention at the time, heartsick as he was about his life and the meager prospects. But eventually he rallied enough and Danny was indispensable in cleaning up Nampara and the fields. He wasn't much of a help with scything, but Danny had nimble fingers and rolled the hay stacks and mended cloths with the best of them.

Once Ross caught the boy reading the books in the study and discovered that his father also indulged the little urchin by teaching him to read and write. Ross was shocked yet again, but he reasoned that his father was lonely and maybe the young boy was a welcome companion in the last days of father's life. It turned out that Danny was bright and knew his letters quite well. Danny became a secretary when it was necessary. He could cleanly copy any text with nary a smudge and Ross marveled at the boy's neat handwriting. Ross could even leave him with money and be assured that everything was bought for the household.

It was Danny that made him realize that young Jim Carter had been seeing Zacky Martin's daughter. Jinni Martin and Danny talked, apparently. And it caused tensions between the two lovebird. Jim had even asked Ross if Danny had set his sights on the girl. When Ross heard it first he laughed till his stomach hurt. Danny was a teen and looked like it - short, thin, with lanky limbs. No girl would look at Danny and think him a fair prospect.

But Ross did promise Jim to talk to his servant about Jinni. It turned out that Danny was teaching Jinni a little bit of reading. Danny also informed him somewhat haughtily that if Jim wanted to remain in Jinni's good graces, he better stop poaching and make an honest woman out of his friend. Ross nearly swallowed his tongue when he heard the cultured tone and expressions and wondered just how many books did the boy read.

Soon enough, he was distracted by arranging the young couple's living situation. Jim was hired to be
a farmhand and Jinni became a cook in Nampara. Ross still remembered how that came about. They were cleaning up one of the cottages for the Carters to live in and everyone was on hand to help. During a quick break for food, Jinni brought a plate to Ross and the food was simple, but nonetheless delicious. He paid Jinni a compliment, making a joke that Jim would soon get fat with a wife like that. Jinni blushed and Zacky's wife proudly told everyone that all her girls knew how to cook a proper Cornish dinner. It was then that Danny said that it was too bad that Prudie sprained her wrist and could not cook very well for a while. Ross was only too eager to secure Jinni's services to replace Prudie's.

Later Ross thought he was manipulated a little - he caught Danny and Jinni exchange conspiratorial smiles - and he took his irritation on Danny, making him clean the attics. His irritation didn't last long and soon he was consumed with guilt. He joined young Danny in the attic and together they unearthed some old journals written by his father. He laughed when he saw a passage on the Wheal Leisure and the possible location of the copper vein. He showed it to Mr. Henshawe and, with some convincing from Mark Daniel, the new direction for copper exploration was adopted.

Ross was still very pleased with the decision to hire Jinni to be his cook. The quality of food improved dramatically, not to mention the general cleanliness of the kitchen. And the Carters were happy. Watching them together almost reversed some Ross' own jadedness over the marital state. Jinni, small smart Jinni, was carrying their first child and Jim's face would light up in wonder every time he saw his wife.

In contrast, Frances and Elizabeth were at odds. Or at least it looked like it to him. That was the reason Frances decided to drink yesterday. Not that he told as much. But as the night progressed, Frances' tongue got loose and he slurred to Ross something about enjoying freedoms of the single state before all joy in life was forfeited at the altar of the married life and responsibilities.

Things at Grambler weren't going too well, he gathered. Frances, too assured of his own inability, could not convince Uncle Charles to realign expenses to allow for better wages for workers. Ross could almost sense George Warleggan circling around the Trenwith Poldarks like a bird of prey. In his more reasonable moments, Ross knew he should not have made an enemy of George, but his pride and sense of fairness... His damned pride got the better of him every time he saw that pale man.

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He just exited the mine when he spotted Danny, red cheeked and breathing heavily. Something clenched in his chest again at the sight of those ginger locks, his hand tingling with the phantom feeling of the softest of silk.

"What is it Danny?" he asked not too kindly, irritated at himself.

"Sir, it's young Jimmy! He- He was caught poaching this morning!" the boy nearly cried and Ross swore loudly at this news. Danny's eyes widened at the foul language and Ross almost apologized before he remembered that Danny spent plenty of time of Jud and at the village. He ought to be used to this.

"Where? Whose property? Was he already sent to jail?" his questions came rapidly and he began brisk walk to where Suleiman was tied. Danny ran along with him, his short strides no match to Ross' long legs. He grabbed the reins of Suleiman.

"Magistrate's land. Pheasants. He was about to be sent to jail. And then it would be up to the judge. Sir, he would die in prison," Danny's eyes were pleading and it was probably the first time Ross witnessed Danny looking directly at him. Those eyes were... They were like the Cornish sea. Ever changing and deep. Right now they were dark blue and very big, staring into his like he was the
answer to all the boy's prayers. "Sir, Jinni is with child. She needs Jimmy. The baby would need its father!"

Suleiman gave a snort and Ross was released from the spell of those eyes. He climbed the horse and was about to send it galloping, when Danny touched his hand. The touch was just as shocking as the sight of the pale small hand on his own big and tan wrist.

"Sir, the magistrate. He likes to hunt. He is about to start one when Jimmy was caught. He does not want to deal with it. But if you hurry, if you hunt with him and make a good sport, he might let Jimmy go with just the recompense for the lost fowl."

"And if he is already sent to jail?" Ross barked, both in fear for Jim and irritated with his own reactions to the boy.

"It's a long road to Bodmin. And servants might just be slow enough..." Danny whispered, hiding his eyes again.

Ross spurred Suleiman and the animal, sensing his master's need, set the record speed getting to the magistrate's house. Ross was lucky: the hunt has yet to begin and Jimmy was just about to be escorted to jail from the basement of the house.

"Ahh, Mr. Poldark. Care to join us for a bit of sport?"

"Absolutely. It's been a while that I indulged in such an activity. But, if you are amenable, I would like to dispense with a bit of business?" Magistrate nodded, surprised that the proud Ross Poldark had anything to discuss with him. "Jim Carter, he was caught on your lands this morning."

"Poacher? What of him?"

"He is my servant and I would like to resolve this issue without involving courts. I am willing to compensate for any loss."

"But it would not do! These people, you let them go off once, you are bound to regret later. Thieves, the lot of them."

Ross swallowed the sharp retort that was on the tip of his tongue, "I understand, of course, your frustration. But as it is Mr. Carter's first offense and seeing as he is about to become a father- I personally vouch that he would not stray again."

"You are a liberal one, Mr. Poldark. Your sympathy for the lower class is misplaced. Ranks have to be preserved." It was obvious that the magistrate was gearing towards a long lecture.

"He is my milk brother. I feel responsibility for him as he was one of the boys I grew up with."

His host sighed, shook his head and mumbled something about young reformers, whose ideals are bound to disappoint, but agreed.

Ross bit his own tongue and joined the doddering old men to a useless sport of hunting. He even missed couple of shots on purpose to let the host get his shots in first. It was as ridiculous as any past time that the gentry indulged in. Slightly better than dances and balls: at least on the hunt Ross did not have to dodge the young women on the hunt of their own.

His suffering paid off. The magistrate came out with a few birds he shot out of the sky and he was in a generous mood. Ross offered to pay for the lost pheasants, but his offer was declined. Instead, Ross was to come to the magistrate's next dinner party as it was dear wish of the host's wife. Ross nearly
wept with joy for Jimmy and with pity for himself. No doubt there would be a niece or a cousin, who Ross would be seated next to during the dinner.

He collected his wayward servant and Jimmy was practically in tears himself. Still, Ross yelled at him enough to scare all the wild life in one mile radius and promised to take Jimmy to jail himself if he ever heard of poaching again. When he delivered Jimmy to his wife, Jinni was flanked by her parents and Ross was sure that Jimmy would know no peace for then next few days.

Dinner was spent alone, which suited Ross just fine. Since Jinni was out, Prudie served him and Ross was glad to discover that at least Jinni cooked before she left. Ross was so tired, he almost walked past the study in favor of the bed. It was only because he saw the small amount of light coming out that he stopped at the door.

Danny was copying the investors' reports, which Ross had to provide at the next meeting. The light of the candle lit up Danny's hair making it appear almost bronze, framing the glowing face.

Ross shook his head off this thought. The movement must have alerted the boy, because Danny lifted his eyes to Ross and they looked at each other for a moment. Then, the boy looked down and said softly, "Thank you, Sir. You did a right thing for Jimmy."

"How did you know about the hunt and the magistrate?" Ross asked just as softly.

Danny shrugged, still looking down, "common people talk too. Common people can be friends too."

Ross nodded at this and marveled at all the ways he overlooked the boy. "Don't stay up too late."

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Ross woke up before dawn, stretching with pleasure and rubbed his eyes. He was well rested and clear minded. Last night was so quiet and Ross felt remarkably well. Despite the prospect of the dreadful dinner, he was quite pleased with himself. The copper was coming soon; he could feel it and he was ready for the next investor meeting.

The only fly in his ointment was his possible strange awareness of the servant boy, but Ross shook it off as simply grudging respect for a boy, who turned out to be smarter and more industrious than any servant he had before. That and the long time that passed since he touched a woman. His options right now were either servant girls, which wasn't likely seeing as his choice would be Prudie or Jinni; an affair, which was a deeply uncomfortable thought to Ross; or visit to a prostitute. The third option was something he indulged at times, when the loneliness and sheer physical need overwhelmed him, but the relief was short-lived and tinged with regret and self-loathing. And yet, as things stood right now, he might visit Bodmins finest whorehouse after all.

Ross left the quiet house and inhaled deeply. It was early still and the summer heat has not set in, leaving the air fresh and smelling of flowers and sea salt. He was sure he would recognize Cornwall air with closed eyes and half-dead. The fragrant meadows, the nearby sea, the crispiness of the air before sunrise when the last of night stars were still fading. The house was still quiet and nobody was about, but Ross already saddled Suleiman and rode to the little cove, where he used to swim and found a small cave as a child. He had planned to be at Wheal Leisure all day today, the anticipation of finding copper making him want to be there in person. Whole day in the dark and dusty mine, shoulder to shoulder with sweaty workers made him want to at least refresh in advance.

He left Suleiman to graze on the meadow and went down the cliff in search of the cove. He shed his clothes, left only in his britches, but something halted his movements. Ross stared and even shook his head to dispel the incongruous vision...
Before his eyes ... a mermaid - he had no other description for the enchanting young woman - slowly walked out of the sea. Titian hair, strawberry and gold mixed in generously, wet from the water and clinging to the graceful neck. Droplets of water, lit up by the first rays of dawn, shone brightly like diamonds as they run slowly down the porcelain skin. Little pink pearls of nipples moved gently with each step. Small, but perfectly shaped breasts, that would have fit ideally into his hands, drew his attention. Positively tiny waist, the line of the body dipping in and flaring out to continue to shapely hips and slender legs. And small feet that moved so lightly, they did not disturb a single grain of sand on the shore. Ross stood there, struck dumb and speechless, and watched as the enchanting creature walked into the nearby bushes and disappeared from the view. He still stood unmoving and not breathing until his lungs burned for lack of air. Finally, noisily, he gulped precious air and the world resumed existing.

He jumped into the water, going deep and relishing the cold sea that helped him shake off the rest of his stupor and returned ability to think. 'You are one randy bastard,' Ross thought to himself. 'Why haven't you looked at her face? How are you going to find her now? How? How did he miss seeing someone so beautiful around?' Ross thought and thought in circles about the gorgeous girl and where to find her. All thoughts about visiting town prostitutes left his mind and he instead focused on who the unknown beauty could be. Was she a gentle born woman? No, she could not be. Why would she be bathing here? Alone? Could she be some trade person's daughter? But it was too far from the town. Was she someone from the village? How did he miss her?

The mystery of the young bather plagued him and he arrived to Nampara subdued and deep in thought. If only he could find her...

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"Wher' ye been?" Prudie asked Danny none too gently, grabbing his wrist the moment he stepped into the kitchen. "Jud be lookin' fer ye this morn'. Ye be needin' to clean tha' cellar."

Danny gave Prudie an indifferent look and mumbled quietly, "I was out."

"Jus' cause ye'kno 'em letters, Capt'n Ross be kind ta ye. Don' be puttin' no airs here, ye pest," Prudie was chastising Danny and eating a scone at the same time. Jinni shot Danny a sympathetic glance and moved a plate of scones towards him. "Jud be doin' it all cause ye actin' like ye better tha' hones' workin' folk."

Prudie raved some more about unjust fact that Young Danny was receiving what she thought to be a preferential treatment. Yet she never felt comfortable to sabotage the young servant directly. The old master liked the boy a lot and taught him letters. The new master was less friendly, but in the time since his return, Ross Poldark came to rely on Danny's skills and Prudie knew that it was his manipulation that freed her from kitchen work. Young boy was smart and quick. And Jinni was friends with him. As was Young Jimmy. No, Prudie may not know her letters, but she wasn't stupid. It suited her to have Danny around. So she only limited herself to some tongue-lashing and occasional sharp grabbing of boy's hands.

"Ye be dun' here, Prudie?" Jinni asked and pointedly looked at the second scone in the older woman's hand.

"Aye, aye. I go an' tell Jud tha' Danny be back from his walk," Prudie said mockingly and left the kitchen, followed by Danny's heavy sigh.

"Eat some more, ducky," Jinni passed a cup of milk to Danny.

"I am fine. Not hungry at all," Danny pushed the milk away and sighed again.
"Eat, ducky. Ye be thinner tha' 'em reeds," Jinni persisted and Danny reluctantly took a pastry. "An' thank ye. Ye got Capt'n Ross right quick." There were tears in Jinni's eyes and Danny quickly stood and hugged the young woman.

"Oh Jinni. I would gladly help you and Jimmy again. You know that. And so would Mr. Poldark. I am just glad it got resolved without trial and jail."

"Capt'n Ross be spending money fer tha' damned bird. Oh, I was right mad at Jimmy, I tryna kick 'im." Jinni sniffled and Danny laughed with her imagining Jinni with her pregnant tummy trying to kick her husband.

Jud stumbled in, red faced and surly, and took in the young people in the kitchen, "Danny, ye pest. I be lookin' fer ye all over. Tha' cellar-"

"I know. Prudie told me. I am coming as soon as I finish my breakfast."

Jud's face got even surlier and he hit the kitchen table with his fist, "Ye go now, ye pest! Capt'n Ross ain't payin' ye to walk 'round and eat his food!" He made as if to intimidate the boy, but Danny lifted his head and looked at Jud with such haughty and superior expression that the older man stopped mid-move. Irritated and mad, Jud lifted his hand to grab the boy's ear, but could not complete the move under the near-black eyes filled with hatred and challenge.

"Don't you ever try and touch me, Jud Paynter," Danny's voice was quiet, but it resonated in the still kitchen.

"Ye be talkin' back, ye pest?" Judd fumbled and continued to stay still under the impossibly heavy look of the boy's eyes.

"What is going on here?" Mr. Poldark's deep voice boomed in the kitchen and discharged the tension.

"Tha' pest, Capt'n Ross. He be lazin' 'bout and yellin' at me. Tellin' he only do wha' ye tell 'im. I cannae wor' all meself!"

Danny, who dropped his head the moment the master stepped in, made a noise half-way between a snort and laughter and Ross almost joined him. Jud as the only hard-working servant was such a ridiculous notion...

"Tis not true, Capt'n Ross. Danny say he come an' help after he breaks fast," Jinni filled in the silence and Ross internally rolled his eyes. All this little fights between servants was the last thing he wanted to deal with.

"I will sort the truth of the matter myself. If Danny is refusing to work, then I shall deal with him," the boy's head lowered even further, but he remained silent. "In the meantime, why don't you go and complete the task I set out for you, Jud?"

Jud still stood there, mouth hanging open and Ross got the whiff of the stale breath. Jud has been hitting his brandy supply again. "Now, Jud. Go!"

Jud gave another baleful look at Danny and left the kitchen.

"What happened here, Danny?" Ross asked more gently, determined to squash his abnormal reactions to the boy.

"Nothing serious, sir. Jud is ... Jud, I have been dealing with a him a lot."
"Hm... I suppose you have. Fine, go and clean Suleiman. I shall be going to Wheal Leisure after breakfast."

Danny nodded and turned to leave.

"Wait... Do you know everyone in the village?" the boy nodded and Ross perked up a little. "Then, perhaps, you know if there is a young woman, a redhead, that lives nearby?"

Boy's eyes widened a little, although he still avoided looking at Ross. "Ahh... No, no young redheads in the village, sir."

"Are you sure? Maybe among trades people? Or Trenwith?"

Again the boy shook his head in negation and Ross sighed; the mystery young bather would remain a mystery a little longer.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I, by no means, know everything about Cornwall in 1780s. I simply googled things and that's the extent of my research.
Also, a warning. This contains a vague allusion to an attempted sexual assault.
Nothing's specific.

Danny waited for disaster to strike at any moment now. Mr. Poldark spent last week travelling around the county and coming home late and irritated. Everyone could sense his worsening mood and even Jud and Prudie got quiet and avoided touching the brandy. As if to spite the impatient man, the copper was not found yet. Mr. Henshawe was just as concerned, only he was far too polite to scowl at anyone.

Danny was at the mines as he was helping Jimmy with the purser tasks. The ever present breeze from the sea whipped Danny's hair around and he wished for the cap of sorts. Mr. Poldark gave them one heavy look, visibly wincing at the sight of Danny's face, and turned abruptly on the heel. Soon, his black stallion carried the temperamental man out toward town and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ye reckon he be lookin' fer sumthin', eh?" Jimmy asked and Danny only looked down.
"Or someone," he said quietly.
"Ye think he be lonely?" Jimmy nudged the other boy and winked saucily.

Danny only shuddered delicately and coughed, "I don't think anything, and neither should you."
"Ye right. Gentle folk be strange."

The day was finally over and Danny was in the kitchen waiting for Jinni to finish preparing a simple dinner that could be served cold in case Mr. Poldark came late and she was already gone.

"Tis late now. Wher' is Capt'n Ross now, ye reckon?" Jinni was methodically stirring a stew in the pot.

"Probably at the Red Lion again," Danny said glumly, but then quickly said. "I wouldn't know, Jinni. Mayhap he is at Trenwith or with investors."

"Nay. Ye right. He be drinkin' again. Three days now he be late home... He ought ta marry."

"He wasn't in his cups these past three days," Danny felt that he needed to correct Jinni and defend Mr. Poldark.

"Ye said ye hide from 'im when he be mad, ducky." Jinni gave Danny a sharp look.

"He didn't see me. I- I was awake still and saw that he was sober," Danny looked everywhere but Jinni.
"Awake, ye say. Walkin' about again. Ducky, tis askin' fer trouble."

"I know, I know. I was careful, I promise."

Jinni hummed in disapproval.

Ross searched high and low looking for the mystery woman with Titian hair. His memory served up snippets of that morning vision with perfect clarity. She was like Botticelli's Venus born of the sea and bathed in the first light of day - half goddess, half mermaid, and all beauty. He could scarcely believe he was capable of such poetry. 'Lovesick fool,' he mused to himself. Even when he was in the throws of his first love for Elizabeth the most he compared her to was the porcelain doll. Beautiful, delicate, fragile... Someone to admire from afar, but also not someone he could imagine bathing in the sea.

As more days passed and he hadn't caught sight of that mesmerizing girl, Ross grew more and more upset. He visited all the nearby villages and estates, seeking his vision, but the girl disappeared as if she was indeed a mermaid and returned to her home in the deep sea. He would return home entirely exhausted, tired and sore, but could not sleep, haunted by the beautiful memory.

Today he resolved to stop his fruitless search, deciding that he only imagined the girl on the shore. He was lonely lately. More so than before. Elizabeth was lost to him forever; his old feelings for her were just a pale memory that settled into a quiet regard for a relative. None of the marriageable girls of the county caught his attention and Wheal Leisure was taking up most of this time. He spent his days with men, surrounded by rough and unpolished people. Was it any wonder that he longed for something? Someone? Someone to soothe his lonely heart. Share his lonely bed. So his mind conjured a beautiful girl, mysterious and enchanting. In his late night ruminations he wondered if his mind tried to reconcile the fact that he felt drawn to Danny and created an alluring female with hair the color that he only saw on Danny before.

He avoided the young servant at all opportunities and hadn't seen the boy for a week. In that time he missed the damned boy. He didn't realize that he talked to Danny so much. The boy was smart and quick with a clever observation. And the boy read a lot. Ross found that he could talk about history with Danny and thought that the boy's opinions were similar to what he had when he was younger: idealistic, maximalistic, hopeful...

And it wasn't just opinions on books that the boy has read. Ross would talk at him, unloading all his frustrations and uncertainties - no doubt the lack of any company affecting him more and more - and the boy would oftentimes offer clever observations. About the mines, Wheal Leisure and all nearby ones; about Ross' neighbors, because Danny was somehow aware of everything the servants were aware of; about prospects for fishing and crops...

Once, after another excruciating dinner at Trenwith, Ross lamented that Verity was like a healthy branch that was going to wither and die without sprouting any buds of her own. Not a very elaborate metaphor, he would admit, but a fitting one. More than Verity's own 'on the shelf' status, Ross was concerned that his Uncle and everyone of the Trenwith Poldarks came to rely on Verity too much and might not wish her to settle on her own. It was an uncharitable thought, but it was a true one nonetheless. He almost told Danny to forget about it and never mention this to anyone, but Danny was surprisingly understanding.

"Ms. Verity is full twenty and five," Ross only nodded. "She might not need anyone's approval if she were to find a suitable situation," Danny offered this tidbit carefully and Ross looked at him with curiosity. Prompted by the continued silence Danny said, "I only mean that she is of age... And there
might be brave men, who would not care if Ms. Verity had no dowry. She is a capable mistress. Everyone knows that she runs Trenwith. She is accomplished, as ladies should be, and is a sweetest person this side of Tamar River."

Ross held the burst of laughter at this description of Verity. She was accomplished, and capable, and a good mistress. And she was sweet. But that would present a problem if there was a 'brave man.' Verity herself might not wish to upset her family. Ross smiled genuinely at the boy, who so clearly saw how deserving of happiness his cousin was. And was that a veiled criticism of Elizabeth and her skills as a mistress of the house? He wondered silently what servants said about Frances.

When Danny blushed and looked away, Ross realized that he stared at the boy for too long...

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Elizabeth stopped by for a visit today, her posture ramrod and face blank. They had one of those stilted and stifling conversations about Grambler of all things. Elizabeth seemed... troubled, but Ross could only provide an ear to listen to. He had no words of encouragement: it wasn't his place to come between a man and his wife. They descended into a heavy silence and Ross wondered when the careful and elaborate way Elizabeth was attired and coiffed stopped being so attractive. She certainly looked pretty, but so did fashion plates or paintings. He was at a loss as to what to say when Danny walked in with some papers in his hands and stopped abruptly at the sight of the mistress of Trenwith. He bowed smartly and was about to leave when Elizabeth asked him how he was doing.

"I am well, Mrs. Poldark. Thank you for asking."

"Oh, no need for formalities, Danny. We are, after all, old acquaintances," Elizabeth had a small wan smile and Danny only nodded in response.

"Of course. Sir, shall I take these to Mr. Henshawe for you?" Danny held up papers and Ross was glad that his tête-à-tête with Elizabeth was cut short.

Elizabeth got up and left and Ross was still amiss at the reason for her visit.

"I did not know you were acquainted with Elizabeth," he said to Danny on the way to Wheal Leisure.

Danny visibly blushed and then offered, "Mrs. Poldark, she was a Ms. Chynoweth then, would visit with Ms. Verity sometimes. When late Mr. Poldark was alive."

"And you talked to her?" he was curious to know. He saw Elizabeth as a proper and polite gentlewoman - understandable since she was raised to know how to comport herself - but he never saw her be genuinely friendly with servants. Mostly he was curious to know Danny's opinion of Elizabeth.

"Ms. Verity and Mrs. Poldark would come to learn of any news of you," Danny was straight forward. "But she stopped when there was news of your- When there was the false report about you. The boy's voice got quieter at the end and Ross was confronted for the first time with the fact that other people were hurting when they thought him dead. Elizabeth stopped visiting and- His father was alone. In the house with just two drunks and a young servant boy for company. His throat constricted with the emotion. "Mr. Poldark, your father was sad, but he also was proud. He thought you died doing your duty for the country. That you were brave and never besmirched the Poldark name with your actions. He- he loved you. He would be proud of you now."

Danny's voice was suspiciously breathy and Ross realized that the boy might have grieved his
father's death too. Ross was overwhelmed with gratitude and the wave of shared pain. He squeezed boy's arm in support and once again his fingers tingled and warmed.

He exited Wheal Leisure - the copper was still out of reach - and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Danny's locks whip wildly in the breeze. Damnation! That hair was almost exactly the same color as the mystery girl's. Ross swallowed hard against the uncomfortable realization that he probably was right last night: his tired and lonely mind conflated awareness of the boy with his needs and created this mirage of a beautiful girl by the sea. That settled it: he would go and see Margaret to drive the image of the girl (and the awfully unsettling awareness of the servant boy) out of his mind. However, when he got to the Red Lion and settled at the table, he felt stifled in the hot and musty place. The tavern, nay, the whole town, was unbearably warm - like wearing a fur coat in summer. And it smelled: of people, sweat, dirt, greasy food, horses. He missed the fresh and crisp air in Nampara and he debated just going home and drinking there until he did not feel anything. He sat, staring the glass in his hand, until the tart smell of woman's perfume alerted him that he was no longer alone. He turned to find Margaret's smiling eyes.

"What is so compelling about the drink that you glare at it so?"

Ross smiled obligingly, "I was debating whether your eyes are as dark as this drink? I am sure they are just as intoxicating."

Margaret looked down demurely, "Oh, you still remember that I exist?"

"You are unforgettable, Margaret," rote flirtation was easy for Ross. He did it often enough in his youth. Margaret gave him another coquettish look from under the lashes and shrugged one shoulder in a practiced move, which made her chest heave. Ross leaned closer to her and moved one finger over her arm, "If you are amenable, we can refresh those memories tonight."

Her rouged lips pursed into a small smile and she whispered, "You are a naughty one, Mr. Poldark."

They left for her rooms upstairs and the maid brought them wine. They sat opposite one another at the small table, sipping their drinks and studying each other carefully. Ross was marveling at himself - he absolutely had not interest in bedding this woman. She was a beautiful specimen and he always appreciated her as a man could appreciate a woman. It used to be that he would look into her dark eyes and would imagine his fingers plunging into that mass of dark hair. However, when he tried to remember how it felt - her long black locks pulled into a sophisticated chignon - a different memory burned through him, alive and bright. Danny's hair, so soft and silky and... and red.

Ross leaned back in the chair and gulped the rest of the glass, willing the memory, the sensation, to go away. It worked very little: his thoughts were more traitorous than his strength of will. He barely held off from throwing the glass into the wall. Margaret noticed the change in his mood and leaned back too.

"You have changed, Ross. I hope I can still call you by you Christian name?"

"Changed? How?"

"I am not sure yet. I simply feel it that you are different. You do not desire me any more," she spoke diffidently and looked at him across the rim of the glass. "You still know how to treat a woman though, be it a lady or a whore."

Ross almost flinched at the crass word, "I apologize. I am no longer so inclined to be in a company
of a woman."

"I can see that. Please, pour me some more wine."

Ross obligingly poured her wine and filled his glass with brandy.

"Do you think, hope perhaps, that if you drink enough you might forget her?"

"Her? Margaret, what have you been hearing?"

"I think you might be in love."

"In love..." Ross repeated with an amused smile, but his thoughts went to the mystery girl on the shore and he sighed deeply.

"I am right, no?" Margaret smirked and shook her head. "Ross Poldark, handsome and decisive master of Nampara, is in love..."

"I am sure I don't know what you mean."

Margaret moved to sit next to him and leaned her torso into his side, her chest practically in his hand. "I mean that you are different. And your heart does not have place for other women in it. Even when you still mourned the loss of Elizabeth's regard, you had time for me. And now..." she moved her hand over his chest. "See, your heart does not lose its beat. Before you would have been kissing me already. Remember?"

"Margaret... I am simply tired."

"Of course. You should go and rest. Sleep. Perhaps you shall dream of her," Margaret smiled mischievously.

"Dream of her... Dreams is all I have, unfortunately," Ross mumbled.

"And is she as beautiful as a dream?" Margaret's voice was even, but there was a hint of jealousy there.

Ross was lost in the memory, "I... I am not sure what to say, but..." he trailed off as if remembered his companion. "It's like looking into the sun too long. Bright, blinding and almost painful in the end."

Margaret looked down and started to pull away, but Ross, irritated with himself, followed her and kissed the reddened lips. But the spark wasn't there and his body did not react to the beautiful woman before him.

She moved away again, "Please, Ross, stop. I can see you do not desire such distractions tonight."

Ross was almost apologetic and disturbed by his own behavior, "I am sorry. I must be more tired than I thought."

"Or maybe it's not me you desire..." Margaret whispered.

"I... I am not... Thank you for understanding."

"Glad to be of any service, Mr. Poldark."

Ross only shook his head at her and left with a bow.
On the way home Ross thought back to his conversation with Margaret. Was he in love? In lust, more like it. He wasn't sure his heart was capable of that leap - or a fall. Too much disappointment. But, physical attraction and a good conversation were excellent foundations for a relationship. Eventually he would have to marry - Nampara would need an heir. Prudent choice would be to find an eligible girl among his rank, but everything in him rebelled at the notion of some proper gentlewoman, who could only speak of proper subjects (weather, balls, latest sleeve fashion), walking in Nampara and looking down her nose at the miners that ensured his prosperity.

Frustratingly, his thoughts strayed to the young servant again. Ross actually ground his teeth in irritation. Thoughts of Danny came to him more and more often, disturbing him. His own inconsistent behavior disturbed him. He actually wanted to touch Danny's hair again to relive that sensations of tingles, which was more than he got when he kissed Margaret. He wanted to tousle that hair, comb through it, push if off the boy's face and finally take a look at him without obstruction, look into those ever changing eyes. 'You noticed his changing eyes?' Ross asked himself sarcastically. Why, oh why, couldn't the mysterious mermaid be real? She would cure him of this inexplicable, and most unwelcome, awareness of the boy.

He was so consumed with his thoughts, he hardly noticed Verity going into a house of the old widow, who rented the rooms.

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She was so tired! How much longer could she go on like this? How much longer could she hide the truth?

Demelza dove into the water and tried to reach the bottom. The water was refreshingly cold and bit into her skin. She turned around and pushed herself up. A slim body burst from the water and just as noisily went down again, sending fountain of salt water all around.

'If you splash around like this, you are bound to catch someone's attention,' she chided herself and waded towards the shore. It was time to go back to Nampara, back to being a quite teen boy. Only in this early hours of the day, when hardly anyone was around, could she afford being herself, being Demelza - a young, comely woman, who just met her nineteenth summer.

She splashed water into her face and finger combed through short wet hair. 'It's time to find courage and confess to Mr. Poldark. It is possible that he won't begrudge her lies, when he finds out the truth. And if he turns her away from Nampara, she'd leave. Although she had no where to go. Certainly not her own home. If only she was a little older. She could find other jobs if she could get recommendations.'

She thought about her prospects as she methodically turned into a boy. Baggy, loose clothes helped hide the slender shape. She dried her hair on a towel and then intentionally messed it up, making it fall over her eyes. Using water as a mirror, she saw a teen boy of fourteen-fifteen at most; thin and serious. With one more sigh, she ran to the house.

Danny found Jinni in the kitchen and together they began preparing for the next meal. Danny was peeling potatoes and Jinni was preparing a dough.

"Ye were out ta water again?"

"Yes," Danny offered after a pause. "I know what you would say, Jinni."

"Don' mind me sayin', mind tha' people be watchin'. Ye 'eard 'im. Capt'n Ross be askin' 'bout redhead, eh?"
"Oh, Jinni! You think it was about me? I am always in disguise and only when I am-" Danny trailed off horrified with the realization. Mr. Poldark saw her swimming. Judas...

"I think tha' ye need ta tell 'im tha truth, ducky. An' soon."

"But he would turn me away..."

"'Ee likes ye. Well, 'ee likes Danny. An if ye tell 'im tha' whole truth, 'ee mighta help ye hide better. Ye be growin' more. Soo' that shirt an' 'em britches ain't be foolin' no one."

Danny wiped his face with sleeve and left a smudge.

"Wher' ye' be findin' tha' dirt, hm?" Jinni clucked her tongue and went to clean the spot away.

"I do it on purpose."

"Ye reckon if ye be dirty, no one see ye be a girl?"

Danny just shrugged again and went on peeling. It was silent for a stretch as both occupants went about the mundane task of cooking.

"Jinni... Do you think Mr. Poldark will marry soon? We have not seen Mrs. and Ms. Tigue lately..."

"Eh, Lord knows. Capt'n Ross be ansome man and Nampara be needin' a bleddy cheel.* Why ye ask?"

"Jinni, if I- that is if I were to tell him the truth, would he- And if he knows that I am a-"

"Ansome maid*?" Jinni finished for him.

"Yes. It would not be appropriate for a young unmarried woman to remain in the house with a single man. I know, as far as people know, I am a servant, but there would be all these insinuations..."

"Ye cannae stop folk from talkin'."

"It's not the gossip I worry about. I haven't known him before the army and Elizabeth, but was he-did he- Oh, I am going about it all wrong!" Danny said, blushing hard and looking down.

"Ducky," Jinni said gently. "I reckon ye worry tha' he be like 'em yer uncle and Da..." Danny nodded still looking down. "He be kind even he was a cheel 'imself. An' he never bleddy kiss a maid tha' didna want ta be kissed. 'em maids all be wantin'. He never hurt ye, be ye a boy or a maid."

Danny, no, Demelza, sighed in relief. It was such a concern now. Before, with late Mr. Poldark, Demelza was sure that no harm would befall her. But young Mr. Poldark was well liked by women and had some healthy appetites, if his late night visits to Truro were any indication. Being a boy protected her from being found by her family, and it protected her from being pursued by men. Her experience taught her to be wary of men and their attentions. If Mr. Poldark found out that Danny was actually a young woman and tried- like her uncle tried - Demelza swallowed hard as memories of that evening crowded her and she tried to breath through fear and anxiety.

No, it was far easier to be a boy. Just two more years and then she would be of age.* Demelza knew enough of the law to be certain that as soon as she turned twenty one, she would be done with the last bit of the power her father had over her life. Two years... Could she hide for two more years?

*Cheel is a Cornish word for child
Bleddy is Cornish version of bloody

Maid means maiden, or a young woman.

*Demelza is thinking of the Marriage Act of 1753. The Act was meant to curb the elopements, most notably to Scotland (Gretna Green). The Act required that the marriage rites be performed by a member of clergy, in a church usually attended by either groom or a bride, and after the banns have been read. It also specified that women under 21 had to have permission of their male relative to have banns read and marriage contracts signed.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

They finally struck copper. And there is news of Verity and her man.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The time for the investor's meeting was approaching fast and Ross was so tightly wound, he felt like he might snap at any moment. As it was his irritation bled out in bits and pieces and Danny was the unfortunate recipient of most of it. He decided that since he never before shown signs of homosexuality, then all his symptoms were merely a manifestation of the extreme loneliness and physical need. His visit to Margaret proved that simply relieving the physical need might not be an option. So he sought to rectify the situation with a lot of physical activities to tire out his body and by spending as much time as possible in the company of others.

He also wanted to prove that he was not affected by Danny and stopped avoiding the boy. As the result of these decisions, Ross spent a lot of time at Nampara and Wheal Leisure. Together with Danny. Unfortunately, Ross still felt drawn to the boy and he was very close to either yelling at him or, worse, doing something entirely stupid like touching Danny's hair.

It was most timely that Elizabeth decided to come for a hasty visit, because Ross was standing close to Danny, who was writing a letter as Ross dictated. His body involuntarily moved closer and closer to the boy. So much so that Ross could sense his scent: crisp mint mixed with salt.* When Jinni announced that Mrs. Poldark was there to see him, Ross was about an inch away from sniffing the crown of Danny's head. Damnation!

However, all thoughts about his traitorous mind and body left him, when Elizabeth told him that Verity - Verity! - might have done something worthy of disapproval. He rushed to Trenwith and came upon a scene straight from the Shakespearean play. Frances was accusing Verity of scandalous behavior. Uncle Charles was threatening to disown her. Great-aunt Agatha spewed vitriol about selfishness of young people and Elizabeth... Elizabeth said nothing, only wincing at the loudest and most dramatic words.

By all accounts, Captain Blamey was not a good match for Verity. He was older and had been accused of murdering his wife. Ross could not reconcile all that he knew about Verity - her smarts and her good judgement - with this most singular connection. He recalled his own conversation with Danny about Verity. Was she doomed to be a fruitless branch or was this her chance at happiness?

When Verity pled with him to meet Andrew Blamey and judge the man for himself, Ross agreed.*

By the time he got home, he questioned his decision. Accusation of murder was a serious matter. That it was his wife that Captain Blamey was accused of killing, made Ross reconsider everything. He sat after dinner, nursing a second glass of brandy and wondered if he made a mistake. Danny was finishing the expense ledger for the household and every now and then would ask Ross about adding items to the shopping list.

"Danny, what do you know of Captain Blamey?"
The boy stopped writing and looked up, "He is a successful captain. When ashore, he lives in town at the Widow Pennell's house."

"And this is the entirety of your knowledge about the brave Captain?" Ross asked almost mockingly. Danny visibly struggled and Ross encouraged him on, "He means to court Verity..."

Danny's eyes went wide and his mouth opened slightly in surprise, "And Ms. Verity means to accept his suit?"

Ross shrugged unsure of Verity's position. "She asked me to meet Captain Blamey. Frances and Uncle Charles are dead set against him."

"It is said that Captain Blamey used to like his liquor. And that his temper is rather quick."

Danny obviously avoided the biggest rumor and Ross appreciated that Danny wasn't a gossip. "And what of his late wife?"

Danny was silent for a moment. "Some say he killed her because he is a born sinner and no man's judgement is above the God's. Yet some say, like the court, that it was an accident."

"And what do you think?"

"I don't know Captain Blamey. The men he commands, the sailors, think he is a good captain. They say he doesn't drink and is strict with others who indulge. And he is smart, if he chose Ms. Verity."

There was hint of a smile on his face that softened everything about him and Ross almost forgot how to breathe. The light of the candle cast shadows that angled off Danny's cheekbones, only to be broken by the outline of the lips. His eyes were mesmerizing, darker than ever, and Ross thought that any woman would envy the long lashes that framed those remarkable eyes.

Damnation...

Another night was spent wondering if he had missed some latent signs of a preference for the male sex. When Ross did manage to fall asleep his dreams were filled with chasing a laughing mermaid that lured him into the deep water and when he finally caught her, and cupped her face in his hands it was Danny's eyes that looked at him.

Ross woke up with a start, drenched in sticky sweat and hard. He wasn't even sure which part of his dream caused this particular situation: the mermaid or the boy. He was both ashamed of it and unable to ignore the obvious arousal. He finally chose to pour the entirety of the water pitcher at his nether regions and while it was painful, it did resolve the issue.

He started his morning as usual and was pleased to see that the boy was out. No one could account for his whereabouts, although Jinni suggested that Danny maybe out picking herbs for the stillroom. Ross only hummed in response and went to Wheal Leisure to work his body till it didn't feel anything.

The new shaft was widened and now the miners were methodically carving the bowels of the earth in search of the hidden treasure. Ross was in a state of fugue of sorts. He didn't allow himself to think of anything other than the immediate step ahead. The work was tedious and being in semi darkness made for a best mind numbing environment. Ross only saw what his eyes saw. He only thought of what to do next. He was so absorbed by the process, it took him a while to notice...

Green*... Beautiful, blessed green... Green like the new blade of grass... Green like the sea under sun... Green like smiling eyes from his dream...
"Copper... It's... COPPER!"

The celebration was spontaneous and raucous. His men hollered and yelled enough to wake up the dead. They spilled from the underground and were joined by bal maids.* Word spread fast and the villagers showed up, some with their meager supplies of drinks and food. Ross was about to send someone to Nampara, when he saw a cart approaching with Jud at the helm. He recognized the barrel - it was from his own cellar - of ale and a smaller barrel of brandy. There was even some simple food, bread, pastries, fruit. Soon everyone was drinking, laughing, and being merry.

Mr. Henshawe, pleased and already red in the face, would every and then grab Ross's shoulder and remind him that it was Ross himself and Mark Daniel, who pointed toward the new direction. The Daniel brothers were engaged in a silly arm wrestling. Jud was steadily getting drunker. Women chattered around and Jinni was asked and given plenty for advice for when the babe came. Ross saw Danny finish talking to Mrs. Martin and pick an apple from the make shift table. A constant smile on his face made the boy look a lot less serious than usual.

Ross felt magnanimous. The good news made him see everything in the best possible light. The boy was as much part of the Wheal Leisure as Ross himself. Danny was the one to locate the old journal by his father and this success was partly Danny's doing. He saw as the boy talked to Jinni, who looked him over critically and pointed at the fresh tear on the boy's sleeve. This gave Ross an idea. He approached the two young people and nodded at Jinni, who went back to her mother's side.

"Danny, tomorrow you are coming with me to town."

"But we just did the monthly shopping," boy immediately responded. "Sir."

"I am aware. You are coming to the investors' meeting with me. You know about the mine as much as I do, you might as well sit in and take notes of the meeting," Ross saw the boy's eyes dart sideways.

"B- but Zora has cast her shoe and hurt her leg. There isn't a horse for me to take."

"Suleiman is strong and you can't weigh more that three and a half stones, if that," the boy was short and thin. Danny's face went suddenly pale to the point of little dusting of freckles standing out in stark contrast. "What is it, Danny? You are not suddenly afraid of Suleiman, are you? Enough of this silliness. You are coming with me."

Demelza felt faint and almost swooned in front of Mr. Poldark. They haven't ridden together since the first year he was back. Once Mr. Poldark acquired Zora, a calm little mare, there was no need for sharing a ride. Demelza would often ride to town by herself, since Mr. Poldark realized that Danny could read and write and count. With Zora unavailable, Demelza would have to ride with Mr. Poldark, her back to his chest and she did not think she could stand it.

Her poor heart threatened to beat straight out of her chest as she imagined a long ride with Mr. Poldark's strong, able body behind her; his powerful arms around her; his scent surrounding her... She might just expire from anxiety and ... and... oh...

When she run away from her family she was just about to turn sixteen. She was afraid and hid herself at Nampara and everyday was filled with a danger of being discovered. Old Mr. Poldark and Jinni were the only one who knew her secret and she spent majority of her time in or around the house and nearby village. Demelza had no time, or opportunity, or even an interest to fancy anyone. And it suited her just fine.
But then young Mr. Poldark came back and when she saw him first, she felt like she was stabbed or struck by lightning. The immediate reaction was that of seeing a beautiful wild animal up close: she wanted to touch him and be in his presence, but some lizard part of her brain wanted to run, and hide, and never see the strikingly beautiful man again. Her fingers shook and she felt like the layer of her skin came off and she could feel the very air that separated them. It was unbearable. He only glanced at her once - she was too unimportant to garner another look or even a conversation - and proceeded to drink and wonder around the county like demon: dark, and brokenhearted, and unhappy.

The same part of her that wanted to touch him, wept every time she saw him so unhappy. She wanted him to smile and laugh, for when he rarely did so it was like the sun shone right on him and he was breathtaking.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for her, Mr. Poldark did not seem to like Danny all that much. He was giving Danny so much work and chores that Demelza had little time to dwell on her impossible feelings for the man. Every interaction reminded her of who he was and who she was. So, eventually, she learned to ignore the way her heart leapt every time she was near him and reminded herself time and again that Ross Poldark was meant for the likes of Elizabeth - born and bred gentlewoman, who never had to clean the sty or wonder if she might go hungry another day.

But she could not very well ignore it, if she were to ride with him behind her. And worse, what if being so close to her he might realize that she was not a boy? Judas... She had to come up with a plan to stop the trip to town - not likely - or to prevent him from finding her out.

The trip to town with Danny was excruciating. The boy was sat in front of Ross and occasionally the movement of the horse made them come in contact. At first, Danny held himself very rigidly and had a death grip in the front of the saddle to keep from brushing up against Ross. And Ross was grateful for that because the times that they came in contact, all Ross' suppressed awareness and fascination with Danny came to the fore. There was simply no ignoring Danny's scent (crisp mint), his pale skin on the back of the neck (like heavy cream, ivory with a hint of pink), his slender body (graceful even with the rigid posture), his soft buttocks that were right in front of him... At one point Suleiman took a jump over a low fence and Danny fell back onto Ross, who instinctively wrapped his arms around the boy and he had to grind his teeth and fight himself to release the boy once Suleiman resumed a slower pace... By the time they reached town, Ross cursed himself for even suggesting this trip and essentially ignored the boy until they reached the room, where meeting was to take place.

Ross was very tempted to just drink brandy until he could forget the entire infernal trip and to quiet his own mind. However, the meeting was important and he took cues from Danny, who sat down at the end of the table with papers in front of him and opened the inkwell. The boy was yet to look him in the eye and Ross wondered if he somehow realized what Ross was thinking throughout the trip. If he did, then Ross' humiliation would be complete.

When his investors started showing up, he was surprised to learn that some of them knew Danny. Dr. Choake actually asked if Danny was now Ross' secretary. He looked askance and the good doctor obliged, "This boy was on hand when your father was sick. Clever chap."

Danny blushed and mumbled a quiet 'thank you.'

The meeting went spectacularly. Some already knew about the success at Wheal Leisure and the meeting soon devolved into a cheerful and optimistic conversation about the prospects and pricing and auctions. At some point, Ross called meeting adjourned and they all agreed to celebrate the news with some well-deserved brandy and food. Ross shook hands, and smiled, and laughed, and soon
they all were drunk enough that the conversation deteriorated into the sort of topics unsuitable for a parlor in a decent house. Danny hung at the edges of the room and at some point asked Ross if he could leave. Ross was tempted to stay in town, but his recent fiasco with Margaret was still somewhat fresh in his mind. Alcohol may not have rendered him unable to move, but it certainly addled his mind. So he decided to leave for Nampara. With Danny. Sharing a ride...

* Demelza would have used something like rose water to add fragrance, if she were a woman. As she is cross-dressing, she uses mint as a way to create a fragrance.

* In the series, the pace of the TV-show left little time to explore this particular subplot, but in the books Captain Blamey was drunk and argued with his wife and pushed her, causing the death. It was still an accident, but there was more to Verity's forgiveness than what the show portrayed. So, I am having Ross ruminate on Verity's plight and also her solid judgment, when he agrees to meet the Captain.

* Copper ore is oxidized and appears as bright green, like patina.

* Bal maids was a name for women, who worked above ground on the ore that was brought up, cutting the copper out of the ore.

Chapter End Notes

So, I am keeping to canon that Demelza is a miner's daughter. But she had the benefit of earlier instruction from old Mr. Poldark.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

We get the backstory of how Demelza ended up being Danny and living in Nampara. WARNING: I mention past sexual assault; see that I added a corresponding tag. Also Ross is drunk. And Demelza is feisty. And we end up in angst. Sorry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Growing up Demelza was taught, like most young girls, to be wary of men and their intentions. Preserving one's virtue was paramount and marriage was the ultimate goal for every woman's life. When her mother died and she was left alone in the house full of men, she was forever occupied with work and helping her younger brothers. She doubted that her father would let her marry. He was a violent man, prone to fits of temper that saw her and her siblings beaten more often than not. But even her alcohol-addled father saw that Demelza essentially run the house and raised the boys. No, she strongly doubted that she would be allowed to leave that dreadful place.

But then, somehow quite miraculously, her father became a pious man and married equally pious woman. Demelza suddenly did not have the same place in the household as before. And that was when her new step-mother's brother started coming to visit. Every single time the vile man, who insisted that she call him Uncle, was in the same space as her, he would stand just a little too close and stare just a little too long. She felt his gaze like it was a dirty, smelly and greasy cloak. She hated it. She was afraid of it.

Her apprehension was proven right, when during one such visit the vile man cornered Demelza in the kitchen and pressed her into the wall. His hand was over her mouth and she could smell alcohol on his breath, But most horrifying was the feeling of him, hard and hot, pressing into her back.

"Ye be ansome bird, Demelza," he slurred, his hips pushing her harder into the wall. "Yer skin be fair and ye jus' like yer ma.' She be a looker too. I be watchin' ye now, and I like wha' I see."

Another hard push and Demelza finally snapped out of the shock and stupor and bit the man on his hand. He cursed and she used his distraction to elbow him hard and twisted from his hold. She grew up with several brothers; she knew a thing or two about fighting. She darted out of the kitchen and ran outside like the hounds of Hell were after her.

But her nightmare wasn't over. Her non-Uncle stayed for dinner, eyeing her with the disgusting and triumphant smirk, and she wondered what that was about until her new step-mother had spoken, "Demelza, ye be old 'nuff ta run yer own home. Me brother be lonely now and 'ee reckon ye be a good wife fer 'im. Yer Da and I reckon the same. On tha' morrow, we be talkin' ta Father Michael."

Demelza tried to run from the table only for her father to grab her by the hand. "Ye be a good gir' now, Demelza. Ye Unca is a good man and ye be better pray ta Lord tha' he be wantin' ye. Lord knows wha' he see in ye,"

"I knew ye hit tha' man, and by Jove, I want ta teach ye 'ow ta be a good gir', but ye Unca didna want no black or blue on ye hide."

She twisted out of her father's grasp and ran to the fields, seeking freedom she actually did not have.
That evening, when she out hanging clothes to dry, her not-Uncle tried to sneak a hand under her skirt and she, horrified and repulsed, swung her arm wide and decked the man in his face. She heard a crunch of something being broken and looked on in shock as he clutched his face. Blood dripped down his fingers and she watched in fascination as one escaped and landed on the ground. It was as if she heard the moment it hit the earth and all the senses came back to her. She saw his hands move down and it was clear that she broke his nose and one of his eyes was already swelling shut. But more than the blood and bruises, she saw his eyes full of violence and hate.

She run. She run from her house and did not stop until she was halfway to Bodmin. Angry and helpless tears run down her face. It was getting dark already and Demelza was shivering and hungry. She figured she'd go to a mine somewhere farther away and work as a bal maiden. She knew the work and she knew she had at least one friend. Jinni Martin from Sawle village, near Nampara estate. They knew each other a little, when they both were in town for a market day. It was far enough away from Ilogan and she could find a place to stay with the Martins. So resolved, Demelza set out to Sawle. Walking in the night did not scare her as much as the idea of being found by her family. She walked with the moon and the stars as her companions and was lulled into a peaceful state by the silver light that rendered everything so mysterious, by the dull roar of the sea and by the feeling of being alone in the whole world. It was because it was so quiet that she heard the sound of the hoofs on the road and she darted away into the bushes, afraid that she might be found by someone with nefarious plots.

The rider was a gentleman, dressed in fine clothes she only saw on market day. He slowed his horse and then stopped altogether, casting his eyes about. Finally, he said, "Come out now. I saw you from afar. Whoever you are, know that I am armed."

Demelza slowly crawled out and stood in front of an old man. His eyes widened when he took in her appearance, no doubt wondering if she was a beggar. "What are you doing here, child? At this hour?"

It turned out that the old man was of Nampara Poldarks, Joshua Poldark. Once Demelza told him that she was only going to Sawle to seek employment, he sighed and told her that Grambler had plenty of bal maidens of its own and that she was travelling this far in vain. Demelza almost cried, but managed to swallow fresh tears. Still, old Mr. Poldark noticed and actually dismounted to offer her a handkerchief.

Slowly he coaxed the entire story out of her and she could see that he did not feel particularly hopeful about her situation. "Your parents, they have the absolute authority over you. And they can agree to marriage on your behalf. Where would you go? Unless you get hired as a house maid... It would be easier if you were a boy."

That throwaway phrase by Mr. Poldark became her salvation. He agreed to take her in as a servant if she became a he. So this was how Danny was born.

Demelza was so pleased with the solution. Being a boy was such a change from before. She had plenty of experience with her brothers on how boys would act - often gross - but that wasn't the pleasing part. Being a boy meant she could do things that girls couldn't. At first, old Mr. Poldark just let her be, but Demelza never was an idle type, so she took upon herself to clean and cook a little. Prudie actually resented Danny, a boy, showing her up and that had to stop. But Demelza persisted. She nearly took over all the valet services from Jud, who was more often than not drunk and surly. She cleaned the study, being careful to place things back to where they were before.

She was curious about books and would often stare at pages, convinced that mysterious symbols held the fascinating stories. Old Mr. Poldark noticed and on the whim showed her the alphabet and
how to sound the letters out. Demelza took to it like duck to water. Her curious mind was thirsty for any knowledge and challenge. In mere three months she learned to read. First, there were old books of young Mr. Poldark. Then came the fairy tales, which Demelza still loved to re-read.

It was another three months that she learned to write. At first her letters were block writing easiest to understand, but old Mr. Poldark, buoyed by the early success, made her do daily lessons of cursive writing. She obliged him, both to please him and because she wanted to. She struggled with the all the decorative writing, until old Mr. Poldark made her read his son's letters to him, because his eyesight was getting worse and worse each passing day. Demelza, seeing old Mr. Poldark's joy, made a monumental effort to learn the difficult writing, until it no longer was difficult. Then she became the secretary for the man.

The time spent with Joshua Poldark - learning, reading and writing - made her love the man. He was so patient with her stumbles and struggles. Slowly, their interactions were less about teaching her and simply him telling of his long life and things he'd done; things he regretted doing; things he regretted not doing. He let her read anything she wanted and explained all the new words she found. He hardly had any books appropriate for a young lady, but he'd joke that Demelza was a boy now. So she read philosophy books (too abstract, too many words she did not understand), scientific publications (she had a preference for botany and zoology, enjoying illustrations and forever looking for the familiar plants and learning their proper names), and history. That was the most exciting discovery. Demelza was fascinated to learn about the land she was on and it's history. Brave kings, their queens, knights, courts, fair ladies...

But the man's favorite topic was his son, Ross Vennor Poldark. Old Mr. Poldark loved him and it showed in his every word. Said Mr. Ross Poldark was also the reason for visits from Ms. Verity Poldark, a niece to the old man, and Ms. Elizabeth Chynoweth. Demelza sussed out the situation quick enough and once again marveled at the young man's luck - so many people cared about him, loved him. Ms. Verity was a genuine and friendly person, often stopping by kitchens to check on the state of things in Nampara. She also surreptitiously asked after old Mr. Poldark: how was he, how was he eating, was he getting worse, what has Dr. Choake said. Ms. Verity was practical and Demelza found that the two of them got on very well. Ms. Verity told her of her trick of mixing the medicine into food to get the man to take it without objections. Ms. Elizabeth was beautiful and... cold. Utterly polite, but she never stopped in the kitchens and she never asked her how the old Mr. Poldark was doing. Oh she asked the man himself, but did anyone ever answered those types of questions truthfully?

When old Mr. Poldark died, Demelza was once again lost at what to do. She knew by now that she had to wait at least until she was twenty one before she could avoid being married off by her father to someone she didn't want. And she was better off now. She knew how to read and write. She knew about running household. She hoped that if necessary Ms. Verity would vouch for her. She even learned how to make certain salves and herbal mixtures that Dr. Choake prescribed to the old Mr. Poldark. She could find an employment for herself now. But in the time that she spent in Nampara she learned to love its residents and people from the village. They were her people now. And she strangely felt loyal to the Poldarks.

Of course, when young Mr. Poldark returned and she had so inconveniently fell in love with him, she was very reluctant to leave. And she would have to leave if he knew her to be a woman. A lying woman, who disobeyed her father and maimed her uncle. So she continued to be Danny, secure that Mr. Poldark would never guess who she really was.

The unexpected trip to town made her worry about it. She tied her breasts down tighter than before, which made it little hard to breathe. She was sure now that even if there was an accidental touch, Mr. Poldark would not guess anything was amiss. As an added benefit, it made her hold her back
straight. So reassured, Demelza climbed Suleiman for what was bound to be the longest ride.

Pleasantly buzzed, Ross hauled Danny on sit in front of him and they were off to Nampara. The sun was low in the sky and Ross enjoyed the moment. His prospects were so much better than yesterday and he talked to Danny excitedly about all the things that went so great and yet more great things to come. Danny responded with an obvious smile that Ross could hear in the boy's voice. Slowly he relaxed the death grip on the saddle. His posture slumped a little more and the occasional brushing against each other happened more and more often.

Ross was beyond ignoring the feelings of warmth and tinges that engulfed him again from the simple touch of this maddening boy. He ground his teeth, once again lamenting his own stupidity. He should have listened to Danny, when he told that Zora was unavailable.

Then Suleiman jumped and Danny fell backwards again with a small exclamation. Ross wrapped his arms around the boy and the feeling of acute desire that descended on him was as shocking as it was welcome. His head spun and was heady from the drinks and the smell of the softest hair - mint, salt, sunshine. Ross tried, honestly tried, to not breathe, to control himself. But Danny did not move right way to straighten himself and sighed contentedly. Feeling like it got suddenly darker and his eyes focused only on the crown of hair, Ross tightened his hold on the boy and pulled the slender body to himself. One arm went around the boy's waist, another - looped around his neck to turn the face towards Ross... Danny stiffened immediately, but Ross' hands were strong and he held Danny tighter. And then, Ross finally was near that face and his mouth descended on soft pink lips. Ross almost growled at the sensations - soft, sweet, sacrilegious - blood pumping faster and louder - so much better than any dream and oh, they were trembling and even opened a little - and he could not stop himself from slipping his tongue in and grinding his aching arousal into boy's backside, unable to resist that animal part of himself any longer... Oh, damnation and salvation...

But soon the sweetness of the lips turned to salt and he pulled back slightly from the unresponsive boy.

Danny was crying and the moment Ross let his arms fall, the boy tried to get off Suleiman. Ross instinctively reached for him, "Steady there, you'll fall-"

He didn't get to finish as Danny reared his head back and it collided painfully with Ross' face. Clutching his nose, Ross swore softly and tried to blink away the spots and to breathe through pain. Danny was so quick - and awkward - and before Ross realized what was happening, he threw himself off the horse and the motion made them both fall down. Ross landed hard, breath knocked out and the last vestiges of intoxication lifting. Danny fell somewhere nearby with a pained cry and Ross turned to look at him. Slowly lifting himself up, he moved towards Danny's who tried to squirm away, whimpers escaping trembling lips.

That made Ross freeze in shock. Oh, merciful God, what has he done? Loathing and disgust with himself filled him at the sight of the tear stained face. He tired... to... What exactly? Impose his attentions on a helpless servant? Someone in no position to fight back? A boy who had no one and nothing to his name? How was he different from a predator? When did that happen? When had Ross Poldark ever had to pressure anyone to return a kiss? And yet he had to face the fact that he became a monster who preyed on innocents. So all those who condemned him when he was young as so unruly and radical as to be considered blasphemous, were right after all. He was the worst of sinners...

He looked up and saw that Danny was watching him from a crouched position, his whole body screaming that he would run the moment Ross tried to do anything. Ross lifted his arms in
supplication, "Please, don't run. I swear I shall not touch you ever again. I would give you my word of a gentleman, but I am not sure it would be enough." It stung him that it was actually true. He has not behaved as a gentleman. He pulled out the cross he wore and held it for the boy to see, "Here. I promise on the cross that you are safe from me."

Danny looked at Ross for a very long time, judging him and Ross felt like he was being scrutinized by an avenging angel - fitting since he was the worst of sinners after all. Finally, mercifully, ever so slightly, Danny nodded and slowly got up. Or at least tried to. He hobbled a little and it was obvious his foot hurt.

"It is probably sprained," Ross said gently, holding himself still and not rushing to help the boy, afraid to spook him. "You shouldn't walk on it... Come on, get on Suleiman." Ross came to his stallion and held two hand to create a makeshift step for Danny.

"I... I am not..." The boy's voice started high and then lowered to the usual tember.

"Danny, I promised. You'll be the only rider. I'll walk along."

The boy hobbled close and put his good foot on Ross' interlaced hands. Ross easily lifted the boy and soon Danny sat atop Suleiman. Ross walked around and inspected the sprained foot. He was careful not to touch it. "It is already swelling. We should wrap it. I can... May I tend to it?" He could hardly recognize himself. His voice was soft, his gestures - unsure, and his words - polite and solicitous.

Danny nodded jerkily and Ross took off the boy's shoe. The only thing close to a bandage that he had on hand was his stock, so he took it off and used the cloth to carefully wrap the injured limb. Despite the situation, his fingers still tingled every time he touched the pale skin. Damnation... Ross was affected by the boy, but it was hopeless really... He could only pray that Danny would believe him and did not leave Nampara. Ross didn't think he could go back to being without the boy's quiet presence.

He finished the job and looked at the boy, "All done."

Danny was looking at him with eyes that were dark blue, which Ross came to understand to mean Danny was afraid and desperate, but boy's face full of longing and resignation and desolation.

Ross averted his eyes unable to bear this. He did not deserve any happiness. He ruined everything he touched.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter would be of Demelza's point of view on the whole kiss on the horse (Ross really wasn't thinking straight when he tried that, was he?) They, both of them, will angst all over Nampara. Also, Verity and Captain Blamey come to visit.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

A little angst. Ross is good with apologies. Demelza decides to fess up. But Poldarks, all of them, interfere. There is the duel in Nampara. I think I wrote something crack-ish.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Demelza sat in the saddle, for once not bothering to keep her back straight, and wondered how she ended up in this situation. She was boring her eyes into Mr. Poldark's back so shocked by everything that transpired and her mind was in some sort of chaos. It would flash back to memories of her time at Nampara and this evening and then conflicting thoughts would make her head buzz like a beehive.

Mr. Poldark was a deviant in private... That made no sense, considering all the stories about him destroying hearts and dreams of eligible gentlewomen and simple maidens alike. It contradicted the accepted theory that he was still pining for Mrs. Elizabeth Poldark. Did she imagine long and lingering looks between them? And didn't he visit loose women in town? How did they all miss his secret predilection?

He tried to kiss Danny... Demelza's heart thudded wildly when she recalled the feeling of his mouth on hers. There was the honey of brandy, a hint of smoke on his lips and she felt it burn her all the way to the pit of the stomach. She wanted that for so long - a kiss from Mr. Poldark - that she forgot herself for a moment. Oh, but the kiss was both the fire that burned, but also the fire that warmed her soul. And she hated that it was really just her self delusion.

So she fought him off. Because she wasn't Danny. She wasn't who he wanted. If she thought her heart hurt when she believed him to be so above her as to be exist in the different sphere, now her heart was destroyed because he wasn't just in a different sphere - he was in the different world from hers.

She swallowed against fresh tears as she recalled the infinite tenderness and care, with which he tended to Danny's sprained ankle. It was her ankle, but it was Danny who got the care and attention. It was hopeless. She loved Mr. Poldark, who had eyes for Danny, who wasn't a real person... And she wasn't sure if Danny could continue to exist. Being a boy wasn't safer. Perhaps it was time for it to change. She either had to leave Nampara or confess to Mr. Poldark who she really was.

She imagined telling him that and her mind quickly drew an ugly scene. Her telling him. Him in disbelief. Him in shock. Betrayal and hurt in those beautiful eyes. And he would feel betrayed: she lied for so long and now she knew his secret, because of her lies. Oh, Mr. Poldark would undoubtedly hate her! And then she would have to leave anyway, because he would tell her to leave.

But then she imagined not seeing this impossible man ever again and her heart - destroyed and useless organ - would tear afresh and she simply had to stop that line of thought.

They reached Nampara and she was no closer to a decision than before. Mr. Poldark turned to her and lifted both arms to help. Demelza wished she could avoid contact with him, because that was just pure torture, but her ankle throbbed and she reluctantly turned in the saddle. With a firm, but gentle,
hold of two hands on her waist she was placed on the ground as safely as possible.

"Are you going to run?" Mr. Poldark's deep voice startled her, vibrations running deep and causing her stomach to roil. She was silent for a long time, looking down, unsure what to say. "I see... Danny, I know I scared you. I think I scared myself. You have to believe me that I never before in my life tried to- Had to- And with an unwilling- That is to say- I intend to keep my promise. I know now that my attentions are unwelcome and I can only be ashamed of them. I do, however, think that you are indispensable at Nampara and Wheal Leisure. So, if you can forgive me, then I ask you to stay. Please."

She lifted her eyes to him. Mr. Poldark, proud to the point of being absurd, had never, ever, said please. Or that he was sorry. And he said it twice during this evening. Demelza reeled from the whiplash of all the events of the night so far and she could not give him the answer right away, "I shall think on it."

His nose and one eye were already bruising and she almost reached out to soothe the ache, but it wasn't her place. It was safer for all if they never touched again.

With a careful nod, Mr. Poldark stepped away from her and left, and she recovered the ability to breathe. She had to tell him. It could not go on like this. Tomorrow, she would tell him tomorrow.

Sleep evaded Ross for most of the night. He was stark sober and his head pounded as if he was inside a giant bell. But Ross avoided brandy. Danny's head butt didn't break his nose, but it certainly hurt a lot and it looked swollen. As did one of his eyes. He used some make-shift compress with vinegar to reduce the swelling, but the bruises were already forming. He would have a black eye tomorrow for sure. He welcomed these pain and bruises. They marked him as a sinner and were just a tiny sliver of punishment he deserved for what he tried to do. He wondered, almost morbidly, that once his nature allowed for the sin of homosexuality, then another sin of forcibly ravishing unwilling victims was sure to follow.*

He apparently desired men... Well, one particular slender adolescent. How old was Danny exactly? Sixteen, fifteen? In the years he's known him, the boy hardly grew and his voice was still too high to have fully dropped. Damnation! He lusted after a very young boy.

No, not lusted. At least, not only. He liked the boy. He liked talking to him, spending time with him, came to rely on his presence and assistance. The boy was clever in practical ways and his advice was always welcome. Danny was his father's companion before death and Ross believed that the two were quite close. Sometimes Danny forgot to be wary of him and would talk about his father, affection lighting his eyes. For that alone Ross could not let Danny go. This was his connection to the man he often ignored when he was young. When Danny said that his father loved him and would have been proud, it signified so much. It mended a wound that was in Ross' heart that he carried ever since he learned that his father died thinking him gone forever. And Danny was loyal. To his father, to Nampara, to Sawle villagers... Even Prudie and Jud...

Ross did not exaggerate when he thought he did not know how to be without him. He prayed that Danny would be here when the morning came. Otherwise his heart might be broken yet again.

Next morning, Ross was expecting a visit from Verity and Captain Blamey. It was Jud who reminded him of that. Danny was conspicuously absent during breakfast.
"Where is everyone?" Ross hoped he sounded normal.

Judd, who looked at his black eye skeptically, slurred, "Jinni be resting in tha' kitchen. Tha' bird about ta lay her egg." Jud chuckled at his own joke and Ross just closed his eyes and prayed for patience. "Jinni be near if he hafta run ta fetch midwife. Mah' Prudie be workin' tha' low glenn. An' Danny.. I reckon tha' pest off ta village." Ross looked sharply, fearful that Danny has actually left. "Zora, Sir. She be needin' tha' shoe. 'Em blacksmith be free now."

Ross nodded, relieved, and retired to his study to revise the monthly budget for Wheal Leisure, now that the mine was producing copper. They'd need to hire more workers and organize an efficient transportation of copper from the mine to the smelting works. He needed to ask Danny if he knew of any tenants nearby who would be looking to supplement their income.

Ross was thus engaged for couple of hours, until Jinni waddled in to announced that Ms. Verity and Captain Blamey were here to see him. He looked at Jinni critically, "How much longer?"

"Abou' fortnight, Sir."

"You can take it easy, Jinni."

Her eyes flashed at him with a smile, "Danny and Jimmy be doing most work now, Sir. Thank you."

Danny. Of course, everything was tied to that boy somehow.

He walked into the parlor and smiled at the eager expression on Verity's face: she was apprehensive, and yet she glowed. She was happy, because her feelings were so clearly returned. The men bowed to each other and Ross invited everyone to sit. But Verity suddenly got up, "I need to check on something with Jinni. She made this preserve and I simply must have the receipt." She turned on her heel and fled the room, abandoning the two men to their own devices.

Before Ross could devise any appropriate topic of conversation Captain Blamey began, "Captain Poldark, I am aware of the significance of this visit. Especially in light of recent developments at Trenwith."

At least the Captain Blamey was not one to dance around the issue, "Then you must also realize that this visit is at the request and for the benefit of Verity, who is very dear to me. She wanted me to meet you and judge you for myself."

Blamey's eyes narrowed as he heard the unspoken "You would have been turned away from Nampara otherwise." Ross' strategy was dual: he wanted to convey how much he cared for Verity, but also to test the limits of Blamey's temper. The snub in Ross' tone and words would rile up any man.

There was a moment of silence between the two man and Ross idly wondered when was the last time that his dueling pistols were cleaned. Then Blamey's face relaxed and his mouth twisted into an approximation of a smile, "I understand you with perfect clarity. Ms. Poldark is very dear to me too. In that, Captain Poldark, you and I are alike. Her happiness is my only concern."

"Your concern may not be enough. Her family is rightfully worried. Her situation and your situation being what they are, these worries are reasonable and just," Ross wanted to ascertain the extent and constancy of Blamey's regard. It was quite possible that Verity would be disowned and shunned by the Cornwall society as the result.

Once again Blamey's eyes narrowed and Ross could see the jowls visibly clench and relax, "I was judged innocent." Words came out almost too sharp, "As much as your family has reservations
against such a union, Ms. Poldark does not see it as an obstacle."

"You misunderstand me, Captain Blamey. Verity's family may and can judge her as too disobedient as to deny her the shelter and protection of the family name." So far Blamey held onto his temper with aplomb and this last point was Ross' attempt to determine whether it was Verity's name and connections that the good Captain sought.

The change in Blamey's face was unmistakable. He was livid and clenched his hands into fists. Ross mentally scanned the room and decided on a fire poke as a possible weapon in the face of such fury. "I appreciate that you are Ms. Poldark's relation and have her best interest at heart. I would have pursued her if she were a penniless companion of Mrs. Pennell. She is the kindest, the best woman. Her regard is something that I shall always treasure." Blamey breathed deeply as if to calm himself, "As for her settlement, I am successful* enough that I can set up a house in town and Ms. Poldark will not run out of her pin money even if she bought all the fabrics in Bodmin."

So it was that when Verity returned from her prolonged visit to the kitchens, Ross and Blamey were amiably discussing transportation of copper ore by sea. Ross was trying to figure out if the risk of a shipwreck, as well as the cost of renting a ship, were worth the shortened transportation time. Verity, who looked nearly white she was so pale with apprehension, relaxed and a tentative smile graced her face. Ross' heart clenched at the sight of his cousin so happy. At least one of Poldarks is happy, he thought morosely.

The visit was almost over, when Danny ran into the parlor, disheveled and limping badly. Ross was on his feet and near the boy before he processed the intent to do so, "What is it, Danny? And why were you running on your bad foot?" His hands fluttered uselessly because he wanted to scoop the boy in his arms and put him on a comfortable sit, and then check on the injured limb. Wanted, but couldn't.

"Trenwith... Poldarks... Mr. Charles... And... Mr. Frances... Here..." Danny wheezed and doubled over, gulping air. Ross's hand hovered over the boy's bowed head as if to rub it and he had to snatch it back.

Verity and Blamey jumped and his cousin pleaded with her beau to leave the house, "Oh, Andrew... I don't want anything to happen-" "I am not hiding like recalcitrant schoolboy, Verity. If I can face the lawless pirates, I can face your family."

Just then Frances barged into the room, nearly bowling over Danny. His face was twisted into a mean scowl and Ross wondered what had driven his normally placid cousin to such high dungeon. Uncle Charles followed at more sedate pace, but was equally in a strop.

Each of them zeroed on their targets. Uncle Charles berated Verity in harshest words and it pained Ross to see his sweet cousin wilt under the castigating words. Frances, careless and full of bravado, taunted Blamey until there was no choice but to call a duel of honor. Verity screeched and pleaded and cried, but both her beau and her brother were beyond reasoning. Uncle Charles stood by and watched event unfold and it was as if he liked what he saw, as if he wanted it to go this way. Of course, Ross thought: Frances would prove that he was a son Uncle secretly hoped for; Verity would be shamed into letting Blamey go; Blamey would not be able to shake off two major scandals.

And both men accused Ross of arranging the subterfuge. Perhaps this was the reason for Frances' unusually pig-headed attitude.

Soon the two duelist walked out to the front lawn. Frances, in a fit of stupidity recruited Jud (!) as his
second, which left Danny as a second for Captain Blamey. Ross began to object, heart uncomfortably lodged in his throat, but it would have looked very strange indeed if he showed more care for his servant than his cousin.

Duelists took their marks and turned to face each other and Danny began the count in a high and tremulous voice.

Everything became just individual disjointed pictures... Verity, who he held tightly, wailing piteously... Jud's surly and, frankly, hangover face... Uncle Charles, his face red under the wig... Frances' bright blue eyes opened wide... Blamey's focused and composed stance... And Danny... Trembling, small, fierce, eyes nearly grey... His body stumbling on the last count... The shock of red hair whipping in the breeze... Blamey's eyes making quick dart to the side, distracted... Gun shoots being fired... Verity's shriek... Bright red on Blamey's shoulder... Bright red on Frances' side...

Time resumed its normal pace and Ross jumped into action. He ran to Frances to check his wound, just as Danny did it for Blamey. Verity tried to run to one end, then another, and then simply collapsed on the ground in tears. Uncle Charles joined Ross, but he was hardly any help.

Frances' wound was a graze on his side. Aside from possible inflammation, his only major issue would be a bruised or fractured rib. He looked up to Danny and saw that he was already taking off the coat off Blamey to access the wound, "Just a scratch for my very stupid cousin. How is Captain Blamey?"

"It's a through shot, Sir. We need to stop the bleeding." Verity's cries rose in tenor and then subsided. She got up, stumbled to stand near Blamey and squeezed Danny's shoulder. Danny was composed and serious and Ross felt that he could deal with this new crisis.

"We need water, bandages, soap, alcohol... And somebody go and get a doctor!" Ross yelled, but Danny abruptly turned to him.

"Sir, a healer in the village is closer. She knows about wounds like these..."

Uncle Charles bristled, "I am not letting some illiterate healer look after my son." He turned to Jud, "You there. Send for Dr. Choake."

Before anyone could move, Elizabeth burst onto the lawn and stopped abruptly as she took in the scene, "Oh..." Her soft exclamation trailed off and Ross saw her eyes roll back as she started to swoon. Jud was the the only person nearby and he caught her with alacrity that defied his somewhat hangover state. Ross closed his eyes and wondered if the day could get any worse.

But he rallied and took over the reins. Jud was instructed to carry Elizabeth to the parlor and Jinni attended to her with a cold compress and smelling salts. Verity and Prudie were put to boil water and make bandages. Jimmy and Ross took Frances to master bedroom and then Blamey to the guest bedroom. Jud was already half-way to Dr. Choake's and Uncle Charles sat near Elizabeth and drank Ross' excellent brandy. It left Ross and Danny to tend to wounds.

When Dr. Choake showed up, both wounded were resting comfortably. Frances really only had a scratch. Not that one would believe it, if one were to see his half smug, half stupefied face. Blamey's wound was more serious and would require some recuperation, but if he could avoid inflammation, then he too would recover soon enough. Elizabeth was awake and, after a brief conversation with Dr. Choake, announced that she was in fact in the family way. She was sipping mint and camomile tea as Jinni swore it was the best for dispepsia and nerves.

Danny, who Dr. Choake addressed and treated as a learned apprentice, was sent to Mr. Finley, the
"You might as well open a hospital here, Mr. Poldark," Dr. Choake laughed as he took in the sheer number of patients. "Two men wounded; two women in the family way; you with a black eye and Young Danny hobbling with a sprain. I wonder what went on here this afternoon..."

After he left with instructions to keep wounded patients immobile for a night to prevent the inflammation, Ross finally collapsed on the chair in the parlor, "Well, Poldarks continue to be the best entertainment to be found in Cornwall," his tone was half amused, half sarcastic.

His uncle looked up at his sharply, "You find this amusing, Nephew? Of course, you live for scandal, whereas--"

"Whereas you needled Frances into a such a fit he barged in here with murder on his mind. You could have lost him today, Uncle. All to prove to yourself that he is the son you always wanted? Elizabeth would have been a widow and your future grandchild - an orphan. For all the times you chastised me for being rash and proud, look at what you have fostered."

"It was necessary. Our honor, the scandal--"

"Is only made worse by an even bigger scandal. Dr. Choake doesn't even have to embellish. He only has to tell the facts: two gunshot wounds, one pregnant gentleman's wife."

"No!"

"Oh, yes. Imagine what the delightful Tigue ladies could concoct with just these details. Add to it that one duelist is the Naval officer previously accused of murder."

"You exaggerate."

"Why do you think Danny offered to call for a village healer? Because people of the village are loyal to me," Ross was beyond sugar-coating anything.

Uncle Charles didn't reply and sat in deep silence and Ross let him ruminate. Soon, they heard off-kilter steps and Danny could be seen with a bag in his hands.

"Come here," his uncle commanded and Danny stepped into the room. "What have you heard about this in town?"

Danny shot a quick look at Ross, who nodded, "That there was a duel in Nampara. That Captain Blamey killed Mr. Frances. That Captain Poldark then in turn killed Captain Blamey, because Mr. Verity is with child--"

"What?!" both Poldark men spoke in near unison.

Danny went on as if he wasn't interrupted and stared unflinchingly at Uncle Charles with stormy grey eyes, "They say all Podarks are too scandalous by a half and it is entirely possible that Captain Poldark, who is of course a hero for defending family honor, might be hung for murder of the officer."

Ross slumped in the chair in dismay. He got the brunt of gossip even when he didn't do anything! And Verity- She wouldn't be able to show her face anywhere without jeers. Uncle Charles sat there stupefied and his face went pale, which gave him an interesting shade of grey-puce. Did not expect that, you old crocker!
"I- Oh, my- Verity- And Frances- I-" even now, when Ross was looking at the possible death sentence, his Uncle was mostly concerned with his own offspring.

"Danny, how far have the rumors spread?" Ross finally asked.

"Just a few footmen and apprentices of both Dr. Choake and Mr. Finley." Ross threw his glass at the wall, irritated and frustrated. "Too many," he lamented.

Then he felt a lightest touch on his shoulder and he recognized who it was just by sensation of tingles. "Jinni would say that you can't stop people form talking. So, I told them it was all a load of sh-" Danny swallowed the rest of the word. "I told them it was a hunting accident and that the only person expecting here is Jinni."

Uncle Charles looked up at Danny, as did Ross, "Think it would be enough?"

"Jimmy, and the Martin brothers, and other miners are in every tavern from here to Bodmin right now, telling the tallest of tales. Of course, if everyone saw that Mr. Frances and Captain Blamey are alive. Maybe even if they were seen together..."

"Sunday service in Bodmin!" Uncle Charles exclaimed. "We show up en force. We can even trot out Aunt Agatha."

"And we better start saying aloud that Verity and Captain Blamey are courting," at Uncle's sharp look, Ross continued. "Unless you want people to start counting months and check waistlines."

And so it was agreed between Trenwith and Nampara that come next Sunday service, all would be in Bodmin. His Uncle left and, when Danny returned from applying poultice on both patients, Ross told him quietly, "Thank you. I don't deserve your kindness or loyalty, but nevertheless you bestow it willingly. I thank you."

Danny looked at him with that familiar expression of resignation and desolation, "You and your father have been kind to me, to Jimmy, to everyone here..." Then, with a mischievous smile he added, "And you generously offered to pay for everyone's ale tonight."

Chapter End Notes

*It's late 1700s, homosexuality was considered a major sin.
*Naval captains at that time could capture enemy and pirate ships and all that they captured was considered their boon. So, Blamey was successful, meaning he probably had money.
*Duels were prohibited, but if there were fatalities, there was prosecution. But even if courts convicted a gentleman of murder via duel, they were often pardoned by the monarch. Honor was paramount to a gentleman. The same goes for duels of the officers.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Confession time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frances left Nampara in two days' time, after Dr. Choake inspected the wound, but not before Ross and him had a serious conversation. It actually was Frances who started it.

"I wondered for a long time how you could go on like this, without a care for other people's opinions, for the norms and decorum," he said to Ross.

"I do care. But Frances, a man has to decide whose opinions matter to him; whether the norms he follows are meaningful; and whether decorum serves any purpose. I don't care if Mrs. Tigue thinks me a man of good manners. I do, however, care if you think me a good man."

"Do you think me a good man still? After all, I caused such trouble and scandal..."

"Your heart was in the right place: you were concerned with Verity's wellbeing. I am too, you know. It was the purpose of the meeting you came upon. I was trying to judge whether Captain Blamey is good for her."

"You went against us," Frances was strangely upset.

"I went with Verity's wishes. She is my cousin, just as you are."

Frances nodded and they were quiet again. Then his cousin laughed, "It is strange to be the scandalous Poldark for once. It used to be that you got all the criticism, but that in itself held attention and fascination of the crowd. I used to want that."

Ross was surprised to hear that. He knew that Frances was less sure of himself, but he had no idea that Frances was envious of Ross' dubious notoriety for rule-breaking, "And now that you have crossed that line..."

"Being at the center leaves a man alone. It's not the easiest place to be."

"You will need to learn to be in center, Frances. When time comes and you take over Trenwith and Grambler, you will become one of the most influential people in the county."

Frances lapsed into a silence and Ross left him be.

His time was split between tending to his unexpected patients and entertaining equally unexpected guests. The conflicting rumors spread wildly and Nampara saw a steady stream of visitors. All his neighbors came during visiting hours to see for themselves what sort scandal happened there. Both Verity and Elizabeth came to check on their respective men and the exchanges between the local gossips and the two Poldark women were a master class of petty and vindictive words camouflaged as polite conversation.
Ross saw the last visitor out and sighed deeply. He'd rather be in the mine, breaking his back, than deal with another visit like this. At least the visiting hours were over. Stepping back into the house he saw Verity walking upstairs with fresh poultice, clearly taking over from Danny. He hasn't seen the boy since morning. He wanted to check on the boy: the bulk of wound tending fell on him, since Ross and the ladies were busy with guests.

He found Danny in the kitchen, kneading the dough. The movements of his hands were sure and measured; clearly he'd done this before. It was soothing and Ross stood for a while just watching. It was when Danny moved towards the oven that Ross made himself known. Of course he startled the boy and Danny lurched awkwardly and almost fell. Ross caught him and the momentum brought them into close embrace. He froze in place, afraid to move and make Danny fear him again.

Danny did not move and Ross slowly untangled himself, making sure that the boy did not lose balance again. The interaction made him agitated and he covered it with a brusque question, "Why are you on your feet again? It must hurt to stand on that foot. You already spent the morning with the wounded."

"Ms. Verity helped with Captain Blamey," Danny said quickly and then looked away.

"Ah... Of course," the situation was very strained and he was not sure what to talk about. Well, it was not true. He wanted to check on Danny's foot, to see if he was all right after yesterday's events, to thank him again for his assistance... "And Mrs. Poldark? Did she help with Frances?"

"I think Mrs. Poldark's disposition is very sensitive right now. Certain... sights upset her," Danny said very carefully, but his eyes were light green. Oh, he was in good humor... He knew Elizabeth was quite put out by Frances...

"Indeed?" Ross asked with a smile to see an answering one on Danny's face.

"Indeed."

They stared at each other, smiling stupidly and if it was anyone else, Ross would have rolled his eyes. Instead he drank in the sight of the lovely smile.

Slowly Danny's smile faded and his eyes turned dark-blue again. Oh... Ross' stomach clenched in apprehension.

"Sir, I- I need to talk to you. I wanted to- Yesterday- But with all the happenings- And bullets and wounds- Oh, I am not sure if it's a right time, but if I don't do it now, I'll never find a courage-"

Danny stopped, and visibly gulped for air, and twisted the hem of the shirt in his hands.

Ross was torn by two competing emotions. He wanted to reassure Danny that everything would be fine no matter what Danny had to say and he also did not want to hear anything that would change the fragile status-quo. What if Danny wanted to leave Nampara? No, Ross would not interfere. He owed this boy at least that.

"Danny, please, be assured that whatever you have to tell me would not change my opinion. You are part of Nampara and you are important," the unspoken 'to me' lingered in the air and Danny's eyes saddened again.

"Sir, when your father took me in- it was because I ran from my own family," Danny said in a rush and Ross' imagination took off with pictures of abject poverty that drove the boy out. "My own father- He is - was - a drinker and he has a temper," another hard swallow and Ross' hands clenched in fists. Poor brave Danny. And yet it was such an everyday occurrence, the beatings and harsh
discipline.

"He remarried. And- oh, I am saying the wrong thing. Or not saying this right-" another big gulp and then. "Sir, my name is not Danny. My name is Demelza Carne and I ran away because I didn't want to marry my step-uncle."

If Ross was shot at that very moment, it would have been a lesser shock to him.

He stared. And stared. And stared some more.

Dan- No, Demelza... was looking at him concerned and self-consciously adjusted his, no, her clothes. HER clothes... Oh Lord in Heaven!

He stared still, seeing Dan- Demelza for the first time.

Slight built that always looked too slight for an adolescent boy, but now it made sense... Voice that never fully dropped... Soft skin... Gentle and nimble fingers... And the hair...

The hair! Strawberry and gold...

"Mermaid... You are real..." Ross took a large step towards Demelza and she took a step back, shooting him wary looks.

"I- wha-?"

Now that she was not trying to make it sound low, her voice was beautiful. Clear and musical and he swore he heard it before only he thought it was Jinni singing...

"I bet your singing is just as alluring as any mermaid's... I though I was going insane... You drove me insane... Botticelli's Venus here, in the Cornwall Sea..."

Demelza's eyes went wide and she quickly looked around and took another step back, now eyeing him with fearful suspicion, "I- What now? Sir?"

Ross followed her retreat, enormous smile splitting his face in two, as he reveled in this knowledge: Danny was the elusive mermaid, who was actually Demelza. What a beautiful name... And she was real. And was a woman. Oh, sweet Lord...

Demelza's back hit the wall and Ross loomed over her (her!) barely an inch between them. If Ross was poetically inclined, which he found he was when it came to his mermaid, would say that he could feel and almost see the tendrils of heat and sensation arc between them and his entire body was so sensitized he was afraid he might burst in flames.

"You drove me insane, mermaid. I saw you once, bathing in the morning and I could not get you out of my head for weeks. I searched for you everywhere. I thought I imagined you, the little sea goddess that disappeared back to her home," he was speaking low and quietly, head bending closer towards Demelza and she had to tilt her head back (that graceful neck, the span of that cream skin, damnation) to keep an eye contact with him. He saw her eyes, blue-green turning darker as the pupils were blown back. "You know that I now learned that your eyes can be at least three different colors. Grey when you are mad, green when you are happy, dark blue when you are sad or desperate..." he lowered his head even more and she had to turn her's to the side and his next words were whispered into that gorgeous skin, "... but right now they are nearly black."

She shuddered delicately and sighed and he really was too far gone to think straight because his hand rose to finally touch that hair - so soft - and bring her mouth to his-
Demelza was set to leave Nampara. She spent the night after the trip to Bodmin going over her meager possessions and her prospects in town. She decided that it was still easier to pass as a boy and apply for apprenticeship in one of the shops in town. She still was going to tell Mr. Poldark and, expecting to be shown the door, she prayed that he would keep her secret. She simply did not see how it else it would get resolved. Mr. Poldark would be embarrassed once he knew she was a woman. Embarrassed and ashamed and betrayed... Oh, she wished she could spare him this heartache, but there was nothing for it. She owed him the truth and she would do it.

Only the next morning brought such a deluge of events that Demelza was surprised to be alive. She expected some tension between Mr. Poldark and Captain Blamey: both men were known for their temper. She did not expect Mr. Frances and Mr. Charles to show up too. When she saw them approach, she abandoned Zora and hobbled as fast as she could to Nampara to warn everyone. Not that it helped much. She would never understand gentle folks and their rules about duels. Might as well go into fist fights, as far as she was concerned. But somehow she ended up a second to Captain Blamey. Her! She knew nothing about pistols!

She was terrified. She saw Mr. Frances angry face and slightly shaking hands and she was terrified. Captain Blamey was calmer and she did not envy Ms. Verity at that moment. Her brother and her beloved facing each other off, ready to kill. She saw Mr. Frances' shaky hand and at the last count took a step aside. Of course, she stumbled and then the shots were fired and she heard the grunt of pain from Captain Blamey.

It was largely a blur after that. Wounds, blood, tears, swooning ladies and Ross Poldark. He was in the middle of the chaos, standing tall and resolute. He commanded everyone and suddenly it wasn't a chaos anymore. People sprang into action at his command and Nampara stopped being a battlefield and became a makeshift hospital. Dr. Choake sent her to the apothecary and she had to take Suleiman. She rode as fast she could and when she got there, she was surprised that everyone was watching her. At first she was afraid that somehow people knew she was a girl in disguise, but it became clear that people had much bigger things to gossip about.

They thought Ms. Verity was with child! And that Mr. Frances was dead, killed by Captain Blamey! Worse, people thought Mr. Poldark killed Captain Blamey! And was now wanted for murder!

"Tha' a load of bleddy shite, tha' wha' it is!" Demelza was so incensed (and terrified for Mr. Poldark) that she slipped into her old way of speaking.

"Oh right! You work there, no?" Mr. Finley's apprentice asked her and she only nodded. "So what happened?"

She would never know how and where this lie came from, but it slipped from her lips as easy as a song. She told her audience, that grew significantly since she came into apothecary, the story about ill-fated hunt, poor aims, blasted rabbit holes, and Jinni Carter, who soon would welcome a child.

She wasn't sure if it worked. She felt like every single person she came across in town was looking at her and when she saw soldiers marching someone to jail, she nearly fell of the horse because she imagined they'd be coming to Nampara soon to take Mr. Poldark with them. So she told the Daniels brothers and Zacky Martin about the rumors and her cover-up. They understood her perfectly. When she got home, she calmed down a little and was wary that her lies would get her in trouble. Poldarks didn't need any more stories made up about them.

But then Mr. Poldark was so distraught and she couldn't stop herself. She touched his shoulder and it was like she thought when she saw him first. He was a wild animal, caged and powerful, but also
gentle with her and she got tingles just from a simple touch.

Now she thought she might have to leave even if he didn't kick her out. She was too involved, cared too much. If she stayed, and knowing about his secret preferences, she would only hurt more in the end.

The next day was no better. There were patients to take care of and guests to provide for. Jinni was constantly on her feet, so when the visiting hours were over, Demelza convinced her to take a rest. She was in the kitchen, preparing the dough of the evening meal and wondering if this was the last time she'd see this room. The quiet task let her mind roam and she drifted through memories made in this room and at Nampara.

Of course, that was when Mr. Poldark decided to make himself known and she almost fell. When they fell into a teasing exchange and just smiled at each other, Demelza realized with a start just how easy it was for her to forget herself and let this love lead her. She had to tell him.

And she did.

And prepared for the worst.

What she didn't expect was Mr. Poldark's apparent delusions. He talked of mermaids and sea goddesses and called her some name she hasn't heard before. And then he was so close to her she could feel the warmth of his big body, his voice was so low and he was saying such strange things. About the mermaid that drove him insane... And then about the color of her eyes. It was hypnotic and she couldn't resist the effect he and his presence and his voice had on her...

At the first touch of his large hand her thoughts stopped just like her breathing did and she felt the pressure of his hand to bring her closer to him. Her eyes darted to him, but he was everywhere and she saw bits and pieces... Broad expanse of the chest covered in vest and coat... Stock that covered his neck... Warm skin of the jaw covered with a hint of hair growth... Lips...

Her eyes slid closed when those lips were on her.

The first touch was so soft and gentle, it felt like butterflies, not human lips, touched her. It made her lips tingle and she forgot that it was wrong and she wanted more. The hand on her head tilted her once again and it was too uncomfortable to have it bent so far. So she lifted herself on one good foot, her hand landing on his chest as she rose a little to even out the height difference. He tasted like tea and biscuits that were served to guests. She felt his chest vibrate (and then heard the rumble of a groan) and she dug her fingers into his clothes and felt the warmth of him underneath.

He pulled back and she followed him, disoriented and hungry for more.

"Mermaid..." he whispered to her in low rumbling voice and she felt it tingle down her spine.

He kissed her again, keeping more control this time, wrapping his hands around her and holding her up and she yielded a little, her lips opening when she gasped and he swallowed the sound and pressed for more, learning the shape and taste of her mouth.

Judas...
Freaking out here, because I am afraid the reveal was disappointing. They will talk properly in the next chapter.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

They stop kissing long enough for Ross to remember the reason for Demelza's hiding.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all the kind words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She did not know how long it lasted. Felt like ages, but then her lungs screamed for air and she pulled back reluctantly from those lips. Head falling back with a thud against the wall, she welcomed the pain of contact because it brought some clarity to her thoughts.

She kissed Mr. Poldark... Or he kissed her and she responded... Judas...

She felt his sinful lips on her neck kissing and nibbling, the slight scratch of stubble on her skin making her lose the already tenuous hold on reality...

"Nnnnooo..." she moaned and let her head drop to the side, giving him more access.

"You-" kiss "want-" nibble "me-" lick "to-" scratch "stop-" kiss "Demelza?" exhale into the skin.

Oh, but her name sounded like the most decadent and beautiful word, luxurious and melodious. Or maybe it was just this voice...

"Mr. Poldark-" shudder "I-" breathy moan "am-" mouth dropping open in silent exhale "not-" deep inhale "who you want..."

She managed to put some space between them, or rather he pulled back a little, keeping their torso still touching, and looked at her in askance, "What?!"

"Uhhmm..." she said feebly. "I am not Danny... Or a boy-" She hid her eyes because it was so strange to be so close to him now that the haze lifted.

But she had to look up, because she felt light vibrations travel through her torso. He was laughing! Actually laughing! She huffed and tried to get away, but he tightened his hold on her and spoke slowly, mirth colouring his voice, "And I am so glad that you aren't. Truly, I began questioning everything about myself. You never made sense to me. Something about you didn't make sense. It was the reason I was so short with you in the beginning. And then you were so helpful, smart, clever, funny. I didn't realize I came to rely on you so much... And then I touched your hair and it was like my own body was at war with me. I was so attracted to you. But I should not have been. At least until that point I never knew myself to prefer men."

His one hand went to her hair and he ran gentle fingers through short strands, "It is so beautiful. Soft, like silk. It flows like water. The ends curl just a little and the colour... It is the most vibrant color I've
seen. Gold, strawberry, bronze... It matches your skin. I sat behind you on that blasted trip to Bodmin and though that I never saw skin so perfect. The back of your neck was like cream with a hint of pink and I wanted to taste it so much..." his mouth drifted to the side her neck - and she let him because she really was powerless against this man when he was like this. "And now that I have, I declare that it taste as perfect as it looks."

She was helpless when he kissed her and moved to follow his lead, but her sprained ankle that she forgot about, protested when she put weight on it. She whimpered in pain and he looked at her in concern.

"It's my foot."

He carefully prodded the ankle, turning it this way and that, looking at her every time he did so to judge her reaction. One such twist elicited a wince and a hiss from her and his face crumpled in sympathetic misery. And then he lifted her foot and kissed the spot he just prodded. She forgot how to breathe, her entire being now centered around her foot.

"Sir..." she whispered in a strangled voice. "Please, stop. It's not proper."

"Call me by my name," he whispered heatedly against her skin.

"M-mr. P-poldark," she managed.

"Demelza..." was dragged across the particular sensitive spot on the inside of the ankle. It was her foot! How was it so sensitive right now?

"Rooooooss..." she hardly recognized her own voice. Low, raspy and begging.

He kissed around her ankle and his lips went higher and she finally caught her wits.

"Mr. Poldark! It's... unseemly!" When he didn't stop she finally had enough strength to pull her foot out of his hands. "I am but a mere servant, Sir. Even if I am a woman."

He seemingly caught on that she was serious. He looked at her for a long time, really looked, and she felt very acutely her modest clothes, worn shoes and wild hair. A lady she was not.

"Demelza, I don't give one whit about what you are. I apparently didn't even care when you were a boy. It's you I care about. These past few years... They have been hard. I was alone and lonely. I reveled in my own disappointed feelings and only my grudging loyalty to you, people of Nampara and Sawle, made me try hard. I rose out of that abyss of being mad and lonely because of you. When I realized that I cared about my servant boy, I fought it at first. But there was no denying just how attracted I was. And then, after the trip to Bodmin, I thought I'd lost you, or Danny, and I thought it might break my heart... Demelza, you made my life so much lighter, I wouldn't lose it just because of who your parents are."

Oh, but to believe his words. It wasn't the 'I love you' she wanted, but it was still more than she ever hoped to hear..

But then his last words penetrated her mind. Parents. Her parents.

"Sir-" at his raised brow she corrected. "R-ross, that is part of the problem. You should care who my parents are." He looked at her with challenge and familiar mulish expression and she nearly rolled
her eyes. Sometimes this man was too stubborn and oblivious. "My father and his wife and her brother..."

She saw the realization dawn on him as his face first turned concerned and then stubbornly defiant again, "Demelza, you will not be marrying anyone, if you do not want to. I shall protect you."

"But by law my parents have rights over me until I am one and twenty," she nearly sobbed, the old fear and ache flaring up.

"So this is why you mentioned Verity's age. Did you find out about it specifically? Did my father help you?" he finally sat next to her on the bench and she was relieved. It would have looked very strange if anyone saw them like that: her on the bench with bare foot and him kneeling in front. More strange perhaps, that she was thought to be a boy.

"Yes, your father and I read the Marriage Act. My parents can arrange for banns and sign a marriage contract until I am one and twenty. I was waiting it out..."

"And how much longer do we have to wait until you are safe from them?" Her heart lurched hard at the little word 'we.' There was no going back now: she was too far gone.

"I am full nineteen years old, sir," she was about to correct herself, but he was silent. She looked up to see his expression grow dark. It was a fearsome sight. His brows knitted close a deep groove forming in between; his bright eyes were darkest they've been and his gaze was heavy; his lips thinned into a grim line. Oh, it was too much trouble for him: to hide her for another two years.

"How old were you when they tried to marry you off?" Demelza almost got up to stand at attention at his hard and angry voice.

"'Tis been more than three years since, sir."

"Damnation!" he jumped from the bench and started pacing, foul curse words slipping form his mouth in harsh bursts. 'Fifteen!' 'A child!' 'Lecherous deviant!' His hands clenched in fists and he was quite agitated and Demelza worried that he might lay waste to the kitchen with his bare hands.

Light footsteps almost were drowned by Mr. Poldark's stomping and cursing and then Ms. Verity stepped in, taking in the situation.

"Ross, what is the meaning of this? I am sure whatever Danny did, it does not warrant such a display," she stepped fully in and saw Demelza sitting there with her swollen and bruised foot in full view. "Oh Danny, we all were quite thoughtless, weren't we? How are you doing?" she said coming closer and looking over Demelza and her foot.

"I am fine, Ms. Verity," Demelza mumbled. "Tis only a sprain. I'll be right as rain soon enough."

"I- I know that Andrew is a very good shot. I do not think he would have aimed to kill Frances, but that shot was quite bad. Andrew was distracted. And I know about the rumors and the cover-up you came up with," Ms. Verity said, shooting Mr. Poldark a reproachful look. Demelza began protesting, but Ms. Verity plowed on, "I am very grateful for everything you have done, Danny."

"I hardly-"

"I- I am sure you will be much faster, if you were not asked to do all the silly tasks my cousin comes up with," Ms. Verity said, shooting Mr. Poldark a reproachful look. Demelza began protesting, but Ms. Verity plowed on, "I am very grateful for everything you have done, Danny."

"I hardly-"

"I- I know that Andrew is a very good shot. I do not think he would have aimed to kill Frances, but that shot was quite bad. Andrew was distracted. And I know about the rumors and the cover-up you came up with. It was a very clever and timely ploy by you, my dear. So, once again, I must thank you. And if Ross bothers you too much, you can always find place at Trenwith. And if I ever am settled on my own, then I would hire you too." The last bit was delivered with a shy smile and
Demelza smiled in response.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't try to steal my servants away from me. Especially such valuable ones. And I was not berating Danny, if you must know. In fact, I was concerned with his foot. He should be resting."

Mr. Poldark finished speaking and stepped close to her. In one move, he bent and swept her in his arms for the second time in less than half hour, and walked to Demelza's little room behind the kitchen. Ms. Verity followed them with Demelza's shoe and discarded bandage in hands and Demelza could not believe this turn of events. Two Poldarks were serving her... It was too much...

Mr. Poldark placed her on the bed and quickly reapplied the bandage, "Rest."

"But supper-"

"Neither I, not our patients would go hungry with all the food already cooked. And I am sure Captain Blamey would rather Verity attended to his wound."

"Ross!" came his cousin's indignant reply, tempered with a smile.

"I shall check on you later," Mr. Poldark's eyes lingered on her and she almost shivered at the look in them. She didn't think he'd let go of her so easily now.

Verity walked with him slowly and kept shooting him sidelong glances.

"Out with it Verity. I am not a mind reader, you know," Ross said to her and she shot him an exasperated look.

"I am just still in awe and disbelief over all that transpired. Everything is so changed, so altered. I, Frances, father, you... Even Danny, who is worth his weight in gold."

"I agree. On all scores. Everything is changed. For the better, I hope."

"Is it? There are so many rumors now..." Verity looked troubled and Ross remembered that this was his cousin, the sweetest person this side of Tamar river. He smiled remembering Danny - Demelza - describing Verity in such glowing terms.

"Nothing we Poldarks can't shrug off. People like to gossip, Verity, but one has to be close to the source of gossip to be the first to know. I guaranty you that all our neighbors and acquaintances would seek you out. They can't shun you and deny themselves the front row view of anything that might transpire."

"You speak of it so lightly. Oh, I can't imagine people's looks and whispers," she shuddered.

"Cheer up, Verity. I am sure some new and exciting rumor would eclipse this event. Coming Sunday would be the worst of it and you will not be alone. We all shall be there. And then people will see you with Captain Blamey and it all will be water under the bridge. Next, your wedding would be the event of the year. Throw a party big enough and no one would care how it came about."

"Father is still fuming for being thwarted, but he understands the scandal would be unshakable otherwise. Even if I am not with child, Elizabeth is." She was quiet for a moment and then, "Some people tried to imply that it was you and Frances, who dueled," Verity whispered quietly.
"What?!" Ross' voice rose dangerously and only Verity's shushing made him lower it to relatively normal levels. "What? How? Why"

"Because of Elizabeth. Your history, you see," Verity hid her eyes as if afraid to upset him, or rather upset his heart.

"Verity, I promise that I am not pining hopelessly. No matter how romantic ladies might think it, I have managed to move past my youthful hopes. I have been through war, loss, hard work, disappointment and some success. It has changed me. What I wanted when I was younger, is not what I want now."

Verity looked at him for a long time her dark eyes intent and penetrating. Whatever she saw in his face, satisfied her, because she let her eyes warm over and smiled at him, "I can see that. You are different now. Not as weighed down. At first, I thought that you applied yourself here and at the mine to prove something. Or to forget. But, I see it: you are changed, Ross. Have you, perhaps, found someone?"

"Ahh... You are very romantic, for all that you are the unofficial mistress of Trenwith." It was a good distraction as Verity's eyes went eyed in surprise, "Everyone knows it. Or so the servants say."

"Oh dear. I hope those words don't reach Elizabeth. She is quite capable, you know."

"But you have grown up there. You know all the people. And you know just how your father, your aunt and your brother like their teas and biscuits." Verity did not look reassured and Ross added with a small smile, "You had a lot of time to practice and soon you will be a mistress of your own house. Then it would be Elizabeth's turn to learn everyone's preferences. She'll know the names of people in Trenwith and you will be hiring your own household staff."

Verity blushed and her smile was so bright that even her modest features were illuminated to make her very beautiful indeed.

Later, when everyone was settled for the night and Verity and Elizabeth have left, Ross walked to Demelza's room anticipation making him giddy. He still marveled at this turn of events. Certainly, life right now had a few complications. The recent scandal and rumors, Wheal Leisure that just started producing copper, his investors with their mercurial attitudes, and Demelza's own circumstances, all of it seemed insurmountable. But Ross was optimistic, nay, hopeful about his future for once. The latest scandal did not involved him alone, and Demelza quick thinking may turn it into just a bit of entertaining story. They struck copper and investors were euphoric right now. They had a solution for Verity's situation. And Demelza... Well, he wasn't going to give her up just because her paterfamilias desired to marry her off. He'd marry her himself if need be.

Ross actually stopped in his tracks. The thought was so radical and yet not shocking at all. He admitted to himself and to her already that he not only was attracted, but also held great affection for her. He regarded her as a friend and a confidant. She shared his burdens reducing their impact and made his triumphs more meaningful. She had firmly inserted herself in his life, in practically every aspect of it. She may be of the lower class by birth, but she was an intelligent and curious person, eager to learn and possessing of the practical mind that was strategic in the way that the most intellectuals sometimes were not.

And there was the fact that his body sang when in her presence.

He could marry her. He should. It would be what his heart desired.

He just had to convince her: that practical mind of hers would throw up many an objection.
He squared his shoulders and went in with more purpose.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Ross proposes and there is the Sunday service in Bodmin.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Proposal... And a conversation. Without kissing. Which helps a little.

Chapter Notes

Also, I know I said there would be the general Poldark family plot development, but these two ended up talking a lot.

Demelza was at first put out that she had been ordered to rest - her active nature demanded some occupation - but found that, once she actually sat down, her foot was quite sore. It appeared that all the events of the afternoon eclipsed or made her forget about the sprain. She picked her sewing basket and began mending her clothes. The work was familiar and did not require much concentration. Like earlier in the kitchen, her thoughts flitted from topic to topic as she tried to think of everything at once. The turmoil may have been familiar, but the theme and the tenor of her thoughts changed.

She told Mr. Polda-Ross... Judas, she got to call him by his Christian name. He asked her to. She no longer thought of leaving Nampara. He was not shocked or felt betrayed by the deception. Oh, he was relieved! He kissed her! He liked her! Well, he liked Danny and he apparently liked her when he thought she was a mermaid... Oh, sweet Heaven, he saw her in the nude! And now that she as one and the same, he was quite taken with her. Her lips tingled again in memory of the kisses they shared and she could feel the blush rising in her cheeks...

Of course, the revelation and his reaction were just part of the problem. She still had to worry about being found out and brought home. She shuddered in revulsion thinking of her not-Uncle and his unsettling, possessive, stare.

Mr. Pol-Ross was so passionate about her not marrying anyone she didn't want to, but Demelza wondered if just desire to protect her would help. She could plead her case and stay as Danny in Nampara... No, it would be dangerous. It was obvious that he... desired her. She blushed so hot, she had to bring hands to her cheeks. And she was powerless against the man. She desired him too. So much. If she stayed, then they would inevitably keep being drawn to each other. And do things like this afternoon. And more. They'd end up laying with each other, like man and woman. Demelza wasn't clueless about things men and women did in private. She grew up around animals and her older brothers were quite chatty about things, forgetting that she could hear and understand everything. She also knew where such things led. Pretending to be a young man, hiding her identity, and being with child was not something she wanted. Even if she wasn't assuming Danny's identity, she did not want to be unmarried and with child.

She went in circles thinking about all of it and slipping every now and then to remember the kisses and embraces from earlier on. She did not see an easy resolution to this.

She was done with most of her sewing work when Mr. Pol-Ross knocked on the door. She already
had Prudie stop by and her heart did not jump outright, having expended itself the first time around. Still, when he stepped in, his tall frame filling the space and his energy making her very being react, she was struck speechless again. How was he able to do that? He was beautiful no doubt, but there were other men who were easy on the eye. However, none of them made her hands shake and her skin prickle like this.

He was staring at her, his unfathomable eyes growing darker as he took in her form. She felt like she was naked under his gaze and she realized with some sort of numb fascination that he actually, quite possibly, was seeing her naked right now. He saw her like that already. She was so distracted by his stare and the heat of it that she pricked her hand with the needle. The little shock of pain was welcome and she finally was able to drag her eyes away from him and look down at her hand.

"You have to stop hurting yourself like that, Demelza," he said lowly as he came close and sat down on the bed with her. Her hand was pulled into his and he inspected the tiny prick, which already had a bead of blood gather there. He slowly licked it off and looked at her. She was entranced yet again. "My heart tears in two when I see you hurt. Please, for my sake, be careful."

She would have promised him everything and anything at this moment, "I- I shall try... Ross," his name came out in a hesitant whisper and his eyes softened from their intent and heavy look at the sound of it. Yet he was not smiling.

"Demelza..." he got up and walked to the farther corner of the room from her. It was such a small room that he could only make four-five steps before he turned. "I- I have thought of your situation. Of our situation. I think I have a perfect solution," he finally announced and she could tell he thought it was the best decision ever. For her part, she had no earthly idea as to what that might be.

"I- I thought that I have to wait it out."

"That's too long a wait. You can't fool everyone for too long. Already I suspected that your adolescence lasted too much. There might be others, equally eagle-eyed."

"People don't usually pay me that much attention. What's another slightly dirty and poor child? And I can be fairly invisible to others."

"You are selling yourself short. Most of my family know you now, if they haven't before. They may not have paid too much attention before, but they will start wondering. You've been in my father's and my employ for a while and yet you have not grown one bit. Dr. Choake, the apothecary, investors, Mr. Henshawe, Jinni and other servants..." he went on painting a bleak picture for her. She winced involuntarily at the mention of Jinni's name. He saw. "She knows, doesn't she?"

"Yes. We've been friends before. I had first thought to work at Grambler and live with the Martins-"

"You?! Work in the mine?!" his voice was both incredulous and hard again. "You were fifteen! And as skinny as you are now, I imagine you were even smaller before. It's a hard work to be a bal maiden."

"Mr. Poldark, that is the fate of many a girl from miners' families. Unless they can find a place as servants," she felt his sympathy, but it was the hard fact of life of poor people.

"Ross. Call me by my name when we are alone. And I apologize, I did not mean to sound so harsh," he quieted down and then looked up again. "Is that why my father hired you? Because being a bal maid was your only option?"

She nodded, "Your father was so very kind to me. He did not even need anyone. At first I just was left alone, but I did not like being so lazy and ungrateful. And then old Mr. Poldark taught me to read
and write..." Her eyes glazed over a little as she remembered her patron and his kindness.

"Shhh... Damnation... I did not mean to make you cry. Please, Demelza," he hovered over her, his hands clenching like he did not know what to do with them. Finally, he simply put one large hand over her head and smoothed the hair down.

She finally blinked away the tears and looked at him, "Sorry. I am being so- It has been quite the day. And yesterday. And the day before..."

"I understand. I just hope you have enough wherewithal for the remainder of this day," he said with purpose and she looked at him quizzically. Oh, right, his solution to her situation.

"Of course, Mr. P- Ross."

"Demelza, I do wish you learn quickly to call me by my Christian name. Especially after today." She only looked at him askance. He stepped back again and made a short trip to the far corner. Then he came close again and stepped back. He did that at least three more times, obviously agitated.

Finally, she came close again and dropped to his knee, "Demelza, I think we should get married. No! I know we should get married."

If he told her he was secretly a Prince, she would not have been more surprised. As it was, her thoughts scattered again and she looked at him stupefied.

He obviously was waiting for an answer, his face unguarded and waiting, even as his eyes tightened a little as the silence stretched. He made a grumbling noise to get her out of her stupor and she obliged.

"Wha-? Tha' be crazy, sur!"

His eyes widened a little and then crinkled in amusement, "There she is. And call me 'Ross.'"

"Ah call ye wha' I oughtta, sur. Ye be a master o' Nampara and I be a miner daughtah! Ye up above me and I'm in a gutter. Us, we never oughtta mix." Demelza's shock was so great she slipping into her unpolished speech style and even her voice roughened a little.

His brow wrinkled and she saw the moment his amusement turned into obstinate defiance. He rose swiftly and stomped the same short distance. "You are Demelza Carne. An amazingly resourceful, clever, intelligent young woman, who proved her worth many times over. You are not beneath me. And if society thinks that the accident of birth is the only thing that matters, then I don't have a need for such society."

She knew this face and this expression. It was his 'I am taking on the world' face. She loved - admired - his fighting spirit and the sense of fairness that he possessed. He wanted to fight the world over this. Over her! She had a vivid recollection of the story she read. About the man who was so noble he wanted to fight like the knight of the old. Don Quixote. And he had a fair dame he fancied. Dulcinea, who was also of common birth. She could easily see him - Ross - fighting for her with the same fervor as he fought to restore Nampara.

And he was so stubborn...

"Sir-" at his impatient look she corrected herself, "-Ross, please. Be reasonable. I am your servant. A miner's daughter. A runaway. I have abandoned my family and I may not even have their name any longer. I am worse than orphan. I think the only way this situation could get worse if I was, in fact, a man and you proposed to me. Do you not understand the kind of censure and ridicule you'd be
subjecting yourself to? Ross, your investors. Think of what it would cost you. If you don't care about them abandoning you, think of who might step in their stead. You know the answer to that." She saw him impatiently open his mouth to protest and she hurried on, "What about your family? Can Poldarks weather another scandal? Are you going to subject Ms. Verity to this? Especially after the recent events?"

She saw him struggle, but it did not last long, "Demelza, I am quite determined to see you safe. If you are married, then your family would not be able to do much more than cause a scene. I care about you, you know that. So what if there are a few gossips and naysayers. I had those since I was just eighteen. And this, us, is a far better reason to taunt society rules than gambling and smuggling."

Oh Judas... It would be his undoing. This generosity and justness and nobility. He was the best of men, at least in his intentions. But wasn't there a saying about intentions and Hell? He was willing to gamble it all for her safety! Oh, this impossible man. And he did not even love her! Demelza's heart thumped painfully at this again. He did not love her. He was fond of her, for sure, but it might not last. This infatuation, the newness of it would fade and then he would be stuck with a low-born wife, who everyone quietly shunned. He would resent her. Worse yet, what if he eventually fell in love? Then his resentment would turn into hate. And she was not ready to live in the world where he hated and resented her.

"Then you leave me no choice, sir. I must refuse your offer of marriage," she nearly choked on those words and looked down unable to see the shocked and distraught look on his handsome face.

Ross expected it. Well, maybe not such polite refusal. But he did expect her objections. Of course, marriage to someone of her station was completely unimaginable among the elevated ranks. Her reaction was reasonable, but the refusal still hurt. He did not expect that. He didn't realize that he was looking forward to her acceptance, to the tearful 'yes' and a few (a lot) kisses.

He almost laughed at himself. He really was too assured of himself and maybe the root of her objections (their disparate positions in life) was something he thought would be a motivator for her to agree. He stopped himself. How very magnanimous of you, Mr. Ross Vennor Poldark, master of Nampara. His thoughts were a bit sarcastic. How long have you known Demelza? Did you ever think, suspect, that she would be so mercantile? She cared about your father and she cares about you, you imbecile.

"Demelza, darling, I understand your reticence. I do not ask you to marry me on the whim. I care about you a great deal. Your well-being is important to me and knowing your situation, I am offering you the solution that would be mutually beneficial. You will be protected from your family and I shall have the most wonderful wife. Really, if you look at it my way, there are only advantages to this solution."

She sighed and looked like she was beyond exasperated. Come to think of it, he saw that expression on her a lot.

"Ross, for all the advantages you see, I see as many if not more downsides. Look at what people say about you and Ms. Verity now. They have been dragging your name for a while since you came back. And this business with Ms. Elizabeth... Even if I was a proper lady, people would still talk that there is a cover up or a distraction. As it is, people will question the whys and hows of Ms. Verity's situation. And if you suddenly marry, and a scullery maid no less, who up until this point was hiding in your own home as a boy? Can you not imagine the talks?

"And then, imagine a dinner party at Trenwith, that is if your uncle even agrees to host a former cross-dressing maid in his home. Everyone is polite and talking about weather, until someone says
something about my upbringing. Would you challenge every single person who slights me? What about women? And I can read and write and speak like your people can, but I was not raised a lady. There are so many things I don't know!"

This he did not expect. That she would doubt herself so much. She did not need to know how to play pianoforte or harp, or what sort of menu was appropriate for what occasion. Nampara wasn't some sort of great estate and he himself was from the cadet branch of the prominent family...

"Demelza, once again you sell yourself short. You know plenty and what you don't know, you will learn. I have no doubts." He saw her doubtful eyes and pressed the point, "It took you just three years to get this far. You have done the hard part already. The rest should be easy. As for gossips... Let me tell you what I have told Verity. People like to talk and judge. But they are also fascinated with people who give them reasons to talk. They would not shun us entirely, if only because they want to be close to know first-hand if something rumor-worthy took place."

She gave him one unimpressed look. Again he noted that he saw this on Danny's face before, "That supposed to give me comfort? To know that people would not spit in my face because they'd rather have me as the entertainment in their dull lives?"

"No, not all. I don't expect it to be comforting to know it, but... Demelza, tell me honestly, do you care about opinions of the Tigues, or the Choakes, or even of my Uncle Charles'? Knowing them as you do, do you care what they think of you? More importantly, are you going to stop yourself from doing something, because some idle gossip thinks it is inappropriate?"

He saw her thinking about his words, really thinking, and held his breath waiting for her decision. It lasted for a good while and he just sat on the bed watching her, fascinated by the play of emotions on her beautiful face. Finally, she looked up at him, "I still have objections-

He was about to talk and plead his case again, but she wasn't finished. "For one, we would have to wait for the current scandal to die down. At the very least, Ms. Verity should be engaged and everybody be assured that she is not with child." He breathed a sigh of relief; this was not an outright refusal like before. "Then, I'd prefer that I wasn't known as your former servant or that I was hiding as a boy. And-" she paused to take a deep breath, "-I want you to propose to me when the time is right again."

He was not sure what she meant and looked at her askance. "I am not sure-

"Ross, you do not l-love me and I would hate it if you met someone, who you did learn to love, and not be able to unite with her because of the understanding between us. So, I ask you to propose to me again. Later."

He sat silent analyzing what she has said and then, "You think that between now and some point in future, when Verity becomes engaged, I will meet someone, fall in love with her, and would want to marry?"

She nodded, her face was resolute and he knew he hit the wall in this argument.

"And what about you not being the servant or a boy? I thought it was unsafe for you to live as a woman?"

"I'll leave Nampara and find a place in town. Not as a servant, but-" she breathed again. "As a companion to some older lady. Like Widow Pennell." She saw his expression and hurried to add, "Ross, please, if we are here together..." she blushed hard and he realized with some horrified fascination that he understood her perfectly. If they are together in Nampara, it would require an
inhuman strength of will to withstand her beauty and allure. Even now, as she blushed and looked away, part of him wanted to know how far that blush traveled and the fire stoked low in his belly.

If nothing else, Demelza was smart.

Ross wasn't sure he could deal with being so removed from her, but he saw this as the only chance and he waited until she looked up at him, "Then I agree."
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Sunday service and an idea...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ross got ready for the Sunday service like he was going to battle, which was truer than ever. He made an effort of combing his hair and shaving as cleanly as he could. His clothes was some of his newest and best, clean and pressed, and even his boots shone with fresh polish. He smiled wryly remembering the last time he asked Demelza, as Danny, to polish them. God, was it only a few weeks ago? How everything has changed. These days he was more likely to do her work for her than to ask her anything.

She still was presenting as Danny, seeing as they needed to arrange her living situation. He asked Verity and Elizabeth to find out if there was a suitable older woman looking for a companion. His story, which he concocted in the dead of the night, was that one of his army friends has suddenly came into his inheritance and was responsible for the poor relative - a young woman of very little means, but also of very modest needs. Ross added, although it wasn't something that he mentioned to Demelza, that the said poor relative would have a monthly settlement. Again, modest, but sufficient for pin money and such. He felt responsible for Demelza and she earned some money while she was employed here. He felt like it was a fair solution.

Verity and Elizabeth both were curious about this friend they never heard of and even more curious that Ross took interest in helping an unknown young woman. Verity gave him a knowing smile and he winced when he recalled her comment on his new-found lighter spirits being the result of a possible love interest. He imagined that when Verity met Demelza as a young woman, his cousin would suspect the truth of her statement immediately. Despite the delay in resolving the situation with Demelza, Ross felt optimistic. Even the upcoming social engagement with the Cornwall's prominent families after the fiasco of the duel did not dampen his spirits. It was worth it.

He rode to Trenwith to join the rest of the clan. Frances, still recovering, was riding in the carriage with all the ladies, and Ross and his Uncle rode on horseback. They made an imposing picture - a well sprung carriage and two gentlemen accompanying it. His Uncle was still in a strop over how the situation was resolved and talked little to Ross. It suited him as his thoughts were back in Nampara.

He asked Demelza to saddle Suleiman to arrange for some time alone with her. She was dressed in Danny's loose clothes and her hair was habitually disheveled and all he wanted to do was to see her in a woman's dress. Of course, when they were alone in the stables, he just took the saddle out of her hands and proceeded to harness Suleiman himself. Demelza gave him an exasperated look, but he ignored it and she started cleaning up the stalls. His little industrious girl, he thought affectionately.

He finished the saddling and turned to her. She was sweeping the ground, the movements pulling the shirt over her slender back and he marveled again that he was so blind before. Now he saw that what he thought as malnourishment on Danny, was just her incredibly slim and delicate built. Her waist was tiny and he imagined it would look even more so if she wore in a corset. His imagination quickly drew a picture of her in a deep burgundy dress, her remarkable hair a halo around her
beautiful face. The image was so enticing, he walked up to her and quickly turned her around, keeping his hands on her waist.

"Sir!" she squeaked and he only laughed at the adorably flustered face.

"Ross," he spoke lowly, their intimate position eliminating the need for normal tone of voice.

"R-Ross," she stumbled because he was running his nose along her hair, inhaling the familiar scent of salt and mint. "We shouldn't..."

"I know... Oh, how I know..." he said still holding onto her tightly. "Still want to..." he pressed kisses along the forehead and side of her face ending at the beautiful pink shell of the ear. Even her ears were perfect. "You know that I would stand near you when you wrote letters for me? Just so that I could catch a whiff of your smell? You smell like the sea and meadows... I was forever looking for chances to stand closer to you..." he whispered into the little shell only to watch it pinken further until it was almost red. He blew on it and the shudder that ran through her was the most delightful thing he ever saw.

But his triumph was short-lived as Demelza, adventurous and not shy, lifted her hands and ran them through his hair, the light scrape of fingernails on his skin making him break out in goosebumps, "And I wanted to touch this hair for forever. It is as black as Suleiman's pelt, shiny like the silk dress I saw in the chest upstairs, and-" she gently fisted the hair on his nape "-so soft..."

The rest of her statement got lost in a searing kiss that he planted on her, his desire spiking at those artless words. God, she was amazing, unspoiled by pretense taught to the society young women, and it was refreshing and amazing. She whimpered a little, the noise making him lose a little more of his restraint and he walked her to the post until her back hit it. She leaned against it, her eyes half-mast and lips reddened from their kiss and he only held off from ravishing her then and there by the look of absolute trust that he saw on her face.

With effort he stepped back from her and tried to bring himself under better regulation. Oh, but she was the temptation and innocence all in one... Judas...

Ross was brought out of his memory by the distinct discomfort he now felt riding at a good pace. Hmmm, perhaps he should stop thinking of his secret future bride. It only would make things worse for him right now...

Sitting in the family pew with his family and Captain Blamey, Ross had an excellent view of the Tigue ladies and noticed that both were often adrift in their prayer books and that Mr Tigue had to patiently find the right page for them. It was obvious that the sitting arrangements on the Poldark pew made everyone wonder about the rumors and gossip. For his part, Ross kept one ear out for the service and another - to catch any wayward whispers. When the clerk gave the note for the psalm, he listened to the usual uncertain murmur, led by Mrs. Choake's penetrating but often off-key soprano, before leading off with a confident baritone. He did not sing often, having been a less attentive practitioner of religion, but he knew his psalms and hymns. Besides, he needed to make as good an impression as possible. The congregation thankfully accepted his voice as a more promising lead and the rest of the service was much more melodious, with Verity and Elizabeth offering their harmonizing voices.

After the service, the congregation stopped for the usual exchange of pleasantries, his Uncle particularly wishing to chat with the magistrate regarding the hunting prospects. Of course, this was an opportunity to add a joke or two about hunting accident that supposedly took place in Nampara. Frances stood near his father, Elizabeth having been accosted by her own mother. Ross stood as a sentinel near Verity and Captain Blamey, until Ms. Tigue got the necessary wherewithal to approach
the somber group.

Verity and Ms. Tigue exchanged stilted civilities, exclaimed over the unseasonable warmth, expressed their hopes for continuing dry weather and very quickly ran out of civil commonplaces. Verity glanced over at her father, still expounding, apparently oblivious to the magistrate's growing bewilderment. Ross knew all about his Uncle's ability to appear oblivious.

However, Verity had no idea just how very pretty she looked. She wore a dress that was a different colour to her preferred light-gray. Her chestnut curls clustering beneath a most becoming bonnet, the blush of her cheek complemented by the dark blue of her ribbons and spencer. Verity was happy and it was making her exceptionally lovely. Captain Blamey looked at her like she was the most wonderful sight in the world, his affection almost unseemly so near the house of God. It was obvious that Ms. Tigue observed it too and finally asked what she meant to.

"My dear Verity, I heard reports of the most unusual kind about events of this week!"

"Oh dear, I hope you did not find yourself too concerned over those wrongful reports, Ruth. 'Tis was only a mishap at the hunt. Of course, Captain Blamey and Frances are less likely to shrug it off, but there is nothing for it. Both missed their targets terribly and the flock of birds in Nampara got to live another day."

"I dare say, my birds are grateful to be spared," Ross added jovially and Ms. Tigue looked at him sharply. "Captain Blamey, if you find yourself in need of shooting practice, you are always welcome to Nampara."

He saw the moment it registered with Ms. Tigue that the Poldarks were publicly showing support for the Captain.

"Indeed, Captain Poldark, I believe I shall take you on this generous offer," the other man was showing a remarkable hold on his temper.

Verity smiled widely at this pronouncement and Ms. Tigue turned to Ross again.

She raised her face to him and smiled, "I really mustthank you for your assistance with the singing, Mr. Poldark. I have seldom heard us make a more 'joyful noise unto the Lord'. You should attend more services in Bodmin."

He felt a moment of discomfort, but politeness was more important right now than the need to discourage Ms. Tigue, "I would hardly know if this was better than any other day. Besides, I believe Verity and Mrs. Choake attributed greatly. And, I suspect, that soon enough the chorus of singers here in Bodmin would be supplemented by some exceptional voices." He made a point to look at Verity and Captain Blamey in turn and was rewarded by a blush on his cousin's face and a look of shock on Ms. Tigue's.

She left them soon, no doubt eager to spread the news, and Ross sighed in relief. The hard part was over. Once people saw that the Poldarks were there together with Captain Blamey at their family pew, Verity had no shortage of ladies, who wanted to talk to her. There were quite a few pointed questions and even more pointed looks at her midsection, but his cousin was unflappable, even if her cheeks flamed. Better yet, Great Aunt Agatha was on hand and he never knew a more disdainful woman. She delivered her pronouncements on everyone with so little decorum, hiding behind the notion of being an old lady, that even the most caustic of people were silenced by her.

Ross' only true disappointment was when he spotted Frances talking to George Warleggan. The pale man with even paler eyes was not as careful as he thought himself to be. Ross knew that George had
an unusually strong dislike of him. He thought that George's friendship with Frances made little sense, other than George needed all the acquaintances among gentlemen to elevate his standing. Ross wouldn't have cared about who George's ancestors were, but he did chafe at the mercantile ways of the Warleggan family. The quiet conversation between his cousin and his nemesis did not last long, but he caught Frances' displeased expression, followed by a quick look from Ross to Elizabeth.

This was a new observation for him. Until now Ross believed that George merely disliked him and tried to insinuate himself in Ross' financial affairs. He did not realize that George was poisoning Frances' against him. And resorting to jealousy as a motivation for sowing discord among Poldarks. As usual, he wished he could just bite his tongue and be friends with George, but there was nothing for it. Some things Ross simply could not stomach. At least he could be sure that this particular tactic of George's would not work very well. Ross had little interest in pursuing anything with Elizabeth and, if everything went well, Frances would have little reason to be jealous as Ross would be himself married.

They finally were able to leave the church grounds and began their journey to Trenwith. Uncle Charles was in better mood now that the hard part was over.

"I tell you, my boy, very few of them believe the story your servant made up, but none of them are going to challenge it. Cowards the lot of them. All talk and little action," older man delivered it smugly and Ross wondered what made him so at peace with the situation. He did not have to wait too long. "They all are afraid, you know."

Ross only looked askance.

"Now that Frances has shown himself as a gentleman ready to duel for the honor of the family, few people would directly disparage either Verity or Elizabeth to his face. And if they are not afraid of him, there is you to step in. They know you need little reason to pick a fight and you were in the army." Uncle George was still smug and Ross wondered at how easily his relative embraced Ross' infamous temper, when it suited his needs. "And, since everyone realized that Captain Blamey is courting Verity, they definitely would keep their tongues to themselves. I say I can be assured that there would be few rumors openly spread about my daughter. Shame that she has to marry that blackguard, but her chances were non-existent already... She would be settled. Frances is going to be a father and Poldark line shall go on. 'Tis a good time to be alive."

Ross felt acutely his own place in Uncle Charles' world. He only was pleased that his relationship with cousins was better than relationship between his own irreverent father and his hard-headed Uncle.

After a meal at Trenwith, Ross finally left for Nampara. He felt lighter and lighter as he approached his home, anticipation building in him. This was where he felt at ease and at peace. This was where some of his most loyal supporters were. This was where Demelza lived. At least for the time being.

He spurred Suleiman on.

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Demelza was visiting Jinni, who was so big by now, she could hardly rise from the chair without help. Demelza was helping her to sew clothes for the new babe. Her thoughts, though, wandered toward her employer and one of two men, who wanted to marry her. She had a nervous laughter bubble up when she thought of it like that: Mr. Pol- Ross wanted to marry her, but so did her not-Uncle. That was a strange thought indeed.

Jinni caught her smile and asked, "Ye be smilin' now, ducky. How come?"
"Oh, just glad everything's resolved with Ms. Verity and her Captain," Demelza hated to keep secrets from her only friend, but she had to.

"Oh, ye happy for Ms. Verity. An' wha' 'bout Capt'n Ross? Whe' ye gonna tell 'im?"

Demelza smiled widely, "I did."

"Ye be tellin' tha' truth, ducky? An' wha' now?" Jinni was genuinely surprised.

"Oh, Jinni. I was wrong to worry so much. He understood my problem and wasn't mad at me for lying."

"I tol' ye. He be kind."

"He is. He is just like his father," Demelza barely contained the giddy laughter. Ross was kind like his father, but he was so much more to her now...

"He gonna let ye stay in Nampara?" Jinni's practical question brought her back.

"Well, he thinks since everyone in his family knows me so well, I won't be able to hid for much longer as a boy-"

"So, ye be living like a girl here?"

"No... We think I should leave Nampara and find a living in town with some older gentlewoman. If I stay in Bodmin and live like a young miss, mayhap my family won't come looking."

"An' then?"

"And hopefully I can live like this until I am one and twenty, then my da' word will have no power over me," Demelza chin rose in defiance and she desperately wanted to be older than her nineteen years.

"Ye better off with Ms. Verity tha' some ol' crow!" Jinni said with passion and Demelza looked at her, surprised. Jinni wasn't looking at her and was attacking the cloth in her hand. Demelza gently tugged it out of Jinni's hands.

"What is it, Jinni?"

"Nuthin'" Jinni said and Demelza only stared at her. "Oh, stop lookin' at me. Ah jus' reckon it be hard wit' some lady ye dunno. An' I be missin' ye. An' Nampara be empty without ye. Whe' tha' babe comes, I be busy here and Capt'n Ross won't have a proper dinner wih' tha' lazy chit Prudie."

Demelza was floored by the emotion, she blinked her tears away, "I will miss you too. And you are right: Ms. Verity is so very nice, but she is to marry soon."

"But her Capt'n be away at sea! She be needin' company! An' ye know Ms. Verity not be sittin' drinkin' her tea all day. She be a good mistress."

Demelza was struck by this observation. Could it really be that easy? Could she find a living with Ms. Verity after she marries? She said she would hire Danny... Mayhap she would hire a maid?

Demelza colored again... No, Ross would not allow for it. And she herself wanted to live not as a maid before Ross proposed again. If he proposed again...

She needed to talk to him again.
Chapter End Notes

So, do you think Ross can fool Verity or would they have to tell her the truth?
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Ross talks to Demelza and Verity. Really, they are the best...

Chapter Notes

I want to thank all of the kind and wonderful reviewers. Really, it gives me energy to go on with this story.

Ross arrived at Nampara to find Demelza anxiously waiting for him at the door.

"I hope everything went well. How is Ms. Verity?" was out of her mouth before he finished taking off his jacket. He smiled at her and to himself. He was quite pleased that Demelza cared about his cousin so much. Quite a contrast to his Uncle for sure.

"All is well, darling Demelza. And Verity is a Poldark and had plenty of experience with Great Aunt Agatha, which means that ladies of Bodmin have to try very-very hard to say anything to affect her equilibrium, and that she can engage in a lively repartee herself."

Demelza gave him a hard look, "You can't just say it in normal words? Were they mean to her? Did you defend her? What about Captain Blamey and the rest of your family?"

He laughed at this pronouncement. Demelza was comfortable around him enough to scold him, "Ah cain talk righ' simple, fair maid." She shot him unimpressed glance and he gave another booming laughter. "Please don't frown and forgive me for making light of it. To answer your questions: they tried to be mean, but Verity can be quite brave, you know. I didn't have to defend her, but I did step in a few times to show that she is not alone. Captain Blamey is very much taken with her and, really, you wouldn't want him trying to defend her. In fact, I think people understood that and were more or less polite. Uncle Charles is pleased that no one is openly calling Verity a fallen woman. And even more pleased that Frances can act rash and stupid, as long as it is perceived as manly." He took a deep breath, "There now, have I answered all of your questions, darling?"

She gave a quick look around as if checking for possible eavesdroppers, "Ross, we have to be careful."

"What? More rules? You already forbade me from touching you, now I can't call you 'darling.' It is worse than courting a society miss," he said jovially only to see her face go blank.

"Oh, have your expected a ... more ... forthcoming dalliance, Mr. Poldark?" she said with all the haughtiness of a well-bred gentlewoman. It struck him then that Demelza was in fact a creature that lived between worlds. Not half mermaid and half woman, but a common girl, who got the beginning of the proper education. She straddled two worlds, no doubt because his father was quite liberal and didn't try to limit her natural curiosity just because of the circumstance of her birth. She definitely lacked certain aspects of what a young woman should know and, perhaps, some of her behavior was...
quite unseemly. But she was such a naturally intelligent person, genuinely warm and kind - and sensual - that she was appealing to him in spite of any and all shortcomings.

"I am glad that I am not going insane and you, my darling Demelza, are here with me and not in my imagination. I truly don't expect anything... Perhaps a smile and a kiss," he said with a wink. His smile faded and he turned serious, "Demelza, I know you asked me to propose again at a later time, but you should know that I consider you my intended. I would not offend you with scandalous behavior."

His last statement was delivered more formally and Demelza automatically straightened and lifted her chin. In that moment Ross saw her as a great lady she could become. She nodded at him and they held the silent moment of contemplation.

Finally, Demelza smiled while looking at him from under the fringe and reverting to the impish and clever boy she lived as.

Ross smiled back, "So, how was your day?"

"Zora is fully healed and I can start using her again..." Demelza told him all about little goings-on of the estate and the mine. He listened wondering how was it that this woman came to mean so much in his life. It happened so gradually, he could hardly tell when it began. "-and Jinni is ready to have the cheek any moment now." She paused and looked at him sideways, "I told Jinni. Not about us," here she blushed very becomingly. "I told her that I need to leave Nampara and live as a miss in town."

It was what they discussed and planned, but his mood worsened at this reminder. "I believe that some living situation would eventually become known to us. We only have to wait."

Demelza was worrying the lower lip and it was distracting, even if it was clear that she was hesitant to say something to him.

"Out with it."

"'Tis nothing. Only, Jinni... She said and I thought... Well, I am sure it's a terrible idea... And it is so very unusual... And, of course, I can't imagine lying-"

"Demelza..." she was quite endearing when flustered, but he wanted to know what sort of idea she had.

"I could live with Ms. Verity," she blurted and he stared.

Verity... Obviously not while she was living at Trenwith... Then, she meant after marriage... It would be most advantageous. Verity would not be alone when Captain Blamey was out at sea. Demelza would live with someone, who she and Ross knew to be a decent person. Ross himself could visit his cousin and see Demelza without obstacles of some other person's idea of propriety. And it would be a perfect opportunity for Demelza to learn the particulars of the appropriate behavior. She was worried that she didn't know how to be a proper young lady. This just might be the chance for her. And he knew Verity to be kind and patient. She would be a great teacher...

Just as his imagination took off, he was reminded of the difficulties of achieving that point. They would have to explain everything to Verity. He imagined telling her that Demelza was the young poor relative of his army friend and all the little details and explanations that would have to be concocted, and sighed. Verity would see through it immediately. Then he imagined telling her that Demelza and Danny were one and the same and how shocked Verity would be. Shocked and scandalized. A young woman, who lived disguised as a boy... Who lived in the same house with an
unmarried man... Oh, Verity certainly would be scandalized...

And even if she went along with their plan, there was Captain Blamey to consider. Would the future husband of Verity's agree to housing another person?

He was silent long enough for Demelza to start squirming. She sighed and shook her head, "I knew it. It is too unusual and Ms. Verity shall never agree to the scheme. And for a scullery maid no less."

Ross was startled to hear her defeated tone, "Chin up, Demelza. Nothing risked, nothing gained. We have to at least try. Besides, Verity might refuse to help, but not because you are a servant. I can be sure of at least that: my fair cousin is not a snob." He smiled encouragingly at her, holding her hand in his and giving it a squeeze, "I rather think our problem might be the fact that she would be a married woman, whose husband has to agree to hosting a young and impoverished friend."

Demelza paled a little, "Do you think we can trust her to keep this a secret, even if she doesn't agree to help?" At his look she rushed to finish, "It is only because Ms. Verity is so very nice and if someone were to ask her directly, I doubt that she could lie."

"I would have agreed with you if it were three months ago. Now that I know Verity met Captain Blamey in secret, without letting any one of us know, I am inclined to think that Verity has more conniving in her than previously thought."

Demelza gave him a knowing smile and look, and it was too much for him. He pulled her close for a short, but sweet, kiss.

Once Ross decided on something he didn't wait to act on it. So it was the next day that he paid visit to Verity. She was busy arranging the still room and quickly put him to work, taking advantage of his height.

"Ross, would you put this bunch on top rack. It is more fresh and I'd rather we used the bunch from last year first." She bustled about with the confidence of an experienced mistress, "I can stop by Nampara and organize your still room, if you prefer. Although, I believe that Prudie and Danny are managing just fine."

Ross realized with a start that he actually hasn't been to his own still room in a while and that Verity probably did so for Nampara when he was away. Gratitude flooded him. "I thank you, Verity. I believe that the only reason the still room is in fine condition is because you have been checking on it. And probably taught Danny enough to keep it up. I doubt Prudie would know the difference between lily-of-the valley and wood garlic."*

Verity blushed at the praise, "Oh, it was nothing. And Danny loves to read the herbology books and has a keen eye. Such a clever boy."

Ross saw the opening he needed, "Yes, Danny is clever. So clever in fact that no one realized he was a she all this time."

He wasn't disappointed. Verity stumbled and dropped the next bunch she was tying together and the delicate lavender stems fell on the ground. Her face was a picture of shock with eyes and mouth rounded into the same shape of perfect O. It would be comical in any other situation, but right now Ross only wanted for his plan to succeed.

"Danny is a she?" Verity whispered and her eyes took on far-away look, no doubt trying to recast her memories of Danny in the new light. "But how is it possible? I mean, of course, he- she must be
very young. I never stopped to think why he never grew past adolescent stage. I... I did not pay attention to that. And he- she is very slender and... The voice... The skin... He- she was always good in the kitchen... Oh, Ross... How is it possible? And to what purpose did he- she conceal herself?"

She stopped talking and looked at him with bright eyes. "Demelza... Her name is Demelza... She sought refuge in cross-dressing because she is deathly afraid of her family discovering her. They want her to marry some lecherous old man, who is as unscrupulous as he is violent. Verity, make no mistake, she did not do this lightly."

Her face showed all the sympathy to the plight of the young woman at the mercy of the unfeeling family, "How terrible! But she must have been very young-"

"Barely turned sixteen when her father decided to make her marry an older relative. She ran away, partly because the prospective fiancee tried to start asserting his marital rights early..." This was as far as Ross could allow himself to speak on the matter. It was not appropriate to mention something of this nature to the proper young lady. And it was making him volatile to the point of riding to Ilogan to confront Demelza's tormentors.

Verity paled considerably and he saw comprehension and commiseration flood her face, "Oh, that poor girl. Did you father know?"

"He did. He suggested that she conceal herself and offered her a place at Nampara. He did not want her to actually work, but Demelza is not one to still idly and she took over some tasks from Prudie and Jud. And then, father taught to read and write, and she became his assistant."

Verity nodded to herself, "Then she isn't gentle born?" He shook his head. "Then it is even more remarkable all that Demelza had achieved."

Ross smiled like a proud parent, as if Demelza's successes were his own, "She is truly remarkable."

It was only when he saw Verity's questioning look that he realized that he showed his hand too much.

"Ross... My God, Ross... Is she the reason for your improved spirits? Is she the one who lifted you out of your ennui?" Verity said it teasingly, but there was genuine interest on her part.

"I... Yes, I suppose she is. Only I did not know she was a she at the time," quite possibly Ross blushed.

Verity stared at him like she never seen him before, "My God, have you not always known?"

"Verity, consider that I arrived here after a war to find that everything I knew changed. I was... unwell. But Nampara, Cornwall, my people and, yes Danny, were what brought me to focus and made me try. And then I found I didn't quite had to try to force myself as much. And Danny was always there. Smart, studious, funny... I didn't know Danny was Demelza until few days ago. Believe me, it was quite a shock to me as well."

"Oh! Is she the poor relative of your army friend? She has to be. But then it means that she can't stay at Nampara," Verity muttered to herself and gave him a piercing look. "Ross..." her voice was filled with warning and censure, "... are you so heartless as to let her go? Where would she go?"

"Verity..." he pleaded. "It is not what you think. I would very much like for her to stay at Nampara. Indefinitely. But that is part of the problem..." he trailed off and she gave him another piercing look. He saw the moment comprehension sunk in.
"Oh... Of course, a young unmarried woman living in the house with a young unmarried man. Even if she is a servant, people talk. They talk with or without reason and, of course, you are a Poldark. We seem to be a favorite subject for talks and gossip..." Verity spoke to herself and then something dawned on her because she looked at him again. "Does this mean Demelza intends to pass as a well-bred woman? If you were indeed looking for a living situation for her."

The way Verity asked him made him question the wisdom of his and Demelza's plan. As much as he believed Demelza to be a capable student, she was not raised to be a society miss.

But just as quickly he doubt was squashed: Demelza was remarkable and their plan was as good as any. "My dear Verity, if you believe Danny to be worth his weight in gold, then you should think that Demelza worth at least twice as much. She accomplished so much with so little going her way. She reads and writes. She knows quite a bit about running a house and all other tasks that usually fall on a mistress. She is very circumspect, partly because she had to live in disguise and partly because she is an intelligent and kind person. Her manners, where they matter, are at least polite and cordial. She might need some polishing, but she is not likely to be introduced at St. James court."

His cousin huffed a little even as her cheeks flamed, "I did not mean to imply that Demelza is incapable of such a feat. I merely wished to ascertain as to the ultimate purpose of such an endeavor. Is she looking to become a companion for life? She surely cannot be a governess. Does she mean to marry above her born station?"

At this point Ross knew he was blushing, "I imagine someone as remarkable as Demelza would have no shortage of suitors. However, she has little dowry and I don't think she would find happiness with someone, who was of the same class that she was born into."

Verity shrewdly studied him, "Ross, you can't be thinking."

"Verity, 'tis not important right now. My purpose for this visit was to see if you were amenable for providing Demelza her living situation."

"I? B-b-but why would...? Oh... Ross, it is only would be possible if I am married... Oh, right, you thought of that too... But then Andrew might object... No, I don't think he would and it would be nice to have company when he is away." She stopped and paced the room around a little, "And, of course, I can help her. I can teach her things that are important for any gentle born woman..." He could see that Verity, whose adventurous and insubordinate nature he only recently discovered, was quite taken with Demelza's plight and her circumstances. "And I do owe her so much, it would only be fair if I helped her now."

Ross gently squeezed her hands, "Verity, please, know that Demelza and I would have done everything in our power to make you happy. You are quite popular among servants, you should know. I believe Demelza called you 'the sweetest person this side of Tamar River.' And I agree with her. When I came back, I felt like I did not belong among the circle I was born into. I still thinks so half the time, but you, you, my dear Verity, you were always the best of the Poldarks."

She blushed and looked away, "I just try to have courage and be kind."

"Then you and Demelza should get along famously. She is courageous, and kind, and steadfast."

"And beautiful?"

"That too."

"Oh, Ross... My dear cousin, I believe you are smitten."
Ross did not argue. It was the truth after all.

*This is a nod to the Outlander series. There was an episode in season one, when Claire figures out that a young boy is not possessed, but poisoned, because he confused lily-of-the-valley for wood garlic.

**Totally stole this from Cinderella.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Finally, Demelza is at Trenwith, presenting as a young miss.

Chapter Notes

We have a bit of a time jump here to move the story along. Demelza learns to live like a young society woman.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Verity, once she was on-board with the idea of Demelza as her companion, got to work immediately. She convinced Ross that it would be advantageous to present Demelza as her own friend, rather than a poor relation of some fictional friend of Ross'. To that end, Verity used just enough true facts to create a perfect backstory. Verity reminded Ross that she traveled to London a few times to visit some distant relative and there she had a busy enough social calendar that she could conceivably have met a young woman to become friends with. Of course, they could not simply conjure the girl out of thin air and Verity began her quill campaign.

She wrote to the London relative and got a polite response. This prompted many 'memories' about the visit and people she met. It naturally led her to remember a dear friend she met there - a younger woman by the name of Demelza. Verity 'wrote' to her. And in due time, Demelza responded. The young women exchanged a few more epistles and Verity touted the idea of having her friend visit her here in Cornwall. Her father bristled at the idea at first, but soon relented and even thought it would be great to have a distraction of a young lady's visit. Of course, the point of the visit was to introduce Demelza as a friend, possibly an only friend of Verity's, with the notion of having her come once Verity was married.

While Verity was thus engaged, she also visited Nampara to meet the young woman, who so cleverly disguised herself for years. Their meeting was a strange affair at first. Demelza was shy and kept shooting Ross wary glances every time Verity addressed her by the given name. It was almost painful to watch and Ross was about to revise his opinion on how 'famously' they would get along, when he realized that perhaps the two women were just too stifled to be talking openly with him present. So he did what he's done usually when a clever idea struck him: he acted on it. He got up abruptly and left the two young women to their own devices, confident that they would find similarities in how much they both were peeved at him.

It worked. When he returned half an hour later, Verity was laughing at something Demelza said in a mock deep voice. It was obvious she was mimicking him.

"Demelza! I do hope you are having a good time with my cousin," both young women burst into the most unrestrained laughter and even though he was the source of all this amusement, he joined in.

The tea afterwards was a more relaxed event, with Verity telling a story of serving a tea to Great Aunt Agatha as part of her test on whether she was ready to be a hostess. Ross knew exactly what
Verity was doing: between slight eye-rolls and even indelicate laughter or two, were kernels of the important aspects of the social conventions expected of a young society woman. Verity only slightly exaggerated the persnickety nature of their older relative, but Demelza heard and saw what was important. This was part of what made Ross marvel at this young woman. She did not have to be told what she needed to learn. She always took it upon herself to do so.

"And you know, meadows here are always so full of flowers, but it would not do for Great Aunt. I can recall her lecture on appearance and perception of such simple decorations," here Verity assumed a haughty demeanor of their older relative and spoke at Demelza down her nose. "My dear Verity, people know that we can afford orangery flowers from London for an important event. Therefore, you should put our hot-house flowers even at the most mundane occasions. It would be most effective to communicate that Trenwith has a wonderful hothouse, that you are most attentive of hostess to treat guests to beauties of flowers out-of-season and, that you are not a wastrel mistress, who would order blooms from London for mere country gentry."

He saw Demelza's pensive look, even as she smiled at Verity. She had such a preference for the local wildflowers. He noticed them before around the kitchen and dining room, but he always thought it was Jinni. Now that he knew of Demelza's love of herbology, he realized that it was her all along. He wanted to reassure her that if it were up to him, they would have nothing but wildflowers.

"Come now, Verity. This might be something Great Aunt Agatha considers necessary for Trenwith, but Nampara and, more importantly your future abode, do not have to compete with great country homes of England. I, for one, prefer the wildflowers of Cornwall. Their scent mixed with sea breeze..." he trailed off a little, "... well, let's say that I missed it when I was away and despaired of ever breathing it again."

Both Demelza and Verity had given him near identical looks of sympathy, because he almost never mentioned his war experience, but it was Demelza's gaze that radiated acceptance and willingness of fill every room of the house with wildflowers that nearly made him choke. She smiled at him - a warm and small smile - and he regained his equilibrium.

He was home, among the wildflowers.

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He saw Verity off and she twisted her glove nervously. He waited a little and finally she spoke.

"You are right, Ross. Demelza is remarkable. And such a talented young woman. I am in awe of her abilities and fortitude. I wish I had some of her courage. She was so young and her own family turned against her..."

"She is not alone anymore. My father helped her, I, and now you, dear Verity. She has us," he smiled encouragingly at his cousin.

"Yes, I intend to help her every which way. On that account, Ross we must visit haberdashery, and millinery, and shoemaker, and-"

"To what end?"

Verity threw him a withering look, "What do you think young society women wear? She cannot possibly come to Trenwith in whatever clothes Danny wears."

Of course Verity was right, Demelza must be dressed as appropriate for her new assumed station. He was glad that Wheal Leisure was now producing copper and his credit in Bodmin improved
"If I can have one request for this most fashionable endeavor," he said with a smile. "I very dearly wish to see her in a deep-red dress."

Verity gave him such an impertinent and wry smile that he nearly blushed. Damnation! Now she was certain he had harbored tendre for Demelza.

Demelza could hardly believe her life at the moment. It has been only six weeks since she confessed to Ross and she was about to 'visit' Ms. Verity, or simply Verity, as she was told to call her new friend. She nervously smoothed the new dress she was wearing. In fact everything she wore was new. She argued, so much, against such extravagant expenses, but couldn't win against the combined power of two sets of dark Poldark eyes. Ross was beseeching her to accept it as an act of kindness and gratitude, and Verity insisted that it was only expected that a young woman would have at least five dresses.

These past few weeks, Verity came nearly every other day and the two of them went over Demelza life story, trying to keep as much of the true facts to avoid unnecessary deception. So Demelza kept her name and her partial orphan status. It was further elaborated that Demelza had many siblings and a new step-mother. This permitted Verity to suggest that Demelza was not particularly well treated as she was without a dowry and her marriage prospects were dim. Naturally, everyone understood that a young unmarried woman, who could not work and could not marry, was a burden to her family.

She was constantly surprised at the open and welcoming demeanor of Verity Poldark. Before, Demelza thought of her in terms of the mistress, a member of the higher class. And Verity was wonderful then too, but now that they struck a friendship, Demelza discovered a kind and attentive person, who was also quick to laugh and was prone to self-sacrifice. Demelza was grateful to have more people by her side.

As a sign of how much her life was changing, Demelza recalled that merely three weeks ago Jinni had her child. Demelza would not have been able to attend at birth, because everybody thought her a boy, but the village healer intervened. She knew that Danny was good with herbs and salves and had assisted Dr. Choake and Mr. Finley a lot, so she called for Danny to quickly whip up the tincture of Shepherd's Purse and Angelica to help Jinni with bleeding. When she did come with her tinctures, Jinnini's little girl was already here and she was beautiful.

The healer stepped away and Demelza came up to the bed and brought the medicine to her friend. Jinni was pale and tired, but also smiling and relaxed.

"My girl... She be the prettiest cheel I seen," Jinini whispered and Demelza agreed.

"She takes after you," she said and was rewarded with a huff a laughter.

"I feel so full of love right now," Jinni said quietly. "I never knew I could love someone so much." Her eyes darted every second to where her baby lay and Demelza felt it too, The love that Jinni felt for her daughter was palpable like a gentle breeze, cocooning everyone in its balmy presence.

She left her friend, who started the new chapter of life, and contemplated her own new prospects. Demelza smiled to herself. Jinni was so brave: when Jimmy was poaching or when he was caught, Jinni did not fall apart and she went on and now she had someone she loved so completely...

She could be brave too, Demelza thought. She could try and make a place for herself in Ross' world,
among his people. She could be brave.

She arrived to Trenwith by post and Verity was the first person to greet her. Demelza nearly called her 'Ms. Verity,' but stopped herself at the last moment.

"It is good to see you again, Verity," she said smoothly, her skin prickling in nervous goosebumps.

"I am so glad you could make this journey. Please come in," Verity beamed at her and they walked into the house together. Demelza was proud of herself for not just stopping in awe of the beautiful hall and parlor. Instead she looked around politely and turned to compliment the house to Verity. By now they were fully in the parlor and the entire family was seated to meet her.

"It is a most fortunately situated house and the formal rooms are so well appointed," Demelza told her friend and almost dismayed at how insincere those words sounded to her. Wouldn't it have been more flattering if she just stared and gasped something along the lines of 'beautiful'?

"Thank you. Demelza, my dear, please meet my family. This is my father Charles Poldark; my brother Frances and his wife Elizabeth; and this is my Great Aunt Agatha," Verity pointed to all of them in turn and Demelza bobbed small curtsies to them all. "And this is my friend Demelza Carne."

She looked down, afraid that everyone would realize the deception the moment they looked at her. She was worried about it constantly, but the new clothes and a hair piece made a world of difference. When Demelza became Danny, she cut her hair short, but kept the braid as one of the few things that she could call her own. The hair piece, created by a coiffeur (Demelza giggled to herself for a few moments when she heard him being called that) allowed her to pull her own hair back and attach the piece with pins. She could add different colored ribbons to complement her dresses. It looked so good and saved her a lot of time for her toilette. She never imagined how much time the gentle women spent dressing and undressing.

"It is lovely to meet you, Ms. Carne. Now which part of Kingdom are you from?" Great Aunt Agatha spoke and looked Demelza up and down.

"Wessex, ma'am," it was an agreed upon addition to Demelza's life story.

"Hmm, I think we know someone there. Do you perchance know the Hardys?" Demelza shook her head in negation and the old lady squinted again. "Now, that name... It sounds like a good Cornish name."

"My mother, ma'am. She was of Cornwall."

"Ahh... And what a proud daughter of this land she was to name you so fortunately. You look handsome enough, is anyone courting you?"

Demelza paled a little at such a direct question. Verity told her it would not be polite to ask young women about their age and marital prospects. Then she remembered how Ross would laugh at his Great Aunt for her seemingly blunt comments. 'She means to unsettle and see if you have thin skin. Or if you have some fire in the belly to tell her off.' It would seem that she was being tested, "You are too kind, ma'am. As for suitors, it must be my Cornish name that puts them off, for I am sure it has nothing to do with my other accomplishments," she smiled sweetly and heard Charles Poldark cough, just as Elizabeth's eyes widened a little.

Great Aunt Agatha gave Demelza a smirk that made her wrinkled face look less sour and nodded along, "It must be. Come, sit here, Ms. Carne. You must be parched from the dreadful trip."
After that first interaction with the Poldarks, things went smoothly for Demelza. The plan was for her to stay for four weeks. In that time, everyone hoped that Captain Blamey would propose and the wedding date would be set. Demelza would leave Trenwith, only to come back after the wedding, when Verity was settled on her own.

She found that Elizabeth was just as quiet and circumspect as she thought her to be. She didn't speak a lot and was often absent in the afternoons. Understandably, she was tired a lot. She was already showing a little and it would seem that morning sickness of early pregnancy abated only a little. Demelza proved her mettle as a quick study of Dr. Choake and Mr. Finley, when she made several tisanes for Elizabeth to help with her upset stomach.

Great Aunt was secretly an incurable gossip and felt like Demelza was a fresh audience to all her opinions on everyone in the county. Between the Taro cards and whist, Great Aunt was quite entertaining.

Charles Poldark and Frances were rarely at home. Mr. Charles was at the mines and with tenants, while Frances often disappeared to Bodmin and no one could tell definitively what was it that he did all this time.

And, of course, there were visitors. Ross and Captain Blamey were expected and frequent callers and it so worked out that the four of them would form a walking party and Verity's courtship was progressing smoothly under the 'watchful' eyes of Demelza and Ross as chaperons. Of course, Demelza and Ross were consumed with their own conversations to pay a great deal of attention to Verity and her suitor. She found that she did not like to spend so much time idly. When she was Danny, her days involved correspondence, accounts settling, visits to Wheal Leisure with Ross, and frequent trips to town. Now, as a young woman and a guest of Verity's, she found herself at a loss. There were plenty of servants in Trenwith and Verity was quite efficient as a mistress. And, of course, it would be unseemly for women to show interest in such mannish pursuits like mines, crops, and sea faring.

But Ross did not think so. He talked to her about all of those things when he visited. He complained about the prices that the smelting factory paid for copper (too low), the transportation costs (too high), the well-being of miners (they got bad cough in winter, but even in warmer months it bothered many), the poor state of the kitchen in Nampara now that Jinni was minding her babe and only came in once a day to prepare the supper. Demelza missed it all acutely and wanted to visit Nampara if only to remind herself of the place that was her home for years.

"You would not believe it Demelza, but Jud misses Danny," Ross told her and she gave him an questioning look. "'Tis the truth, my darling. He grumbled something along the lines of 'tha' pest better know wher' 'is bread' buttered.' I believe he is worried that Danny's visit with his relatives might become permanent."

This was the cover story they made to explain Danny's absence. That the boy found some distant relatives and wanted to visit them. Prudie and Jud were dismissive at first, but it would appear that they grew used to Danny's presence in their lives.

"I shall be back. Rather, Danny will be back until Verity is married and settled... I miss Nampara so much..."

"Only Nampara?" his voice dropped even lower and it was like magic, because she shivered despite the warm weather, and her skin prickled in anticipation. He lifted her hand and placed an ardent kiss on her wrist.

"Ross... We mustn't..." she whispered and he huffed in annoyance.
"I can't wait for Captain Blamey to make his offer," he said lowly and she smiled a little. Indeed, she could not wait either.

Finally, it was time for a dinner party, where many neighbors were invited. Demelza dreaded the event, although she realized that no one tried to be unnecessarily mean to her. It must have been the notion that she was a gentleman's daughter, even if impoverished one. And because she was poor, she hardly presented a competition or a prospect to anyone.

She and Verity were getting ready for the evening and Demelza was deciding between the only two evening dresses she had. The green one would look marvelous with the color of her hair and she could thread a green ribbon for a simple tin cross she had as jewelry. The dark-red dress was so beautiful, Demelza got goosebumps every time she looked at it. The color was bold and it felt almost like it did not belong on someone like her. Not because she was secretly a miner's daughter, but because the sumptuous fabric looked expensive to be beyond reach for a poor miss.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Verity knocked on her door.

"I have something for you, my dear," Verity stepped in and held out a small box. "Ross has asked for one of your dresses to be dark-red."

Verity said it lightly, but she had such a mischievous smile that Demelza blushed as red as the dress.

"Oh, dear Demelza, I only meant to tease you," Verity came closer and sat next to her. "I believe he was already thinking of this, when he asked for the particular color," she opened the box to reveal a an intricate filigree pendant that lay there with a burgundy velvet ribbon.

"Oh... For me?" Demelza barely breathed. The pendant was beautiful. It was made of tin - by now Demelza spent enough time with copper and tin to know - and was very delicately wrought. On the whole, it looked like a cluster of flowers, each petal separate and colorful enamel of dark pink and red was dotting the metal flowers. It was delicate, beautiful, simple because of the material and lack of precious stones, but immensely intricate and elaborate because of the work put into it. "It's wonderful, but I shouldn't-"

"You should, dear. I believe Ross had it specially made for you," Demelza blushed even further just as her heart squeezed inside. "And don't say that you don't deserve it. Because you do. Demelza, when I first met you as Danny, I came to appreciate you as one of the few people, who cared about my late uncle. I knew that he was not alone because of you. When Ross came back, so changed and was so... melancholy afterward... I was glad that you were there, because Danny could do for Ross what he did for Uncle Joshua. And I was right. Then, I saw Ross come back. His spirit and energy, all were back. I thought he found someone to soothe his heartache and I was right. It was you, dear Demelza. You did that. And for that alone you deserve this."

Demelza could not speak at the moment, tears clogging her throat. "You give me too much credit," she eventually croaked.

Verity tutted and brought her a glass of water, "Please, don't cry. We wouldn't want red eyes to compliment this wonderful dress."

Demelza smiled and gratefully accepted Verity's help with her stays and the dress. When they were done, Verity tied the necklace on Demelza.

"There, now you are ready to face all of Cornwall. Don't worry. Ross and I will help you. And Great Aunt Agatha likes you, you know."
Demelza took a deep breath.

She could be brave.

Chapter End Notes

Dinner party and Demelza meets larger group of people she needs to impress.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Dinner at Trenwith...

Chapter Notes

Great Aunt Agatha is a queen of shade and Demelza can sing... Also, thank you for your comments and kudos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Demelza stepped into the hall, feeling like the that time she was in the duel. The same fear and anticipation filled her, only it wasn't pistols and men's anger that she feared. This would be a duel - nay, a battle - of a different kind. Still, Demelza decided that she must use the same wits and courage that she always relied on. She took another deep breath and walked with Verity by her side.

"Remember, Mrs. and Ms. Tigue are notorious snobs. Mr. Tigue is hen-pecked, but not malicious. Mrs. Choake is genial, but has a niece to marry off. Mrs. and Ms. Turner are convinced of their superiority, because Mr. Turner is related to an earl on his mother's side. Connection is tenuous at best, but it is enough to imbue them with the sense of self-importance. The Chynoweth are an old family and don't need to remind everyone of it. Elizabeth knows and likes you now, but her mother is a little less forthcoming with new acquaintances. The Warleggans are cordial people, but neither Great Aunt, nor Ross likes them. Others would simply follow the general direction of the crowd."

Verity directed her as if she were a general. A very lovely and charming general. She was dressed in the most becoming robin egg blue dress. The cut was modest, but pick-ups and gathering, coupled with the expensive sheen of the fabric, created the most alluring silhouette on her. Her usual hair style - all pulled back with a parting in the middle - was replaced with the wonderful lush curls that extended along her face. Demelza marveled that Verity and Ross had more features in common, than Verity and her own brother. When she said as much, stroking one tight curl, Verity laughed and coyly said that her and Ross got the best of Poldark features.

When they entered, there was a palpable quieting in the room and Mr. Charles Poldark stopped long enough from his pontificating to look at his daughter. His eyes, at first surprised and then a little wistful, warmed over and he walked to them.

"My dear daughter, you look so lovely," he kissed her on the temple and turned to Demelza. "And so do you, Ms. Carne. Come, let me introduce you."

And off they went. Demelza 'met' the families that the Poldarks kept ties with. There were quite a few that she hadn't met before, of course. There were plenty of sea-faring men and officers of the local regiment. She didn't quite know what to make of all the flirtatious exchanges, but convinced herself that it was par for the course for officers and captains.

Verity, who had Captain Blamey by her side, introduced Demelza to a fellow officer, Captain
Hornblower,* who was absolutely delighted to meet her and said so with a broad smile. "I do hope, Miss Carne, that you'll enjoy your visit to Cornwall. There are many fine walks around and about the neighborhood if your predilection lies in that direction."

Demelza allowed a faint smile. "As it happens, Captain Hornblower, my predilection does lie in that direction."

He rubbed his hands together, "Good, good," he said. "I would be delighted to play your tour guide. We have a wonderful shoreline with cliffs that I'm sure you'll love to explore."

Demelza dared a glance at her hosts, to find that Verity was now staring intently at her. She felt the color rise in her face and she turned away to see Mrs. Tigue and Mrs. Choake glaring at her. Oh, right... Single men with means were sought after and she was but a penniless friend of Verity's.

"Miss Carne," Mrs. Tigue started, "do you play?"

"I enjoy plenty of games, Mrs. Tigue, and though I must admit I can play whist, I prefer a game of chess and best of all a good book."

Mrs. Tigue narrowed her eyes, "You play chess?"

"On occasion, ma'am."

Mrs. Tigue was not amused, "Chess is a man's game, Ms. Carne."

"I play by men's rules," at that point Demelza was sure that she was undoing all of her good work of establishing herself as a proper young woman. It was the faint smile on Captain Blamey's face and, surprisingly, a considering look in George Warleggan's eyes that made her realize that she was successfully skirting the edge of 'acceptable' and into the territory of 'singular.'

"When I asked you if you played, I meant the pianoforte, Ms. Carne."

"I do not."

Mrs. Tigue had a very smug look on her face, but Verity hurried to add, "Demelza sings. Most beautifully."

Demelza blushed deeply and added, "Mostly for own amusement."

"For your own amusement? I've never heard such a thing. You were instructed so you could entertain others."

"Forgive me, Mrs. Tigue. I was not aware there were rules governing why we learn. In any case, I'm self-taught which means that I need only entertain myself," Demelza spoke so sweetly with such an angelic smile on her face that she was sure the occupants of the room must think her an imbecile to be speaking such rubbish.

"Your mother must have peculiar notions about women's education, Ms. Carne. For I have never heard a woman's accomplishment to be for her own amusement," this news delivered with just enough disbelief to show how preposterous was the idea itself and how unusual was Demelza's mother.

Demelza gathered her courage and a healthy dose of anger, "I am sure my mother would have been surprised to learn that other people raised their daughters differently. But it is only a speculation on my part, for my mother is with her Maker now." She wasn't sad anymore. She was simply mad.
Mrs. Tigue had the decency to look contrite for a second, but it was then that Great Aunt Agatha chimed in.

"I swear I have told you that Ms. Carne was without a mother. Now, I have never been forgetful and Lord spared me the indignity of senility," she paused to let it sink in and then... "Mrs. Tigue, you must be overtired to have forgotten so quickly. Ask Ms. Carne here for one of her tisanes. Would you credit it? She is a veritable apothecary herself. Now, there is an accomplishment that every woman should have."

There was long uncomfortable silence, which Demelza bore quietly, looking at Great Aunt with gratitude. Mrs. Tigue looked anywhere but the old woman or Demelza.

It was then that Ross approached, freshly shaved and his clothes pressed.

"What a beautiful picture all the lovely ladies make. I declare, between your colorful dresses and enchanting perfumes, anyone would confuse you for a loveliest of bouquets."

At this chivalrous announcement everyone relaxed and Demelza smiled at him with gratitude.

Ms. Tigue was about to pounce on him, but mercifully, the butler called them to dinner at that moment and Ross hastened to Demelza's side. He escorted her to the table and she felt everyone's looks as if they were physical touches.

It must have been Verity's doing, but she was seated between Ross and Captain Blamey, with Great Aunt Agatha on the opposite side of the table. She was so grateful. This has been more stressful than she expected.

"Demelza, I spoke half the truth just now," Ross murmured close to her ear, his deep voice rumbling through her body and making her ache for the unrestrained time they enjoyed in Nampara.

"Oh... Which part was the truth then?" she said coyly, sending him a quick glance.

"Why, the part about you being the loveliest bloom in all of Cornwall."

She blushed and whispered, "It is truly amazing what a good dress would do to a woman."

"I am sure a pig in this dress would still be a pig. But you, my dear Ms. Carne, would be fetching even if you were dressed as a mere boy," he said it low enough so that no one heard, but she still colored.

"Hush, sir!" she mumbled and felt, rather than saw his amusement. "Thank you for this pendant. It was unnecessary, but it is very much appreciated. I love it."

His eyes darted to where the pendant lay against her breastbone and she felt the traitorous blush that began to spread. The neckline of the dress and the corset have revealed quite a bit more of skin than her usual morning dress and certainly far more than any outfit that Danny wore. She could see that Ross was entranced by the view, seeing as he stared at her a little too long.

Her blush got even more pronounced. At least she felt hot all over.

"Ms. Carne," Mrs. Turner, who sat across and to the left of Demelza, spoke and broke Demelza's Ross-induced stupor. "I must admit that I know little of Wessex. I don't believe we have any family there. You see, dear, our family is mostly in London and Wales."

Demelza saw everyone's face in the vicinity acquire the 'polite boredom' look and realized this was
an opening to bring up the earl. Sure enough, Mrs. Turner went on about her relative and his estate, which yielded a ‘living.’ Somehow this led Mrs. Turner to ask Demelza about her family's standing. It was pretty obvious where it was headed and Mrs. Tigue added, not without certain bite in her words.

"I believe that Ms. Carne's family must be of some particular circumstances. Why, they never thought to finish her formal musical training. I, of course, do love music so. I simply cannot imagine my life without it. And my Ruth..."

Great Aunt Agatha dropped the fork with great clang, "Ms. Carne, you will sing for us after dinner. Elizabeth shall accompany you. And, please, indulge this old woman and sing us something of the local flare. I believe in pursuit of being just like all other ladies of ton, people forgot our own native language of Cornwall."

As expected, this pronouncement brought silence and everyone looked away, either shocked that Mrs. Tigue mentioned Demelza's poor circumstances so directly or because they no longer spoke Cornish. Once again, Demelza marveled at the old lady's ability to effectively shut people up. She wasn't looking forward to public singing, but there was no way out of it and she was grateful to Great Aunt Agatha.

"Of course, ma'am. I would be delighted."

The conversation resumed and Demelza expelled a quiet breath of air, her fingers shaking a little. This was already far more taxing than she expected and they were only half-way through dinner.

Suddenly she felt Ross's leg move closer to hers and the illicit touch grounded her, "I believe you should obtain calling cards while you are here in Trenwith. Add you age, dowry and relative life expectancy of your imaginary Wessex father. Don't forget to mention that your mother is gone too. It should make any future conversations easier." She inclined her head toward him and gave him a grateful smile. "In the meantime, you can be assured that Mrs. Tigue and George have already assessed all that you are worth."

"Not much, according to them," she said wryly, a hint of doubt coloring her voice.

"That is because their scales are based on them. You should always see who your judges are to know if their judgment should matter to you. Verity thinks you are worth your weight in gold."

She blushed at this compliment and looked at him under her lashes, "And do you agree?"

Ross looked at her full in the face, "I think you are worth every bit of copper that Cornwall has to offer, and then some."

His dark eyes were intent on her and she recalled all the times they have kissed. Then, as now, he also would get this dark and focused look and she felt as if she were a fly caught in the spider's web. She had gone tomato-red and was afraid people would notice the intimacy between them. She saw that Ross was equally caught up in their moment.

Distraction, she needed a distraction…

"I must say, this quail is superb and Verity informed me that you have overlooked the preparation. Are you always so involved, ma'am?" she threw in the direction of Great Aunt Agatha.

Great Aunt looked at her shrewdly, obviously realizing what was going on here. She looked at Ross, who was looking down and Demelza swore she saw the bemused expression on the woman's face. She was enjoying it! She finally turned to Demelza, "Of course, I do. I have to make sure that the
table at the house I live in is most respectable. But, dear Mr. Carne, how refreshing it is to see a young woman, who pays attention to such details. Some ladies spend their days in other pursuits..."
A long pause made Ms. Tigue squirm. "If you stay here long enough, I must share some of our family recipes with you."

"You are most kind, ma'am," Demelza demurred and Ross finally caught his breath and settled down. He took a large gulp of wine and looked up at his relative.

"What's with you, Nephew? You aren't catching your cold, are you? If you are, ask Ms. Carne for some restorative."

"No, Great Aunt. 'Tis only the quail. It was so delicious and I bit more than I could chew."

"You lost all your manners in the colonies, Nephew."

"I am sure a few days in Ms. Carne's company would cure my manners better than any of her restoratives," Ross said with a wide smile and it was Demelza turn to look down and fight a large smile. He was such a flirt.

The dinner was finally over and no one cared to say anything to Demelza directly. She caught George Warleggan watch her and Ross carefully and wondered if the other man could undermine Ross somehow through her. He was very quiet and, if he spoke, it was in measured and deliberate terms. She imagined that he thought himself far more intelligent than many in the room, but the quirks of the societal system were stacked against him. She could sympathize with his frustration over the seemingly unfair system. After all, she felt like society was particularly uncaring towards women without regard to their worth. But she found that like Ross she couldn't abide the Warleggan's mercantile nature.

Before she could spend too much time worrying about what the local banking family thought of her, she was directed to the center of the sitting room for a performance. Demelza paled at the thought of so many refined people watching her sing. Unpolished as she was, she knew that Verity and Elizabeth would catch any and all of her mistakes. And then, of course, the choice of song would be up for criticism as well. She hardly knew anything other than Cornish folk songs...

Too late to lament and worry, she reminded herself. Slowly, she followed Elizabeth to where the harp was placed. She tried to ignore the slight shaking she could already feel in the backs of her knees, making her wonder if she simply would fall from nerves. The trembling traveled upward and settled in her stomach, making it roil and flip. She stepped up to Elizabeth and the other woman gave her the most beautiful smile and a slight nod. There was a great understanding in her eyes, like she knew exactly what Demelza was thinking.

And perhaps she did. She was a society woman and her maiden days were probably spent being assessed just like brood mares on the market day. Elizabeth, quiet and delicate, probably disliked this part of her existence as well. Being the daughter of the prominent family, she was better positioned than Demelza, but this distinction also hid the great burden. Elizabeth had to be the outward perfection; her choices and actions were always a reflection on not just Elizabeth herself, but her family as well. She was no freer than Demelza herself was, when she ran away from her own family.

In that moment, when Elizabeth gave her this silent support, Demelza felt like she understood this woman. And maybe understood what attracted Ross to her as well. There was a quiet fortitude in this fragile beauty. Demelza nodded as well, knowing that her eyes warmed over and took a deep breath.

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Ross could hardly believe his ears. He heard Demelza before, in Nampara. The quiet singing was becoming synonymous with home and comfort, but this… this was entirely different. Demelza's clear voice, soft and deep, started like the tinkling brook and swell at the high points like a tide that crashes onto the shore, only to retreat back to the clearest of notes. She was like a true maestro and controlled her voice innately, commanding it to rise and fall along the melody. Each verse gained more confidence and depth, her voice stronger and more lyrical; the nerves gone and only emotion remained.

He was mesmerized… Stupefied… Taken prisoner…

She was a mermaid… Born of the sea and possessing its beguiling beauty.

She was a siren… Her voice nor less powerful than her physical beauty in conquering any and all.

He could hardly credit that this was Danny, his one-time servant and the bane of his existence. The boy who made him question everything about himself…

Oh, how blind he was…

She was a gem, an angel, a mermaid and a siren. She was a pagan goddess and Gaelic words of the song were an ancient spell that made everyone fall under her thrall.

She sang and looked directly at him as if to draw strength from his presence and that moment he was willing to pledge his entire life to her. She could have him at her beck and call and he would be the happiest of mortals to serve her.

But she was far too merciful. The gaze that she directed at him was full of so much love, that he had no doubt that just as he was ready to pledge his life to her – she was ready and willing to pledge her life to him.

He loved her, just as she loved him…

* This was a shout-out to the Horatio Hornblower books and TV-show.

Chapter End Notes

I tried to describe (poorly) that magical moment in the series, when Demelza sings and Ross visibly falls in love. I thought the actors did a superb job and I wanted that moment in the story as well...
Chapter Summary

Some transitional stuff and a proposal...

Chapter Notes

I am terribly sorry, dear readers. I was on spring break last week and the connection was awful most of the time. I also sprained my thumb (!). It turns out humans use thumbs a lot. I now have to wear this wrist/thumb stabilizing thing that makes typing really awkward. So, I apologize for the delay.

Ross' own realization felt monumental and yet to most attendees it was just a remarkable performance. No one could argue that Demelza's singing was evocative. It may have been unpolished and there may have been some notes that fell flat, but those shortcomings were overshadowed by the undeniable emotion and lyricism that imbued her performance. Everyone was taken with it and Ross knew he wasn't the only one affected by it.

There were a few pursed lips, but majority of people were just coming out of the trance that her singing brought on. Verity was the first one to begin applause and everyone joined in. His own Uncle, seemingly an implacable pragmatist, had a soft expression on his face.

"What a treat this was, my dear Ms. Carne. I must commend your mother for raising you to know this part of your heritage," he clapped and kissed Demelza's hand.

For her part, she looked equal parts affected and shy, "You are far too kind, Mr. Poldark. And I must thank Elizabeth for providing such an excellent accompaniment."

Elizabeth nodded politely and then gave Demelza a loaded look. It was as if the two women somehow had an understanding. It surprised him, because he could not imagine such an outcome. Demelza was down to earth and practical in ways that no one from his class, especially a woman, could imagine. And Elizabeth was a perfect embodiment of the upper class refinement. Everything she said and done was proper and polite, but it did leave one to wonder what she really was like outside of the rigors of the acceptable behavior. He reasoned that Demelza was indeed partly magical for she was able to forge understandings and relationships with people of all creeds.

"Demelza, my dear, you were wonderful," Verity burst in with a bright smile.

Blushing, Demelza demurred quietly, "Not that wonderful. You must have heard all the notes I missed... I can't thank Elizabeth enough for covering for me so well."

"In music, a proper technique is nothing without the emotion powering the performance. And you have that in spades. Truly, you have nothing to worry about," Elizabeth said softly and then added in even lower tones. "I wouldn't worry about anyone noticing. I find that people's appreciation and understanding of music is like their taste in any arts and politics: much spoken of, but rarely truly
owned."

Verity blinked, Demelza smiled coyly, Uncle Charles smirked and Captain Blamey coughed at this pronouncement.

As if remembering herself, Elizabeth blushed and left with apologies to find Frances. After a bit of silence, Uncle Charles cleared his throat.

"I believe your tisanes helped Elizabeth quite a bit. Why, I think this is the most animated I have seen her in months. Now, if you had a poultice for my heartburn..."

There was general laughter and Demelza stopped blushing. Everyone congratulated her and even her detractors could not argue with the general mood of approbation. Verity held onto Demelza's hand, squeezing it every now and then, and it made Ross wish he had siblings or close friends like that.

Both young women were called to Great Aunt's side and Ross walked over to where most of his investors congregated. He almost reached the group, when he spotted Ms. Tigue making determined strides in his direction. Quickly he ducked behind the curtain, wondering how soon after Captain Blamey proposed would be too soon for him to ask Demelza's hand in marriage.

Ready to leave his hiding spot, he approached the curtain and heard hushed tones of Warleggan uncle and nephew. Etiquette required that he made himself known, but he was in unenviable situation no matter his intentions: if he appeared now, he would look suspicious. He resolved to ignore conversation until he heard his name and Demelza's.

"Well, you must see now that Poldarks are all about wasting opportunities, George. Look at Ross Poldark. Just when I think he has head for business, he proves me wrong. He could have had his choice of brides: girls from rising families, girls with dowries to prop his endeavor. Yet, he practically declares himself to a penniless miss. No need to strive so hard to be accepted by them."

"They were, are and will be one of the prominent families in the area, Uncle. Whether they are wastrels or not, their storied family history stands behind them. And I wouldn't call Ross a wastrel. The Wheal Leisure is producing copper and he achieved that without coming to us."

"It still bothers you that he refused your offer?"

"I can't help but think of it as a judgment on my character..."

"Or our standing..."

"Other gentlemen and women perhaps would turn their noses at us even as our money is keeping them afloat. But Ross Poldark is different. I think he genuinely dislikes us for who we are, not what we are."

"You cannot control how other people behave, Nephew. But you can control what you can do."

"Not much at the moment. While copper is flowing and being sold, his investors won't desert him. I hoped that the scandal with the duel would shake their confidence, but..."

"But it only takes one stumble. There is something to be made of the reason for a duel. Perhaps, it was about different Poldark woman-"

"No, Uncle. Not that."

"The Chynoweth are always in need of a credit. If you liked her so much-"
"That's enough, Uncle."

"Have it your way, although heart is a poor advisor. At least, Ross Poldark's interests are engaged elsewhere. It must make Frances happy."

"Yes, Ms. Carne seems like a delightful young woman, although poor and with very little prospects—"

"Her prospects are a sight better than Ms. Tigue's at the moment."

Ross heard low chuckles and wondered if this was the first time he heard George Warleggan laugh. What a miserable fellow he was.

"I must say I was never more entertained when Ms. Carne was so deliciously insolent to Mrs. Tigue. 'I am self-taught and only need to please myself,' indeed."

"By Jov, Nephew, do you like Ms. Carne?"

George snorted delicately, just as Ross clenched his fists in a fit of jealousy, "Please, Uncle. Ms. Carne has joie-de-vivre that might be a tad too... vivacious for my liking. But I do admire her so thoroughly trouncing the gentle folks, while being polite. No wonder that old crow, Agatha Poldark, likes her."

They finally moved away, leaving Ross alone to think about what he heard. George liked Demelza. Because she was impertinent to the gentry. And, apparently, Elizabeth as well. His uncle was truly disgusting, discussing everyone and everything as items in the gross ledger. Both paid excessive attention to his affairs. Specifically, the Wheal Leisure. He had to be careful, lest his investors turn on him. A lot of them were already indebted to the Warleggans... It was apparent that the uncle wanted money and George--- George wanted control. Over Ross.

He shook his head. No need to worry about this now... He'd think on it later, after this dinner.

Demelza lied in the lovely guest bed that was her own while she stayed at Trenwith. Somehow, after the fancy dinner, it dawned on her - all at once - just how much her life has changed. She was living, breathing, sleeping (!), being treated and waited upon like an honest-to-god gentle-born young miss. Incongruity of it seemed so vast that she kept waiting for hordes of disappointed masses to break down the doors and drag the impostor out. The butterflies that took up residence in her belly at the beginning of the dinner, finally subsided and that incessant trembling inside stopped.

She needn't have worried. She survived. Some - Ross and Verity, but they were biased - would argue that she was a smashing success at this soiree. Oh, Judas... Even in her mind she used fancy words like soiree and consommé. What a lark! She remembered vividly how often she had to look up new, fancy, words when she learned to read with the old Mr. Poldark. And then how often she had to remember to speak more plainly with Jenny and Jimmy. And now this fancy - educated, polished, sophisticated - way of speaking was natural to her. She'd come a long way since she was a runaway. It was almost as if she could become Ross' wife and not embarrass him.

Ross... Predictably, her thoughts went back to the man, who has occupied all her thoughts for a while now. He was very flirtatious tonight. So much so that Agatha Poldark mentioned something about wedding bells being in the future of more than one Poldark. She blushed hotly when the old woman said that to her and Verity, the two of them looking anywhere but their respective suitors. Part of Demelza still worried that she was simply an obligation to Ross.
But a much larger part of her wondered now if he might possibly feel a tendre for her. He was charming and chivalrous and, at one point, voiced a very necessary support of her, but it was his face during her performance that made her think that he loved her. She never saw such an open look of admiration of anyone's face before. Admiration, awe, very tangible pride, a hint of sadness because the song was melancholy... But amid all these emotions was that look of sparkling hope mixed in with desire that made her think that the combination of all these might be a total sum of... love. She sang of love and she looked at him as if her eyes were compass drawn to the only true North in her life - Ross Poldark. And when she looked at him, she felt like he returned that feeling - he was looking at her like she was his morning star, the brightest in the sky, shining when the night waned.

She chuckled at herself. What a flight of fancy... But even as she reminded herself not to get carried away, an irrepressible smile bloomed on her lips.

Ross Poldark may have stolen her peace and quiet, but she was confident that she stole his in return.

Next morning Captain Blamey was at Trenwith the moment the family broke fast. He stepped in, at once serious and nervous, and Demelza knew that today would be the day he proposed. It seemed that everyone thought so too. Elder Mr. Poldark frowned, but had a resigned look on his face. In truth, Demelza thought that Captain Blamey made a better impression on Verity's father over the course of their courtship. The good Captain was quick to frown and often it was a wonder whether he would offense in things being said. Especially because Mr. Poldark was blunt, quite like Aunt Agatha. It was no wonder that Verity could handle the Captain. He was assertive and was used to commanding his men, but so was Mr. Poldark. And Verity may have been soft and spoke gently, but she had that ability to direct and diffuse. Sometimes Demelza wondered if the two men realized just how often they were managed by Verity.

Probably not. At least not anyone named Poldark. She would know - Ross almost never realized when she made suggestions that became his decisions.

As was the tradition now, Demelza walked out with the couple to chaperon. Verity looked very anxious and when Captain Blamey offered his hand to her, Verity clutched Demelza's elbow quite tightly. Verity looked up to her with eyes full of conflicting emotions and downright fear and Demelza wondered if her own stunned reaction to Ross' proposal was because it was such an unexpected shock. Verity, Poldarks, Trenwith - entire county in fact - expected this proposal and it made anticipation almost too much.

Demelza took her friend's hands in her own, gently squeezing them. She wasn't at liberty to reassure Verity verbally with the source of her unease right next to them, but she tried to communicate her own unwavering support through her expressions. Verity must have understood it, because she squeezed Demelza's hands back and then nodded slightly. Then, as an elegant woman that she was, she took a half turn that made her skirts swish and in one move threaded a free hand through Captain's elbow and inclined her head in some sort of invitation to lead. She looked so charming and elegant and graceful that Demelza blushed recalling her own first - clumsy - attempts at curtsies.

They walked slowly along the path that led them to the cliffs. Captain was silent and Demelza could hear almost forcibly excited chatter of her friend. It was obvious that the Captain was either gathering his courage or waiting for an opportune moment to speak his mind. Demelza felt like the most unwelcome intruder and shortened her own steps to give as much distance between herself and the couple as possible.

Clearly, it was not enough. The Captain was still quiet and Demelza marveled at the man who so easily challenged Mr. Frances to a duel, but quailed at the sight of Verity's bright eyes.
"Verity, my dear," she began, "would you mind waiting here by the tree a bit?" Verity looked unsure as they were on the path by the cliffs with the sea on one side and a meadow on the other. "I am in need of the catmint and verbena saplings. They are good for the butterfly garden that Elizabeth wanted to create. Would you mind terribly to wait while I search for the perfect ones?"

Captain Blamey, who at first was startled to hear her talk, looked in a mix of determination and gratitude. Oh, good, he understood her plan. Demelza was sure of it, because he nodded to her ever so slightly.

Verity looked like Demelza was leaving her alone in the tavern. However, she took long enough to answer and Demelza just turned and stepped into the meadow.

She quickly put some distance and knelt in the grass ostensibly looking for pretty blooms. The couple by the tree stood far enough that she could not hear them, but she could see their interactions.

Captain began pacing a little and Verity fiddled with the handle of the parasol. - Demelza pulled a blade of grass without looking.

Captain stopped abruptly and turned to Verity, who stopped fidgeting and lifted her head up. - Demelza pulled a whole fistful.

Captain closed the distance between him and Verity and took her hand in his. - Demelza ducked a little lower and stopped pretending that she was looking for anything.

Captain started speaking, his face animated and eyes fixed on Verity's. - Demelza actually stopped breathing and watched the action with intent eyes.

Captain said something, while lifting Verity's hand to his lips and placing a lingering kiss on it. - Demelza blushed and almost looked away, but she was too curious.

Verity lifted her free hand, dropping a parasol in the motion, and cupped Captain's face. She said something and it must have been a good answer, because Captain Blamey smiled and leaned over her friend and - Demelza looked away. It was their moment and she needn't intrude on it.

She was still crouching amid the meadow flowers and wondered how long was appropriate for the newly-engaged couple to... seal their understanding. Her mind drifted to her own courtship and she blushed when she realized that with Verity engaged, she herself was closer to being married to Ross. What a lark...

She rose when she heard her friend's voice calling for her. She came up to the couple by the tree and the combined power of their happiness was a sight to behold. Verity was smiling and glowing, while Captain Blamey had that stunned and mopey look that Demelza once saw on Jimmy's face when Jinni produced a daughter.

"Demelza, my dear, please let me share with your the most wonderful news! Andrew asked for my hand in marriage. We are engaged to marry. Oh, my happiness is so complete. Oh, I could hug the world!" Verity beamed at Demelza and proceeded to hug her with the surprising amount of strength.

Even thought it was an expected news, Demelza found herself being swept away in the moment. She hugged her friend back and smiled at the Captain, "It's wonderful! I am so happy for you!"

"I must go back to Trenwith to speak with your father, darling," Captain Blamey positively cooed at Verity and Demelza almost laughed at his besotted look.
"Then we shall walk back. I am sure the butterfly garden can wait," she said impishly and all three of them laughed.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

So, our couple is edging towards confessing their feelings.

Chapter Notes

They certainly are attracted to each other, but Ross only now realized he loves Demelza and he correctly understands that she might not believe him yet...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The good news spread quickly. While Captain Blamey and Mr. Poldark secluded themselves in the office - no doubt to discuss the ever boring subject of settlement - the women of Trenwith were left to decide on the ceremony itself. No one wanted to wait, but Aunt Agatha was set in her ways. She cared little about most of the denizens of Cornwall, but 'Poldarks were a family of certain consequence, my dear.' Therefore, she insisted on crossing her Ts and dotting her Is. Verity had warned Demelza of all that a proper wedding would entail, but, despite her mental preparation, Demelza still found herself greatly overwhelmed at the sheer number of teas and visits that Aunt Agatha had planned. She herself was only a guest and a friend, but nevertheless she and Elizabeth, for their part, had become immediately engrossed in the veritable storm of lace, flowers, and ribbons that had to be decided upon. Verity, who shared Elizabeth's rather quiet style in clothing, clung her sister's hand with great alarm growing in her eyes as Mrs. Chynoweth, the only visitor that day, discussed all the possible lace trims and sleeves styles for a stupendous number of dresses Verity presumably needed for her trousseaux. It was fortuitous that Elizabeth was equipped to deal with her own mother. She, very quietly and clutching her growing belly, would simply respond in negative whenever her mother spoke of exotic clothes and trips to London for shopping at the best warehouses. Under her management, the number of dresses and lace trims was greatly reduced. So much the better, because Verity had to rein in Aunt Agatha, who began to recite the tremendous list of guests who simply must be invited to the engagement ball and the wedding itself.

So preoccupied were Elizabeth and Verity, that Demelza simply took on the task of writing down every final decision that the other four women made. It was easy for her to do so, having had an experience as the secretary to both Ross and his father. By the time the visiting hours were over, there were four parchment lists full of tasks and names. Demelza, in the habit of organizing different lists for Wheal Leisure and Nampara, created these lists with groupings of similar tasks to be undertaken: engagement ball (guest list and menu), wedding (guest list and menu), dresses for both occasions (possible colors and styles), trousseaux (categories of items, numbers of items, possible sources). She submitted her lists to Verity with a shy smile, unsure if it was presumptuous of her to do so.

"Ms. Carne," Mrs. Chynoweth began. "What a clever idea! And such good penmanship. Now, we can work off these lists to see if our tasks are complete."

Demelza almost snorted, recalling the stubborn cursive letters and the Herculean task that was
copying them again and again until the flow became a second nature to her. The late Joshua Poldark would have been proud.

"Ms. Carne, you must stay here for the wedding planning. The engagement ball would be in one week's time and the wedding another month after that. Surely, your family can spare you?" Aunt Agatha pronounced.

Demelza wasn't prepared for this development. They planned for her to go back to being Danny in Nampara until the wedding day and then come back after Verity's honeymoon. She only had those dresses that Ross bought her for a 'visit' at Trenwith. And she really missed Nampara and her inhabitants. She missed the freedom being Danny gave her.

And Ross. She missed him the most.

"I am quite surprised, ma'am. My plans have been so settled. I hardly anticipated staying here beyond the planned time. I, of course, would be willing to help-

"Then write to your family about your change of plans. I am sure you want to help Verity. And I would like to have one person with a good head on her shoulders. If nothing else, you can help us write the invitations."

Demelza's eyes grew big at the old lady's decided tone and Verity shot her an apologetic look, "Aunt Agatha, Demelza is too polite to mention, but she had not packed for such a long stay and, I am sure, her family misses her too."

"Nonsense. Her father can spare her and I am sure there is a housekeeper to make sure everything is well-run. As for your clothes, why not take some of Verity's? She would be changing her wardrobe to that of a married lady as it is. Take Verity's dresses and alter them. Our Maggie is quick with the needle or you might take to the seamstress."

Seeing the old lady's determined face, Demelza chose to close the subject before she and her hostess butted heads, "I shall write to Sussex, ma'am. However, I must acknowledge, that if my family requests that I come back, then I shall do so at once."

"Very well."

/

When Ross came to visit the day after the dinner party, the newly engaged Captain was already at Trenwith taking his tea with Verity and others. Of course, Ross had already heard the news, but he was busy at the mine and wasn't fit to be seen after a day on the inside. The copper was coming along nicely, but the prices charged by the smelting factory were low enough as to make the whole venture a break-even enterprise. The smelting company was the only one in the area and its owners had no incentive to raise their prices. Of course, the Warleggans were behind the factory as well and Ross was doubly irritated with the situation. Until there was another place to melt the ore, he and other mines were stuck with the unfavorable prices.

A visit to Trenwith would be a respite from the hard work that Ross had to put at Wheal Leisure, where he spent more and more time. Nampara was surprisingly a quiet place now. Without Demelza and Jinni's reduced working hours, it was only him and Jud and Prudie. It came as no surprise to him, of course, that he would miss Demelza so acutely. She, even when she was Danny, was his constant companion and a helpmate in the years that he took over Nampara as its master. His missed the company, the conversation, quick smiles and soft singing. And, of course, he especially missed Demelza's kisses, laughter, her warm eyes and that gorgeous hair. She had been 'visiting' Trenwith
for almost a month now and he counted days until she would be back home, in Nampara.

He greeted everyone and offered sincere congratulations to his cousin and the Captain, but his smiles was directed at Demelza, who kept looking away in dismay. Ross was on high alert immediately. He did not think that anyone would be rude or condescending to Demelza now, but something was upsetting her. He desperately wanted some time alone with her and luck was on his side.

Captain Blamey, the besotted man who smiled in the most lovesick ways whenever he looked at Verity, rather abruptly suggested that the day was nice and it would be a shame if they haven't enjoyed the outdoors. No one mentioned, of course, that it rarely rained in Cornwall and this particular nice day was just another one in a series of such days. Aunt Agatha cleared her throat and reminded Verity that they had visits to make, but agreed that a small walk would be most diverting.

Gloves and parasols were collected and the four of them were at the grand entrance, when Demelza darted to to the parlor and returned with a book. Ross didn't even bother vocalizing a question, merely raising his brows at the redhead.

She backed away with a dimpled smile and held up the huge rectangle of a book she had brought out. "I wish to compare the plants hereabouts to those in this guide to the fauna of southern England. I fear I shall be quite absorbed doing so and have absolutely no attention for your conversation or doings," she winked at the engaged couple, adding, "However, I might need help with locating the plants and would certainly appreciate a steady hand if I step off the path..." This was addressed to Ross and he looked at the blush rising in Verity's cheeks and Captain Blamey's answering, knowing, smile.

Oh, oh... Clever girl...

"Allow me and my steady hand to assist you, Ms. Carne. I admit that botany wasn't my strong suit, but I do know these lands quite well and would be of assistance in your endeavor."

The four set off on their walk, and Ross and Demelza had soon trailed a fair distance behind the engaged couple. As promised, any time Blamey glanced back at them, Demelza appeared preoccupied by her book. The distance between the two groups deadened sound, and as Blamey animatedly talked with Verity, to Ross it felt like they were alone.

Verity stopped walking and looked back at them. As if on signal, Demelza flipped through the book and pointed to an illustration as if seeing it for the first time. She stepped off the path and bent to look at something and Ross quickly followed her.

"Have you had an agreement with Verity on this most excellent of tactics?"

She blushed becomingly and whispered back, "It was a spontaneous plan on my part yesterday, when Captain was eager to propose, but could not find time alone. Then, as now, I chose to look for herbs."

The large book she held open so it entirely blocked the view of another couple. Ross had to lift himself a little to observe them. Captain and Verity stood impossible close, her parasol bent so that their head were obscured, but Ross did not miss Captain's hand on his cousin's waist. Well, then...

Before he could complete that thought, Demelza laid her gloved hand on his cheek and pulled him to look towards her. Blushing brightly at her forwardness, she leaned up to kiss him. Distracted from his earlier confusion over her upset looks, Ross quickly followed her lead and soon the first kiss led to another and another, until Demelza pulled away flushed.
"I know it is to be very improper of me to allow such liberties to a man, who is not my wedded husband or even my intended, but I missed you so..." she trailed off to look at him with eyes of clearest blue, like the sky above them. "That is if I were a proper miss," she continued quietly and her eyes turned darker, which he knew meant an upset Demelza.

"What has brought this on, mermaid? You have acquitted yourself so completely in acting like the most proper miss so far. I believe that you have made my entire family love you and it is a no easy fit. And the rest of the society - little that I care about their good opinion - actually accepted you too. Even George Warleggan. So what is this about?" he said softly, tracing the line of her cheekbone that reddened and warmed at his touch.

"No, it's not that. Your aunt wants me to stay through the wedding to help Verity. Elizabeth needs more and more rest and Aunt Agatha is quite old, despite being spry. I do wish to help, but that means not going to Nampara for another month... I-I- I miss Nampara and I miss you... God help me, I even miss being Danny. Look at me, Ross! I am wearing lace gloves in the summer and can't spent unchaperoned time with any man!"

Ross wanted to dance a fast jig from happiness at her heartfelt confession and he quickly looked at their companions. They walked a few steps more and once again stood very close obscured by Verity's parasol. Demelza's sweet lips were red and entrancing so he leaned over and kissed her again, allowing himself to deepen the kiss as he wanted for quite some time.

"I miss you to. So-so much. Nampara is too quiet without you and I miss your clever observations and attention for details. Somehow you remember names, numbers, places... That is to say that I understand why Aunt Agatha would want your help. And Verity too. And I would be upset that your are not in Nampara sooner, but I'll visit as often as I can and Verity and Captain Blamey would need their very botanically-inclined chaperons."

This time Demelza's eyes were clear blue again and she took Ross' arm and firmly grasped his hand. Her face glowed a delightful shade of red, "You miss me?"

"Most profoundly, my little mermaid. You stole my peace of mind the moment I spied you on the shore..."

She blushed bright red and whispered almost to herself, "I think you held my attention the moment I saw you for the first time in Nampara... I've never seen men like that before... And had no hopes of you noticing someone like me..."

Ross wanted to roar with happiness; he wished to tilt his head back and shout at the skies. He was worried though that if he confessed now, she would not believe him. Worse, she'd think his interest and feelings were fueled by carnal desires. After all, he spoke of the mermaid enough that Demelza might think that was all that he wanted her for. So, instead of blurting his love to her, he laced his fingers with hers and smiled widely.

For a time smug happiness prevented speech. The sweet taste of her mouth lingered. Everything was perfect.

They walked slowly again, stopping every now and then to either steal a kiss themselves of let the other couple do the same. Eventually, they joined Verity and the Captain. Ross walked next to the older man and managed a conversation about conditions on the Continent, despite Captain's very distracted state of mind. As a newly engaged man, Captain was an interesting mix. At times he was the same severe and abrupt man Ross knew before, and yet, often, his face would softened into the most besotted look and he would trail off staring at his beloved. One such lapse made Ross smile and Captain caught the tail end of Ross' amusement. The older man flushed and spoke softly.
"You may think me a ridiculous character from a street farce: a swain violently in love," at Ross' words of protest he continued. "My road to this happiness was not an easy one. My first marriage, my first wife... I would not speak ill of her. I was so young then, fond of my drink and deaf to the calls of reason and caution. My temper, quick as it is now, was almost violent before. I made mistakes aplenty and was punished for them too... Few men would look at me without judgement and even fewer women. I despaired of finding familial happiness and resolved to simply live as an honest man. But then your cousin came along and my foolish heart would not listen to reason. Her forgiveness, her trust, her love are worth everything. Everything."

Ross was lost for words in the face of such emotion and simply nodded his head. Captain Blamey nodded in response and then looked to Demelza and back to Ross, "Ms. Carne is a worthy young woman. My Verity thinks highly of her and I know just how clever and spirited she could be. A man could do a lot worse than a clever, brave, worthy woman with little money to her name."

Ross was left stupefied at this. Captain Blamey, grouchy and severe man, approved of Demelza as well. It would seem that Demelza had a unique talent of being liked by all. Worthy woman indeed...

Chapter End Notes

I promise we'll move at a faster pace next chapter. I have a plan...
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Ross has an idea about the price of copper. And confesses to Frances about his plans to propose. And dress shopping with Verity brings some unpleasant excitement.

Chapter Notes

I am adding some drama here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Preparations for the engagement ball were mercifully short. It was in interests of every party to have this new alliance confirmed and settled in the minds of the gossiping public. So much of public's attention was taken with the upcoming ball and the future marriage itself - not to mention it gave everyone an opportunity to revisit every possible Poldark related rumor and event. In fact, Ross found himself to be the host to many visitors. Jinni and Prudie traded acting as his maid and Jinni learned to stock up biscuits even when no visitors were expected. It was because of so much constant traffic that Ross charged Jimmy and other villagers to widen the entrance alley and mark it with stone. There was plenty of it dug out to make way in the mines and it was only a few days of work to arrange a wider, more stately entrance.

Demelza would like it, he thought.

Between the idle gossipers and well-wishers, were visits from some of his investors, conveniently disguised as social engagements. It was a good thing too given George Warleggan's interest in his affairs. Ross, already missing his trusted secretary and partner in Danny, felt acutely the absence of Demelza's quick mind that could spring any information related to the Wheal Leisure at mere prompting. But even without her there, it was obvious that until the price of copper ore went up, his venture would take a while to break even, let alone make substantial profit. He shared his frustrations with Demelza and she listened as she always did when he talked about things that mattered to him.

"How far away is the next smelting plant?" she asked as they walked behind Verity and her Captain. "Probably too expensive to move the ore there anyway."

"It is, unless I own a boat. However, being at sea risks potential shipwreck," Ross sighed.

"Then, you and other mines have to take the only option available." Demelza said quietly. "It's like on the market day in fall: a big harvest means cheaper potatoes. I wouldn't pay more than I have to even if the farmer might need more money."

"Abundant supply and a single buyer..." Ross began and trailed off, a thought bouncing around his head spurred by Demelza's analogy. "Single buyer..."

She remained quiet, by now aware of his habit of falling into deep thought.
And though he was preoccupied her small hand, resting in the crook of the elbow, was reassuring and comforting.

The day of the ball was arrived as sunny as was typical of Cornwall in summer. Ross took a swim in the small cove, remembering vividly his encounter with Demelza. His mermaid seemed farther out of reach and yet one day closer to being his. The ball would mark the beginning of the new schedule for him. Now that he realized that he loved her, he saw no need in her being Verity's companion after his cousin's marriage. Demelza, wonderful and smart girl that she was, learned a lot while ‘visiting' Verity and would learn quite a bit more while staying in Trenwith for the wedding. He'd even ask Verity to show her the usual tasks of the lady of the house. Demelza knew a lot about running the household, but she needed to learn to be a hostess. And that task could be accomplished in the six weeks' time that left before Verity's nuptials.

And then he would propose...

He simply didn't see the need for longer wait. He didn't want to wait. He'd propose as he promised to her: after scandal with the duel died down and Verity's situation resolved. By then, he hoped, Demelza would feel more comfortable in her skills to be the wife he believed she needed.

It would be glorious. She'd be back in Nampara, where she belonged. Back by his side, where she should be. And in his marital bed, where he fervently hoped she wanted to be to.

The ball was a testament to the impressive skills of Aunt Agatha, Verity, Elizabeth and, to a certain extent, Demelza's. Plenty of white soup and punch; abundant flowers; good orchestra and every Cornish family of consequence in attendance. Poldarks presented a united and well-attired front. The receiving line, consisting of Uncle Charles and Aunt Agatha and the newly affianced couple, was something to behold: between his Uncle's gregariousness and Aunt Agatha's caustic remarks, no guest has left unscathed. Verity smiled so radiantly, she was lighting the room practically all by herself. Elizabeth was far enough along in her pregnancy that she was seated in a corner by the window, a pitcher of punch resting next to her on a small table. She was surrounded by all young mothers of the county, who clearly either entertained or scared her by their stories. Frances traveled the loop between his wife and the receiving line, at once excited and scowling. Captain Blamey looks were so severe that guests only stopped by him for briefest of times and left with the most perfunctory of greetings. Ross thought privately that he should assume this tactic, for all that Captain Blamey appeared a dour and angry man, he wasn't bothered for polite chit-chat.

He hasn't seen Demelza yet since she wasn't in the receiving line. He walked the room twice, exchanging pleasantries with fellow attendees, searching for his elusive girl. And then he saw her...

She wore the green dress. Only to call it green would be an understatement. It was silk and he wasn't sure how, but it was as if two different colours were woven together and depending on the fold of the dress it was at times green and at times blue, like the sea wave. There was sheen to it whenever light hit just the right way and it gave the dress of impression of constant movement. She was talking to people, her face lighting up with an easy smile and she was simply mesmerizing. Her gorgeous hair, bright as a flame now, was a perfect complement to the dress and for the umpteenth time he thought that she was part mermaid, for she looked like she came of the sea.

He approached her, carefully waiting for all unmarried women to leave Demelza alone and bowed smartly. She bobbed a small curtsy - not wobbly and very elegant - and he smiled again at the progress she's made.

"Ms. Carne, you look most lovely today. I must confess that your dress inspired some very poetic effusions on my part,” his words were flirtatious, but his smile was genuine.
"Mr. Poldark, I thank you. I did not know you to have poetic inclinations," she returned the genuine smile, even though he could see amusement dancing in her eyes.

"Ahh, but a muse can inspire even the most pedestrian of us. In fact, if you are not engaged otherwise, I would like the pleasure of dancing the first two sets with you. Mayhap I can present to you my poetic endeavors."

"Yes, my dance card is free," she curtsied again and he caught the tail-end of the disbelieving look she gave. He suspected he knew her feelings: they acted as if they were nothing more than young society people. A young gentleman farmer and a young miss of many accomplishments. But they both knew the truth: they were so much more... And very soon, he promised, they'd be even more to each other...

He was obliged to engage Verity to at least one set, as she was his cousin and soon his card filled in as well. He didn't worry about other young women anymore. To dance the opening set with Demelza would send a message of his preference to those, who haven't figured out yet where his interests were.

Demelza's fresh looks attracted a lot of attention and it appeared that her card was filled in as well. It was quite disconcerting to see her twirl around the room on the arms of another men. He wasn't even particularly jealous of the other men looking at Demelza. How could they not when she was so beautiful? No, he was jealous of her easy smiles and attention she bestowed on them. It was as if he wanted all her attention to be on him.

He sat out one set and had an unobstructed view of dancing Demelza and tried as he might, he couldn't stop his fists from clenching every time she saw he smile at whatever her partner said.

"Take care, cousin. If you continue in this fashion, poor Verity might have to endure another scandal involving a duel," Frances said jovially to him, clearly having already imbibed brandy.

"Frances," he said low. "Enjoying the festivities?"

"Well, I better find some enjoyment in his farce of an alliance."

"I thought you reconciled to this marriage. Captain Blamey has proven-"

"Please. Our hands were forced into this and you know it."

"So this is what rattles you? That it didn't go your way? Frances, Verity's life, her happiness, should not be held hostage."

"You don't have a sister or a brother to worry about how their actions reflect on you and your family."

"It's true. I don't. But Verity hardly doing anything to make the reputation of Trenwith Poldarks suffer. Truly, Frances, you have to let go of this disappointment and learn to be happy about what's to come."

"You obviously are happy. No doubt your future has some happy prospects. Ms. Carne is a delight and seems to favor you."

"I plan to offer for her. After Verity's wedding," Ross couldn't contain his smile.

Frances' responding smile was genuine, "I am happy for you, cousin."
Somehow the ball and the dancing that they have done, convinced everyone that Ross was officially courting her. Demelza would have laughed at the formality of the courtship rules in high society, if she wasn't at once deliriously happy and worried at the same time. Ross' intentions, the idea that he wanted to marry her, filled her with so much joy, she'd find herself smiling with no reason at all. Yet, she was still worried that his decision had nothing to do with his affections and everything to do with the obligation he felt for his once servant.

That, and certain carnal attraction that existed between them.

She blushed at the thought...

Verity gave her knowing looks and smiled, but Demelza never felt comfortable discussing such matters with Verity. Maybe it was because Verity was a true gentlewoman and Demelza could not imagine talking to her about pedestrian things that happened between man and woman. Maybe it was because Elizabeth was Verity's sister now and discussing Ross and matters of his heart might be uncomfortable for Verity. As it was, Mr. Frances pointed out Ross' interest in her at the breakfast after the ball and Elizabeth suddenly paled and asked to be excused. While Demelza blushed at the insinuation, it didn't skip her attention that Elizabeth morning sickness was very tellingly timed. It was as if she still held some feelings for Ross and the news of his possible new interest upset her. She felt like Mr. Frances came to the same conclusion as his face clouded and he stormed out of Trenwith and rode to Bodmin.

No, Demelza wouldn't discuss this matter with anyone at Trenwith.

There was one unexpected supporter of her success. Mrs. Chynoweth was most welcoming of Demelza when she showed her talent for herbal medicine to help Elizabeth. She was first to appreciate Demelza's organized approach to the wedding planning and, after the ball, she encouraged Demelza to 'look to improve her situation and not miss opportunities presented.' Demelza had a suspicion that Mrs. Chynoweth benevolence was powered by the same emotion that drove Mr. Frances: because of the history between Elizabeth and Ross, they perhaps wanted him settled down and soon.

They were at the atelier, having already purchased the fabrics to make an entire new wardrobe for Verity. Mrs. Chynoweth was on hand and made sure that Demelza got her time with one of the seamstresses to alter Verity's older dresses. Demelza would admit that the older woman had an eye for colours and patterns and her suggestions, while easy to accomplish, would alter the dresses significantly to make them appear to be entirely new. She paid a great deal of attention to Mrs. Chynoweth for it was an invaluable lesson in fashion and sewing that Demelza didn't know she needed. If she were to become part of this world, she most certainly had to know about the appropriate dresses, the complimentary colours, the inexpensive ways of altering dresses and so on.

She was wearing one of the Verity's pale pink day dresses - modest neckline, petty coats and stomacher made of the simpler cotton fabrics - and had to admit that this shade of pink wasn't well suited for her complexion. Her skin looked dull and the pale pink color was so close to her own complexion that it was hard to distinguish the dress. Mrs. Chynoweth shook her head and Demelza began to unlace the dress.

"Well, that eliminates pink as the colour for your dress to the wedding, my dear. And yet, we need to find one that would be pale enough to not overwhelm the bride." Mrs. Chynoweth flipped through fabrics and dresses, while Demelza gaped at her. Catching her expression, the older woman spoke, "Well, Elizabeth cannot stand up with Verity and you are a dear friend to her. You would need a new dress. Of course, green and red would look good with your hair and eyes, but these are
predictable choices, too bold for the wedding at any rate, and you already wore dresses in those colours."

She'd need a new dress because she'd stand up with Verity... She needed to discuss this with Ross and Verity. She didn't have enough money and she could not expect either Poldark to cover for her. Again.

She was so preoccupied with these thoughts as they left the atelier, it took her a moment to realize that something felt wrong. It was only when that feeling intensified into the feeling of being watched, the feeling of greasy cloak over her, that she stopped at once remembering the last time she felt it.

Her not-Uncle, his hands, his foul breath...

She gulped and lowered her head so the hat she wore covered her face. Darting quick glances, she tried to locate the man, who was in her nightmares often enough. They walked slowly, hands full with fabrics and other items, and she used the time to search.

And then she saw him. He was hanging at the corner of the Red Lion with a few other men, their red faces betraying that they were into their cups already. The three ladies walking past them proved to be a sufficient enough distraction and Demelza saw their eyes landing on her and her companions. She lowered her head further down and even lifted one hand as if to hold to the brim of it, all to obscure the view. Heart hammering hard, making her hands shake and sweat break out down her spine, she walked as normal as she could.

Please, please, please...

She begged God to help her avoid being discovered and it was so that luck was on her side. She and Verity were walking behind Mrs. Chynoweth, whose icy and disdainful looks must have deterred the men, as they let her pass without a comment. When Verity and her walked by the group, a low whistle came from one of them followed by an unintelligible murmur that caused others to laugh and leer at them.

Verity's face turned pale and quite without consultation, they both quickened their steps. They were almost past the group when one of the men made a move as if to touch Verity's dress and she jumped back a little. Nasty laughter broke out and the men were openly leering at them now. Demelza had only one goal in mind: to leave this place as quickly as possible, so she marched on, dragging Verity with her.

There were footsteps behind them and Demelza was not above running, when a loud noise and a curse came from behind. She looked back very briefly, unable to resist the curiosity, and saw that a seaman stepped in front of the group and by the looks of it had punched one of the men. It was obvious that a fist fight was about to break out as more and more seamen joined the first one, and she turned back and proceeded to walk very-very fast, pulling Verity along.

Later, when they were at Trenwith and went over the events, Demelza realized with sudden horror that her plan to pass as a society miss was entirely terrible and naively optimistic. Today was a close call, but in reality it was inevitable. While she hid out in Nampara, disguised as Danny, she could conceivably escape being recognized. But now that she was lived as a young woman? With her family living in whereabouts of Bodmin? And Verity's wedding being the society event of the season? If anyone found out that she was an impostor and deceived the people of Cornwall high society, the repercussions would be severe. She wasn't blind and she knew what the high-born folks thought of lower classes. They thought that class divisions were part of the divine order. They believed themselves to be innately better and, of course, they believed the lower classes to be of low morals and mean understanding. For her to have fooled them, she'd be making mockery of those
notions and no one likes to have to admit that they were wrong.

And yet, the hardest part for Demelza was the realization that she would hurt people, who treated her so kindly. The Trenwith Poldarks didn't deserve this. How would they feel to learn that the guest to whom they opened doors and hearts was a poor runaway and disobedient daughter of a miner?

She could not imagine hurting Ross or Verity with a scandal of this proportion: a scullery maid pretending to be a well-born young woman and planning to marry a scion of the ancient family.

How did she come to thinks that she could aspire above her station in life? How could she have been so... so... stupid? Her lot in life was to be the servant. Not marry somebody, who was so above her...

She had to tell Ross that the ruse was over. That she had to go back to being Demelza Carne, miner's daughter. Or Danny, orphan and homeless boy...

She could not hurt him...

Chapter End Notes

What do you think Ross would do when Demelza acts all self-sacrificial?
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

They talk. Ross is very persuasive. Demelza wants to be persuaded. And there are three little words that seal the deal.

Chapter Notes

I tried to do angst... And it sort of began this way, but then this Romelza are so sweet.

Demelza slept poorly: visions of being exposed as an impostor and betrayed faces of all Poldarks made her wake up in cold terror and it would take a while for her to calm down. By the time morning came she felt like she single handedly mowed the entirety of Nampara's lands. Still, she rallied and drank the morning coffee with relish. There were more tasks to accomplish today and she could think about her plans of untangling herself from Ross and other Podarks.

She was preoccupied with these plans so much so that Verity took notice of it and gently asked Demelza if she was faring well. This evidence of Verity's good opinion only strengthening her resolve to go through with her plans, so Demelza shook her in negation and went back to filling in envelopes with countless names and addresses.

When Captain Blamey came to visit, he was agitated and it soon became clear that he was aware of the incident in Bodmin. It so happened, that the sailors that defended the ladies were men under his command. They, of course, recognized Ms. Verity and set out to teach the hoodlums a lesson in manners. Still, Captain was concerned and insisted that from now on Verity traveled with either her father's servant or allowed one of his men to accompany her when she was in town.

"There really is no need for such measures, Andrew," Verity whispered to her groom. "I have successfully traversed these areas and Bodmin plenty of time."

"Yes, I am sure you have. But I believe that the situation is quite a bit different. The mines have been closing and, except for your cousin's new venture, there is not much work to be had hereabout. More and more men idling their days in the company of equally affected and the liquor flows freely. Those men were just some such affected people, Verity. They are miserable, angry, poor, have little means, and even less care for the world."

Demelza heard his explanation and ventured an inquiry, "Captain Blamey, what happened to the men, who accosted us?"

"My men have roughed them up and sent them to their homes."

So, her not-uncle was a free man still. Poor and unemployed, if one were to believe the Captain. That meant that she was still in danger of being discovered if she were to undertake more trips to Bodmin. She went back to her task and when the time came, she dutifully walked with Verity and the Captain.
Her best option was to honestly confess her fears to Ross. If she ran, which was a thought she entertained, she wouldn't put it past him to come searching for her. The man was stubborn if he had an idea in his mind. And she was sure that them being together was an idea for him. She had to come up with her arguments, to explain to him the dangers they were in. For all that he was a rule-breaker, now that he was a mine owner and had people, who depended on him, Ross understood what responsibility meant. If not to people of his class, then to the common people who worked for him.

Only when they do have that conversation, she was not prepared. At all.

Ross arrived at Trenwith, prepared to deal with his chaperon duties in the most lackadaisical manner. He found Verity in the parlor addressing envelopes and he leaned to kiss her cheek.

"You are all alone this fine afternoon?"

"Visiting hours are over and Andrew has already left. Elizabeth is probably taking her nap, as is Great Aunt Agatha."

"And Demelza? I thought she'd be helping you with these?" he pointed to the stack of papers.

"She did this morning and she chaperoned Andrew and I. She is resting, I think. Or reading. You know that she reads a lot," Verity spoke casually, but something seemed amiss in the carefully nonchalant manner of hers.

"What is going on Verity? Had anybody said something to upset her?"

"No, no, cousin, settle down. She has been in low spirits since yesterday and I cannot account for the reason for such a turn in mood," Verity appeared sincere and Ross settled next to her.

"What was yesterday?"

"We were at the atelier. My dresses are coming along. And I believe Verity had spent time with Mrs. Chynoweth: they were deeply in discussion on alternations to dresses."

Nothing so far seemed alarming. Demelza was quick to deny any splurges on herself, but Ross saw how her face lit up when she got a new dress or a trinket. So a certain dress-shopping fatigue that he himself would experience, probably didn't afflict her.

"Did Mrs. Chynoweth inadvertently offend Demelza?"

"No. I haven't heard their entire conversation, but they were smiling at each other and I don't think that it was mere politeness." Verity was quiet, filing in another envelope with tight writing. "Ross, has Demelza-? That is to say... Have you any idea how-? Well, there is no discrete way to ask..."

"Verity..."

"Ross, I believe that Demelza was uncomfortably reminded of the time when she was with her family last," Verity said quickly and looked away, red cheeked and her lips trembling.

"When Demelza was last with her family...’ Thoughts circled rapidly around those words, bouncing from memory to memory, until...

"What happened Verity?" his didn't mean it but his voice was hard and commanding, which made
Verity sat up straight and look at him in supplication.

"Ross, please, this could very well be my conjecture and nothing more..." at the impatient growl from Ross, she hurried. "There were these men on the street... They were simple men, farmers or miners... And they were... insouciant to us. They leered and laughed and one of them lunged as if to grab me." Verity shuddered delicately and Ross was engulfed in the feeling sympathy. He squeezed her hand and she continued. "This was it. Almost immediately some sailors stepped in and we walked away. Andrew knew about this incident this morning. Turns out those sailors were his men."

"And you think that this incident reminded Demelza about her lecherous relative?" Quite beyond his control, his voice grew harder yet again.

"Well... Yes. Demelza hid her face and tried to walk away very fast. And then, afterwards, she was very quiet. I know she hasn't slept well and even today she would drift into her thoughts."

There was the sound of running feet behind him and he had time to turn around and catch Demelza's startled face. She turned on the heel and darted back into the hallway and he rose to follow her until Verity took his hand and whispered, "Whatever it is - I will help!"

Then he had run after the girl, who so thoroughly occupied his thoughts. He hoped to God that she would trust him enough to confide in him.

He found her in the still room. The pale flowers and herbs hang around everywhere, creating the soft background against which her vibrant hair and delicate face stood out like a painting of the wood nymph. She looked troubled, but also determined, the stubborn tilt of the chin telling him as much.

"Demelza," he began softly and she looked up and away so quickly, he almost missed how shiny her eyes were. "What troubles you?"

"So much..." she exhaled and shrugged her shoulders. Then she straightened, adding height and presence to her form, and turned to him. "Ross, I must release you from your word. While I never accepted your proposal, you told me that you consider me as your intended. So, I release you..."

Ross' thoughts came to a full stop, leaving behind shock and stupor. She kept looking at him and he, when he realized that his lungs burned without air, managed a mangled, "Why?"

He hardly recognized his own voice. The anger, the pain, the disbelief, were all in that one word and he hated - hated - how it exposed all of him.

She must have felt it too, because her frame stooped and her face crumpled from resolute expression into that of complete suffering.

"Please, Ross..." she cried in earnest now, pleading with him and he wanted - so wanted - to ease her suffering, because he could not stand seeing her so upset.

Those wretched people, her family in name only, who made her feel so afraid and so upset.

And then the most horrific thought occurred to him... Did her vile relative do more than try to impose himself on her? Did he-?

Thoughts stopped again and he was frozen with acute misery and sympathy for this brave woman.

Was she trying to protect him because she was not a maiden? How could she think it made any difference to him?
He softened his voice and gently took her hand, placing small kiss on the wrist.

"Tell me, Demelza. Tell me everything."

Still she shook her head, hastily drying her cheeks.

He had no wish to equivocate. "I think I know why," he said. "I just talked to Verity. She told me of the encounter in Bodmin. If I have any say in the matter, our marriage will go ahead."

She whipped her head at him so suddenly, he was worried she'd pull something vital. "Oh Verity... It is because of her and you that this cannot go on any further."

He kissed her wrist again, pleased that she wasn't pulling away yet. It was encouraging. He gathered her close and spoke even softer than before, "Darling... I wish you to know, really understand, that I have no expectations for when our marriage is consummated. We could wait, if you want to be more comfortable. Please know, that I would never force you. And I wouldn't hold it against you if you were forced in the past..."

Her eyes, dark blue again, grew wider and wider the more he spoke and he locked gazes with her when he delivered the last part.

She stared and he held the look for a long time.

"I... Really... Well that is... Thank you for reassuring me... Although your concern is misplaced, still it is noble of you." She smiled a little and he just tried to keep up with her. "I am still a maiden." She blushed hard at this. "They didn't take that from me," her face lost the softness and was transformed into a resolute expression.

"Then what is the matter?" he tried to pull her close again, but this time she stepped out of his loose embrace.

"The people, who accosted us on the streets... My not-uncle was there." Ross made a noise of anger and she hurried to add, "No, he didn't recognize me. But, Ross, it is only a matter of time before one of them does. And then I shall be exposed as an impostor, who tried to get above her station. Worse yet, you and all Poldarks would be dragged into this mess. Ross, it was foolish of me to agree to pose as Verity's friend, as a well-borne woman. I am neither of those. And when it becomes known, the consequences would be dire for all involved. I can't do this to Verity. I can't do this to you. You can't do it to yourself and the people, who depend on you. Please, Ross, let's end this farce."

He almost smiled in the face of her anguish. If this was the entirety of her problems and objections...

"You should know that Verity at this very moment is anxiously waiting for me to tell her how can she help you. She would disagree mightily with this wrong-headed notion of yours that you are not her friend. You are. And she wants to help you, Demelza, her friend. It was always a possibility that your origins would become known. It did not stop Verity from being part of this scheme. Let her decide what she is willing to do for a friend."

He saw her resolve crumble a little as she shook her head, "B-but her nuptials. And Captain Blamey-"

"Captain Blamey is the last person to throw stones. And I have it on good authority that he respects and admires you. If he ever learns about your identity, then he would be grateful to you just as much as the rest of Poldarks for your role in the duel aftermath."

Still she was unconvinced, "And the rest of your family and your investors?"
"Demelza, I was willing to brave it all when you were still known only as my servant. I still am. My family... Well, I'd be a fool to miss on my own happiness because of them. And my investors are just that - investors and business partners. If I start planning my life with only the mercantile interest in mind, I might as well change my name to Warleggan," he said almost jovially, because he really didn't care about such things.

His mood must have been noticed, because she smiled faintly and rolled her eyes, "How could you be so reckless? I still could be discovered by my family."

"Then let's plan for that. If we marry now, then would not be able to do much. If they cause the scene, they'd find themselves in court. But we could always try and obtain their permission now. I can address your father-"

"No! Ross, please, he... He is violent and-"

"Demelza," he drawled a little to let her know that her mere suggestion that her was not up for dealing with violent men was laughable. "Let me quote my friend George Warleggan. If you believe him and his uncle, everyone has a price." He came up to her and took her hand again, happy when she didn't pull away. "I can always reassure your family that their daughter would be well taken care of. I am sure it is their primary concern."

She looked him at him face to face. "Ross, that is most generous of you but I cannot ask you to take our troubles upon yourself."

He could not help himself, "My darling mermaid, do you not know? I long to take your troubles upon myself. Not because I wish to place you under any obligation to me but because your pain distresses me greatly."

She put out a hand and he took in in his. Her expression was wondering. "What are you-?" she said.

"Because you are you, my love." He bent and kissed her hand and felt her start and shiver beneath his lips. "I swore to myself I would not importune you until after Verity's wedding but I cannot stand by while you are anxious and unhappy. Let me take care of you."

"You love me?" her voice was soft and tearful, but her eyes... Her eyes shone...

"Yes, I love you. You captured my thoughts, my loyalty, my desires most thoroughly. If you'd have me, I am yours."

She looked up into his face, searching for something and it seemed to him that they stood like that for an age. Then she made a soft sound, and laid her head on his chest.

He put his arms about her, pressing her to his heart. Suddenly, the world seemed full of light and splendor, the sun on the leaves brighter, the song of the birds more jubilant. His heart was huge in his chest and he felt close to tears. She was crying softly and he held her, not caring why she had consented, knowing only that she was his and he was hers.

He had a sudden vision of her yesterday, racking her brains for some solution to the most recent problem, thinking that she had only herself to rely on. He knew that not the least of what he could give her was the reprieve from loneliness, and power of his name, and choices. All that were denied her by the accident of birth and wretched luck of being born into a despicable family. He had to fight not to crush her to him, his tiny, valiant love.

"Demelza?"
"Mhm?"

"Do you- That is- I want to hear-"

She looked up, her eyes the greenest he's ever seen them, "I love you too."

"And will you marry me?"

"Yes."
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Captain Blamey is told of Demelza's identity. And Ross talks to her family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ross simply could not believe his good luck. Demelza finally agreed to marry him. It would not do to dwell on details, but he remembered all too well that she refused him at least twice. He did not doubt that she cared for him and loved him (loved! she said so herself!). But the dreaded class system stood between them. At least in her mind. He thanked his tutors at the university for teaching him to speak eloquently and argue, so that he prevailed over her stubbornness and insecurities. So it was entirely understandable that as a young man whose proposal of marriage has just been accepted, he was desirous of an immediate wedding.

They were still in embrace and his mind already was busy with calculations and it was fortunate that he remembered to consult his intended before he made any sort of statements.

He pulled back slightly and lifted her face with a hand under the chin, "Darling," he said. "I am anxious to settle matters between us and your father but I am not sure how to approach him and whether now would be an appropriate time. Demelza, did you even have recent news of him?"

He did not say, for all that he thought it, that he needed to know the exact circumstances of the Carne family to gauge her father's willingness to bless their union. But he knew precious little about her past life. He didn't even know whether Demelza was the only child! Christ, he was a terrible beloved and groom!

She looked up at him, and it was all he could do not to kiss her again. "I- I understand your concern and your desire to talk to him urgently," she said. "But surely we need to talk to Verity about my fears of discovery? If it is as you said, that she is my friend and chooses willingly to stand by me, then I must do my friendly duty and inform her, and maybe her intended, of the risks."

"If you think it wise. Verity was anxious to help, let's find out how adventurous is my fair cousin."

They left the still room and walked to the house, her hand securely in the crook of his elbow.

For her part, Demelza told him of her family. She kept informed of the goings-on of the Carnes. She had brothers, both younger and older than her. She helped to raise the younger once, and her voice warmed when she spoke of her younger siblings. Her father was a hard man, who was now hiding his violent outbursts behind the teachings of the Book. In it he had support of his second wife, a devout Methodist. She hasn't mentioned her step-mother's brother, but Ross was well-aware and only squeezed her hand when she faltered in her tale.

As she spoke, a plan was forming in his mind. Given the circumstances, Ross was inclined to think that the Carne family was probably quite poor. Perhaps, he could convince her father to give permission and to stay away with a generous amount of money? If he recoiled at the thought of exchanging money for the chance to be with Demelza, he reassured himself: it was no different than
dowries and settlements. It would be worth all his money to have Demelza safe in Nampara.

When they reached the main parlor of Trenwith, Verity took one look at their face and smiled widely. She hurried to their side and her hug was earnest enough that it dislodged Demelza’s hand from his.

"Oh, dearest Demelza! I am so happy for you! You deserve to be happy!" she gushed and the two women kissed each other’s cheeks. "You too Ross. I am happy for you, cousin."

Before the news could be shared further, as was Verity’s intention, Demelza gently asked Verity to listen to her concerns. In the end, Ross was correct. Verity saw no reason to worry about the truth of Demelza’s origin being discovered. She appreciated the scandal it might engender and the chance of ostracizing that Ross and Demelza might suffer, but she adopted Ross’ attitude: nothing would be gained to worry about other people's actions and one could only be responsible for his own. She was willing to tell the truth to her Captain as it dawned on her that they were starting new life together and she wanted to start it with complete honesty.

So, the Nampara lovers parted that day with new happiness and new worries. Ross promised to arrive at the start of visiting hours and perhaps the two engaged couples could have a common discussion during their daily walk.

Ross slept well, his dreams filled with visions of Demelza in all her glory settled back in Nampara and in his bed. His morning awakening was embarrassing as was usual these days, since his dreams left him quite excited. Another swim in the cove and a cold morning ablutions helped him to find his equilibrium and he arrived at Trenwith for the ‘council of war.’

The tea and biscuits served to them was excellent, but he did not have the patience to appreciate the taste. When they were finally walking, he waited for Verity's signal to approach the couple ahead of them. Demelza was pale, her eyes dark blue again and he squeezed her hand reassuringly several times.

"Do not be troubled, darling. Even if Captain Blamey is not willing to go ahead with the pretense, I am still quite willing to marry you. We can even ride to Gretna Green," he said with a wink to her and she smiled as she shook her head. "That should solve the problem of banns and familial objections."

She smiled at him with that familiar expression of fond exasperation and he wondered how was he so blind before, when she was Danny and did not notice this charming impertinence.

Even if Ross could not hear his cousin’s conversation, he saw when Capatain Blamey stopped and turned to face Verity after sparing them one glance. Ross internally gathered his resolve, prepared to defend his love and his choices, when Verity's incredulous expression caught him off-guard. Before Verity could speak further, Captain Blamey walked over to them and bowed to Demelza.

"Ms. Carne, congratulations on your engagement. And Mr. Poldark, I likewise offer my felicitations on this occasion."

Demelza curtsied, her expression wondering and Ross shook Captain’s hand, himself a little surprised, "I thank you, Captain."

"Verity informed me that you Ms. Carne are especially concerned that your true identity would become known and therefore would harm myself and Verity."

Demelza nodded again and Ross could see her gathering her own strength, "Yes, Captain Blamey. I
do not wish any scandal to ruin Verity's life and reputation—"

"You mean any more that it's already ruined by association with me?"

Demelza blushed the dark pink and sputtered some negations, but Captain Blamey waved them off, "You misunderstand me, Ms. Carne. I do not think that you hold that opinion, only that others do. And in their eyes, I am not worthy to be accepted at Trenwith by the Poldarks, let alone marry one of them. It didn't stop Verity or your groom from accepting me. So, the knowledge of your true birthplace doesn't stop me from wishing you the best. You know things are different where I come from.* Besides, I knew for some time now who you were."

Demelza and Ross both gaped at the man, identical expressions of surprise, Ross' 'what' was overlaid by Demelza's 'how.'

"Ms. Carne, Mr. Poldark, I am a sea captain. Good observation skills are part of any seafaring man's duties," he answered somewhat cheerfully and then added with a smile. "And you cost me an excellent shot, Ms. Carne. Or should I say Danny?"

Demelza was bright red now, looking down and twisting the fabric of her dress with restless fingers, "Are you not upset that I disguised myself as someone above my station and in doing so I lied to you and others?"

He was thoughtful for a moment and then spoke quietly, "I shall leave the accusations to others better suited for such office. No doubt your reasons were compelling. I do know that your wellbeing and happiness mean a great deal to Verity and I trust her judgement. Whatever it is, Ms. Carne, that made you first disguise yourself as a young servant and then as a young woman from Wessex, you can be assured that I shall not destroy your story and take away your safety. I owe you and Mr. Poldark, after all."

Demelza's eyes were shining with unshed tears and Ross took her twisting fingers and freed the fabric of the dress, "Thank you, Captain."

Verity was smiling softly, looking at her groom with such transparent adoration that was only matched by his own responding ardor.

"You see, Demelza, you needn't have worried. Andrew understands."

His own intended, finally caught up with all the revelations of the day, laughed a little, "I am the luckiest girl in all of Cornwall."

It was after all gratitude and felicitations were expressed, that Captain Blamey asked the pertinent question, "What do you plan to do about Ms. Carne's relations? I understand that they live in the county?"

Ross frowned at the pedestrian nature of this inquiry after such height of elation, but it was necessary, "I plan to meet with her father. Demelza is not one and twenty yet, permission of her father is required, unless we elope."

Demelza paled again and her words were what he expected, "I do not think he'd be inclined to agree..."

"And why not? Under the circumstance, and forgive me for speaking so freely, but wouldn't marriage to the member of the upper class be most advantageous for you?" Captain was perplexed.

"My father... Such considerations might not be enough to sway him. He and my step-mother planned
for me to marry another...

"But no banns were read?" Verity asked as gently as possible, aware of the history with Demelza's potential groom.

"I don't think so. I ran away after they told me of their decision..." his brave little mermaid was wilting under the weight of memories and circumstance and Ross clenched his hands into fists. Verity quickly took her hand and the two young women walked ahead with Verity comforting Demelza with gentle words and even gentler touches.

"Do you really think her father would be against the marriage?" Captain Blamey asked him directly.

"I doubt it. Demelza tells me that her family is large and her father is only a miner. They might not be in the position to deny me," a look of understanding passed between them and Captain nodded resolutely.

"I would imagine there is no love lost there."

"No. I am not worried my potential in-laws showing up at the Assembly," he chuckled freely, the conversation with Captain Blamey putting him at ease.

Privately, he was worried about that man, who her parents wanted as Demelza's husband.

/ Once again, Ross decided to pursue the matter immediately. He got the name of the village from whence Demelza hailed and only her insistence that her father's violence was notorious, and more importantly her pleading eyes, made him take the Martin brothers with him. It was a strange procession that arrived at Illogan. He had no troubles locating the Carne residence and when he knocked, he was forcefully reminded of just how humble was Demelza's upbringing. It made her progress even more impressive.

A middle-aged woman opened the door and she was startled to see him there. She bowed awkwardly to him and showed him in. There were other younger men - Demelza's brothers, perhaps - and they all stood up hastily at the sight of the gentleman in their midst. The Martin brothers flanked the door and it made for a very tense atmosphere to have all the able men crowding the small house.

Mr. Carne, a tall and severe looking man, sat at the table and only got up when Ross was fully in front of him, "I cannae say tha' ah know ye, master."

"I am Ross Poldark of Nampara."

"Poldark ye say. Ah reckon ye tha' one ta open tha' new mine. Wheal Leisure, eh?"

"Yes, I did."

"Ye cannae be lookin' fer workers here," the man cracked a smile, but there was a question in his eyes.

"Nay, my good man. I am here on the account of your daughter."

There was an audible gasp among the crowd and Mr. Carne's face twisted a little, "Mah daughtah! Wha' tha' wretched sinner do ta ye?"

Ross heard the murmur of the prayer and saw the woman's lips move in a practiced fashion.

"I wish to marry her."
There was such a stunned silence that one could hear the bustle on the street outside. Ross watched as Mr. Carne's face went pale, then red, then pale again and finally settled into an angry, well angrier, expression, two spots of high colour on his cheeks.

"Sinner! Sinner in mah home! Ye name cannæ hide ye sins an' trespasses! Ye sinned, an' ye sinned wi' tha' gurl! Devil owned she is!" the man shook with righteous indignation, his eyes wild, and voice loud.

Ross was losing his patience and he slammed his fist on the table, the sound loud and sharp like a gunshot. It made the raving man stop and the silence reigned again.

"I have not sinned, as you put it. And neither has your daughter. You have my word as a gentleman. I wish to marry your daughter. As she is only nineteen, I would like your permission. Do I have your consent?"

The man looked uncomprehending and Ross clenched teeth tightly, "I am fully prepared to ride to Gretna Green and accomplish my plan to marry her. It is unconventional, but is entirely legitimate and you would have no say in the matter. However, I promised that I will try to reason with you. So, do I have your consent-"

"She be hidin' in Nampara all tha' time? Wretched gurl had better ta listen ta me-"

"I cannot say that I disagree with her choice to leave your home and your control!" Ross said angrily. "You cared not for her happiness."

"Tha' whore-"

Mr. Carne's outburst was silenced by a punch to the face. Ross' hand throbbed as he hit the man and prayed that he and the Martins would be able to take all the Carne men on.

"I would greatly appreciate it if you did not use such terms to describe my bride! As a gentleman, I am entirely within my rights to demand satisfaction!"

Mr. Carne, his cheekbone now red from a bruise, got a mulish expression on his face and Ross prepared by taking a more stable stance.

Before they could engage in a battle, Mrs. Carne stepped in-between them, "Sur! We be lucky tha' ye wish ta marry our daughtah. We was worried tha' she be gon' too long. We was worried tha' she be dead."

Ross saw what she was about and relaxed his stance, "Indeed, I would imagine you were worried about her. She was gone for almost four years..." He let the sentence hang to stress the fact that the Carnes were hardly wrecked with worry or guilt over Demelza's disappearance.

"Ah have cheels ta feed. An' tha' gurl be helpin' aroun' the house. Mah wife be workin' her fingers ta tha' bone all alone," somehow this blatant accusation of Demelza's desertion that left the household chores to be accomplished by a wife was exactly what Ross was prepared to hear.

"Yes, I understand. The absence of daughter, who worked at home to help her family, must have been a loss to you. And now that she is marrying me, I would be getting an excellent housekeeper and a helpmate."

"She be so high above us. We’d nevah see her ‘gain," one of Demelza's brothers whispered and Ross was heartened to hear that at least some of the Carne family members genuinely missed Demelza.
"Yes, with her marriage to me, she would be entering an entirely different sphere. Her new position in life would leave little room to childhood things and attachments. After all, she would be a wife, and therefore must be obedient to her husband, forsaking all others. Isn't it what the good Book say?"

Mr. and Mrs. Carne looked between each other and he could see when the penny dropped and they understood exactly what he was implying.

"Four years she be hidin’ ‘way in Nampara. Four years she's not workin' here or be a bal maid... Tha’ a lot o’ money tha' we lost."

Ross sighed internally in relief. Four years’ worth of Demelza's earnings would be nothing to him. He'd pay it happily.**

He got his purse out and threw the coins on the table before them, "Pleasure to have made your acquaintance. I shall take good care of your daughter."

He turned and left the house, happy to be out of the stifling atmosphere and equally happy to have resolved this issue.

*I believe in the books, Captain Blamey is American, where the class system was less rigid.

**Again, I believe in the books, Ross ends up paying Tom Carne money, when he tried to take Demelza home from Nampara.

Chapter End Notes

I have one more plot point for this story, but, yeah, we’re nearing the end.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Demelza visits Nampara as Demelza...

Chapter Notes

Last bit of business to resolve before we end this story.

Ross was on the way to Nampara, still reeling from meeting the Carnes, when Zacky rode closer to him and said quietly, "I reckon ye'r getting married now."

He was smiling, but there was a question there nonetheless. Ross spared one look at the brothers and nodded quickly, "Yes, I am. Her name is Demelza and she will be a great mistress of Nampara."

Zacky nodded and then added, "She be a miss or a--"

"She is better than that. She is a great friend of Verity's and father liked her."

This seemed to stop further inquiries. As far as Ross could tell, the bothers were confused about Demelza, but chose not to pursue this topic further. It seemed that being Verity's friend was enough for them to overlook just who her father was.

He got home with enough time to visit the Reverend Ogders in the Sawle parish to ask how soon the banns could be read. The Reverend was almost apoplectic to learn that Ross would be settling down. Didn't they have this conversation at Jimmy's wedding? Has Ross found someone to settle down with? Would he, the Reverend, meet this mystery woman, who surely must be a miracle worker to have caused such change of heart in Ross? On and on the Reverend talked, while bustling about the calendar and Ross accepted the excited congratulations in good humor. With money given to Tom Carne, Ross ensured that the man would not come forward and object to the wedding.

This conversation did remind him that he hasn't actually asked Demelza about the date she wanted to have the wedding. He, of course, wanted it to take place immediately, but with Verity's upcoming nuptials, the timing might be tricky. He asked if he could bring his bride with him to discuss the matters, ensuring another bout of effusions. It was settled: Ross would bring Demelza to Nampara to show her the future home and place where the wedding would take place.

So it was on a sunny and beautiful afternoon that Demelza and Verity arrived to Nampara. By then the rumors have spread and a lot of people just happened to have the need to be outside to watch Nampara's visitors. Jud and Prudie have cleaned the front and when Demelza's eyes widened at the new entrance, marked with stone and enlarged, Ross congratulated himself on this new improvement.

Demelza was radiant in the very fetching dark-blue dress, her hair pulled back with a matching
ribbon and topped with a small percher hat. She looked every bit a society miss and he saw people bowing to her, recognizing the future mistress of Nampara. When they stepped inside, Ross quickly sent Jud and Jimmy to tend to horses and Prudie executed a very wobbly curtsy before leaving for the kitchen. When all the bustle died down and it was only three of them. Demelza released a shaky breath and settled on the settee.

"Judas, I was worried everyone would recognize me and then laugh at me," she whispered in distress.

"My dear Demelza, I hardly recognized you and I've known you as Danny for a while."

Any further reassurances had to wait as Prudie brought tea and cakes and Verity proceeded to serve everyone. Such protocol was strange, but it was part of the ceremony that upper classes had. Demelza was a guest and Nampara had no mistress, therefore Verity, as Ross' cousin rose to occasion. For all that they were alone, Ross knew that they truly weren't as he could practically hear Prudie's, Jimmy's and Jud's breathing as they spied on the future Mrs. Ross Poldark. Demelza must have heard it too as she praised the house, its cleanliness and the quality of the tea and cakes. She even managed to add a faint praise to the promptness of men, who attended to horses. Verity and Ross exchanged amused glances and Demelza herself almost broke the pretense with laughter, but it was a good maneuver on her part. If nothing else, she made a good "first impression" on the residents on Nampara.

When tea had finished, Verity and Ross invited Demelza to look over her future home. Demelza blushed as they made a procession through the first floor with formal commentary provided by Ross, his voice carrying through the house. When they got tot the second floor, Verity wandered off somewhere, and the newly engaged couple stayed behind to talk.

Demelza and Ross looked at one another and smiled.

"I suspect that is my cousin's idea of romantic discretion," he said. "I shall have to revise my opinion on her adventurous streak yet again."

"She is so good to me, Ross."

"I know. And you are good to her. I am delighted to see you becoming friends. You are both very dear to me." He smiled at her again. "How are you really, darling?"

"'Tis so strange, Ross. To be here, in Nampara, as a Demelza, not Danny. I still feel like an impostor here."

"You belong here, Demelza. I hope you know that."

"I belonged in the kitchen or that little room behind the kitch-"

"You belong with me. Be it in the kitchen, the Wheal Leisure, or these rooms," he delivered his statement with all the intensity of the love declaration and she heard it too for she leaned up to him and he kissed her as thoroughly as he dared.

They got downstairs and settled back at the parlor, finding themselves alone still. They looked at one another across the room, the curtains in the open windows billowed in the slight breeze and the only sounds were birdsong and footsteps in the kitchen as Verity and Prudie could be heard talking.

Ross calculated how long before his cousin would coming in and whether it was enough time to have another kiss with Demelza.
"We can't," she said quietly to him, obviously reading his expression right, and he laughed. "They might be back at any moment and I have to make good impression in Nampara."

She pouted and assumed a very proper - snooty- expression.

Ross could not help but laugh. "Oh dear, I am not sure I like you setting good impressions. What about my 'scandalous' reputation?"

He eyes widened first, but then he saw them darken just as she looked at him from under her lashes, "Behave, Mr. Poldark."

He got up and strode over to her and took her hands in his and kissed them both, one after the other and then led her over to a high backed chair. "Now, darling, you can sit where I cannot see you and drink your tea while I inspect the business post, without distraction. Mayhap, we can survive the next few moments without anything untoward happening." He thrust a book in her hands and spoke quietly, "There, read, instead of tormenting me."

She smiled up at him from beneath her lashes and he had to tear himself away.

Back at the writing desk, he pulled the papers towards him and attempted to read the letter from the landowner, where a potential smelting plant could be located. He wondered briefly how the news of his marriage would affect his investors and then shrugged. He owed no duty to anyone but himself and Demelza and, while he hoped that his fortunes did not turn, he had no intention whatsoever of being swayed by any disapproval.

Despite his best efforts, he was distracted. He saw a slim arm and hand come out and replace the empty cup and saucer, and take up one of the books he had left on a side table. He wondered how she would enjoy the conversation on the mine prospects as he took up another sheet of paper. Since the progress was not encouraging, he was ready to fetch Verity himself, when a loud noise interrupted him.

"Got you 'lone, you bastard! Wher'd ye hide 'er? Wher's she? Tha' whore!"

Framed in the open door, drunk and belligerent, stood a tall man with a crooked nose, wielding a knife. By all appearances it was another miner, but his words and his palpable hatred made him appear quite singular.

"Who are you to disturb me in my home, man?"

"Sit d'wn and shuddup, Poldark. Wher'd you keep 'er? In tha' bed? Wher' she'd spread 'er leg fer yer?" the man lurched inside the room and Ross saw frightened Prudie and Verity hovering behind the man. He signaled with his eyes for them to leave and he saw that Verity caught his message. She turned on her heel and scrambled out.

Ross' attention was back on the man. If he had to guess, he'd say that this would be the infamous 'not-uncle' that caused Demelza endless suffering. Fortunately, he didn't know Demelza was in the room. Oh God, if he found out then there was no telling which of them he might attack.

"Who are you? Who are you looking for? What do you want?"

He needed to stall until more help was here. He didn't want to expose Demelza, for this man could recognize her and unmask her to anyone. Stalling him was the only thing Ross could think of.

"She'd know me. Oh, tha' gurl would!" he leered so exaggeratedly that Ross wanted to simply bash his head until the man was not capable of speech. "Ah wan' ye to rot in hell. An' ah wan' 'er to
suffer, tha' whore. Ye came an' toss 'em coins an' now she'd be a lady? An' ah got nothin' - NOTHIN'!" He was shouting now, almost in tears and he was standing not far from the high backed chair in which Demelza was sitting.

"If it's money you want..."

"Ah wan' wha's mine. Ah wan' tha' gurl."

Dear God, the man was mad.

The wretched drunk looked thin and feverish, the hand that held the knife unsteady.

"Killing me won't get you anything but a noose. Attacking a gentleman gets you transported."

"Ah don' need ta kill ye. Ah jus' wan' her an' ye give her ta me."

"All this for a girl, who rejected you?" Ross pushed back his chair and stood, not caring that the man stepped closer to him. Ross was desperate to make the man move before he could spot his invisible target. "Why haven't you looked elsewhere? There must be other girls for you."

"NO! Tha' whore hit me an' ran. Ev'r' y one laughed. Lookit tha' stupid Micky, cannae hol' one tinny cunny down. He hafta be limp fer ta gurl ta run than marry him! Ah oughta teach 'er!"

The man was spitting and raving and Ross put one hand on the desk, preparing to vault it in an effort to get to him the next time the man lowered his unsteady hand. Before he could do so, something came flying round the back of Demelza's chair, grasped in a slender hand, and caught the man squarely on the back of the head. He crashed to the floor. The knife fell with a loud noise.

Ross rushed round to him, kicking the knife aside and running his hands over the prone body, looking for other weapons. Another long knife he found thrust into the back of the belt under the vest was tossed out of the window.

Just in time, the room filled with people, Jimmy, Jud, Mr. Henshaw, two burly-looking villagers. The man was seized, blood pouring from his broken nose. He looked stunned and bewildered. The footstool which had hit him was kicked under a sofa and he was led away, struggling feebly, to be locked in a cellar.

At last it was safe for Ross to take Demelza into his arms. She was trembling, as well she might, and he could tell that tears were not far away, so he rocked her gently, calling her his brave love, his valiant mermaid, until she raised her head.

"I couldn't let him," she said, "I was sitting in that chair and I knew I couldn't let him." Then firmly and loud enough for everyone to hear, she said, "You're mine - I won't let anyone hurt you!"

He kissed her then, in front of the servants, Mr. Henshaw and Verity; had they been alone, he would have carried her off and made her his. She twined her arms round his neck, neither of them caring that he had lifted her off her feet. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her throat. She flung back her head and gloried in it.

A loud cough from Verity brought them blushing to their senses. He set her back on her feet and had to watch as Veity and Jinni, who appeared in the room at some point, descended on her with cries of alarm and concern.

Mr. Henshaw took his arm and led him into a corner. "Shall I send for the constable?"
Ross shook his head. "No. I can't do that to him yet."

"He tried to kill you, man!"

"The man was drunk. I believe he confused me with someone else. Perhaps, once I ascertain who he is and just how delusional he might be, I shall call for authorities."

"You don't mean to let him go free!" Henshaw was looking at him as though he were mad. "You are too liberal"

Ross wasn't. He really wasn't. He just wanted to make sure that this was what Demelza wanted. That wretched man was somehow part of her family.

"Nay, I am not. But I am not cruel either. If the man is sick, then no justice would be served by sending him to die."

Excitement of the day quite changed their plans. They no longer had time to visit the church and Demelza was understandably upset. With people surrounding them, Ross only could gently hold her hand every now and then, but he saw Henshaw's approving looks and certainly those of his servants. Finally, once nerves settled, they set the course for Trenwith. Ross chose to ride with them to act as the security for the fair ladies. It also gave him a chance to speak with his bride.

"Darling, I must seek your opinion on how to handle the 'not-uncle.' If I sent him to the constable, he surely will be transported. There is no returning from that. Would... Would your family hold the grudge enough to interfere with our wedding?"

"I ought to be merciful. I ought to forgive, but how can I? He made me flee my home and hide myself. And he threatened you."

Ross only squeezed her hand in response. It was necessary for Demelza to think, to talk through this afternoon, and the past behind it.

"And my family... If they do object, then we elope," she said with determination.

Ross could only look at her in wonder, "Demelza-"

"No, Ross. I don't want to be looking over my shoulder for the rest of his or my life. He took enough of my peace of mind. And my family too... My father doesn't deserve my obedience or my loyalty. But you do."

There wasn't much more to say to that. Ross nodded again and lifted her hand for a long kiss.

"Whatever you wish, mermaid."

Chapter End Notes

So we have just two weddings left to finish. Probably two chapters more...
In his darkened bedchamber, Ross rolled over with a frustrated sigh.

Sleep eluded him yet again. It seemed that he had not had a full night's sleep since the earliest days of spring, when his thoughts - and his dreams - had first been invaded by a frustrating and secretive boy, who vexed and confused him until his mind felt as scattered as leaves upon the forest floor.

He smiled in the dark. "My mermaid..."

Tomorrow, she would be one day closer to taking his name and becoming his. They agreed that waiting too long after Verity's wedding meant to wait until she was back from her honeymoon. For once, he and Demelza were of one mind and agreed to have their nuptials a day after Verity's. Demelza didn't want a big wedding, but she wished for her friend to be there. Ross tried, to the extent that he was capable, to prepare some things to commemorate his marriage, but it was Jinni, who quietly told him to not worry about a thing.

One more day and she would finally, finally, be his. His wife. He would not be forced to bow and say good-night at the end of the evening and feel the press of her delicate fingers in his, the dissatisfaction of his lips on her gloved flesh. They would no longer be reduced to stealing hurried kisses whenever they were benevolently granted a moment alone together.

One more day and she would be in his arms, in his bed. This bed.

With a muttered oath, he threw back the counterpane. These thoughts would not aid his sleep.

He slipped into his dressing gown, fastening it securely as he stepped into his slippers and moved toward the door. The house was quiet and he was unlikely to run into anyone, but Andrew Blamey was staying with him tonight, wanting to be close to Trenwith and the parish church.

Ross stopped that thought before it could progress into visions of the late nights his future would bring. Going off at night would wake up her, he thought and smile dot himself. He would not be so alone anymore.

He warily eyed the shadows as he moved through Nampara's halls. Better watch his step to avoid dangerous falls. His overactive and panicked imagination jumped from the horror of that scenario to
the multitude of catastrophes he had envisaged during his sleepless hours.

He was so close to the fulfillment of all of his dreams, and he could not stop thinking of all the ways his joy could be ripped from him.

In the shadowy gloom, he saw a cataclysmic storm, a tempestuous gale that washed out roads and bridges and flooded the whole of the kingdom, a giant earth-shaking tremor that shuddered the church to pieces. He saw her father show up to halt the proceedings and her not-uncle escape the chains. He saw his Great Aunt Agatha and Uncle Charles force a kicking, screaming Demelza away from the altar, because they found out about her origins. He saw Elizabeth's fragile body go into the process of childbirth in the most inopportune moment.

Of worst yet, Demelza would succumb to the bout of insecurity and fear and deny him, because she didn't think herself worthy to be the mistress of Nampara.

Ross jerked to a stop, clenching his fists. With a deep breath, he worked to slow his pounding heart. Perhaps it would be he, who would succumb to an attack of nerves.

"She loves me," he murmured, unaware of the plaintive sound of the words in the still of the night.

If anything, he was not worthy of her. They were equal to each other. She would not have accepted him if she did not believe so, and he would do everything in his power for the rest of their lives to be the man that she deserved and to make her happy. He only hoped his best efforts would be enough.

With surprise, he noted that there was light shining under the door of study, several steps away. A solitary trip to the library no longer held any appeal. He did not want to be alone with his thoughts. Perhaps a glass of brandy with company would help. He moved to the door and knocked softly.

"Blamey?"

"Poldark!" Surprise and relief were more than evident in Blamey's muffled voice. "I apologize that I made myself comfortable here in your- Come in, come in!"

Ross entered the study to find Blamey standing at the window, glass of water in hand. He, too, was in his dressing gown, his hair tousled, a lack of sleep clear upon his countenance.

"Good evening," Ross said evenly, doing his best to seem as though this was a normal encounter and not one taking place on the wrong side of midnight.

His guest mumbled a reply and gestured to a chair by the fire as Ross quickly crossed to the decanter.

"I could not sleep," Blamey burst out, his voice swift and full of nerves as he gulped his water. "I keep imagining everything going horribly wrong."

Ross smiled cheerlessly as his own fears found voice in his guest's words. Seating himself, he took a bracing sip of brandy, welcoming the warmth.

"Blamey-" he began, but his guest and future cousin could not be silent.

"What if her father falls ill? What if the parson falls ill? What if she falls ill?"

"No one will - "

"What if the church burns down?"

"Blamey - "
"My God, man, what if she changes her mind?" his panicked eyes found Ross'.

"Calm yourself, Blamey. Verity is not going to change her mind."

Blamey took a deep breath and dropped into the chair besides Ross. "Yes. Of course." He rubbed a hand over his face, and another deep breath gusted from him in a sigh. "I wish that I possessed half of your composure, Poldark."

Guilt stabbed at Ross, heating his cheeks. He locked eyes with his guest.

"I could not sleep either," he said quietly. It was the closest he could bring himself to an admission of premarital nerves.

Blamey understood in an instant. His eyes widened, and his rueful smile was filled with gratitude.

Blamey relaxed back into his chair, and they sat in silence, sipping water and brandy, each trying to calm his own racing thoughts.

"Well, Poldark," Blamey said eventually. "Tomorrow we shall be cousins."

Ross studied the man beside him. Their acquaintance grew to become a friendship. He knew that their relative amiable rapport was considered at best an oddity in most of county's drawing rooms. His family was ancient, a seemingly permanent fixture at the center of the first circles of Cornwall, and Blamey was an American sea captain, who was once accused of murdering his first wife. Blamey was a reticent man of few words and quick temper. Ross was more gregarious and capable of great charm. And yet, they had plenty of similarities. Neither man was happy in a ballroom, surrounded by chattering people, known and unknown. Both were liberal by a large measure, both cared about people they either commanded or employed. And both men's actions ran counter to some societal norms.

He pulled himself out of his thoughts and saw that Blamey was studying him, curiosity clear in his tired eyes.

"I believe I will like that, Andrew," he answered sincerely. "I believe I will like that very much."

Blamey's answering smile was filled with satisfaction, and they sat quietly together, their thoughts full of the morning to come.

The day of Verity's wedding dawned early, sunny skies and chirping songbirds joined in effort to make it most wondrous. Demelza was finishing her morning ablutions, when Verity's maid knocked hurriedly on her door.

"Beg yer pardons, Miss Demelza. Please come to Miss Verity at once."

Demelza shrugged on a dressing gown and quite possibly ran to her friend's room, If she did, the maid would not tell as she ran alongside.

"What is happening, Verity?" Demelza dispensed with civilities to get to the heart of the matter. "Demelza, I have freckles!" Verity was almost in tears and Demelza collapsed against the wall in relief.

"Judas... I thought the worst has happened-" she began on an exhale.

"The worst has happened!" Verity was almost blotchy and her eyes were shadowed. It looked like
she hasn't slept well and Demelza realized that almost unnoticeable freckles were just one - vocalized and acknowledged - of many reasons that her friend was anxious about.

"Please, do not worry over it, dear. Let us have some tea," she turned to the maid and asked her to bring the lavender and rosehip tisane. She walked up to Verity, who sat at the mirror with a water jug nearby. Slowly Demelza dipped a towel in water and began to wipe her friend's face in soothing motions, removing remnants of tears, murmuring all along. "There, there... One or two of those dots aren't going to ruin anything. We have some rice powder and some Chinese white.* Dust a little here and there and no one would be the wiser. And look how lovely your color is this morning. One may even call you a 'painted lady'* for your cheeks are so lovely pink. A little of French chalk* and you would be as lovely as a doll."

She could see Verity calming down from her anxiety at the constant rhythm of movement and words so she kept it up, "We shall have the most wonderful tea. And, If you want, you can even bathe in lavender water. It would be like an orchard itself gave you your perfume. And you hair is always so pretty. Why, I believe I told you how much I like these dark curls of yours."

Verity gave her a feeble smile, "You are much too kind to me, Demelza, but no one thinks I am lovely. I am not like you or Elizabeth. My cheeks are too big and my lips are too small. And am hardly a young bride. Everyone thinks me too plain and too old. And now I am having this fanciful wedding with a dress that is wasted on someone like me. Oh, I can just imagine what people would say-"

"People... The same people, who would think I don't deserve to be near you, let alone be your friend? Or marrying Ross?"

"No!" Verity exclaimed, but then subsided. "I always, always, felt acutely how un-pretty I was. Until Andrew came along, I thought my life would be to forever serve my Aunt, and father, and Frances..."

"Verity, you are the most deserving of happiness. Captain Blamey loves you very much. I can see it. Everyone can see it. And you are beautiful. When you smile, when your eyes shine, when Captain Blamey looks at you and you look back... I swear you are most beautiful then."

Verity smiled shyly and looked away, but the anxiety seemed to leave her.

Tea had arrived and now calm young women sat down for the morning repast. The maid smiled broadly at Verity and, after passing the plate of biscuits, said, "Begging your pardons, Miss Verity, me an' others, we be so happy you found a husband."

Verity smiled in thanks, "Thank you, Sally. I think my father planned to give some ale and cake as well-"

"Nay, Miss. 'Tis not 'bout tha'. Jus'..." Sally darted to the door and quickly got something from another servant, who clearly stood there. She turned to them, now positively red, "'Tis gorse... we plucked the thorns not to hurt yer hands."

In Sally's hands was a small bouquet of bright yellow flowers. Demelza smiled knowingly, but Verity looked a little perplexed. Still, she was impeccably polite and hugged the maid with words of thanks.

When they were alone again she turned to Demelza, "I see these flowers everywhere it seems. Why would she give me them?"
"Oh, it's believed that having gorse flowers at your wedding would bring you many children," Demelza thoroughly enjoyed her friend's sputtering. "You see these flowers everywhere, because they bloom throughout the year. And there are so many of them on each bush. So people think they can be the symbol of fruitfulness."

Verity looked at the bunch thoughtfully.

"It is no worse than Reverend saying, 'Go forth and multiply.' At least these flowers are pretty. I shall use them," Verity said with determination. "Not because I think they will ensure children, but because Sally and others have done this for me."

"It's why they call you the sweetest person this side of Tamar River," Demelza exclaimed.

They both burst into joyous laughter and all Verity's anxiety was forgotten.

Verity used Demelza's advice and bathed in lavender water. Her gown was the softest cream satin, with stomacher and petticoats of matching muslin that had delicate pale yellow flowers embroidered. Even her heeled shoes were made of the same satin with prettiest of bows. When she put the dress on, nervously adjusting the bow on the chest, Demelza could only stare in wonder. Verity was radiant.

Hair, plaited and curled, was tucked away to leave room for a hard and veil. Demelza's recipe for hiding freckles was used. Even Verity's lips were touched up with a bit of beeswax mixed with evergreen bugloss.* Verity stood before her ready and pretty and Demelza nodded her head.

"Not only the sweetest, but also the prettiest person this side of Tamar River."

Demelza herself wore a light gray dress, neckline high with the batiste undershirt peeking out, the white a nice bridge between the tone of her own skin and the dress. Her hair was now longer than before and she managed to create some height in the front, so her comb with white enamel flowers looked perfect.

"Ready?" she asked Verity.

"Yes."

Myrtle and roses were displayed everywhere around Trenwith' public rooms and Demelza tried not think how much it cost, but it certainly looked lovely. She also wondered how Nampara would look tomorrow. Or the village church, a building decidedly much more modest than this. Mr. Charles, dressed in his best and his wig freshly powdered, walked with Verity every inch a proud father. Demelza followed them with her own myrtle bouquet and tried not to think about all the people looking at them. She knew that Verity was the focus of this attention, but quite a few of those glances were sent her way. As usual, she wanted to cower, afraid that people would somehow see that she was just a miner's daughter. But Verity turned to her quickly with a tremulous smile and Demelza straightened and smiled back. Her friend needed her.

It was as she walked she realized that half the church was filled with officers and captains, their uniforms creating a wonderful contrast to dresses and finery of the county's elite.

Captain Blamey met them at the altar and his face as usual looked severe, but his eyes were soft when he took in his bride and he almost forgot to respond to Mr. Charles. Demelza took Verity's bouquet and stood to the side, for the first time catching the man, who was standing up with Captain Blamey. It must have been one of the fellow captains, for he wore a uniform as well. They exchanged glances and then the Reverend began the ceremony.
She had been to a few of the weddings of villagers and miners and the ceremony hardly differed. The same words, the same vows, the same steps. She wondered if it would be different tomorrow, when it was her own turn. Just thinking about it made her breath catch and she surreptitiously looked at the congregation to see if Ross was there. She found him in the back of the church, dark and imposing, his figure a stark contrast to the bright dresses of women and powdered wigs of men. Their gazes found each other and looked in for what felt like a century. She knew he was thinking the same thing as she did. She knew that he was looking forward to it as much as she did. She knew he loved her and she smiled and looked away shyly from the intensity and heat of his eyes.

Tomorrow they would be united forever...

*Chinese white - was a colloquial term for zinc oxide, a typical additive to the whitening powders of the time.

*Painted lady - was a term of chastisement to call out society ladies, who used makeup.

*French chalk - was a colloquial term for talc, another common substitute for powder.

*Evergreen bugloss - is a plant that when the leaves were crushed, created a red tint.

Chapter End Notes

I ended up not going through the whole receptions afterwards, because my focus is Ross and Demelza...
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The wedding and more...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Demelza spent the night at Trenwith. The Poldarks were planning to attend the church ceremony, if not the wedding breakfast. Great Aunt Agatha woke her at a ridiculously early hour and then confused her with a murmured lecture on the duties of marriage, a lecture which required a further discussion with Elizabeth to become intelligible. Considerably relieved, for she had known nothing for certain before and her imaginings had all been based on farm animals and one unfortunate encounter with non-uncle, Demelza suffered more lectures about family life with 'that incorrigible boy' while she dressed and ate what little breakfast she could manage.

It had been intended that she'd walk alone, as she didn't want to see her father. However, about an hour before the service was due to start, Sam, her brother, showed up on horseback. He was dressed like a modest gentleman farmer, clean shaven and nearly silent. It so happened that Ross retrieved him and had him cleaned and dressed to take part in the wedding. Demelza valiantly tried not to cry, but her eyes shone a little too suspiciously. Tom quietly told her and many of her brothers wanted to come, but the situation at home was tense and none of them wished to embarrass her. Sam's presence helped to assuage some of the unspoken concerns that the Trenwith Poldarks had about her family.

So Demelza walked down the arm on her brother, the pews filled with a jovial company of Ross' family, investors, their friends and gawkers. She saw the villagers and miners crowding near the entrance of the church and spotted the Martin family with Jinni's rosy face catching her attention. Jinni pointed to the main arch and Demelza saw that their simple church was decorated with wild flowers and colorful ribbons. It must have been her friend's doing and Demelza smiled widely at her.

Captains Henshawe and Blamey were in their regalia, but her eyes were glued to Ross, who stood waiting for her, gallant in his best clothes. She hardly heard the service, except for his deep voice repeating the vows, everything else was drowned out by the beat of her heart and a sense that time and place were not entirely real and that at any moment she might wake and find herself once more in the small room behind the Nampara's kitchen.

Afterwards it was the smells she the flowers in her bouquet and hair, the smoke from the candles, the salt in the sea breeze that wafted though the open doors of the and, when Ross bent to kiss her cheek again, the soap he had shaved.

When they left the church, she did not expect the villagers to form a alley for her and Ross to go through. Or that the Cornish people loved their customs and showered her and Ross in gorse flowers and lamb's tails.* So they bent their heads and ran laughing through the crowd to the coach that was to take them back to Nampara: only to find that the horses had been removed and Ross' tenants and miners had taken the traces to pull them home in a shower of dried flower petals and good wishes.

The wedding breakfast was hardly more memorable to her. Jinni had done them all proud and there was ample food and drink, including real French spirits, a wedding gift from Captain Blamey. Ross'
investors, Poldarks, gentle folks who had to see Ross Poldark settle down, were milling about Nampara's main rooms, while villagers and miners were served outside. Perhaps it was the drinks for, despite the fact that there were so many strangers present, there was no awkwardness or polite silences. She passed among the guests, on her new husband's arm, feeling his warm, living strength beneath her hand and could not remember afterwards who had spoken to her and they had said, save that they were happy for her and confident in his care for her.

She walked out to greet the people, who lived and worked to make Nampara And Wheal Leisure what it was and the mood was equally festive there too. Their wishes were less eloquently expressed and some were quite brazen in their hopes for a 'new cheel' to stomp around the house soon, but they were sincere and she only blushed and thanked in response. And, like at Jinni's wedding, there was some dancing and merriment and Ross cheekily pulled her into a circle of dancers much to approval of everyone. It was soon that Verity came out to inspect the joyous sounds and she, too, was pulled to dance. One by one, the young guests joined the villagers in their dancing and singing, young women wearing flower crowns and young men taking off their coats. It was spontaneous and riotous and Demelza was glad to have the little bit of her old life to be present now.

Eventually, everyone left and she and Ross were at Nampara alone. Priudie and Jud were quite sauced, leaving them by themselves. She felt the nerves set upon her and was grateful when Ross gently sat her down at the table.

"How strange it is to be here as Mrs. Ross Podark," she said and blushed.

"I am feeling more than a little overwhelmed myself. Tell me, did you sleep last night?"

"Not a wink"

"Nor I. I hope I shall be a good husband. For all that I am impatient and stubborn, I would wish to do my best for you," he said.

"I have no fear on that score," she replied.

He smiled at that and come over to sit on her side of the table, taking her hand, "Have I told you today how beautiful you look?"

"Yes, however, it is a sentiment that bears repetition."

He took her hand and kissed it gently. "I could hardly believe my good fortune when I saw you walk into the church."

"You must credit Verity for that, for it was her choice of gown and hair combs."

"I think it is called 'fishing for compliments' for you know quite well that, becoming as they were, I do not refer to your gown or the combs," he laughed. "Are you blushing, my darling?"

"If you can find a young lady who does not blush at such things, then I fear you have not found a lady at all," she replied and then blushed deeper.

He booming laughter was contagious and his next words set her cheeks on fire, "No, I believe I quite failed to find a lady. Instead I found an enchanting mermaid that liked to pretend to be a boy and torment ceaselessly. I dreamt of you as you were on the sea shore for months now, Demelza..."

His kiss was welcome and when they walked to his, no, their chambers, she was not as skittish as she expected to be.
He helped her with the dress stays, his hands practiced and sure so much so that Demelza wondered
how many women he'd bed. She didn't dwell too long on that as his ministrations freed her from the
dress and hair combs quickly enough and soon she was only wearing her undershirt.

She looked up at him and there must have been something in her eyes, because he stopped and took
her hand.

"You are not afraid of me, are you, Demelza?"

She shook her head vehemently. "Oh no, you must not think that. It is only that I am, I think, a little
afraid of disappointing you."

"Disappointing me! Oh, darling-"

"No, but Ross, I know you have been looking forward to this moment with considerable anticipation
and..." she broke off and he looked down to see she was worrying her shirt over and over between
nervous fingers. "I want everything to be perfect for you."

He took her hands in hers and kissed them, first one and then the other, "You are assuming that I
have been anticipating perfection, my love, and I haven't. " She looked up at this to find him smiling
fondly. "Sharing a bed with someone is like sharing a life. We both have to learn how to do it
properly and I dare say we will both make mistakes along the way."

"You have been thinking about this too, haven't you?" she said, her tone wondering. "Are you as
nervous as I?"

"More so, I fancy. It is not unknown for a clumsy husband to give his wife a lifelong disgust for the
whole business - I want to give you joy, and I know I will probably have to hurt you to do so. I can
think of nothing more calculated to dampen the ardor."

She considered for a moment and while she did so, he put his arm about her shoulders and drew her
against his side. He was warm and the fine fabric of his vest was cool and smooth against her cheek.
She slipped an arm about his waist and he rested her cheek on her head. "There is a lot of nonsense
spoken about man's marital rights - if you would rather wait until tomorrow... You must never feel
that you must... when you are not inclined... I mean I would rather not if you are at all unwilling,
either now or in the future." He broke off in exasperation. "I wonder if a time will ever come when
we can discuss this easily." He pressed his lips to the top of her head, "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"May I ask if you feel you know everything you need to?"

She pulled away at this and swiveled on the bed to look at him directly, "You need not be
concerned. I have grown up tending to animals... That is to say, your Great Aunt and Elizabeth have
spoken to me on the matter." She almost laughed at the expression of heartfelt relief on his face.

There was another long pause, until Demelza spoke again, "It's only that I do not know what you
will, what we will do, exactly." She sighed, "It was so easy when we were just kissing."

"Then perhaps we should start by kissing, after all, we can kiss all we want now. We don't have to
worry about being interrupted by anyone... I can kiss you here," he laid a gentle finger on her lips
and bent his head. It started gentle. She could taste the brandy and coffee he had consumed earlier,
and opened her mouth to him. She heard him make a little sound of pleasure, at once endearing and
exciting.
"And I can kiss you here," he ran a finger from behind her ear, down her throat to her shoulder. She flung back her head as he did so. His lips were warm and his tongue wet. It was not at all how she had imagined - or rather tried not to imagine. Her heart was beginning to race and she felt once more the familiar sensation beneath her navel, half-stab, half-pang of pleasure. She tugged on his hair to bring his mouth back to hers and they kissed for long minutes. She could feel the strength in the arms about her and knew that, with someone else, she might well have been terrified. Here, with him, she felt safe and valued, as she had never felt valued before.

They fell backwards on the bed and her fingers were quite impatient in removing his clothing. But when he was without his shirt and she saw how he looked without covers, she was quite overwhelmed with the sheer masculinity of it. She looked away, but he brought her back when he put a gentle finger under her chin.

"Now where were we?" he murmured before kissing her again and again, her lips, her throat, the curve of her shoulders, the soft skin of her arms and hands. It ought to have felt strange, frightening but it didn't. This was natural, this was what was supposed to happen. He knew what he was about and she was content to trust him.

He kissed her throat again, then with a husky, "May I?" he drew aside the chemise that covered her breasts and kissed them too. This was more and better, much better. She shifted beneath him, suddenly aware that her head was tossing from side to side. She arched her back, her hands pressing his head closer as he drew her into his mouth and suckled. A knife-sharp sensation coursed like lightning between her breast and the junction of her thighs and she cried out in shock and pleasure combined.

He lifted his head at this and she stared at him wide-eyed. Then he smiled happily and bent to the other breast. She ran her fingers into his hair and held his head to her breast. She had never heard, never known, never been told... She surged upwards and she felt him nip at her flesh. She knew he was being gentle, it wasn't pain, it was the furtherest thing possible from pain. She ran her hands across his shoulders, feeling their breadth - such a strong man he was, her husband and lover. His skin was hot and smooth and she could feel his great muscles flex, moved by some unknown impulse, she ran her nails across his back. He cried about and reared above her, his eyes wide in the candle light before falling on her mouth like a starving man.

They kissed, their hands tangling in their nightclothes as they struggled to touch everything and everywhere, before he at least had the presence of mind to tug at her chemise and ask, "Off? Yes? Please, oh please." She couldn't talk but she struggled out of the hampering garment at the same time as he cast his britches away somewhere. They rolled into each other's arms and both gasped at the heat and touch of the other's skin.

His hands were where his mouth was not and his mouth seemed to be everywhere. She had never thought that the inside of her elbows was a particularly sensitive spot but his lips burned there, her side where the ribs swept down to her waist, and her breasts, always and again, her breasts. One leg was trapped beneath one of his and she struggled restlessly, not wanting to escape, just wanting. She was past being shocked when she felt his hand between her thighs. She ached for the touch, a strange burning, no not burning, a strange nameless sensation where there had never been any sensation before. She keened between gritted teeth as he stroked and stroked, long gentle passes of his fingers. Then he found - something - and his hand became urgent, focused. Heat gathered in her belly, in the small of her back, sensation pooled, hot and urgent between her legs, her head thrashed from side to side and she cried out as the pleasure peaked and burst its bank, strange and wonderful, in waves that shook and shivered her.
She seized her husband's head and showered kisses on his face as he rolled over her. She parted her legs instinctively and he was there and he was big, and there was pain but his face... oh his dear, strong, beautiful face - twisted with pleasure, gasping his love, his gratitude, his sorrow for the pain he had caused, his joy in her and her body. She flung her arms about him and held him as tightly as she could and he breathed raggedly her name and shuddered above her, once, twice, thrice and then collapsed, turning at the last second to lie on his back, cradling her against his heart.

She could feel his heart racing beneath her cheek and knew that hers was full as fast. She touched him with gentle, curious fingers - she had not realized that gentlemen might have hair upon their chests and it was soft, not coarse and wiry and she had thought without thinking that it would be.

Ridiculous to feel shy, but she did and was grateful for the few moments of quiet. "I did not hurt you?" She shook her head. "Are you sure, sweetheart? It does get better, I promise."

"Better?" surprised, she raised her head to look at him.

He laughed then, and his expression took on a faintly self-satisfied edge. She thought about objecting but decided perhaps he had a right to feel a little smug, just this once. She lay her head back on his chest. There was a dull ache between her thighs but it was mixed in with the left-over pleasure and could be easily ignored. A small price to pay.

She was yawning and they had both been awake for a very long time. He drew her head down to rest on his shoulder, and pulled the blankets up so she would not feel chilled.

They had the rest of their lives before them and at least a third of it could be spent in bed.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Poldark," he said.

"Good night, Ross... H-husband," she replied. Which in one way was unfortunate because this new title found him suddenly and fiercely excited all over again.

It was very nearly dawn before they finally fell asleep.

* Lamb's tails are sugar coated almond and caraway seed, a traditional Cornish sweet sold at fairs.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

This is the end, my friends. I hope you enjoyed reading this story. First time writing for this fandom and you overwhelmed me with positive responses. Thank you all so much!

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