



A *Pirate's*
Primer

JILL KNOWLES

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Part One

Adam settled himself firmly on his crutches and placed his haughtiest expression on his face. There would only be one chance to avert disaster, and he didn't intend to squander it. Holding himself rigidly upright despite his body's limitations, he rapped sharply on the jail's guardhouse door.

What 'cher want?" a surly voice called out.

"I require an audience with your newest prisoner," Adam responded in his best "officer" voice.

A narrow window slat opened in the door, and the pinched, suspicious face of Sergeant Buddy Tremont glared out. His brown eyes widened. "Lieutenant Chandler? Is that you, sir?" The sergeant was one of the few men who had accompanied the Chandler family on their move south after the end of the war with the Aslinders.

Breathing a sigh of relief at the familiar visage, Adam said, "Ah, Sergeant Tremont, I was hoping you were on shift tonight. I must speak with the pirate -- Captain Fox, I believe his name is." Just speaking the name aloud sent a thrill of fear down Adam's back.

"But, sir," Tremont said, "the guildmaster gave orders that no one was to talk to the pirate. The mayor seconded them."

“I am aware of my father’s orders. And those of my brother, as well.” Adam leaned heavily on his left crutch as his right thigh threatened to spasm. The weather here in the humid south kingdom was temperate, but when it rained, the damp got into his bones. “Sergeant, do you think I would be out in this miserable weather if it weren’t important?”

The window closed with a snap, and the door opened. “Come in, sir. If you put it that way, sir.” Tremont waved Adam inside.

Settling himself carefully on his crutches, Adam entered the guardhouse. The sullen ache in his damaged legs made him want to rage at his father and brother for creating this mess. It would do no good, though. It never did. Both men were obsessed with power, and had seen a way to seize it in the war-ravaged southern parts of the kingdom. No one else was in charge, they’d reasoned, no one to protest the Drover’s Guild taking over. Had his mother still been alive, she would have protested leaving the city she’d grown up in, but she’d succumbed to marsh fever ten years before.

His father’s predictions had been correct. The folks in the port city of Ralston had been grateful for the wagonloads of food and necessities the Chandlers had delivered, and no protest was raised when Arthur Chandler was placed in charge of the city. Everyone knew that Arthur took his orders from Albert Chandler, the leader of the Drover’s Guild and patriarch of the Chandler family.

Tremont picked up a lamp and opened the door at the far side of the guardhouse. Adam knew it led to the special cells, where the most dangerous prisoners were kept to await hemp justice.

“Follow me, sir,” Tremont said. He glanced at the crutches Adam leaned on. “The way’s fair smooth, sir.”

“Thank you,” Adam said, gritting his teeth on a smile. His poor legs hurt, and he wanted nothing more than to be at home curled up in his warm, soft bed. Damn you, Father.

“Stay back from the bars, sir. He knows it’s the rope-waltz for him tomorrow, and so he’s got nothing to lose by trying to escape. Nothing ’sides a short drop and a sharp stop, anyway.” Tremont stopped in front of the only one of the four cells that was occupied. The man in the cell was a dark form, tossing a tri-cornered hat onto his foot and kicking it back, then tossing it again in lazy repetition.

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Adam said. “Please light the lanterns and leave us.”

“But, sir,” Tremont protested.

“Sergeant Tremont, I would not ask this of you if it weren’t important.”

The older man stared at him, studying his face and seeming to find an acceptable answer. “Yes, Lieutenant.” Tremont lit the lanterns at each side of the pirate’s cell, casting a warm halo of light on the dank stone and dark iron bars. Finished, Tremont turned and strode back toward the guardhouse. Just before passing through the door, he called, “Shout if you need me, sir. I’ll be right here waiting.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.” Adam waited until he heard the quick *snick* of the door closing before peering at the form on the cell’s rough cot.

Feeling as though he’d been punched in the gut, Adam studied the pirate captain.

The man wore an old-fashioned black frock coat trimmed in gold and cream. High leather boots folded down just below the knee. Dark, loose trousers were neatly tucked inside the boots. Then there was the jewelry; rings gleamed on each finger of the pirate’s hands, including wide circles of silver on each of the man’s thumbs. Dark auburn hair was pulled back at the pirate’s nape in a riot of shoulder-length curls. Only the wine-colored scarf covering the top of his head corralled them.

The pirate looked up, and Adam’s pent-up breath left him in a gasp. One sea-green eye sparkled up at him; the left eye was covered by a worn leather patch. Gold glinted from each ear, and a close-cropped beard and mustache, a shade darker than the pirate’s hair, framed full, sensuous lips.

“By all that’s holy, it is you,” Adam breathed. He’d been hoping the legends were merely that -- legends. But they were real. Wonderfully, terrifyingly real.

“Not very holy, mate.” The pirate spoke with the rounded vowels of the South Seas. Full lips curved in a mischievous smile, teeth gleaming white in the darkness. Gold glinted in his smile as well.

Adam tried in vain to find breath to speak to the apparition before him. He hadn’t been this nervous the first time he’d ordered men to battle.

“Who is it you think I am, then?” the pirate asked, setting his hat on the cot beside him.

“Captain Jaden Fox of the *Grey Lady*,” Adam forced the words out. He studied the pirate’s clothing and face, searching for something, anything, to tell him he was wrong.

“Ah,” the pirate said, coming to his feet. “It’s like that, is it?” He prowled close to the bars. “They’ve realized who they’ve got and sent you to parlay, eh?”

Adam drew in a breath, expecting to smell stale sweat and unwashed human, and perhaps things even less pleasant. Instead, a sharp, crisp breath of sea air filled his lungs. Surprise broke through his shock at meeting this man. “Not exactly. My father and brother have no idea who you are, nor would they believe me if I tried to tell them.” Just like they dismissed talk of the capricious sea Goddess Marita, who he was certain had sent the *Grey Lady* and her captain on this deadly errand.

“Then why are you here?” Fox asked, sprawling back on the cot like a sun-drunk cat.

“I’ve studied the legends, learned the lore, the oaths crews swear to their captains. I know about Telmarston, swallowed by the sea when those oaths were broken.” Adam licked his lips, tasting salt. “I wanted to tell you that only a handful of men know of the betrayals my father has ordered.”

“Including you,” the pirate said, tossing his hat back onto his foot.

"I found out tonight. Believe me, I'd have tried to stop them if I'd known." He'd been hurting, unable to sleep and in search of brandy to help numb the pain when he'd overheard the conversation between Arthur and their father. Pain forgotten, he'd listened in growing horror as their plans had become dreadfully clear.

They were paying men to pretend to be pirates and get taken on as crewmembers, lying to the men that an oath given to the Drover's Guild would protect them from breaking their oath to the ship's captain. And it might have, if the oath wasn't sworn on and witnessed by the sea Goddess Marita. It was an oath no one broke, so the pirates didn't look for treachery. The Goddess showed no mercy to those who foreswore her.

The false pirates carried magical signs in their blood, letting guild mages track them. Guild ships would surround the pirate vessel and demand the surrender of the captain, promising to let the crew go unharmed. But as soon as the captain and the spy were onboard the guild ships, the pirate ship was shelled, sunk with all hands on board. It truly was a perfect plan. With no pirates to raid merchant vessels, Ralston was rapidly becoming the South's premier port. Most of the imported goods were shipped inland, keeping the Chandler's wagons busy, and allowing for three price increases in the past year alone. The Chandler family was becoming richer and even more powerful, and the only cost was the family honor. Though, if Adam was correct, that was about to change.

The piling of betrayal on top of betrayal had brought the crimes to the attention of the Goddess, and She'd apparently sent the *Grey Lady* and Captain Fox to claim vengeance. The ship and crew had been sent to the bottom of the ocean during a similar betrayal more than two hundred years ago. They hated oathbreakers.

The pirate spoke, jarring Adam from his memories. "You'd have stopped the guild from killing the pirate brethren?"

"At the very least, I'd have seen to it that the townsfolk knew what was going on."

Fox laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. “And you think the good people of Ralston would rise up and tell the guild to stop?”

“Truthfully?” Adam asked, resting his shoulder against the bars in a vain attempt to relieve some of the strain on his left leg. When the pirate nodded, he continued, “I think some of the people would be angry, some would think the guild was right, and most wouldn’t care one way or the other, as long as they had food to put on the table. But at least they’d have made the choice.” He let more of his weight rest on the bars, almost hoping Fox would grab him and use him in an ill thought-out escape plan. He wouldn’t mind being wrong about the man’s identity, not if it would save lives.

“Truth,” Fox said. He sat up and leaned forward, chin on his hands, and peered up at Adam with one sea-green eye. “You interest me, Lieutenant.”

For a moment, Adam was startled, wondering just how much the pirate knew about him, before he remembered that Sergeant Tremont had called him by his rank. Something about the pirate drew him, made him want to prove his worth to the other man. It was no wonder the crew of the *Grey Lady* followed Fox, even in death; the captain had an uncanny amount of charisma. “You fascinate me, Captain,” Adam admitted.

“Oh?”

“I’ve studied sea lore since my family moved to Ralston. The legends and tales make for entertaining reading, none more so than the tale of the *Grey Lady*.” Self consciously, he shifted on his crutches. “My body is limited, but my mind is free to roam the world.” How ironic it was that the thing he loved most in the world -- being on horseback with the horizon in his sights -- had been the thing that had crippled him. His horse had been hit by cannon fire during a charge and tumbled down a steep hill, shattering both Adam’s legs beyond repair by even the most skilled royal healers.

“Were you a sailor, then? In the Navy?”

“Cavalry, actually. I'd never seen the sea, until two years ago, when my father and brother moved the family south.” Ruefully, he nodded down at his crutches. “There was nothing left for me in Gervaiston.”

A soft smile transformed the captain's face into boyish handsomeness. “You've come to love the sea. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Yes.”

“Have you sailed her then, these past two years?”

“No.” Adam couldn't keep the bitter sorrow from his voice. “I'm not exactly able-bodied, and a ship's no place for a cripple.”

“Aye,” the pirate said. “Though it does depend on the ship.” He bounced to his feet in a move Adam envied. “You've given me much to think about.” Placing a hand over his heart, Fox said, “I swear to you, upon my Lady and my Goddess, the town will not suffer for acts they had no part in choosing.” He stepped up to the bars. “I would ask a boon of you.”

“Of course,” Adam said, “if it's within my power, it's yours.” He braced himself for the pirate's request, expecting to lose his life or his soul in the next moment.

“First things first,” the pirate said. He thrust his hand through the bars. “Captain Jaden Fox of the *Grey Lady*. Servant to the sea-wench Herself.”

Adam flushed as he realized he'd never introduced himself. “I do most humbly beg your pardon. I am Adam Chandler, formerly Lieutenant in Her Majesty's Royal Cavalry.” He took the proffered hand, expecting to feel the cold of the grave. To his surprise, Fox's hand was warm and callused, and not at all unpleasant to touch.

Still clasping Adam's hand, Fox rubbed the tip of his index finger across the pulse point in Adam's wrist.

Shivering at the unexpected touch, Adam locked gazes with the pirate, whose face was quite near his. He could feel the other man's warm breath upon his lips. “Captain?”

“A kiss,” the pirate murmured, husky voiced.

“I don’t understand,” Adam said, his eyes riveted on Fox’s full lips. “The price is a kiss?” Why would the pirate want to kiss him, another man?

“Not a price, Adam Chandler, merely a boon, a favor, freely given.” Fox rubbed his thumb across Adam’s first knuckle.

The caress sent a wave of heat rushing through Adam, centering low in his belly. He leaned forward, uncertain his ears were giving him the truth.

Their lips met between the bars.

It was...nice. The pirate’s lips were soft, and his mustache tickled Adam’s top lip. Before he could pull back, Fox’s mouth moved beneath his, parting. A warm, wet tongue darted out in a silky caress. Adam gasped at the intimate touch. The pirate seized the opportunity, yanking Adam closer and deepening their connection, until their tongues danced a duel of passion.

Adam’s cock grew hard inside his trousers, and he strained against the rough iron bars of the cell, desperate to get closer. It wasn’t until he wobbled on his crutches that sense came back. One of the cell’s bars pressed uncomfortably against his cheek, and his head was tilted at an odd angle to allow the kiss. Wrenching his mouth from the other man’s, he pulled away, panting. Realizing that his fists were clenched in the pirate’s frock coat, he let go and stumbled backward, the pain in his abused legs bringing him the rest of the way back from the mind-shattering arousal he felt.

Where had it come from, the desperate, frenzied need that had him rubbing against another man like a beast in rut? Raising his hand, he rubbed his fingers over his swollen lips. Adam opened his mouth to speak, but could find no words.

Fox licked his lips, smiling like a cream-fed cat. “Be in the front row tomorrow.”

Adam nodded once before turning away.

* * * * *

The gallows was stark against the backdrop of an iron-gray sea. Long tradition placed the instrument of ultimate judgment close to the only thing that could overrule the law. If Marita chose to appear and proclaim the innocence of the condemned, it was reasoned, She shouldn't have to walk far.

Adam ignored the unruly crowd from his place at the front of the throng. He was appalled by the atmosphere of fun surrounding the event. He'd avoided the other hangings, hiding in his study to research maritime law. That's where he'd first learned of the *Grey Lady* and her captain.

Merchants hawked tea and sweet rolls, women squabbled for position, and children laughed and played underfoot. *After eight years of war, one would think they'd have had a bellyful of death. Apparently, one would be wrong.* Black-winged gulls swirled around the mob, adding their querulous cries to the noise.

"We should change the time from dawn to noon," Arthur muttered. "Make a half-holiday for people, charge a copper to watch."

His father, on Arthur's other side, murmured his agreement.

Sickened, Adam wished he'd lost his nerve and stayed away. He and Arthur were barely two years apart, and had the same medium brown hair and hazel eyes. They both were tall and lean, with fair skin and faces that were interesting, though not particularly handsome. Yet they couldn't be more different in spirit. Arthur took after their father, and Adam...well, he wasn't sure who he had inherited his sense of right and wrong from. Even his mother had been far more conscious of her position than of treating the servants fairly. Where Albert and Arthur thought only of wealth and power, Adam just wanted to serve his country honorably and keep any men in his charge from dying needlessly. It made him a good cavalry officer. It made him a bad Chandler.

"Be in the front row tomorrow," Fox had whispered, his full lips wet and swollen from the kiss they'd shared.

Adam could be nowhere else this morning.

The city bell rang six times, calling in the dawn. A hush of anticipation filled the air as Captain Fox was led from jail to the gallows. A mutter of curiosity ran through the crowd as they noted his old-fashioned clothing.

“Who is he, then?”

“What was the name?”

“Good riddance!”

“Why’s he dressed so strange?”

“Fox, wasn’t it? I remember hearing somethin’ about a Captain Fox.”

“Chandler’s doing a bang-up job of getting rid o’ the pirates.”

The crowd quieted as the pirate was led up the steps to the gallows by two guards. Adam was relieved that neither of the jailers was Sergeant Tremont. He liked the old campaigner and didn’t want to see the man hurt for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The captain was magnificent. He looked like he was out for a morning stroll, despite the shackles that shortened his steps and the heavy iron chains that pulled his hands tightly behind his back.

Adam felt his cheeks flush, remembering the feel of the pirate’s body against his, the south-wind taste of Fox’s mouth. He wondered what it would feel like to have those strong arms wrapped around him. Shaking his head, he forced the memory into a dark corner inside his mind. *I must be going mad; this is no time for fanciful imaginings.*

Fox stopped in front of the noose, turning to face the crowd. With no ceremony, the hangman placed the noose around the captain’s neck and stepped backward, turning to walk toward the lever that dropped the trapdoor from beneath the prisoner’s feet.

This is all wrong. Adam bit his lip to keep the words from escaping. The condemned had the right to hear the charges against him, the right to a hood, and the right to speak his

last words. And, under maritime law, the Goddess should be offered the chance to set the condemned man free. *More betrayals*, he thought, tasting copper from his bitten lip. What if he was wrong? What if the pirate was deluded or lying? Adam clenched his hands on his crutches as panic twisted inside him. *What if this amazing, vibrant man dies?*

On the gallows, Fox's teeth were bared in a gold-tinged smile. Beside him, Adam saw his brother nod sharply, and the hangman pulled the lever, dropping the pirate to certain death. Adam's cry of denial was lost in the crowd's triumphant "Ahhhh," as they watched an unfairly-condemned man hang.

Except it didn't happen that way. The trapdoor dropped, but the pirate remained standing on empty air. He stepped forward, the noose slipping through his body like water. The shackles binding wrists and ankles did likewise, dropping to the platform with a curiously muffled clank, and his tri-cornered hat appeared on his head. Captain Fox strode to the edge of the gallows platform, then two steps further, until he stood in midair only a few paces from Adam's father.

The crowd went silent, staring up at the pirate in awe.

"Good people," Fox said. "I am Captain Jaden Fox of the *Grey Lady*." He swept off his hat and bent into a perfect, extravagant bow. Coming back up, he replaced his hat with a flourish, then pulled his legs up so he sat cross-legged on the air. The movement pulled his trousers tight against his crotch, making Adam blush as he remembered his body's reaction to the pirate. He drank in the sight of the other man hale and healthy, dizzy with relief.

"Your mayor and your guild leaders have been quite naughty, sending men out to deliberately break oaths sworn before the Lady of the Sea."

"Hear now," Albert Chandler said, stepping forward.

Adam rolled his eyes. Trust Father to be so sure of his own importance that he would shout down a man sitting on thin air.

"Silence," Fox whispered.

The crowd went unnaturally still. Adam tried to open his mouth, but found he couldn't move. The gulls stood quietly, and even the incessant churning of the waves seemed hushed.

"I see you want a bit more of my bona fides. How's this?" The pirate snapped his fingers, and a great ship faded into view, her sails gray as ocean mist. The vessel loomed off the edge of the beach, floating easily in water far too shallow to hold it.

"Ordinarily, in a case like this, when so deep a betrayal has been committed, I'd simply call in the sea and remove the problem forever."

Adam found he could look around a bit, and saw shock on the faces of people who only moments ago had been enjoying a relaxing morning out. Part of him rejoiced to see the townsfolk brought low for making a spectacle of death, but mostly, he worried for their safety. Unlike his father and brother, they weren't bad folks, just short-sighted and more concerned with their own lives than what their leaders were doing.

"But it was brought to my attention that most of you good people didn't know what your leaders were doing in your name." Fox held his arms out to his sides, palms up, and made a "rise up" gesture with his fingers.

Movement from beyond the gallows drew Adam's eyes then widened them in horror. Dead men walked from the waves. Dozens of animated corpses left the sea to stand behind the gallows in row upon row of ghastly accusation. Many of them were missing limbs or had grotesque wounds gaping all over their bodies. One in particular, whose head was split neatly in two, had bile scalding the back of Adam's throat. He was almost grateful he couldn't move; otherwise, he wasn't sure his knees would hold him at this graphic proof of his father's crimes.

"What say you, gents? Should I be merciful?"

A low, eerie moan rose from the figures on the beach.

Adam learned that while he couldn't move his legs, the short hairs on the back of his neck were certainly free to move, and so stood up. Beside him, he could see tears rolling

down the cheeks of a young woman. He wondered if she was seeing someone she knew among the corpses.

"Hmm," Fox said, rubbing his chin. "Eloquent, but not particularly helpful." He stood up in one graceful motion. "So, this is what I came up with last night while I rested in your lovely jail." He jumped forward and down, landing on the ground in front of Albert Chandler. "What does an oath of loyalty mean to the crew of a ship?" He picked a piece of lint from the guild leader's shoulder. "It means the other members of the crew are one's brothers -- or sisters, in some cases. It means safety and shelter. Comfort." He grinned, though his eye -- now as dark a gray-green as the coldest waters of the sea -- held nothing of warmth. "I curse you, all of you who plotted to dishonor the Goddess by breaking vows sworn in Her name, with a curse of no comfort. May you all lead long lives."

The dead men groaned then, slipping back beneath the waves that had spawned them.

Fox turned to follow, pausing to meet Adam's eyes and give a slight tilt of his head in the direction of the his ship. "Come," he mouthed.

For a moment, Adam wanted to follow the pirate, but reality, in the form of a cramp in his thigh, broke Fox's spell. He closed his eyes against both the pain and the invitation. When he opened them, the pirate and the *Grey Lady* were gone.

Part Two

Adam drifted.

The sun, hours away from its deadly zenith, baked bones and muscles too long abused. Oddly, nothing hurt at present, though he knew that would change soon enough. Cautiously, he raised the arm he'd flung across his face to shield himself from the glare. His one good eye slitted open, peering upward into the fathomless blue of the sky. Even so early in the day, it was too bright, and both eyes leaked water in protest. Water he couldn't afford to lose. Though it did help him to open his other eye a bit, dissolving some of the blood that gummed it shut. Moving only enough to scan the sky as far as he could see, Adam searched for a hint of white in the vast blue. Nothing. He closed his eyes, tongue worrying the button he'd torn from his shirt upon waking. Mother of pearl was no substitute for water, but he was hoping to fool his mouth into believing it held moisture -- an old campaigner's trick. The strangest thing was that he felt a prickle at the back of his neck, as though he were being watched.

A shadow blocked out the sun, and the rowboat he lay in tilted and swayed as large waves rocked it. Opening his eyes again, he saw a carved wooden woman, face lifted to the spray and arms swept back to merge into a ship's prow.

Adam struggled in vain to sit up, licking the rime of dried salt from his lips in hopes of finding enough moisture to call out. He didn't want to die crushed beneath a ship's hull. He'd come to love the sea, but he wasn't yet ready to spend eternity in her embrace.

The rowboat tapped against the side of the ship like a tradesman seeking entrance at the back door of a mansion. He heard a series of clicks and lifted his head enough to see the end of a rope ladder fall between his feet. Adam squinted, trying to focus on the man climbing toward him, but all he could see was boots and dark trousers.

"Adam Chandler," a familiar voice said. "I thought I tasted you on the breeze."

At the sight of Captain Fox, Adam's mouth curved in a grin, splitting the cuts on his lips open.

"Ah, lad," the pirate murmured. "What's been done to you?"

Gentle hands wrapped around him, lifting Adam free of the boat that was supposed to be his coffin. The movement shifted his rebroken legs, ripping a scream from deep inside him, before merciful darkness claimed him.

* * * * *

Adam stared up at the ceiling, trying to make sense of the sight. His ceiling was much higher than this, and painted dark green. The one at the hospital had been higher still, and white. He had no experience with low ceilings made of dark wood. His legs ached, but it was manageable -- a low, secret sort of ache constantly tearing at him like a rat gnawing beneath the floor. Rubbing a hand across his jaw, he was surprised to find a fair amount of stubble.

"You're awake, then?" said a voice as warm and smooth as honeyed whiskey.

It all came back to him. His father, wild eyed and disheveled, hitting him over and over again, finally stomping on his legs when he'd fallen. The pain, the shock of waking in the rowboat, the relief at being found, then more pain.

"Yes," he mumbled, swallowing against the dryness in his mouth.

“This’ll help.” Strong, careful hands tilted his neck up, and a cup was placed at his lips. The water was barely cool, smelled of old wood, and was the most exquisite thing Adam had ever tasted. He held that first sip in his mouth, moistening the parched tissues. When he could stand it no longer, he swallowed, then took another mouthful, and another. He had to force himself not to grab the cup and gulp the water down. At his stomach’s first protest, Adam let his head fall back on the pillow, signaling that he was done for now.

“Good man,” Fox said, removing the cup. “We’ll let that settle a bit then you can have more.”

“Thanks,” Adam rasped, sagging into the soft embrace of the bunk. More aware now, he noted that the pillows and mattress below him were exceedingly comfortable, and smelled faintly of cinnamon and strong tea. The bunk where he lay was up against the curved side of the ship, and wide enough for him and Fox to lay side-by-side. He blushed furiously at the shocking thought, almost dizzied by the inappropriate sensuality of it. “Your cabin?” he asked, blushing even more. After his encounter with the pirate -- and the pirate’s lips -- Adam had set out to learn what two men might do together. By searching his family’s library and carefully asking questions of the few men he trusted completely, he’d begun to gain understanding. Picturing those things was both terrifying and erotic. And now, here he was, lying in the captain’s bed.

“Aye,” the pirate said, perching on the edge of the bunk. Winking, he added, “Not that I’m averse to seeing you in my bed, but what happened to put you in the rowboat in such perilously ill health?”

The blood drained away from Adam’s face at the question. “My father.”

“Excuse me?” Fox’s sea-green eye opened wide with startlement.

Adam made a pained sound, half laugh, half sob. “Father discerned that I was responsible for telling you about the townsfolk’s innocence. He was...displeased...that I had

not seen fit to warn him." The first blow had been a shock. Though he ruled the household with a firm hand, Father had never struck Mother, or any of his children.

"Your father beat you to a bloody pulp?" At Adam's nod, he continued, "He broke your legs?" His look of incredulity was replaced by narrow-eyed fury.

Nodding again, Adam said, "He's not been able to find satisfaction with his mistress since you cursed him." A wry smile curved his lips. "Everyone knows who the oathbreakers are: the men who are skinny, itchy, and wild-eyed as they wait for the next thing to go wrong." His smile faded. "Father has let his quest for power take over his entire being. He was always strict, but the last two years have changed him." He was glad his mother hadn't lived to see it.

Anger tightened the pirate's voice into a low growl. "I was too gentle with my curse."

"No," Adam said. "I cannot imagine a more vicious -- and fitting -- curse. It only harms the men who committed the betrayal, not their families or anyone else. Truly, it was a masterful piece of justice."

A slow smile lit Fox's face. "I thought so." His gaze traveled down to Adam's blanket-covered legs, and his expression softened into one of regret. "I am sorry that you were hurt."

"I would not change my actions, nor yours. My father is the one who's wrong in this."

"Aye," Fox said. He rubbed a hand across his bearded chin. "And now you need to make a choice. I'll take you back to Ralston if you wish it, or anywhere else you'd like to go. Or" -- He straightened his shoulders. -- "I want to offer you a berth aboard the *Lady*. We can use someone like you."

Hope warred with shame in Adam's breast. He wanted, he desperately wanted to stay aboard the ship and travel to the places he'd read about. By the same token, he feared that Fox's offer was made out of pity. Oh, the pirate said he desired Adam, and perhaps it was true, but no cripple could be useful aboard a ship -- even a ghost ship. Come to that, how could Adam stay on the ghost ship? He didn't believe he was dead. Surely, one didn't still

hurt when one died. Unless it was his punishment for not stopping his father and Arthur -- or for his unnatural thoughts about the pirate captain. "I..." He trailed off as despair choked him. He had no option other than returning to Ralston. At least there he had friends. He would find a welcome of sorts, even if it wasn't from his family. "Why would you want me?"

Captain Fox leaned back, a faraway look on his face. "We've sailed the seas of this world and the next for more than two hundred years. In that time, we've found treasure uncountable. Gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, and something else." His sea green eye focused on Adam. "Can you guess what it might be? What kings and emperors and other sovereigns hoarded with their treasure?"

Adam shook his head.

"Books."

Adam felt his mouth gape like a hooked fish. "What?"

"Books, scrolls, clay tablets. In any number of living and dead languages. The written word is as powerful and precious as any heap of gold." A rueful expression dominated Fox's face. "And the greatest irony is that I can't read or write. Nor can most aboard, save to make their mark." He leaned forward. "That's why I want you aboard. I want you to teach me, and any other who wants to learn, how to read and write." He looked down at Adam's legs. "I don't need another deckhand; I need a scholar and a teacher. Will you stay on the *Lady*, Adam? Will you teach us?"

Adam stared up at the pirate, unable to believe his ears. Stay on the *Grey Lady*, teach the pirates to read -- and get to read books that kings believed as valuable as gold. And he'd get to travel, to feel the wind in his hair as the ship sailed to places he'd only dreamed of visiting. It was a wish come true. It was all he'd ever wanted. Did he dare reach for it? A sudden thought struck him. "Am I dead?"

"No," the pirate said. He picked up the cup of water and helped Adam raise up enough to drink.

Taking another few precious mouthfuls, Adam savored the cool water, then asked, "How can I be part of a ghost crew?"

Looking sheepish, Fox said, "That's the next bit I was getting to. You see, the stories got some of it wrong." He leaned back, squirming a bit to make himself comfortable. "You said you'd read the lore?"

"Yes." Adam had devoured tales of Sarivi, the pirate king, who'd nearly succeeded in uniting the pirates under one banner. Sarivi, who'd captured and killed any who refused to join him in his quest to become the most powerful force on the world's oceans. Sarivi, who'd dared to break Marita's laws. Adam had shaken his head at the pirate king's folly. The seas were free; they belonged only to the Goddess. She would not tolerate any attempts to control Her waters. Navies were allowed because they were defenders of the land. But pirates had no land, called only their ships home.

Jaden Fox and the crew of the *Grey Lady* were among the last of the free pirates who had not sworn to follow Sarivi. They were betrayed in the pirate town of Telmarston and captured. Fox had refused to acknowledge Sarivi as king, and his crew had followed their captain. Furious, Sarivi had made an example of them, cutting the mast of the *Grey Lady*, then towing her far out to sea and setting her afire. All those on board had perished with the ship. Sarivi must have been dreadfully surprised when Captain Fox had appeared at the planning session in Telmarston the next day and called in the sea to destroy the town.

"I'm a ghost, and so is the *Grey Lady*. We couldn't work for the sea-wench if we weren't. But the crew, they're a different matter. When the Goddess offered me a place as Her enforcer, I accepted, but I asked that the crew go free, that She let them live again." He shook his head. "They refused to leave, the bloody stubborn fools. Marita was impressed, and intrigued by their loyalty, so She granted my boon, as well as that of the crew." He took a deep breath and continued. "Anyone who swears the oath of loyalty to me becomes a ghost, able to travel between the worlds, and unhurt by mortal weapons and diseases. If I release them from the oath, they live again, but must leave the ship. The crew I have now is less

than half of my original crew. The others went ashore to live out normal lives, and a few new crew members have replaced them, more than we need, really.” He must have seen Adam’s confusion, and clarified, “Ordinarily, on a ship this size, we’d have a hundred men and women. But the *Lady* is anything but ordinary; she doesn’t need near the amount of care that a normal ship requires. Not including yourself, there are fifty-three people on board.”

Adam stared up at the ceiling, digesting that. Go back to Ralston and whatever future he could salvage, try to make his way elsewhere, where he had no friends or money, or stay aboard the ship as a ghost, so he could teach other ghosts to read. Laughter, the first genuine laughter he’d known since his legs had been crushed three years ago, welled up inside him. This tangle of futures could only happen to him. The cup was placed before him, and this time he drank his fill, his mind working furiously. When the cup was nearly empty, he lay back and met the pirate’s gaze. “And this?” Adam motioned down at the bunk. “Would I be expected to share your bed as well?”

“Expected, no,” the pirate said, setting the cup aside again. He captured Adam’s hand and held it between both of his. “Hoped, wanted, desired, yes. I feel a connection with you, Adam Chandler, one I’d like to explore. But --” His voice hardened. “Never would I force my attentions on someone unwilling. Nor will I allow any of the crew to do so. Anyone who would commit such a crime would find themselves suddenly fully alive in the middle of the sea, without even the false hope of a rowboat.”

“Oh.” Adam stared up at the pirate, awed by the fury in the man’s expression. At the same time, he became aware that his hand felt quite good surrounded by the pirate’s hands. “I --” He felt the blush suffuse his face again, and cursed his fair coloring. “I know little of what two men might do together. It was only after kissing you that I learned such a thing was even possible.”

A gold-sparked grin flashed across Fox’s face. “Then I propose a trade. You teach me to read, and I’ll teach you the ways of passion.”

“I agree.” Adam looked down at their hands, turning his so his fingers were linked with the pirate’s. “I want to teach.” His cheeks felt like they would burst into flame if they flushed anymore. “And be taught.”

Part Three

“Adam Chandler, do you swear loyalty to the *Grey Lady*? Do you swear to treat all those aboard as your brethren, be they man, woman, or child? Do you swear to obey the laws Marita, Goddess of the Sea, created? Do you swear to accept Jaden Fox as your captain, and do what he requires in commanding the ship?”

“I do so swear, asking the sea to witness my words and bind me to them ’til she or Captain Fox releases me from my oath.”

“Welcome aboard, then, Adam,” Fox said, the twinkle in his eye in contrast with his solemn expression.

“Thank y -- ack,” Adam’s words were cut off as a spray of salt water splashed his face, drenching him and the litter he lay on. It felt strange to swear an oath of loyalty while laying flat on his back.

“Ah, She likes you,” Fox said, chuckling.

The other pirates, both male and female, and several Adam wasn’t certain about, cheered.

“Welcome, Adam.”

“Welcome.”

“Teacher, welcome.”

“Glad you’re aboard.”

Adam waited until the cacophony of greetings died down. “Thank you all,” he said, keeping a wary eye out for more spray. “I am honored to be part of the crew of the *Grey Lady*, and will do my utmost to make you all proud.” He leaned up on one elbow and ran his eyes across the gathered crowd. They were a motley bunch, and they all studied him with eagerness. “I’ll set up a schedule of classes so everyone who wants to will have the opportunity to learn to read and write.”

At the even louder cheer, he shifted on his pallet, wincing at the expected throbbing in his broken legs. Only to find there was no pain. Reaching down with one shaking hand, he flipped the blanket away from his legs. Instead of the twisted, pitiful limbs he was used to seeing, he saw whole, straight legs. He bent his left knee, bracing himself for agony. The leg moved easily, as strong and comfortably as it had before the horse had fallen on him. Afraid it was all a mistake, he moved the other leg, again with no pain. Stunned, he looked up at Fox.

“I may have left out one of the benefits of joining my crew,” Fox said, a playful smile tugging at his lips. He offered his hand to Adam.

Overwhelmed, Adam took it and let the captain pull him to his feet. His limbs moved easily, as if they’d never been broken. He stood, swaying, staring into the pirate’s face. For the first time in three years, he stood without the aid of crutches. “It doesn’t hurt,” he whispered.

“Aye,” Fox said.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Adam repeated, his voice louder. He flung himself at his captain, wrapping his arms around the pirate and hugging him fiercely.

Fox held him and laughed, not trying to fend him off.

Adam finally calmed down and met Fox's gaze. "Thank you," he said. The words weren't remotely adequate for the feelings welling up inside him.

Fox nodded, leaned forward, and pressed his lips against Adam's. This kiss had neither the tentativeness nor the explosive passion of the first. It was a comfortable meeting of lips and equals that soon deepened into a rich, tea-flavored sharing. Breathless, Adam pulled away. "Wow," he murmured.

Catcalls and clapping behind him made Adam flinch, a blush heating his cheeks. He was afraid to turn, afraid to see condemnation in the eyes of the crew. After all, most people believed it was unnatural for a man to kiss another man.

"It's all right," Fox said, gently, but firmly, turning Adam around. "As long as all parties involved are grown and agreeable, any form of love is acceptable."

Indeed, there was no censure in any of the crew's faces. Adam read a hint of jealousy in some, but mostly, there was good-natured humor.

"De captain will be gettin' private lessons, den?" a rapier-thin woman said, mischief twinkling in her brown eyes. Her smile gleamed white in her nut-brown, handsome face. If he were to guess, Adam would put her age at perhaps twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old.

"Kami, you're a dirty-minded woman, and that's a fact," Fox said. Stepping forward, he drew Adam with him. "Adam Chandler, meet Kami Salsdatter, my first mate."

Adam shook her hand, marveling at the callused strength he felt.

She gave his hand a brisk one-two pump, then let go. "Welcome to de *Grey Lady*, Adam," she said. "I look forward t' learnin' me letters." Her accent marked her as being from the far south and west, near the belly of the world.

"I've never taught anyone before," he admitted.

Chuckling, she said, "I'm guessin' dere other t'ing ya haven't done, yes? No worries, you be fine."

* * * * *

Adam sat cross-legged on the deck, marveling that he could sit on the hard wood without any discomfort. And the fact that he could bend his legs with no pain... If he thought too much about it, he might burst into tears, not the best way to impress his students.

The first small group sat across from him, all of them around a long rectangular plank of wood that was serving as his "chalkboard." The half-dozen pirates -- two women and four men, all held thin sticks of charcoal and had eager smiles on their faces.

Goddess, please don't let me mess this up, he thought and started. "We'll begin with the alphabet." He drew a capital letter "A" and a small "a" on the smaller board he'd cut for his use and turned it around, so his students weren't looking at it upside down. "This is an A. A is for anchor. It's the first letter of the alphabet, so in a sense, it anchors all the other letters."

"They come in two sizes?" Pudgy, white-haired Wilson asked, drawing shaky representations of each letter on the cloth in front of him.

"Yes," Adam said. "The big ones are used for first letters in names and at the beginnings of sentences." Seeing the puzzlement on his students' faces, he added, "It will make more sense when we start actually reading, I promise. For now, we'll just concentrate on learning the letters." Had he had trouble understanding the need for both capital and small letters when he was a child? Adam didn't remember. He did remember the wonder he felt when the strange little squiggles his teacher made him draw resolved themselves into words and a whole new world had opened up for him. Looking at his students, he saw that they knew there were worlds among words -- worlds they'd been denied, until now. *I will guide you*, he promised.

Above, a young child perched in the rigging, watching the lesson with interest. Adam had asked about him or her and been told that the child -- no one knew whether or not it

was a boy or girl -- had been with the ship since the beginning. Known only as Kid, he -- for ease of speaking -- didn't talk or interact with the crew much, spending all his time crawling about the *Lady*. Fine brown, shoulder-length hair blew in the breeze as he watched the crew with a dark, solemn gaze that seemed to miss nothing. His unbleached cotton shirt and blue trousers were worn, but neat. One hand clutched a small, carved wooden boat; the other hand and his bare toes were hooked into the ropes that rigged the sails. Adam had seen the child climb around the ship, nimble as a monkey. According to Wilson, Kid could be seen whispering sometimes, as if he spoke to the *Grey Lady*.

Adam peeked up at Kid and shifted so the child would have a clear view of the letters.

Seeing that each pirate had copied both A's, Adam turned his board around, wiped the charcoal from it with a rag, and drew both B's. "B is for boat."

* * * * *

The sun dropped the last little bit below the horizon, painting the sky in broad strokes of purple and orange. For a moment, Adam saw the shadow of a bat against the fading light. Cold fingers of fear walked up his spine, surprising a shudder out of him. *How odd*. He'd always liked bats; they were useful little creatures that kept the mosquitoes from taking over in Ralston. He blinked, and it was gone. Shaking his head, he dismissed it as a speck of something in his eye. There were no bats this far out to sea; there was nowhere for them to roost during the day.

Staring out over the water, he found himself wanting to learn everything he could about the sea and the ship he sailed on. He'd been surprised to find out that neither food nor drink was necessary for the pirates, and even more startled to realize how much time he was used to spending preparing for and eating meals. His mind boggled at the amount of free time he had before him, now that he was no longer a slave to his body's mortality.

The lack of provisions also meant that the cargo hold could be used for other things. The ship's carpenter had built a rabbit-warren of small rooms there, enough so that each

person could have a bit of privacy if they desired. In addition, a cramped common room had been placed just inside the entrance to the hold and supplied with a table and several chairs. Adam had offered to hold his classes there, but the crew preferred to be on the deck while the weather was mild.

A muscular arm draped itself around his shoulders. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Glancing at his captain's face, Adam said, "Yes."

"There's a berth for you below with the rest of the crew, if you want it." A flash of teeth. "I'd like you to live in my cabin, but if you're not yet ready for that..." He trailed off, shrugging.

Was he ready for that? Adam leaned into Fox's embrace, feeling the warmth of the pirate's skin, the leashed strength of muscles beneath. He remembered seductive kisses and gentle hands and the twin truths of respect and desire in Fox's eyes. *Am I ready to learn more, feel more?* "I would like to stay with you."

The arm tightened briefly across his shoulders. "I'm glad."

* * * * *

Adam stood just inside the cabin door, looking around at Fox's room. Although he'd spent the better part of a day in the cabin, he'd not taken much opportunity to look around, being more concerned with his future and the pain of his present.

Now, he was charmed by what he saw. The room was small and low-ceilinged, curved on the outside where it followed the ship's hull. The furnishings were all well made and well worn -- heavy oak furniture stained the color of warm honey, and brass lamps that gleamed in the firelight. The small living space was tidy and accented with bold colors. The bunk had a warm cotton spread of brilliant indigo, with pillows in purple, red, yellow, and green strewn across it. Brightly painted masks, feathers, and pictures hung here and there on the walls, and a low, generously cushioned bench occupied space opposite the bunk. The silk

cloth covering the cushions was painted in glorious shades of gray, blue, and green -- as if capturing the sea in all her moods.

“You can still take one of the other rooms,” Fox said.

Realizing that Fox had interpreted his hesitation in the doorway as reluctance, Adam stepped forward and turned to face the other man. “No. I just didn’t have much time to look before.” He smiled. “I like it. You have eclectic taste.”

“Ah.” The pirate made a gesture encompassing the room. “Look your fill. There’s nothing here I’ll not share with you.”

“I wouldn’t presume,” Adam said. Curiosity was one thing, but good manners were more important. Besides, he’d read too many stories where the indulgence of curiosity caused one to lose everything, and that he was not prepared to do.

Fox shrugged. “I know. But even if you were the nosiest, greediest man in the world, there’s nothing here I’d begrudge you.” He rubbed his bearded chin. “In my many years, there’s been little of the material world that I’ve found worth fighting for.” He nodded toward the side of the ship. “My *Lady*, but even she’s far more than wood and sails.”

“And treasure?”

“Merely a way to keep score, sweet.” Fox strode past him and sat on the bench.

Bravely, Adam walked across the cabin and sat down beside the captain. It was a bit of a tight fit, but he had no objections to pressing the side of his thigh against the other man’s. Adam was relieved when Fox wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close. The slow fires of arousal, banked for several hours, sparked back into life. His cock began to stiffen as he imagined kissing and touching the pirate. Yet, he was frightened. What little he’d been able to glean about man-love from gossip and rumors about certain townfolk hadn’t sounded erotic, merely strange and uncomfortable. He found it hard to believe that Fox was being so patient with him. Most of the powerful men Adam knew wouldn’t tolerate

anything less than instant gratification of their every whim. "I'm sorry to be such a ninny about this." The words burst out before he could stop them.

"You're here beside me, sweet Adam, and that takes more courage than most men will ever have."

Adam closed his eyes and rested his head against Fox's shoulder, surprised not to feel a blush warming his cheeks. Feeling bold, he turned his head and nuzzled the tanned skin of the pirate's neck. Fox smelled of sea breezes and man. Experimentally, Adam swiped his tongue over the soft skin. Cinnamon and salt. *What an odd combination.* His tongue darted out for another taste, drawing a low groan from Fox's throat.

"What you do to me," Fox murmured, gentle hands catching Adam's face and holding him still while the pirate brushed butterfly kisses across Adam's lips.

This time, Adam needed no encouragement to deepen the kiss. Fox's tongue rubbed lazily against his. The flavors of salt, cinnamon, and strong tea exploded into Adam's mouth. Fox tasted of cool seaside mornings -- the kind where the world was so filled with joy and possibility that it was ridiculous not to be happy. Adam didn't try to fight the bliss filling him. He sank into the kiss, not minding that his neck was tilted at an awkward angle.

Fox swung his leg over Adam's, straddling him. An unmanly squeak left Adam's throat as his lap was suddenly full of pirate.

Laughing, Fox pulled back. "All right?" he asked, his eye gleaming with mischief and desire. He braced both hands on Adam's shoulders, squirming to get comfortable, and pressing on Adam's arousal.

"Very," Adam said, somehow finding breath enough to speak. He felt as if he was standing at the precipice of the world, and all he had to do was spread his arms to fly. The encounters he'd had with paid courtesans held not a fraction of the sheer eroticism of kissing Jaden Fox.

The kisses resumed, deeper, hotter, and even more powerful with the welcome pressure of the pirate's weight on Adam's legs. Adam found himself moaning into the other man's mouth as Fox's ass rubbed across his rigid cock.

The pirate's hands skimmed from Adam's shoulders to stroke across his chest. Adam jumped when clever fingers found and teased his nipples through his shirt; he'd never known the small nubs of flesh could be so sensitive. Arching up against the touch, Adam let his hands slide around the captain's body to grip the other man's buttocks and pull him closer.

Fox's hands gave a complicated twist-yank, and Adam's shirt slid from his body. Adam broke the kiss long enough to see his shirt disappear as it was tossed away over Fox's shoulder. Callused hands traced hot circles across Adam's bare chest, pausing to tug at his sensitized nipples.

"Off," Adam said, pulling at the pirate's shirt, desperate for skin-to-skin contact.

Fox shrugged, and his shirt slithered off him and down to the floor without being unbuttoned.

Adam knew he should be reacting to that, but the distraction of silky, tanned pirate skin against his proved too strong.

Fox slid off Adam's lap, kneeling between Adam's spread thighs. He fumbled with the buttons on Adam's trousers, freeing his cock from confinement.

"Need to taste you," the captain rasped, leaning forward to lick the pre-come from Adam's cock head.

"Goddess bless," Adam shouted at the unexpected touch. His hips jerked, bucking upward as Fox's mouth claimed him.

Hot, wet suction. Thought left Adam's mind as sensation pulled him under. He slouched forward on the bench, his back arching as he braced himself against the pleasure swamping him. Fox's tongue swirled around Adam's shaft, pressing firmly against the sweet

spot just beneath the head. Adam panted, mentally naming his cavalry gear in hopes of calming himself before he shot his load like a green boy. He looked down in time to see the pirate's mouth stretch around his shaft, and it was all he could do not to fuck the other man's mouth with no heed to Fox's comfort. As if sensing his thoughts, Fox braced both forearms on Adam's thighs, preventing Adam from thrusting. It was a good thing, too, because his next action was to swallow Adam's cock down to the root.

"Ahhh, Goddess," Adam cried, tangling his fingers in Fox's hair, moaning as the pirate's throat worked around his rigid shaft. Adam felt fire pool at the base of his spine and stammered out an incoherent warning. "Captain, I'm -- I'm..." His orgasm was ripped from his shaking body. He shouted nonsense as his seed spurted into the pirate's welcoming, greedy mouth.

Adam felt as though his bones had turned to water, and he was helpless to do anything save smile foolishly as Fox sat back and grinned at him. Sweat trickled down the side of his face, and he panted as though he'd just run several miles. His heart was pounding so madly, he almost feared it would leap from his chest.

"Sweet Adam, you look do beautiful half naked, debauched, and sated, your delicious cock half-hard and wet from my mouth."

At the husky words, a tremor surged through Adam, a resurgence of desire stirring his cock. He looked down, stunned at his body's swift recovery.

"Well, now," the captain said, trailing a finger across Adam's belly. "That's promising."

The throaty seduction in Fox's tone stiffened Adam further. "Bed?" he gasped out.

"Aye." The pirate unceremoniously scooped Adam up, tossing the startled man over his shoulder. By the time they tumbled side-by-side onto the bunk, Adam was naked, as was his captain.

The feeling of the pirate's hard shaft against his hip startled Adam into stillness. The captain's cock stood up proudly from a nest of coppery curls. Curious, he reached down,

stroking his fingers across the velvety tip of Fox's penis, smearing pre-come across the smooth flesh.

Fox's hips gave a shallow thrust, and he made a soft sound of encouragement.

Adam leaned up on one elbow, concentrating on what he was doing. It was strange to touch another man so intimately -- but nice. He ran his fingertips down the shaft, drawing courage from Fox's low moan and rocking hips. Emboldened, he carefully closed his hand around the hot shaft, pumping up and down as he did when pleasuring himself.

"Ah, sweet," Fox said, groaning. "That's the way of it."

Adam concentrated on the sight of his hand moving up and down the captain's hard cock. It felt so familiar, and, at the same time, so strange to move his hand over the rigid flesh. Remembering what he liked when he pleased himself, he twisted his hand over the smooth skin, pausing occasionally to rub his thumb across the leaking head. As he watched more clear fluid ooze from the pirate's cock, interest overcame hesitation. Adam sat up enough to free his other hand, swiped a finger through Fox's essence, and brought it to his mouth for a quick taste. The pirate's come tasted of brine and tea, with a hint of exotic spice. Not a pleasant flavor, exactly, but unique and interesting.

Fox's breath hitched. Adam looked up at him, his own breath catching at the expression on Fox's face. The pirate's eye was focused hungrily on Adam's lips. Deliberately, Adam trailed his finger over Fox's cock again and licked it clean with quick, darting strokes of his tongue, his gaze never leaving his captain's face.

Fox cried out, his body spasming. Fox's cock jerked in Adam's hand, pulsing as his seed burst free. A surge of renewed arousal rushed through Adam at the almost pained expression of rapture on Fox's face.

Panting, Fox wrapped his arms around Adam and pulled him close.

Adam rested his head on the pirate's sweat-damp shoulder, content to let his arousal fade until it was a low thrum in his blood. Staring up at the ceiling, he listened to Fox's

breathing calm. He'd touched another man intimately. Put his hand on another man's cock and brought him to orgasm, tasted his seed. The sense memory of tea and spice made his mouth water. Why wasn't he upset, or elated, or something other than content to lie here beside a centuries-dead myth? His world should be tilting on its axis, not swaying gently, rocked in the sea's arms.

"You're over-thinking things, aren't you?" Fox said.

Adam started; he'd thought the pirate asleep. "I...yes," he said, well aware of his own quirks. He felt Fox's muscles tense beneath his cheek.

"Regrets?"

"No," Adam said, pouring every bit of his happiness into his tone. "It's just -- I had intimate relations with a male ghost aboard a sailing legend. I keep waiting for panic to set in."

"Ah," Fox said. "If you can tie your thoughts into tangles this soon after loving, I've failed in teaching you the first lesson of pleasure." With a sinuous move that owed more to a cat than a man, Fox rolled on top of Adam.

"I am your eager student, Captain," Adam said, trailing his hands up the pirate's muscular back. Instead of satiny skin, his fingers found rough, raised lines. Puzzled, he traced the marks. Fox's entire back was covered with them. Adam's mind stuttered over the reason for such lines marring Fox's skin, and his fingers stilled. Surely, it couldn't be what he was imagining.

The pirate arched into the touch, "Old scars, sweet. They've brought me no pain in close to three hundred years."

Adam frowned, mentally doing the math. Fox looked to be in his early forties -- and had died more than two hundred and fifty years before. The lash marks -- and the scars beneath Adam's fingertips could be nothing else -- must have been administered when Fox was still a child. The idea of anyone hurting his captain made Adam go cold with fury.

“There’s that thinking again,” Fox said, then captured Adam’s mouth in a rough kiss.

Arousal, which had never retreated completely, burst through Adam’s body in a conflagration of need. He traced the marks on Fox’s back, as if in learning them he could erase the memory of pain from his captain.

Fox, apparently untroubled by those memories, sucked on Adam’s tongue, then sent his own to invade Adam’s mouth, plundering it as thoroughly as any pirate might a treasure hoard.

Overcome with desire, Adam thrust helplessly up against his captain’s ass, his cock slipping between Fox’s legs until it nudged against his balls.

Breaking the kiss, Fox sat back, his eye half-lidded and dark as the fathomless sea. He leaned forward, resting his left elbow next to Adam’s right ear, and reached down to open the small drawer in the beside table. After a minimum of rummaging, he made a soft exclamation of triumph and sat back.

“Lesson number two,” Fox said. He opened a small glass vial and dripped fragrant oil onto his fingers. “A bit of preparation makes all the difference.”

The scent of almonds teased Adam’s nostrils. Before he could inquire as to what Fox intended, the other man was reaching behind himself and giving voice to low, breathy moans.

Not quite daring to ask Fox what he was doing, Adam concentrated on stroking and petting Fox’s muscular chest. Remembering his own pleasure, he trailed his fingers over Fox’s small, caramel-colored nipples, grinning when they puckered at his touch.

“Quick learner,” Fox rasped, pressing forward into the touch for a moment before pulling away and dripping more oil onto his fingers, which again disappeared behind him.

“Good teacher,” Adam said, resuming his torment of the pirate’s nipples.

“Impatient teacher,” the captain said. “That’s good enough.” He ran his hand over Adam’s cock, coating it liberally with the fragrant oil.

Adam groaned at the touch, hips pushing upward in response.

"Now, sweet, I need you to listen to me," Fox said.

Going still, Adam nodded. "I will."

"Let me set the pace; do your best not to move until I give you the okay. It's been a long time since I've done this."

"What?" Adam asked, a tiny tendril of anxiety threading through him.

Fox just smiled and rose up, reaching between them and grasping Adam's cock, guiding it up and...in?

Adam froze. Surely Fox wasn't, wouldn't, *couldn't*...

Tight heat grasped him. Adam panted as his cock was slowly, greedily engulfed by the pirate's body. He'd heard whispers of this, and they had always been followed by sniggers of disgust. This amazing feeling of connection was the opposite of disgusting.

Fox was seated on Adam's belly now, Adam's erection fully inside him. He rose, then slowly lowered himself.

Adam's entire being focused on the shocking intimacy. It was so good, so pleasurable, he felt as if he might die from it.

Fox moved again, then again, sliding up and down Adam's cock in a rhythm as old as time.

Adam's brain began working again, and he discovered his hands were clamped on the pirate's thighs. Still half stunned, he slipped a shaking hand between their bodies, finding the place where they were joined, tracing his own flesh where it pushed inside Fox. "Captain, my captain," Adam whispered brokenly, a lifetime's worth of need in his voice as he held himself still.

"Aye, sweet Adam," Fox said. "It's okay now; take what you need."

Freed, Adam began to thrust up into the pirate, moaning as Fox's muscles rippled around him.

And then Fox leaned down and kissed him. The changed angle of Fox's body deepened their connection, threatening Adam's resolve. He shuddered, mentally reviewing the steps involved in grooming a horse, catching hold of his fragile control by the barest of margins.

Fox pulled away and began moving in counterpoint to Adam's thrusts. The pirate captain grasped his own cock, stroking it. It was the most erotic thing Adam had ever seen. Fox's muscles were sheened with sweat, his auburn hair sweat-soaked and curling wildly as he fucked himself on Adam's cock. Fox had never looked more powerful.

The glorious image pushed Adam over the edge, and he bucked, crying out as he spilled himself into the other man.

Fox groaned, grinding down onto Adam, his cock spurting gouts of semen onto Adam's belly.

The sight, feel, and sound of Fox coming apart pushed Adam's climax a notch higher. He felt as if he were being pulled inside out, all the old notions and weaknesses stripped away as he was remade anew in the wake of pleasure.

Finally, *finally*, breath and sense came back. Adam gradually became aware that he was lying sated beneath the captain's slack body, and cool air was blowing over his sweat-drenched skin, chilling him. Adam rubbed an affectionate hand over Fox's back, hoping to wake the pirate.

"Mmm," Fox murmured, settling further down onto Adam, his face buried in Adam's hair.

Fox's hair, meanwhile, trailed over Adam's face, tickling his nose. And the pirate was remarkably heavy for a ghost.

"Captain," Adam said, shaking Fox's shoulder.

Fox drew back, peering down at Adam, amusement plain in his expression. "Adam, sweet, don't you think you should call me Jaden?"

The absurdity of continuing such formality under such intimate circumstances drew a snort from Adam's throat. "I didn't want to presume," he said, opening his eyes wide and plastering a guileless expression on his face.

"I think we're well enough acquainted now, don't you?"

"If you're sure?" Adam said, lips twitching as his smile tried to escape.

"Your cock is in my ass. I'd say that demands first name status," Fox said dryly.

A strangled, squeaky sound left Adam at Fox's -- Jaden's -- words.

Fox laughed, warm and rich as honeyed brandy. He slipped to the side, breaking their intimate connection, and used the edge of the sheet to clean them both off. Lying on his back, he pulled Adam close. Adam went willingly, lying on his side and resting his head on Jaden's shoulder.

Between one moment and the next, Adam slept.

Part Four

Adam started awake to the sound of loud knocking. Fox was out of the bed, a cutlass in his hand, before Adam could blink. Adam stared at the shiny, pale stripes marring the tanned skin of Jaden's back. Wrenching his eyes away from the proof of the pirate's difficult life, his gaze landed on Jaden's ass -- round and smooth as a ripe peach.

"Captain," Kami's voice called. "Wake up, man."

Fox set his cutlass aside long enough to pull on a pair of pants, then retrieved it and strode to the door. "This better be important," he growled, throwing it open.

Kami stepped inside, eyes searching the room. "Is Tif here?"

"What?" the captain said, rocking back on his heels as Kami passed him. "Why would Tif be here?"

"I wen' to de bow to take over de watch, an' he be missin'. I check de whole ship an' he nowhere."

"Damn," Fox said. He set the cutlass down and placed both hands on the ship's side, closing his eyes.

Adam watched, fascinated and more than a little alarmed, as Jaden's hands sank wrist-deep into the ship's hull. The pirate's face became slack and dreamy, making the hairs on the back of Adam's neck stand at attention.

Desperate for something to pull his attention away from the strange drama being enacted a few paces away, Adam looked at the pile of clothes on the floor. Sensing that he would be needed on deck soon, he reached down and picked up his pants. Kami was watching Jaden with rapt attention, so he slipped out of bed, turned his back, and quickly pulled on his pants and shirt. He was just stomping into his boots when Fox stepped backward.

Shaking his hands as though trying to bring circulation back to them, Jaden said, "He's not aboard the ship."

Kami closed her eyes, sorrow claiming her face. She held her hand up, swaying it back and forth in imitation of the waves. "He wit' de Goddess now, den."

"Aye," Fox said. His shoulders slumped, and he leaned against the ship, stroking his hands over the polished wood.

Holding herself rigid, her arms crossed tightly over her breast, she said, "I tell de ot'ers," then turned on her heel and walked away.

"Jaden?" Adam said, not certain he should interrupt the captain's grief, but unable to pretend the other man wasn't upset.

Moving with none of the barely-leashed energy that was his norm, Jaden walked over and sat down on the end of the bunk. In that moment, he looked defeated. Adam knew that expression; he'd felt it on his own face each time he'd lost one of the men under his command.

Adam sat on the other end, facing Jaden. Though concern burned within him, he hesitated to speak. He knew his lover was hurting, but wasn't sure Jaden was ready to accept comfort. All Adam could do was be there and follow his captain's lead.

“There are rare creatures that can kill a ghost,” Jaden said. “Over the years, I’ve lost three men to them, four now.” He looked at Adam. “No matter how invulnerable, how powerful someone is, there’s always something bigger, something stronger.” Shaking his head, he added, “We’ve only seen one of the beasties -- a kraken -- though I don’t doubt there are more, and even more dangerous.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam said. He wasn’t sure which of the many crewmen Tif was, but seeing Jaden’s obvious distress brought a catch to his throat.

A sweet, sad smile creased Fox’s lips. “Me, too.”

* * * * *

His students were subdued, feeling the loss of one of their own keenly. Adam had to struggle not to let the melancholy mood influence his teaching -- not wanting to depress everyone further. He was able to keep his examples, if not lighthearted, then at least neutral, until they reached “T.”

“T for Tif,” Molly said. She looked up at Adam, tears glittering in her hazel eyes. “How would I write Tif?”

Adam wrote the man’s name, guessing as best he could at the spelling. “Big T, small i, small f.” He turned his square of sailcloth around, pointing to each letter in turn.

“Use the big letter for the first piece of the name, then small letters,” Wilson said, copying the name down.

“Yes,” Adam said, a surge of pride welling up inside him. It was only the second day, and already Wilson had grasped one of the most integral rules of reading.

“Do you think it was one ‘o them krakens what got him?” Copper, a thin young man with carrot colored hair and freckles the size of pennies, asked.

“It’d have to be, to pluck him off the *Lady* like that without none of us the wiser,” Molly said.

Something bounced off Adam's shoulder and fell on the sailcloth. He glanced at the small white barnacle shell, then up into the rigging. Kid looked down at the assemblage, an impatient expression scrunching his face.

Guessing at the cause, Adam scooted to the side, leaving an unobstructed view of the letters that comprised Tif's name.

A brilliant smile lit Kid's face for a split second, then disappeared into the child's usual scowl.

Adam felt his own grin, and vowed to bring more smiles to Kid's face. He looked at the rest of his students and saw varying degrees of amusement and understanding on their faces.

A dark-haired, swarthy man, whose name Adam couldn't remember, said, "Aye, he has that effect on all of us."

"How did he come aboard?" Adam asked, not sure if he was overstepping the bounds of acceptable curiosity.

"He belonged to Sarivi," the man -- Jonn, that was his name -- said. "He managed to escape Sarivi's cabin and stow away on the *Lady* when the bastard towed us out and set us afire. Kid died with us when she burned. He stayed aboard after the Goddess offered Her bargain."

Dread clawed at Adam's belly as he thought of Kid in the clutches of the vicious pirate king, and in his cabin. "He belonged to Sarivi?"

"Aye," the pirate said softly. "And whatever you're imagining, it ain't near bad enough."

"Goddess bless," Adam said, bile rising in his throat.

"She did," Molly said. "She guided him to us. He's learned to trust us, at least a little."

Adam stared at her. "But I've never seen him on deck."

"You won't," she said. "He'll meet our eyes now, and accept treats and toys, though he only comes close enough to snatch them and take them away."

Wilson nodded. “The first hundred years, we barely saw him. He’d hide in the crow’s nest all day and only come out at night. If anyone tried to climb anywhere near the nest, he’d scream like a thousand banshees. The *Lady* looks after him; sometimes it seems he’s even closer to her than the captain.” He shrugged. “Since Kid’s always alert for danger, we leave the nest to him. He takes his duty seriously, and only sleeps when someone else is on watch.”

“Twas Kid what saw the kraken what took Lendy forty years ago,” Jonn said.

The other pirates nodded. Jonn added, “Aye, and that kept the foul beastie from gettin’ any more of us.”

A flurry of small shells rained down on them like calcified hailstones.

Adam looked up to find Kid pointing at the sailcloth “blackboard” with an imperious finger.

Snorting, Wilson said, “All right, lad, don’t get yer knickers in a twist.”

Obediently, Adam turned his square around and erased Tif’s name, then drew both U’s. “This is U. U is for useful. Learning to write is a useful skill.”

* * * * *

Dolphins leaped in the wake of the ship’s bow, easily pacing the *Grey Lady*. Adam alternated between watching them and watching Jaden pilot the ship, strong hands steady at the wheel. Those same hands had explored Adam’s skin, stroking him as confidently as they now caressed the wheel. Adam’s mouth went dry as memory brought the sensation of exquisitely rough calluses on his most tender flesh. Licking his lips, he tasted salt. Arousal surged through him with the stealthy force of a riptide. Clutching the rail as his knees threatened to buckle, he stared at Jaden, remembering the feel of warm skin and the intoxicating taste of cinnamon tea and salt.

As if feeling Adam's gaze upon him, Jaden looked up. Between them, the air seemed to shimmer with the heat from their wordless exchange.

Kami broke the spell, stopping in front of Adam and blocking his view of his lover. "Dis ship burn once; she don' need to experience dat again."

Adam flushed so hard he felt dizzy.

"De captain lucky man," she said, eyes traveling over Adam's body. "Dat ass o' yours a t'ing of beauty."

Adam's eyes widened. He felt all the blood drain from his cheeks, then flood back in a tsunami of mortification. "You saw?" he squeaked.

She closed her eyes and shivered, then leered wickedly at him. "Oh, ya, I saw. Be seein' dat sight in all me best dreams now."

"I -- I," he sputtered, unable to think or speak rationally.

Her predatory grin softened. "Don' fret. You good for de captain. He smilin' more in de last few days den in de last ten years. And you teachin' us to read." She shook her head, wonder lighting her tea colored eyes. "I can write me name. Me, Kami Salsdatter write me name like I be a real lady, not de chile of a whore."

Embarrassment forgotten, Adam said, "I'm glad. I'll teach you as much as you want to learn, as much as I know and can learn in the future."

"You good man," she said, clapping him on the shoulder. "When de readin' get too hard, I jus' look at dat ass for a minute, and I be ready to work again."

"Glad to be of service," Adam said, grinning through his blush. "Just let me know when you need a peek, and I'll be happy to oblige."

She clapped him on the shoulder. "Don' t'ink I won'." Glancing up at the sun, she said, "And now's de time for learnin'."

Adam walked with her as they headed toward the stern of the ship, where a small area had been set aside for his lessons. As they passed the captain, Jaden fell in beside them, and Wilson took over the wheel.

Adam enjoyed this class the most of all the small groups he was teaching, and not just because it included Jaden. All of the ship's officers took part, including the cook, a wizened little man who could apparently create gourmet meals from the barest of ingredients. Not that Adam had tasted anything Cook had prepared. Because the ghostly crew didn't need to eat, they didn't carry provisions on board. Meals were only prepared while visiting shore, or just after, when enough supplies for a sumptuous meal were brought onto the ship. Adam was looking forward to it; he missed tasting food. It was nice, though, not to be regularly interrupted by the need to refuel his body.

Finding everyone there and the sailcloth unrolled, he waited only until Kami and Jaden found places before beginning.

"We'll go through the alphabet again, then practice writing our names." He wrote both A's on the cloth. "This is an A. A is for animal."

Kami gave him a speculative look. "A for ass, yes?"

"Correct," he said, feeling his face go red. Before anyone else could say anything -- especially Jaden, who looked intrigued -- he continued. "Here's B. B is for barnacle."

The first mate winked at him, then obediently copied the letters down.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Adam concentrated on the lesson. He liked working with the officers because they were more comfortable around him than the rest of the crew was, but that also meant they were free to tease him unmercifully.

"And now C. C is for captain."

* * * * *

"A is for ass," Jaden said, kneading one of Adam's nether cheeks. "How would I write 'ass?'"

Preventing more blushes by willpower alone, Adam traced the letters on Jaden's belly. "A-s-s," he said, as he drew each one.

"A," the captain said, writing the letter on Adam's hip with his index finger. "Then the squiggly ones, s-s." He completed the word. "A is for Adam, who has a lovely ass."

Adam snorted at the joke and brushed a quick kiss on Jaden's lips. "Correct, you get a kiss."

"I like these lessons." Jaden's eye narrowed as he concentrated. "Let's see. B." He wrote the letter. "B is for..." He hesitated, then said, "Balls," cupping Adam's testicles in his hand and rolling them gently.

"Correct," Adam said with a shaky breath. "And C?"

Jaden's brows drew together as his fingers slid upward. "That's one of the tricksie ones. Cock?"

"Yes," Adam hissed the word as the pirate began stroking his erection.

"Next would be D," Jaden mused, absently rubbing his thumb across the head of Adam's cock. "D is for..." He paused, hand stilling.

"Don't stop," Adam said, arching up into the contact.

"That'll work," Jaden said, laughing. He obligingly resumed his stroking. "E. Hmm, you'll have to help me with this one." He twisted his hand as he moved it up and down, his grip strong enough to tantalize, but not as tight as Adam wanted it.

"Erection," Adam gasped out.

"E." Jaden drew the letter on the shaft of Adam's cock. "I like E." His hand slipped from Adam's penis to caress his balls. "F. Fondle. Is that right?"

Adam nodded, maintaining his interest in the game, and not just because he was reaping the rewards. "And now?"

“G,” Jaden said. “Another tricksie one.” Frowning, he said, “Not Jaden, because that’s a J. How about...good?”

“Very, very good.”

Still petting Adam’s balls, Jaden shifted his position so he was on his back, saying, “On top of me, sweet.”

Adam did as his captain commanded, covering the other man, bringing their erections together in a duel of silky-skinned shafts.

“Mmm,” Jaden said. “Better than good; great.”

“Yes,” Adam said, kissing him.

Moving against each other lazily, they kissed, letting desire slowly build.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Adam bit back a curse at the interruption and moved to the side. Jaden leaped from the bed and stalked toward the door, cock still gloriously rampant, smooth muscles bunching and flexing beneath the skin of his back and legs.

“What?” Jaden yelled, opening it just enough that Kami could hear him without shouting.

“Molly,” Kami’s voice came through the door.

Adam shivered at the bleakness in the first mate’s tone. Quickly, he rolled out of bed and began pulling his clothes on, keeping watch over his lover as he did so.

The captain placed both hands on the ship, then sagged forward, resting his cheek against the dark wood. “Sound the alarm,” he called, his voice snapping with tension. “I want everyone on deck.”

Part Five

Lamps lit and hanging from the roof overhang of the captain's cabin chased away night's shadows.

"Lads and lasses, we've lost Tif and Molly," Jaden said, voice grim.

The crew looked shaken, but watched Jaden with intensity and trust. Adam was both touched and impressed by this evidence of the crew's unswerving belief in their captain.

"Has anyone seen anything out o' the ordinary?" When no one spoke, Jaden looked up at the rigging. "Kid?"

The child shook his head, lips pressed tightly together, his young face a study in sorrow and anger.

"So, here's how it will be." Jaden pinned each of the crewmembers with a gaze as sharp and hard as flint. "Watches fore and aft, all day and all night. Change of guards every two hours. You know who your watch partners are. Stay together when you're on deck, a minimum of two people together at all times. I don't want to see anyone out alone, or you'll be peeling taters for Cook the next time we go ashore." He paused and took a deep breath. "This creature has taken two of our own when they were alone and unaware. It won't find us easy prey again." Glancing at Adam, he said, "Adam, you'll have second morning watch, aft,

with Jonn. I'll take Molly's spot at the bow with Niles." He nodded toward the ship's carpenter, a tall, thin blond.

"Aye, Captain," Adam answered. He felt his spine grow ramrod straight at learning he would stand watch with the rest of the crew. Not wanting to sound like a green boy, he bit back the words, "I won't let you down, sir," before they could escape.

* * * * *

Just after midday, Adam and Jonn stood facing away from each other, Adam's right shoulder brushing against Jonn's left. It was an efficient position; this way each of them could easily see three-quarters of the area behind the ship, and their views overlapped by quite a lot. The floppy straw hat Kami had loaned Adam kept his eyes well shaded, though from the grins he kept getting from the crew, he knew he looked ridiculous. Squinting a bit against the glare, Adam scanned the sea and sky. Nothing but uninterrupted blue as far as he could see.

"Thanks," Jonn said, breaking the companionable silence.

"Excuse me?" Adam asked, resisting the temptation to look away from his post.

"For coming on board and teaching us to read and for making the captain happy."

"I -- you're welcome," Adam stuttered, unsure what to say. Finding composure, he added, "It's been my pleasure, all of it."

Jonn chuckled, low and wicked. "I'll bet."

"Quite," Adam said. He was surprised not to feel a blush staining his cheeks. Perhaps he was finally becoming inured to the ribbing and growing immune to embarrassment. It helped that none of the teasing had been mean-spirited. The officers and crew were all genuinely welcoming, if a trifle more ribald than he was used to. It reminded Adam of the camaraderie he'd shared with the men in his cavalry troop -- though there had been some

distance there, as he was one of only three officers. Still, his men had treated him as one of their own.

He'd missed that sense of belonging these past three years since his injury. He'd been isolated while in the hospital, but there had at least -- and unfortunately -- been men there he knew. Coming south with his family and a few loyal men had been a hundred times worse. He'd never had much in common with his father and brother, and forced proximity had only revealed the ever-growing gulf between them.

Arthur had changed from a strong-willed, if stiff-necked, young man into a fawning sycophant to their father. Father -- Father had changed as well. The higher he'd climbed in the Drover's Guild, the colder he'd become. Power made some people passionate; it had made Albert Chandler into an icy bully.

For the first time, Adam found himself wondering why his father had been willing to leave their home in Bremerton, the center of the Drover's power. Why would Albert choose to move so far away? Had something happened? Adam knew his father had been at odds with some of the other powerful men in the guild over the hiring of new mages. Had something gone wrong? Had Albert truly been willing to leave, or had he been forced out?

"Do you really like teaching?" Jonn asked.

Train of thought broken, Adam considered for a moment. "I do. It's amazing to watch all of you work so hard and learn so quickly. I was taught to read and write when I was younger than Kid, and I've always taken it for granted. Working with the crew has reminded me what a gift learning is. I admire all of you for working so hard at this."

They stood quietly for a while before Adam spoke again. "Forgive me if this question is out of bounds, but can you tell me why you all stayed with the *Lady* after the Goddess gave you back your lives?" Since the first time he'd read the legends, he'd been curious about this answer. Then again, when Jaden had asked him to stay on the ship, Adam hadn't hesitated for more than an instant. Perhaps it had something to do with having nowhere else to go.

Beside him, he felt Jonn tense.

Fearing he'd overstepped courtesy, Adam began, "I apologize --"

"No," Jonn said, interrupting him. "It's okay, it's just -- the Goddess brought us back to life, but it was Captain Fox what *gave* us back our lives."

"I don't understand."

"And that makes my heart glad," Jonn said, giving Adam a quick, searching look. "All of us were slaves at one time or another." His voice took on the cadence of a storyteller. "The captain led a mutiny on board the slaver *Seahawk* when it was captained by Gregor Linten. Linten was killed in the fighting, and Captain Fox took over. He sailed to the port of Telmarston and let anyone who didn't want to stay aboard go. About half the crew stayed. They liked the idea of turning pirate and targeting slavers. While in port, they hauled the ship into a warehouse, stripped it down to its bones, and cleaned and refurbished it. The captain himself carved the *Lady* on the bow. He had the sails made of gray canvas, so they'd blend in with the sea mist. When all was ready, he bought the most expensive bottle of champagne in Telmarston and renamed her *Grey Lady*."

"I thought it was bad luck to change the name of a ship," Adam said, trying to wrap his mind around the dreadful idea of Jaden as a slave. He felt Jonn shrug.

"So the stories go. But see, Captain Fox did far more than change her name. He freed her from Linten's incompetent piloting and remade her. Like he remade all of us." Jonn shifted a bit. "I was a rower on the slave ship *Crawfish* when the *Grey Lady* came to call." He gave Adam another quick glance. "It was terrifying. I was on that side of the ship, and could see out the oarlock. One moment the sea was covered with fog, the next the *Grey Lady* was there, cannons aimed right at me." With a rueful laugh, he said, "Believe me, that's a sight I won't ever forget. The mouths on the cannons looked big enough to swallow a shark. The crew boarded us, and the *Crawfish* surrendered without a single shot being fired. There were still some crew slots available on the *Lady*, and I accepted one of them. I swore my oath to

the captain and the Goddess Marita. Leave the *Grey Lady*?" He shook his head. "This is the best place I've ever had. I owe her my happiness, and the captain my freedom. You'll find the rest of the crew feels the same way."

Before Adam could speak -- assuming he could find words after listening to Jonn's tale -- the ship's bell rang three times, then two, then three again. Looking at his partner for guidance, Adam was surprised to see a broad grin on the other man's face.

"Captain Fox's found a crossing place."

Kami and Copper came up beside them. "You're relieved. Adam, de captain wan' you at de helm."

"Thanks, Kami." Adam offered his hand to Jonn. "Thank you for trusting me with your story."

Jonn gave his hand a brisk double pump. "You're one of us now."

Adam hustled to the helm, wanting to know what exactly a "crossing place" was.

He found Jaden standing at the wheel, spyglass raised to his...left eye? The patch that normally covered it was flipped up onto the pirate's forehead. When Jaden lowered the glass, Adam gasped. In the place where his left eye should have been was a large, faceted aquamarine. As Adam watched, foxfire played across the gemstone and down the spyglass. Adam felt his body go hot, then cold. This was magic: true, uncanny power. For the first time, he saw his lover not as a man, but as the legendary Captain Jaden Fox, servant to the Goddess Marita.

"Adam," Jaden called. "Come stand with me."

Stunned, Adam joined the pirate, feeling as if he'd stepped into a dream -- or a tale.

"I've found a place for us to cross over into the spirit world, and that's always a bit disconcerting the first time you experience it."

Adam stopped beside the captain, turning to face the direction Jaden pointed.

"Sound the crossing bell!" Jaden shouted.

The ship's bell rang out in its pattern of three, two, three, then paused and repeated.

A shimmer filled the air, and pale blue heat lightning played across what looked for all the world like an empty buttonhole made of foxfire. The *Lady* sailed into the center of the hole. For a moment, everything went white, and a tremendous ripping sound rent the air.

The light faded, leaving the ship floating on a silver sea, the sky above the faint blue-gray of dawn. As he watched, a thin rime of the sun rose above the horizon, glowing molten gold against the dark water.

A small splash was all the warning Adam got before an enormous black and white shape breached the ocean's surface, surging nearly all the way out of the waves before falling sideways in a tremendous crash of water. Moments later, a second whale leapt from the sea, then a third. Open mouthed, Adam watched the sea's leviathans frolic like children.

"Now that's a good omen," Jaden said, resting an arm across Adam's shoulders. "Where orcas are found, most other predators aren't."

"Good," Adam said faintly, his brain scrambling desperately to catch up to his new circumstances. He swayed as his knees threatened to give way, clutching at Jaden's arm for balance. Near the ship's mast, a shadow seemed to move under its own power. Nausea clenched Adam's belly, and it was all he could do not to vomit.

"Niles," Jaden called. "Take the wheel." He guided an unresisting Adam to their cabin.

* * * * *

"Sit," Jaden said, pushing Adam down onto the cushioned bench. Leaving him there, the pirate left and moved about the cabin. "We can only cross from the living world to the spirit world where there are weak places in the boundaries between the two. And it's never the same place twice. Here, take this."

Awareness returned to Adam as a cup was pressed into his hands.

"Drink."

Tea and cinnamon exploded into his mouth. It tasted of warmth and passion and shelter. He took another mouthful, then set the cup carefully on the floor.

“Adam?”

“I need you,” Adam said, his voice low, husky, and strange in his ears.

Adam reached up, wanting to push the patch from Jaden's eye.

“No, sweet, it's too dangerous,” Jaden said, catching Adam's hand and bringing it to his lips for a lingering kiss.

Standing, Jaden drew Adam to his feet as well and led him to the bed.

“Clothes,” Adam said, pulling ineffectually at his shirt. His hands didn't want to cooperate with the muddled commands sent out by his brain. All he could think about was holding Jaden close, loving the other man until the world made sense again.

“Allow me,” Jaden said. The pirate placed his hands together so that the silver rings on his thumbs touched, grasped Adam's shirt, and pulled.

Much to Adam's surprise, his shirt seemed to become insubstantial and was pulled through his body and dropped to the floor.

“Neat trick, eh?” Jaden said, quickly dealing with the rest of Adam's clothing the same way.

“Quite.” Adam's fingers restlessly stroked the pirate's shoulders. “Now you.” He couldn't explain the strength of his need; he only knew that he had to be with Jaden, had to ground himself in the flesh and blood man. Between one blink and the next, Adam's hands went from petting cotton to touching warm, silky skin. *Goddess, yes*, Adam thought, pressing close to his lover. “Need you,” he said, sitting down on the bed.

The change in position put Adam's mouth level with the pirate's groin. Heat pooled in his belly as he looked at Jaden's proud shaft, jutting up from the nest of tight auburn curls. A drop of clear fluid glistened on the crown, and it was the most natural thing in the world for Adam to lean forward and lick it away.

Jaden groaned, gentle fingertips caressing Adam's cheek. "You don't have to."

Not bothering to answer, Adam cupped Jaden's taut buttocks with his palms and pulled him forward. Opening his mouth, he sucked on the head of the other man's cock, exploring it with his tongue. The spongy, slick flesh felt good in his mouth, and the taste of brine, cinnamon, and Jaden was pure ambrosia. Adam rubbed his tongue over and over the leaking slit, wanting more.

Gentle hands wove themselves into Adam's hair as the pirate's low, guttural cries urged him on.

Adam took more of the rigid flesh into his mouth, loving the satin-over-steel feel of it on his tongue. He bobbed his head up and down, mimicking the rhythmic rocking of the ship. He relished this feeling of connection with his lover; it was the most exquisite thing he'd felt since his cock had been claimed by the other man's body. Suddenly, he wanted that, wanted to belong to Jaden in the most intimate way possible. Leaning back, he let the pirate's cock slip from his mouth. He looked up at his lover, seeing the passion and wildness in the other man's face, and knew for sure. "I want you in me."

Jaden's eye closed briefly, and when it opened, it was filled with such fierce desire Adam caught his breath.

"Lay down on the bed," Jaden said, husky-voiced.

Adam did as instructed, his gaze never leaving Jaden's face.

"Turn over."

Mouth dry, Adam did so. Beneath him, the bedclothes rustled, whispering of forbidden pleasures.

"Ah, sweet, sweet Adam," Jaden said, fingertips stroking down Adam's flank.

The mattress dipped as Jaden climbed onto it, and Adam leaned up on one elbow to watch the pirate sit next to him.

“Lay down,” Jaden said, pressing lightly on Adam’s raised shoulder. “Let me look at you.”

Adam’s cock jerked at the promise of ecstasy in Jaden’s rich, sensual tone. He moaned as the muscles in his lower back and ass were kneaded by the pirate’s callused hands. Apprehension mingled with arousal as Jaden’s fingertips dipped -- just barely -- into the crease between Adam’s nether cheeks. Forcing tense muscles to relax, Adam concentrated on how much he wanted Jaden to claim him in this most intimate way. There would be no going back, Adam knew. Lieutenant Adam Chandler would be no more, and Adam the teacher, ghost, and pirate’s lover would go forward.

Jaden’s fingers dipped further down, making Adam shiver and open his legs a bit to grant easier access.

“That’s it, open your legs for me,” Jaden said, voice low and rough with passion. “Let me touch you.”

Adam spread his legs more, the movement rubbing his cock against the comforter. The pressure felt good against his neglected erection. He thrust his hips, seeking more of the delicious friction.

A light slap against his buttock made him freeze in place.

“None of that,” Jaden said sharply. “It’s me and none other that’ll be pleasuring you tonight.”

Obediently, Adam stilled his motion. He’d never passively waited for another to please him, and the thought of it was both embarrassing and arousing. Still, he couldn’t help squirming a bit.

Jaden’s low, wicked chuckle sent chills down Adam’s spine.

“I see we must remove temptation. Up on your knees and elbows, Adam.”

Hypnotized by the pure seduction in Jaden’s voice, Adam complied, shifting so that he was on his hands and knees.

“Rest your weight on your forearms,” Jaden said, tapping Adam’s elbow.

Adam followed his lover’s instructions.

“Spread your legs for me,” Jaden whispered, moving so he knelt behind Adam.

Adam shuddered, but did as the pirate asked. At Jaden’s wordless “hmmm” of appreciation, Adam felt his skin flush. He could only imagine what he must look like, how decadent, how submissive. He felt both embarrassed and oddly free in such a suggestive position.

Warm hands massaged his buttocks, pulling them apart. Adam rested his forehead on his arms, relieved not to be watching his lover’s intimate perusal of his most secret place. The brush of Jaden’s thumb over his anus made Adam tense and start to pull away.

“Should I stop?” Jaden asked.

“No,” Adam said, forcing himself to relax.

“You’re in control, Adam,” Jaden said, his tone such that Adam couldn’t question the pirate’s sincerity. “If you say stop, I will, and I won’t be angry.”

“I trust you,” Adam said.

“I’m glad,” Jaden said.

The gentle caress over his anus resumed. It felt strange, but pleasant. He wanted more, and pushed himself back against Jaden’s fingers, seeking more contact. Jaden complied with the wordless request, rubbing his fingertips over Adam’s opening, exploring and sensitizing the heated skin.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” Jaden whispered, pressing light, biting kisses to Adam’s buttocks. “I have to taste you.”

Adam felt hot breath on his buttocks, then something hot and wet stroked over his anus. He froze, a wordless cry escaping his lips, torn between trying to get away and needing more of the incredible sensation.

“Let me,” Jaden whispered against Adam’s skin. “Let me taste you this way.”

Unable to deny his lover, Adam moaned and made himself be still, only the shaking of his muscles betraying his tension.

Jaden's tongue found him again, stroking over his opening, pressing delicately inside. Adam heard his own sobbing breaths as pleasure such as he had never dreamed of coursed through him. It was as if every swipe of the pirate's tongue drew him further and further into a web of desire. Arching his back, he thrust his hips in counterpoint to Jaden's greedy mouth. Just when he thought it couldn't get any better, something pressed inside him; Jaden had slipped a finger into his anus. Adam stilled at the intrusion, trembling on the edge of fear. It felt odd, unexpected, but not unpleasant. Then the teasing tongue was back, swirling around Jaden's finger, swamping strangeness in ecstasy. The finger moved inside him, peculiar, but not unwelcome.

The scent of almonds teased his nostrils, adding to the heady sensations surrounding Adam. The finger invading him was gone, and he mourned its loss. Then the finger was back, this time with a second added. It was too much, almost painful. Before he could voice a protest, the fingers twisted and brushed across a sensitive place inside him. Adam gasped, pressing back against Jaden's hand.

Jaden's fingers moved inside him, twisting and caressing Adam inside and out. Each time he pressed against the magical place inside, Adam's hips bucked.

Then Jaden withdrew his fingers again. Adam groaned, hips moving restlessly as he tried to find the words to tell Jaden what he needed.

Three fingers slid into him, the fullness almost painfully intense. Adam felt as if his body were being stretched open to accommodate his new life. Then Adam understood; Jaden was opening him, preparing him to accept his cock. The realization made Adam's own cock leak in anticipation.

"I wish you could see yourself," Jaden said, his voice low and raspy with need. "Your virgin hole stretched around my fingers as I get you ready." His hand twisted, and he pressed

deep inside Adam's ass, finding and massaging Adam's sweet spot. Then he pulled his hand back until his only the tips of his fingers were still inside Adam. "Do you want me?"

Adam nodded, arching up against Jaden.

"Say it, sweet, tell me to fuck you."

Adam blushed furiously, biting his lip and thrusting his hips backward in an attempt to get Jaden's fingers deeper.

"Tell me, Adam." The fingers withdrew completely. "Tell me to fuck you."

Adam shook his head, arching his back until his spine threatened to snap, as he wordlessly begged Jaden to fill the emptiness inside him.

"Tell me." Jaden blew a breath of warm air across Adam's anus.

"Fuck me," Adam said brokenly. "Please fuck me."

"Yessss." Jaden drew the word out.

Adam felt the press of something much larger than fingers against his opening. He pressed back, crying out as Jaden's cock breached his body. "Hurts," he said, tears prickling behind his eyelids.

"The pain will ease in a bit," Jaden said. "Say the word, and we'll stop and try this another time."

Adam considered waiting for another time, but he remembered the unfeigned rapture on Jaden's face, remembered how good it had felt to be inside him. He wanted to feel what Jaden had felt, to belong to the other man utterly. "Don't stop."

Jaden began a series of shallow thrusts, each movement pressing him further inside Adam. It hurt, but there were flashes of pleasure as well when Jaden's cock brushed across Adam's sweet spot. And then something gave inside Adam, and Jaden was all the way in.

"You're inside me," he said, the wonder of it overwhelming the discomfort.

"Yes." Jaden resumed his shallow thrusts.

Pain slipped away with each of Jaden's movements, leaving raw pleasure in its place. Adam's erection, which had softened at the pain of penetration, firmed again, becoming diamond hard with need. Soon, the slow, careful thrusts weren't enough, and Adam moved against his lover, seeking more friction. "Fuck me," he said, the words coming easily in the heat of passion.

"Aye," Jaden said. His hips began to move more quickly, setting up a steady, fast rhythm.

Adam moved with the thrusts, wanting more. "Fuck me," he repeated.

Jaden wrapped both arms around Adam's chest, pulling Adam up onto his knees. The change in position drove his cock deeper inside Adam.

"Jaden," he cried out as the pirate's blunt cock pressed more firmly against his sweet spot.

Jaden gave a throaty chuckle and wrapped one hand around Adam's cock, stroking it in time with each thrust.

Adam groaned, his hips moving frantically as he sought friction both on his cock and on the pleasure spot inside him. When Jaden's free hand pinched Adam's nipple, it pushed him over the edge. Adam's vision went white, then gray, as jet after jet of semen spurted from his jerking cock. He felt his lover buck against him as his climax roared through him in a tidal wave of sensation, rolling him and pulling him under.

Gradually, sense returned. Adam laid face down, the pirate's weight only partially on him, their bodies still joined.

A kiss was pressed against Adam's shoulder. "Back with me, sweet?"

"Yes," Adam said, most of his attention on the feel of Jaden's cock filling him. Now that the urgency of passion was spent, Adam felt odd and a bit uncomfortable; Jaden's cock was much too large to be inside him. And yet, he didn't want Jaden to move, didn't want to break their intimate connection. Part of him was afraid -- as he had not been even in the beginning

of this amazing journey -- that he would wake up and find himself in the rowboat, or worse, back in Ralston at Father's estate.

"I need to move," Jaden said, his weight shifting.

"Not yet," Adam said, glancing over his shoulder at the other man. "I like feeling you."

"As do I, but your body's not accustomed to loving this way, and the longer I linger, the sorer you'll be." He kissed Adam's shoulder again. "This may hurt." Jaden moved back, his softening cock slipping from Adam's body with a wet pop.

Adam hissed at the sharp burn of pain. More distressing was the sensation of emptiness that accompanied Jaden's withdrawal.

Gentle hands massaged Adam's buttocks, pulling them apart. "No blood or signs of tearing -- good."

Heat suffused Adam's cheeks at the casual examination of his most secret place. He blushed even harder when Jaden wiped away the residue of oil and seed from Adam's opening.

After cleaning himself, Jaden lay on his side next to Adam, up on one elbow, head resting on his fist. His sparkling green eye studied Adam's face.

Adam turned so that he lay on his back, smiling slightly at the twinge of discomfort in his well-fucked ass. Odd that he was grateful for the pain; it reminded him that this was all real. Not even in his most horrifying, vivid dreams did he ever feel pain.

Echoing Adam's thoughts, Jaden said, "It suddenly became real, didn't it?"

Still deep in thought, Adam said, "Hmm?"

"The magic, the legend, the ghosts...you saw it, really *saw* it for the first time since coming on board."

"Yes," Adam said. Speaking slowly, he ordered his musings and put them into words. "I knew you were the legendary Captain Jaden Fox of the *Grey Lady*; I saw you walk on air and raise the souls of the dead."

Jaden nodded as Adam spoke. "Aye, but *you* weren't yet changed, and you were in familiar surroundings."

"Yes." Adam smiled sadly. "As dreadful as things were, it was all familiar. Now --" He shrugged. "I've changed so much. Everything is new, even the very world we sail in. I was terrified that I would awaken to find it all a dream. And if it was a dream, I wanted at least the memory of loving you that way -- even if it was only an illusion." He thought about what he'd said. "Does that make sense?"

"Aye," Jaden said softly. "I do understand." He looked pensive for a moment. "Jaden Fox lives inside this body, but there's part of the Goddess as well. I'm more than Marita's servant; I'm a part of Her -- a tiny part, to be sure, but no longer merely a man."

A most inappropriate snort left Adam at this. "You have never been *merely* a man, my captain."

The gold-tinged grin he got in return for his words warmed Adam clear down to his toes.

"Ah, sweet, you're good for this old pirate's heart."

Adam stroked Jaden's bearded cheek, the tips of his fingers just brushing the thong holding the eye patch in place. "Can you tell me about this?"

"I lost my eye two years before Telmarston." Jaden shuddered. "We'd heard the tales of Captain Bird's cursed ship *Waverider*, said to sail the sea forever, carrying untold riches in its hold."

Adam cast his memory back, but could find no mention of such a ship. "I'm not familiar with that one."

"You wouldn't be," Jaden said. "'Tis a legend by pirates for pirates." He settled himself on the mattress, plumping his pillow up. "Captain Bird struck a deal with the Goddess to keep the *Waverider* sailing forever." His eyes narrowed angrily. "The sea-wench is my Goddess, but She can be a capricious bitch when the mood's on Her. She'll bargain, aye, and

She'll keep Her word, but She loathes fools, and Bird and his crew were fools of the highest order." He shook his head. "Bird forgot to specify immortality for himself and his crew. By all accounts, they were washed overboard when the next storm blew up. But the *Waverider* sailed on. That cursed, empty ship claimed the lives of any who tried to sail her. Creatures moved onto it, things out of mankind's worst nightmares."

Shaking his head, Fox continued. "We were arrogant, and, in truth, hungry for money. As much as we all hated the slavers and enjoyed sending their ships to the Goddess's mercy, there wasn't much profit on an empty ship, and attacking ships loaded with slaves tended to get the wrong people killed. So we talked to anyone who knew anything, and set out to capture the legend. We just planned to go aboard long enough to empty the hold. And we succeeded." Jaden rubbed his fingers over his chin. "Aye, we succeeded, and broke the foul magic powering the ship with the Goddess's help. But that help cost my eye."

"She took your eye?" Adam repeated, horrified.

"Traded. I had to be able to see the magic to avoid the traps that would trick us into trying to keep the *Waverider*. So I went aboard first and led the crew safely on and then away. We planted charges on the ship on our way back, and blew enough holes in the hold to remove its fell presence from the sea."

"But She created the ship; why would She want to see it destroyed?"

Rubbing his finger alongside his nose, the captain said, "In truth, I think She regretted the creation of the monstrous vessel. Then again, perhaps She was bored with it."

"And was it worth it? Did you find the treasure?"

"Was it worth it," Jaden mused. "Aye, even if we'd found nothing, that unholy thing needed to be destroyed. It had claimed far too many lives. As for treasure --" A grin lit the pirate's face. "Aye, there was treasure. Gold and silver, gems and pearls aplenty." He rolled over and opened the drawer in the side table. "And this." He handed a small book to Adam. "I can't read the words, but the pictures are interesting."

Adam opened the book randomly, blushed furiously, and slammed it closed.

Jaden roared with laughter, tears leaking from his eye.

Adam grumbled under his breath and poked his lover in the shoulder. "You could have warned me."

Still chuckling, Jaden said, "Where would the fun be in that?"

Adam stuck his tongue out at the other man, then took a deep breath and opened the book.

And the prince's mighty sword was sheathed inside his concubine's sweet hole.

"It's a stroke novel," Adam said, blushing at the illustration that went with the words he'd just read.

"A stroke novel?" Jaden inquired, brow raised over a mischievously gleaming eye.

"Yes," Adam said, holding the book in one hand and pointing at his crotch with the other. "You're supposed to hold it one-handed and use the other to, um --" He made an up and down gesture with his loosely closed fist.

"Really?" Jaden said with a wicked grin. His hand strayed down to pet Adam's flaccid penis. "Perhaps we can explore that later." He sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "For now, I've got to get back to the helm."

Adam looked out the nearest window, seeing that it was now full morning. He climbed out of bed as well, dressing lazily. He'd barely finished pulling his shirt on when Jaden pulled him into a quick kiss before leaving the cabin.

Part Six

After putting the stroke novel back in its place and resisting the temptation to examine the drawer's other contents, Adam ambled up onto the deck. How strange to go through morning twice without afternoon and night between. He had a half hour or so until his watch, then would spend the rest of the day teaching. He found a quiet place next to the mast and watched the crew go about their daily lives. It was soothing to watch as the ship, mast, and sails were checked and rechecked for any tears; though the *Grey Lady* was immune to most damage, still the habits of a true sailor were hard to break.

Movement from above him made Adam look up into Kid's bright brown eyes. The child stared at Adam speculatively for several long moments, then gave one brief, blinding smile and scurried up the rigging, nimble as a monkey.

Glancing at the sun, Adam noted that his watch shift was due to begin soon and began to make his way aft, his progress slow as members of the crew took the time to call greetings to him.

Finally reaching his destination, he spied a pale blonde woman named Lorna, part of his second teaching session, and Wilson, though Jonn was nowhere in evidence.

"Anything?" Adam asked.

"Nothing," Lorna said. "Well, 'cept the whales playing and a cloud or two." She nodded toward the high, thin clouds diluting the blue of the sky.

"Good."

They waited for a few minutes, and Jonn still didn't put in an appearance. Disquiet knotted Adam's belly. He exchanged an uneasy look with Wilson.

"Go and wake the laggard up," Lorna said, elbowing her watch partner, her watery blue eyes dark with worry. As Wilson strode off, she gave Adam a forced smile. "Jonn sometimes oversleeps, lad. There's no need for us to fret."

Adam failed to bring a matching expression to his face. A dark certainty was filling him, one he prayed wasn't true.

He and Lorna stood silently, staring out at the gentle waves, waiting for news.

When it came, it was delivered by Kami. Adam looked into the first mate's bleak gaze and turned away, walking toward the helm. Seeing Jaden standing strong and true at the wheel, his heart clenched with regret and longing. Stopping directly in front of the captain, he said, "It's me. I have to leave the ship."

"What?" Jaden said, peering at Adam.

"You've lost three men since I've come aboard. That's the only thing that's changed: my presence. And --" Nausea swirled in Adam's belly. "My father has a history of using 'volunteers' to get onto ships, providing targets for his mages. Twice I've seen shadows that don't act normally, but I thought it was just more strangeness on a ship full of odd things." Horror twisted in him at the thought that he was being used as a stalking horse to bring harm to the crew of the *Grey Lady*. His knees turned to water beneath him, and Adam sank to the deck of the ship, kneeling in supplication to his captain. "I'm so sorry, Jaden."

"Look at me, Adam." Jaden's words were steely.

Adam looked up at his lover, bracing himself to find hatred in the other man's eye. Instead, lightning surged into him as he was caught and held by aquamarine flame. Heat

surged through him, settling in to burn low in his back, at the base of his spine. Adam trembled as his worst fears were realized. He could feel something pulling at him, using him as a guide to the ship.

“He’s been tagged,” Jaden said. “And it’s linked to something in the hold.”

Adam could hear movement and shouting around him, but could not look away from the blazing gemstone. Inside it, he could see his father surrounded by red-robed mages. They all stood over an altar holding a prone man. Albert reached down, pulling a black, squirming shadow away from the man. Though Adam couldn’t hear anything, he could see the man’s mouth gaping open in a scream.

The image shifted to morning on the sea’s edge. Adam watched, mesmerized, as his own bleeding body was dumped into the rowboat, the shadow poured in after him. As his father pushed the boat away from the shore, Adam’s awareness was pulled back into the here and now.

The crew called out, “Here it is. What is it? Some sort of shadow? Why can’t we touch it? Chase it to the captain.”

Adam wished he could see what was happening, wished he could help fight the creature that had attacked the crew of the Lady.

The brilliant blue flames flared, drawing a cry of pain from Adam as the place in his back burned white-hot.

Adam could see again, much to his dismay. A shade stood before him. The dark, translucent thing held the shape of a man. “You poor, doomed bastard,” he said, sorrow warring with anger in his breast.

“Your pity sickens me.” Father’s voice came from the shadow’s mouth. “You’re weak, a disgrace to the proud Chandler name. And a catamite, to boot.” The shadow shook its head. “Whores have their place, but not in this family.”

“How could you do this?” Adam asked, hoping his father’s need to gloat would give Jaden enough information to destroy the shadow creature. That his own life would be forfeit as well, Adam had no doubt. Nor could he regret it, not if it would save lives.

The shadow’s dark face frowned its disgust. “I have many friends in many places,” Albert Chandler said. “And I didn’t have to fuck them to gain their favor.”

Beyond the shadow, Adam could see Jaden’s face, both eyes blazing with terrible anger, and the triumphant smile on the creature’s face shook him to his core.

“Stop,” Adam shouted.

Captain Fox froze, one hand upraised, foxfire flaring up from his clenched fist.

“You even make your lover weak,” Father’s voice sneered from the shadow’s mouth.

“He wants this, wants you to attack,” Adam called, desperately trying to puzzle out his father’s plan.

Jaden frowned. “You were awfully easy to find, and you seem quite determined for me to attack. What does that mean, I wonder?”

“It means you’re weak, and I anticipate no threat from you,” Albert blustered.

“I sense there’s more to this.” Jaden’s aquamarine eye burned with sea-green flame. A woman’s voice issued from the pirate’s mouth, “I will not interfere. Human magic created this abomination, human magic must defeat it.”

“You can’t stop me, boy; you’re *dead*,” Albert gloated. “I’ll destroy everyone on board this ship, one by one.” The shadow looked over its shoulder at Adam. “Tell me, dear son, did you whore yourself to the good Sergeant Tremont? I only ask because he continued to defend your honor, even as I was cutting his throat. You must be quite the hot little slut. It’s a pity I didn’t think to try you myself before I cast you adrift.”

Suddenly, Adam understood. “Jaden, I must ask you to release me from my oath.”

The captain looked confused, his attention pulled from the shadow to Adam.

“Coward,” Albert shouted, contempt evident in his voice.

“Release me.”

“You’ll be lost,” the pirate said. “You’ll fall into the real world and drown.”

“I know,” Adam said. “But I must ask this of you.” Heart breaking, he added, “Please.”

Jaden nodded, anguish darkening his eye to deep gray-green. “Adam Chandler, I release you from your oath.”

Pain stabbed through Adam. He threw his arms around the shadow, holding tight to it. His father’s laughter mocked him. “Kill my vessel; it makes no difference to me. I’ll live to claim my revenge.”

As the deck dissolved beneath his feet, Adam locked his gaze on Jaden. The words, “I love you” trembled on his lips, unspoken.

His arms locked around the shadow, Adam fell, and the shock of freezing water on his broken legs made him scream and nearly lose his grip on the shadow. A full moon rode low in the starlit sky, casting the shadow into sharp relief.

“Bastard, traitor,” Albert shrieked, the words garbled as water splashed into the shadow’s mouth. “This isn’t over.”

Waves battered them as Adam grimly held onto the shadow creature, shifting his grip one hand at a time until he grasped it by the shoulders. A man’s face, empty of anything resembling sanity, flashed before Adam’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, then pushed down. The shadow sank beneath the water, barely struggling. Adam held it down until its struggles ceased, then counted to twenty before letting go. It occurred to him then that he wasn’t sinking, though he was doing nothing to keep himself afloat. Something nudged him, and he turned, surprised to find a barrel float and rope line attached to his belt. *What on earth?* As the thought entered his mind, he heard faint shouting from above him and looked up.

Just to the right of the moon, a dark oblong stained the sky. The rope tied to him seemed to lead up to it.

Hope sputtered in his breast, and he turned in the water, wrapping the rope around his waist and his arms around the float. The sea calmed around him, and he had the sensation of being cradled in the palm of a giant hand. *Thank you, my Goddess.* He sent the words out to the ether. A cloud swirled across the moon, and for a moment, a woman's face smiled there.

"Heave!"

His mouth gaped open as the hull of the *Grey Lady* sank into view. A splash of saltwater quickly reminded him where he was.

"Heave!"

More of the ship became visible, and the light around it seemed to bend, as if it were being pulled downward with the ship.

"Heave!"

Adam looked at the rope tied around him. It was taut, yet placed no pressure on him. The only thing he felt was the tug of the float tied to his belt.

"Heave!"

Boom! Boom! Boom! Rriipppp!!

The *Grey Lady* fell toward Adam. He closed his eyes, waiting to be crushed by the hull of the ship.

Not this time, sweet, a woman's voice whispered in his ear. Dark mist surrounded him, keeping him in calm water, even as whitecaps roiled and surged around the *Lady's* hull.

"Adam!"

"Here," he called. The rope began tugging uncomfortably on his belt. Adam looked up along it, seeing something amazing. The carved bust of the *Grey Lady* had one arm loose, her wooden hand holding tight to the rope. Beside her, Kid stood at the ship's rail, grinning down at him.

As he held to the rope, trying to keep it from yanking his pants up and making moot any reunion with his captain, Adam was pulled upward. His broken legs throbbed, now that

they were free of the sea's chill. As soon as he was within grabbing distance, hands gripped his shirt and pulled him on board. He cried out as he was set down, his broken legs buckling beneath him.

Jaden stood in front of Adam, a stern expression on his face. "Adam Chandler, do I have your oath?"

Salt and cinnamon and wood smoke filled his nostrils. "Always, my captain."

* * * * *

"We t'ot you los' for good, den de Kid jumps onto de deck, shoutin' nonsense," Kami said. She pointed to the bow, where the *Grey Lady's* hand was once again fused into place, though now singed black against the dark brown wood.

"Aye," Jaden said. "We looked where Kid pointed and saw my Lady holding a rope, her hand smoldering where she touched it. We all grabbed hold and started pulling, expecting to drag you up. Imagine our surprise when the ship was pulled down. The harder we heaved, the more my Lady's hand burned, but she never once flinched. When we broke through to the real world, her hand was afire, but Kid put it out, quick as a wink."

Adam rubbed goose pimples from his arms at the thought of his close brush with death. "How was she able to move? Was it the Goddess?"

"No. You heard the sea-wench. She won't meddle in the affairs of mortals as a rule." Jaden rubbed his chin. "It was *Grey Lady*. Even before Telmarston, she was more than just a collection of wood and sails. After, well, she kept her own council." He frowned in the bow's direction. "She still does. She wanted to save you, and made it happen."

A barnacle bounced from the captain's head and fell to the ground. "She couldn't have done it without Kid's help, mind."

Childish laughter greeted this pronouncement.

"Now, sweet, tell us why you asked me to release you." Jaden's eye darkened, and his lips turned down.

"Looking into your eye --" He gestured toward the patch-covered gemstone. "I saw my father create the creature and tie it to me. When he said that I was dead, I knew that the shadow was vulnerable only to a living person."

"You got dat from dose words?" Kami said, incredulous.

Adam shrugged. "I know how Albert Chandler does things. He's sneaky and vindictive. I'm guessing he put me onto that rowboat hoping that you'd come to me, but if not, he'd still get his revenge on me for not warning him." One thing still puzzled him. "I'm not sure I understand why the Goddess couldn't help." He'd felt a bit stung by that, though the fact that She'd protected him later while he was in the water mollified him.

"Even the Gods and Goddesses have rules they must follow."

"Ah," Adam said. A yawn ambushed him, and his jaw popped as it stretched wide.

Jaden stood, offering Adam his hand and pulling Adam upright. "Kami, take the wheel. Adam and I need to get reacquainted."

"Aye, Captain," she said, winking at Adam. "Take your time, and give dat pretty ass a squeeze for me."

Adam blushed, but arched his back, flaunting his assets in her direction.

She fanned herself, grinning like a madwoman.

Laughing, his cheeks so flushed they burned, he followed Jaden into their cabin.

"Clothes," Jaden barked.

Sobering, Adam stripped, letting his clothing fall into a heap. When he was fully naked, he lay down on the bed, spreading his legs. Voice shaking with need, he said, "Take me, my captain; claim me and make me yours forever."

Jaden shrugged off his own clothes and climbed up onto the bed, lying on top of Adam. Their cocks rubbed together, making both men moan. Jaden's mouth captured Adam's in a

possessive, plundering kiss. It went on forever and not nearly long enough. Finally, when both men were breathless, Jaden broke the kiss.

“I thought I lost you,” Jaden whispered against Adam’s ear.

“I love you,” Adam said, afraid to say the words, but more terrified not to.

Jaden pulled away, gazing at him. “Adam, my Adam, my sweet love.”

“Please, Jaden, I need you.” Adam bucked up against the pirate. “Come inside me. Fill all the empty places.”

“Aye.” Jaden sat up, his erection jutting proudly up, purpling head leaking clear fluid.

Adam pulled his legs up, gripping his thighs just above his knees, holding himself open for his lover. The scent of almonds teased his nostrils, and then a finger slid inside him. Gasping, he arched up into the contact. The finger moved inside him, spreading oil liberally, then was removed. Before Adam could protest, two fingers pushed inside him, stretching him and readying his opening for his captain’s cock. Adam groaned when Jaden’s fingertips pressed firmly against his sweet spot. All too soon, Jaden pulled his hand away, then three fingers filled Adam, his muscles burning as his body opened beneath the pirate’s ministrations.

“Do it, do it,” he chanted, needing to feel Jaden come into him.

“Goddess bless,” Jaden groaned. Adam watched jealously as Jaden slicked oil onto his own cock. He wanted that glorious shaft and didn’t want to wait any longer. “Now, my captain, take me.”

“Aye.” Jaden positioned himself, guiding the head of his penis to Adam’s opening.

Adam moaned as the head of Jaden’s cock breached him. Unwilling to wait any longer, he hooked his ankles around the captain’s back and pulled him forward, surging his hips upward at the same time. Excruciating pain-pleasure shot through him as Jaden filled him. “Love you,” Adam whispered, tears prickling in his eyes.

“Mine,” Jaden growled, his hips pulling back then thrusting forward.

"Always," Adam gasped.

Jaden set up a quick, punishing rhythm, growling, "Mine" with each plunge of his hips.

"Yours," Adam replied, as his body was irrevocably claimed by the pirate.

Their passion flared bright and fast, and before Adam was ready for it, heat pooled in his belly and his climax shuddered through him. Gouts of semen spewed from his aching cock, coating his belly and scenting the air with musk.

Jaden gave a shout and stiffened, hips jerking as he spilled his seed into Adam's body before collapsing on top of him.

They lay entwined, Jaden's still-rigid cock inside Adam as their breath calmed.

Jaden traced a letter on Adam's sweat-sheened chest. "L -- Love. I love you, Adam. Don't ever ask to leave me again."

"I'm yours forever, my captain," Adam said. "You have my oath on it."

None shall part you, the Goddess said, giving Her blessing. Beneath them, the *Grey Lady* rocked in agreement.

 THE END 

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Jill Knowles writes dark fantasy, horror, and erotic paranormal romance. This former archaeologist now lives and works in Tucson, Arizona. In her spare time, between working, writing and trying desperately to have a life, she volunteers as a mediator for Pima County. She is owned by far too many cats. Currently, her work can be found in “Forgotten Worlds” magazine, “Modern Magic” print anthology, and online at “Abyss & Apex.”