



A Pirate's Dream

JILL KNOWLES

Loosely

*Chronicles of the Grey Lady 2:
A Pirate's Dream*

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Fantasy Paranormal

Series: Chronicles of the Grey Lady; **Previous Title:** *A Pirate's Primer*

Ghost pirate Nicolas wants nothing more than to sail the ocean aboard the legendary *Grey Lady*, but evil stalks the ship. In his dreams, a silver shark comes to him in the form of beautiful, otherworldly Kieru. Kieru warns that a kraken is trailing the ship, intent on devouring everyone on board.

Despite the dangers in the waking world, the dreams Nicolas and Kieru share are filled with passion. Nicolas teaches Kieru the ways two men can come together, and Kieru is an eager and inventive student.

As lust deepens into love, the murderous kraken begins attacking the crew. The situation is hopeless, but pirate and shark refuse to give up the fight for a future together.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices.*

A Pirate's Dream

Nicolas sent a prayer to Marita, goddess of the twelve seas, and tipped Jamie's corpse into the frigid water. One of the large blue sharks delicately grabbed Jamie's ankle and towed the dead man's body away from the wreckage of the *Dawn Raider*. Nicolas was grateful for the courtesy as a second and third shark joined the first and began tearing at the body, churning the water into a crimson froth. He knew the sharks honored his friend with their hunger, and hoped they would honor him as well, after he succumbed to thirst and lost his tenuous hold on what had once been the pirate ship's hull.

Movement at his far right caught his attention, and he used a bit of his failing strength to turn his head. An enormous silver-gray fin marked the progress of one of the sea's behemoths. Fear and anticipation danced inside Nicolas's spirit. To be consumed by a silver shark was a singular honor for a pirate; he just wasn't ready for such an honor to be bestowed on him. Knowing he was going to die was a far cry from resigning himself to his fate.

A shadow fell over him, blocking the sun's cruel rays with even-crueler darkness. Horror blossomed in his heart, paralyzing him. Evil loomed overhead, and he knew he was going to be devoured—with no chance of rebirth. He opened his mouth to scream, and shades swarmed inside, stealing his voice as they stole his soul.

* * * *

Nicolas gasped as he sat up in his bunk, heart hammering in his throat. With hands that shook, he grasped the water skin hanging next to his bed, pulled the stopper, and took a drink. It took all his willpower not to gulp the life-giving fluid down. Holding the tepid water in his mouth for ten seconds, he waited for it to moisten the tissue. As he allowed himself to swallow, he felt his control come back. After several deep, calming breaths, he put the stopper back into place.

Though he no longer needed food and drink—hadn't since joining the crew of the ghost ship *Grey Lady*—he was unable to sleep unless he had water nearby. Three days of thirst because of a hurricane that had ripped apart the *Dawn Raider* had left an indelible mark on him—both in his waking life and in the twilight life of dreams.

But the dream was wrong.

In reality, after the blue sharks had honored Jamie, Nicolas had lain on the wreckage for another half day, slowly succumbing to thirst and exposure. When all hope was gone and he was singing his death song, the *Grey Lady* had found him, and Captain Fox had offered him a place upon the fabled pirate ship.

Shivering, he rubbed away goose pimples, chilled through despite the warmth in his small room. It was an ill omen when dreams went awry. The shaman in his home village always warned that when dreams went bad, the waking world was in grave danger. Nicolas returned the water skin to its peg and lay back, staring up into darkness.

He rested his hand against the wall of his small cabin, the smooth, living wood warm beneath his palm. Sometimes it seemed as though he could almost hear her voice whispering to him in the darkness. He treasured those quiet moments when he felt at one with the ship.

Because the *Grey Lady* carried no cargo and little food and water, there was space enough for each of the crew members to have a bit of privacy if he or she wished. Nicolas's room was tiny, barely longer than his narrow bunk, with just enough room for him to sit upright but not to stand. Still, it was the most space he'd ever been able to call his own. As a boy living in the longhouse that belonged to his grandmother, privacy had been a rare and wondrous thing, only found on the few occasions he managed to steal away from the watchful gazes of his sisters.

He murmured a quick spell—the most useful of his meager store of magic—and the ceiling of the room brightened until it glowed with a soft, golden light. It shone through the dark green fabric he'd tented over his bed, creating the illusion of sunlight spilling through a canopy of pine needles.

A wave of homesickness flooded him. It had been so long since he'd seen the deep forests that lined the shores of the Western Sea. As the youngest of five children—and a male at that—he had been a useless drain on his family's resources. His magic had made no difference to his clan. The ability to create a witch light or speak mind to mind with another brought no meat to

the table, no fish to the nets. When he had his eighth winter, his grandmother had sold him to Captain Tiu of the *Dawn Raider*. Given no other choice, Nicolas had learned to love the sea even as he learned to be a sailor. Captain Tiu had been a harsh mistress but fair; he'd never been flogged without a good reason.

Low mutters interrupted his reverie. He listened for a moment, frowning at what he heard. It seemed he wasn't the only one having unpleasant dreams. At least two others shared his restlessness. After the events of the past few months, he knew all too well that the *Grey Lady* and her crew were not invulnerable, for they all held favored status with the sea goddess. *Goddess, grant peace to this ship.*

He swung his legs from his bunk and pulled on a pair of trousers. A quick command banished his witch light, and he padded barefoot up onto the deck. There would be no more sleep tonight, he knew. Rather than stay abed and fret, he would help keep watch. If danger still threatened, it would not catch them unawares again.

Still puzzling over the mistakes in his dream, he nodded to Captain Fox and found a place to stand at midship. Staring over the moonlit waves, he let his thoughts wander free. The sea's calm green water rose and fell in swells. The *Grey Lady* had sailed across the oceans of many worlds in the aftermath of a dreadful attack, wherein three of her own had been stolen away by a shadow sent by an evil sorcerer.

The crew had mourned lost Molly, Jonn, and Tif for the past several months. Only now were they starting to once again find joy in most things, though sorrow still came upon them occasionally. Nicolas missed Tif, the first man killed. They had been lovers off and on for the first ten years after Nicolas had come aboard the *Lady*, but that had changed when Tif admitted his love for the captain. Though Tif's pursuit of the captain had never borne fruit, Nicolas had ended their relationship, not wanting to be second best, even to so great a man as Captain Fox.

Sailing away from sadness, the *Grey Lady* had crossed the barriers from the last world to their current sea but a day ago, only to find that the warm waters had been forsaken by the wind. As he raised his head, using his long, aquiline nose to search for any hint of a breeze, strands of inky black hair fell across his face. Exasperated, Nicolas pushed them back behind his ear, making a mental note to ask Bekah to cut it for him sometime soon.

A cascade of soft whimpers caught his attention, and he looked up to where a small figure slept, cradled in a nest of rope surrounding the *Lady's* mainsail.

"Kid," he called. "Wake up, young one."

The child thrashed, keening. It was a ghastly sound, like the scream of a rabbit caught in a trap.

"Small brother, come back to the waking world," Nicolas said a bit louder.

The boy jerked and gasped, nearly falling.

Nicolas sprang forward, ready to catch the boy if he fell. Luckily the child recovered sense and balance before an accident could occur. "All right?" Nicolas called. Though their status in between life and death prevented most injuries, such a fall would still be painful, and the boy had already endured far too much pain.

Kid waved and climbed farther upward, vanishing behind the mainsail.

"Keep him safe, m'lady," Nicolas whispered. He knew he himself had been lucky. Captain Tiu had not molested him sexually, nor had she allowed any of the other crew members to do so. Kid had not shared that luck. He'd been brutalized by the notorious Pirate King for years before finding his way to the *Grey Lady*. The boy trusted no one, rarely set foot on the ship's deck, and had only spoken once in Nicolas's memory—a few months ago, in order to save the life of the newest crew member, Captain Fox's lover, Adam.

As Nicolas turned back to the rail, a fond smile curved his lips. Not only was Adam a good-natured young man who made the captain very happy, he was also a scholar and a teacher. Under Adam's guidance, Nicolas—along with the rest of the crew—was being taught the mysteries of reading and writing.

A flash on the horizon drew his gaze. It was just possible to make out the triangular shape of a fin.

S for *shark*, he thought.

* * * *

Iciness surrounded him, yet he felt no chill. Nicolas lazily trod water, expending little effort to stay afloat though storm winds lashed the waves into a churning froth of white. Something bumped his legs, and before he knew it, he was astride the back of a silver shark.

The dream—and he knew that it was a dream—shifted around him, leaving him standing on the black sandy beach near his home village. Or at least, near where his village should be. He recognized the shoreline, but there were no longhouses, no totem poles, no fish drying on racks—no evidence anyone had ever lived here.

“They did. They will,” a deep voice said.

Nicolas turned to face the other man, his breath catching at the beauty and otherworldliness he saw. Desire pooled in his belly, stiffening his cock even as fear had him stumbling backward. The silver-haired man opened his mouth to speak, revealing row after row of sharp teeth. He seemed to waver in and out of focus, as if his form couldn't decide what shape to take.

An odd tingling itched at the back of Nicolas's skull, and the pale man's body seemed to solidify.

A sharp knock on his door jolted Nicolas to wakefulness. As the dream world faded, he heard the man speak.

“Beware.”

* * * *

Kami exchanged a triumphant smile with Nicolas as they each printed their names on the sailcloth—with absolutely no assistance from their teacher.

Adam smiled and nodded congratulations to each of them before turning to help Tyreel, who was having difficulties.

Learning to read had been a cherished dream of Nicolas's since he'd first seen written words and understood they told a tale. His own people, the Tsawah, who lived in the deep forests lining the coast of the Western Sea of his home world, had no knowledge of reading and writing. Instead, honored storytellers told the histories and goddess tales during the bitter cold months when winter held the land in an icy grip.

Written words had always seemed to be unattainable magic, a mystery that only a lucky few could solve. Until now.

He gazed down at the hand that held a sharp stick of charcoal. Blunt-fingered, echoing the stockiness of his body, it was a perfectly ordinary hand. Nicolas turned his free hand over and examined the lines in his palm, then over again to see the back. His coppery brown skin was

crisscrossed with the scars he'd gained as a boy hauling ropes and doing scut work aboard the *Dawn Raider*, and the thinner slashes he'd earned as he learned to use his daggers and cutlass after he'd grown enough to help defend the pirate ship. Becoming a ghost hadn't erased any of the lines, for which he was grateful. Each scar was like a written word, holding the tale of his life.

Chuckling at the fanciful thought, he turned his attention back to the teacher.

At Adam's directions, he and the rest of his lesson mates wrote several more words, painstakingly matching letters to sounds. By the end of the two-hour lesson, Nicolas was exhausted, his back sore from leaning over the sailcloth and his hand cramped from holding the charcoal. The previous night's disturbed rest caught up with him, and he yawned.

"You look tired," Kami said quietly to Nicolas.

He looked down before he addressed the first mate. "Aye, Mistress." As the second most powerful person on the ship—subordinate only to Captain Fox—she held Nicolas's well-being in her control. Early life in his grandmother's longhouse and his later experience on the *Dawn Raider* had burned obedience to women into his very marrow.

"What's dis, den?" she asked sharply. "I tot we broke you o' dat bowin' and scrapin'."

Flinching, Nicolas felt a flush stain his cheeks. Harsh words from a woman meant a beating. *Not anymore*. He shook himself all over, as a dog shakes away water, and remembered where he was. On the *Grey Lady*, punishments were rarely meted out—because they were rarely necessary. The crew served Captain Fox of their own free will and were able to leave the ship whenever they so desired.

Chagrined, he looked up at her. "You did." He rubbed his eyes. "I had uneasy dreams last night." Dredging up a grin, he added, "Remembering home brings back old habits." It was a strange thing. He'd been but twenty-three winters old when he'd taken the oath and joined the crew aboard the *Lady*. Though he'd roamed the worlds' oceans for nearly two hundred years, still, the lessons learned in his early life crept back to haunt him.

"Bad habits," she said. She shivered, her warm brown eyes troubled. "Some tings don't need rememberin'."

Nicolas offered a smile, wanting to bring some comfort to his friend. He wished he held the courage to reach out, perhaps take her capable hand in his, but old lessons held him back.

"Shark," Wilson called from the crow's nest.

"*S-H-A-R-K*," Adam called up to him.

"No, *shark!*" Wilson repeated, pointing south. "A silver. A big one."

Nicolas felt a frisson of fear as he cast his gaze out over the calm green waters. Was the evil sorcerer still a threat? Was brother shark following them in anticipation of a feast?

* * * *

The silver-haired man sat cross-legged on the glittering black sand. Nicolas sat facing the beautiful man. "Who are you?" he asked. This time, the other man's image was solid.

"Kieru." A flash of sharp teeth accompanied the unfamiliar name. "And you are Nicolas."

"Yes," Nicolas said, fear and desire playing chase inside his mind. How could this man know his name? *Why* should this man know his name? *Bright spirits above and below, this beautiful man knows my name.* His heart beat so quickly, it felt as though it were trying to escape the cage of his ribs.

"You must believe me," Kieru said. "Evil stalks you all, and it calls to its own."

Nicolas suppressed his awe at being selected to receive such a valuable omen. That he, a mere man, had been chosen for such an honor was a wondrous thing. Perhaps *too* wonderful. Was this pretty stranger a trick sent by the evil sorcerer? "Why me?"

"I can speak to you, here." Kieru tapped the side of his head. "You are the only one on the ship with the right kind of mind."

The tingle Nicolas had felt the night before increased, warming and spreading out as the silver-haired man grinned at him.

The rows of serrated, triangular teeth should have been threatening. Instead, they reassured him. An evil spirit would have taken pains to appear fully human. He remembered what one of the shamans had said while testing Nicolas's magic when he was a boy: it was impossible to lie to someone when speaking mind to mind.

He would listen to Kieru and tell everything to Captain Fox once he awakened from this dream. Determination stiffened his spine. Sitting up straight, he said, "Tell me all. Is it the sorcerer? Has he sent another shadow creature to harry us?"

Kieru frowned. "I do not have the words. My world only touches yours; interactions such as this are rare. All of this"—he waved an elegant hand at their surroundings—"I pulled from your memories. Even the way you see me."

"You're a spirit?" Nicolas wasn't surprised.

"I'm real enough." Kieru tossed his head, hair gleaming in the bright moonlight. "This"—he gestured toward his body—"is not my true form. I wear it so that I might speak to you." He stroked Nicolas's cheek with his fingertips. "So much work to communicate, and now I find that speech is the least of my desires."

The caress trailed down Nicolas's face, down his neck, until Kieru's palm rested over Nicolas's pounding heart.

Desire pooled heavily in Nicolas's belly. He forgot all save the exquisite man before him. "Yes," he whispered, leaning forward to press his mouth against the other man's. There was a brief moment of contact before he remembered the sharp teeth and pulled away. "Wait."

Kieru looked puzzled—and disappointed.

"Your teeth," Nicolas said. "I want to kiss you, but I don't wish to bleed for the pleasure."

A slow, pointed smile lit Kieru's fine-boned face. "This is *our* dream, Nicolas. My dream and yours. In this place, our word is law. And I say that I will do nothing to harm you."

The tingle in Nicolas's mind surged. He knew the other man spoke the unadorned truth. His fears removed, Nicolas swayed forward into the kiss. Beneath his lips, Kieru's were soft and warm. Compelled to taste, Nicolas licked the other man's lower lip.

Kieru gasped.

Quick to take advantage, Nicolas brushed his tongue against Kieru's. Kieru tasted of chilies and mango with a faint hint of salt. It was a wild taste, and it held nothing of Nicolas's home. The unique flavor and the certainty that Kieru was a friend removed the last barriers holding passion at bay.

Nicolas thrust his tongue forward aggressively, encouraging the other man to duel with him in the precursor to coupling.

Kieru's response was timid at first, then welcoming, then enthusiastic. Strong arms wrapped around Nicolas, pressing him close.

Nicolas explored Kieru's mouth, running his tongue over the jagged peaks of Kieru's teeth, feeling the razor sharpness, though he was not injured. He deepened the kiss, reveling in the sensation of Kieru's mouth beneath his, warm skin and taut muscles pressed full length against him. It had been too many years since he'd held another man so intimately against him.

Still kissing, they fell sideways onto the warm black sand, hands and mouths exploring. In the distance, Nicolas could hear the ringing of a bell. Ignoring it, he ran his hands across Kieru's shoulders, caressing the hard muscles.

The bell continued to toll, dragging him toward wakefulness.

Kieru wrenched away from Nicolas, black eyes wide with desire and dismay. *"Too late."*

* * * *

Nicolas awakened to the insistent peal of the ship's bell. He shook the remnants of his arousal away and pulled on a pair of pants. Cutlass in hand, he trotted up onto the deck with the rest of the crew. As soon as he could, he would tell the captain about the warning Kieru had given him.

Captain Fox stood at the wheel, his lips pressed in a tight, grim line.

Shivering in the predawn chill, Nicolas waited, forcing his body into stillness though fear made his pulse pound in his ears. No one spoke or fidgeted; the assembled crew seemed to be holding their breath. Sudden guilt twisted knots in his belly. Had his surrender to lust with Kieru doomed one of his shipmates?

"Lads and lasses..." The captain paused, his dark gaze sweeping over the crew. "We've had another loss. Gerry is missing. He was last seen at the end of his watch at midnight. Has anyone seen aught of him?"

There were a few murmurs, but no one stepped forward. Grief for his missing crewmate was mingled with guilty relief. The dream had come upon him in the early hours before dawn, well after Gerry had vanished. Nicolas took a deep breath, steeling himself to speak up and describe his dream and the warning it contained. The words would not come, as the thought of speaking in front of so many people turned his bones to water.

Nicolas felt a tap on his shoulder and looked around. No one was paying any attention to him. A small white shell bounced off his chest, and he looked up. Kid's dark eyes peered solemnly down at him from beneath the near sail. The boy gestured for Nicolas to come closer.

Curious, Nicolas eased from the gathered crowd and toward Kid. The boy swarmed up and across the rigging and down the stern of the ship, apparently seeking privacy. Nicolas followed, aware as he did so that part of his willingness was due to his wish to avoid speaking before a crowd.

He watched, stunned, as Kid jumped lightly to the deck and walked to the far right corner of the stern. The boy looked terrified, but determination sang from every line of his posture. Deliberately keeping his body movements as nonthreatening as possible, Nicolas joined Kid at the railing. Everyone was careful not to startle the boy. Nicolas, knowing how narrowly he had missed sharing the horrors Kid had endured, treated the boy with all the care he'd give any wild, skittish creature.

"Here." Kid pointed to a faint mark on the smooth brown wood.

Nicolas leaned forward and examined the mark. It looked as if a heavy bowl had rested on the rail, pressing a melon-sized outline of a circle into the wood. Nicolas ran his fingers across it. The inside and outside of the circle were smooth except for a small area of scratches on either side of the line. The incised mark itself was rough, as though whatever had pressed against the railing was serrated like a shark's tooth.

"Arm," Kid said, miming an arm coming over the side of the ship and snatching something.

Chilled to his marrow, Nicolas said, "Kraken." He traced the edge of the mark, then said, "Did you see it, small brother?" Even as he asked the question, he knew the answer. If Kid had seen the monster, he would have roused the entire ship.

"No. The *Lady* showed me the mark. She said it took Gerry."

"Goddess, grant him peace," Nicolas said, staring blankly over the water. The kraken were the enemies of all sailors. Intelligent monsters who traveled the oceans of all the worlds, they hated ships. Legend said a kraken would follow a ship and pluck off crew members one by one, feasting on the fear it created. Eventually, once it was sated on terror, the great, multiarmed beast would rise up, grasp the ship in its two clawed tentacles, crush it to pieces, and devour the remaining crew.

Forty years before Nicholas had come aboard, a young kraken had targeted the *Lady*. Nicolas knew Kid had sounded the alarm that time, and Captain Fox and the crew had fought the

creature, eventually killing it. Kami told of eight powerful, reaching appendages with serrated suckers the size of her fist in addition to the two dreadfully clawed tentacles. The creature's body had been more than twenty feet long, its arms adding another thirty feet to its length, and the two clubbed tentacles had measured more than ninety feet long.

He looked at the mark on the rail, calculating how big the tentacle that held such a sucker would be. Cold sweat drenched him as he imagined the size of the creature. How could anyone fight such a monster? Irrational anger made him glare at Kid. "Why bring this to me? You should go to the captain."

"I can't," Kid whispered. He jumped up and swung nimbly into the rigging. "Captains hurt Kid."

Compassion drowned Nicolas's anger. The Pirate King had indeed hurt Kid very badly. "Not our captain, little brother. Captain Fox would gut anyone who tried to harm you and leave their body for the crabs. But I do understand. I will speak for you."

Kid nodded and vanished up among the tops of the sails.

Nicolas made his way back to the high deck that held the *Lady's* wheel. The crew had dispersed, each to his or her job, quarters, or to one of Adam's tutoring sessions. Captain Fox stood alone before the wheel, every line of his body shouting tension and expectation. Sunlight haloed the captain, striking flame-colored streaks in the man's dark auburn hair.

"What did the lad have to report?"

As always, the captain's whiskey-and-honey voice stirred something deep inside Nicolas. Yet this time, even as arousal teased his senses, he remembered the heady taste of spiced mangoes and the sensation of sharp teeth pressed against his lips.

He could feel a faint flush against his cheeks as he thought of Kieru, but the dire news he bore quickly drove it away. "A circle, bigger than Tyreel's two fists together, pressed into the stern railing." He named the ship's smith, a blond giant of a Northman who stood more than seven feet tall and carried a greatsword few could lift, let alone wield effectively in a fight. "Kid says the *Lady* told him it was a kraken."

"Damn." The captain's sea green eye closed, and he rubbed the place where the patch over his left eye pressed against his cheek. "It sounds like a big one. We killed one of the fell creatures many years ago, but it was scarce more than a babe."

“There's more, sir.” When he had the other man's full attention, he described his dream and Kieru's vague warning, leaving out only the account of the kisses they had shared.

Captain Fox questioned him thoroughly about the warning and its carrier. Nicolas was as honest as he could be, even admitting to his attraction to the silver-haired man.

“Well, my friend, you've done a fine service for the *Grey Lady*. I thank you,” he said with a formal half bow.

Nicolas flushed, stammering his certainty that his actions were nothing but what anyone would have done.

Waving away Nicolas's protest, the captain said, “This silver-haired man, Kieru...you said he was handsome?”

“Aye.” Nicolas blushed beneath the other man's knowing gaze.

“Listen to his warnings and tell me everything he says, but”—Captain Fox rubbed a finger beside his nose and smiled slyly—“no one can fault you for seeking pleasure inside a dream. And if you care to share tales of *that*, I will, of course, be happy to listen.” A wide grin showed the gold in his smile. “Perhaps Adam can be persuaded to write an account of your dream.”

Unsure what to say in the face of his captain's teasing, Nicolas stared out at the sea. A glint of sunlight off silver brought a tiny smile to his face.

“It's still out there,” Captain Fox said, his green eye twinkling.

“The kraken?”

“The silver shark.”

Nicolas scanned the horizon but saw no more flashes of silver. “He's not our enemy.”

The captain gave him a speculative look, then said, “No. He wouldn't be.”

* * * *

“You're safe.” Kieru pulled Nicolas close, pressing a kiss against Nicolas's mouth.

Nicolas savored the contact for a moment, then pulled reluctantly away. “You were warning us of the kraken?”

“You speak of the creatures with all the arms, yes?” After Nicolas's nod, he continued. “We call them *sustak*, ship killers.”

"Aye," Nicolas said. "That's what they are, all right. It took Gerry last night." Grief at this latest loss found a place in his heart. He didn't know Gerry well; they were not friends. Still, having spent so many years together on a ship barely one hundred feet in length, one knew all one's companions. Gerry liked salt pork; he made the sign to ward off evil whenever he spied an albatross; and he liked to find a quiet place on deck where he could view the stars late at night, when all but those on watch slumbered. It was the last that had likely gotten him killed.

His dark eyes bleak, Kieru said, "It is ancient, immense...a true leviathan. I..." He looked away. "I want to help you, all of you." Shaking his head, he said, "It is too much for me."

Giving in to the urge to touch the other man, Nicolas cupped Kieru's smooth cheek. "You've warned us. That's enough."

Kieru leaned into the touch. "I thought it would be. Now..." His smile held nothing of joy.

"It's enough," Nicolas whispered. He pressed forward, his mouth finding Kieru's and capturing it in a searing kiss. Sweetness and spice flooded his senses. Moaning, needing more, he pushed the other man back onto the sand and sprawled across Kieru's muscled chest, trying to communicate all his pent-up desire with lips, teeth, and tongue. Death stalked the *Grey Lady*; Nicolas wanted to remember he was alive.

Kieru groaned, hands cupping Nicolas's ass and pulling him even closer. Nicolas could feel the hard strength of Kieru's cock against his belly. His own cock was swollen and leaking with need. He shifted his position until their bodies were tangled together, mouth to mouth, chest to chest, groin to groin. The first brush of Kieru's rigid flesh against his made Nicolas shudder with pleasure. They strained together in the age-old dance, bodies slick with sweat and desire.

Nicolas broke the kiss, gasping, and looked down at his lover. Kieru's dark eyes glittered with sensual hunger. His lush lips were kiss-bruised, parted as he panted for breath. Silver hair gleamed brightly against the black sand that formed their bed.

"You're beautiful," Nicolas said. He wanted to explore that pale skin, touch it and taste it until he was sated.

"As are you." Kieru reached up and twined his fingers behind Nicolas's neck, pulling him back down.

Nicolas avoided Kieru's mouth, instead pressing a series of nibbling kisses down the man's neck and shoulders and onto his chest. Kieru's skin was soft and salty against Nicolas's tongue.

He angled until his mouth was above one flat nipple, then let his tongue dart out in a lightning-quick caress. The tender nub held the sweet tartness of mango and the bite of chili as it hardened against his lips.

“Oh.” Kieru arched up against him, his face a picture of shocked delight. “I didn’t know they did that.”

Grinning, Nicolas captured the tight peak in his mouth, suckling gently first and then with more force, nursing greedily at the sensitive flesh.

Kieru gasped and writhed beneath him, low moans betraying his enjoyment of the touch.

Nicolas teased the tender nub with teeth and tongue, then shifted to lavish attention on Kieru’s other nipple. Feeling as if he were a bee unable to decide between two flowers, Nicolas concentrated first on one nipple, then the other.

The silver-haired man panted as his body was stimulated, twisting and arching up against Nicolas’s hungry mouth.

Yesssssss. Nicolas released the taut peak he’d been tormenting and pressed a kiss in the center of Kieru’s chest, then licked downward, past the man’s navel. He rubbed his nose in the sparse silver curls that surrounded Kieru’s proud cock, then pulled back enough to see the straining flesh. It was glorious, long and thick, a bead of fluid gleaming at its slit.

“Will you kiss me there?” Kieru whispered.

“Oh yes,” Nicolas promised. He rubbed his cheek against the rigid member, inhaling the musky scents of man and lust. A slight turn of his head brought his lips into contact with hot skin. He brushed them over the head of Kieru’s cock, painting his lips with the man’s essence. Leaning back, he held Kieru’s dark gaze and deliberately licked his lips. Salt, spice, and tart sweetness filled his mouth. “Delicious,” he murmured. He kissed the tip of the swollen cock, parted his lips, and drew the head inside.

Kieru gave a whole-body shiver, then went still, seeming to hold his breath.

Nicolas let his mouth slowly sink down onto Kieru’s rigid shaft, delighting in the feel of silky skin over steel-hard flesh. He loved doing this, loved granting a partner this joy as much as he enjoyed receiving such an intimate kiss.

Kieru shivered again, a strangled shout bursting from him as he writhed against the black sand. Nicolas pulled away long enough to gaze at his lover. Sweat made Kieru's pale skin glisten almost silver in the moonlight.

Laughing wickedly, Nicolas bent back to his task and drew the other man's cock back inside his mouth. Glorifying in the power of giving pleasure, Nicolas bobbed his head up and down, sucking gently as his mouth moved over his lover. He slipped his hand between Kieru's legs to cup the silver-dusted balls, rolling them gently in his fingers. Kieru arched up against him, hips thrusting as he lost control. Nicolas's opposite hand slipped onto his own cock, stroking his neglected arousal. Wave after wave of pleasure shivered through him at the dual sensations of his rough palm against his shaft and the hot cock in his mouth.

Nicolas pulled back a bit until just the head of Kieru's cock was in his mouth. He suckled for a moment, then probed the narrow slit with his tongue, catching the proof of his lover's arousal as it seeped from Kieru's body.

"Nicolas, I—" The rest of his words were spoken in a sibilant language as Kieru lost his command of Common. Still, his meaning was clear enough to Nicolas. He sank down on Kieru's cock again, deliberately relaxing his throat so he could take the entire length of his lover's member into his mouth. When his nose was buried in the downy silver curls, he swallowed twice, then pulled back.

Kieru convulsed, hot seed spilling into Nicolas's mouth. As his lover climaxed, Nicolas followed, matching passion for passion.

* * * *

"*K-R-A-K-E-N*," Adam said, giving Nicolas a look that said he wasn't entirely happy with Nicolas's question. Their teacher's hazel eyes were alight with good humor and exasperation, a faint smile curving his lips.

On his left, Lorna said, "*K*, not *C*," printing the word in shaky letters. She cocked her head, staring down at the word. "Somehow it doesn't seem as frightening when you see it wrote down." A pirate to the bone, she never went anywhere without a collection of throwing knives in belts crossed over her ample chest and a cutlass at her hip. After pushing a wisp of curly black hair behind one delicate ear, she used a dampened cloth to wipe the charcoal letters away, nodded sharply, and turned a brilliant smile at Nicolas. "Thanks for asking about the fell beastly."

“You're welcome,” he said, returning her smile. They'd been lovers for a brief time several years ago. It had quickly settled into an easy companionship as they discovered that they were much better as friends. They still occasionally shared a bed, but it was about comfort far more than passion.

Across from him, Adam was shaking his head at the two of them, lips twitching as he tried to stifle his smile.

Nicolas smirked at his teacher, resisting the urge to poke his tongue out at Adam.

It struck him then how comfortable they all were with the captain's lover. Adam's instinctive warmth and joy in living affected everyone he met. Nicolas looked around at the rest of his lesson mates. Seated about the rough square of sailcloth that served as their writing table, everyone seemed relaxed, almost playful. Ancient Jinjin, who must have been nearing seventy before becoming a ghost, cackled, pink toothless gums bared in a wide grin. Dour Tomas, the ship's cook, wore a smile that softened the harsh lines of his face into an expression approaching pleasant. Flame-haired Bekah, whose years as a wharf-side doxy had cultivated a sultry, artificial smile, was grinning like a madwoman, her blue eyes sparkling with happiness.

Theatrically rolling his eyes, Adam said, “So glad to be of service. Are there any more questions?”

“I would know how to write 'sorcerer,' if it please thee,” Tyreel said.

Nicolas loved the soft, formal speech patterns the big Northman used. He put his charcoal stick down and shook the beginnings of a cramp from his fingers.

“By all means, let us face all our demons, and yes, I will also teach that word,” Adam said, his wry smile taking the sting from his words. Leaning forward, he drew an *S* on the sailcloth. “First letter is *S*.”

Nicolas retrieved his stick and bent over his own section of the cloth, eager to learn the new word. Lorna was right; knowing how to write the name of an enemy gave one some measure of power over him.

“*Ware*.” The word whispered in his mind as a shadow blotted out the sun.

Fear bitter in his throat, Nicolas looked up in time to see an enormous clawed tentacle, bigger in girth than a man's body. The underside of it was sickly white in color and lined with both suckers and cruel yellow talons. It hovered over them for a moment, swaying like a cobra,

its mottled skin an ever-changing mixture of blue, green, and gray. Between one breath and the next, the monster's tentacle swooped down and plucked Lorna from the midst of the lesson group. As she was lifted above the deck, claws and serrated suckers stabbed into her, making her bleed from dozens of wounds. Blood sprayed down over them in a warm, ruby-hued rain. Lorna screamed as she was dragged over the edge of the ship to vanish beneath the water.

It happened so quickly that no one had a chance to draw a weapon.

"All hands, 'ware the kraken!" Nicolas shouted once he'd found his voice. Drawing the twin daggers he wore strapped to his belt, he quickly moved until he stood back to back with Bekah, watching for the next attack. Tears rolled down his face, mingling with Lorna's blood. All over the ship, steel flashed in the bright sunlight as the pirates armed themselves and peered fearfully into the blue depths.

Amidships, he could hear Captain Fox ordering the artillery crew to man the cannons. As the well-trained crew took battle stations, nothing stirred. The *Grey Lady* swayed gently on the untroubled waves as the sea kept its secrets.

* * * *

"*It's getting bolder,*" Nicolas said. He was seated on the black sand, just out of touching distance from Kieru. The silver-haired man had been curiously reluctant to touch as this newest dream began. Nicolas feared that meant his lover was preparing to leave, knowing the *Grey Lady* and all who sailed her were doomed. Above, a waning moon rode low in the sky. What little light it produced was subdued, shadowing rather than illuminating.

"It will get bolder still before it ends the chase."

"Aye." Nicolas paused for a moment to order his thoughts. "Do you think it is fully under the thumb of the sorcerer? If we can somehow strike at the creature's master, will that make the kraken leave us in peace?"

Kieru shook his head. "The kraken has no master. What the evil one—the man you call a sorcerer—did was cast the scent and location of the *Lady* at the kraken. The evil one placed a beacon on the ship to call the monster, but holds no power over it."

"Are you sure?" Nicolas didn't doubt his lover's words but yet held out hope that the fell beast could be turned from its hunt.

Kieru's answer held nothing but certainty. "The favored of Marita, the hungry goddess—the sharks, the jellies, and the kraken—cannot be commanded by magic."

Nicolas felt the faint hope slip away. "We are setting multiple watches all day and all night. The captain has the artillery crew manning the cannons at all hours, working in shifts. It will not catch us unprepared again." He'd served his own watch, then spent hours helping to ready the myriad weapons the *Grey Lady* carried. Swords and daggers and spear points were sharpened, bows were strung, arrows fletched. Cannon trajectory had been altered as much as the ship's structure allowed in order to make them effective in fighting a foe who comes in close from beneath the sea.

"Good." Kieru took up a handful of black sand and let it trickle from between his fingers. "I'm sorry about the woman."

Tears prickled in Nicolas's eyes. "Aye," he agreed. His own grief must wait until the kraken had been defeated; sorrow was a luxury the crew of the *Lady* simply couldn't afford right now. "Just before the attack, I heard a warning in my mind. Was that you?"

Kieru nodded. "It's difficult to send thoughts outside these dreams, but I hoped you might hear me."

"I did." Deciding to confirm something he was sure of, though it had not been spoken aloud before, he said, "You are the silver shark that's been following us."

"Yes." Curious black eyes regarded him. "Did you doubt this?"

"No, but I want no secrets between us, not even accidental ones." He longed to reach out to the other man, wanting the comfort of contact with another living being.

"How can you not hate me?" Anguish made Kieru's voice shake.

"Why would I hate you?" Nicolas asked, genuinely puzzled. "You've gone out of your way to warn us when you did not have to. And"—he blushed but steeled himself to continue—"we have shared pleasure together. I care for you, as a friend and...more."

"But I let the sustak steal away two people. What good am I?"

Nicolas closed the distance between them and placed the tip of his index finger over Kieru's lips. "Hush. I've seen at least part of the monster that has targeted us. Even the largest silver shark would be no match for such a fiend. An attack on a creature that has no interest in

you would be foolish, and likely fatal.” He rested his forehead against Kieru's. “We may yet defeat the creature. Regardless, I want you safe.”

Strong arms encircled him as Kieru pulled him close and turned so that they lay back on the sand, this time with Kieru on top. “I would like to bring you pleasure,” the silver-haired man said, trailing his tongue down Nicolas's neck.

“Yes, please,” Nicolas said, tilting his head to one side as his lover began nibbling at the juncture between his neck and shoulder. Those rows of sharp teeth should have filled him with terror as they nipped the skin over the large vein in his neck, but Nicolas simply sighed with bliss. He trusted his lover completely. In this dream, they were in control. Teeth didn't tear, and sand didn't get into uncomfortable places. The temperature was mild, and there were no distractions. Above, the moon waxed, her welcome light driving the lurking shadows away. Truly, this was as close to heaven as a ghost pirate could desire.

Kieru licked and kissed his way down Nicolas's chest. Nicolas felt his nipples pebble into hard nubs in anticipation of Kieru's mouth. The first tentative touch of Kieru's tongue made him sigh. He buried his hand in his lover's silken hair and urged Kieru closer. Lips closed over the hard peak, sending a delicious shudder through Nicolas as Kieru began to suckle him, lightly at first, then with more enthusiasm. His cock hardened further as he gave himself over to delight.

Nicolas arched up into the intimate kiss and tangled his hand farther into Kieru's hair as his lover suckled at his breast. With one last, greedy suck, Kieru turned his attention to the other nipple and fastened his mouth on it as though starving.

“Goddess bless.” Nicolas gasped at the almost painful pleasure. He'd never had a lover who seemed to enjoy playing with his nipples as much as he enjoyed having them played with. Most of the male lovers he'd had didn't derive much pleasure from the act—neither giving nor receiving—and his female lovers had often been reluctant to perform this kind of kiss. Not so his silver-haired lover. Kieru seemed to genuinely enjoy what he was doing, if the soft sounds of satisfaction he made and the hard length of his cock pressed against Nicolas's thigh were to be believed.

Desire sang along every muscle; every sinew hummed with passion. Nicolas felt urgency build low in his belly as his aching cock began to weep.

Kieru switched his attention back to the other nipple, his grin baring row upon row of wickedly sharp teeth at Nicolas before swooping down and claiming the tender nub with a stinging bite.

Pain and pleasure exploded into Nicolas's senses, and his body convulsed as a powerful climax rushed through him. Stunned with the intensity of his orgasm, Nicolas shook as his cock jerked, spurting his life essence onto his belly. Panting, aftershocks surging through him as relentlessly as the tides, Nicolas concentrated on getting his body under control. Several deep breaths later, he found the strength to open his eyes.

"Good?" Kieru asked, his expression one of pure male satisfaction.

"Yes," Nicolas said, bliss-drenched need sparking along his nerves. "Want you. Inside me. Please."

"Show me how to please you," Kieru said. He brushed delicate kisses across Nicolas's lips. "Let me give you this gift. Let me love you."

His heart squeezing painfully at the raw honesty in Kieru's voice, Nicolas opened his legs, wordlessly encouraging his lover to settle between them. When Kieru was in position, Nicolas ran his hand through the slippery seed on his chest, collected as much as he could, then rubbed it over Kieru's hard cock. Kieru gasped, shuddering against him at the intimate contact.

Once his lover's cock was slicked, Nicolas shifted his position until he could guide the head of Kieru's shaft to the hidden opening in his body. "Inside me," he repeated, voice husky with desire.

"Are you sure?" Kieru asked, teeth worrying his lower lip. "I will not hurt you?"

"Not in this place. Even were we both awake and human, the hurt is brief and well worth it. Come inside me, my beautiful silver shark. I would belong to you this night."

Kieru flexed his hips, pressing forward.

Nicolas hummed his satisfaction as his body was breached. His lover's cock slid easily into him, filling him. He pulled his legs back, wanting deeper contact. Kieru moaned and began shallow thrusts, his rigid member pressing unerringly against Nicolas's sweet spot.

They moved together in the ancient dance, each giving and taking, finding their own rhythm, their own song of joy.

Nicolas submerged himself in the intimate connection, knowing that all too soon he would be back in the waking world with its uncertain future. They rocked together on the sand, hands and mouths busy memorizing silken skin, straining muscles, and the slick joining of lips and tongues. As they loved, Nicolas felt his cock harden again, the quick recovery a welcome surprise. As his own desire increased, he wrapped his legs around his lover's slim waist, urging deeper, harder thrusts. , Long before he was ready for it, completion surged through him, and his body convulsed in a shattering climax. Kieru gasped and shuddered above him, spilling his seed deep inside Nicolas's body.

Sated, they lay, still entwined, mouths lazily kissing though all urgency was spent. For once, fate was kind, allowing them time for their breathing to quiet, for sweat to dry, and for lovemaking to gentle into holding. Nicolas pillowed his head on Kieru's shoulder, his hand resting in the center of his lover's chest. Contented and safe within the dream, human and silver shark slept.

* * * *

Nicolas shaded his eyes with his hand as he peered out over the vastness of the ocean. Most of the watches were done in pairs, but where he was stationed, there simply wasn't room for two people. He'd drawn the midday watch at the ship's prow, his favorite place to stand. In front of him he could see the back of their ship's carved representation of the *Lady*, her wooden hair streaming behind her and merging into the tip of the prow, her arms stretched backward along the ship's rail.

Her right hand was darker than the rest of the ship's wood, singed by the rope she'd held as the pirates pulled the great ship from one world to another. It should have been impossible. There were only certain places where the chosen of the goddess could cross between realms, and carved wood could not move under its own power. Impossible, Nicolas was beginning to understand, did not truly exist.

He stroked the smooth, dark wood, awe filling him as he remembered how the carved arm thrust forward and down and held the rope that the pirates had used to save Adam's life a few months before. Nicolas knew the *Grey Lady* was truly alive, but neither he nor anyone else in the crew had guessed that she might be able to move. Even Captain Fox had seemed surprised, and he was delighted that one of his loves had been able to save the other.

The bare hint of a breeze ruffled his black hair. The *Lady* was still becalmed, her pale gray sails slack, only the vague movement of the sea's current pushing her forward. He wasn't sure if the fickle wind's abandonment was good or ill. They couldn't outrun the kraken, for the fell beast was far faster than even the greatest of ships, and it could follow them throughout all the waters of the myriad worlds that shared the same vast ocean. Of all the sea's beasts, only sharks, jellyfish, and kraken could travel the ways between the worlds. The favored of the sea goddess Marita, a gift the *Grey Lady* and her crew shared, were all equal in the goddess's eyes. She would grant no help for one of her favorites against another.

On the near horizon, a silver triangle broke the surface. Smiling at the sight of his lover, Nicolas sent a pulse of love toward the great shark. Startlement, then wordless affection, suffused him, warming him even more than the mild sunlight.

"You lookin' happy," Kami said, pausing beside him. This watch, her job was to patrol the decks, ensuring that everyone on watch was in place and paying attention. Nicolas didn't imagine she'd need to remind anyone of his or her duty. Anxiety sang along the ship, and the very ropes of the rigging seemed to hum with apprehension.

He glanced at her, letting her see his smile, then resumed scanning the area in front of the ship for any signs of the kraken. Kieru's dorsal fin angled so that it flashed in the sun before sinking beneath the slow green waves.

"De silver seem fair interested in us," Kami said, leaning her elbows on the rail. "De captain tinks he might be a help in de nex' attack."

"Maybe," Nicolas said. "He's no match for the kraken. I don't want to die, but neither do I wish to see him injured or killed." He had already decided that he would not ask Kieru to fight the kraken. If Kieru made the decision to help—and a traitorous part of Nicolas's heart prayed for just that—then Nicolas would accept that decision. Until then he refused to put any pressure on his lover to attack an almost unstoppable foe.

She nodded, brown eyes scanning the horizon. "To help or not, dat's his choice. Me, I hope he helps. De more fighters we have, de better de chance o' everyone livin'." She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "De kraken tryin' to steal our future. Me, I ain't done livin'."

While Nicolas was still searching for the words to answer her, she squeezed his shoulder and continued her patrol along the ship's port side.

Her kindness and determination suffused Nicolas in warmth. She was a remarkable woman, and he was honored to be able to call her “friend.”

The fin came into view again, closer this time. The great silver shark's back emerged fully from the water as he altered his course until he swam beside the ship.

Nicolas caught his breath at the sheer size of his lover's true form. More than thirty feet long from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail, Kieru was a magnificent creature. The brilliant gray skin that gave the silver shark its name glittered in the sunlight, making Kieru look as though he'd been sprinkled with stardust. The dorsal fin, its tip as black as Kieru's eyes, rose like a sail above the shark's back.

The great shark rolled onto his side, one inky black eye peering up at Nicolas, mouth open enough to flash row upon row of triangular teeth. His black-tipped swim fin trailed sparkling drops of water as it came above the surface in a lazy wave.

His heart in his throat, Nicolas marveled at the predatory perfection his lover embodied. “*Beautiful*,” he sent toward Kieru. It took the whole of his will to prevent himself from diving overboard so that he might stroke and explore his lover's true form.

“*Tonight*.” The response held the promise of bliss.

* * * *

“*Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful*,” Nicolas said, punctuating each word with a quick kiss.

Kieru laughingly fended him off. “Thank you, my heart. I will admit to some fear of showing you my true form. Most humans fear my kind.” He paused, generous lips pressed in a thin, worried line. “I am no shape-shifter. It's only in dreams that I can be with you like this.”

Nicolas nodded. He'd guessed as much. “I have no ability to change my shape either. I had hoped you might possess it, but it was a faint hope.” He nestled close to his lover, inhaling the heady scent of spice and man. “I don't care. We are together now. Dreams are enough. In truth, I never dared to hope I would find such happiness as I have with you.”

“I have attended the gatherings where my kind come together every decade to breed, but I've never felt so connected to another person.” Kieru tilted his head back so he could see Nicolas's face. “In finding joy, I have no mind to lose it. Tell your captain I will fight for the *Grey Lady*.”

“Aye,” Nicolas said, acquiescing to his lover's will even as his heart longed to beg Kieru to leave and stay safe. “Will you come inside me again?” As death moved ever closer, he needed the reminder that they both yet lived.

Eyes glittering with passion, Kieru said, “I had hoped you would claim me.”

“I want that, I do, but I need to feel your strength tonight.”

Wordlessly, Kieru pressed Nicolas back on the sand, settling between Nicolas's eagerly opened legs. “I can deny you nothing.”

As his lover's cock filled him, Nicolas cried out, wrapping arms and legs around the amazing man who was willing to risk his life in a fight that need not involve him. “Be strong for me, my heart,” Nicolas murmured as they moved together.

Before they could find the rhythm of thrust and counterthrust, a bell began to peal.

* * * *

Wrenched into wakefulness, Nicolas, having slept in his trousers, grabbed his daggers and cutlass and sprinted up onto the deck as the first of the cannons were fired. A high-pitched shriek rent the air as an enormous clubbed tentacle crashed onto the deck, snapping the mast holding the aft sail.

The tentacle retreated, then came back, swiping sideways at the crew members lining the starboard side. Nicolas rushed forward and looked for an opening to put his cutlass to work. It was no use; the great rubbery arm moved too quickly, bowling over everything in its path. Claws and suckers drew blood wherever they encountered flesh, and scored the wood of the *Lady's* decks wherever they touched down.

The kraken dominated the fight until it tangled its tentacle in the rigging surrounding the mainsails. Seeing an opening, Nicolas darted forward and hacked at the back of the trapped tentacle with his cutlass. Around him, the uninjured crew members did the same. Dark blue blood welled up from each cut, and the kraken shrieked and ripped its tentacle free, taking most of the mainsail with it.

The body of the kraken surfaced next to the ship, its mantle alone more than half the length of the *Lady*. Two malevolent yellow eyes glared at the ship, promising swift, ugly death to all aboard.

“Ware!” Kami cried as the creature's second tentacle burst from the waves.

“No.”

Nicolas heard the word in his mind and rushed to the ship's rail in time to see the silver arrow of his lover strike the exposed part of the kraken's mantle, targeting one of the enormous yellow eyes.

A cry of triumph erupted from his mouth as that evil lamp was extinguished. His jubilation was short-lived. The kraken turned faster than a striking snake and wrapped its arms around Kieru, bringing the shark's right fin within reach of the murderous beak.

The boom of cannon fire drowned out Nicolas's scream of denial as his lover was grievously wounded. The shot hit the tip of the kraken's mantle, damaging one of the beast's rear fins. A black cloud stained the sea as the monster released Kieru and spewed forth a gush of ink, using the manufactured darkness to hide its path as it jetted away, disappearing into the depths.

The crew went on alert, watching for any signs of a renewed attack. Nicolas, however, had eyes only for his lover.

The great shark floundered in the water, his mangled right fin useless. Red blood stained the water surrounding Kieru's body.

Turning, Nicolas spied Captain Fox. “We have to help him.” He wanted to dive into the water right then and go to his lover but knew the few minutes it would take to make a plan would be far more useful. He could feel Kieru's pain and weariness and sent a pulse of comfort back along their faltering link.

“Aye,” the captain agreed. “But I've no idea how.”

Nicolas pushed back the threatening despair, forcing himself to think. They needed to keep Kieru near the surface, but how? The shark was nearly half the length of the *Grey Lady* and had to weigh several tons.

“De silver in trouble. He be startin' to sink,” Kami called. “I'm tinkin' dat ain't good.”

Nicolas turned back to the rail, preparing to join his lover and do whatever he could for the silver shark, even if it was to die beside him.

A rope from the damaged rigging flopped down over his shoulder. From above, Kid's voice said, “Tie him to the *Lady*. She'll keep him safe.”

Nicolas grabbed the rope, looped it around his arm, and dived off the side of the ship, aiming to land several feet in front of the injured shark. Warm, bloody water closed over him, but he didn't care. Surfacing quickly, he swam to Kieru's head. Stroking the floundering shark's blunt snout, he said, "I'm going to wrap the rope around your belly. The *Lady* will keep you afloat."

"Yes." The word entered his mind laden with pain. Luckily Kieru's uninjured side was closest to the ship, so there was no worry about the injuries being further damaged if Kieru bumped against the side of it. Would this truly work, or would the shark's weight pull the ship over onto her side, dooming them all? Nicolas had to trust that the *Grey Lady* knew her own strength and would take no harm in helping Kieru.

Glad now for the calm seas, Nicolas dived beneath the shark, opening his eyes so that he could see where to place the rope without further injuring his lover. The salt stung his eyes, but desperation gave him the strength to ignore the pain. He manipulated the rope so that it circled Kieru's body just behind the shark's dorsal fin.

Surfacing, he was surprised to find Adam in the water with him. The teacher held another rope. "Trade with me," Adam said, handing Nicolas the new rope and taking the one that was already in place. "Ready, Kami."

Looking up, Nicolas saw the first mate holding a boat hook down, ready to take the ropes up to be anchored on the *Lady*. Not wasting any more time, he swam toward Kieru's powerful tail and dived down, arranging the rope around its thinner part, careful not to bind either of the small rear fins. Coming up, he found Adam waiting for him and again made the rope exchange. The final rope he very, very carefully positioned behind Kieru's head but in front of the shark's gills. His goal was to make a sort of sling that would keep his lover from sinking, but that would be easy to remove if the *Lady* started to founder or if the kraken returned before the shark was fully mobile.

Once the rope was passed up and tied off, he rested for a moment, leaning against his lover, using the rope to hold himself in place. Kieru's silver skin was an odd mixture of smooth and rough, almost like the fine rasps carpenters used to put the final finish on a carving. Beside him, the shark's dark eye watched him, and he could feel the faint touch of Kieru's mind against his own. His lover was in a great deal of pain but found comfort in Nicolas's nearness.

Nicolas looked up at the *Lady*, expecting to see her listing to starboard as she held Kieru's heavy body close to the surface. To his surprise, she held steadily in the water, as straight up and down as she always stood.

Once Nicolas had his breath back, he moved down Kieru's body, looking at the shark's injuries. The right fin was badly torn, part of it actually separated from Kieru's body. In addition, he had a deep bite wound where the kraken's cruel beak had savaged him. Numerous small cuts and punctures from the beast's murderous arms wreathed the areas around the heaviest damage. Bright red blood oozed from the worst of the wounds, marring Kieru's silver skin with crimson stripes. Nicolas bit his lip until he tasted copper, wondering how they were going to help his lover.

A splash startled him. Nicolas turned and found Falon, the ship's healer, swimming toward them. A weary smile creased his face. The dusky-skinned woman had the healer's gift, though she was rarely called upon to use it. Ghost pirates rarely suffered injuries, after all, since very few things could harm them. He just hoped Falon's magic wasn't limited to healing humans.

"Will it let me help?" she called, treading water a safe distance away.

Nicolas couldn't fault her caution; sharks were on the short list of beings pirates were vulnerable to, and a shark the size of his lover could kill a human with one bite.

"His name is Kieru, and he will not hurt you." As he spoke, he stroked his lover's side, offering what comfort he could. "His mind is much like ours, though he wears a form far different." He put as much reassurance into his tone as he could, praying that it would be enough.

Her movements hesitant, Falon swam closer, her gaze darting back and forth from Kieru's head to the injured fin. When the shark did nothing to threaten her, she grew bolder, laying her hands on either side of the bite wound.

A shudder ran the length of Kieru's body, and Nicolas felt a strong flash of pain from his lover. He could feel Kieru's instinctive urge to turn and bite the cause of the pain, but the shark's will was far stronger, and so Kieru remained still.

"Shh," he whispered, also mentally projecting the word. "Let her help."

"Yes. *I accept*," came the thought.

"I need both my hands," Falon said. "You're going to have to hold me up."

Nicolas shifted his grip on the rope encircling Kieru's head and fisted the other in the back of Falon's tunic. He was grateful to see Adam do the same from the other side, using the rope around Kieru's middle as an anchor. He hadn't realized the teacher was still in the water.

Catching Adam's eye, he nodded his thanks. Adam nodded back.

Once she was steadied, Falon turned all her attention to the wound. Slowly—so slowly he was afraid he imagined it—blood stopped seeping and the wound closed. When it was fully closed—though still painful-looking—Falon moved to the damaged fin. She hissed at the extent of the damage, then got to work. Finally, after what felt like hours, she pulled her hands away, and Nicolas saw that the fin was fully reattached, the wounds on their way toward healing.

Falon took her hands away from Kieru's side. “That's all I can do for now. When we've both rested, I'll do another healing.” She shook her head, wet hair flopping with the movement. “If he were human, I'd say he needs to sleep, then eat a hearty meal, but”—she shrugged helplessly—“I've never healed a shark before.” Reaching out, she placed a hand on Kieru's side. “He's a wonderful patient; he didn't fight the healing at all.”

“Sleep and food should help,” Nicolas said, teeth chattering. For the first time, he realized he was cold despite the warmth of the water and surrounding air.

“Come, lads,” Falon said. “We need out of this water before Nicolas goes into shock.”

“But—” Nicolas protested, reluctant to leave his lover. Kieru had been injured because he chose to help Nicolas. If the valiant shark drew comfort from Nicolas's nearness, then Nicolas was determined to stay close.

“You need to rest and recover so that you can help him,” Adam said. “Wearing yourself to a frazzle does no good for anyone.”

“*Sleep, heal,*” Kieru's voice said in his mind.

“*And you as well, my love,*” Nicolas answered as he reluctantly let himself be pulled back aboard the *Lady*.

* * * *

Kieru lay on the black sand, right arm held protectively against his chest. Barely healed wounds marred his pale skin, and lines of agony made deep creases around his eyes and mouth.

Overhead, a gibbous moon cast dim light over the beach. Nicolas knelt beside his lover, wanting to touch but afraid to cause more pain.

"Join me, please." The silver-haired man's voice was hoarse.

"I don't want to hurt you," Nicolas said, feeling tears prickle in his eyes at Kieru's obvious suffering. He blinked them away, not wanting to show weakness in front of the man who'd fought so bravely on his behalf. And yet he felt compelled to touch his lover, if only to reassure himself of Kieru's presence.

"Lie on my left side. I've few injuries there, and I find I take great comfort from your nearness." Kieru moved his left arm away from his body, an invitation for Nicolas to nestle close.

"Aye," Nicolas said. He carefully arranged himself so that he lay lightly against his lover's body, ready to move at the first sign that he was causing distress. "Thank you," he said, knowing the words were inadequate. "You saved the ship. Without you we would have been lost."

The *Lady* and her crew had taken some damage, but nothing that couldn't be easily repaired. Had Kieru not intervened, Nicolas had no doubt the kraken would have triumphed.

Kieru sighed. "I wish I could have done more. We drove the kraken away, but I think it will be back to seek vengeance, and when it returns, it will attack full out."

"I know." Guilt assailed Nicolas. "And now you're injured and vulnerable." He lifted Kieru's hand and kissed the center of his lover's palm. "I'm sorry." The worst part of his remorse came from the certain knowledge that in joining the battle, Kieru had made himself a target for the most dangerous creature in all the worlds' seas.

"No." Kieru's voice was hard as iron. "I made my choice. Your healer did me a great service. I can and will still fight. This monster may yet defeat us, but not because we faltered."

The words woke determination in Nicolas's breast. "Aye. Our lives are dear to us and will not be taken easily." Though he knew it was the most blatant of clichés, Nicolas had to admit that his life was sweeter to him with Kieru's company. Fighting for his own future was compelling; fighting for their future together was an absolute necessity.

A strange thought entered his mind. "Would you ever have spoken to me had the kraken not targeted the *Lady*?" How ironic if the beast threatening to tear them apart was the very thing that brought them together.

“No.” Kieru turned his head and kissed Nicolas's cheek. “I have long thought of the *Grey Lady* and her crew as friends, merely because we travel the same waters and have done so for hundreds of years. I also hate the kraken, for one of the beasts killed my first mate, and she was heavy with our young. It wasn't until I saw the danger my old enemy presented, felt the evil one's foul beacon, that I thought to try to communicate with someone aboard the *Lady*. It was pure luck that I was able to reach your dreams and that we should find so much about each other to admire.”

Nicolas rested his fingertips on Kieru's cheek in a careful caress. “I am sorry for the loss of your mate and the babies you might have had.” Children had never been a possibility in Nicolas's life. The few women he'd bedded before joining the crew of the *Lady* had been paid doxies. Afterward, the same magic that kept the pirates from aging or being vulnerable to most injuries rendered them infertile as well.

Kieru sighed. “It's not the same for my kind as it is for yours. We are wanderers, unhappy in each other's company for any length of time. Still, after we mate, we stay linked mentally after the young are born until the pups are ready to leave their mother. I was only ten miles away when the attack occurred. I felt her die but was too far away to render any aid. I sorrowed at the loss of a friend, but my feelings for her were nothing like what I feel for you.”

“I understand,” Nicolas said. He mourned the loss of his friend Lorna, taken just yesterday by the kraken, but his depth of feeling for Kieru was far greater, even after so short a relationship. Never before had he felt so much so quickly with any of his previous lovers. The depth of his regard for the silver-haired man was almost frightening. Wanting to distance himself from the confusing welter of his feeling, he cast about for something to say. “Do you have other children?”

“Two females and a male roam the seas.” A soft smile lit Kieru's face. “One of the females has had young of her own, so my bloodline continues.”

“Do you ever see them? Their mother?” He squashed the irrational and instinctive jealousy he felt at the thought of his lover mating with a female and siring children.

“My younglings all have different mothers, and I see them but rarely. If our paths cross, we say hello but little else.”

“Don't you get lonely?” Nicolas asked. He'd been lonely for most of his life, cherishing each of the relationships he'd shared but not expecting them to last. Kieru's warm presence in his mind hinted at permanence and loneliness forever banished.

“Yes and no.” Kieru sighed. “I am used to wandering and have friends among many different beings in different worlds. I enjoy speaking with others, but I also enjoy the solitary hunt. Until I met you, I couldn't imagine staying close to any other being for a long period of time. If we survive, I will continue to wander, but I will come back to you as long as I am welcome.”

Nicolas sat up and stared fiercely down at his lover. “I will always welcome you, for as long as I live.” The days and nights would no longer hold emptiness as long as he knew his lover would return. Perhaps, if they were very lucky, the ever-increasing strength of their mental link would allow them to communicate even when separated by many leagues.

A broad smile lit Kieru's face. “I wish I could dream the pain away, but my traitorous body won't let me forget it. I would have you claim me tonight.”

“There will be other nights,” Nicolas promised, knowing his words were more wish than truth, even as he spoke. Filling his voice with sultry innuendo, he added, “I have *many* things to teach you.”

Kieru frowned. “I shall endeavor to be patient, but I do so love the feel of your body against mine, the sharing of thrust and moan, and the beauty of your face as pleasure overtakes you.”

Desire shivered down his spine at Kieru's bold words. He too wanted to make love, to feel his lover's joyous surrender to passion beneath him.

A daring, wicked thought stole into Nicolas's mind. He looked up at the moon, willing it to be full. The sky shimmered, and a fat full moon shone down on them, its light nearly as bright as the sun. Taking a deep breath and hoping his lover would enjoy the show, he stood and stepped so that he straddled his lover's supine body. Before he could lose his nerve, Nicolas ran his hand up his chest, circling, then pinching his nipples.

Kieru caught his breath, dark eyes following Nicolas's hand.

The avid interest lent him courage, and Nicolas felt his cock begin to swell. Ignoring it for now, he concentrated on his chest and belly, stroking the skin and tormenting his nipples with soft pinches and tugs.

Between his legs, Kieru's torso raised a bit as black sand mounded behind the silver-haired man's back. "Show me," he said, licking his full lips, his sharp teeth gleaming.

Emboldened, Nicolas raised his free hand and traced his own lips before letting it trail down his chest and abdomen, finally coming to rest on his engorged cock. Closing his eyes, he ran his hand up and down the shaft, groaning at the rush of pleasure.

A soft gasp made him open his eyes and look down at his lover. A hectic flush stained Kieru's cheeks as his heated gaze traveled between the hand on Nicolas's cock and the one toying with Nicolas's nipples. Nicolas could almost feel the heat from that lusty regard.

Shaking with the need to please his lover, Nicolas caressed his shaft, wanting to satisfy Kieru's hungry gaze. He paid careful attention to the weeping head, using his own essence to lubricate his grip. Watching Kieru's eager response was an added delight to the usual sensations. It was strange to indulge in self-pleasure and yet be so focused on another—strange, and powerfully arousing. He held nothing back, moaning, shuddering, tossing his head back as he tried to hold off his climax as long as possible.

Inevitably completion could no longer be denied, and his body quaked as seed and cries of bliss spilled from him. When the last of the tremors finished shaking him, Nicolas opened his eyes and looked down at his lover.

Kieru was staring up at him, wonder and no little lust filling his expression. "Beautiful," Kieru murmured.

Nicolas smiled, suddenly bashful, and sank down on his lover's uninjured side. Hiding his blush against Kieru's shoulder, he was surprised when his hand was lifted. He looked up in time to see Kieru's tongue dart out to taste Nicolas's seed. Catching his breath at the sheer eroticism of the scene, Nicolas watched as his fingers and palm were licked clean of every drop of his essence.

* * * *

The water was cooler today than it had been yesterday when the kraken had attacked, but Nicolas didn't care. His lover was nearly healed after a second session with Falon. A good feed

on the ship's store of salt pork had gone a long way as well toward restoring the shark. They had just cut the ropes anchoring the shark to the *Grey Lady*. Kieru had made several passes around and beneath the ship, stretching muscles that had stiffened during his forced stillness. Nicolas swam around the *Lady*, simply enjoying being in the water with his lover. Luck had been with them all, as the seas remained calm and the kraken had made no new attacks.

Hammering and shouts came from above as the crew set about repairing the damage inflicted on the *Lady* by the monster's murderous tentacles. The crew itself had been extremely fortunate. There were no deaths, and aside from a few broken bones, most of the injuries had been superficial and easily healed by Falon. Nicolas had been surprised to learn that the creatures favored by Marita could injure the ghost crew as well as kill them. Somehow it seemed more unfair that a kraken could break Bekah's leg than that it could kill. Irrational, he knew, but while the deaths of Lorna and Gerry made him ache with grief, the news of the injuries made him indignant.

A bump against his side brought his attention back to the magnificent creature he'd fallen madly in love with. Kieru watched him with one gleaming black eye. Nicolas stroked the shark's blunt snout, laughing aloud when Kieru rose from the water, mouth open in a shark's pointed grin.

Abruptly Kieru sank out of sight beneath the water. Nicolas didn't have time to be concerned before the shark rose up beneath him in an echo of the first dream where they'd met face-to-face.

"Ride me."

Physical contact made their mental communications much easier, so Nicolas understood his lover's intention. He opened his legs to straddle the shark's back and grasped Kieru's dorsal fin with both hands as the shark waited patiently for him to find his seat. Once he was settled, Kieru began to swim, staying at the surface. They circled the *Grey Lady*, Nicolas waving to the crew as if he were royalty on parade. Those who saw him waved back, laughing and calling out encouragement and playful insults. As they passed the ship's prow, Captain Fox saluted them, then waved, gold teeth glinting as he laughed.

The kraken might even now be preparing an attack, but Nicolas couldn't bring himself to worry. His lover was healthy, the sun was shining, and the warm seawater was green as glass and nearly as smooth. For this moment, the world was simply glorious.

Nicolas clung to Kieru's dorsal fin as the shark's broad back undulated beneath him. He could feel the caged power in Kieru's body and marveled anew that such an amazing creature cared for him. That a being who'd roamed the oceans of all the worlds, met hundreds of fascinating people of all species, should choose him. Truly, he was blessed.

Memory of the previous night's loving made arousal rush through him, and he felt his cock harden despite the impropriety of the situation. Playfully he wrapped his arms around the black-tipped dorsal fin in front of him and pressed his hard length against Kieru's skin.

"Truly?" came the question.

Nicolas could feel how intrigued his lover was by the thought that he was aroused outside their dreams. Did he dare speak his feelings? Yes. If he didn't seize this moment to tell Kieru how much he cared, he might never have another chance. His lover showed great bravery in attacking the kraken; it was time for Nicolas to find his own courage.

"I love you. All of you. It doesn't matter what shape you wear. You are my Kieru, the other half of my soul." The words burst forth in a rush. Terrified he'd spoken too soon, revealed too much, he held his breath, waiting for Kieru to respond.

The silver shark slowed until he was barely moving. *"My Nicolas. My soul mate. I love you."*

Relief made Nicolas giddy as he sagged against Kieru's fin. The increased contact once again pressed his arousal against the shark's fin. "Sorry," he said aloud, laughing at the inappropriateness of rubbing off against his inhuman lover.

"I miss the feeling of arousal in a human body. This body doesn't work that way." In his mind, Nicolas could hear Kieru's rueful chuckle. Then, *"I dare you."*

"What?" He could not have heard that correctly.

Kieru surged forward, then back in the water, making Nicolas gasp as his cock was stimulated. *"I dare you."*

"But...but...people are watching," Nicolas sputtered, a hot blush staining his cheeks. He couldn't believe that he was actually considering doing something so bold.

"They won't be able to see. But I'll know. I'll feel it. You are exposed but not truly visible to them."

Nicolas felt his cock jerk at his lover's provocative words. Scarcely able to believe his own daring, he slipped his hand inside his trousers and caressed himself. Shuddering at the illicit sensation, he fisted his cock, rubbing his thumb across the slick head.

"Yesssssss," Kieru said.

As Nicolas pleasured himself, he could feel his lover in his mind sharing every sensation. The intimate mental contact as exciting as physical contact, it was but a few brief minutes until Nicolas shuddered his release. Limp, sated, he held on to Kieru as the silver shark dropped lower in the water. Grateful for the cover, Nicolas pulled his hand from his trousers and rinsed it clean in the cool water.

"That was better than the kill after a long, fast chase," Kieru said, sounding as replete as Nicolas felt.

"Twas good for me as well," Nicolas replied. He rested his forehead against his lover's fin for a moment, then reluctantly spoke aloud, "I'd best go back aboard the *Lady*. It's near my watch, and we still have a deadly enemy stalking us."

"True. Tell your captain that I will keep watch as well."

Kieru swam close to the ship, and Nicolas called for help in boarding. To his surprise, it was Adam and Captain Fox who hauled him aboard. Nicolas nearly died of embarrassment when the captain winked at him, saying, "Have fun, lad?"

* * * *

The second day had passed without attack. Tension among the crew was nearing the breaking point. No one believed the monster had abandoned them, and the longer it waited to attack, the more time its own wounds would have to heal. Still becalmed, the *Lady* could only wait.

Nicolas had served his watch, then helped raise the repaired aft mast before finally seeking rest.

Now he waited on the black sand, but his lover was nowhere to be found. He cast his mind far and wide but could feel only the barest trace of the shark's thoughts. Fearing the worst—that

his lover was injured and dying—he stared blankly over the sea. The moon hid her face as the dreamscape aligned itself with his mood. Despair settled over him at the thought of losing the love he'd so recently discovered. Without Kieru as part of it, would life truly be worth living?

“Love”. Kieru spoke into his mind as a sharp fin cut through the water a few yards out.

Nicolas leaped to his feet as the silver shark arrowed through the surf, taking on human form just as Kieru neared the beach. Flinging himself at his lover, Nicolas scattered kisses all over the silver-haired man's face, his hands searching Kieru's body for new damage.

Kieru pulled him close, pressing the hard evidence of his arousal against Nicolas's belly. Their mouths met, and heated kisses were exchanged. When Kieru broke the kiss to pull away, Nicolas clutched him close.

“Wait,” Kieru said. “I have news.”

Reluctantly Nicolas stepped back, though he linked his fingers through Kieru's. “I'm listening.” Hope sprang forth in his breast. Could a miracle have happened? Could the kraken be dead?

“I found a pod of dolphins nearby. Though they did not want to hear me, I persisted and was able to tell them about the kraken's hunt of the *Grey Lady* and her crew. They have no love for the fell beasts, but they were wary of me, with good reason. I have hunted and eaten dolphins in the past, as they hunted me when I was but a pup. I promised never to hunt dolphins in this world or any other where they might be found, and they agreed to keep watch for us. The kraken will not come upon us unawares.”

“That's wondrous news indeed,” Nicolas said. His spirits fell. “I must awaken and tell the captain.” Though loath to leave his lover so quickly, he knew his duty.

Kieru shook his head. “It will wait. The dolphins say the beast isn't to be found a day's journey in any direction. As soon as it moves, one will come to me. I will tell you immediately. At the same time, several others will surround the *Lady* and make as much noise as they can. Believe me, we will have ample warning of an attack.”

Knees weak from relief, Nicolas nearly sagged to the ground. “Thank you,” he said, aware even as he spoke that the words were inadequate. For the first time since the kraken appeared, he felt hope that they might actually survive.

A sultry smile lit the silver-haired man's face. "You have things to teach me yet. I am eager to learn how it feels to be claimed by a lover."

Lust flashed through Nicolas like lightning. "Then learn you shall, my heart," he said, raising Kieru's hand to his lips. Still, he would not leave the *Lady* vulnerable. "Are you sure the dolphins will keep watch?" he asked, carefully tracing the new scars on Kieru's shoulder and side. Fury burned through him as he contemplated the lines marring his lover's pale skin. How dare the kraken harm what was his?

"Their leader gave his word." Gracefully Kieru knelt in front of Nicolas, and with the reverence of a suppliant before an altar, he closed his mouth around Nicolas's cock.

"Goddess bless." Nicolas groaned the words as his member was engulfed in sharp-toothed heat.

Kieru looked up at him, smirked, and deliberately suckled the head of Nicolas's cock before bending to take it more fully inside.

Without conscious thought, Nicolas's hands buried themselves in silken silver hair and guided Kieru into the proper rhythm. The points of Kieru's teeth scraped painlessly over Nicolas's skin, providing an exquisite counterpoint to the shark's nimble tongue.

Sense returned before he could fully lose himself in sensation. "Wait," Nicolas said, tugging at Kieru's hair so his lover would release him.

Kieru looked up at him, dismay plain. "Did I do it wrong?"

"*NO*," Nicolas said, panting. "You do it very, very right. But if you want me to claim you, we should stop. I don't want to come too soon and deprive you of your lesson."

"We can't do both?"

Nicolas chuckled, blushing. "Ah, my recovery time isn't usually as good as it was the other night."

Kieru lay back on the sand, spreading his legs. "Then claim me now."

Caught by the beauty, Nicolas drank in the sight before him. Kieru was a vision of pale loveliness against the dark sand. Long-limbed and graceful, silver hair gleaming in bright moonlight, he gazed up at Nicolas, wantonness personified.

Nicolas pounced. Capturing Kieru's lips, he plundered his lover's mouth, mapping teeth, tongue, and moist, welcoming heat. His hands roamed, petting smooth skin and tightly pebbled nipples, dipping playfully into the silver-haired man's navel, and finally encircling Kieru's proudly erect cock. He stroked once, twice, paused to rub his thumb across the flared head, smearing his lover's essence over the tip, then resumed his firm strokes on his lover's shaft.

Kieru thrust within Nicolas's tight grip, then wrenched his head away from their kiss. Panting, he said, "Stop. I want to come with you inside me."

Nicolas, his own breathing none too steady, said, "We need something to ease my way inside you, else there will be discomfort."

Kieru placed his mouth on Nicolas's shoulder and bit down. Nicolas felt the delicious pressure of those rows of sharp teeth against his skin, but there was no pain; his skin remained whole.

"No harm, remember?" Kieru kissed the spot he'd just bitten. "As my teeth cannot hurt you, so you will cause me no injury. Claim me, beloved, and let me find my joy as you gift me with yours."

Reluctantly Nicolas acquiesced. He understood Kieru's desire. This might be their last time together. Yet the fear of causing pain where there should only be delight cooled his own ardor, though nothing could quench it completely when he was so near his lover. A plan took shape in his mind, a way to ease his way into his lover and give them both much gratification.

Ignoring the other man's protest, he moved off Kieru. "Turn over, love." As he urged his lover to roll over, he asked, "Is your shoulder strong enough to hold you if you rest on knees and elbows?"

"Yes." Kieru's voice took on a dissatisfied edge. "Do you intend to mount me from behind? I would like to see your face when you claim me."

"We will be face-to-face when I enter you, I promise." Nicolas grinned. "Though there is great joy in the other position as well, that is a lesson for another time."

"Then why?" Kieru asked, positioning himself as Nicolas had requested.

"I have a lesson of another sort in mind. One we will both enjoy."

Nicolas caught his breath at the sight of his lover's ass raised so temptingly before him. Pale white globes, muscles taut beneath satin skin, begged to be touched. Fighting the longing to

do just that, Nicolas instead placed his hands on Kieru's powerful shoulders, rubbing the corded muscles.

With a hum of contentment, Kieru settled farther onto his elbows.

Taking his time, Nicolas explored his lover's back and flanks, admiring the play of muscle and sinew beneath the skin. After he'd mapped this part of his lover with his hands, he repeated the process with his mouth, kissing, nibbling, and licking his way down to the shadowed cleft of Kieru's ass. Using both hands to spread Kieru's cheeks, Nicolas bit back a moan at the sight of the opening to his lover's body. Leaning forward, he licked delicately across the crinkled skin.

Kieru bucked beneath him, calling out in the language of the sharks.

Hearing only surprise in the silver-haired man's tone and no distress, Nicolas smiled and continued with the lesson, running his tongue over the tight pucker again and again.

Kieru arched up against him, wordlessly begging for more—a request Nicolas happily granted.

Kieru tasted of spice and musk and man. Wanting, needing, more, Nicolas plunged his tongue into his lover's anus.

Shuddering, Kieru keened his enjoyment, pressing his ass up farther against Nicolas's plundering mouth. Nicolas worked his tongue in and out of his lover's body, mimicking the act of love. The taste of his lover was more intense here. It held the mystery of the deepest ocean trench and the hot rush of blood at the apex of the hunt.

Losing himself in the heady joy of learning his lover in such an intimate way, it took Nicolas a few moments to realize that Kieru was chanting, “Now, now, now,” over and over again.

He pressed his tongue deeper and felt his lover's body quiver around him. Knowing Kieru was as relaxed as possible, Nicolas decided to stop the delicious torment and grant his lover's pleas. With one last lick and thrust, Nicolas pulled back and helped Kieru roll over.

The silver-haired man was almost incoherent with need, his head twisting back and forth on the black sand, breath coming in harsh gasps. Kieru parted his legs, entreating Nicolas with his body even as the soft chorus of “nows” continued.

Nicolas positioned himself and guided his aching cock into the sweet, hidden opening. Catching Kieru's mouth in a bruising kiss, he pushed forward, breaching his lover's body.

Kieru stiffened at the initial invasion, then relaxed and welcomed Nicolas inside.

Nicolas broke their kiss and watched his lover's face for any signs of discomfort as he slowly eased full length into Kieru's body. His careful movements were exquisite torture as Kieru surrendered so sweetly beneath him.

Black eyes wide with wonder, Kieru said, "You're inside me."

"Aye," Nicolas whispered as the need for control made sweat bead on his forehead. "Is it okay?" Retreating now would likely kill him with sheer frustration, but at the slightest hint that Kieru no longer wanted this, he would withdraw immediately.

"Oh yes," Kieru said, undulating voluptuously beneath him. "Claim me, my Nicolas, spill your seed inside me so that I know I am yours forever."

"I love you," Nicolas said, hips thrusting gently. Around his cock, Kieru's body was a hot, velvety sheath.

Kieru's arms encircled him, pulling him closer. As their mouths joined once again, their bodies found the rhythm of loving, rocking together in perfect harmony—two halves of a whole. Slowly at first, then with more and more urgency, the lovers moved together in their dance of bliss.

As Nicolas's control began to fray beyond redemption, Kieru implored him to move faster and harder. With a low, keening wail, his lover bucked and cried out. As Kieru's body tightened around him, Nicolas felt his own climax overtake him and, with a shout, spilled his essence deep inside Kieru's quaking body.

They lay together for a long while, tongues dueling lazily as they caught their breath. As his cock began to soften and slide from his lover's body, Nicolas moved to Kieru's left side, gathering Kieru close so that the man's head was pillowed on his shoulder. "Thank you," Nicolas murmured, pressing a soft kiss against his lover's temple.

Kieru shifted until he could meet Nicolas's gaze. "You've given me an incredible gift this night. Whether I live a thousand years or but a single day longer, I will treasure our time together."

"Aye," Nicolas said. He tried to find the words for what he was feeling, but they wouldn't come. Kieru's lush lips curved into a gentle smile, and he nodded at Nicolas. A surge of love

traveled through the link they shared, telling Nicolas that Kieru understood what was in his heart—understood, and felt the same.

They snuggled into the warm sand, bodies twined together, and slept safe in each other's arms.

* * * *

Day three dawned hot and still. Nicolas made his way to the ship's rail and looked out at the watchful dolphins that ringed the *Lady*. They did not play this morning, and the unaccustomed stillness from so lively a group of creatures added to the pall of tension. Kieru's mind was a comfort at the back of Nicolas's awareness as the great shark patrolled the waters beneath the becalmed pirate ship. His cutlass and daggers sharpened to razor keenness, Nicolas took a place amidships where he could call a warning to Captain Fox as soon as Kieru spoke. Nicolas looked around at his fellow crew members—his family—and could see the knowledge in every face. The attack would come today. They were as ready as they could be, each man and woman knowing that, for good or ill, this coming battle would be the last.

As if compelled by his thoughts, a dolphin leaped from the water, chittering and scolding urgently, all hints of playfulness subsumed beneath terror.

"It comes. Fast," Kieru said.

"Captain, Kieru says it comes, and fast," he called. Fear and resolve burned in his breast. The monster must not be allowed to triumph.

"Ready, lads and lasses. We must defend our *Lady*." The captain raised the patch from his left eye, baring the fox fire-laden magic orb he bore in that socket.

All around, pirates drew their weapons and stood poised, ready to fight for their lives.

Nicolas felt a fierce pride fill his spirit. They would fight, and if the battle was ultimately lost, they would make the kraken pay dearly for its victory. Along their shared link, Kieru sent his agreement, echoing and amplifying Nicolas's resolve.

The dolphin's chatter abruptly stopped as all of them disappeared. The world went utterly silent. The very waves seemed to hold their breath as Nicolas strained eyes and ears for the first sight of the enemy.

"NO!" Kieru's shout was almost painfully loud in Nicolas's mind.

Fifty feet away, water exploded upward as the silver shark and an angry red kraken burst from the sea. Kieru's teeth dug into the fell beast's body and tore away one of the grasping arms. A cheer resounded from the pirate crew as the arm sank amid a welter of dark blue blood. Quick as a striking snake, the kraken squirmed in the shark's hold, wrapping its remaining arms around the shark and battering at him with its powerful, clawed tentacles.

Nicolas found himself shouting as the crimson haze of fury from Kieru's mind invaded his. Clenching his hand around the hilt of his cutlass, he searched vainly for a way to strike at the enemy. Those who knew how to use crossbows shot barbed bolts at the kraken. Some pierced the rubbery crimson skin, but most bounced away. Wake from the fight rocked the ship, making footing a bit treacherous.

Nicolas knew the artillery crew waited belowdecks, ready to fire cannons as soon as they could be certain they wouldn't injure their silver ally. The shark was much more vulnerable to the heavy cannonballs than the kraken seemed to be.

The rest of the crew shouted encouragement to Kieru as the two behemoths churned the sea in a battle of teeth and terrible grasping arms. They all knew that Kieru's actions had slowed the kraken from ramming speed, stealing away the force of the beast's swift charge—a force the *Lady* would have been hard-pressed to withstand.

Bleeding, the combatants separated as the kraken jerked itself from Kieru's jaws. Before the silver shark could close the distance and bring strong jaws and powerful, muscular body to bear on the beast, two tentacles wrapped around his body, lifting him free of the water. For a moment, Kieru hung in the air, a crescent moon of purest silver, until the kraken flung him dozens of feet away. The shark spun in the air, sunlight flashing on his skin, and landed on his back with a frightful splash. Kieru floundered for a moment before sinking out of sight beneath the crimson-tinted waves.

A growl of defiance sounded from the crew as the kraken turned toward the *Lady*, its remaining yellow eye glaring at the ship as it surged forward. With slow deliberation, the monster stalked its prey, remaining arrogantly at the ocean's surface as if it felt the waiting pirates posed no threat. The crew raised their weapons, ready to fight for their lives.

Nicolas's fury cooled to cold anger as the kraken hit the *Lady's* side, the monster coming partway over the rail. The ship swayed but remained upright as the *Grey Lady* did her best to protect her valiant crew.

As one, the pirates attacked. Nicolas, near one of the beast's arms, slashed at it with his cutlass. The sharp steel bit easily into the rubbery red skin, leaving behind weals that filled with dark blue blood. For all his rage-fueled strength, his cuts did little more than make the kraken bleed. The arm Nicolas attacked was wider than a rain barrel, and the monster paid little attention to its attackers as it heaved itself farther over the rail.

Nicolas heard the muffled boom of cannon fire, then a second, and saw the beast shudder as it was stuck by the heavy iron balls. It shrilled an angry cry, but its hold on the *Lady* didn't falter. Nicolas cursed. The ship wasn't designed for combat such as this, and only two of her cannons could be brought to bear on the kraken. With the ship heaving and rolling beneath the creature's onslaught, he knew the artillery crew would be having difficulty reloading the two cannons.

A flash of lightning sizzled by him and hit the place where the kraken's arm joined its body, leaving a scorch mark behind but little further damage. Grimly, fighting desperately to keep his feet on the bucking deck, Nicolas hacked at the arm, causing as much injury as he could. As he exposed the white tissue beneath the kraken's thick skin, the beast finally took notice. The arm surged upward, hitting Nicolas a solid blow and knocking him back and into the *Lady's* main mast.

Dazed, he took a moment to watch the battle, looking for the best place to strike. The kraken seemed mostly unconcerned by the pirates attacking it with cutlass, sword, and fox fire. Wilson, one arm hanging uselessly at his side, grimly hacked at one of the monster's arms with his battle-ax, finally succeeding in cutting a good six feet off from the tip. The kraken shrieked and flailed with the injured arm, flinging blue blood onto the deck as it struck Wilson a vicious blow. Senseless, the man fell near the opening to the living area and was pulled to safety by Falon.

Nicolas couldn't figure out the beast's strategy. The kraken seemed to regard the attacking pirates as minor annoyances, striking at them only when they did it significant injury. Instead, it seemed to be concentrating on twisting its tentacles through the rigging on either end of the ship.

The ropes, sails, and wooden struts slowed it down, but it nearly had one tentacle down to the deck behind the *Lady's* prow. Why was it so intent on getting its tentacles onto the *Lady's* deck? What could be so important to the creature that it seemed willing to endure pain and injury? Why would it focus its most dangerous weapons on the *Lady* rather than her crew?

The memory of the murderous tentacles lifting his lover's body flashed through his mind. They had lifted and thrown several tons of shark with very little effort. With a sudden rush of comprehension, Nicolas understood the kraken's cunning plan. If the beast could get a firm grip on each end of the ship, it could use its great strength to rip the *Lady* asunder. The crew would be easy pickings in the water once the ship was destroyed.

Heaving himself to his feet, Nicolas stumbled toward the tentacle. An area about ten feet above the fleshy bulb at the end of the tentacle was within reach. Nicolas raised his cutlass and brought it down hard, once, then again. He remembered cutting the trunks of fallen redwoods in the forest of his homeland and concentrated on hitting the same place each time. It wasn't easy, and his feet went out from under him several times as the ship rocked and the tentacle writhed and squirmed its way free of the rigging.

The kraken finally broke its tentacle free of the nest of ropes with a last mighty jerk. The tentacle dropped on the deck in front of Nicolas with a heavy *thump*. Before he could react, the tentacle swept him sideways, sending him skidding against the far rail. His head cracked back against the wood, and his vision went gray for a long moment.

Stunned, he stared at the battle, as everything seemed to be moving in slow motion.

The kraken's nearest tentacle was now wrapped around the *Lady's* prow, and the other was moving ever nearer to the ship's stern. Less than half the crew was still fighting, the others down or missing completely. Niles and Copper sawed at an arm with their swords while Adam stabbed another repeatedly with his rapier. All three of them were marked with blood where they had taken injury, but they fought on, refusing to concede defeat.

Movement amidships caught Nicolas's attention, and he saw Kid tugging at Captain Fox's free arm as the captain alternated striking the nearest arm with sword and fox fire. The captain backed away from the kraken and leaned down so he could hear Kid's words, both of them balancing nimbly on the slick, rocking deck.

“Blood for blood!” Tyreel ran past Nicolas, greatsword in hand, and attacked the kraken's tentacle. The huge Northman howled a challenge as he severed the end of the tentacle with three strikes of his sword. The kraken shrieked, and two of its arms came up, wrapping around the squirming Northman and tearing him in half. A great gout of hot blood splashed down, painting Nicolas's vision red. The greatsword clattered to the *Lady's* deck and slid along the red-stained wood before coming to rest but a short distance from where Nicolas lay.

Still too dazed to move, Nicolas watched Captain Fox stride to the center of the ship and kneel in front of the remains of the main mast, placing both his hands palm down on the *Lady's* deck. The electric blue glow of fox fire surrounded the captain, then spread out, lighting first the *Lady* and then her remaining crew.

Nicolas could hear a sizzle and smell the stench of burning flesh as the fox fire reached the kraken, but the determined monster refused to release the *Lady*. Instead it dragged itself farther up onto the ship's deck, glowing yellow eye and cruel snapping beak coming over the rail. Nicolas flinched, waiting for the *Lady* to founder beneath the kraken's massive bulk, yet somehow she stayed upright.

Shaking himself, Nicolas got to hands and knees, then forced his way to his feet. His cutlass was missing, lost when the kraken attacked. He wished he had sharp teeth like his lover, that he might never be disarmed. Thoughts of his lover made him search for the touch of Kieru's mind.

Nothing.

Frantically he strained, reaching with all his strength. He only felt darkness. Had he sensed his lover at all since the shark had been flung by the kraken?

No.

Kieru was dead.

Never again would Nicolas hold his silver-haired lover in his arms. Never again would Kieru's mind brush against his, bringing comfort simply by being there.

Despair surged through him. Screaming in wordless anguish, Nicolas stumbled forward, picked up the fallen greatsword, and held it with both hands. It seemed lighter than his cutlass, though he remembered trying unsuccessfully to wield it once during a training bout.

He ran toward the kraken, aiming for the yellow eye. The *Lady* seemed to tilt toward the beast, lending Nicolas momentum. Fox fire burned blue along his hands and out onto the steel blade, making the mixture of blue and red blood on it steam and boil away. As he neared the kraken, he dodged between two of the arms, bracing the hilt of the sword against his chest.

Nicolas hit the beast, the greatsword driving into the monster's glaring eye. Cutting and searing its way into the beast's head, the sword went in hilt-deep. Nicolas felt his ribs break as the hilt of the sword was driven against fragile bone.

The kraken shrieked, body spasming and roiling as five feet of sharpened steel pierced its brain.

Heat surged through Nicolas, burning his feet and hands as the captain poured fox fire through him and into the kraken. Hands locked to the sword, his body was battered against the side of the *Lady* as the kraken convulsed in its death throes. A particularly violent seizure flung Nicolas free of the dying leviathan. As he tumbled through the water, Nicolas felt a strange calm sweep over him.

Opening his eyes, he watched the kraken, still twitching, sink into the ocean's dark green depths. Savage satisfaction filled him at the death of his enemy, but it was tempered by the memory of lost love. He could feel sharp pains in his side with each movement his body made, but couldn't find the strength to care. A peculiar draining sensation within him aroused a bit of distant curiosity.

Lethargy overtook him, and he understood that his broken ribs had punctured his lungs. How ironic that his status as a ghost wouldn't let him drown in the ocean's waters, but the blood filling his lungs would suffocate him as surely as water would a normal man. He knew that if he could find his way to the surface he might yet live. If Falon, who'd been ordered to stay safe in the ship's hold to tend to any wounded she could reach, still lived, she could stabilize him, heal him completely if she still had the strength.

Nicolas drifted, making no move to save himself. He'd avoided death and the blue shark's appetite once when the *Grey Lady* found him. Now, having lost the love he never dreamed he'd find with the death of the silver shark who'd become the other half of his soul, he could find no reason to struggle.

Consigning himself to the goddess's embrace, he resolved to let the sea claim him. Perhaps if there was an afterlife as the priestesses claimed, he might be reunited with Kieru. It was something to hope for as he sank into welcome oblivion.

Unsure how long he drifted between life and death, he descended into the cool, dark water. As his life's blood grew heavier and heavier in his chest, something bumped him. A flash of white teeth told him that a shark had found him, probably trailing the blood leaking from his numerous wounds. Nicolas closed his eyes and waited for pain to come as the predator honored him with its hunger.

"*You will live.*" The words burned into his mind with all the force of the tides. A broad back came up beneath him, supporting him as he was carried toward the surface.

* * * *

He awakened on black sand, the sun blazing brightly above him. Despair surged through him, and he closed his eyes, not wanting to see the empty beach. Gradually he became aware of the warm skin beneath his cheek and the strong body lying at his side. Scarcely daring to hope, he opened his eyes and looked at the man who held him.

"I wondered how long you would sleep," Kieru said, grinning at him.

"I'm dead," Nicolas whispered. "I'm dead, and this is heaven."

"No." Kieru shook his head, silver hair flashing in the brilliant sunlight. "We both live, though it was a near thing." He paused, frowning, and then continued. "Why did you give up once the kraken was dead? Why didn't you swim to the surface and call for help? Why didn't you fight to live?" His voice broke on the last word.

"I couldn't feel you," Nicolas said, terrified this was a fever dream and that his lover would melt away, leaving him forever bereft. If he yet lived, he would ask Captain Fox to release him from the oath binding him to the *Grey Lady*, and seek true death.

"I was knocked unconscious when the monster threw me. I was told that as I sank, the dolphins caught me and carried me to safety. They have mages of their own, and one of them consented to heal me. It took hours before I was able to return to the *Lady*. I learned that the battle had been won, but at a terrible cost. You were gone. The child told me you had destroyed the kraken and been destroyed in turn. I..." His voice trailed off, and Nicolas felt his lover's anguish rush through him in a tidal wave of pain. "I would not believe it. I cast my mind out and

found you, though your thoughts were terribly weak.” He pulled Nicolas tightly against him. “I searched with all my senses, but the water was full of blood from so many different bodies that it was nearly impossible to separate yours. Finally I located the trail and followed it down into the dark waters. As I got closer, the blood scent became stronger even as your mental voice faded. By the time I found you, the link was gone.” He gulped, and his voice shook as he continued. “I carried you to the surface, but you were dead, drowned by the blood in your lungs. As I despaired, the dolphin mage came up beside me and poured her strength into you. It was enough to bring you back, but your hold on life remained tenuous. Falon came down into the water, and she and the dolphin mage worked their magics. It wasn't sufficient, and I could feel your mind moving into the final stillness. Then the Lady's captain joined us in the water and placed one hand on the *Lady* and one on your chest. Blue light flowed from them and into you, and you took a breath, and then a second. From there, the healers were able to heal the worst of the damage.”

Tears blurred Nicolas's vision as he learned his captain and his *Lady* had joined forces to save him. He loved the ship, her captain, and her crew as family; it filled him with joy to know they loved him as well. “I remember nothing of it,” Nicolas said, kissing his lover's shoulder. “How long did I rest?”

“It's been three days. The dolphin mage and Falon used their magic on you four more times after that first one.”

He'd been so close to death, so close to damning the man he loved to the very hell he'd fought to avoid. “Goddess bless.” Gratitude flooded Nicolas. “How shall I ever repay them?” He would somehow find a way, he vowed, even if it took the rest of his life.

“I've come to understand that the words 'thank you' hold great power.”

“Aye, and they shall both have those words once I am awake to say them. But it's not enough. Not for my life, and certainly not for yours.”

Chuckling, Kieru kissed his cheek. “You killed the kraken, love. I believe that is thanks enough.”

Fear twisted in his gut. “Is it dead? Truly dead?”

“Yes.” A flash of sharp white teeth. “It tastes dreadful, though my cousins the tiger sharks don't seem to agree.”

Sudden euphoria blasted through Nicolas. "We did it. The monster is no more." He sat up, wanting to caper and dance his joy. Dizziness swamped him, nearly dragging him into darkness.

"Shh," Kieru said, easing him back down onto the warm sand. "You're not fully healed, and the dream can compensate for only so much."

Groaning, Nicolas lay still. He concentrated on taking deep, even breaths. It would be a shame to lose this time with his lover by overdoing and falling unconscious. Once his vision stopped swimming, he carefully turned his head so he could see Kieru. "And you, love? How bad are your injuries?"

"They are healed, though I will bear the scars of the battle for the rest of my days."

"Tell me," Nicolas demanded. "Show me."

With a sigh, Kieru eased from beside Nicolas and stood. He faced away long enough for Nicolas to see the circular marks left by the kraken's suckers, then turned around so that Nicolas could see how the scars extended around to the front of his body. The pale white skin of his chest, belly, and thighs was marred with raised, reddened circles and puncture marks.

"Beloved," Nicolas whispered, seeing irrefutable evidence of what his lover had suffered. Irrationally he wished he could kill the monster again for daring to harm his beloved.

"Hush," Kieru said, fisting his hands on his hips, expression determined. "I am alive, and I intend to stay that way. We have many years of loving ahead of us."

Seeing the other man standing so fierce and proud before him, Nicolas had to believe. Letting his gaze trail over his lover's body, he noted that the scars looked months old rather than newly healed. Muscles bunched beneath satiny skin, and the short curls surrounding his lover's quiescent cock gleamed silver in the light.

Heat moved through him in a slow tide at the sight of his lover's body and the comforting presence of Kieru in his mind. To his great surprise, his cock swelled, visible evidence of his joy in living.

One silver eyebrow raised, Kieru gazed down at him, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a half grin. "I admire your optimism, but I fear you are yet too weak for such activity."

Nicolas grinned as his lover's flesh responded, lengthening and hardening until it stood fully erect. "Still eager for lessons, I see." He wanted to caress that pale, silken skin. He yearned

to give pleasure and smooth away the last lingering hints of pain, yet fatigue lay too heavily on his bones.

Black eyes laughing, Kieru stroked himself. "Shall I show you what I've learned?"

"Yes, please," Nicolas said. He concentrated on the sand beneath him until it mounded up behind him, raising him up until he was seated, reclining against a warm dune. His traitorous body might be too weary for lovemaking, but he certainly had enough energy to watch.

Kieru used one elegant hand to tease his nipples as the other worked his cock.

His mouth dry at the delicious sight, Nicolas mirrored his lover's movements, caressing himself.

"Beautiful," Kieru murmured, playfulness replaced with lust.

"Aye," Nicolas agreed. As his flesh responded to the stimulation, his mind remained curiously unengaged. He realized that he needed more. He needed Kieru's strength. "Love me," he said.

"Always," Kieru answered.

"Aye," Nicolas said. Confused, his mind addled with need, he said, "Nay. *Love* me."

Understanding bloomed on the silver-haired man's face. "It's too soon, beloved. You need to rest and heal. We shouldn't even be doing this much."

"I need you." Nicolas struggled to put his thoughts into words. "Death nearly had us. I need to know you're alive. I need to know *I'm* alive." Holding his hand out in entreaty, he repeated, "Please, love me."

Kieru stared down at him, then nodded once. "Lie back on the sand."

Nicolas let the sand melt away from behind him and opened his legs, wincing at the weakness he discovered in his muscles. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except feeling his lover's strength.

"No." Kieru brought his hands together in a sharp gesture. "Legs closed. I will see to this final healing."

Confused, Nicolas complied, his muscles shaking from even that minor exertion. Logic told him that he didn't have the strength for lovemaking, but he refused to submit to his body's weakness.

Kieru stood over him, straddling him, then sank gracefully down. As Nicolas watched, curious, Kieru knelt over his groin, grasping Nicolas's cock.

Desire surged through him as he realized what his lover intended. Before he could open his mouth to protest, his cock was engulfed in tight heat as Kieru eased down, taking him fully inside in one smooth motion.

Gasping, a low moan pulled from his throat, Nicolas thrust up helplessly against the other man.

“Shh,” Kieru said, placing a fingertip over Nicolas's lips. “I will do all the work.” He rose up, then sank back down, his body gripping Nicolas's cock in a fist of hot velvet. Clever fingers found Nicolas's nipples, tugging and pinching them as Kieru set a languorous rhythm.

Overwhelmed by sensation and his body's limitations, Nicolas could do nothing save feel. And watch. Kieru's hips undulated, making the muscles in his chest and abdomen ripple. His black-eyed gaze held heat, lust, and tenderness in equal measure, and his long silver hair shone like a river of stars.

Need became urgency. Nicolas gripped Kieru's hips with hands that trembled, encouraging his lover to move faster.

Kieru complied, rising and falling on Nicolas's rigid flesh with increasing speed, though still not giving Nicolas all the friction he needed to come.

“Faster.” His hips surged upward as he strove toward satisfaction.

“Not yet, love,” Kieru answered. “I wish you to have no doubts of our existence. Feel us—feel your cock inside my body and know that I am yours. Feel my flesh surround you and know that you are mine.”

His lover's words lit a flame inside him. “Kieru, my Kieru.” Tears prickled in his eyes and trickled unheeded down his cheeks. His love was with him, and all was right with the world.

“You're beginning to believe.” Kieru increased the speed and force of his movements, head thrown back to expose his throat as he gasped into each rough thrust.

Finding strength, Nicolas used his grip on Kieru's hips to pull the other man tighter against him, grinding them together. All tenderness forgotten, Nicolas gave in to his body's drive for completion. His climax struck with the unstoppable force of a tidal wave, and he stiffened, pouring his life essence into his lover's straining body. Kieru convulsed above him, finding his

satisfaction as well, cock spurting hot and slick onto Nicolas's belly as Kieru's internal muscles milked Nicolas of every drop of seed.

Spent, Kieru collapsed down onto him, a welcome weight. Nicolas gasped and shivered beneath his lover as aftershocks swept through him, delicious echoes of bliss.

Still breathing heavily, Kieru withdrew from atop Nicolas's body and moved to one side, pulling Nicolas into the welcome shelter of his arms.

Nicolas cuddled close, still trembling. They lay together for a long time, until passion had completely cooled to comfortable satiation.

"The teacher becomes the student," Nicolas said, lazily wrapping a lock of silver hair around his finger. The weakness that had gripped him before had mellowed into contented relaxation.

Kieru laughed. "I had much to inspire me." Leaning up on his elbow so that he could see Nicolas's face, he added. "Have I convinced you?"

"Aye," Nicolas said. "How can I doubt your life when your very essence is drying on my belly?" Then, fearing his words had been too flippant, he said, "You are my Kieru, the love of my life."

The silver-haired man brushed a gentle kiss across Nicolas's lips before lying back down.

They lay together awhile longer until Nicolas found the courage to say what he must. Sitting up, he pulled his lover upright as well. As the curious black eyes met his, he said, "I know you are a wanderer, and I would never ask you to change that part of you. When you feel the need to travel, go. And when you're ready, come back to me."

"I will always come back to you, as long as I am welcome in your dreams."

"Then you will always come back to me."

 THE END 

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