



Her Perfect Pirate (Northfield Hall Novellas #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: On this pirate ship, their fake marriage isn't meant to last.

If there is one thing Rebecca Smith knows how to do, it is survive. Shipwrecked in the Caribbean, she heads for *The Ghost*, a legendary pirate ship that targets the slave trade instead of gold. She hopes to be welcomed onto the crew, but she doesn't bargain on the surly, tattooed quartermaster who tries to stop her.

Sharkhead Chow has been a pirate too long to allow a pretty woman aboard. After the rest of the crew votes to admit her to the ship, he vows to ignore her, no matter how clever, captivating, or courageous she proves to be. But when her safety is threatened, Sharkhead steps in to protect her the only way he knows how:

By claiming her as his wife.

Though their kisses are real enough, Rebecca knows her steady, stalwart husband doesn't mean to keep her. To survive, she tells herself she isn't falling in love with him. As *The Ghost* chases slave ships across the Atlantic, Rebecca and Sharkhead are drawn deeper and deeper into a deception that could lead to mutiny—or worse, heartbreak.

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It was an easy decision to say no to the woman and her goat. Sharkhead Chow barked the order at de la Cruz and turned away without even taking a full look at her.

She was a woman, which meant she had no place on the Ghost. Even Captain Boukman, the best pirate to be found on the seven seas, was a threat to her.

Chow had seen for himself how Captain Boukman made use of a woman whenever one was at hand. Sure, the women walked away a little richer and without making complaint—but that was because he only remained with any one of them for a few days at a time.

Chow did not want to imagine what Boukman would do if this woman remained on the ship with him for months on end.

“But Sharkhead,” old Julio de la Cruz countered, instead of directing the woman and goat back into their dinghy. “Fresh milk. Maybe even cheese. Can’t you taste it right now? Even the doldrums would be sweet if we had a goat.”

“Then buy the goat. No women on the ship.”

“Don’t remember ever voting on that. Seems to me only the goat is in your purview of supplies we do or do not need.”

Chow turned to face the navigator. Julio de la Cruz was at least ten years his senior and had been with Boukman since before the captain had seized the Ghost and turned it into the best pirate ship in the Atlantic.

That didn't count for much in a pirate crew, though.

If they all voted to prevent the woman from joining, then that was the decision.

But Chow didn't much care to go through the hassle of a crew vote, especially not in the languid afternoon heat of the lagoon off Fortune Island.

"You can't purchase the goat without me," the woman said, interrupting Chow's staring contest with the grizzled old navigator.

Her voice was smooth, like a fish too slippery to hold.

Her English was native, her accent wide from the American north.

"You won't be purchasing the goat at all, in fact.

Either you invite me to join the crew and the goat comes with me, or we'll both be returning to shore. "

Chow took a proper look at her at last. Tall like a pine tree. Black hair tied under her bonnet in a braid as thick as a rope. Dark eyes that, despite her proud statement, remained cast down to signal submission. A complexion that was neither pale nor brown.

She could be a runaway slave. She could be a white woman down on her luck. She could even be some Mediterranean princess hidden under the shabbiness of a servile identity.

She was pretty, if not beautiful, and that was all Captain Boukman would need to see to take her for his pleasures.

Chow knew he should chase her off the ship. Yet she intrigued him, or maybe he, too, was partial to a pretty face. “Why do you want to join a pirate crew? Don’t you know what pirates do?”

“I know what Pirate Boukman does,” she replied, her chin lifting even as her eyes remained fixed respectfully on the floor. “Chases after slave ships. Maroons their crews and makes their captains walk the plank. Plunders the warehouses on the African coast and sets fire to the longboats.”

Chow couldn’t—wouldn’t—deny those stories.

At least Boukman’s reputation was still intact in this tropical spit of land, a proper legend for his heroics, not for these last few cursed months.

“Aye. And to settle our balances, we battle other pirates for gold or attack innocent merchant ships to frighten them into giving us their cotton and sugar and tobacco.”

“Merchant ships are not innocent. Not when they are trading cotton or sugar or tobacco.”

At last, her eyes lifted to meet his. Whether it was that look—daring and fierce—or her words, Chow felt as if he had been shaken awake for the first time in days.

Could she possibly know he was from Northfield Hall? Could she be from Northfield Hall herself?

He didn’t like to waste time thinking about it. He growled, “In between which, we drink rum all day and take our pleasures from whatever woman is closest to us. Which, if you joined, would be you, all day, every day.”

This time, he was the one to look down, almost as soon as he started the threat. He

couldn't say it directly to a woman's face, not even in the interest of protecting her. He stared at the deck, which shone in the sunlight from having just been swabbed that morning.

"I can see to myself, thank you." Beside her, the goat bleated, and she added, "With the assistance of Mrs. Adams."

"That's settled, then." De la Cruz clapped his hands together. "Where shall she hang her hammock, Sharkhead?"

He could, at least, face de la Cruz. Chow glared at him, hating the smug gleam in the navigator's eyes. "Why couldn't you buy a goat without its keeper attached?"

"Didn't you hear the lady? We're not buying the goat. It is gratis."

Chow opened his mouth with further objections, which lined themselves up in a row: The cost of a new crew member was far higher than any price de la Cruz could have paid for a goat. This woman, whoever she was, clearly did not qualify as a lady—a distinction Chow resented himself for even thinking.

But most of all, despite her confidence, the Ghost was no place for any pretty woman to survive.

"We're not as fearsome as Sharkhead makes it sound," de la Cruz assured her. "No one will touch you unless you want them to. Sharkhead is only jealous that ladies always do want Captain Boukman to touch them."

She smiled, a little twitch of her lips that was as practiced as it was coy. Her voice got even more slippery as she cast a teasing glance across Chow's body. "Perhaps, if you play your cards right, I shall want you to touch me, Sharkhead."

He wanted to deny that the idea stirred his body. Bodies, unfortunately, would not be denied. Chow reached forward and took the goat's lead rope. "When you regret this day, don't come crying to me."

That he pulled the goat too roughly down to the lower decks was only one more sin among many for which Chow was quite sure he could never atone.

Buoyed by relief, Rebecca followed the man called Sharkhead below to a hot, stuffy deck lit only by open portholes. The crew turned to watch as they passed, and she felt the curious, hungry eyes of dozens of men raking down her body.

It didn't worry her. She was pretty, yes, and a woman, and these were pirates who craved physical pleasure they didn't get for months on end.

But pirates had their own sense of honor—especially on the infamous Captain Boukman's ship—and Rebecca was now part of their crew.

She would serve them goat's milk and scrub the deck on her knees beside them and within a matter of days, they would know her as one of them, same as all the households Rebecca had ever worked in.

In the meantime, she sensed that this man called Sharkhead would protect her, even if he resented it.

Rebecca had observed him as he argued with de la Cruz about her presence. He wasn't what she expected of a pirate, firstly because he spoke perfect King's English while looking like a Chinaman. Then, when he addressed her, he was frank without being cruel.

He seemed honest, and even on the Ghost, Rebecca hadn't expected to find that among pirates.

He led her to the back of the ship, where a wire cage held three hens and a low wooden wall penned in a pig. “Your goat will remain here.” He tied Mrs. Adams’s lead to a hook.

“I’ll need to take her above a few times a day if you want her to keep producing milk.”

In truth, Rebecca didn’t know too much about the husbandry of a goat.

She had spent most of her life in city households, where milk was purchased each morning from a dairy.

But she had been with Mrs. Adams for three weeks now, ever since the *Primrose* wrecked off the northern shore of Fortune Island.

Mrs. Adams had been at her side when she crept away from the other ragged survivors after receiving too many leers.

Mrs. Adams had wandered the outskirts of Albert Town with Rebecca as she looked for a reputable place to stay.

And when in the span of one day Rebecca had been mistaken for a slave and then for a prostitute, Mrs. Adams had lunged forward both times to attack the people threatening to steal Rebecca away.

Now that they had found safety on the *Ghost*, Rebecca intended to do right by her friend. It only seemed natural that an animal would want daylight and fresh air.

Sharkhead gave her a look, but it was too dark for Rebecca to see much of it. “We’ve got hay to feed her here. I’ll have to lay in some more before we sail. I wasn’t counting on a goat.”

“When do we sail?”

She didn’t think the question would rankle. Yet Sharkhead stiffened, and he replied curtly, “When the captain says so.”

Rebecca bristled, as was her nature when anyone got so short with her. She wasn’t poking around to be troublesome. She had a right to ask questions, same as anyone else.

She schooled herself against reacting. Now was the time to acclimate herself, not to ruffle feathers.

“Do you know much about sailing?” Sharkhead asked her. She felt his eyes on her again, but still, the shadows cloaked his face.

Rebecca thought about exaggerating. At age fourteen, she had said a false yes when the head cook at Placid Manor asked if she knew how to make a roux, and that had worked out just fine.

But Cook had been a friendly old woman with a soft spot for a motherless child. Sharkhead already didn’t want Rebecca on the ship. She admitted simply, “No.”

“Every man has a part,” Sharkhead said. Then, he amended, “Every body has a part. You’ll start by learning the knots.”

He spoke roughly, as if each word cost him a penny, yet a layer of kindness softened everything he said.

Rebecca couldn’t quite figure out where the kindness came from—it wasn’t in his expression, which she couldn’t see, nor was it in his body language, since he stood stiff as a board.

Still, it was as if he merely acted the part of a mean old pirate.

“I learn quickly,” Rebecca replied.

“Let’s hope so.” He preceded her back to the ladder that led above deck. When he stepped into a shaft of sunlight, Rebecca was shocked to discover the hint of a smile on his lips. “Otherwise, you’ll walk the plank.”

She followed him up without finding a reply. She was accustomed to men who wanted to fuck her, men who wanted to wield their authority over her, and men who only wanted her to serve them—as well as men who wanted a combination of all three.

She didn’t mind letting a man fuck her when the situation called for it.

It was like eating salted sardines or cheese with spots of mold on it; she could put on a brave face and come through the other side with a little more sustenance.

And she certainly knew how to act the part of a good servant who made no complaints.

But she didn’t know to which category Sharkhead belonged, and that left her feeling both unsettled and intrigued.

He led her to the quarterdeck, where a trio of men sat in the shade of a great white sail.

One was another Eastern man whose bald head was covered in intricate tattoos; the others were no more than thirteen years old, with complexions as mixed as Rebecca’s.

“Lee,” Sharkhead said, “We’ve got a new crew member.

” He looked at Rebecca, a frown creasing his otherwise smooth skin. “What’s your name, then?”

She hesitated, considering a false name. But she wasn’t on the run, and she didn’t want to make her life any more complicated than it needed to be. “Rebecca Smith.” She smiled at the three sailors, her spirits lifting from their interest. “Although I suppose I need a pirate’s name now.”

Lee grinned. In accented English, he said, “A pirate doesn’t choose his name. His name chooses him.”

“Rebecca will do for now.”

She turned to Sharkhead as he said this and was surprised to discover him looking directly at her. In the sunlight, Rebecca saw all the dazzling browns that colluded to make his irises look black as ebony.

As his eyes lingered, Rebecca felt his interest in her as surely as if he had grabbed her waist and hoisted her onto his lap. It lasted only a moment, yet it was all Rebecca needed to know, at last, which category to sort him into:

A man who wanted to fuck her—despite his better judgment.

The most dangerous kind of man of all.

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Chow marked the days of Captain Boukman's absence in little slashes across the top of the logbook.

As quartermaster, Chow was responsible for the ship in the captain's absence: keeping records, tracking supplies, and maintaining order among the restless men.

The pirate crew was a good one when they were sailing, with few disputes and even fewer acts of insubordination, but the longer they stayed in the little Fortune Island lagoon, the rowdier they became.

On the captain's fourth day away from the ship, Fearsome Fred poured rum over a boy's head for some disrespect; the next night, Fred found a steaming bucket of shit dumped on his hammock.

Chow ordered everyone to swab the decks, even though they had only just done so, to keep away any further "harmless fun." There was no such thing on a ship like theirs, not when he still heard the crew grumbling in hidden whispers about the captain's decision to leave three of their mates behind in Grenada last month.

The captain had claimed the pirates failed to return to the ship before it sailed and therefore deserved to be deserted in the British-owned town.

The crew felt that the captain had retaliated because those three pirates had argued with him about the decision to go to Grenada in the first place.

Chow didn't know who was right. He didn't care who was right.

He only wanted order on the ship so that they would be poised to sail as soon as they had a whiff of a slaver.

When the decks were clean, he set everyone to rat catching in the hold.

Then they inspected each line and sail and gun.

By the captain's eighth day away, Chow had ordered so much work that old de la Cruz convinced him they needed a day of rest. "The crew will fall ill with exhaustion if you keep us working like dogs in this heat."

Chow was tempted to ignore the advice. In the course of his life, he had learned the value of hard work to distract from one's inner demons.

So, too, had he come to trust in a hierarchy with a clear leader, and there was no clearer demonstration of who was in charge than seeing who set the tasks and who followed them.

But in the almost-decade that he had been on the Ghost , he had also learned to trust de la Cruz's instincts. Reluctantly, he ordered everyone to observe the day as if it were the Sabbath, with no work except the necessary.

The crew made no complaints. De la Cruz was right about one thing: the day was hot, hotter than it had a right to be, and they all appreciated the chance to rig the sails into sunshades and loll about on the deck.

Long Tale Lee took up his ropes, which he turned into intricate artwork, while the musicians set to fiddling.

By the foremast, Liberty Johnson brought out his kit of needles and gunpowder ink to finish young Fuego de la Cruz's tattoo.

Chow planned to stretch out on the quarterdeck with the book of folktales he had purchased at a market stall in Casablanca—until he saw Liberty Johnson wave the woman over.

Rebecca Smith. In her first few days on the ship, she had proved herself willing to help in any task.

She caught on quickly to tying knots under Lee's tutelage, so then the boys started teaching her how to climb the masts and manage the sails.

She helped Cook prepare the mess, and in the evenings, she made sure every dish was clean before joining the men above deck to watch the sunset.

The crew had already nicknamed her Ave Rebecca—a Catholic reference Chow didn't completely understand—and invited her to sing along with their ballads.

When Fred turned that rum over Pip's head, she was the one to clean Pip off.

Chow knew he should be feeling easier about her presence on the ship.

Instead, he felt more on edge. Captain Boukman, for all his good, was an unpredictable man.

If the crew loved Rebecca Smith too much, he might decide she was a liability and send her ashore.

Or he might decide she had to stay forever—and play some game to keep her with the crew even when she was ready to leave.

Whatever her fate on the Ghost would be, Chow found himself crossing the ship now to stop her from falling into Liberty's trap.

“How is it done?” she was asking as Chow approached them. She had dropped to a crouch, and her skirts caught on her knees so that he could see her bare ankles leading to bare feet leading to bare toes.

Fuego held out his arm to display his almost-finished tattoo, an anchor sitting proudly atop his bicep muscle. Meanwhile, Liberty explained the process of dipping the needle in gunpowder ink and then poking it through the skin.

“It’s not for you,” Chow interrupted.

Rebecca looked up at him with amusement dancing across her dark eyes. “I didn’t see in the articles where it says that the quartermaster decides who gets gunpowder spots.”

“You’re still new. Better wait until you’re sure you want the pirate’s life.”

She rocked back on her heels. “I want it.”

Chow didn’t know if she was being argumentative or if she really was so foolish. She wasn’t a young woman who could mistake folly for adventure. If the Ghost were her best hope for escaping prostitution on Fortune Island, then fine; but he didn’t see how she could believe this was her destiny.

“It’s her body to do with as she likes,” Liberty Johnson said. His tone was free of innuendo, his eyes on his needles instead of her flesh.

Still, the mention of her body—the mention of as she likes —sent an unwelcome thrill of desire into Chow’s core.

“And she likes to get one like Fuego’s.” Eyes locked with Chow’s, Rebecca unbuttoned the front of her chemise and shrugged it off.

Suddenly, her shoulders—paler than brown, nuttier than white—shone in the sunlight. Their only adornment was the yellowed straps of her petticoat, which disappeared beneath the soft structure of her short stays.

Under all of which were her breasts.

But Chow wouldn't think about her breasts.

Rebecca offered her upper arm to Liberty. "Will it take long?"

"Depends on what picture you want."

Chow pinched his fingers together, trying to bring some sense of reality to his body. He would not look at her any longer. What she did with her skin was her own business. He would turn around now and let her make her own mistakes.

Her eyes roved over him. "How long did your shark take?"

"Days." That had been in his early years on the Ghost, before he was quartermaster, when he lolled about in the doldrums instead of joining the captain in worrying over course and supplies.

"Show her the whole thing," Liberty said. "Let us all admire it again."

He didn't want to. Shouldn't want to. Yet, without any further coaxing, Chow found himself lifting off his shirt—his coat long since discarded in the heat—to show his torso.

He turned, like a pig being roasted in his final fate, so she could see where the shark tail began between his shoulder blades.

“Did it hurt?” she asked, her voice husky.

The part on his back had felt more like incessant scratching.

The shark’s jaws that curled up his neck had been excruciating.

But Captain Boukman had ordered the tattoo, and Chow had wanted to prove that he belonged on the Ghost .

And so he gritted his teeth through the pain and, in the days that followed, kept up his daily work even though his skin felt like it was about to blister off his very bones.

He debated now whether to lie to make it sound even worse in order to save Rebecca from the inner demon driving her to Liberty Johnson’s needle. He turned back around, shirt balled in his hand, and answered, “Of course it did.”

She swallowed, which drew his attention to her throat, which drew his eyes down to her collarbone and the smooth slope of skin leading to her breasts.

Which he wasn’t looking at.

“That’s not why you shouldn’t do it,” he added. “There’s no removing it once it is done. It will mark you forever as a...”

Pirate. Sailor. Anything other than the housemaid she had previously been.

“I don’t plan on going anywhere. Anywhere the Ghost doesn’t take me, that is.” At last, she pulled her eyes away from him and set them on Liberty Johnson. “What do you suggest for the design?”

Chow had done his best. There was no talking sense into this woman, just as there

had been no preventing her from joining the crew. He would walk away now, retreat to his book like he had planned, and get some peace.

Except he found himself standing in the same spot suggesting, “A swallow.”

It was a typical design, though not simple. It might hurt her a little.

But it was an offering to the deep power that controlled the universe, one that might be worth the pain.

A prayer for safe passage home.

Wherever her home was.

“What does a swallow mean?” Rebecca asked.

This time, Chow didn’t debate about the lie of omission. “Swift sailing.”

She smiled, her eyes landing on his again. “A swallow it is, then.”

Rebecca hadn’t meant to talk her way into a tattoo. She hadn’t known what to do with her leisure time—never had been good at quiet moments when no direct action needed to be taken—and had been curious about the needles Liberty Johnson pulled from his wooden case.

But now, because shirtless Sharkhead Chow wouldn’t stop glowering at her, she was offering up her bare arm for a tattoo.

Her bare arm—and the rest of her torso, exposed down to her underthings. And she, a nice girl who always succeeded in nice households!

She could feel all eyes on the pirate ship spinning towards her like a compass needle pulled towards the North Pole.

After a week on the Ghost , she knew them all.

In a pack with their feet dangling off the starboard side sat the green boys who thought they were ready to handle a woman, shoving each other amid muffled guffaws.

Fearsome Fred, who flirted with her in French over the mess table, watched from the steps leading to the quarterdeck.

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It was Sharkhead who intrigued her the most. Whose glare felt the most potent.

Rebecca knew what he wanted, but she didn't think he knew.

In the course of only a few days, she had learned much about him from the crew: he was called Sharkhead because he had once, in the shallow waters off an island, been attacked by a shark and won the fight by punching it in the head; he looked Chinese but hailed from the middle of England; and—most interesting to Rebecca—he didn't take on lovers.

The elder de la Cruz swore Sharkhead was a virgin.

Fred argued that Sharkhead had taken a vow of celibacy in reverence to some Chinese god.

Long Tale Lee—who, it turned out, was from some kingdom called Joseon, not China—insisted it wasn't a choice at all but rather an order from Captain Boukman that Sharkhead act like a neutered dog.

Rebecca didn't know what to think of it.

She had never heard of a man outside the priesthood taking a vow of celibacy, nor could she believe a pirate would remain a virgin.

All she knew was if Sharkhead wasn't looking at her, then he was intentionally not looking at her, as if he were a young boy who only knew how to express his interest by insisting he hated her.

Offering her arm to Liberty, Rebecca allowed herself to glower right back at Sharkhead.

He was a stocky man with thick broad shoulders above a narrower, muscled waist, supported by legs as wide as the masts.

Rebecca had known he had a tattoo—the head of the shark emerged up the back of his neck, jaws open as if it were about to eat him—but she hadn't expected to see the shark snake around his chest. When he had lifted off his shirt, she had to bite her lip to keep from gasping aloud at both the brutal artistry and the sheer strength of his torso.

Rebecca didn't know what she would do if Sharkhead ever admitted to himself that he wanted to fuck her, but seeing that tattoo spread across his muscled shoulders, Rebecca had realized for the first time that she might want to fuck him, too.

Which didn't have to mean anything at all.

Sharkhead grimaced as Liberty Johnson's fingers curled around Rebecca's elbow, pulling her into position.

The tattooist, a Black carpenter from South Carolina, was a young man, his skin smooth and body still taut; ten years ago, Rebecca might have lost her heart to him, but he was too baby-faced to interest her now.

Now, she couldn't seem to stop gawking at the quartermaster hovering over them, as if he personally would supervise every movement of Liberty's needle.

"It get hot like this where you're from, Miss Rebecca?" Liberty asked as the needle poked into her skin.

It hurt—but no worse than a horsefly in the New Jersey summer. “Depends where you consider I’m from.”

Sharkhead, still shirtless, crossed his arms, and the tattooed tail that stretched around his ribs flexed.

Rebecca decided to elaborate: “It got hot in the almshouse in New York City. When I got hired into a family in New Jersey, it didn’t feel as hot because of the breezes on the farm.

But then I got myself a place in the kitchen in the senator’s household in Rhode Island, and he took us all to Washington.

That was a summer like I had never experienced before. ”

“Not as hot as South Carolina, I reckon,” Liberty replied.

“If it’s worse than this, I wouldn’t like to try it.” They hadn’t had a breeze all day. The air was as thick with humidity as with sunshine, pressing unrelenting heat on Rebecca’s skin.

“How about you, Sharkhead?” Liberty asked.

The man flinched as if he had thought himself invisible.

“It get hot where you’re from?”

Sharkhead cleared his throat. He snapped his shirt, which had been crushed in his fist, into the air, as if he were about to put it back on. “I didn’t know hot until I started sailing.”

Rebecca asked, “How long has that been?”

He looked at her in response, and their gazes locked. His cheeks and forehead were wide, making his face too round to be handsome, yet still, she wanted him to toy with her.

He replied, “Ten years, more or less.”

“And were you a pirate from the start?”

He ducked his head through the neck of his shirt.

“I began as a passenger, until about twenty miles off the English coast when the East India Company decided to force me and the other Lascars into service. Lucky for me, a pirate ship attacked, and I switched crews. Otherwise, I might still be roaming the seas transporting cotton and tea.”

“And you have been on the Ghost ever since?”

Sharkhead wasn't looking at her, yet Rebecca still saw emotion darken his face like a shadow.

“No, I began on a different ship. It was almost a year later that Captain Boukman took me on.” Then, straightening his shirt around his torso, he added, “I am grateful to still be on his crew after all this time. I wouldn't want to be any other kind of pirate. ”

Liberty let out a whistle in agreement. “Wouldn't mind a little more gold in my pockets, of course, but I'd rather give slavers hell than bury a treasure chest on some godforsaken island I'll never find again.”

There was a strange defensiveness to the way they both spoke, as if following Captain Boukman was a suspect choice.

Rebecca was sure she hadn't put that idea in their heads.

She had convinced Julio de la Cruz to bring her to the Ghost precisely because she knew it was Boukman's ship.

Boukman—the free Black man who devoted his life to fighting slavers.

Boukman—the captain who, it was said, called on voodoo spirits to protect his ship.

Boukman—the pirate with a moral code even preachers could praise.

Rebecca wondered who had begun to doubt Boukman—and why—in order to make both Sharkhead and Liberty so defensive.

Sharkhead's eyes returned to her arm, examining Liberty's work, as he asked, "And what makes you want to be a pirate?"

Rebecca had wanted to join the Ghost, to be sure, but that was because it was the only place on Fortune Island that she trusted not to decide she was a runaway slave.

Now that she was a part of the crew, though, she found being a pirate had a certain appeal.

"My employer took me to New Orleans as part of his household. Louisiana being a slave state, and me looking as I do..." She held out an arm, unable to find the words to articulate that her whole life, people had seen her as Black or not, depending on their preference.

And she—she didn't know the truth, except that it was a lot easier when she decided to be a white woman.

“Things got complicated. He put me on a ship back to Rhode Island. But we were shipwrecked a month ago in that hurricane. I ended up on a longboat with two of the crewmen and Mrs. Adams. I don't have my papers or even any money.

I suppose being on the Ghost is better than being stuck on this island forever. ”

“Wait until Captain Boukman hears that!” Liberty said, pausing his work in excitement. “He loves to save a pirate. I myself only had to say that I was a runaway before he said I could be on the crew as long as I wanted. You'll have a home here for life once you tell him that story.”

“A home for life doesn't sound so bad, even if it does mean I'm surrounded by randy pirates,” she teased.

“I haven't heard you complaining,” Liberty retorted.

Sharkhead, watching them, said, “Even if Captain wants you to stay forever, you need only stick with us for an excursion or two. Then you'll get your share, and you can afford to go wherever you want.”

He was being kind again—that was plain from the softness in his voice as he made the promise. Yet Rebecca felt herself shudder as if another hurricane were about to blow through.

All she had ever wanted was for someone to ask her to stay forever. The idea that she might finally have found it in the Ghost made her almost feverish with delight.

She wouldn't let Sharkhead scare her into turning away from a home, now that she

might have it.

“You’d better get used to me,” she said, “for I intend to stay.”

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C how did as he always did during times of unease: returned to the tasks at hand.

When he had been a youth at Northfield Hall, unable to understand why he was the only one in his family who chafed against the Preston rules, he had dedicated himself to carpentry.

In London, where he had doubled as a boardinghouse superintendent for the East India Company while overseeing Preston business, he spent his days focused on finding better rations for his lodgers and getting rid of rat infestations rather than stewing in his churned-up emotions.

And in the aftermath of the Calliope , he had put his hands to work mending sails and tying ropes and doing anything Captain Boukman needed so that he did not feel the horror shrouding his heart.

He counted the Ghost 's food and water supplies again to make sure they had enough to last a journey across the Atlantic and back, if the captain so decided.

He inspected the sails. He drilled the crew on the guns until they could rival the British navy itself for how fast they changed the powder in their cannons.

He did not think about Rebecca. He did not ruminate on the way she appeared at his elbow almost as soon as he came to rest, always with a question or a comment or an observation. He did not think too hard on her plight as a shipwrecked maid.

Nor did he allow himself to imagine her on the ship beyond the first sailing.

She was too pretty, too lively to remain on the Ghost after its glamour faded.

She had joined because she heard too many pirate stories, and as a woman whose tanned olive skin could get her mistaken for a slave in the wrong circumstances, she had a natural interest in joining the legendary crew of Captain Boukman.

All it would take was one bad squall or one bad gunfight or one outbreak of scurvy for her to realize she was much better off booking passage back to Rhode Island.

Until that day, Chow would not waste his thoughts on her.

It was midmorning on their fifteenth day in the lagoon that Captain Boukman reappeared. Fuego de la Cruz spotted him from the topmast and cried, "Captain rowing out!"

The crew straightened themselves without Chow giving any instructions. The boys scrabbled to make sure all the sails were tied up appropriately; those with better clothes went down to change; Rebecca even knew enough to take the goat and pig below.

As for Chow, he combed his hair, shrugged into his heavy jacket, and made sure to display the gold pocket watch Captain had gifted him two Christmases previously.

He was always glad when the captain returned.

They had been sitting in the lagoon too long; the crew was restless, and if they tarried anywhere, they risked the British or the Spanish or the Portuguese finding them.

Even more than that, when Captain was on board, Chow didn't carry the burden of deciding what, when, or how the Ghost did anything.

He could simply execute the captain's orders—and bask in the privilege of being allowed to do so.

But Captain Boukman was at his most unpredictable when he returned to ship.

He spent his days in port liberated from the title of captain, which usually involved too much rum and far more women than Chow could comprehend.

There were fights, too—fist fights, sword fights, gun fights—and wagers that occasionally resulted in him leaping onto the Ghost and ordering immediate departure.

A captain had a right to do what he wanted with his free time, yet Chow could admit to himself that he preferred Captain Boukman when they were in the middle of the Atlantic.

The crew lowered ropes to pull up the rowboat, bringing the captain up one hoist at a time.

First came his hat, a Napoleonic bicorne boasting new rooster plumes.

Then came his head with its collection of thick, snakelike braids.

He wore a black beard, and the rest of his dark face was pulled into a scowl—but then, he always played the tyrant when he returned to ship.

Finally, they had a full view of him standing in the longboat, one booted foot lifted on the bench, as if he were posing for a portrait to display his prowess.

Chow always forgot how big Captain Boukman was: in height, width, and spirit.

“Well, you sorry bastards, what trouble have you gotten into without me?”

He bounded onto the deck, his scowl melting a little with his words. It was to be a happy reunion, then.

Chow let out a breath of relief. “Good to have you back, Captain.”

They went through the routine reports: there had been no attacks, no naval sightings, nor even glimpses of other pirate ships in the captain’s absence. “And the crew?” asked Captain Boukman, his words private for Chow. “Have you discovered any more troublemakers?”

“No, sir.” Chow kept his answer short so that he wouldn’t have to lie. He hadn’t discovered any troublemakers—but neither did he believe there were any to begin with, as the captain feared, and so he had put no effort towards it.

Captain Boukman stared hard at Chow for a moment. Then, slapping his palm on Chow’s shoulder, he said, “My loyal mate, as always.”

Chow didn’t want to admit how good it was to hear that praise.

The captain walked among the crew, calling Julio de la Cruz old and Fearsome Fred fat and Liberty Johnson cocky. He got distracted halfway down the deck, telling a story of some Spaniards who had news of a trio of slave ships that had sailed for Africa from Havana the previous week.

It was at the end of his story that Rebecca ascended from below, where she had been tying up the animals. Captain Boukman, turning to clasp Fuego’s shoulder, saw her immediately.

His eyes lit up, just as Chow had known they would. “Have you splurged to treat me

with a gift?”

Rebecca’s chin lifted a little. She didn’t cast down her eyes, as she had when Chow had first met her, but neither did she look directly at the captain.

“She had a goat,” Julio de la Cruz said, his tone mixing defense of Rebecca with respect for the captain so that it came out as a croak. “We’ve been having fresh milk every other day.”

The captain was busy feasting his eyes on Rebecca. Almost the whole deck stood between them, yet Chow saw the distance closing as if Captain Boukman’s desire alone could erase physical space.

She squared her shoulders. “I’ve joined the crew. Rebecca Smith. Sir.”

“A woman on the crew?” Captain Boukman didn’t scoff, as Chow had, but instead smirked like a cat who had licked the cream. “I’ve never had one of those before.”

Chow stepped forward. He was approximately between them. If he could find the right words, he could stop whatever was about to happen. “It’s not like that, sir.”

“Not like what? She’s not a woman? She is not on my crew?” Captain Boukman leered at her. “Is my crew not sworn to obey my every order?”

Rebecca wore her embarrassment in her fists, clenched around the fabric of her skirt. “I’m flattered, sir, I’m sure, but...”

“Ah, listen to her, with the manners of an American coquette!” Now Captain Boukman advanced, as smooth as a snake slithering across the deck. He got close enough that his hat blocked the sun from falling on Chow.

Chow did not step back.

The captain loomed over him. “What do you think I’m going to do to her?

Kill her?” He looked over his shoulder to gauge the reaction of the crew.

A few of them laughed weakly under his examination.

Then he threw his gaze to Rebecca. “Come here, sweetheart, and let’s show poor Sharkhead there’s nothing to be afraid of under your skirts. ”

“Captain Boukman...” She spoke in that smooth, silky voice, but it trailed off again, as if she couldn’t quite find what to say.

The trouble was, there were no magic words she could say. Captain Boukman saw only breasts and pussy, and nothing from her mouth would change his mind.

Which was why Chow had to say what he said next.

“She’s mine.”

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Rebecca had never dreamed the ship could be so quiet. Even the wind died down so that the sails didn't creak. The whole bay resounded with Sharkhead's declaration.

She's mine.

She didn't know whether to look at Captain Boukman or Sharkhead and ended up doing both.

Except for a straighter spine than usual, Sharkhead looked as disinterested as ever.

As for the captain—Rebecca hadn't been prepared for him to be so much of a man.

Skin as dark as midnight. Head as high as a tree. Shoulders as wide as a house.

Desires as big as demands.

He stared at Sharkhead as if the quartermaster had turned into a kraken. "She is yours?"

The rest of the crew stared, too, and Rebecca wondered who would be the first to contradict Sharkhead.

"How much did you pay for her?" the captain asked.

She bit her cheeks to keep from defending herself. She had known a pirate ship wouldn't be friendly to a woman. Sharkhead himself had warned her of this. If she quibbled over being mistaken for a whore, she would still be taken for a

whore—only, perhaps, more roughly.

“It’s not like that, sir,” Sharkhead said again. He gulped. “She’s my wife.”

His wife ?

Rebecca had never thought she would be someone’s wife without a wedding—or without being consulted on the matter first.

Captain Boukman parroted back, “Your wife ? How did you come by a wife and not invite me to the ceremony?”

Sharkhead’s whole head was red as a tomato with the lie. “Well, sir, it wasn’t in a church. You know I don’t hold with any of that. I met Rebecca doing provisioning, and...well, how else does a man end up married? A pretty face and too much alcohol.”

“And a goat,” old Julio said.

Rebecca didn’t know whether to thank or resent the navigator for backing up the story.

The captain swung around, hands out, to see everyone’s reactions. “And so you have all been celebrating Sharkhead’s nuptials in my absence?”

“Saved most of the celebrating for when you came back, Captain,” replied Liberty.

“She’s been mighty helpful with the mess,” added Cook.

Captain Boukman revolved on the spot, taking in everyone around him. When his eyes landed on Rebecca again, they were no less greedy or invasive than they had

been moments ago. Yet there was a distance to them, and after a moment, he smiled.

“Well then, congratulations are in order! I never thought I’d see Chow with a woman!

” The captain stepped forward and clapped a hand on Sharkhead’s shoulder.

This time, he kept it there, and even from where Rebecca stood, she could see his fingers hook into Sharkhead’s flesh.

“Let the celebrations wait no longer. Take your bride into my cabin and enjoy some private time. The rest of us will have rum waiting when you are done.”

If Sharkhead had been a tomato before, he was now a blazing evening sun. “Now? Surely we need to—”

“I insist.” Captain Boukman’s fingers guided Sharkhead across the deck towards his private quarters. When they reached Rebecca, he grabbed her by the arm, too. His grip was not kind, and up close, she could see something false in his smile.

He was nothing like the mythic captain she had imagined.

“Come on, men. It’s bad luck to send a groom and bride to their chambers without a little ribbing!” he cajoled, and suddenly the whole crew surrounded them. Next thing she knew, Rebecca was pushed inside the captain’s cabin.

Sharkhead stumbled in after her, and the door swung shut.

Leaving her alone with this man who had just talked himself into being her husband.

C how was a fucking idiot.

There was no other explanation for how he found himself trapped in the captain's cabin with Rebecca. An idiot who should have just kept his mouth shut.

Behind him, the crew was growing raucous as Captain Boukman led them in an old pub song about a husband and wife on their first night.

The doorknob grew slick from the sweat of Chow's palm.

On either side of him, the carved wooden shelves with their ledgers and instruments and charts loomed as if they might collapse on top of him.

And in front of him stood Rebecca, hands braced against the captain's desk as if that alone prevented her from falling into the ocean.

"What now?" she asked. Her voice was just as silken as when he had first met her, undisturbed by what had just unfolded. She looked him straight in the eye, and damned if there wasn't a hint of a challenge curving that thick lower lip of hers.

That didn't make Chow any less of an idiot. "We don't have to..."

He said it softly, yet in almost the same moment, something small and sharp jabbed through the keyhole into his upper thigh and from the other side of the door, Captain Boukman jeered, "No wonder you didn't have a wife 'til now. Don't keep her waiting!"

Which meant they were being observed.

He crossed the cabin to stand close to her. Too close. Now he could see the dark shadows beneath her eyes and smell the oil in her long hair. She was a pretty woman, and he wanted her, but that didn't make her his. "I didn't mean to put you in this position."

“Oh? What did you think would happen?”

He should have kept his mouth shut and let her reap the consequences of her own actions. “I didn’t want Captain to abuse you.”

“I’ve been handling men like the captain since my tits began to show.”

The men behind the door broke into another song, this one about a sailor with too long of a prick and the various prostitutes he tried to swive.

“It seems I would have ended up in this cabin either way.” Rebecca released the desk, her palms spreading wide in the air. Chow breathed in her scent again and realized he was feeling drunk. “What are you going to do with me?”

“I’m not going to do anything with you,” he growled—barely remembering to keep his voice low enough for privacy. “I’m not that kind of man.”

Her eyebrows jumped. “It’s true then, what they say? You’re a virgin?”

Chow had heard that whisper. He had nothing against virgins, either. Yet the accusation felt like a sharp knife held against his balls. “I’m not a virgin.”

“Do you only like to play with men?”

“That’s not it either.” Bad memories flashed behind his eyes as pressure mounted in his chest at trying to find adequate words for something he didn’t want to explain.

He didn’t owe her an explanation.

“Then what kind of man are you, Sharkhead Chow?”

It was what he had been called for nearly a decade now, and he didn't have any complaint with it. Yet he heard himself replying—in a voice as rough as any villain's—"My name is Martin."

Rebecca blinked, clearing for a moment the game that was playing out on her face. "Martin Chow, then. What are you going to do now that you have cheated your way into claiming me as your wife?"

The younger boys on the crew were getting even louder now, pounding on the wall, and Chow didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend for this to happen."

Surprisingly, she smiled, a great rainbow of teeth that beamed across her whole face. "I know you didn't. You entered this game without knowing the rules."

"Are there rules?" He couldn't imagine she had ever been in this situation before, yet he realized that she wasn't the least bit anxious. Not even as a dozen men on the other side of the door called for him to throw her on the ground and take her like a beast.

"There's one. You have to fuck me now." Her hands slid backward again, her fingers caressing the fine grain of the captain's desk. "Luckily, you've been wanting to do that since the moment you met me."

Chow couldn't have argued with that even if he wanted to. Her breasts were practically in his face—and she smelled so wonderfully appealing, like a magic bottle of orange blossom in this stinking desert of sweaty men.

"Do you think you can take me right here?" she murmured.

"Yes." He wiped his palms on his trousers.

Rebecca caught his gaze in hers and smiled. “Prove it.”

It still felt wrong. But when he gripped her hips like a brute, she exhaled a little squeal right into his ear.

When he levered her hips onto the edge of the desk, she wrapped her legs around to clench his arse and her arms to hold his neck close.

And when he pushed back her skirts, she reached down to stroke her own cunny and show him the glistening treasure of black curls and soft skin.

He unbuttoned his trousers faster than ever before. His cock ached to be inside of her. He stroked his thumb across her little hill once, then twice, then three times, watching her back arch in delight. Her ankles tightened around him. Then, when she looked ready to burst, he thrust inside of her.

Rebecca cried out in pleasure so robustly that the men on the other side of the door cheered.

Chow wanted to protect her from them, but he couldn't, so he kept on fucking her. The inkwell on the desk rattled. The papers beneath her bum crumpled. As she arched backward another time, the ledger slid off to the floor behind.

And Chow evaporated into someone who wasn't Sharkhead or Martin or man.

He was his body only, and all that existed was Rebecca's, and he was feeling her hot, wet channel; he was seeing her tight little breasts; he was tasting the salt of her skin; he was listening to her huffs of excitement; and he was smelling the sea air of her quim and the orange blossom of her desire and the coconut oil of her hair; and then he came in an explosion of delight.

He had forgotten how deeply pleasure could spiral when he finished inside a woman instead of in his hand.

Captain Boukman swung the door open. Chow slid out of Rebecca in a hurry, pulling her skirts down for modesty, and kept his back to the door as he rebuttoned his trousers.

For her part, Rebecca almost looked woozy, with a great big smile on her face. “My thanks for the wedding gift, Captain Boukman,” she said. “My husband had been too shy of the men in your absence to show me his full prowess.”

Chow turned to face the captain. He didn’t know what Boukman had expected, but he knew this had been a gambit, not a gift. The only question was: had fucking Rebecca under supervision of the men been enough to make up to the captain for bringing a wife on board?

Or were there further consequences awaiting him?

For the moment, Captain Boukman grinned and slapped him on the back once more. “I didn’t know you had it in you, Chow.”

There was nothing to say but “Yes, sir.”

“Now, enough carrying on. Ready the ship to make sail. We’re going to find those slavers.”

“Yes, sir.” This time, Chow said it more heartily. The captain, it seemed, was willing to treat him as normal.

And, as Chow turned to deliver orders to the crew, the whole day almost felt normal again. Except Rebecca slid her fingers into his as they exited the cabin, and Chow

kept them there as long as he could, before finally they both had to go ready the ropes.

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And so, she was Chow's wife.

At least for as long as she remained on the Ghost .

Rebecca did not allow herself to dwell on it—not on its implications, nor on the exquisite delight of feeling Chow inside of her—as they rushed to set sail.

This was far from her first sea voyage, yet always before, she had been a mere passenger who had retreated to whatever meager quarters were hers when sailing was under way.

Now, she merged into the orchestra of men preparing the vessel for voyage.

She had learned enough to be able to untie this rope and retie it there and to hoist the sails in unison with the other sailors.

Old de la Cruz took up his spot at the helm to navigate them out of the lagoon, while Chow barked orders to catch the proper wind.

Rebecca refused to contemplate that the men around her—throwing her a line and ordering her to haul sails—had just ten minutes before been listening at the door.

And when Captain Boukman meandered over to stand beside de la Cruz with a view down upon all the activity on the ship, she resisted the urge to meet his eyes.

She did not need to prove to anyone, least of all him, that she made her own choices.

No matter what happened to her next, and no matter what had happened to her in the course of her life since being left on the steps of Trinity Church as a baby, Rebecca would always choose her own destiny.

As the activity died down, Rebecca leaned against the railing to take in the view.

To the port side, Fortune Island was growing smaller and smaller, so that its trees looked miniature and its beaches mere slivers of pearl in the late afternoon sunlight.

The water beneath the ship morphed into a darker, truer blue, with little waves whipped up by the wind that didn't quite grow white at their peaks.

While she watched, a trio of dolphins leapt into the air, one after the other, keeping pace with the ship until the wind pushed the Ghost faster and faster into the deep ocean.

"There's nothing better in the world than sailing," came a deep voice behind her. Rebecca turned, without surprise, to see that Captain Boukman had sought her out.

She ducked her head deferentially, as she had done all her life to those she served. "I'm grateful to be part of the crew."

He leaned a hand against the rail, close enough to her that she smelled the days of sweat lodged in his coat. There was no denying he was a large man: he towered over her, and she was as tall as the doorways in Placid Manor.

If he had claimed her for himself, as he had clearly intended to do, Rebecca would have had no choice but to submit.

She had already begun to prepare herself to feel those rough hands on her skin.

She would have found ways to minimize his touch.

She did not allow herself to be miserable, not even when her choices were limited.

Yet his smell did not entice her, and his eyes—though just as dark as Chow's—were not kind.

That was what surprised her the most about him.

After all the stories she had heard of Captain Boukman, the pirate who fought the slavers, she had expected a man whose kindness beamed from the center of his heart.

“We have never had a wife on board before,” the captain said. “Chow took considerable risk bringing you along without permission.”

Rebecca considered the purpose behind his words. She did not think he believed Chow's story; that was why he had humiliated them both in front of the crew. Did he want her to say something now that would prove the lie?

Or did he only intend to threaten that this husband she found herself tied to was in danger of the captain's wrath?

She did not know much about being a wife, but she knew she would not betray her husband, no matter how temporary the marriage.

“He respects you more than any man on earth. I am sure he did not mean offense.” She hated being so deferential, and so she could not help adding, “Besides, I'm afraid I left him no option.

I told him he could have neither me nor my goat unless he allowed me to join the legendary crew of the Ghost .”

Captain Boukman smiled in a way that Rebecca suspected he thought was flirtatious. In effect, it was more of a continuation of the threat. “I still haven’t seen this goat.”

“She’s below with the other animals, sir.” Rebecca did not offer to show him, for she sensed that was what he wanted her to say.

If they disappeared below deck while the crew was busy sailing, she knew what he would try to make happen. She knew even better what the men would believe had happened. And she did not want any of it, real or fiction.

The ship swayed with a wave, giving Rebecca an excuse to step backward—not quite out of reach of the captain, but far enough away that she could no longer smell the coffee and rum on his breath.

She turned her head, too, and caught sight of Chow on the starboard side, shouting up at one of the boys on the masts.

No more than an hour ago, he had been between her legs, coaxing her into oblivion. A rush of possessiveness and gratitude and deep, undeniable desire washed over Rebecca, and she wanted more than anything for him to come protect her from Captain Boukman again.

Sharkhead looked at her in the half-second that her gaze lingered. Almost immediately, he jerked his eyes away—but not back to the boy on the mast. He looked behind her, towards the aft of the ship, and then Rebecca heard old de la Cruz shout, “Captain!”

Boukman acknowledged the navigator by raising one hand in the air. Eyes still on Rebecca, he said, “A wife can be set ashore as soon as she is troublesome. There is always another one in the next port.”

It was the only threat he could make aloud, yet Rebecca knew abandonment was not really the punishment he would mete out, should he find it necessary.

The words still locked around her like manacles on a prisoner. She did not want any of the captain's punishments, but she could stomach his body on hers, brutal workdays, or even banishment to the hold better than being left behind.

She ducked her chin once more. "I will not make trouble, sir. I want only to serve the Ghost as best I can."

"Captain!" de la Cruz shouted again, and at last Captain Boukman turned away.

"See that you don't."

Rebecca retied the knot she had just completed to soothe her trembling hands.

By the time land disappeared from sight, the Ghost had settled into its easy roll through the Sargasso Sea, nary a storm nor a bad wind to be found.

Chow permitted the crew to relax; those on watch remained so, but the rest of them carried their meals and rum to the top deck to watch the sunset.

The sky was a bright, brilliant red at the horizon, pink in the higher wisps of clouds, and a startling midday blue above their heads.

The brown grasses that gave the sea its name floated eerily in the water as a counterpoint to the palette.

It was a beauty incapable of being described. Even a painter could not do it justice. One had to breathe the lightly salted air and hear the gulls cawing around the sails and feel miniature in the face of such vast nature in order to comprehend it.

It was the kind of sunset that made the pirate's life worth living.

Yet even with such majesty spread before him, Chow couldn't shake off his nerves. He felt as if he had been carried away in a riptide. He was no longer Sharkhead, the captain's trusted mate and quiet second-in-command. Nor could he hold himself grumpy and aloof from Rebecca.

She was his responsibility now. Even more than that, everyone on the ship knew it.

There was a small part of him that was gratified by that—the macho part of him that flexed his muscles whenever he met a larger man.

But mostly, the fact made Chow feel as if he were walking around naked.

Worse—as if he were walking around naked for the entertainment of everyone except himself.

His instinct was to ignore her. That would show she didn't mean a thing to him.

It would prove to the crew—and Captain Boukman—that even though he had claimed her as his own, and even though she was the first woman he had shown interest in, and even though they had witnessed him fucking her, he didn't care about her enough for them to use her against him.

He ignored that instinct. He had claimed her, and now she was his responsibility, whether he wanted it or not.

Chow settled onto the deck beside where she sat cross-legged with a bottle of rum. She was alone, and as he sat, she angled herself with more than a little gratitude to welcome him. “Red at night is sailor's delight, isn't that what they say?”

“Aye. No storms ahead.”

“Our good fortune continues.”

He studied her, unsure if she meant that sardonically. The pink in the sky colored her in new shades, darkening her skin and warming her lips. He forgot his thoughts, lost in the idea of kissing her.

“There’s much I don’t know about you,” her lips said, touching themselves in interesting ways with every word. The most interesting of all: “Husband.”

Chow shook his head, fixing his gaze on the crimson horizon. “My parents have been married for thirty years and I’m sure there are still things they don’t know about each other.”

“You know your parents, then?” There was something hungry in her question, and Chow couldn’t help giving a contrary reply:

“I haven’t seen them for over a decade.” He didn’t want to get lost in her hunger. Theirs was an arrangement to protect Rebecca, not a real marriage.

She took a swig of rum. “I’m an orphan. Left as an infant on the steps of Trinity Church. I don’t even know my birthday, much less my parents’ names.”

There were plenty of orphans in the world. Still, Chow felt a pang of sympathy for her. “That you survived shows how strong you are.”

“Or lucky.” She offered him the bottle.

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He refused to allow himself to dwell on the fact that her lips had just encompassed its rim as he took his own sip. He would not touch her again, not now that he had marked her as safe from Captain Boukman.

Which reminded him of that moment a few hours ago when the captain had cornered her at the railing. She had only glanced at Chow, yet that one look had been so full of meaning.

Whatever the captain had been saying, it had made her desperate.

“The captain leaving you alone?”

Rebecca took the rum back, but she didn’t drink from it. “He isn’t what I expected.”

“You’ve heard a lot about him, then?” It didn’t surprise Chow.

Even when he had joined the crew nine years ago, the captain had a reputation of equal parts mercy and conviction.

In the intervening years, they had done so much: stopped dozens of slave ships headed for Africa, marooned the slavers on deserted islands, even set fire to empty barracoons on the Guinea Coast to demolish the African slave traders’ warehouses.

Every pirate captain encouraged stories about his reputation, especially to incite fear in his enemies’ hearts. Chow could only imagine what was said about Captain Boukman.

“I suppose I expected something like a god. A captain above vice.” She laughed softly at herself. “Come to find he is only a man, like all others.”

Chow wasn’t quite sure what she meant by this—except that it didn’t seem favorable. “And what is a man?”

“A man is ego. A man is desire. A man is...” Rebecca lifted her hands in the air as if to say she had no further words. “A man has vices.”

By the mainmast, Jack Davies started playing away on his violin, and Captain Boukman boomed out the start of a song. The sounds of a perfect pirate night.

Chow barely heard it. His mind was captured by all that Rebecca wasn’t saying.

He wondered how many men she had encountered and what they had done to make her say such things.

At the same time, he didn’t want to know anything bad that had ever happened to her.

He couldn’t stand to bear witness to another woman hurt, even if all the hurt was buried in the past.

“The captain’s vices shouldn’t be a problem for you now. We put paid to all of that this afternoon.”

She let out a little snort. “The captain is no fool. He smells a lie, and as soon as he can prove it, we’ll both pay.”

In the fiery haze of the red sky, Captain Boukman looked as black as coal as he cut a jig around the deck. He was all merriment and jokes, the best of his moods, and Chow would normally be letting free his own good humor on a night like this.

Rebecca's words kept the rum from flowing through his veins. He promised, "I won't let you pay for my mistakes."

"Then you had better be true to your word, husband, and keep me as yours." She threaded her fingers through his. They were warm, light, and so very slender.

Chow could just as easily break them as he could hold them.

"You are mine." The words made his cock stand as tall as a mast.

She smiled, which made him realize he was looking at her lips again. "Then tell me something more about yourself. Why haven't you seen your parents in a decade? Don't pirates ever get shore leave?"

He blinked away the fantasy of showing up at Northfield Hall with his tattoos on display. The Ghost had approached the coast of England now and then in the past nine years, but Chow had never asked the captain for permission to visit—nor had it even crossed his mind.

As far as his parents knew, he was happily building a life for himself in China, and Chow had no desire to see their reaction should they find out he was instead marauding the Atlantic Ocean.

He answered Rebecca: "We said our goodbyes. No need to put them through that again."

A frown replaced her smile. "Do you write to them?"

"No." He had intended to send letters as he reached the major ports on his voyage back to Kwangchow, but he had never had the chance.

Why should he want to worry his mother by disclosing he had been forced into labor and then kidnapped by pirates?

Even worse was the news that came after: that he himself was a pirate. That he participated in raids of merchant ships. That he stood by and watched as his crewmates took every treasure for themselves.

Chow could barely admit that to himself. He wouldn't write his family to share it with them.

"And you?" he asked, to change the subject. "Will you write to anyone to let them know you did not perish in that shipwreck?"

An emotion as fierce as the sunset glimmered in her eyes. She looked down at her hand, which closed in a fist around the loose, rough cotton of her gown. "I told you, I haven't any family."

"You haven't any parents. That's not the same as not having family."

Nastily, she bit back: "Oh, and what would you know about it?"

Chow didn't mean to poke at an open wound.

He simply couldn't believe that she—this strange, magnificent creature who had already charmed the entire ship in a matter of days—did not have a coterie of devoted friends waiting for her in each of her deserted American posts.

"Have you ever heard of Northfield Hall?"

She shook her head.

“I grew up there. It is in Berkshire.” He had learned over the years that didn’t mean much to people this side of the Atlantic.

“That’s in England. We’ve still got a king and aristocrats there, you know, and all the land is owned by the gentry and the rest of us have to pay taxes and tithes and rent in order to live.

Lord Preston is the one who owns Northfield Hall.

” Strangely, he found himself amending that to, “Lord Martin Preston. He’s a baron.

He decided to do things differently. He still owns Northfield Hall—there’s a law that keeps him from selling it—but he splits the profits with everyone who works there.

And he invites anyone to come live there if they need a safe haven.

Like my parents, who were stranded in England after following some other lord there from China. ”

“What does that have to do with the price of bread?” There was curiosity in her voice despite the dismissiveness of her words.

“A lot of strangers show up. Strangers who don’t have parents or whose children all died or whose family forsook them.

So they come to Northfield Hall, and we become their family.

” He was making it sound so simple when he was the first to say that it wasn’t.

Northfield Hall was complicated, and when everyone was your friend, no one was your close friend.

Still, he didn't believe that Rebecca had never had someone in her life to whom she would want to write a letter.

"Haven't you ever felt as if you made a family for yourself? "

She frowned at the horizon, considering his words. Chow waited, anticipating a small revelation of her heart.

When at last she spoke, she asked, "And you've never been married before?"

"No. I don't have any women waiting for me in any port, married or not."

Rebecca looked at him with soft, teasing eyes. "Why not? You're a pirate, after all. Doesn't everyone else?"

He had seen plenty of his crewmates fall in love while they sat in one port or another, most often with some prostitute who was happy to take their money again the next time they anchored there.

Julio de la Cruz had a wife in Fuego's mother, as well as a few happy mistresses on either side of the Atlantic.

And most everyone visited a brothel when it was safe enough to go ashore.

Chow hadn't allowed himself that luxury for the entire time he had been on the Ghost . But he didn't quite know how to explain his reason to Rebecca. Not without confessing his soul to her—and he wasn't ready to do that.

"I've never been interested in what everyone else does," he replied. Then, taking up her hand, he kissed the knuckles curling around his fingers. "Now, Ave Rebecca, it is your turn to tell me about yourself."

Her mouth opened, as if to spill forth all her secrets, when old de la Cruz called out, “Come dance, lovebirds!”

Rebecca sprang to her feet, tugging him along with her. “Here’s one thing: I love to dance.”

Chow didn’t have it in him to object. He followed her, never letting free her fingers, and they moved into each other’s arms for an Irish-style jig. The men around them cheered—or jeered—before joining in, hopping this way and that to the rhythm of the fiddle and the sway of the ship.

Perhaps it was better he didn’t know anything real about her. This way, she would remain a strange woman who signed on to pirate ships without reason.

This way, he wouldn’t fall in love with her.

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Dancing in his arms was so exquisite it was almost painful.

Not only because his hands were so firm and his face so handsome and she felt like a belle being twirled around a ballroom.

But also because they were dancing as part of something bigger: as part of the night, as part of the crew, as part of the strange little family that gathered on the swaying deck and played jigs to celebrate their freedom from land.

It was magical enough that Rebecca let go of her worries about Captain Boukman, who lifted his heels in fancy footwork alongside the rest of them, and her fears about the future, and even a little bit of herself.

She was a dancer; she was Martin Sharkhead Chow's wife; she was a part of the Ghost, just like everyone else on board.

If every night could be like this, Rebecca would never wake up in the clutches of anxiety, wondering whether she would end the day in the same bed.

They danced until the sun completely disappeared and the stars twinkled overhead.

The moon was but a sliver in the sky, yet it shone like ivory, bathing the whole ocean in shimmering bands of white light.

Fearsome Fred, the bosun, blew into his pipe to sound the switching of the watch, and the men who had been resting below crawled up to the main deck.

The fiddler packed up, replaced by Mad Murphy with his wheezing accordion, and Sharkhead's hand moved from Rebecca's waist to her palm.

"Come along, then," he murmured, "it's time to rest."

Just that morning, they had still been in the lagoon—within eyesight of land, where Rebecca could flee at any point should she change her mind—and Rebecca had been a mere thorn in Sharkhead's side.

She had known his rank, his gruff orders, and that the other men spoke of him with an equal mix of reverence and fondness.

Now she knew the feel of him inside her. She knew the dazzle that glazed his eyes when he desired her. She knew the name his mother had bestowed on him. She knew he had a mother, one who loved him, and that he was from some corner of England that was strange and kind, just like the Ghost.

How much could change, all in a day. She curled her fingers around his and let him lead her below deck.

There wasn't much hierarchy on a pirate ship, but there was custom, and up until now, Rebecca had been told to hang her hammock at the very back of the ship, beside the livestock pens, where the air stank of animal shit and decaying garbage.

It was, she had been told, the fitting place for both the goat keeper and a newcomer, and so she had resigned herself to pinching her nose even in her sleep.

Sharkhead followed her now all the way to the back, and when she went to sling her hammock across its hooks, he pulled it away from her. "You're my wife now. You'll sleep beside me."

The words worked their own kind of magic. Rebecca followed him back to the center of the ship, where the sway of the waves didn't feel quite as severe. Here was where the old hands bunked: old de la Cruz and Fearsome Fred were already snoring away on the opposite side of the mast.

Sharkhead hung her hammock beside his, inside a little nook created by stacked barrels of provisions on one side and crates of gunpowder on the other. It was far from the privacy of a cabin with a door, yet when Rebecca stepped inside, she felt as if she had bid the rest of the ship goodbye.

There were only the two hooks, however, and so their hammocks were hung directly beside each other. Rebecca climbed into hers first, then held herself still as Sharkhead clambered into his. Their elbows clanged, and he slammed into the ship's wall as he tried to settle farther away from her.

"This might be more comfortable if we were just sharing one hammock," Rebecca suggested. At least then they wouldn't swing into each other like church bells.

"I sweat when I sleep. You'd wake up soaked."

"Is that why you haven't had a woman all these years? Because you think you are the only person who sweats?"

She didn't know why she was teasing him. They only had four hours until their watch was called again. They needed to steal as much sleep as they could.

She liked holding his hand, though, even if the connection meant their hammocks kept banging into each other.

"You don't sweat like I do," he said in the same tone that he had used to order her and Mrs. Adams back to shore that first day.

She didn't intend to permit that tone to remain between them. "Perhaps not." She moved his hand to sit just inside the upper part of her thigh. "But I get wet in other ways."

His fingers firmed over her skirts. Rebecca waited, her breath refusing to come, to see what more of a reaction he would give her. It seemed like an eternity before he asked—the words scratching the back of his throat—"How wet?"

She thought of a dozen adjectives to describe the effect the question had on her junction. Soaking, gushing, slick; like a river, like a geyser, like an ocean; hot, eager, insatiable, liquid, impatient, desperate.

None of them would do the trick. She pulled her dress and petticoat up, instead, all the way up to where his fingers held the fabric fast. "See for yourself."

In the lanternlight, his movements merged with the shadows.

He rolled onto his shoulder, the better to slide those tough fingers down the inside of her thigh.

She saw the gleam in his eyes and the curve of his lips, exaggerated by the darkness beneath them.

She heard his breath hitch as he trailed his thumb along her skin.

She matched it with her own gasp. A small, quiet one, because this time, she didn't want the crew to overhear.

Yet she wanted to be overcome by the feeling, so she tipped back her head and shut her eyes.

She focused on his fingers, which skimmed her like a breeze over still water.

He stretched an ankle across their hammocks and hooked it around hers to keep them swaying in the same rhythm to the waves.

The connection—his stockinged foot against her bare leg—sent a shimmy of pleasure down her spine.

Pleasure that was outmatched when his lips found her ear and scraped a kiss in the tenderest part of her neck.

Rebecca stretched her spine, wishing her breasts free of the confines of her gown, wishing herself full of him like she had been that afternoon when he had knocked her senseless against the captain's desk.

Yet Sharkhead had not even started the good part.

Because it was only after she arced against the hammock, only after she bit back a moan of desire, only after her body felt as red as the sunset, that he brought those fingers to her quim.

That thumb—so thick, so sure—found her clit, and those fingers that could do so much with a rope slid down through her wetness and plunged inside of her.

He worked her clit first, flicking it so fast and so lightly that she barely knew how to breathe.

As a hot spiral built from her deepest core to the magic of his thumb, her hips bucked up against those fingers of his, and he rocked his wrist with her natural movement so that the whole of her body was defined by the fiery desire connecting her clit to her slick channel.

She buried her lips in his neck to keep from letting the whole ship know what he was doing to her; when she broke—and she did, gloriously, almost as deeply and as wonderfully as she had earlier that afternoon—her cry was for him and him only.

But she wasn't ready for it to be over. Seizing his wrist, she brought his fingers to her mouth and licked off the remnants of her desire.

His breath came jaggedly into the air between them.

Rebecca reached down to where he waited long and hard for her.

She untied his sashed belt, unbuttoned his trousers, and freed that cock.

It was warm and velvety in her palm, but she didn't want to work it with her hands.

No, she climbed out of her hammock—carefully, quietly—and landed on her knees, propping her elbows on the insides of his sling to keep him in place.

Breathing hard, he tilted his hips to give her a better angle.

Rebecca took him in her mouth in the fluid, practiced movement she knew men to love so much.

Then, her hand at the base of his cock, she slid her tongue and cheeks up and down, up and down, tasting the sea of his flesh and feeling the throb of his desire.

She was gentle but firm, molding her mouth into a replacement for a sweet quim, matching her tempo to his breath, and when it sounded like he was nearing completion, she used her elbows to swing the hammock, too, so that his cock jabbed almost all the way to the back of her throat as if he were fucking her with all the force of his hips, and he came in a great spasm of body and breath.

“I should have gotten myself a wife a long time ago,” Sharkhead said as he returned to himself, and his hand cupped the back of her head as if she were something precious to him.

Rebecca swallowed. She climbed into her own hammock, even though she yearned for him to invite her into his. It was a hot night; their skin would chafe if they spent too long in each other’s arms.

“But then,” Sharkhead replied to himself, reaching out and taking her hand again, “she wouldn’t be you.”

Nice words. Rebecca told herself not to believe them too much. She knew from experience that nothing said after lovemaking was completely true. A phenomenon that made it easier to ask what she had been wondering all night:

“Do you think, if I showed up at Northfield Hall, that I might belong there? I mean, that perhaps I might be asked to stay?”

“Of course you would.” He tugged her closer. “But you needn’t go all the way there. You belong here, with me.”

She smiled, though she knew he couldn’t see it. The smile was for herself, to bask in this moment, even though it wouldn’t last. “Because I’m your wife.”

He yawned, and Rebecca thought she wouldn’t get a reply because he was already asleep. Until he murmured, “Because I like you.”

Words that nestled Rebecca to sleep at last.

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Days had never disappeared into the deep like they did on that sailing.

They followed the same watch schedule that had always dictated his life, yet Chow hardly knew if it was morning or night, so dizzy was he from Rebecca.

In every spare moment, he looked for her—to see if she was at work, to see if she was smiling, to see if he could steal her away for a private kiss or two.

They were playacting, of course. When she decided she was ready to leave the Ghost, she would go without a further word.

Still, Chow could admit to himself that despite the farce, there was something real building between them.

Its foundation was not kisses—though they stole plenty of those—but the little secrets they shared.

Rebecca's confession that her first love had been the senator's son, who had sworn he loved her back but married a society heiress anyway.

The hand she landed on Chow's shoulder when he told her of his still-burning dream to find his relatives in China.

The laugh they both had to stifle when, in the midst of fucking the brains out of each other one night, old de la Cruz ripped a fart so loud that it sounded like a gunshot.

By the time they reached the dark blues of the mid-Atlantic, Rebecca wasn't a

mystery to Chow anymore.

He discovered how her expression stilled when she meant to frown; he saw the little limp in her walk when she had been sitting too long, due to the time she had twisted her knee lugging bathwater upstairs for her mistress five years before; he saw her sitting next to Long Tale Lee and knew she was eager to learn his art of tying ropes into intricate designs.

She wasn't his wife, but it was easier than ever to pretend that she was.

They were in the cold waters somewhere between Florida and Madeira when they spotted the trio of cutters a few leagues ahead.

They were too far away to see the names of the ships, even with the captain's telescope, but Chow had learned years ago how to identify a slaver from far away.

A shallow body, four or more masts of low sails, and the gleam of evil catching every ray of sun.

These three sailed under the American flag, which meant they were immune from the British navy's hunt for slave ships.

Chow handed the telescope to Jack Davies, the blond-haired Scotsman who served as coxswain, and asked the captain, "Should we try to take any of their supplies?"

Slavers headed across the Atlantic from the Caribbean were usually loaded with goods rich enough to pay the Ghost's needs for a year.

In Havana, they had probably stocked up on sugar, rum, and coffee, which they were now bringing to Europe to sell at luxury prices.

If it were just the one slaver, the Ghost would attack, maroon the crew, and keep the ship and supplies to sell themselves in the backwaters of the Spanish-held African islands.

Three slavers together called for a little more strategy. Davies lowered the telescope and said, “Too bad there aren’t any storms brewing. That would break them up long enough for us to pick them off one by one.”

Captain Boukman glowered as if Davies had questioned his honor. “We don’t need to pick them off one by one. Even if there were twenty ships, we would defeat them.”

The captain’s tone sharpened the air around them. More and more, he had been taking offense at innocent comments, and Chow was having trouble predicting whether he would recover his good cheer or descend into a blacker mood.

Chow let out a breezy laugh. “I remember when we took on five slavers at once. That was during the war, wasn’t it?

Five slavers, and one of them tried to flag down a French man-o’-war for help.

We sank three of them and took fifty prisoners.

You’ve never seen anyone as fierce as Captain Boukman during that battle. ”

For the moment, it seemed to work. Spitting tobacco off the side of the ship for emphasis, the captain said, “Sold a thousand dollars’ worth of cotton from them, too.”

Davies had already changed his posture, head nodding and stance open, to show he hadn’t meant any harm by his comment. “Aye, I’ve heard stories about that one.”

“We’ll do the Trojan Horse routine, then,” Chow said, eager to move the captain

towards battle orders.

In the Trojan Horse maneuver, they rowed a longboat out to the flagship under the guise of exchanging latitude estimates, like any other friendly ship in the Atlantic.

Then, once they had installed a dozen or so pirates aboard the flagship, the Ghost opened fire on all ships at once and battled the whole fleet.

The captain had invented the maneuver some years ago, and Chow had named it, a reference from the Greek mythology that Lady Preston had insisted would one day be useful. He expected Captain Boukman to smile as they settled upon a plan he could endorse.

The captain only frowned more deeply. “Are you giving the orders now, Chow? Did I miss the vote when the crew decided to oust me and make you captain?”

“No, sir. I meant it as a suggestion, of course. We’ll do whatever you deem best, sir.”

“That’s right.” At last, Captain Boukman shifted. Claiming the telescope, he raised it to his eye and examined the ships on the horizon. Then he ordered, “Raise the American flag. We’ll pretend to be one of them.”

The Trojan Horse, except for some reason, the captain didn’t want to call it by that name. Chow didn’t care so long as they had a plan. “Aye aye, Captain.”

Chow motioned Davies ahead and was about to jump down from the quarterdeck himself when Captain Boukman gave one more order: “Go and find your wife, Chow. I don’t want her underfoot when the fighting begins.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

The words were like a bucket of cold water sloshed over his head.

He hadn't considered what role Rebecca would play in a battle.

He had been so wrapped up in the surprising joy of her companionship that he had stopped thinking about what would come in the next hour, day, or week.

He, who found peace in making plans for every last provision on the ship, had somehow stopped himself from realizing that if they caught the slavers, it would mean that she had to risk her life, too.

Even if she remained below, running gunpowder from one cannon to another, as the captain was bound to order.

Chow's feet slowed, but still, he descended the ladder to the lower deck.

He found her milking the goat. "We are approaching the slavers, and the captain has special orders for you."

"What special orders?" Rebecca took his hand to stand. He tried to drop her fingers but couldn't. They were so strong and, after just a few weeks, so familiar.

"I don't know. You're to come up and get them from him yourself." He led her to their little alcove between the barrels, where he paused to strap on his leather belt of weapons. He handed her the machete he had bought from an old maroon in Haiti.

"This is meant to cut jungle vines. All you need is to swing big, and it will keep you safe." Not exactly true. Nothing Chow could give her would keep her safe. But at least it would give her some protection.

He wouldn't let himself think about her getting hurt.

They had the protection of all that was moral and good in the world behind them, and that would keep her safe.

Rebecca tied the machete to her thigh under her petticoat with a grim smile. “Small chance the captain will let me join in the fighting, but thank you.”

Davies was already directing the arrangement of the longboat that would be their Trojan Horse as Chow led Rebecca to Captain Boukman on the quarterdeck.

The crew was alive with the spirit of an impending battle: Chow could practically taste their excitement.

His own heartbeat picking up, his mouth growing dry, Chow leaned into the sensations so he would forget that he had no control over Rebecca’s fate.

He took a hard look at the slave ships—looming larger each moment—to stoke the fire he would need to get through the battle.

He was no longer holding onto Rebecca’s hand.

“Here she is, Captain,” he announced. “Ready for your orders.”

Even tall Rebecca looked small in contrast to the captain’s hulking figure. He smiled at her in that way of his that made Chow want to step between them.

“You’ve never been in a battle before.”

“No, sir.” She smiled back at him, but hers wasn’t flirtatious at all. “I’m a pirate now, and I’m ready to do what is necessary.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Now, where is your goat?”

“My goat?”

Chow’s heart began to hammer, though he didn’t know why. The captain had a strategy, and soon it would all make sense.

“She is below deck with the other animals,” Rebecca finished.

“You’ll need her. You see, you have a very special role, my dear. We are making an offer of your little goat to the captain of that flagship so that he thinks we are his friends.”

Rebecca blinked. Then, silently, she turned to Chow, as if to ask him to intervene.

They had never tried offering presents before. There was hardly any time after they boarded a ship for polite conversation, since the battle usually began about then.

Still, as a strategy, Chow could see its advantages. “You’ll get the goat back,” he assured Rebecca. “After all, we’re going to take the ships.”

“I see.” She looked back at the captain. Her smile did not return. “I’ll fetch Mrs. Adams for the longboat, then. Where would you like me to post myself during the battle, sir?”

Captain Boukman’s grin widened. “Why, didn’t I say? You’re presenting the goat to the captain yourself.”

And now Chow’s heart stopped. He stepped forward. “Wouldn’t she be better off as a powder monkey?”

Captain Boukman’s good cheer disappeared. “Again, Chow, you try to give orders on my ship?”

“She has never fought before. She doesn’t have any training or experience. We should send our best fighters on the longboat. Rebecca will be of more use here, tending to the ship and the injured.”

“You tax me, Chow, and you know I do not like to be taxed.” The captain’s voice boomed loud enough that the crew hustling around them hushed. “I am the captain, and you are the quartermaster because I am a forgiving man. A man who gives second chances. Am I not?”

Chow forced his heart to stop hammering long enough to swallow the captain’s words. To remember that he was a man who followed the wrong instincts and who had only been able to repent for his past mistakes because Captain Boukman had given him the chance to serve on the Ghost.

“You are, sir,” he replied, his voice so hoarse that he barely heard himself.

“Good. Then you know my orders. See that they are done.” His authority proven, he turned his back on the whole crew and watched as the Ghost slid into formation with the slavers.

Chow and Rebecca descended the stairs from the quarterdeck together. In a whisper, she said, “I don’t understand what just happened.”

“You’re going to be in the longboat with Jack Davies.

” Chow forced his mind to the tasks at hand instead of inhaling the coconut smell of her.

“You’ll board the flagship and pretend to make a present of the goat.

Then, we’ll fire our cannons and start the battle.

” Rebecca still stared at him—eyes narrowed, brow furrowed—so he added, “You’ll get the goat back. ”

“I understand the captain’s orders,” she said, “but I don’t understand how he has turned you into this...”

Her hands finished the sentence, waving in a circle in front of him as if to encompass some great mess of his spirit.

Chow didn’t have the capacity to acknowledge a remark like that. He gripped her shoulders. “Come back alive.”

Rebecca stared at him. The captain shouted another order, and Chow would be stupid not to heed. He didn’t let her go. Not until she promised, “I will.”

It was all he could ask of her. Chow released her and turned to face his own fate in the battle.

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Rebecca feared Mrs. Adams would jump off the boat into the ocean. It was a stupid fear and far from the biggest threat to either of them at the moment, gliding in the longboat between two slave ships towards the master slaver. Yet it was all she could worry about.

If Mrs. Adams jumped into the ocean, Rebecca wouldn't be able to save her. Then Rebecca would have brought the goat on this godforsaken adventure for nothing.

She resisted the urge to look back at Sharkhead.

He could have volunteered to come on the longboat with her, but he hadn't.

He could have embodied the shark that raged across his skin and insisted to Captain Boukman that the plan was too faulty, but he had caved at the captain's first verbal lashing.

When condemning her to the longboat, he could have at least lied and said he loved her. But he hadn't. Proving once again that a man could bind his body to hers physically yet not lend her any of his heart.

And so Rebecca would not look back to find him on the Ghost, nor would she waste any of her last moments worrying about him.

She would worry for Mrs. Adams instead.

As they approached, she could see the flagship's name painted in gold lettering: Whimsy. Her sides were well scrubbed, the ropes new. That couldn't take away from

the smell that grew stronger as they drew closer. Old wood mixed with something human—and something evil.

Rebecca had heard that slave ships stank of their sin even when they were empty. She had dismissed that as lore to scare greedy men straight. Now she knew better.

Not even the strongest soap wielded by the hardest-working sailors could scrub away the smell of so many people tortured and killed.

She held Mrs. Adams's lead that much closer as the slaver's sailors hauled the longboat up to their deck.

Jack Davies, the twenty-year-old Scottish coxswain who thought far too well of his own looks, acted as spokesperson for the Ghost as they clambered out of the longboat.

He shook hands with the captain of the Whimsy—who wore a fine coat with shining gold braids and a black patch over one eye—and gave a report on the weather and their positioning.

“Is that a tribute?” the captain asked, turning towards Mrs. Adams.

“We found ourselves with too many goats and thought you might like one,” Jack replied.

“Does its keeper come with it?” The captain's eyes roved over Rebecca as she had known they would.

As Captain Boukman had known they would.

As her husband had known they would. Yet Sharkhead had personally put her into

the longboat despite the fate that awaited her.

It wasn't that Rebecca was unwilling to do her part as a crew member of the Ghost. She had the machete, currently strapped by a piece of rope to her thigh.

She had a burning rage that she was anxious to unleash upon the cotton and sugar and rum the ship was carrying as currency.

She wanted to see these slavers begging for forgiveness—and she couldn't wait to tell them they would never have it.

But it was one thing to join the fight and another to walk onto the deck of the Whimsy, where their longboat group of twenty would have to face a crew of seventy-five men.

If they lost this battle—if the Whimsy sailed away while the Ghost engaged with the other two slavers—then Rebecca would be at the mercy of this captain and his men, who were already looking at her like she was the cheapest whore in New Orleans.

She didn't know why Sharkhead had allowed Captain Boukman to send her away, but she knew that if she made it back to the Ghost, she would never permit herself to be in this position again.

In the meantime, Rebecca was going to play the hand she was dealt, whether she liked it or not.

Curving her lips as if to smile, she replied to the captain, "I can stay for a cup of tea, at least."

The man gulped. His voice suddenly reedy, he barked to his first mate, "Give these men a bit of grog and show them around." To Rebecca, he jerked his head. "This

way, then.”

Once again, she resisted the urge to turn her head back in search of the Ghost .

She wouldn't be able to see Sharkhead anyway.

If he was watching through the telescope, maybe he was wondering why she was disappearing with the captain.

Maybe he was realizing what a coward he had been not to insist that Captain Boukman permit her to remain on ship.

Whatever he was doing, it was not firing at the slavers. Which meant Rebecca had to bide her time, even as she followed the captain into his whitewashed cabin. She tied Mrs. Adams to the railing just outside his door. He shut it without locking it.

Rebecca had been seduced by a wide variety of men in her lifetime.

Fellow servants who sweetened the experience by swiping a glass of wine from the dinner table or picking wildflowers from the side of the road.

The senator's son, who had stolen her away for entire nights and offered her liquor, chocolates, even silk petticoats as proof of his love.

Sharkhead hadn't presented her with any gifts yet, but he bestowed her with his attention, always making sure she was comfortable, always making sure she was engaged.

This captain didn't offer any seduction at all. One moment, she was looking around his cabin, noting the bed with a mattress, the window that was cracked open to let in a breeze, and the leather-bound Bible sitting on the center of his desk.

The next moment, he had undone his trousers and whipped out his cock.

It was small, of course, but alarming enough that Rebecca's fingers twitched towards the machete under her petticoat.

"Turn around." He grabbed her wrists before she even had a chance to comply and marched her to the wall, hands above her head, breasts against the wainscoting. He pulled up her skirts so that her arse was bare to him and the room.

He didn't notice the machete.

Mouth dry, heart hammering, Rebecca considered her options. She could go along with it. She could tell herself she was in control, that this was all part of her plan to weaken the Whimsy so they could be sure it was captured.

Or she could stop letting Captain Boukman determine her fate.

He was supposed to have ordered cannon fire as soon as they landed on the Whimsy .

They had been on board for at least a quarter hour now.

If he didn't give the order soon, he never would.

And even if he had ordered her onto the ship as some kind of twisted revenge on Sharkhead, nineteen other crew members were on board, too.

Rebecca didn't care to sacrifice her dignity just because Captain Boukman was taking his damn time to order the cannon fire.

And so, as the Whimsy's captain lunged forward to stick his cock up her body, Rebecca grabbed the shaft of her machete, whirled around, and aimed her blade at the

offending body part.

Swing big.

The cock fell to the ground.

The captain screamed.

And, only seconds later, the ocean resounded with bursts of cannon fire.

Rebecca scuttled around the captain, who had landed on the ground and was both writhing in pain and reaching out as if to seize her ankles.

She untied the rope around her thigh to free the machete.

Someone banged on the door, crying, “Pirates!” so she opened it and stuck her weapon into the man’s stomach before he could blink.

Parts of his guts came out with her blade. Rebecca’s stomach turned, but she didn’t let it stop her. These were men who were willing to trade sugar for a person’s life. To chain hundreds of people into a hold and watch them die of dysentery. To rape women and girls without an ounce of remorse.

She kicked him into the captain’s cabin, shut the door, and untied Mrs. Adams’s lead. “Come on, girl. We’ve got some revenge to take.”

Chaos greeted her on the main deck. Sure, there were only nineteen pirates, but they had come with cutlasses and spears and guns.

The crewmen of the Whimsy mostly had knives and their own fists, though a few had located muskets.

Already, the deck was strewn with injured men trying to crawl to safety—and a few dead bodies, too.

Rebecca dragged Mrs. Adams to the longboat and tied her inside. Then, seizing a long spear, she turned around and aimed it at the first sailor she spotted.

It landed wide. The man turned to her, fury and excitement curling his lips open, and started coming at her with his knife out.

She swung her machete in an X in front of her body to distract him, and then, when he leaned forward to attack, she lunged at him and got him in the thigh. As he fell to the ground, she stomped on his hand and seized the knife from his fist.

His bones felt fragile and human beneath the heel of her shoe.

Rebecca whirled away, swinging her machete now at another sailor coming towards the longboat.

He carried a gun, which he shot in her direction—but the bullet went far to her right.

Rebecca aimed her machete at the muzzle of his musket.

Metal clanged against metal; her shoulder jarred from the impact; his gun didn't quite fall, and he pulled it back to reload.

Rebecca surged beneath the long reach of the musket and sliced at his neck. That was even smoother than cutting off the captain's cock: blood spurted from his throat and he fell to the ground, gasping.

Like butchering a hog.

She was sweaty; her arm was sore and heavy; she could hardly catch her breath. The air was heavy with gun smoke.

Around her, men were fighting and screaming and dying.

And then a cannonball caught the side of the Whimsy. The whole ship rocked. Rebecca fell against the side of the longboat before she could catch her footing. A new kind of smoke filled the air, and from below came shouts announcing a fire.

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A second cannonball came only moments later.

This one landed on the main deck, not twenty yards from Rebecca.

Three men were blown to pieces—including one of her boys who climbed the masts of the Ghost .

A hole opened up in the deck, and as the ship reeled, barrels and weapons and injured men slid towards it.

From somewhere below came an explosion, and then another, and then another, as the fire found the ship's store of gunpowder.

Jack Davies screamed over the melee, "Back to ship!"

It was a mad scramble from there. Rebecca swung her machete in wide jerks to keep the men from the Whimsy from getting too close as her fellow pirates returned to the longboat.

There were seventeen of them now, and Jack Davies ordered them into the boat without waiting to take a head count.

Just as Jack and Fuego began lowering the boat by the ropes towards the water, a slaver rushed forward and sliced the ropes from the pulleys.

Rebecca screamed. Mrs. Adams, too. But the Whimsy was not a tall ship, and while the boat landed in the water with a thud, it did not shatter, nor did any of their bones.

Jack shouted—his voice hoarse—“If you’re not dead, row!”

And they each took up an oar and pulled themselves back to the Ghost.

It always felt like walking on water after a battle like that.

Even though he hadn’t gotten to swipe his knives at any slaver in particular, Chow’s whole body felt like it was flying as he swaggered around the ship, putting it to rights.

Especially when the longboat arrived and he spotted Rebecca on it—alive, with all her limbs.

The crew gave three cheers to welcome the boat, and Jack Davies threw his cap in the air to accept the accolades.

Relief rushed Chow, along with a primal urge to grab Rebecca in his arms and cover every inch of her skin in kisses.

He resisted. First, they had to navigate the Ghost out of the fiery waters.

Then, he had to make sure the prisoners—some three dozen or so saved from the sinking ships—were properly constrained in the brig.

And then there was making sure the Ghost itself was in sailing condition after blasting so many cannonballs from its hull.

Rebecca disappeared. Chow saw her take the goat below deck—without even looking his way—and expected her to come up to help set sail. An hour later, he couldn’t find her as he ordered the first watch down for their mess. Nor did he see her when he set the second watch to inspecting the sails.

When, after sunset, the boys pulled out their instruments to start a jig and Rebecca didn't emerge from wherever she was hiding, he began to worry.

She loved evenings like this, when the stars were clear and the mood was high and she could lift her skirts to dance a reel with the crew. After three songs, he began to fear some terrible reason was keeping her away.

He descended the ladder in two big leaps, then went directly down to the lowest deck, the one where the prisoners were tied up in the brig.

They had captured thirty men in all, the rest of the slavers' sailors perishing in the deep.

Chow's fear—that Rebecca had for some reason come down to see them and that they had in turn captured her —disappeared as soon as he saw the two pirates guarding the prisoners.

"All good, Sharkhead?" asked one.

"Aye." Chow pushed away the anxiety gripping his stomach. "Has Rebecca been down here?"

"Not that I've seen."

He went back up to the deck with their hammocks and livestock. She wasn't in the nook where they slept; she was all the way in the aft of the ship, sitting with that goat. Petting that goat.

Moping with that goat.

Chow approached carefully. "They've started the jigs up on the deck."

“I can hear.”

“I thought perhaps you would want to dance.”

“I don’t.”

That was one way to end the conversation. Shifting on his feet, Chow tried to think what to ask next. He ended up saying, “I heard you were fierce on the Whimsy. Jack Davies won’t stop talking about how you singlehandedly protected the longboat from the slavers.”

“Jack Davies is exaggerating.”

“Still.” Chow dared nudge her boot with the toe of his. “You make a good pirate, Rebecca.”

A compliment he thought she would appreciate, since almost every day, she had asked him once or twice whether he thought the rest of the crew accepted her as one of them.

Her fingers curled around the goat’s rope. “Why did you feed them supper?”

It took Chow a moment to realize she meant the prisoners. “Everyone has a right to eat.”

“That was a proper meal we gave them. More than a slave would get on one of their ships.”

He felt strange towering over her while she launched her argument at the goat’s face instead of his. He lowered himself to squat over the wooden deck. “You would have us treat them by their standards instead of our own?”

“I would treat them as they deserve. They are slavers. There is no lower man than that.”

The judgment in her voice stole away the last remnants of Chow’s good cheer. He braced a hand against the floor. “You know how they get sailors to work a slave ship?”

“They don’t kidnap them, I know that,” she scoffed.

“But they do.” His voice cracked a little because that small sentence allowed distant memories to leak in.

Memories from his life in London, when he had not yet turned into Sharkhead, when he had collected these stories as evidence of a broken world he never expected to be a part of.

“Some of the sailors sign up based on promises of wealth, sure. But most of them aren’t there because they want to be.

The stupid ones don’t ask where the ship is headed.

Others run up a debt at a public house, and the house says either they can go to debtor’s prison or work the slave ship.

And then there are those who intend to leave ship as soon as it makes it to their home port again, only to discover the captain has charged them for tobacco and rum and the only way they can avoid debt is to stay on the ship for another voyage. ”

Rebecca, at last, was looking at him, her expression shadowed in the lantern light. “Are these the sob stories they use to plead for mercy?”

“Before I took to sea, I used to manage a boardinghouse for the East India Company. These are the stories I witnessed myself.”

“If I were forced to work on a slave ship, I would throw myself overboard before we even reached the coast of Africa.”

Her words were so heavy with derision that they stacked like weights upon his heart. “And if they caught you before you jumped, you would be flogged or chained to the deck. And then you would be forced to help with the slaving.”

“We just sank three slave ships. We killed at least two hundred men. Now you’re telling me I should pity them?”

Chow couldn’t look at her anymore. “I’m saying that if they managed to survive that battle and make it into our brig, they deserve to eat a meal. That’s all.”

“Either they are our enemies and they don’t deserve anything, or they are our allies and they deserve everything. You can’t have it both ways.”

If she needed everything to be so certain, so clear, what would she say if she knew what he had done before joining the Ghost ?

She continued: “I slit a man’s throat today. Just like a butcher. He was my enemy. He chose to work on a slaver. That’s all I want to know.”

Her words were awful. Worse still, they invited some hope to lighten Chow’s heart.

This argument was not about a moral right and a moral wrong, with him falling on the wrong side of the scale.

It was about Rebecca facing that terrible feeling Chow knew so well.

The one that made him feel so very unworthy.

He reached out, touching only her ankle. “You were brave on the Whimsy. You did exactly what you needed to do.”

“I shouldn’t have been there.” Her eyes pinned him in place. “I had no business being in the longboat.”

“But you came through safe and sound, and that’s all that matters.”

“No.” Sitting up, she yanked her ankle away from him. “The captain had no business sending me to that ship, and you had no business letting him.”

Surprised by her sharp anger, Chow replied, “He’s the captain.”

“This is a pirate ship. Isn’t this the one place we are supposed to be free of hierarchy? Isn’t this the lawless ocean where we can stand up and say ‘No, we won’t do as you say because it is stupid and dangerous and petty!’?”

He leaned backward from the force of her voice. “He’s the captain and so I trust him, Rebecca. He is the best man in the world for fighting slavers. If he wants you to go on the longboat, I trust it’s because he knows it is our best chance for winning the fight.”

“It had nothing to do with winning and everything to do with putting you in your place. This captain of yours isn’t the best at anything except for holding a grudge, and if you can’t see that, then you’re stupider than I thought.”

He didn’t like her words and he didn’t like her tone, and he most especially didn’t like her implication.

If Captain Boukman hadn’t been acting out of strategy, then he had been punishing

Chow.

And if the captain had sent Rebecca into battle in order to punish Chow, then Chow didn't belong anywhere near her.

He reeled up to his feet.

Rebecca didn't let him escape. "Do you know what happened on the Whimsy ? Do you know what great plan your Captain Boukman enacted? The cannons didn't fire as soon as we were on deck.

They didn't fire even after Jack Davies gave his little story about the weather.

They still didn't fire when the captain asked if I was a gift to the crew, and yes, they remained silent as he took me back to his cabin and pushed me against the wall to fuck me.

In fact, husband , the cannons didn't fire until after I had cut his cock off, just before he was about to rape me.

Tell me. Which part of that was Captain Boukman's plan? "

His mouth went dry. His stomach turned. Rage—hot and violent—filled his body. Rage that he couldn't do anything with. "I didn't know that."

"You should have."

Her words rang so true that Chow could barely hear them.

He had known that Captain Boukman's order was wrong.

He should have insisted, somehow, that Rebecca stay on the Ghost .

He didn't know what he had been afraid of.

Insubordination would be easier to face than this, the full extent to which he had failed to protect Rebecca.

He was no better than he ever had been. He should never have believed he had improved.

“And if you come near me again, I'll cut your cock off, too,” Rebecca hissed.

Chow took himself away without the guts to even look back.

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For three days, the Ghost was caught in a storm that thrashed it from wave to wave while lashing it with great sheets of cold rain.

From the first terrible rock of the ship, Rebecca was sick to her stomach.

Her guts sloshed one way, her brains another, and her eyes couldn't fix on anything that wasn't moving.

It was nausea worse than she had ever experienced—overwhelming and enduring—mixed with cold sweats and, when she tried to move, a weakness in her muscles like fever.

If they had met this storm before the battle, Rebecca would have tried to rise above it. She would have insisted on doing her duty even if she couldn't stand up straight, because she was a part of the crew just like anyone else.

She didn't care anymore. When Sharkhead saw her retching over the side of her hammock, he ordered—in that gruff tone of his as if she were nothing but a member of his crew—“Stay below until you feel better.”

Rebecca didn't argue. She got out of her hammock and crawled to sit beside Mrs. Adams, one hand plunged into the goat's hair and the other holding a blanket around her shoulders.

When the nausea overwhelmed her, she leaned into the animals' pen and left her mess with them.

Mrs. Adams nudged Rebecca's cheek every now and then, and even the pig came to sit by her, as if they all believed that if they touched each other, they would be protected from the storm.

Rebecca didn't know how long the pig had been sailing, but she knew Mrs. Adams remembered as well as she did the hurricane that had wrecked the Primrose .

That had begun in dribbles of hot rain, then whipped into a terrible fury before the crew could even adjust the sails.

In a matter of hours, the ship had been torn asunder, its top deck on fire, the air full of screams, and Rebecca and Mrs. Adams and five sailors had been numb on the longboat, rowing themselves to shore.

Now, with her body revolting, Rebecca wondered why she had not sworn off ships altogether after that terrible hurricane.

She had been stranded on an island, alone except for Mrs. Adams. She hadn't had any way to look after herself there, not in a place where the households kept slaves instead of servants.

If Rebecca had refused to ever get on a ship again, she would have had to become a whore.

Instead, she had become a murderess.

She had known, of course, that was what pirates did.

They pillaged, raped, and killed people.

Even the crew of the Ghost did more than just destroy slave ships.

From the very first moment that Rebecca considered joining the crew, she had known she would be among men who had done unthinkable things.

She had known she would have to do some of those things, too. She had been ready to do them.

She hadn't been ready for what came after doing them.

The fear that she had refused to feel on the Whimsy gripped her now, filling her with a helplessness she could only express as fury.

And remorse—she hadn't expected remorse.

But she could feel her arm shuddering from the impact of her machete on a sailor's arm; she remembered the sensation of its tip slicing a red, sputtering line across the other's neck.

She had thought they were evil men without an ounce of redemption—and they were evil, if they had ever come within one step of the slave trade!

—but what if they had been like her, stranded on an island with no good option?

They were dead now. Sunk to the bottom of the ocean along with the remains of the Whimsy. Whether they had been guilty or not, whether they had deserved it or not, they were dead now, and Rebecca had killed them.

She wished those feelings would disappear the way her seasickness did when the storm finally calmed.

Her body righted itself, her muscles renewed their strength, and with a few hard biscuits fueling her, she climbed to the top deck without a single wave of nausea.

The sky was clear, the sun strong, the air warm.

Sharkhead found her as she was tying up her skirts to help swab the deck.

He had checked on her every few hours, never saying much except asking after her health, and even now, he watched her with that old, wary gaze from before they had become husband and wife.

As if she were some kind of foreign creature who might bite his hand.

Rebecca might bite his hand. She hadn't decided. Yet she hated that he looked at her like that.

"Glad to see you feeling better," her supposed husband said.

She didn't feel it necessary to reply to that.

"Sometimes storms are hard to take."

She hadn't anything to say to him. She didn't want to ask if he was fatigued from working the bilge pumps all night.

She didn't want to tell him he looked like he needed a good meal—and a shave, haircut, and bottle of rum, to boot.

She wanted him to take back what he had said.

She wanted him to stop her from going on the Whimsy.

"Captain says we're headed for Pirate Island.

” He stepped a little closer, his voice lowering, as if this were privileged information for her only.

“That’s where we’ll leave the slavers. Then we’ll land at the Azores.

It’s a respectable port with trade ships of all kinds.

If you want to leave the Ghost and book passage home, you can do it there. ”

Internally, Rebecca’s body revolted. A sharp spike of anger displaced her stomach and heart and mind so that all she could see was red.

Externally, she skewered this supposed husband with a glare. “Why would I want to leave the Ghost ?”

“If you don’t want to be a pirate anymore—”

Rebecca cut him off before anyone could hear him.

“ I am not the one making apologies for slavers. I am the one who boarded the Whimsy and disabled the captain before battle even started.” Her stomach turned at the memory.

“If you don’t want to be a pirate anymore, then by all means, disembark at the Azores and find yourself a ship back to your precious Northfield Hall. ”

He raised his hands, palms facing her, as if in surrender, and backed up a step. “Swab the deck, then.”

“I will, if you would only stop bothering me.” She nudged the bucket with her foot so forcefully that water sloshed over its edge. Sharkhead stepped even farther away,

avoiding the puddle.

Avoiding her.

“Your captain needs you,” she snarled, as if she hadn’t bitten his hand hard enough.

Sharkhead turned away, but not before delivering his own punch, the kind that had earned him his nickname in the first place: “He is your captain, too.”

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When the captain asked for volunteers to row the slavers out to Pirate Island, a tiny spit of land hundreds of miles from any other spit of land, Chow didn't hesitate to raise his hand.

Even though it was a job usually given one of the younger lads, and even though his time would be better spent updating the supply book with a current food inventory.

Chow wanted any excuse to get off the Ghost . She was never a big ship to begin with, and now that Rebecca stalked her decks, reminding Chow with each glare how deeply he had failed to redeem himself, there was no room for him on the ship.

He didn't have anywhere to go, any hope of a life he could live away from the Ghost , but if Rebecca didn't leave at the Azores, then he might have to.

She watched from the foredeck as he helped Jack Davies load the thirty prisoners into the longboat. When Chow—despite himself—raised his hand in farewell, she turned away. As she had done ever since the Whimsy . And as she had every right to do.

Chow had put his trust in Captain Boukman when he should have fought against a bad order. He had chosen the captain's power over Rebecca's safety. They would both be better off if she never looked his way again.

Their small, armed crew rowed the prisoners out to the rocky beach. As per the Ghost 's custom, the prisoners were left chained together with a barrel of rum and some hunting knives. Some of them would live long enough to hail a passing vessel.

Most of them would die—or be murdered—waiting.

Such was the fate of a sailor.

“Rebecca has been in a right mood, hasn’t she?” Jack Davies said as they rowed back to the ship.

Chow’s heart missed a beat at the mention of her name. “She isn’t used to storms yet.”

“Aye, but before that. And after.” The coxswain spit over the side of the longboat to punctuate his observation. “She hasn’t been right since the Whimsy. ”

That Davies had the right of it made Chow that much more defensive. “Everyone needs to sort themselves out after the first time they kill a man.”

“Do they?” Jack Davies tilted his head back as if to look directly into the morning sun.

“I don’t know when I first killed a man.

It must have been in one of the battles when I was running gunpowder here, there, and everywhere.

I was nine when the press gang got me. Me and my da at the same time, only they put me on a ship going to Lisbon and my da on a ship going to America.

They hit my ma in the face when she put up a fight to try to stop them from taking me.

I always looked too old for my age, you see. ”

Chow had heard many a story of the press gangs, which roamed the British coast to

find sailors for the Royal Navy. If a man was lucky, a mob would form to stop the gang from making away with him, but the truth was, many sailors in the British navy had been kidnapped and forced to sail.

“That’s terrible. They should have let you be.”

Davies shrugged and looked away from the sun. “Do you remember your first time, Sharkhead?”

He did—vividly. It was on his first pirate ship, the one that had rescued him from involuntary servitude to the East India Company.

They attacked a merchant vessel, and Chow had been one of the crew to swarm its decks.

Their aim hadn’t been to kill anyone, but the merchants’ guards fought back.

Chow had stabbed one man through the gut in self-defense.

Later, after the ship was won, he saw the man lying there still, slowly bleeding to death.

Chow’s crew members had raised a toast to him to celebrate his new status as a proper pirate.

Now, looking back, he saw it as the first rung in his descent to hell.

Not the fiery hell threatened by parsons, but a hell that condemned him to the swirling vortex of the Atlantic, that ensured that even after he died, his soul would still sail these winds, caught in repayment for the misery he had doled out in his lifetime.

“I only meant to injure,” he answered Davies, “but the man died anyhow.”

“Rebecca meant to kill. She was fierce. It was her or them. Did she tell you about how she seduced the captain away from the men?”

“Yes.” It sounded much better to think that she had seduced the man than to imagine it—as Chow had been doing for days now—as Rebecca trapped in an inescapable situation.

“She was brilliant.” Again, Davies spit into the ocean in a graceful arc. They were nearing the Ghost now, close enough to see Captain Boukman and old de la Cruz in a discussion on the quarterdeck. “She never should have been there, though. No one as green as she should have boarded the Whimsy. ”

Chow glanced behind them to see if the other men in the longboat could hear.

With the boat empty of prisoners, they had spread out: he and Davies toward the bow, and Fuego and Pip in the stern.

Those two were talking between themselves, easy grins on their faces, no idea that Jack Davies was echoing Rebecca right to Chow’s face.

“It was Captain Boukman’s orders,” Chow hissed. “He wouldn’t hear differently.”

“That’s my point.” Davies lifted his eyes again, but this time, it was to where their captain waited, now leaning against the railing, watching them row. “You’ve always been loyal to the captain, Sharkhead, but has the captain been loyal to you?”

Chow didn’t think of loyalty as going in two directions.

At Northfield Hall, people were loyal to Lord Preston, based on his integrity in

making people welcome and treating them fairly; therefore, he had decided what crops were grown, where their produce was sold, and when everyone was paid.

Now Chow's loyalty was to Captain Boukman, based on his commitment to pirating against slave ships, and so the captain decided where they went, what they did, and who did what.

It had never occurred to Chow that either Lord Preston or Captain Boukman might owe him any loyalty in return.

"You claimed Rebecca, and I have no doubt you did it with the best intentions," Davies said. "All I'm trying to say is Captain Boukman has it out for her because of it. You'd best think about who you will be loyal to when it comes down to it."

The words settled ominously in the air as the longboat came within reach of the Ghost. Their conversation paused as they negotiated the ropes to hoist them up to the top deck. They were almost on the ship again when Chow asked Davies on the softest breath, "Where do your loyalties lie?"

Davies shook his head. "I don't trust a man who gives orders to settle grudges, I can tell you that much."

Which made Davies the second person on the ship to question Captain Boukman's worthiness aloud. As they climbed off the longboat, greeted by the crew with three cheers, Chow couldn't help but fear how many more of the pirates felt the same way.

Rebecca didn't like being on the ship without Sharkhead. Suddenly she felt like an orphan again, waiting at the almshouse for someone, anyone, to come claim her. She kept glancing over her shoulder to find Sharkhead, only to remember he had deserted her in order to maroon the slave traders.

He hadn't needed to go. Jack Davies could have handled the drop without Sharkhead's supervision. Rebecca didn't know if he had volunteered for the task because he wanted to avoid her or because he sympathized with the prisoners. She didn't want to know. She didn't want to care.

They hadn't said much more than a word to each other since she had snapped at him those few days earlier, and now Rebecca wasn't sure they ever would.

She didn't want to desert the Ghost and certainly didn't want to return to Rhode Island, where her life would be reduced once more to trading gossip to protect her place in a household.

But as time drew her closer to the Azores, neither could Rebecca imagine staying on the Ghost .

Not if she and Sharkhead remained in this silent battle.

One of them would have to go, and Rebecca was afraid it would be her.

She kept an eye on him as he rowed out to the beach. Anything could happen: the prisoners could revolt and drown him with their chains in the bay; a rogue wave could overturn the longboat; he could decide he would rather cast his lot with the slave traders than return to her on the Ghost .

They deposited the prisoners. Sharkhead said something to them as the younger pirates rolled the barrel of rum to the safety of some rocks. And then Sharkhead got back in the longboat and started rowing towards her.

Rebecca was aware—as she knotted and unknotted the same line five times—that the anger she felt so deeply in her body had nothing to do with Sharkhead.

He was not the one who had seen her as a whore.

He was not the one who had ordered her onto the Whimsy .

Nor was he the one who had sent her alone on a ship from Louisiana because it was too dangerous for her to exist in New Orleans.

Her anger was not for him, and yet she couldn't help but target it at him. Even when he returned to the Ghost , instead of telling him she was glad he was back safely, she greeted him with fury. "I hate the name Sharkhead. It's a terrible nickname. You should never have let anyone call you that."

She finished tying the knot—for the seventh time—and turned away, casting about for some other task that would carry her far away from him.

"There's nothing wrong with it," he replied.

"Everything is wrong with it. It makes it sound like you have a shark head, which you don't.

" She couldn't help glancing up at his head, of which she had grown very fond, and seeing the frown etched into his face.

"And it is a terrible story. What were you doing swimming with sharks? Didn't you know any better?

You should be ashamed of it, not boasting about it. "

He stepped close, his body heat overwhelming her, and took the rope right out of her hands. "Come below with me. I need to talk to you."

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All these days, they had been avoiding each other, even sleeping on different watches, as if to be less than a foot apart would ignite the whole ship.

Now, Rebecca followed without hesitation.

If this conversation ended, that would start a fire.

If Sharkhead looked away from her, he might as well strand her on the island with the slave-trading sailors.

It was dark below deck. In the aft, Mrs. Adams bleated. Sharkhead led Rebecca into the little alcove of barrels they called their own.

“If you’re thinking to have your way with me, you won’t,” Rebecca said as the space closed in on them. She didn’t know why. There was no chance Sharkhead would force a kiss. He hadn’t even done that when the whole crew was watching.

And she certainly wasn’t afraid of it if he did.

She was being a brat, same as she always had done. It would get her kicked off the Ghost as surely as it had gotten her kicked out of Cook’s kitchen at Placid Manor and out of the senator’s son’s heart in Rhode Island.

Sharkhead didn’t react physically at all. But he had heard her: “All I ever wanted to do was protect you, Rebecca.”

It was the way he said her name. Softly. Tenderly. As if by saying her name, he could

cut through the thorned vines that had thickened around her heart.

Too bad for him the vines were so layered that not even a machete could do the trick. “I protected myself, same as I’ve always done and same as I always will. I know I’m the only person I can count on.”

“You can count on more than that.” Sharkhead’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Jack Davies just told me he thinks the captain did wrong by you. If he had known you needed help on the Whimsy , he would have intervened.”

And what was Rebecca supposed to have done to let Jack know? Let out a scream the moment that terrible captain had looked at her?

Into her silence, Sharkhead said, “I’m sorry, Rebecca. It’s not worth much, but I am, and I know Davies would be too, if he knew what really happened. Everyone on this ship would be.”

“Everyone except the captain.”

The ship—preparing to sail away from Pirate Island—shifted so a stream of light through the porthole illuminated her not-husband’s inscrutable face. Except it wasn’t so inscrutable: written plainly in the frown and the tensed jaw was fear.

Fear that he spoke aloud: “Yes, I’m afraid you are right.”

The admission sliced away the last of the angry thorns protecting her heart. Rebecca offered Sharkhead her hand, which he accepted with the gentlest of touches. “Perhaps Captain Boukman considers us properly punished now. He hasn’t ordered me any which way since the battle.”

Sharkhead rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. “I hope so. I would like to

be loyal to him.” His voice strengthened as he added, “I am loyal to you first, though. If it happens again, I will protect you at all costs.”

A promise that Rebecca hadn’t known to request. She fell forward with the sway of the ship and steadied herself on the great wall of his chest. “I have been bad. I’m sorry for it.”

“You were fighting for your life. It was kill or be killed.”

Her head shook no. “I have been bad to you. I blamed you. I’m sorry.”

He stepped away, dropping her hand, and sagged backward against his hammock. “I’m sorry. I should have protected you better.”

“All you have ever done is try to protect me.” It was the truth—and yet, how she had punished him when he failed. Rebecca reached out again, her hand moving through the air to the rhythm of the swaying ship.

From somewhere above, Captain Boukman bellowed, “Sharkhead!”

Her not-husband took her fingers in his. It was a hot day, hotter below deck, and holding hands did nothing to bring down Rebecca’s body heat. She found she didn’t care.

“The captain wants you.”

“I am indisposed.” He tugged her ever so gently, and Rebecca followed the momentum into his arms.

“So you forgive me?” she asked, her lips only an inch from his.

“Do you forgive me?”

They answered each other with a kiss. Soft.

Sweet. Urgent. Hot. His hands moved to her waist, his weight shifting backward onto the hammock, and Rebecca climbed with one knee then the other to straddle him.

Underneath her skirts, his palms landed on her bare arse, holding her to his lap.

The hammock swayed beneath them like a swing.

They only had a few minutes. No time to say all the things that had been swirling through Rebecca’s head for days now. No time even to stoke their desire like a winter’s fire.

Good thing her want was instead like the tropical sun: constant, hot, unrelenting.

She could feel his cock straining against his trousers, and that was enough to remind her of the pleasure it could give when inside her.

His hands squeezing the naked skin beneath her skirts activated all the nerves she had been ignoring for days.

His breath breezed against her cheek, and she was drenched with desire like a sudden rainstorm.

“Chow!” Captain Boukman shouted again, his voice carried above them by the wind.

An obedient sailor would bound up to heed his captain.

Her not-husband lifted his feet from the floor so the hammock swung freely.

“We’re being bad,” Rebecca whispered, smiling against his ear. He chuckled—a sound she had never heard before—and slid two fingers between her legs.

“As pirates should be.”

Their minutes were dwindling. They didn’t have time for him to tease her with those fingers—yet he did.

They didn’t have time for him to rock her against his thumb and coil her desire like a white-hot spiral inside her body—yet he did.

They certainly didn’t have time for him to do all of that and for her to unbutton his trousers and take his cock inside her and swing their hips with the hammock and feel that ancient rhythm release them into pure pleasure.

But they did.

Foreheads together, sweat mingling, breaths huffing, Rebecca admitted: “I have missed you.”

His palm cupped the back of her neck, as if she were precious. “I never went anywhere.”

Someone clattered down the ladder. Rebecca hopped off his lap, throwing her skirts down. He stood and turned, still buttoning his trousers as Fuego found them.

The youth smirked. “Captain is looking for you, Sharkhead.”

“I’ll come up, then.” He said it coolly, as if he hadn’t heard any of the captain’s earlier summonses. To Rebecca, he said in his quartermaster’s voice, “See to the goat, won’t you? She is bleating something awful.”

His eyes told a different story. They connected with hers for just a moment and were so soft, so sweet, that she felt all the unspoken words between them swell like a rose about to bloom.

“I’ll be good,” she promised. And he smiled.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

A day or so later, when the wind was strong and the sun high, Chow forced himself to seek out Captain Boukman.

It was not for his own sake, he told himself.

It was for the captain's good that they have a talk.

A good, honest one, like they used to have years ago, when the war with Napoleon had distracted all the navies and the Ghost had easily struck fear into every slaver's heart.

Before these strange moods had started overtaking the captain and nothing the crew said could please him.

Captain Boukman was in his cabin, eating a ration of salt pork, hard biscuit, and a bruised apple as he wrote in the logbook. He greeted Chow with a distracted wave. "We'll need more supplies when we put in at Ponta Delgada."

"Aye," Chow agreed. "Fruit especially. Last time, I found a man who sold me barrels of the sweetest oranges. I'm hoping he'll be amenable again." The truth was that Chow had paid a premium for those oranges, but they had lasted weeks and put a smile on the lips of every man who had tasted them.

"Gunpowder especially," Captain Boukman corrected. "We have only a quarter of the supply we should."

A good entrée into what Chow had wanted to discuss. He found himself waiting,

anyhow, because the truth was he didn't want to find out how the captain was going to react.

But this was all for the captain's good. For the crew's good. Someone had to have this conversation, and it might as well be Chow. "The Trojan Horse always uses up our supply. This one, in particular. Took us a while to subdue that flagship."

Boukman looked up, danger lurking in his eyes. "We took it, didn't we?"

"Fearsome Fred wishes he had been on the longboat. He wanted to see the whites of the eyes of the men he was fighting."

"Did he now?" Captain Boukman took a swig from his bottle of rum. "Who has he been talking to about this?"

Chow regretted this angle immediately. He should have led with his own regrets about the battle—namely, that he hadn't better protected Rebecca—instead of relying on the grumblings of the rest of the crew. "It is more of a general conversation."

"A general conversation about how they are going to vote me out? Throw me overboard and elect a new captain? Who is it they think is so glorious?" Captain Boukman rose out of his seat and glared out the window.

"It's that Jack Davies, isn't it? Even though he can barely grow a beard, he thinks he has the run of the sea. "

"There are no plots. You are our captain." Chow kept his voice firm yet gentle.

"That's right. I am the captain, and the Ghost is my ship, and anyone who forgets that will find themselves dead or deserted. I'm not picky about which."

“No one has forgotten.” He wanted to retreat, yet he remembered Rebecca, huddled against the goat pen.

And Jack Davies rowing back from Pirate Island, whispering what Chow hadn’t wanted to hear.

He was not here for himself. “We don’t understand some of the decisions you made in that battle.

Why it took so long to attack the Whimsy when normally we fire the cannons as soon as the crew is on board.

” Seeing fire in the captain’s eyes, he quickly added, “I want to learn from you, sir, nothing more.”

“Learn from me?” Captain Boukman advanced around the desk to loom directly above Chow. “Who am I?”

“The captain.”

“What is my name?”

“Dutty Boukman.”

“How did I get that name?”

Chow had been on the Ghost for a few years before he learned about the captain’s name.

That it was not the name given him by his mother nor a surname like everyone else had.

It referred to a specific man, a specific event, a specific fate.

“You seized it,” Chow answered, as he knew the captain preferred to tell the story.

“When you broke free from slavery, you decided to take a new name, and you reached into history to take the name of the voodoo priest who started the great slave revolt in Haiti.”

“And what have I been doing ever since?”

“Fighting slavers.”

The captain prodded a finger into Chow’s shoulder. “And who are you ?”

“The quartermaster.”

“Who were you before I let you join the Ghost ?”

Chow swallowed against the emotion rising in his throat. “A good-for-nothing pirate.”

“A pirate who did worse than nothing,” the captain corrected. As he should. If Chow had done nothing, he would still be at Northfield Hall, angry but innocent. Instead, Chow had done all the wrong things. “And why did I allow you to join my crew?”

“Because you are a forgiving man who gives second chances.”

“That’s right. Second chances. Not third, not fourth. You want to learn from me, Sharkhead? That’s all you need to know.”

He understood that to say anything else was to put his own position on the ship at

risk. If he provoked the captain now, he might end up overboard—and this time, the water was deep, land was far away, and the sharks would get him.

But Chow needed the captain to know. “When you sent Rebecca to that flagship, they thought she was a whore. I won’t do nothing again, sir. She should fight like any other pirate, but not like that.”

Captain Boukman sneered at Chow, his lips curling up as if he were preparing to take a bite out of his face. “Get out of my sight,” he ordered, and spittle landed on Chow’s cheek.

Chow did not want to believe this was the captain.

This was not the man who had found him broken in Cartagena, searching for a way to bury his shame.

This was not the man who went out of his way to make the newly freed people on his ship feel safe.

This was not the captain who kept the crew at the forefront of his mind.

Somewhere, somehow, the captain had lost faith in the Ghost . Perhaps even in himself. And now, the great man that Chow had so long trusted was gone, replaced by someone consumed by petty fear.

Chow would have preferred to walk the plank than to see how far the captain had fallen. But every pirate had to accept the fate delivered them, and so now, Chow had to leave the cabin and shut the door as if Captain Boukman was still a man to be respected.

Rebecca was trying not to trail Sharkhead around the ship like a lovesick puppy.

Just because her body craved his presence at every moment did not mean she could—or should—indulge it.

She had learned that the hard way in past love affairs.

So she forced herself to ignore her heart and even to take on extra tasks, to keep from mooning after Sharkhead just because they had settled their differences.

Case in point, Rebecca was practicing her knots with Long Tale Lee when she saw Sharkhead emerge from Captain Boukman's cabin as pale and gray as the cotton rope in her hands.

She stayed in her seat as he lurched across the deck on unsteady feet.

She forced herself to remain still as he turned away, not even looking around to find her.

But when he bent over the railing, as if to vomit his soul into the ocean, she lost her willpower.

Something was wrong, and Sharkhead needed her.

For some reason, as she approached, the name that came to her lips was "Martin." The soft, gentle name his mother had bestowed upon him. He didn't react to it, not even as Rebecca cupped his shoulder.

She told herself that was a sign to retreat. But her heart didn't listen. She said instead: "Husband."

Now he reacted—a flinch. "You needn't be tied to me."

He didn't want her at his side, then. Fine. Rebecca swallowed and retrieved her hand.
“What do you mean?”

“I'm not a man you want to be tied to.” He didn't look at her. “You should leave us in the Azores. Find yourself a better fate.”

The words would have stung her if she weren't already reeling from his first reaction to her. “Is that what you want? To be rid of me?”

“You were right about him. You and Jack and all the rest.” He still stared at the horizon, the unending ocean, as if there were an answer there to whatever tormented him.

“The captain isn't to be trusted anymore.

I didn't see it all this time. I chose not to see it.

Not until...” At last, he looked at her, and what Rebecca saw in his eyes was horror.

“Not until it was too late to protect you.”

Her panic receded.

He was not trying to get rid of her.

He was apologizing all over again, even though they had already put it behind them.
“I protected myself.”

“You shouldn't have needed to.”

“What did Captain Boukman say to you to put you in this state?”

Sharkhead looked away again. Still as pale as a man who had foreseen his own death.

“He said something to you the day we took the slavers, too, something that shut you up. About second chances. Is he holding something over your head?”

Sharkhead stared at that horizon. Rebecca waited, watching the waves reflected in his eyes, sensing there were words building in him and that a confession would come crashing out if only she stayed silent.

She was right, in a way. He did speak, at last. Only it was to ask: “Do you believe in a god?”

“Yes.” The question transported her back to the steps of Trinity Church, which she had visited every Sunday as an orphan in New York City, sitting on the stone before and after the service in case one of the women proved to be her long-lost mother.

“I never did. Not the English god. But I do sense some greater force. Evil, I think. Evil swirls around us, and what we call good is only our desire to somehow live outside its clutches.” Nodding to himself, he added, “Evil is the ocean, and we are the whales and dolphins who are trying desperately to escape from its surface but can never completely break free.”

Rebecca had never known Sharkhead to be maudlin. She touched her fingers to his hand that gripped the rail. “If you’re coming up with theories like that, you haven’t enough to do. Time for you to mend some sails, pirate.”

“I can be evil, Rebecca, that’s what I am trying to tell you. It’s why I have ended up as a pirate. It’s why I can’t write to my family. It’s why I won’t go to China. You should leave me at your first opportunity.”

That was Captain Boukman’s poison. Forcing Sharkhead to face a warped looking

glass—and making him hate himself rather than the man holding the mirror.

The emotion filled the space between her and Sharkhead like a crate of gunpowder, and Rebecca didn't know how to address it without lighting a fuse.

“By your theory, we are all evil. I'd say you are one of the strongest dolphins who can leap the highest from the waves. ”

He shook his head. “I am a shark pretending to be a dolphin.”

“Fine.” She slid closer and touched her hip to his. “I'm a helpless little fish for you to eat.”

The innuendo worked, returning some humor and color to his face. He looped an arm around her waist. “You are not helpless.”

“I am when it comes to you.” She said it as another flirtatious tease, even pouting her mouth, but her heart hammered in her chest at its truth.

She couldn't keep herself from rushing across the ship to aid him, not even when he darted poisonous words at her.

If that wasn't helpless—if that wasn't losing her head to her heart—she didn't know what was.

“I'm not leaving you when we get to the Azores.

If you want to leave the Ghost because of Captain Boukman, fine. But I'm coming with you.”

Sharkhead held her tightly at the waist. “I'm not sure I will live to see the Azores.”

“Why not?” Her first thought was disease, and she reared backward to evaluate him for some terrible symptom.

“He used to trust us. He used to put the whole crew’s wellbeing at the front of every decision.

All I wanted was to remind him of that. To try to get that captain back.

” Sharkhead shook his head. “He feels I have challenged him. I’m lucky he didn’t shoot me for insubordination right then.

He’ll have me strung from the yardarm in the next few days. He has to reclaim his authority.”

Rebecca didn’t know which was worse—this premonition, or the way Sharkhead delivered it, as if he were predicting the weather. “We can’t let that happen.”

“We?”

“You. Me. The crew.” Rebecca stepped out of his grasp to force him to look back at the ship where the pirates were all at work following his orders. “The Ghost is not a monarchy. Captain Boukman is not our king. If he orders your death, we won’t allow it.”

Sharkhead stared at her. “Are you suggesting a mutiny?”

Rebecca hadn’t gotten that far in her panicked thinking. Yet from the way Sharkhead said it—not with horror, not with surprise, but with a certain inflection of excitement—she could tell he had been contemplating it since long before Captain Boukman threatened his life.

And once he said it, it seemed the obvious solution. “How do we go about that?”

He held onto her ever tighter and replied, “We bide our time.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:13 am

Chow reckoned they were nine days away from the Azores, assuming the winds remained fair. Nine days in which Boukman would claim his revenge on Chow. Nine days for Chow to make his case with the rest of the crew.

Nine days in which Boukman could unmask the true, terrible Chow to Rebecca.

Working in his favor were Boukman's mood swings. When the captain emerged from his cabin hours after ordering Chow away, he was jolly from a bottle of rum and skipped straight to dancing a jig with the fiddler. Chow slipped below deck to stay out of the captain's way.

And so it continued for the next few days. Boukman didn't ask for Chow, and Chow did his best to remain invisible. It was a diseased relationship for a quartermaster and captain, one that would weaken the Ghost if they allowed it to remain for long, but for the moment, it was keeping Chow alive.

He didn't sleep anymore. When he lay in his hammock, fingers linked with Rebecca's, he stared at the sturdy boards above him and tried to reconcile his present with his past. As a young man—younger than some of the boys climbing the topmasts—he had left Northfield Hall for London, his heart full of disgust for the mindless loyalty his parents displayed to Lord Preston.

How he had ranted against the baron to anyone who would listen.

Even now, thinking of Lord Preston filled Chow with an anger he felt he could never outrun.

But why? Lord Preston's crime was hypocrisy, or at least accepting praise he wasn't due; it was making everyone at Northfield Hall believe he was a saint when he still expected them to live as laborers in his service.

Now, Chow himself was an eviler man than Lord Preston. Why couldn't he have just forgiven Lord Preston for being human and stayed there with his family, where life was safe and simple?

Instead, he had pledged his loyalty to Boukman. A man who took bigger risks than Lord Preston—and turned out to be even less worthy of Chow's reverence.

And yet, even now, knowing Boukman to be more of a man than a hero, Chow felt guilty as he whispered to Jack Davies about how to make a change aboard the Ghost . Chow was proving to himself that he was a traitor—a villain.

He knew Captain Boukman wouldn't surrender without making sure every crew member, and especially Rebecca, knew exactly how villainous Chow could be.

And once she found out what Chow had done on Calliope all those years ago, Rebecca would never forgive him.

Perhaps she would lead a mutiny against him, and Chow would meet his fate with the sharks after all.

There was nothing for it but to plan the mutiny anyway.

He gathered men to his side and even came up with a plan, simple though it was.

The next time the captain gave an order that didn't sit right, they would resist. And if the captain wouldn't hear reason—which they all knew he wouldn't—they would take the ship.

They were five days away from the Azores when, from above, Fuego called out about a ship on the horizon. Raising his telescope, Chow found it flying the Union Jack, due southeast—in between the Ghost and the distant African coast.

“British royal frigate, Captain. Heading southeast.” Squinting into the telescope, he managed to make out a name: “HMS Glory. ”

“Not one of the squadron, then.” The West African Squadron, Captain Boukman meant, one of the ships dedicated to stopping the slave trade.

To express his disgust, the captain spit tobacco from his mouth over the side of the ship.

“Probably off to bombard some poor town on the other side of the world.”

Whatever it was doing, they could maintain their distance and sail past if they kept their wits about them.

The Ghost was a known pirate ship, which meant any naval officer would be happy to seize it, but they weren’t making any trouble.

If they switched their flag to the American stars and stripes, HMS Glory would steer clear—or risk inciting another war.

Boukman stared at the horizon, where the ship was but a brown speck. Then, he ordered, “Change course. We’re going to catch those cockroaches.”

Chow’s heart dropped. And instead of seizing the moment, he gave the man a chance to save himself: “Catch them? To do what?”

“Sink them.” Captain Boukman added, “First, we’ll take their supplies, then we’ll

sink them.”

In all his years as a pirate—even before joining the Ghost —Chow had never taken on a naval ship.

It was asking for trouble. The British navy equipped its ships with more cannons and gunpowder than any pirate could hope for, and their crews were the fastest gunmen in the world.

Besides, even if they did defeat that ship, the Admiralty would alert the whole fleet to look out for the Ghost .

It would only be a matter of time before the crew was captured and hanged for piracy.

And for what gain? They didn’t need supplies from HMS Glory , not when the Azores were only a few days away.

Chow waited for Boukman to see reason. “That’s asking for trouble, Captain.”

“I did not ask for your opinion.” The captain did not need to loom to make his physical threat clear. He was the bigger man. His was the deeper voice. The anger in his breast burned with more fuel. “Call for de la Cruz.”

Chow waited a moment longer. He courteously looked away from Boukman. He prayed to the ocean that the captain would take back the order.

If the captain would only remember who he was and what the Ghost stood for, the day did not need to get ugly.

But the captain did not take back the order, and so Chow proceeded as planned. “De la Cruz!” Chow shouted, bringing in a witness to Boukman’s bad judgment.

Julio presented himself quickly. “Yes, sir?”

“The captain orders us to catch that frigate.” Chow pointed to the frigate on the horizon.

“They’ll sink us in a half hour,” de la Cruz said, horror in his expressive eyes.

Captain Boukman sneered. “When did my crew turn into such yellow-bellied cowards? Is it because I allowed a woman on board that you suddenly act like a bunch of eight-year-old girls?”

“We’re here to advise you, Captain,” Chow said as respectfully as he could.

His sentence was truncated by the tip of the captain’s sword pressed to his throat. “We will catch that ship, and anyone who says otherwise will be locked in the brig.”

Chow froze, his only defense against the steel that could so easily rip open his veins. He met the captain eye for eye. Captain Boukman glared at him, his face pulled into a storm of eyebrows and fury. His mouth hung open, angry breaths coming in huffs.

This was a man who needed to prove his power, regardless of the consequences.

And this was the signal the crew had been waiting for.

“Aye aye, Captain,” he mouthed, careful not to let his vocal cords ring against the sword.

Boukman lowered the weapon. His glare still skewering Chow, he shouted, “Davies!”

The coxswain mate bounded up to the quarterdeck with his usual cheerful demeanor. Yet Chow knew he was now playacting a role so the rest of them could prepare to

mutiny. “Captain?”

“Make ready to take that frigate.” Boukman spit again, this time aiming the chewed tobacco at Chow’s feet. “Sharkhead will inspect the hold. Make sure there aren’t any holes that need plugging.”

A demotion that weeks ago would have crushed him. Chow took it without objection, ducking his head to disappear from the quarterdeck just as Boukman wanted him to. He kept his steps slow and dejected until he was down the ladder, out of sight.

Then he let his true reactions reign.

His first act was to find Rebecca. It was starboard watch, which meant she was cleaning the animal pen and scouring the dishes from morning mess. Chow had only to walk half the length of the ship to find her clucking over the chickens as she tried to steal the eggs from their nests.

“These two hens finally did their job,” she said as he approached. “Think I have to tell the rest of the crew, or can you and I eat these eggs as our little secret?”

Chow wished he had time to smile at her joke. He wished Boukman had made the right choice and caught the winds away from the frigate so that this could be like any other day, when he might draw Rebecca to their little alcove and steal a kiss before going back to his duties.

Boukman had not made that choice, and so Chow now needed to act. “It’s time.”

Rebecca straightened from where she bent over the animals. “I’ll alert the sleepers.” As previously discussed. No pirate wanted to sleep through this.

But before she let him go, Rebecca reached out and squeezed Chow’s fingers. It was

a far cry from the kiss he longed for, yet it jolted through him like a revelation.

If it weren't for her at his side, he would be following the captain's orders, headed for his own doom.

Too bad it was only a matter of hours before she deserted him , too.

A calm engulfed Rebecca, one she recognized from the moments of her life when she had felt her fate was entirely beyond her control.

Which was strange because just now, she held destiny in her own hands.

She strapped the machete to her thigh, as she had before boarding the Whimsy.

She added a knife beside the two eggs in her pocket.

Then she took up her role in the plan. Walking the hammocks, she shook each one and hissed, "It's time," until every pirate was awake.

One by one, they climbed the ladder to the top deck.

The day was sultry, the wind strong, and the sails bristled loudly as the crew pulled them into a tack towards the southeast. Fuego and the other boys were above, manning the lines and shouting down about the frigate's activity.

It was raising its sails, too, though it was too soon to tell what it planned to do.

The pirates congregated on the main deck, forming a circle as if they were to vote. Rebecca found herself between Fearsome Fred and Long Tale Lee; Sharkhead had disappeared somewhere below and had yet to emerge.

From the quarterdeck, Boukman bellowed, “Davies! Get these men into proper formation!”

Davies turned to face the captain. “They are.”

“Have you lost your senses? We’re going into battle, not taking a roll call!”

Which was when Chow rose up from the hatch. The men parted, allowing him to cut to the center of the circle and face the captain above.

“Captain Boukman,” he said in that gruff shout that had so often commanded the ship, “we are not attacking that frigate.”

“That’s enough from you.” Boukman leaned over the banister separating his quarterdeck balcony from the main deck. “Davies, lock Chow in the brig.”

“No, Captain,” replied Jack Davies, who jumped down from the quarterdeck to join the circle. “I’m with Sharkhead. We are not attacking that frigate.”

“Aye aye,” said Long Tale Lee. “I’m with Sharkhead, too.”

“Aye aye,” Fearsome Fred agreed.

And one by one, the crew called out their allegiance. With each cry, Boukman’s face screwed tighter, his lips tilted into a deranged smile. When Rebecca at last declared, “I’m with Sharkhead,” he reached for the pistol at his belt.

Julio de la Cruz, who had been manning the helm behind Boukman the whole time, pressed his cutlass into the back of the captain’s neck. “Drop your weapon.”

Boukman was on display for the whole crew to see.

They watched as his options played out across his face, and Rebecca knew the moment his smile widened that he did not intend to surrender.

He was big enough to take old de la Cruz down in a single punch; perhaps he thought he could take them all with the force of his fury alone.

Rebecca reached into her pocket for a weapon. Then, arcing her arm backward the way she had learned to throw a snowball across a Rhode Island field, she vaulted the egg into the captain's face.

It broke in a mess of orange yolk in his eyes and beard. His nose began to bleed, and the red mixed into the egg like a vengeful sunrise. For a moment, all anyone could do was stare.

Then Chow stepped forward, pulling her behind him, in the same instant that Julio de la Cruz plunged his sword into Boukman's side, and also in the same instant that Boukman pulled the trigger on his pistol.

The bullet went somewhere into the sea. Rebecca clung to Chow, and he clung to her, long enough to determine neither of them were injured.

Then they set to work finishing the mutiny. Chow rushed the quarterdeck with Davies and the other men; in no time, they had Boukman trussed and marching down to the brig. "Set sail for the Azores," Chow ordered.

Rebecca hustled with the crew to change the sails. But as Fuego de la Cruz mounted the mast once more, he let out a different kind of shout:

"The frigate is headed for us!"

And a new kind of doom settled as they realized they had not acted fast enough to

save their lives.

Too little, too late.

It was done. Boukman was locked in the brig. Chow was a traitor.

But it was not enough to save them. Even if Chow gave the order to change course, the winds were against them. The Ghost didn't have the option of cutting away from the frigate. The royal ship was coming straight towards them, and there was no way for the Ghost to get away from its cannons in time.

And worst of all—Boukman hadn't revealed Chow's secret.

Standing on the quarterdeck, telescope in hand, Chow's mind was blank, his heart numb, and he realized he had been waiting for Boukman to do the confessing for him.

He had been counting on the crew turning against him. On Rebecca reeling away horrified. But most of all on Boukman doing the telling, so that Chow wouldn't have to.

And now he was the de facto captain. They all thought he was worthy of deciding what to do next. When he caught Rebecca's eyes on him, they were wide with hope and admiration.

The villainous part of Chow's heart wanted to accept the reprieve. If they survived this fight and if he got rid of Boukman on some deserted island, no one—and especially not Rebecca—would ever know the truth about his past.

But if Rebecca never knew the truth, then Chow was tricking her into loving a man

who wasn't worthy.

He could accept being a traitor to free the Ghost of Boukman. He could even accept the title of captain without telling the crew everything about his past.

But he could not be a husband to Rebecca if she did not know what he had done.

Before he decided how to evade the Royal Navy, he had first to confess.

Even if that meant Rebecca would disavow him just before the battle that would take his life.

And so it was all coming to an end.

The mutiny over, Sharkhead was now their captain.

In all their hurried whispers these past few days, they had not discussed what the mutiny meant for their marriage.

But Sharkhead had already become distant, his eyes barely seeing her, his hands barely touching her.

He didn't so much as squeeze her hand before climbing to the quarterdeck to peer through the telescope at the fast-arriving frigate.

And now Boukman was in the brig, no longer a threat to her.

Rebecca need not be an albatross weighing on Sharkhead's neck.

If he was going to part ways with her, so be it. If the entire crew of the Ghost decided she had better leave them at the Azores, then she would go. She wasn't a woman to

stay where she wasn't wanted. And she would be as nice as she could about it. No snarling, no snapping, just an honest farewell.

This she promised herself as she trudged towards the ladder, anticipating Sharkhead's order to make ready for battle.

He probably wouldn't even allow her to fight.

He would confine her below, as if she were a mere passenger, and send her on a longboat to the naval ship for mercy if it looked like the Ghost would lose.

She was almost to the ladder when Jack Davies slapped her on the shoulder. "Congratulations, pirate."

She blinked in surprise. Then Fearsome Fred, from where he sat oiling his blunderbuss, added, "Perfect aim. Should have known, of course. Ave Rebecca has God on her side."

It was the nickname that made her smile. Her pirate name, which Liberty Johnson had promised to tattoo onto her wrist, and which these men had bestowed upon her as a token of welcome.

Perhaps Sharkhead still intended to drop her at the Azores, but Fearsome Fred seemed happy to keep her on. Rebecca teased back, "I wouldn't know God from Adam."

"I would thank God we've got you on our crew," Jack Davies said, then winked. "If only I believed in God."

Rebecca found herself looking around to see a dozen pirates she knew and respected vying for her attention, not because she was a warm body, but because she had earned

her place among them.

She considered, with a brief pang, that she could remain on the ship no matter what. She would not have her husband, but she would still be a pirate.

She would still have these men as her family.

Her thoughts—and the men’s teasing—were interrupted by Sharkhead’s gruff call. “Rebecca!”

He said it with no tenderness at all. Which allowed Rebecca to shield herself as she climbed the steps to join him on the quarterdeck.

This would be the moment he ordered her below, and when he did, she would force him to say what he really meant.

She would do it nicely, for he had been good to her, but before they went into battle, she would know exactly how he felt.

He stood with two feet firmly planted, the telescope clutched in his left hand.

There was no emotion on his face, which made the tattooed shark on his neck that much fiercer.

After all this time, Rebecca couldn’t read the silence of his expressions.

She could only feel her heart hammering too loudly in her chest. “Aye, Captain?”

At least he emoted in response to that: a grimace. “That frigate is coming for us fast.”

“Aye.” She didn’t turn toward the horizon. She had never needed to look in order to

sense doom on her doorstep. “And now you’re our captain.”

She saw him reel back from the words, though she hadn’t intended them to hurt. She had only meant to get to the point of the conversation: that he was no longer her not-husband.

Her hand landed on his sleeve before she could stop herself. “You’ll get us out of this. I’m sure of it.”

His opposite hand, the one without the telescope, took her fingers and pulled her close.

So close that the crew might think they were embracing.

So close that when his words came out as soft as raindrops, Rebecca could still hear them.

“When I left England, I was a man who thought he knew better than everyone around him. Better than my parents and certainly better than Lord Preston. I paid for a ticket on an East Indiaman, same as the white brother and sister going to Calcutta to make their fortunes and the white missionaries off to save souls in Shanghai. But as soon as we were past Ireland, the bosun ordered me below—not them. It wasn’t even the captain, can you believe that?

Just a bosun, a Lascar himself with a cat-o’-nine-tails that I can still feel on my back.

That was my first lesson: money doesn’t guarantee you anything, not when you look like me. ”

Rebecca watched anger steal over his face, his eyes narrowing and his lips hardening.

“We were somewhere off the coast of Africa, five weeks into the journey, when a pirate ship attacked. The East Indiaman survived, but I followed the pirates onto their ship and begged the captain to take me on.”

She pictured it like her own entrance on the Ghost , the crew watching with interest, waiting for the man in power to decide.

“Even still, I thought I knew everything. If rank doesn’t matter, as I learned from Lord Preston, nor money, as I learned from the East India Company, then what makes a man is strength.

And I decided to be the strongest by learning from the strongest. We were fearsome, we pirates, and we did terrible things with our strength.

I knew they were terrible things, but terrible things had been done to me, so why should I not return the favor? ”

Now his eyes shone with a horrific brightness, stuck on the horizon far beyond her. Despite the unending heat, a chill ran down Rebecca’s spine. She knew what pirates did. She had done it too, now.

She had never imagined this not-husband of hers doing anything terrible . Fighting, yes. Killing in a battle, yes. But shooting cannons into towns? Waking women in their beds? Setting fire to houses whether or not there were still children inside?

She steeled herself not to break away if he confessed to any of that.

“I lived by their code for a year or so. Attack ships, steal their treasure, sell it somewhere on the coast, and do it again. Then we attacked Calliope .” His pause was not for dramatic effect but because his voice seemed to be giving out.

“Off the coast of Brazil. I should have known...What other kind of merchant ship would it be?” He cleared his throat.

“It was a slave ship. That was clear when we boarded. A few of them were armed to help fight us off. We killed them.” His body shrank, withdrawing from her.

“I thought we were going to free them. Or maybe make them pirates. Give them free rein of Calliope and let them sail off to do whatever they wanted.”

In the silence that followed, Rebecca guessed, “Instead, you sold them at the nearest town?”

“But first, we got our pick of the women. Raped them.” His words came fast now, like they might not come out at all if he didn’t rush through them. “Not me. I didn’t—couldn’t—but I was there. On the deck. I saw it. No one tried to hide it.”

At last, his eyes landed on Rebecca. Dark. Hopeless. Condemned.

“I didn’t try to stop it.”

Rebecca could feel the scene as viscerally as if she stood on Calliope that moment.

The humiliation of being naked for months on end, inspected, disregarded, and now, when there should be salvation, being pressed to the hard deck, still shackled, and used by a greedy pirate who smelled and spit and didn’t care if any of it hurt.

But she also felt the scene as Chow, a man standing futilely by the railing, pressing backward and backward and backward as he tried to escape the crime.

She felt the sun burning his skin, the helplessness of having nowhere to look.

The weapons that hung at his side boasted the dried blood of slavers, yet he couldn't wield them now.

If he did, he would be shot, hanged, or thrown to the sharks, and the women would still be raped.

And so he remained where he was. He let it happen. The moment ended, but it lived on in him, until one day, years later, a captain threatened to take a woman to his cabin, and Martin Chow broke free from his silence and claimed her as his own instead.

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“I had heard of the Ghost by then,” he continued, “and so I abandoned that crew when they made port and I followed rumors until I found the Ghost in Cartagena. I told Captain Boukman about what I had done and why he might not want me on the crew because of it. He took me on. Said that I could make up for it by stopping as many slavers as possible with him.”

“And save yourself in the process.” She didn’t mean it biblically. She meant that she could see his soul had been torn into tatters on Calliope . If a person didn’t repair such a wound, they couldn’t live. They could only wake, eat, work, sleep, and so forth, until the day they died.

He took it as a religious comment. “I don’t believe in any of that. But I’m a villain, I know that much, and you deserve to know it, too.”

Rebecca took the hand that had withdrawn from her and held fast to his fingers.

“That frigate that is approaching bears no love for pirates, and because I was on Calliope , I understand why. The ones who harm others just because they can, those are the ones who deserve to be strung up. Captain Boukman? I’m not sure he deserves to be hanged.

But I think our only hope is to hand him over in exchange for our own immunity. ”

She understood now. This wasn’t some deathbed confession, and she was not his priest to give him absolution in his final moments.

Chow had a plan, and what he needed was permission to do it.

Permission from her. His not-wife. Because he wasn't saying farewell to her at all.

"Would they do that? Let us all go free in exchange for Boukman?"

"I don't know for sure."

But there was a chance. A better chance than they had fighting with their half-full store of gunpowder and seventy-three-person crew.

"We're all pirates, at the end of the day, whether we think we're doing it for good or not.

We take from others without any right, and we do it knowing the risk.

Captain Boukman is no different." Rebecca pulled her not-husband's hand to her heart.

"Let's see if we can save seventy-two of the seventy-three of us. "

Even though the frigate drew closer, Chow felt lighter for having confessed to Rebecca. The more of the story he had unspooled, the more it had felt like a weight dragging him beneath the water, and if Rebecca had whirled away in judgment, he would have sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

Now he had cut that line free, and the terrible past disappeared into the waves like the soft rain after a hurricane.

He gave the orders. Boukman was retrieved from the brig and, still tied at both the wrists and the ankles, deposited in the longboat.

Rebecca, her goat, and Chow got in the vessel with him.

The rest of the pirates would stay behind under Jack Davies's command, a white flag flying in place of the Jolly Roger.

That way, if the captain of the frigate decided the deal wasn't worth it, the Ghost would have a fighting chance.

Chow would have gone alone, except Rebecca hadn't yet let go of his hand, and he didn't particularly want to ask her to.

Julio de la Cruz muttered a prayer to the Catholic god in farewell as Chow helped Rebecca into the longboat.

Long Tale Lee offered her a special rope star for protection.

Fearsome Fred shook Chow's hand and said, "Good luck, then." There were murmurs from the rest of the crew, but mostly mute gestures, like Liberty Johnson's nod as he started lowering the ropes and Fuego's crossed fingers.

And then it was just Chow, Rebecca, Boukman, the goat, and the sea.

Boukman tried to speak through his gag. Chow ignored him.

He focused instead on Rebecca rowing behind him.

Each stroke pulling them that much closer to their fate.

A pirate confronted death frequently, and Chow had often imagined his own: drowning in a storm, bleeding out from a gunshot wound, a knife spearing his back.

Always, he had pictured it as brutal. Always, he had expected to be alone.

If this was the day he died, then at least he would do so beside Rebecca. If he had to sacrifice his life now to pay for all his past deeds, at least she was here with him, praying for his reprieve.

He wished he could spare her this fate altogether. If only she had listened when he had tried to send her back to shore on Fortune Island. But then they never would have known each other—she would have been just an anecdote, one he quickly forgot—and he never would have loved her.

He loved her deeply, he realized as the longboat drew within firing range of the frigate.

It surprised him, because he had never expected to fall in love.

He had pictured a wife in some far-off future when he finally made it to China; even then, he had expected he would respect and appreciate her—but love?

Let his heart be stolen away to belong in someone else's body?

Let his days feel bigger and his nights feel fuller by sharing them with someone else's soul?

Chow had never imagined that.

A swell rocked their boat, spraying saltwater into his eyes and carrying them within the lines thrown down by the frigate to lift them up to the deck.

Rebecca walked carefully to the stern of the boat while Chow headed to the bow, taking care as he passed Boukman that the man could not push him over the side.

The goat bleated. They tied the lines to the longboat, and the sailors above began to

haul them up.

The safe thing to do was to stay in place so as not to rock the boat.

Chow climbed over the benches to reach Rebecca in the back. She watched him come, confusion in her eyes, but when he held out his hands, she accepted them into her own. He pulled himself into that sphere of her body so that he could smell her skin and feel her energy and hear her breath.

They only had a few moments left together. He wanted to make them count.

“I love you, Rebecca.” He kissed her, one heart to another, to ensure she understood. He didn’t need to hear a response. He only wanted her to know that, if she could count nothing else towards her fortune, she had his love.

With a jerk, the longboat reached the frigate’s deck. And it was time to meet their fate.

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A platoon of red-coated marines awaited them on the top deck, bayonets at the ready.

At their front, a naval captain waited in a blue wool coat frogged with gold braids and crowned with epaulets that declared his great and mighty power.

The longboat wobbled against the frigate, and Rebecca clung to Chow's hand.

Chow, who loved her and was her not-husband.

A lieutenant came forward, sword glinting in the sun, and told them to surrender their weapons. Chow handed over the pistol in his pocket but not the knife in his boot; Rebecca made a show of untying a blade from her ankle while keeping the machete strapped to her thigh under her dress.

The lieutenant searched Boukman with rough hands, then stepped back and nodded to the captain.

They were ordered off the longboat. Mrs. Adams objected to being pulled on deck—perhaps remembering the battle that had ensued the last time Rebecca had forced her on a journey like this. Rebecca willed her own heart to beat more steadily so that the goat wouldn't sense her fear.

"I've never seen a pirate wave a white flag," the captain said. "State your name and what makes you think we might show you mercy."

"Sharkhead Chow—"

“The name your mother gave you, pirate.”

“Martin Chow.” Standing up a little straighter, he volunteered, “Of Berkshire.”

The captain’s eyes raked across him. “Of Lord Preston’s Northfield Hall, I wager.”

Chow nodded. “I am named for him.” His words were losing the roundness of the sea, getting sharper and more English, as if in the midst of British company he had suddenly remembered an old set of manners.

Something in the captain loosened in response, and a hint of friendship stole into his expression. “I sailed with Nate Preston for a few years. I hold the family in high regard.” Then he scowled. “How disappointing that a pirate should claim a connection to them.”

Chow did not flinch at the insult. “We are no threat to you, and to prove that, we offer you a prize: the famed Captain Boukman.” Stepping back, he gestured to Boukman, who wriggled in his seat on the longboat but could not get out a word around the gag.

“Boukman.” The captain stepped forward and examined their prisoner. Even tied up, Boukman was large and intimidating, his bent limbs showing off muscles that could pound a person to dust in a matter of seconds. “The slave traders live in fear of you.”

“You may try him for piracy, theft, and all manner of violence. With his capture, your name will be celebrated in the newspapers.”

“The Admiralty doesn’t pay prize money for captured pirates. Only for captured ships.”

“Aye, but we haven’t anything worth your time. All we have right now is food, water, and animals. Some gunpowder, too, but not enough to make you a fortune.”

The captain's eyes fell on Mrs. Adams. On Rebecca, too. It wasn't as much of a leer as the captain of the Whimsy had given her, but it was enough to make anger harden the blood in her veins.

"This is my wife, Rebecca," Chow said, and she realized that all this time, he had still been holding her hand.

"If you decide that Boukman isn't enough of a prize, then I beg only that you take mercy on an honest woman.

Perhaps—" His voice wavered a little. "Perhaps even help her get to my family at Northfield Hall."

She was no honest woman, not by any definition of the term. But Rebecca could see that Chow understood a code of honor that existed in the navy, one that cloaked her like a suit of armor by announcing her connections to a family that mattered.

It wasn't because she was some helpless woman Chow was protecting out of the goodness of his heart.

It was because she was his wife.

And he loved her.

"You have my word." The captain nodded as gravely as if he had made a deathbed promise. "And the goat?"

This part, Rebecca had to say herself. "Is yours, if you would like her. In gratitude for letting us continue on."

The captain stared hard at the Ghost behind them. Whatever he was thinking, he kept

it to himself. Rebecca clung to Chow's hand. His fingers were steadfast against hers, his palm pressed just as urgently to her skin as hers was to him. If this worked, they could sail away into a new life.

If it didn't, these were their last moments together.

"My lieutenant will inspect your ship," the captain announced. "If, as you say, there is no evidence of looting, we have no reason to assume that you were lately involved in piracy, and we will arrest only the known pirate Boukman. Otherwise..."

Otherwise they would all be hanged.

"That's very fair, sir," Chow said.

They made arrangements for the inspection.

The captain selected his lieutenant and a party of twenty sailors to row over to the Ghost, while Chow wrote a note for Jack Davies—or, more specifically, the literate Fearsome Fred—to approve this plan of action.

Meanwhile, a boy in a striped shirt darted forward and took Mrs. Adams's lead from Rebecca.

"I'll take good care of her, ma'am," he said, his young eyes earnest and excited. "We've got two other goats to keep her company, Magpie and Frivolity. What do you call her?"

"Mrs. Adams. After the wife of President Adams. She is American."

The boy grinned. "We won't hold that against her."

Still, Rebecca released Chow's hand to circle her arms around Mrs. Adams's neck and kiss her furry brow.

They had been through so much together in the short time they had known each other.

Mrs. Adams had been her company when stranded in the storm, then her ally on the Ghost and her protector on the Whimsy .

The animal had made Rebecca feel less alone as she faced the men and nature that wanted to tear her down.

From here on out, they would have to take on the world separately. Rebecca hoped the boy was right and that Mrs. Adams was about to make goat friends and live a better life than she could hope for on the Ghost .

She watched the boy lead Mrs. Adams past the marines and saw that, at least for now, her friend was safe.

It was a parting Rebecca had made a hundred times in her life—from her friends who were adopted from the almshouse, from familiar faces when her employer pulled her from one city to another, and, somewhere deep in a memory too old to exist, from the mother who had left her on the steps of Trinity Church.

That didn't make it any easier to do it again.

She realized that a part of her had been counting the moments until she would need to say goodbye to Chow, too. It was inevitable that something would part them: he would leave her; he would force her to leave the Ghost ; he would die; he would fall in love with someone else.

That was all still true. Their separation was, quite possibly, minutes away.

Yet she suddenly wasn't afraid of it anymore.

Even if he was arrested and she was shepherded to mythic Northfield Hall and they never saw each other again, Rebecca felt Chow would never truly leave her.

His memory alone would be strong enough, his heart true enough, that she could conjure him to her side even if he were on the other side of the world.

Because he loved her, and he had said it aloud.

And she loved him back.

The inspection organized and Boukman carried off to the brig, the captain invited Chow and Rebecca to wait in the shade of his cabin.

As he led them away, Rebecca took Chow's hand again and pressed close.

They were in full sight of a hundred men, and in earshot of dozens, but she didn't care who witnessed it.

Leaping onto her tiptoes, she pressed a kiss to Chow's cheek and declared, "I love you, too."

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It took all afternoon to clear up the matter, but clear it up they did.

Captain Pembury entertained Chow and Rebecca like guests of honor in his cabin while they waited for his lieutenant to inspect the Ghost .

Over a bottle of wine, they spoke of the weather, swapped superstitions for avoiding African fevers, and shared news from their most recent ports.

Pembury volunteered news of the Preston family: Nate had been court-martialed for being too free with his command of the West African Squadron and Lord Preston was still fighting in Parliament to abolish slavery.

“The big scandal a year or so ago was that the youngest daughter married a Chinaman. A glazier, I think. Do you know him?”

Chow couldn't say for sure. But he did remember his little brother Eddie following Caroline Preston around and the occasional worried whisper between his parents that someone would have to put an end to that friendship.

He grinned at the idea that Eddie had managed to marry Caroline after all.

The joy surprised him: for so long, if he thought of his family, it was to be grateful they didn't know what he had become.

He hadn't spent much time imagining their lives continuing onward after the day he had left Northfield Hall for the last time, his stomach full of his mother's clear soup and steamed buns.

Yet it had been a decade. Eddie had grown up.

Spencer and Oliver, too, might well be married—might even have children wreaking havoc at Northfield Hall.

His parents would be ten years older, that much frailer, and Chow realized with a pang there was even a chance they might no longer be alive.

The emotions swept over him in an instant like a hurricane wave. When Captain Pembury asked, “Would you like to send a letter to Northfield Hall?” Chow didn’t hesitate to say yes.

And so while the navy searched the Ghost, Chow composed a letter to his parents on borrowed paper.

He told them he was alive, he was in the Atlantic, he still thought one day he might make it to China, and that he thought of them with love in his heart.

Then, with space for only a few remaining lines, he asked Rebecca, “May I tell them about our marriage?”

A marriage that had never happened in the eyes of Britain’s god or man’s laws. Yet a marriage that had already been tested and stretched and aged. He watched Rebecca’s serene black eyes as she considered the question, then smiled. For a woman who might be arrested in the next hour, she was radiant.

“Nothing would make me happier.”

So he did:

I have found a woman I love, Rebecca, and we live as husband and wife on our ship.

And then, at the end, he signed it with the name he had for so long tried to reject:

Martin

By the time he finished the letter, the naval crew had returned from the Ghost with one barrel of gunpowder, one barrel of rum, and Fearsome Fred's blunderbuss. "This was all that was worth anything," the lieutenant reported to Captain Pembury. "No evidence of piracy other than the Jolly Roger."

"Which you fly to protect yourself from other pirates, no doubt," Pembury said with a wry smile. He walked them to the longboat, the redcoat marines now nowhere to be found. "Do not make me regret showing mercy this afternoon, Martin Chow."

He didn't flinch at the name, even as a silent part of him objected he was no longer that man.

He wasn't the Martin who had left London full of resentment and righteousness and plans.

Neither was he Sharkhead any longer, a man so ashamed of his past that he could not think for himself in the present.

Sometime in the last few weeks, in the presence of Rebecca, he had been reborn, and he was now Martin and Sharkhead and someone new entirely. Someone who loved and was loved in return.

He kissed Rebecca when the longboat landed in the water and once more when they reached the Ghost. Now, back on the ship, they joined the crew in watching the frigate catch a wind back towards the African coast. Rebecca leaned into him. "What next, Captain Chow?"

He surveyed the crew waiting for his next words. Jack Davies had as much claim to

the captaincy as he did, yet he looked to Chow, eager for their next adventure. And Fearsome Fred, who had been with Boukman since before the Ghost , stood at the ready, too. Chow, apparently, was captain.

But this was the Ghost , and therefore the next decision belonged to all of them.

“We could go to China,” he ventured. “Or see what we could get from the spice routes. Or we could keep hassling the slavers until slavery is finally no more.” He watched interest in each option play out on his crew’s faces.

Some of the options were more appealing to him than others.

Yet he found that he didn’t care much where they went, so long as he was surrounded by these people.

The ones who were both good and bad but tried to make a difference anyway.

The ones who could survive a storm and dance a jig as soon as the sun broke through the clouds.

The ones who knew him as a mate, a quartermaster, a traitor, and still wanted him to lead them across the oceans.

And most of all, Rebecca, the impetuous whirlwind that loved him. So long as he had her, he would be happy.

Smiling—beaming, perhaps—he finished his speech. It was time to determine their fate. “Shall we take a vote?”