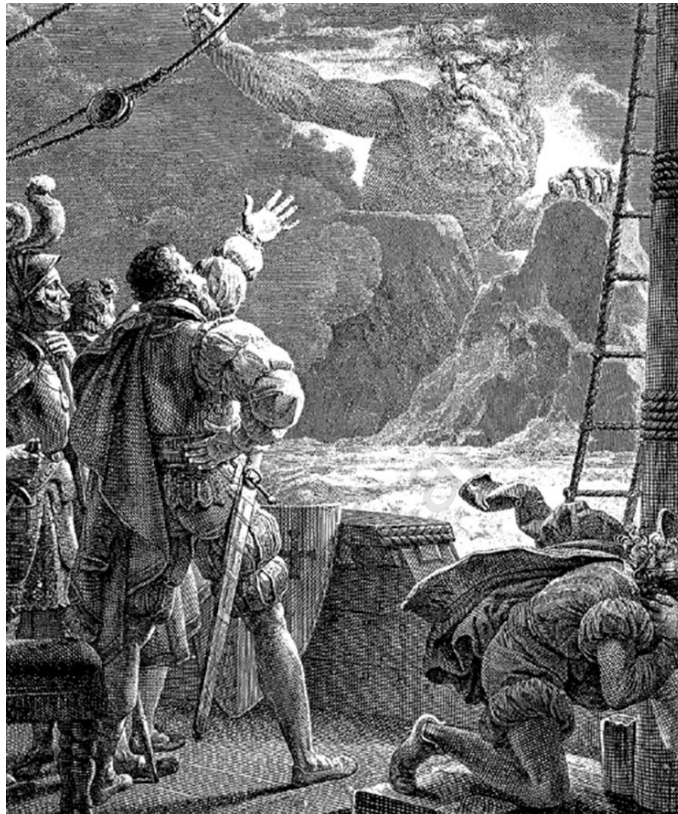


The Flying Dutchman

Calvin Scholtz 1284085 SCHCAL001

A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)



Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2014

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Abstract

A Dutch sea-captain and his crew wake up on the deck of their VOC ship in the middle of the ocean with no memory of who they are or how they got there. However, one of the sailors does remember their captain's name: Heinrich van der Decken. Then they discover a port nearby: it is Simon's Town, South Africa, and the year is 2012.

The man sent by the SA Navy to meet the foreign visitors is Commander Paul Jones, who is surprised by the old sailing ship and its crew of sailors dressed as though they'd stepped out of a pirate film. Jones decides that they must be historians sailing their antique vessel on a recreation of the voyage of some famous explorer. He offers to help them in any way he can, starting with lunch at a local restaurant.

It is at this restaurant that Captain van der Decken meets Elbé Abrahams, a waitress who looks exactly like Senta, a slave that he fell in love with in Holland. The captain tries to talk to her, but she rebuffs him, saying she has never met him before. When she leaves the restaurant, van der Decken follows her home.

As the captain sees more of Elbé, the more he remembers about his past. The more Elbé sees of him, the more she finds herself drawn to him.

And the more van der Decken learns, the more he realises that *someone* is responsible for imperilling the lives of himself and his crew, and that a battle that has been anticipated for centuries will finally be fought...

The author seeks to explore and combine two legends of the Cape of Good Hope, that of *The Flying Dutchman* and Adamastor, through the medium of fiction. The author attempts an imaginative retelling of these legends by having them play out in the year 2012, recasting an old story for a new age, while remaining close to their geographical point of origin, the Cape of Storms.

The novel is rounded out by two modern characters, from whose perspectives the story is sometimes seen: Paul Jones, a thirty-something commander in the South African Navy, and Elbé Abrahams, a nineteen-year-old girl who is still trying to decide on her path in life, and whose destiny may be bound up with that of the Dutch sea-captain, van der Decken.

The low sun whitens on the flying squalls,
Against the cliffs the long grey surge is rolled
Where Adamastor from his marble halls
Threatens the sons of Lusus of old.

Faint on the glare uptowers the dauntless form,
Into whose shade abysmal as we draw,
Down on our decks, from far above the storm,
Grin the stark ridges of his broken jaw.

Across his back, unheeded, we have broken
Whole forests: heedless of the blood we've spilled,
In thunder still his prophecies are spoken,
In silence, by the centuries, fulfilled.

Farewell, terrific shade! though I go free
Still of the powers of darkness art thou Lord:
I watch the phantom sinking in the sea
Of all that I have hated or adored.

from 'Rounding the Cape' (Roy Campbell)

'The Cape of Storms' (Thomas Pringle)

O Cape of Storms! although thy front be dark,
And bleak thy naked cliffs and cheerless vales,
And perilous thy fierce and faithless gales
To staunchest mariner and stoutest bark;
And though along thy coasts with grief I mark
The servile and the slave, and him who wails
An exile's lot – and blush to hear thy tales
Of sin and sorrow and oppression stark: –
Yet, spite of physical and moral ill,
And after all I've seen and suffered here,
There are strong links that bind me to thee still,
And render even thy rocks and deserts dear;
Here dwell kind hearts which time nor place can chill –
Loved Kindred and congenial Friends sincere.

Prologue:

Waking

The smell of water on wood, the taste of salt in his mouth, and the feel of a lukewarm sun spilling over his back; these were the first things he sensed before he opened his eyes. Now, his hearing returned too, and all around him was the sound of men moaning. The clamour grew louder and louder, until he feared to open his eyes. If he did, what would he see? What images matched the terrible sounds that filled his ears?

It was a sense of responsibility for these unknown men that made him face up to the truth. The first thing he saw was a body lying in front of him. As his peripheral vision broadened, the sight that greeted him was the main deck of a ship, and there was debris all over it. He lifted his head and felt a sharp pain shoot through it. With some effort, he sat up and looked around. There were more bodies on the deck, at least ten of them that he could see, and they were also stirring. He heard shouts above his head, and looked up to see that a couple of sailors were caught up in the rigging of the mainmast. He could only imagine how horrible it must be to wake up in such a position.

He tried to get up. He put his hands out in front of him and saw that they were dirty and full of scars. He pressed against the deck and, planting his boots beneath him, hoisted himself to his feet. He took two steps and then stumbled over the body lying closest to him. The face that stared up at him was that of a young man. He thought that he'd seen the face before somewhere. The young man's eyes were open, but they stared at nothing and he seemed to be dead. Without knowing exactly why, he felt a deep sense of loss for this sailor; but he could not mourn him yet, as they were others who needed his help.

Even as he thought this, the youngster started coughing and gasping for breath.

"Johannes," a name jumped unbidden to his lips as he looked down at the sailor, "can you hear me?" It felt strange to use his mouth, and to hear his own voice.

The young sailor's coughing subsided and he looked up at the figure leaning over him.

"Yes, Captain," Johannes replied, a look of recognition on his face.

Captain? The other man thought as he pulled the crewmember to his feet. He looked down at his clothes and compared them to those of the rest of the men on the deck, who were now also standing up. *Yes, it seems that's what I am. I am the captain. And this is my ship.*

"Johannes," the captain said, "there are men stuck in the rigging. Get some of the crew together and help them down."

"Yes, Captain."

As Johannes walked away from him, the captain approached another sailor whom he recognised. "It's Jakob, isn't it?"

"Yes?"

"I want you to check if anyone is injured and, if they are, get them down below."

Jakob left to do his master's bidding. The captain, meanwhile, went over to the gunwale and looked out at the sea. It was no good. The ship was surrounded by a fogbank that blocked out the world around them. It was as if they were floating inside a cloud.

A cry came from below him and he looked down to see a sailor floating in the water beside the ship.

"Man in the water!" the captain shouted as he looked about for something he could use to help the sailor back on board. He found a rope net as two other sailors arrived to help; they cast it over the side and, once the man overboard had a grip on the ropes, they pulled him back up.

While the other two sailors checked on their fellow crewmember, the captain turned his attention back to the main deck; Johannes and the others had succeeded in untangling the men from the rigging. Jakob reappeared at the captain's side.

"What is your report?" the captain asked him.

"No one seems to be hurt, which is strange given the state of the ship."

The captain followed Jakob's gaze up towards the sails, which looked frayed, as if they had been in a hurricane.

"I say there are no physical injuries, Captain, but many of the crewmembers are disorientated, and a few even claim not to remember their names. I myself cannot recall anything that happened before I woke up just now."

“It will come back to you,” the captain said, although in truth he was experiencing a similar amnesia. He then pointed at a group of sailors and commanded, “I want you men to set every inch of sail we have. Jakob, take the helm and keep us on our current heading, at least until this fog clears and we have some idea of where we are. Get to it!”

The men ascended the rigging like monkeys. The captain called Johannes over. “I need to speak with you,” he said.

They walked across the deck towards the poop as Jakob watched them from behind the wheel. The captain opened a door that led to his personal cabin. It seemed almost empty and the bulkheads bore no decoration. There was a desk and chair in the centre, both of which were lashed to the deck. The desk had three built-in drawers: the captain opened the middle one. There was a bottle and some small glasses inside. He was doing everything by instinct, and it had served him well so far.

Johannes closed the door behind him. He stepped up to the desk and saw the captain pour them each a tot of rum from the bottle.

“Here,” he offered the glass to the sailor. Johannes took it, but dared not drink yet. The captain took his seat behind the desk and contemplated his glass, and the young sailor before him. Light streamed in through the windows at his back. They both heard the ship creak and groan as it slowly started to move through the water. This all felt so familiar, as if they’d done it before.

He decided to ask Johannes the one thing that was bothering him the most. “This may seem like a strange question, but do you know my name?”

“Yes, Captain. It’s Heinrich van der Decken.”

The captain nodded. “And, how do I know you, besides the fact that we sail on the same ship together? I wouldn’t just invite any crewmember in here for a drink.”

Johannes thought for a bit. “My father,” he said at last. “I think you knew my father somehow. You sailed with him, too. His name was also Johannes. Johannes van Wijk.”

The captain was stunned. Yes, now he remembered. *Van Wijk. He had been older than me then, but he was good to me; a mentor, of sorts.* His gaze wandered over the desk in front of him. It was covered in loose sheets of parchment. He picked up one and examined it: it detailed what cargo had been loaded on the ship. It also included a series

of dates and the names of the various ports of origin. At the top of the page was a crimson seal of a V intersecting an O and a C. These three letters called to mind a phrase: *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*. Dutch East-India Trading Company.

Van der Decken shifted some more papers to reveal a map underneath. It depicted a large tract of land flanked by a vast ocean. An ornate compass rose pointed to the north. The land curved southwest to a point marked with the words: “*C. Bone Spei*”. That was Portuguese, he thought. It also showed an assortment of river mouths along the coastline. The sea to the east was criss-crossed with various straight lines, possibly indicating ship routes. Over these lines were spread letters that read: “*Mar Di India*”.

“What can you recall from before you woke up just now?” the captain asked.

Johannes frowned. “Nothing, I’m afraid, Captain. I must have hit my head.”

Van der Decken downed the last of his rum. “Then the entire crew must’ve all hit their heads at once.”

Johannes was about to speak when they both heard a buzzing noise coming from outside, followed by a shout from one of the crew. The captain got up and made for the door, Johannes close behind him.

As they stepped onto the main deck, they could see that the fog had dissipated somewhat. They were now aware of a wall of mountains on their port side; there was open water to starboard, but they could discern more mountains in the distance. All this seemed to indicate that they were in a channel of some sort, perhaps even a bay.

The buzzing sound was louder now, and seemed to be coming from up forrad. A crewmember was standing on the bowsprit, and calling for the captain to come and look. Van der Decken made his way over to the beakhead, with Johannes in tow. The captain recalled the other sailor’s name as he turned to face him. “What is it, Pieter?”

Pieter just pointed. Making their way around the ship were two smaller craft, but they were unlike anything the crew had ever seen. They were sleek, and dark-coloured, and moved fast despite their apparent lack of oars. The captain focused on the one on the starboard side; the front half of the vessel was closed off from the elements, and it even had little windows. A man in a plain black-and-blue uniform was standing on the open aft section, holding some sort of horn in his hand. He spoke through it, and the volume of his voice was greatly enhanced.

“Follow us, we’ll lead you to the harbour!” he said.

Van der Decken paused when he heard this; it wasn’t the language that he spoke and thought in, but somehow he found he could understand it. A memory of learning this foreign language flared within him, and he remembered its name: *English*.

“What are they saying?” Johannes asked.

The captain stirred from his reverie. “They want us to follow them into port.”

“And should we? We don’t even know who they are.”

“Whoever they are, we need repairs.”

The pair of small craft turned around and maintained a steady speed and course. The captain informed Jakob, still at the helm, to follow the boats into port. Then, he leaned against the foremast and stared out into the remaining fog, as if he hoped that the heat of his glare would melt it. Johannes stood by him and was silent for a while. But, he soon voiced his concerns.

“Captain, you said the rest of the crew also can’t remember how we got here?”

“It seems that way.”

“And what about you?”

“The same.”

“But, Captain, that is very strange.”

“I agree,” said van der Decken. “But we must be patient, and hopefully more will become clear in time. For now, I intend to take the ship into this port they are leading us to. There we may learn more.”

Almost as he said this, the crew became busy around him; a wharf had come into view. The captain looked out off the bow and saw the port revealed to him as the fog lifted like a veil. The harbour was extensive, and the vessels docked within it were alien to them. They had no sails, were grey in colour and twice the size of their own ship. Behind them lay several large buildings, and beyond that, a vast town lay sprawled against the mountainside.

“Johannes,” the captain said. “Where are we?”

Chapter 1:

Paul Jones

Commander Paul Jones approached Simon's Town on his Honda CBR1000 motorcycle at a glorious speed. To his left, the sun had just risen over the Hottentots Holland Mountains and now its rays broke through the heavy fogbank lying over the waters of False Bay.

Jones kept his focus on the road ahead. As he passed Lower North Battery, he noticed the usual back-up of early morning traffic into the town; but the commander had only to pull his right handlebar towards him slightly, and he bypassed it all, zooming along the centre-line of the road.

He had to reduce his speed, however, once he entered the town proper. Here, the main road was narrower, and overtaking was not always possible. His helmet hid his face so completely that no one could read his expression, and so there was no need to form one. Jones found this liberating; so much of his working life consisted of putting on the appropriate "mask" to deal with certain people, it was nice to begin the day without that.

He reached the East Yard gates and showed his permit to the guards. They took their time examining it these days; a few years back, Jones had fooled them by replacing his ID photo with that of a chimpanzee's face. He smiled as they let him through.

Jones arrived outside the Fleet Command Headquarters, a large building with a strange architectural mix of red face-brick walls and large glass windows. He chose a parking space and then performed a "stoppie" by pulling on the brake and letting the bike's rear wheel lift off the road while the front wheel stayed grounded. He smiled to himself before he kicked down the side-stand and dismounted.

The commander removed his helmet to reveal a clean-shaven face with a slightly bulbous nose. He had short blond hair and steely grey eyes that seemed out of place on a face as unhandsome as his. Then he entered the building and made his way to his office, removing his leather riding jacket as he went.

He stopped by a mirror in one of the passageways to check himself; one epaulette was a little skewed, so he straightened it out. He wore black trousers with a white shirt.

Jones walked into his office at 07:25 and greeted the other staff members who were already there. He had just enough time to make himself a cup of coffee in the

kitchenette. He did so and then sat down behind his computer to begin the day. He also turned on the radio, which was set to a classical music station. He preferred Indie Rock when he was at home, but he found that the classical stuff set the right mood for his job, which was as the liaison officer for the FOC, the Flag Officer Commanding.

He tackled his e-mail inbox first, before moving on to the physical in-tray lying on his desk. Nothing new had been added yet, but there were a few matters left over from the day before. He worked through them steadily, as was his way.

About an hour or so before noon the phone on his desk rang. "Commander Jones, FOC Liaison Office, good day," he answered.

"Hello, Commander. Captain Kruger here."

"Yes, sir." It was the Harbour Master.

"We have some unexpected foreign visitors who will be docking soon. I need you to get down to O Berth to welcome them ASAP."

"I'll leave right away, sir. What is the captain's name and nationality?"

"I'm afraid that we don't know. We were not able to establish radio contact with them."

That struck Jones as rather odd, but he did not presume to tell Kruger his job.

"That's not a problem is it, Commander?" came the Harbour Master's voice again.

"No, sir."

"Excellent. Please report to Admiral Ledwaba afterwards."

Jones put down the phone and headed out, retrieving his side-cap from the coat-rack and the keys to his military vehicle. Outside he got into the silver Toyota Corolla that the Navy had given him for official business. He started the engine and the sound of classical music filled the car's interior. He was about to change the station when he recognised the music from the film *Apocalypse Now*. "Ride of the Valkyries"; the name of the piece came to his mind.

He set off towards Oscar berth on the other side of the harbour and even dared to hum along to the brass fanfares. He savoured the honour of being called upon to greet the foreign visitors. It was almost enough to make him glad that he still worked in the South African Navy.

He had joined straight out of school in 1990. At that time, the Navy had seemed perfectly integrated to his eyes; he had plenty of Indian and Coloured colleagues and no one could find fault with the work they did. His father had always preached the “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it”-philosophy, and Commander Jones didn’t see why the Navy couldn’t live by the same motto.

Affirmative action was instituted soon after the democratic elections in 1994, and ever since then Jones had to just accept being passed over for promotion whenever he was up against a “person of colour”. Maybe the other candidate was more qualified than him, but neither he nor the other guy would ever know, because the process was tainted by political favouritism in Jones’ opinion.

It was now time to “right the injustices of the past,” the authorities had said. *Yeah*, Jones thought, *by introducing a host of new injustices*.

It was a small miracle that Jones had managed to reach the rank of commander over the course of his 22 years of service, but he knew that he would not go any higher. He didn’t stay on out of choice, either. He was always sending job applications to various companies, but to no avail. Unemployment was pandemic, and he was a “pale male”.

As he passed the yacht club basin, the foreign vessel came into view and his heart sank; an antique sailing ship? So it wasn’t a *real* foreign naval visit after all.

He parked his car a little distance away, got out and walked towards the ship. It was an impressive vessel with three masts: a fore-, main- and mizzenmast. *A brigantine*, he thought. He had a keen interest in naval history, a trait once common-place among sailors in the South African Navy, although nowadays people enlisted not because they had a love for the sea, but merely because they “needed a job”.

Despite the ship’s grandeur, it was not looking its best at that moment. The black and yellow paint was worn off in several places and there were significant chips in the woodwork. There was also seaweed and barnacles clinging to the ship’s hull. When he lifted his gaze to the sails, he saw that they too were in a bad way.

As he scanned the main deck, he saw some of the crew moving about on it, and he noticed that they were all wearing clothing applicable to the period of the vessel. Jones thought back to the last time he’d seen such a thing; it was a few years ago now, when some sailing enthusiasts had recreated the voyage of Charles Darwin and *The Beagle*. At

the stern of this vessel, however, they flew a large tricolour of red, white and blue in horizontal lines. In the white space in the middle, V.O.C. was printed in black letters.

His gaze returned to the ship's hull. He stopped again when he reached the bow, as he had noticed the place where the ship's name was engraved in the wood. It was hard to make out, and there were almost certainly a few letters missing, but he did manage to read: *D-LIE-NDE-LAN-R*. He took out his cellphone and typed out the letters in a memo.

Then there came a sound of heavy boots on the gangplank. Jones looked up and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man coming down it. His clothes were dark blue and brown in colour, and he wore an old tricorne atop his head. Everything about him seemed battered and weatherworn, although he looked younger than Jones. He had keen blue eyes and pale skin. He sported a short copper-coloured beard, while shoulder-length hair of a darker shade hung down from under his hat. He stepped onto the wharf and stood before Jones, who felt quite out-of-place, despite the visitor's outlandish clothes.

Jones saluted him with a flat hand. "I am Commander Paul Jones. Welcome to Simon's Town."

The captain raised a curled index finger to his forehead and touched his hat. "*Simon's Town*," he repeated in accented English. "Excuse my ignorance, but where in the world is that?"

Jones smiled. He assumed that this was all part of the charade. "The Cape of Good Hope," he replied in a dramatic manner. "South Africa."

"*Cape of Good Hope*. Yes, I have seen it on the maps."

"And you are?"

"I apologise. I am Captain Heinrich van der Decken."

"Pleased to meet you," Jones said and held out a hand; the captain did not take it. "So, where are you bound?"

The captain answered without hesitation, "Holland."

"The Netherlands," Jones corrected him, but there was no reaction from van der Decken. "And where have you just come from?"

"Batavia."

Jones smiled once more. He was familiar enough with naval history to know that Batavia was the old name for modern-day Jakarta, where the Dutch East-India Company

had had its eastern headquarters. Clearly this was quite an elaborate act that these men were putting on. “So, you’re just stopping here for provisions, I guess?”

“Yes, please. And, as you may have seen, our ship is a little worse for wear and we need to do some repairs. We’ll need new sails as well. We will pay.”

“We will offer any assistance we can,” Jones replied, although he knew precious little about how one would go about repairing a sailing vessel of this sort. “Now, your unexpected arrival has caught our catering services a little off-guard, but you and your crew are welcome to a meal in the town at our expense.”

“That is most generous.”

“I’ll send a kombi around in half an hour or so.”

“A *kom-bee*?”

“A car.”

“A *car-riage*?”

Jones was amused by this, “Yes, a *carriage*, if you like. However, you can drop the act now. It’s just you and me talking, and I am very impressed with everything I’ve seen and heard so far. So tell me, what’s the real purpose of your voyage?”

The captain seemed confused. “We are carrying a cargo of spices from Batavia to Holland,” he recited, as if from memory.

This irritated Jones. “Very well then; keep playing your little game,” he muttered under his breath before addressing him again. “It was good to meet you, captain. I’ll send the car around in a bit.” He turned to walk back to his vehicle.

Van der Decken called after him, “But this is not what I was expecting.”

“Me neither,” Commander Jones called back to him.

He returned to the car and drove back up the wharf. He thought about his conversation with the strange captain all the way to the admiral’s office. He was not looking forward to meeting with the admiral; she always reminded him of an angry Chihuahua, and he got bitten often.

He was still thinking about how he was going to explain all of this to the FOC when he drove through the gates into headquarters. He parked in the space that was reserved for him. The headquarters of the naval base were unassuming. It was just a two-storey wooden building, overarched by thick green tree branches. An anchor lay on the

trimmed grass in front of the entrance, and a large yardarm stood behind it. It held three flags: the national one, the naval one, and one bearing the admiral's pennant.

He removed his cap as he stepped into the foyer. The admiral's secretary saw him enter and picked up the phone. "Commander Jones is here," he said. He then put the receiver down and gestured towards the door, "You may go in."

Jones nodded and pushed open the door. He approached the large desk in the centre of the room and stood at attention. The admiral was poring over some paperwork and did not look up. She was a mature African woman, rather short in stature. Her slight frame belied her feisty nature, and her long, braided hair was done up in a bun. This, combined with the small pair of glasses that she wore while reading, gave her the severe, no-nonsense look of a schoolteacher or a librarian.

He lowered his eyes and noticed the little plaque that stood on the edge of her desk. It read: *REAR ADMIRAL, JR. GR., T. LEDWABA, FOC*. His gaze then wandered around the rest of the office, which was quite opulent, but he knew that she preferred it that way. Her desk was made of a shiny dark-brown mahogany, and the wall panels matched it. The floor was carpeted navy blue, and she had various oddments placed throughout the room: a model ship or two, one in a glass case, and an old cannon shell that she used to hold an umbrella, an assegai and a knobkerrie. There were also a number of framed certificates and newspaper articles hanging on the walls, testaments to her achievements.

She stopped and examined Jones over the rim of her lenses. "You may sit."

"Thank you, ma'am." He took one of the two seats on his side of the desk.

"Now," she said as she set aside the papers and removed her glasses, "what do our visitors have to say for themselves?"

"Not much, ma'am. I spoke to their captain; van der Decken, he said his name was. He claims to be *en route* to Holland, carrying spices from Batavia."

The admiral sighed. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Those were his exact words."

"And you believed him? No one carries spices any more, or if they do they simply call it bulk cargo. And no one has referred to Jakarta as 'Batavia' in over two centuries. It's clearly a joke."

“If so, then it’s a very well-thought-out one. They have a brigantine, the captain speaks with a Dutch accent, and all of the crew were wearing period clothing.”

The admiral took off her glasses and twirled them between her fingers. “Isn’t the fifth *Pirates of the Caribbean* film in production now?”

Jones smiled. “I don’t think it’s that, ma’am. This whole business smacks of history buffs or new-age activists.”

“Historians I don’t mind,” she said, closing her glasses’ arms with a sharp *click*. “It’s the hippy types that worry me. They could be plotting some demonstration against the government for who-knows-what; probably still harping on about the arms deal. I’m actually quite disappointed with Captain Kruger for allowing this vessel to dock so easily. I must speak to him as soon as I can. Has he not heard of the Trojan horse?”

Jones had to stop himself from rolling his eyes or sighing. *There she goes again*, he thought, *showing off how literate she is*.

The admiral then put her hands together on the desk and leaned over them. “Did you notice the name of their ship? It might help us get a better idea of who they are.”

“I saw it carved on the side, ma’am. But it was not very clear. This was all I got.” He found the memo on his phone, stood up and showed it to her. She put her glasses on again and examined the phone. Then she copied the letters onto a Post-it note, which she stuck on her computer monitor.

“Nothing comes to mind. I’ll have to run it through all the registries of antique ships. But, what do these people actually want from us?”

“They want provisions, and I offered them a meal for the crew in the town. Also, their vessel looks like it’s been through a storm, and they need some repair-work done.”

“And who’s going to do that?”

“I said that we would assist.”

“You did, did you?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Admiral Ledwaba leaned back in her chair. “Well, you made the promise, so it’s up to you to see that it gets done. I also want you to join them at this meal. Speak to the captain again. Find out what their purpose here in Simon’s Town really is. I want to know

whatever they do, wherever they go, and whomever they meet with. We may be offering them our hospitality, but that doesn't mean that we trust them. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, ma'am."

"Good. Then you're dismissed," she said as she returned to her paperwork.

Commander Jones stood to attention and turned to leave.

"Hang on," said the admiral. "You said their ship seems to have been through a storm?"

"Yes, it does," he said.

"But it's the middle of summer. When last did we have bad weather here?"

"I don't remember, ma'am."

She pushed her reading glasses back onto the bridge of her nose before she turned away from him. "Strange."

Above the fogbank, at the old Cape Point lighthouse, the figure of an old man stood at the wall in silent contemplation. He looked out over False Bay and his gaze penetrated through the fog to the calm waters below. He had been standing there all morning, and he had watched the progress of the brig towards the harbour with interest.

He knew exactly what ship it was, and who sailed on it. He also knew that the captain of the ship would eventually remember what had happened to him and who was responsible for it. And, when he did, he would come looking for him.

Chapter 2:
The Captain

Captain van der Decken watched Commander Jones leave in his strange carriage. Well, the captain called it a carriage, but there was an obvious lack of horses, which made him wonder how it was propelled. It seemed to be made of metal, and made a noise whenever it was in operation, so he guessed there was some kind of internal mechanics involved.

As he walked back up the gangplank, he thought about the man whom he had just met. He did not resemble an officer in any Navy that the captain had ever encountered; his hair was far too short and his uniform too clean. He didn't even have a beard! He also thought about their conversation, and how details of their voyage had come to his mind upon request. *At least now we are beginning to learn more about ourselves*, he thought.

He reached the main deck and found himself confronted by his crew. They were all looking at him. Johannes asked, "What did he say, sir?"

Van der Decken drew a deep breath. "He said his name is Commander Jones, and that this port is called Simon's Town, near the Cape of Good Hope. He asked me about our voyage, and I said that we were carrying spices from Batavia back to Holland."

"Why didn't you tell us that earlier?" asked Pieter.

The captain didn't like his angry tone. "Because I didn't remember that either until I was standing before Jones," he replied.

Pieter looked only partially satisfied. Jakob asked, "What about the damage to the ship, Captain? And we will need provisions soon."

"Commander Jones promised to provide us with some provisions, and to do all he can to assist with our repairs. For now, he has offered us a meal at a local tavern. He said he'd send a carriage around to fetch us soon. So you all may stand easy until then."

The captain turned around and walked towards his cabin down aft. As he did so, he experienced a passing feeling of déjà vu, as if he had addressed the crew many times before, and then also retired to his cabin.

Once inside, he decided to take a closer look at the maps lying on his desk. The Cape of Good Hope was marked on a few of them, but there was no sign of a port called

“Simon’s Town”. It was as if his charts were out of date, but why would he have been sailing with such old equipment?

The carriage arrived not long after this, and van der Decken saw that it was of a similar type to that owned by Commander Jones, although it was a little larger, so as to carry more people. They soon discovered that, to transport the ship’s crew of fourteen, two such carriages were needed, and another soon arrived.

Then van der Decken had to convince his men to trust him enough to get inside these strange vehicles. At last, they each took a seat and the carriages moved off. Once off the wharf, they started to gain speed until they were going like a horse at a full-out gallop. The crew seemed thrilled by the experience.

The captain noticed very little of their surroundings at first, but as he became accustomed to the speed of the ride, he started to look out through the windows. They exited the harbour through a large gate and were soon driving down the main road of the town. The metal carriages seemed to be everywhere he looked, as if everyone owned one and went about town in it rather than walking. Although, to be fair, there were also many people walking in the streets, wearing clothes the like of which he had never seen; people of all colours, too, from pale of skin to very dark, and in-between.

The architecture of the buildings along the main road had a familiar style to them. Most were made of stone, painted an off-white colour; some even had wooden balconies on their second levels. Various flags hung on poles outside some establishments, also taverns and inns most likely, while other places had signs proclaiming in English what their business was. Some words he recognised. Most he did not. The ride was over sooner than expected. They turned down a side street and stopped outside a public house. The name on the wall read: “The Salty Sea Dog”; there was also a picture of a dog wearing a sailor’s cap.

The captain and his crew disembarked from the carriages and made their way inside. Something about the style of the restaurant’s interior immediately set them at ease, and they all sat down at a large table in the centre of the room.

“This is more like it,” said Jakob to the others.

A waiter appeared and said, “Good afternoon, my name is André and I’ll be your waiter. What would you gentleman like to drink?”

The crew looked confused; very few of them understood English. They turned to van der Decken, who translated for them. There was a collective “Oh” sound and then they gave the captain their orders. They all wanted rum. The captain told the waiter this.

“Rum and –” André began.

“And nothing; just rum,” said the captain.

“Okay.... So, that’s fourteen rums. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be back soon.” He headed off in the direction of the bar.

The crew started talking amongst themselves. Within a minute they’d demolished all the bread rolls from the little baskets on the table. Fortunately, their drinks arrived soon afterwards. The crew were amazed that they had all been given glasses, and they admired the look and colour of their drinks before consuming them. Then they became even more animated. André returned to ask what they would like to eat. Van der Decken took their orders once more and translated for the waiter.

André winced at some of the requests. “Oh, I don’t know if we can do that –” he started, but stopped when he saw the murderous look on van der Decken’s face. “I mean, I’ll see what I can do,” he finished.

“Thank you,” the captain said.

The waiter left and the captain cast his eyes over the establishment. There were a few windows, so the place was well lit. The view included a small jetty that poked out into the sea. He could even see the masts of his ship in the harbour. The tables had cloths over them, and there were some flowers in glasses placed here and there. The bar had a nautical look to it, made of heavy wood and with small decorative portholes on the wall behind it. A man stood there pouring drinks and cleaning glasses. Just then, van der Decken noticed a waitress emerge from the kitchen, and his mind lurched.

He felt that he *knew* this girl from somewhere and sometime, just like he’d felt when he’d looked into Johannes’ face earlier that day. She seemed to be of mixed race, like the offspring he’d seen of Dutch officers and their Indian servants. She had a slight figure, full sensual lips, and her curly dark brown hair was tied up in a ponytail.

The captain watched her as she served a couple of other patrons. Her flawless skin was both dark and pale at once. She smiled at the man she was speaking to and it dimpled

her cheeks. However, it was her eyes that really held his gaze; her irises were the colour of the sea at night when the moonlight glistened on the wave-crests.

As he stared at her, Van der Decken found himself transported to a different time and a different place. The sight of her unlocked something in his memory. He was also in a tavern, although it was in Europe somewhere, and it was much darker, lit only by a few lanterns hanging on the walls. The waitress was there, too. She brought him a drink. He accepted it and she sat down next to him. He knew she was looking at him but he avoided her gaze by taking a swig from the flagon. He drained his drink too quickly and thought he should have taken it slower. Now he had no choice but to acknowledge her.

“So, Heinrich,” she started, “have you returned to stay, at last?”

He shifted in his seat. “Senta, I’ve explained to you before, I can’t –”

“You mean you won’t. You don’t want to.”

“Don’t say that. Of course I want to. But it’s not that simple. I’m a sailor, and a captain, no less. I’ve got to go where they send me. Tomorrow we sail for the East.”

She laughed. “*The East?* Is there anything left there for you people to carry back? It feels like you’ve been there a thousand times. Will it ever end?”

Van der Decken reached out to take her hand, but she pulled away. “I could make it so that this will be the last time,” he said. “After this, I’ll quit, and then I’ll come back here, to you. Will you wait for me?”

The girl called Senta stood up. “I don’t know, anymore. I honestly don’t know.” She turned to walk away and the captain knew that he’d not seen her again since that day. Not until now. But, what was she doing *here*, in this part of the world?

At that moment, Commander Jones walked in. He made his way over to the table and took a seat next to van der Decken.

“So, Captain,” he said, “what are you having? Or, should I say, what are you *not* having? You haven’t even touched your drink yet.”

However, the captain wasn’t listening to him. He seemed not to have even seen the commander come in and sit down next to him. He rose from his seat, his eyes fixed on the waitress, and walked towards her. The crew noticed this and turned to watch their captain with interested expressions. Van der Decken reached her and stood by her side.

She was still taking another man's order, but stopped when she sensed his presence. She turned to him and said, "I'll be with you just now, sir."

The captain looked taken aback. "So now it's *sir*, is it? You're not still angry with me, are you?"

The waitress faced him, "Sir, please. I'll come to your table now. I'm not done with this gentleman yet."

"But, Senta, it's me. It's Heinrich. And what are you doing here at the Cape of Good Hope, of all places?"

Then her whole demeanour changed. "Sir," she said, firmer than before, "you're mistaken. My name is not Senta. Now, please return to your table."

"What are you talking about?" van der Decken raised his voice and a few other patrons' heads turned around. Johannes approached his captain and coaxed him back to his seat. Van der Decken didn't resist much, so stunned was he by the waitress' failure to recognise him.

"There you go," Jones said, smiling at the captain. "You win some, you lose some, eh? Why don't you have a drink?"

"But, I know her," van der Decken said. "I met her in Amsterdam. She was barely more than a slave then, but we were lovers."

Jones looked amused by this statement. The rest of the crew resumed their chatter, eager to show their lack of interest in the captain's affairs. Only Johannes sat beside van der Decken in a show of support.

A little later, after the crew had received their food, they overheard the waitress speaking to the man behind the bar. She seemed to be complaining to him about the incident, which he'd not witnessed.

"Look, Elbé," the man said at last, "if he's bothering you that much, then go home. Your shift's almost done, anyway. But, I can't afford to throw the whole lot of them out. They're guests and the Navy's footing the bill."

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow then," she slung a bag over her shoulder and stormed out of the restaurant. The captain got to his feet and also headed for the door. Johannes tried to stop him again, but van der Decken turned to face the young sailor and said, "I'm not going to do anything stupid. I just need to get to the bottom of this mystery."

Johannes backed off and gave a small salute. Van der Decken addressed Jones in English, “I thank you and the Navy for your hospitality, Commander. I’m not sure when I’ll be back, but please ensure that my crew return to the ship safely. Don’t worry about me; I can find my own way back.”

And with that, van der Decken walked out into the street.

He looked left, towards the harbour, but didn’t see her. He turned to his right, towards the main road, and saw the waitress disappear behind a stone wall. He hurried after her. When he reached the main road, he saw that she was walking fast, and that she had already put about ten metres between them. He tried to close the gap, but he couldn’t move very fast in his heavy uniform, which still felt a bit damp. The pavement was also full of people walking in the opposite direction, and he struggled to find a path through them. Many gave him strange looks, and some held up little black things that emitted a flash of light. Despite all this, he kept his eyes fixed on the figure of the young woman.

So, her name was Elbé, not Senta. Or could the former be an assumed name?

He’d been following her for about five minutes, and had almost caught up with her, when she stopped, looked left and right, and crossed the street. Van der Decken did not wait for a gap in the traffic and just stepped into the road. He misjudged how fast the carriages were moving and had a couple of near-misses, but he made it to the other side in one piece.

There he found himself in front of a three-storey building with whitewashed walls. It had four small arches over as many wooden doors, which had dark green frames. The railings of the little balconies above were the same colour. The waitress, who seemed unaware that she had been followed, stood in front of the second door and knocked.

The door was opened by a short, dark-skinned man wearing blue and black. He had a moustache and looked middle-aged. He smiled when he saw her.

“Hello, honey.”

“Daddy,” she hugged him. “You’re home. When did you get back?”

“Oh, just now; I haven’t even had time to change yet.”

They were about to step inside when the captain realised that this may be his only chance. He stepped onto the porch and said, “Elbé?”

Both the man and his daughter turned to look at him. “Who’s this, my dear?” the man said.

Elbé looked embarrassed. “It’s just someone from the restaurant.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said van der Decken. “I met your daughter there.”

Her father took a step towards the captain as if he were about to assault him. But then he said, “That’s a Dutch accent, isn’t it? You’re not one of the sailors from that old sailing ship in the harbour, are you?”

“Yes, I am. In fact, I’m the captain.”

“Oh-ho!” the man said, beaming. “What an honour! Welcome to Simon’s Town. Please, you must come inside for a drink or something.”

Van der Decken smiled back. “Thank you, but I couldn’t, really. It sounds like you have just returned home from a journey. I’m sure you would prefer to take some time to rest and be with your family.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later. You say you know Elbé, then you must meet her mother. Come on, come in. I’ve always wanted to meet a real-live Dutchman!”

“*Dad!*” Elbé chided.

“Oh, well: *a native of the Netherlands*, then!” he said.

The captain removed his hat and entered the house as the man closed the door behind him. Van der Decken found himself inside a cosy-looking living room with a large maroon carpet laid across the wooden floorboards. There were some cushioned chairs in the centre of the room, and a small table with some books on it. Elbé seemed none too pleased with this turn of events and headed off down a passage.

“I’m Martin Abrahams, by the way,” her father said.

“Van der Decken,” he said, looking to catch Elbé’s eye, but she was already gone. “Heinrich van der Decken.”

“So, what brings you to Simon’s Town, Captain?” Mr Abrahams took a seat and motioned that his guest should do the same.

The captain lowered himself on to one of the chairs. He found it to be a lot more comfortable than the one in his ship’s cabin. “Oh, nothing in particular,” he said. “I guess you could say that the wind blew us this way.”

The man laughed. “Yes. This town has had that effect on ships, from the very beginning, if I know my history.” He waved an arm in an easterly direction. “False Bay offers shelter from the storms that often rage out beyond Cape Point.”

Van der Decken was not sure what to say about that. The captain was searching for something to say next when Elbé’s mother walked into the room. She stopped when she saw the strange visitor, who rose from his seat in respect. He could see a lot of Elbé in Mrs Abrahams. Although she had a much fuller frame, Mrs Abrahams had the same caramel complexion and piercing eyes. She was wearing a black headscarf and a golden-brown dress, which gave her quite an exotic appearance.

“Ah, Captain van der Decken,” Mr Abrahams said, “this is my wife, Miriam. Miriam, this is Captain Heinrich.”

“Good afternoon,” she said without lowering her gaze.

“Pleased to meet you,” said the captain.

“Likewise.”

“The captain is visiting from the Netherlands,” Mr Abrahams told his wife. “Elbé served him at the restaurant, and then she brought him home to meet us.”

Van der Decken winced a little. That wasn’t quite true. In fact, it wasn’t true at all. Then he noticed Martin casting his wife some significant looks.

“Oh, I’ll get us all some tea.” She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Silence fell again, but the captain had just remembered something Martin had said earlier. “Sorry, Mr Abrahams, but you told me just now that you’ve always wanted to meet someone from my country. Why is that?”

The man smiled and his moustache seemed to extend beyond the corners of his mouth. “Please call me Martin. It’s because I’m partly Dutch myself, you see. You and your country are in my blood, as it is in all the Coloureds here at the Cape. We even speak a language adapted from your own. *Kan jy verstaan wat ek sê vir jou?*”

Van der Decken nodded. “Ja,” he replied.

“But there’s more than that,” Mr Abrahams said, standing up and walking over to a cabinet against one of the walls. It was made of a dark wood, and it held a few ornamental plates and vases on its shelves. He opened a door near the bottom and pulled out an old string-bound book. He placed it on the table in front of the captain. “I can

actually trace my family's roots back to the Malaysian slaves brought to Amsterdam in the late sixteenth century. It wasn't easy, but it's become a bit of a hobby for me; more than a hobby, actually. I think it's very important to know where one comes from."

"Oh, no," said Mrs Abrahams as she re-entered the room with a laden tea-tray in her hands. "Not the family saga again. I've told you, Martin, you need to stop living in the past."

She poured water into a small cup and offered it to Van der Decken. He took it from her and, not wanting to seem ungracious, took a large gulp of the liquid. He started coughing as soon as he felt it burn his throat. Miriam rushed from the room and brought him a glass of water, which he drank with relief. The couple stared at him with curious expressions.

"You need to sip it slowly, my dear," said Mrs Abrahams.

The captain could only smile in embarrassment. Mr Abrahams got up and stood at the doorway of the passage Elbé had disappeared down earlier. He called to her, "Don't be rude now, honey. Come and have some tea with us." While Martin made his way back to his seat, Van der Decken turned to Mrs Abrahams and said, "How old is Elbé, if I may ask?"

Miriam drew in a breath and stared at the foreigner for a moment or two. She seemed to decide that it was better to respond to the question rather than avoid it. "She's *only* nineteen. She finished school a year ago, but we could not afford to send her to university, not on what the Navy pays Martin. But she's such an independent type, so she's been working at that restaurant for the last year or so, saving up for her fees. She's been accepted to study psychology at the University of Cape Town, starting this coming February, and we are very proud of her."

Van der Decken listened to all that the mother had said, but he only understood parts of it. He was saved from thinking any more about it by Elbé, who had just stepped into the room. She had changed into more casual wear, and it was only now that the captain realised that she had been wearing some sort of uniform at the tavern. He rose from his seat once more, and Martin stared at his wife, as if to say, "What manners!" Miriam looked unimpressed.

Mr Abrahams told his guest, "Come, Captain. You may sit again."

But the captain remained standing, transfixed by Elbé's presence. He looked at her much as he had when he'd first seen her earlier that afternoon, with a sense of joy and wonder. She gazed back at him, her eyes betraying nothing.

"No, thank you," van der Decken spoke at last. "I think I must be going."

"Oh, so soon?" said Martin.

"Yes. But, if it's all right with you, I'd like to call on Elbé again tomorrow."

The Abrahams family seemed a bit bemused by this. "*Call on?*" repeated Martin. "Yes, I think that'd be fine."

"Around the same time?" the captain asked.

"No," Elbé spoke. "I mean, I'm working at the restaurant tomorrow afternoon."

"Then, I could walk you there in the morning. Would that be all right?" he asked her.

"Okay," she said, without emotion.

"Shall I come by at noon?"

Elbé nodded. Van der Decken smiled and turned towards the front door. Martin got up to let him out. "Thank you for the drink, Mrs Abrahams," he said. He got a similar nod from her. He told Mr Abrahams, "It was nice to meet you."

"Likewise," said Martin.

The door closed and the captain was alone once again. He made his way across the road and re-traced his steps back to the tavern. When he got there, he found his entire crew sitting in the carriages. Commander Jones was there, too, and he approached van der Decken as he came striding down the street.

"Excuse me, Captain," he said, "but where the heck have you been?"

"I was visiting a very nice family."

"Ah, well. I wanted to talk to you about something at lunch, but it can wait until tomorrow, I suppose."

The captain got into one of the carriages and it took them back to their ship. This time, however, van der Decken didn't notice a single thing passing by outside the windows. His heart and mind were preparing him for tomorrow.

Chapter 3:

Elbé

Heinrich van der Decken did not sleep that night. After the day's excitement, he was certain that he would, but sleep eluded him. Instead, he lay on top of the bedding on his wooden bunk with his eyes closed, enjoying the gentle motion of the ship as it tugged against its moorings.

One moment it was dark outside the window of his cabin, the next there was light streaming in. It was as if he'd blinked and the night was gone. He got off his bunk and put on the boots that were standing beside it. He also retrieved his tricorn from his desk before he ventured out onto the main deck.

He found the crew hard at work under the direction of Johannes. The captain was glad that he had someone like Johannes whom he could rely on.

Van der Decken made his way across the deck towards the gangplank. The sun was already beginning to climb over the ship and the sky was clear of clouds. It looked to be a fine day for a walk through the town, he thought; and he could not wait to see Elbé once more, and to hear her voice.

As he approached the gunwale, however, he was forestalled by one of the crew, Pieter van der Dussen. Van der Dussen was tall and thin and his dirty brown hair hung in front of his sunken eyes. He made a perfunctory salute. "Good morning, Captain. Where are you going, if I may ask?"

"You may not ask, Pieter, as it is none of your damned business."

Johannes heard this exchange and stopped what he was doing to observe.

"I'm sorry, Captain," said Pieter, "I only meant that we are looking to begin on the repairs, and are in need of your advice in this regard."

"Nonsense. Johannes seems to be handling things very well in my absence. I trust in his judgement, and so should you. Commander Jones assured me that he would see to our needs with respect to the repairs, so I expect that he shall pay a visit to the ship later."

"Well, in that case, Captain, should you not be here when he arrives? After all, you are the only one of us who speaks their language."

Van der Decken heaved a weary sigh. Pieter was not blocking his path off the ship, but was instead standing a few steps to his left as he argued with him. In some ways this was more confrontational than if he had taken up a place right in front of him. And the idiot did have a point.

“I have to go and see someone in the town this morning. It should only take an hour or two, and I’ll try to get back as soon as I can. If the commander arrives in the meantime, then try and keep him here until I return.” The captain took a step closer to Pieter and said, “And you’d better hope that on my long walk I forget how you have spoken to me today. We in the Dutch-East India Trading Company are not above giving insolent crew members a good flogging, understand?”

Pieter took a pace back and bowed. “Yes, captain.”

Without another word, van der Decken strode down the gangplank in his heavy boots, shaking the timbers as he disembarked. He stepped off on to the wharf and realised that today, he would not have the luxury of a carriage to take him where he wanted to go.

But that did not bother him. The weather was good and there was a bracing breeze blowing at his back as he started to walk down the long stone pier. He passed one of the huge grey vessels that they had seen the previous day when they had first docked in the harbour. It was so long that it must have taken him a minute or so to walk its entire length.

He did not spend too much time looking at it, as he found his mind unable or unwilling to process the very fact of it. Instead, he looked to his right, where there lay a basin with much smaller boats tied up in it. They looked more familiar, with their small hulls, mainmast and sails. And yet, they still seemed a little strange to him.

The captain tried to follow the exact path that he and the rest of the crew had taken to the tavern the previous day. He exited the harbour through a gap in a large grey stone wall, and continued until he reached a set of ornamental gates. They were open, and he passed through without being stopped by any of the guards on duty. After that, he was soon walking along the main road of the town. He walked past what looked like the town hall, then the town square, and then he was at the alley in which “The Salty Sea Dog” was situated. He smiled when he saw the small white-walled building; it was there, after all, that he had experienced his first real memory since waking up on the ship’s deck.

Now van der Decken made his way further up the street. He traced the steps he'd taken when he'd followed Elbé home less than twenty-four hours before. He walked past another pair of large iron gates set into the wall on his right, which he had not noticed before. He followed the road uphill and around a bend until he came to the building where she stayed. Once again, he stepped into the traffic without hesitation. He made his way in-between the fast-moving vehicles, but still seemed to expect them to slow down or to stop for him; luckily, they did.

When he reached the other side of the road, he stepped up to the second of the four doors and prepared to knock. However, before his hand touched the wood, the door opened to reveal Elbé in her waitressing uniform and with a small backpack over her right shoulder. Her dark hair hung loose and the captain was reminded once more of Senta. "Good morning," he said.

"Hello," she replied in her neutral tone.

"I'm sorry I'm a little early –"

"That's okay. I'm ready to go. I could show you around the town a bit?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much."

She closed the door behind her and they walked over to the edge of the pavement. Van der Decken almost stepped off without looking, but she put out her right hand to stop him. "No, we have to wait for a gap."

The captain looked at her as if she'd just explained one of life's great mysteries to him. Of course that's what one did. It seemed silly now that he had not guessed it before. He watched her and only walked across the road when she did, and they made it to the other side without any trouble. Once there, they both stood looking at each other for a moment, as if neither were sure of what to do or where to go next.

He cast his eyes about for something to focus on and he noticed a church-like building on the other side of the white wall in front of him. Most of the building lay below him, except for its clock-tower. The face was black and it had gold hands. There was also another, stranger structure in front of the church. It looked like the frame for a large wooden house, except that it was made out of metal. Elbé saw the captain looking at it, so she explained.

“My father told me that that was the lower station of an aerial ropeway that went all the way up the mountain, although it hasn’t worked for many years.”

“An *aerial* what?”

“A ropeway; it was used to carry people and supplies from the harbour to the other naval buildings up the hill without putting unnecessary strain on the roads. It also transported patients with contagious diseases so that their infection wouldn’t spread.”

Van der Decken’s gaze traced its way up the mountainside and down again. He was just as impressed by Elbé’s knowledge as by the apparatus itself. “Huh,” he said. “It’s unbelievable what people can do nowadays.”

She gave him a curious look and replied, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

They then began to walk downhill, following the same route the captain had just taken to reach her home. They walked in silence, for the most part, his thoughts grasping for something, anything, he could say to her. Although he didn’t see it, his strange attire was once again drawing curious looks from passers-by. Elbé clutched her bag a little closer and lowered her eyes, keeping them fixed on the ground in front of her. He could only guess what was going on in her mind. Was she embarrassed, as he imagined, to be seen in the presence of a foreigner? Or, was there perhaps a hint of shyness about her?

In no time, they’d reached the turn-off to “The Salty Sea Dog”. Van der Decken felt agitated at the thought of parting from Elbé so soon, and the fact that he would have to endure probably another twenty-four hours before he would be able to see her, to be with her, again. His relief was palpable when she didn’t turn aside, but instead pointed down the Main Road, and said, “Let’s go to Jubilee Square, there’s something I want to show you.”

He followed her into the square. He looked down and noticed that the ground was paved with dark-grey cobblestones. There was also a row of palm trees placed along the pavement, which gave it an even more exotic feel. The square itself seemed to be used more as a stopping point for all of the metal carriages than anything else. Elbé led him to the far end, where the harbour could be viewed from over a low stone wall. It was not a dissimilar view from that at “The Salty Sea Dog”, which was adjacent to the square.

A step or two led to a raised section, in the centre of which stood a stone fountain and three flagpoles. He failed to recognise any of the flags flying from them. To the left and right were various dark-skinned African traders selling their wares from small tables.

“So,” the captain said to Elbé, “what was it you wanted me to see?”

“This,” she pointed to her left. “Almost every foreign visitor to Simon’s Town ends up coming to see this statue. It seems only right that you do, too.”

What van der Decken saw before him was a most curious thing. With a large rock forming its pedestal, there stood a sculpted figure; not of some heroic explorer, nor even of a great beast like a lion, but of a dog. As he moved closer, he noticed something sitting in front of the dog’s front left paw. It was a sailor’s cap, and it was a part of the statue, as if the cap had actually *belonged* to the dog. “You have to tell me the story behind this. I mean, what did this dog do to earn this memorial to him?”

Elbé smiled at his bemusement. “Not much actually. He was just a dog who used to hang around the harbour and the sailors a lot. So much so that he became the first dog to be enlisted into the Royal Navy. They called him Just Nuisance, and he held the rank of Able Seaman. When he died, they buried him with full military honours. His grave’s up there on top of the mountain.” She pointed. “Pretty amazing, right?” she asked.

The captain shook his head. “Only the English,” he said, chuckling.

They returned to the wall and Elbé hoisted herself up to sit on it. She looked out over the small basin below and towards the harbour beyond.

“After living here my whole life,” she said, “I’ve never grown tired of this view. It’s one of my first memories. My father used to bring me here often when I was a child.”

Van der Decken let his gaze drift from the beautiful young woman beside him to what she was looking at. He saw his ship again, tied up at her berth. Behind that lay the blue water of the bay, stretching out only a short distance before it met a white sandy beach with a green wooded hillside rising above it. It was a view that reminded him of a panorama he had seen before, in a place that was important to him and his crew.

That place was Batavia, their final port-of-call before departing the East Indies and returning to Holland and their families. The captain recalled now that they had sailed on Good Friday. All of the crew but him had spent their nights camped on the beach; he had enjoyed the luxury of a small hut further up the hillside.

That morning, he emerged into the light of dawn and spotted Johannes and the rest of the crew bathing at the mouth of a freshwater streamlet. He returned to the inside of the hut to get dressed, but when he stepped out once more, he found that the crew were making their way up a path just below where he stood.

“Where are you all going?” he asked.

The sailor at the head of the crew turned; it was Pieter.

“To the church, Captain,” Pieter said. *He was a problem, even then.*

The captain looked to his left and saw that there was a small church built among the tropical vegetation. Its white walls shone in the sun, like a beacon beckoning people closer.

“Why?” he asked Pieter.

“Because it’s Good Friday, Captain.”

“To Hell with that!” he told them. “Let the Church keep its damned holidays. Today, we sail for Holland. Now, get your useless backsides to the dock!”

“But, Captain,” Pieter tried to argue. “It’s a very bad omen to sail on Good Friday, or on any other holiday for that matter –”

“Look, do you want to go to church or do you want to go home? I don’t know about you, but I want to go home; and the sooner the better. I’m the captain, and you go when I say we go. Now, get a move on.”

Pieter failed to conceal the murderous look on his face, but he kept his tongue.

None of the crew spoke as they turned around and walked down the hill again. They had all expected to be sailing soon, but they had thought that the captain would at least wait until after Easter Sunday. They made their way down to the pier in a slow and solemn fashion; their ship was waiting for them there. Her sails had been white once, but were now light-brown from weathering. The holds were packed to capacity with the cargo that they had crossed three oceans to find.

By mid-morning, they had set sail for home. Van der Decken remembered seeing people standing on the shore as their vessel skirted the coast, Dutch families who worked for the Company and had chosen to settle there. They were making their way to church and looked on the departing ship with disdain.

The captain imagined the women explaining to their children that one must always attend church on religious holidays. Not to do so was blasphemous and could incur God's wrath. *Poor lost souls*, he thought.

Just then, a voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Captain? Heinrich? Hein? Can I call you Hein? Are you okay?"

Van der Decken looked to his left and saw that he was still in Simon's Town, and that Elbé was still standing at his side, staring into his face with a concerned expression.

"I'm fine," he said. "And yes, you can call me Hein, if you like."

"Oh, all right. I thought there was something wrong with you. It was like you were in a trance."

"In a *what*?"

She smiled at him. "Forget about it. Look, my shift's starting soon, so I'd better be going. Can you find your way back to the harbour from here?"

"Yes, I'll be all right."

"Okay. Well, I guess I'll see you around, then," she said as she walked away in the direction of the restaurant.

"Yes," he murmured. He tried to think of something else to say to her, but nothing came to him. Instead, he stood silent and motionless as he watched her leave. Then he turned to Just Nuisance's statue and sat down on the rock that served as its pedestal. He stared out at the masts of his ship; it calmed him. After about five minutes, he turned away from the wall and made his way out of Jubilee Square and back towards the docks.

When the captain returned to his ship a little later, he saw that Commander Jones' silver carriage was parked at the foot of the gangplank. He boarded the vessel and found Jones standing on the main deck with his arms folded across his chest. Johannes, Pieter and most of the crew were on deck as well, staring at the South African naval officer as if he were a curiosity on the shore. Van der Decken glared at his crew and told them all in Dutch, "Stop gaping and find something useful to keep yourselves busy with."

They all dispersed to various parts of the ship as the captain turned to face Jones, who then saluted him. The captain returned the gesture and said in English, "I'm sorry. I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

“Not too long. But why would none of your crew speak with me? I tried but they just stared back at me dumbly.”

“I am the only one who speaks English.”

“Really? How is that possible in this day and age?”

Van der Decken didn't know what to say.

“Never mind,” said Jones. “You're here now. But, before we begin, may I ask you something?”

“Yes?”

“Who were you visiting in the town yesterday afternoon?”

He thought about refusing to answer, but then realised how rude it would seem to someone who was, in effect, his host.

“His name is Martin Abrahams. He's in your Navy, but I don't know his rank.”

“And how do you know him?”

“He's the father of the waitress at ‘The Salty Sea Dog’.”

“So, you followed that young girl home yesterday and he just – what? Invited you in for tea?”

“Actually, he did.”

Jones was quiet. It occurred to the captain how this sort of behaviour might seem suspicious, so he explained further, “Elbé, the waitress, she's offered to show me around the town while I'm here. I was just with her now. She took me to see the old ropeway and the statue of the dog, Just Nuisance.”

The commander looked a little embarrassed. “I'm sorry to pry. But it did seem strange, considering you've never been to Simon's Town before.”

“Well, everyone here has been very welcoming.”

“Yes, I'm glad. Now, let's take a look at what needs doing on this ship of yours.”

Van der Decken and Jones walked around the ship together with Jones making notes on what needed to be fixed. The main item on the list was a new foremast, as well as a new set of sails.

When they were done, they descended the gangplank, and Jones strode up the wharf towards the bow. He called to the captain, “We could try and get you a new name-plate as well. This one's unreadable. What's the ship's name?”

The captain also looked at it: *D-LIE-NDE-LAN-R*, it read. Nothing jumped to mind. There was no way he could tell Jones that he didn't know the name of his own ship.

"That's all right," he said. "It can wait until we return to Holland. Just get us what we need and we'll have this ship ready to sail in no time."

"Very well, I'll send this list off to the chandlers now. Seeing as tomorrow's Friday, I'll do my best to get the first of the materials to you by tomorrow afternoon."

"I am at your service."

Jones got into his car, did a quick turn and drove away down the pier. The captain stared at the ship's name-plate once more. It was so frustrating; he could sense the name, just out of reach of the fingers of thought. In that moment he felt very old and forgetful, a feeling he couldn't shake even as he returned to his cabin to ponder the day's events.

That evening, he invited Johannes to his cabin to share a drink with him. After they'd both taken their first swig, van der Decken told him about the two curious visions that he had experienced: in the tavern the previous day, and then in the town square.

Johannes agreed that it was interesting, especially the second one, which he also now remembered happening.

"I need you to talk to the rest of the crew about Batavia, and see if they remember anything else. Whatever they do recall must be reported to me. We must try and pool our memories so as to reconstruct what happened to us," said van der Decken.

"I will. But, Captain; this girl from the tavern – you know that she is *not* Senta? It cannot be her. It's impossible."

"Not impossible. Unlikely, I admit. But, the resemblance is remarkable, isn't it? And, there's definitely something else about her, too. I've only seen her twice, but both times, she helped trigger vivid memories in me."

"So, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if I am to remember our full story, I have to keep seeing her."

Johannes smiled. "As if you needed a reason before," he said.

Van der Decken gave the sailor a stern look before breaking out in laughter. They continued to drink and laugh late into the night as the candle between them burned low.

Chapter 4:
A Picnic

As promised, at around three o'clock the following afternoon, a large vehicle arrived on the wharf alongside Captain van der Decken's ship. Three men disembarked and started offloading various supplies, which they left on the wharf for the Dutch crew to pick up. These supplies included the new canvas, several tins of paint, wooden planks, hammers, nails and paintbrushes.

Van der Decken watched all this happening from the quarterdeck and hoped that Commander Jones would make an appearance soon, as there was something he wanted to ask him. It was an ambitious, almost crazy, idea that had occurred to him in the early hours of that morning, as he lay awake on his bunk. He had still not managed to sleep at all, a fact which would've worried him except that he did not feel tired.

Fortunately for the captain, Jones was a fastidious man when it came to his work, and it wasn't long before his silver carriage arrived on the pier. The commander stepped out of his vehicle and looked up at the ship. He spotted van der Decken above him and gave a quick salute. The captain waved back at him while Jones turned and approached one of the workers.

Van der Decken decided to meet the commander on the wharf. He descended the gangplank and walked over to where Jones was standing. The captain waited for him to finish consulting with the worker.

Jones turned to him at last. "Good afternoon, Captain. I hope you are well."

"Very well, thank you."

"Good. As you can see, the first of the materials have arrived. The foremast will take a little longer, however."

"Yes, of course. You have been most helpful, Commander. But I wonder if you could help me a little more. You see, I have a request to ask of you. I'd be very grateful if you could grant it."

Jones looked bemused. "You may as well ask me. The worst I can say is 'no'."

Van der Decken told the commander exactly what he wanted. Jones was silent for a moment. Then he rubbed his chin and said, “It’s not impossible. I think there may still be someone in Cape Town who does that sort of thing.”

“So, you will try?”

“Yes. Why not? I enjoy a challenge. If I’m successful, where would you want it to meet you, and at what time?”

The captain hesitated; this was only one half of his plan, after all. The other half had yet to be confirmed or put into action.

“If you succeed,” the captain said, “have it meet me at the white-and-green houses opposite the old ropeway at noon tomorrow. You know where I’m talking about, yes?”

“I do.”

“Thank you, Commander. I’ll be forever in your debt.”

Jones nodded. He waited until the workers had finished unloading their truck, and then he left when they did. Van der Decken had Johannes and some of the other crew move the materials from the main deck to a safer location on the vessel. The captain then sat in his cabin, wondering if he should go through with his plan.

A lot depended on Commander Jones. If he failed to secure what the captain had asked for, the plan would still work, but it would not have quite the same effect.

In the end, van der Decken told himself that he’d seen enough of Jones to know that he was a man of integrity, a man that could be relied on to get the job done. With that in mind, van der Decken stepped off the ship once more and made his way out of the harbour gate and through the town to Elbé’s front door, a route that he was coming to know quite well.

He knocked on the door and it soon opened to reveal Martin Abrahams. He was wearing his blue-and-black uniform once again. However, there was a conflicted look on his face as he realised who was standing before him.

“Captain,” Abrahams said. “Good to see you.” He didn’t sound like it was good at all.

“Mr Abrahams,” said van der Decken with a hint of boyish nervousness, “could I speak to Elbé, please?”

“You may.” He opened the door a little further in order to let him in. “As long as that’s all you want to do.”

The captain sensed some hostility from Martin, who stepped away from him and called his daughter’s name down the passage. This prompted Miriam to emerge from the kitchen and put her head around the corner. Van der Decken greeted her, but she just made a noise that sounded like *harrumph*, before disappearing into the kitchen again.

While they waited for Elbé, Martin looked at the captain and broached the subject that seemed to be the cause of the discord between them.

“I received a visit from Commander Jones at work this morning.”

“Oh. Do you not usually see him?”

“No. He works for the admiral. I serve on one of the frigates.”

Van der Decken nodded. “And, what did you speak about?”

“You, as a matter of fact; he wanted to know how we knew each other, and what we talked about when you visited here the other day.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“The truth, of course.”

The captain hesitated. “I’m sorry if I’ve caused you and your family any trouble.”

“Oh no, we’ll be fine. But, it does make me wonder, what is it about you that has the admiral snooping around so much? And do I want someone like that spending time with my daughter?”

“Mr Abrahams, I can’t answer for the admiral’s suspicions, but I assure you that my intentions with Elbé are honourable.”

“Huh, whatever that means. How about you make this your last visit, eh? I’m sure you and your crew will be off soon anyway, leaving a lot of broken hearts in your wake.”

And with that, Abrahams walked away down the passage towards his bedroom. Elbé finally came out into the lounge. Fresh from a shift at the restaurant, she was still wearing her uniform. Van der Decken couldn’t know how much she’d heard of what had passed between him and her father.

“Hello, Hein,” she said with a mysterious smile.

Van der Decken couldn’t help but smile too. He found her shortened form of his name humorous.

“Hello. I was wondering if I could ask you something. Are you –”

Just then, he noticed Miriam looking at him from around the corner again. When she saw that she had been spotted, she retreated once more.

“Do you think we could talk somewhere a little more private?” he asked.

“Follow me,” Elbé said before she led him up a flight of stairs against the far wall. He followed her onto the small balcony above the front door, which looked out on a beautiful view: the last light of day slanted down and shone on the top of the clock-tower across the road. He could see his ship in the harbour again, and it seemed that the wharf could be seen from anywhere in town.

“Now, what is it you wanted to ask me?”

The captain took a deep breath. “What are you doing tomorrow? Are you working again?”

“No, I’m not, actually. It’s my off-weekend. Why do you ask?”

“Well, what would you say to me taking you somewhere tomorrow?”

“*Somewhere?* Where, exactly?”

“It’s a surprise.”

He knew it was a risky thing to say, but Elbé looked intrigued. A smile hovered at the edge of her lips. At last, she shrugged and said, “All right. Sure. I mean, what else am I going to do?”

Van der Decken beamed at her. “Good. I am glad. I will call on you at around noon tomorrow. Just don’t tell your parents about this. Their attitude towards me seems to have soured somewhat.”

“Don’t worry about them,” she said in a mischievous manner.

“Yes, well. I think I should be going. It’s a long walk back.”

She led him down the stairs again and walked him to the front door; he did not see her parents. They parted on good terms and the captain made his way back through the town and the harbour in high spirits. He returned to the ship just as twilight was setting in and had a drink alone in his cabin.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, he heard laughter and shouting coming from the lower decks. *It seems the rest of the crew can’t sleep either*, he thought.

The following morning, van der Decken realised that his plan was lacking one final element; he needed a basket, so he went down below to look for one. He found a wicker one at the entrance to the ship's storeroom. He then made a brief inspection of the food inside before deciding that very little or none of it was suitable to serve up to Elbé. He would have to buy what food he needed in the town, and that required some money.

He had no idea what currency was in use in Simon's Town, but he felt sure that Commander Jones could have helped him; he had been very accommodating with respect to all of the captain's other requests. The problem was that it was unlikely that van der Decken would be running into the commander before twelve o'clock, and he knew of no way to contact him. He could try and find him at the admiral's office, but he didn't know where that was situated, either.

That made his mind up for him; he would have to just take what he could find and hope it was good enough. He descended to the cargo hold and hefted and shook the large brown sacks. At last he tried one that made a clinking noise and, when he opened it up, he found what he was looking for. He grabbed a handful of what was inside and shoved it into his pocket. He wondered how many of the crew knew about what was in these bags. It occurred to him that he should ask Johannes about it when he returned to the ship later.

When he went up onto the main deck once more, he found Johannes directing the rest of the crew; they had begun on the minor repair-work while they awaited the arrival of the new foremast. It seemed that the crew took orders from Johannes just as naturally as van der Decken treated him as his first mate and confidante. The only sailor not doing anything useful was Pieter van der Dussen, who was lounging against the gunwale with a fey look in his eyes. The captain approached Johannes and told him that he was going into the town for the day, and that he should continue with the repairs.

Then, he strode over to where Pieter was leaning and stood right in front of him. The sailor rose to a sort of attention and touched his forelock with his right hand. He muttered something inaudible.

"I am going ashore for the day, Pieter," the captain said, "and before you ask me why again, let me tell you that it is still *none* of your business. But you should know that I am leaving Johannes van Wijk in charge of the ship. Whenever I am not aboard, he shall take on my authority, so you are to help him in any way possible, whether he orders

you to or not. Otherwise it'll be well within his rights to have you disciplined. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Captain."

He turned to the rest of the crew and spoke louder so as everyone would hear him. "Work hard today, boys. Remember, the sooner the ship is repaired, the sooner we can go home."

There was a small cheer of assent, and then van der Decken walked down the gangplank and onto the wharf. The route out of the docks was now as familiar to him as the act of walking, although as soon as he reached the main road, he stopped.

He had to find a trader that sold food and drink along the way to Elbé's house. He was not sure of the exact time, but he estimated that he had a little less than an hour remaining before noon.

He walked along the road, stopping to peek through the doorways of the shops that he passed. In most cases, he could not fathom what business these traders did. There just seemed to be a lot of people sitting around staring at boxes on tables in front of them. At about the halfway point of his journey, he found a shop that he thought could fulfil his needs. He walked in and saw a short, fat and bald Indian man standing behind the counter. The captain put the basket that he had brought with him on top of the counter and greeted the trader. "Good morning."

The shopkeeper stared at him and said, "Hello. How can I help you?"

"I need a fresh loaf of bread with some cheese, a few apples, a bottle of wine, and a bouquet of nice flowers, if you please."

The man gave the captain a curious look and then started to walk around his shop, picking up things as he went. He returned to the till a moment later and dropped all of the items he had fetched, including some flowers, into van der Decken's basket. "White or red wine?" the man asked.

"Uh, white."

He turned around and retrieved a bottle from the shelf behind him; there weren't that many bottles to choose from. He placed the bottle in the basket and said, "That'll be seventy-four rand and ninety cents."

The captain had no concept of the amount that he had to pay, but he was confident that what he had in his pocket would more than cover it. He reached into his jacket with his left hand and pulled out a single coin. He placed it on the counter-top and smiled at the shopkeeper, as if to say, “There you go”.

The man looked at it for a second and then shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can only accept local currency here.”

Van der Decken pointed and said, “That is solid gold.”

The shopkeeper reached out and picked up the coin. As soon as he felt its weight and saw the heraldic device on its opposite side, his whole demeanour changed and he told his customer, “Thank you very much, sir. Have a nice day, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Simon’s Town.”

The captain smiled at him again. “Thank you. I’m sure I will.” He picked up his basket and left the shop feeling better prepared for his day with Elbé.

He continued his walk up the main road, once again attracting undue amounts of attention from passers-by. However, after walking the route three times in as many days, he was getting used to it.

At last he was at Elbé’s front door, and now he just had to hope that Commander Jones would come through on his promise. He looked at the church clock-tower on the other side of the road: it was almost twelve o’clock. He decided to give it another few minutes before knocking on the door.

It was five past twelve when van der Decken decided that the commander had failed in his mission. He raised his right hand to knock on Elbé’s door, but then he heard the unmistakable clip-clop of hooves, and the creaking of wooden wheels.

He turned to his right and there along the road came a carriage, a *real* carriage, made of wood and pulled by a pair of large brown horses. The carriage looked nice, but not too fancy; it had an open top with a high back. It came to a stop in front of Elbé’s home, and the captain heard her front door unlock and saw it open to reveal her standing there.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and she had chosen a floral dress that hung off her shoulders and fell down to her knees. Her hair was loose once more and she looked even more radiant than when he’d seen her the previous day. Her eyes widened in amazement

when she stepped out onto the pavement and saw the carriage. Van der Decken doubted that his expression was any less amazed as he looked at her. He walked up to her and held out the small bouquet of flowers. “You look wonderful,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, accepting the flowers. “I must say, of all the surprises I imagined, I could never have guessed this. How did you do it?”

“I had a little help from a friend. Are you ready to go?”

“Where?”

“That is also a surprise.”

She smiled at him and he gestured that she should climb aboard the carriage first. Soon, they were sitting opposite one another; Elbé at the back and the captain behind the driver. Van der Decken turned and whispered to the driver as he slipped him a couple of gold coins, “Take us to the best picnic spot that you know around here: somewhere nice, but quiet and secluded.”

The man, who had dark skin like Elbé’s father, examined the coins for a moment and then smiled, revealing a gap in his front teeth. “Yes, Captain,” he said. Then he shook the horses’ reins and they were off.

They moved slowly in comparison to the other road-users. Some people were so intrigued by the sight of an old carriage in the street that they slowed down, too. A few others hooted their horns, or simply overtook them. However, Elbé was not noticing any of this. Instead, she was staring about herself, viewing her home town as if for the first time. She seemed enchanted by it all, and van der Decken drew joy from her happiness.

They wheeled their way past the gates that marked the entrance to the harbour. Now they were passing through the part of town that the captain had not seen before. The wall skirting the edge of the docks continued along their left side, while he noticed a couple of churches along the way as well. He saw yet another pair of gates leading into the harbour, and soon after that the wall ended and they were able to see the sea again.

It was a different sort of view from here, Van der Decken realised. The docks lay behind them, so what they were looking at now was natural, almost unspoiled coastline. There seemed to be lots of rocks sticking out of the ocean just off the shore, and he thought about how dangerous it would be for a ship to sail through that stretch of water.

The carriage rode on and on, until they came to an area where thick woodland lay on their right-hand side.

At this point, the driver turned the horses off the main road and they took a gravel path up a slight incline. It was hard on the horses, but it didn't last all that long, and then they had arrived at their destination, a small glade among some trees, just like the captain had requested. There was an open space of short grass, and it shimmered in the sunlight that filtered through the leaf canopy overhead. The soft tinkle of running water from a nearby stream could be heard while a gentle breeze moved through the branches above. Van der Decken and Elbé disembarked, and the driver took the carriage out of their sight.

Elbé noticed the wicker basket in the captain's hand and said, "So, we're going to have a picnic, are we?"

"Yes," he said as he put down the basket. "I mean, if you want to?"

"Of course I do." She sat down and folded her legs under herself, all in one fluid movement, tucking her dress away at the same time. "What have you got in the basket?"

"Well, I've got some lovely fresh bread, and some cheese to put on it." He sat down next to her and took out a small knife from his belt, which he then used to cut a couple of slices off the loaf. He did the same with the cheese and put the two together before serving up the sandwich to her. She took it with a smile before asking, "And what else?"

He looked embarrassed, as his food selection now seemed rather feeble. "Apples," he said. "I'm sorry if it's a little plain and simple, but I haven't done this in quite a while, if not ever."

She laughed a little. "You've never been on a picnic before?"

"Not that I can remember."

"How can you not remember?"

He didn't know how to reply.

"Oh, well," she said. "The food's fine, don't worry about it. This beautiful spot you found us more than makes up for it. And what have we got to drink, by the way?"

The captain reached into the basket and pulled out a couple of tankards which he had brought from the ship. And then, with a flourish, he revealed the wine bottle. That

had the desired effect on Elbé, who laughed again. “Well, so long as that’s half as good as it looks, then I’d say we’re going to have a fine picnic.”

They were both silent for a while after that, as they ate a few slices of bread and cheese, followed by an apple each. Once they were sipping on their wine, however, van der Decken soon found his tongue.

“So your parents said that you’re going to be *studying*, or something like that, next year. You must be very happy, that you have such an opportunity.”

“Yes,” she replied, after a sip of wine. “I am very lucky. My parents never went to university so I’ll be the first in my family. And it’s what I want; I’ve been working towards it for almost a year now. I’m looking forward to the experience, and all the new friends I will meet there.”

He smiled and nodded at her. He still did not understand what exactly her future entailed, but if she was happy about it, then so was he.

“And what about you? I guess you’ll be going back to Holland soon?”

He looked pensive. “That is correct. Once the damage we incurred in the storm is repaired, we’ll have no reason to stay.”

She looked down at the grass and pulled at a blade or two, like a distracted child. He was aware of how his words had sounded and what possible meaning they might carry. But then she looked up again, and her face was thoughtful. “When would you say the storm hit your ship?” she asked.

“It’s hard to say; maybe a week ago. Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious. We haven’t had any bad weather here for at least a month. In fact, it’s been very hot with no wind or rain.”

“Well, maybe the foul weather stayed out at sea and didn’t travel northwards.”

“Maybe.”

They continued to sip their wine in silence. Van der Decken looked away from her and felt a strong breeze blow across his face. He watched the branches of the trees sway in the wind, and he heard them creak like masts while their leaves fluttered like canvas. His mind drifted until he was on the deck of his ship once more, staring through his telescope at the land on the horizon. Jakob had just called down from the crow’s nest that the Cape of Good Hope had been sighted, and he was right. There it was, about eight

to ten miles off the starboard bow. *Known as the Cape of Storms to sailors*, the captain mused, *but the Company didn't like to call it that.*

He looked now for any signs of a storm. Years of experience had taught him how to predict when one was coming a whole day in advance. At the moment, however, the sun shone in a cloudless sky and the air was dry. He put his telescope away and returned to the helm. He felt certain that they would have no problems rounding the Cape today.

Less than an hour later, however, everything had changed. The wind had whipped up from a steady breeze to a gale and massive dark clouds had appeared above the ship. The visibility also deteriorated as heavy rain came bucketing straight down without the prelude of drizzle or even of large drops.

Pieter van der Dussen stood with Johannes and the other crewmembers on the deck and shouted, "It's Adamastor, just like I told you! Or else it's God punishing us for sailing on Good Friday! The captain has damned us all!"

"To Hell with Adamastor!" van der Decken shouted as he appeared on the deck. "And even God Himself will not stop us from reaching Table Bay!"

"Captain," said Pieter, "we can't ride this storm out! We must turn back!"

"Another two days without fresh water and we'll be dead anyway! Now will you get up top and reef those sails!"

"Hein?" A voice in the air.

"What?"

"Hein, are you all right?" It was Elbé.

"Of course I am. What happened?"

"You were in a trance again, just like the other day. Does that happen often?"

"I don't know. I hope not. Don't worry about it, it's nothing."

"It didn't look like nothing." She got to her feet and wiped the grass off her dress. "Come, let's go for a walk."

He struggled to return his mind to the present. This new vision that he had seen seemed very important somehow. They were strolling now along the bank of a streamlet, with about a foot of space between them, as the water from the mountains ran over the rocks and stones in the shallow bed.

Elbé spoke. “This place seems very familiar to me. I think my mother may have brought me here, or somewhere similar, when I was younger. I definitely feel my mother’s presence here.”

The captain looked around himself, as if he thought that Miriam Abrahams had followed them here, and that she might jump out from behind a bush at any time. He wouldn’t have put it past her.

“This place reminds me of something she used to sing to me,” Elbé continued, “a song, the words of which I didn’t understand at the time, but I do now.” Then, she recited the words, putting a little melody behind them, but not enough to call it singing:

*“Hierdie Land, wat ons s’n was,
Sal ons s’n weer wees.
Ons was eerste hier,
Voor die Wit Mense gekom het:
Die Hollanders, die Engelse.
Voor hulle ons weg gestoot het,
Om in die Berge to bly, en op die Vlaktes,
Weg van die See af,
Ons se geliefde See.
Hierdie Land, wat ons s’n was,
Sal ons s’n weer wees,
As dit nie in ons se Tyd nie,
Dan na ons Dood.”*

Van der Decken was silent.

“You understood what I said?” Elbé asked him.

“Yes. It was beautiful.”

“It’s tragic, that’s what it is. Beyond these trees are big houses, built against the hillside and overlooking the sea. The only people who can afford to live there are the whites, mostly. But, do they have any birthright to the land that they built their houses

on? Of course not; their ancestors either took the land by force, or else bought it with a couple of gold coins that the indigenous people had no use for.”

The captain’s hand touched his pocket full of coins without thinking.

Elbé continued, “That’s what the lament is all about. Most coloureds live on the other side of the Peninsula, or else on the Cape Flats, miles away from here. The only reason my family and I can stay in Simon’s Town is because my father works for the Navy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologise. It’s not your fault; not directly, anyway.”

“But, this language you sometimes speak; it is very similar to Dutch, no?”

“Yes.”

“And that is a white man’s language?”

“Yes.”

The captain was confused. “The situation in your country seems very mixed-up.”

She laughed a little. “Tell me about it.”

The sun had almost sunk behind the mountains now, and they decided that it was time to start heading back. Van der Decken called the carriage-driver and he prepared the horses for their departure. Elbé and the captain climbed aboard once more. This time, they sat beside one another, but still they maintained about a foot of space between them. As they moved down the hill and back on to the main road, he could feel a pull towards her, an urge to hold her hand, to put his arm around her, to let her lay her head against his shoulder. He wondered if she felt it, too; probably not.

He remained sitting just the way that he was and did not act on his feelings. Nor did she make a move towards him. They were each pre-occupied with their own thoughts. Not a word passed their lips until they returned to Elbé’s home.

“Thank you for the wonderful picnic,” she said.

“It was my pleasure.”

They both disembarked and Elbé headed for her door, smiling over her shoulder as she went. The captain smiled too and watched her until she was inside. He wondered when he would see her again. Then he paid the driver with another couple of gold coins before he turned away to begin his walk back to the docks.

When van der Decken returned to his ship, he found it looking a lot better than it had earlier that day. Many of the damaged areas on the hull had been overlaid with new wood, and half of the vessel was resplendent with a new layer of paint.

He walked along the ship's length all the way to the bow, where he saw that the area around the nameplate had been painted, but not the plate itself. Those same few letters glared out at him, taunting him: *D-LIE-NDE-LAN-R*. Still nothing came to his mind. It was a small consolation that none of the crew had been able to remember it either.

Later that evening, over a tot of rum, the captain related to Johannes the details of the memory that he had experienced while on his picnic with Elbé.

"So, as we were nearing the Cape, a storm came out of nowhere and swallowed us all. Pieter was shouting something about *Adamastor*, but I don't know what he meant by it. It's vaguely familiar, as is a lot else. Do you perhaps remember anything about it?"

"No, I don't. Shouldn't we just ask Pieter?"

"In his current mood, I'd rather not."

"Mm. I'll think about it tonight, Captain, and ask some of the other men."

"Please do, Johannes. I feel like this is the key to remembering what happened to us. We are so close now, I just know it. If we could only discover what this final piece of the puzzle is."

"I will do what I can."

Silence fell between them for a time, until another thought occurred to van der Decken. "Johannes," he asked. "Have you slept at all the past few nights?"

"As a matter of fact, no, Captain. What about you?"

He shook his head.

"That is strange. The rest of the crew can get no rest, either."

"And yet, none of us are fatigued, are we? I mean, I remember hearing a doctor say once that the body needed sleep in order to function properly. But we all seem to be doing fine."

"As I said, Captain, it is strange."

They parted after another tot of rum. Johannes left the cabin and van der Decken lay down on his bunk once more. He closed his eyes and, although sleep did not come to

take him, his mind was filled with memories from the picnic with Elbé and visions of a ship in a storm.

Chapter 5:
Boulders

Captain van der Decken stood behind his desk and stared out of the window at the world outside. The sun had risen a good few hours ago, so his view was well illuminated. He was fully dressed, as if they were about to set sail for Holland; all he lacked was his tricorn, which lay on his desk. He was nurturing a thought, a thought that might have led to some important piece of information about himself, his ship or his crew, but then there came a knock on his cabin-door, and it was gone.

“Enter,” he called, annoyed.

The door opened and Johannes stepped inside.

Van der Decken turned to face him. “What is it?”

“It’s the girl, Captain. Elbé.”

“What about her?”

“Well, she’s here.”

“What?” He grabbed his tricorn with his right hand as he strode past his desk and Johannes. When he walked out onto the main deck, he noticed that the rest of his crew were all standing against the port gunwale and looking at the wharf. He shouted at them in Dutch: “Come away from there! Get back to work!”

There was a frantic scuffle as each sailor hurried to obey him.

On reaching the ship’s side, van der Decken glanced down at the pier and, indeed, there stood Elbé. He felt excited to see her again so soon after yesterday, but also anxious as to what could have made her seek him out like this.

He saw that she was wearing a dress again, but this time it was a plain white one, which accentuated just how much darker her skin was compared to European women.

“Good morning,” she called up to him.

“And to you, too. What are doing here?”

“Aw, *that*’s nice.”

“Sorry. I just mean, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Well, today it’s my turn to surprise you. I thought we could go for a walk somewhere. Are you up for it?”

“Of course I am. Just give me a minute. I’ll be down there now,” he said, starting in the direction of the gangplank. He noticed that Pieter was shooting a confrontational glare at him, but he chose to ignore it. Then he found his path blocked by someone else; this time, it was Johannes. “What is it now?”

The young sailor spoke in a loud whisper. “I just thought you’d like to know, Captain: I asked the rest of the crew about Adamastor, and they recall that Pieter told them a story about him on the night before we left Batavia. It seems this Adamastor is some sort of vengeful storm-god.”

The captain nodded. “Well, that would fit with the vision I had yesterday. Thank you, Johannes.”

The sailor stepped out of his way. Van der Decken descended the gangplank and joined Elbé on the wharf. They started walking.

“So, where are we going?” he asked her.

“I told you. It’s a surprise.”

He smiled. Then something else occurred to him. “Isn’t today Sunday?”

“It is,” she said.

“So, shouldn’t you be in church?”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “My family’s not all that devout. Well, actually my mother is. My father, however, doesn’t believe that a person has to go to church to worship God; and I agree with him. God is everywhere.”

“That’s quite a radical idea.”

She shrugged. “Not for us.”

They made their way out of the harbour and, on reaching the main road, turned left. They were now following the same route that they’d travelled the previous day in the carriage. Van der Decken again noticed the two churches he’d seen the day before, one on either side of the road. There was a little activity around the one on his right, but the one on his left was dead-quiet. It seemed Elbé’s family was not the town’s only agnostic family. An image of Martin and Miriam Abrahams appeared in the captain’s mind and he felt a sudden guilt.

“Do your parents know where you are?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I mean, do they know who you’re with?”

“They do. I try not to lie to my parents.”

“But, did they not try and stop you? I got the impression the other day that they didn’t want you spending any more time with me.”

“They’re just doing what parents do best: worrying. But I told them not to. I know what I’m doing.”

Van der Decken looked at the young woman beside him with admiration; she had a strong spirit, something that also reminded him of Senta. However, he felt that what faint memories he did have of Senta were becoming blurred with the new ones he was making with Elbé. He struggled to call Senta’s face and voice to mind, and sometimes when he did, it was Elbé he saw or heard.

They continued their walk, and the captain got to spend more time looking at the places they’d rode past the previous day. A while later, he asked, “How far are we going, exactly?”

“You’re not tired already, are you? I’m sorry, but I don’t know anyone who can organise a horse and carriage for me.”

“No, I’m all right. I mean, I’m just concerned for you.”

“I’m fine. I walk everywhere and I enjoy it. We’re almost there now, anyway.”

A couple of minutes later, Elbé took a left turn down a lane. On the corner of the street was a brown-coloured sign with a curious picture on it, pointing in the direction of the beach. The captain could not work out what it was supposed to be indicating, but he followed her nevertheless.

They then turned right on to another little path that led under a green canopy of tree-branches. There were small fences on either side of them, and every now and then, van der Decken heard the squawk of a strange sea-bird and saw something move in the undergrowth. He knew that there were sea-birds around, as he was soon overcome by a smell that he knew well from his life at sea: the smell of guano.

Elbé led him left again, and they found themselves standing on a rocky platform overlooking the beach. It was a glorious sight. The sand was clean and white and the sea sparkled in the morning light. On either side of the beach there were groups of boulders, from very large to quite small ones, which had the effect of forming a nice little cove.

She said, “They call it Boulders Beach, because of all the –”

“Boulders. Yes, I understand.” He walked over to a wooden bench and sat down. He spent another few minutes taking in the wonderful view. She joined him on the bench and, after a while, asked him what he thought of the beach.

“It’s the most beautiful beach I’ve ever seen.”

“Whoa, high praise indeed!”

“I mean it.”

She looked out over the water. “I thought you’d like it. And it’s good we came on a Sunday morning, as well; it’s much quieter. It’ll get busier later, though.”

He tried to steal a glance at her and found that she was staring at him. He looked away quickly, realised how childish he was being, and then turned back. She laughed at his apparent embarrassment. Elbé’s laughter, the captain noted, was the most genuine and infectious he’d ever heard, as if it came bubbling up her throat straight from her heart. He couldn’t help but start laughing, too.

At last their laughter subsided and van der Decken turned his attention back to the beach below them.

“What the –” he said in surprise.

A strange little creature was waddling its way across the sands. It was about a foot and a half high, and it had a beak, so it must have been a bird. However, it walked like no bird he had seen before, with its sleek wings hanging at its sides the way a human might hold out their arms for balance. It had no tail that he could see, and most of its body was black, except for its breast and stomach, which was white – and, even there, it had a black oval-shaped ring skirting the edges of the white area. It was a most curious thing.

Elbé saw the confusion and wonder on van der Decken’s face, so she explained. “It’s a penguin. Have you never seen one before?”

“No. Can they fly?”

“Only underwater.”

“Pardon me?”

She slid along the bench until she was right next to him. He could smell her scent, which was flowery, and he felt her breath on his cheek as she said, “Look.” She pointed

with her right hand at the penguins, but the captain found it difficult to concentrate with the knowledge that Elbé's warm flesh was so close to his.

It was intoxicating, but he had to resist. It would not be gentlemanly to initiate things without her express permission. There was also the thought of an angry Martin Abrahams to keep him in check. He forced his mind to focus on the penguins.

Now, another four of the birds had joined the first one. They made their way together to the water's edge, where they stood for a moment, before one of them entered the water. Another one dived in, but the remaining few climbed up the slope of a nearby boulder and jumped into the water from that height.

The captain laughed at this, and he soon saw what Elbé meant when he spotted the birds darting around the surface of the water, their heads bobbing upwards every now and again.

"They're very curious," he said.

"For years, they were known as Jackass Penguins; now we're meant to call them African Penguins. I don't think they mind, either way. And they're also very rare; you can only find them in two parts of the world. Here and Argentina, I think. Cool, right?"

"It's fascinating."

They watched the penguins swim away and then disappear behind some rocks. Van der Decken looked up and down the beach for more penguins, or some other people, but there were none. They were completely alone, for now, and the tide was starting to come in.

There was silence between them for a while, but then Elbé drew a long breath and spoke, "Hein, I really enjoyed our time together yesterday."

"I'm glad to hear it." She was still sitting so close to him. "I enjoyed it, too."

"But I don't think you understand just how much it meant to me. No one's ever done something like that for me before, gone to so much trouble."

"I can't believe that. You're a beautiful young woman. You must have had suitors before."

She stared at him. "You think I'm beautiful?"

He turned to look into her eyes. "Yes, I do."

They held eye contact for a moment and then Elbé's head dropped a little. "There was a guy in Matric, Kurt, who I went out with for most of the year. But there were no carriage rides or picnics, I can tell you!"

"Where is he now?" van der Decken asked in earnest.

"He's studying at a college in Claremont. We kept seeing each other for the first couple of months of this year, but it became difficult and we drifted apart. He's probably got a new girlfriend by now."

"He was a fool to give up on you."

Elbé laughed a little. "That's nice of you to say, but we gave up on each other."

Van der Decken found himself staring into her dark eyes again. Her voice jolted him when she asked, "And what about you? Do you have someone waiting for you back home?"

"I do; at least, I did. I'm not sure anymore."

"Why's that?" Her voice was soft but expectant.

The captain hesitated. He didn't want to talk to Elbé about Senta, but he was past the point of no return. "She wasn't happy with me going to sea so often. It's hard being with a sailor. The last time I saw her, I promised I was going to give it all up for her. I asked if she would wait for me, but I never got a definite answer. For all I know, she's found someone else by now."

"It sounds complicated. Do you miss her?"

He sighed. "To be honest, I've forgotten so much about her. I feel like I haven't seen her in a decade. All I know is that when I first saw you in that tavern, you reminded me of her. So much so, in fact, that I thought you were her!"

"Oh, so that's what was going on," she smiled. "I thought you were just drunk."

He laughed at that and so did she. There was a strange light in Elbé's eyes when she spoke next. "I hope that's not the only reason why you've been spending time with me."

"No. I mean, maybe at first. But I've found lots of other reasons to spend time with you since then."

There was now a definite glow to her features. "Yesterday, you told me that once your ship is repaired, you'll be going. You said that there was no reason to stay."

He sensed her moving closer to him. “I did say that, but –”

“But, what if I gave you a reason?” she whispered.

Now she was right on top of him, and van der Decken could hold himself back no longer. He could smell her perfume around her neck and feel her breath warm against his face as she leaned into him. She was willing; surely this was the sign he’d been waiting for? He closed his eyes and opened his mouth as he moved towards her, giving himself over to the sheer passion of the moment.

However, what he had been expecting to come didn’t. He sensed time passing when in fact he should have been lost in a universe where time did not exist. He felt nothing; there had been no physical contact with Elbé whatsoever, no meeting of lips, or of their hands on each other’s bodies.

He opened his eyes to see this woman he loved still offering her puckered lips to him; but when he tried to kiss her, and he *really* wanted to, they just failed to connect, like two people stuck in different dimensions of time and space.

A furrow appeared on Elbé’s brow as she realised something was wrong. When she opened her eyes, she was greeted by a confounded expression on van der Decken’s face, and she interpreted it completely the wrong way. All this had passed in an instant.

She pulled back from him and stood up.

“I’m sorry,” she said, stepping away from the bench. “I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry.” A sob escaped from her as she ascended the stone steps and disappeared behind the hedge.

Van der Decken was stunned. It took a while for him to hear the voice inside him shouting, *Run after her!* He climbed the steps and looked up the path that he and Elbé had walked down together a little less than an hour before, but there was no sign of her. She was gone. The captain wandered back to the bench so that he could process it all.

What did she mean, *I shouldn’t have done that?* Was she not attracted to him after all? Had he read the situation incorrectly? Or did she just not think it a good idea to start a relationship with a foreigner she’d only known for a few days? And why the Hell could he not kiss her? What was holding him back? Was it the memory of Senta?

He sat on the bench for an interminable amount of time, staring into the waters before him as he tried to make sense of his thoughts. Although there’d been no wind

when he and Elbé had set out on their walk earlier that day, there was now quite a stiff breeze blowing off the sea. Van der Decken continued to focus on the water as the tide came in, as it lapped up against the rocks, until it filled his vision.

Soon, the roaring of waves and wind were in his ears, and he was no longer on Boulders Beach, but instead found himself on the deck of his ship once more as it sailed into the eye of a monstrous storm.

He was shouting at his crew, “Get up top and reef those sails!”

Johannes was the first to climb the mast; Pieter and the others soon followed. The wind tore at the canvas as the sailors tried to roll it up. At the same time, they were also trying not to slip and fall to their deaths. The rain continued to lash them and the ship, making the rigging a very precarious place to be.

Soon, all of the sails had been brought in, but it made little difference to the ship’s stability. The brigantine was still being tossed about as if it were no more than a coracle. On top of that, they were sailing blind, as clouds surrounded them and there was water everywhere, from both the sea and the sky. The decks were flooded.

The captain looked up and noticed that one of the sails below the crow’s nest had come free and was blowing in the wind, allowing the ship to become even more unstable.

“Someone reef that sail!” he shouted.

None of the crew moved. They were all huddled on the main deck, trying to find shelter from the storm, which now appeared to be at its height. Eventually, a single figure broke away from the others and ascended the mast. It was Johannes. He climbed the wet, slippery rigging like a master and made it to the loose sail in a matter of seconds. Soon, the sail had been brought in, but Johannes did not come down. Instead, he hugged the mast and waited for the ship to become steadier.

Van der Decken watched and waited. With no sail for the wind to latch on to, he felt sure that the ship would regain some stability. It did not. Now it felt like they were travelling in circles, and would do so for eternity. He knew that there was little he could do about it, except to keep playing his part as captain and to set an example for his crew.

In an act of desperate bravado, he reached for some rope and began tying himself to the helm. When he was done, he faced the storm and cried into the howling gale, “We *will* round the Cape! I swear it, even if we have to sail until Doomsday!”

At that moment a very strange thing happened. A black bird zoomed past van der Decken's face, flew up to the crow's nest and perched on the yardarm. What it was doing so far out to sea in the middle of a storm, no one could guess. Then it started attacking Johannes, who was still holding on to the mast. It flew around him, pecking at his face, and Johannes raised his hands to protect his eyes. With a cry he fell from the rigging and onto the hard wooden deck, which splintered beneath him.

"Johannes! *No!*" the captain cried. He untied himself from the ship's wheel and made his way across the heaving deck until he stood over the young man's body. A large wooden spar protruded through the middle of his chest and his eyes stared unblinking.

Van der Decken cried in anguish and looked about the ship, *his* ship. He saw that, despite their efforts, the wind had torn every last inch of canvas to shreds. Even if the storm did abate now, there was no way of steering the ship. They were truly doomed.

He turned back to his crew. Pieter's eyes were wide as he pointed at something over the captain's shoulder. He spun around and saw that a bright shaft of sunlight had pierced the clouds and was shining on the quarterdeck. There stood an apparition in white, neither male nor female; van der Decken was not a believer, but he had seen depictions of angels before, and had read descriptions of them.

Pieter and the others threw up their arms in horror, but the captain drew his pistol and fired at the spirit without thinking. His arm went limp in an instant and the gun fell from his grip. The shot, meanwhile, passed clean through the spectre and hit a rocky cliff-face that had just come into view.

Van der Decken lurched forward and held on to the foremast as the vessel crashed into the stony wall. The impact was tremendous as he felt the mast beside him snap like a matchstick. The cliff-face was the last thing that he saw and, in that final split-second, he could have sworn that, hidden within the shape of the rocks, was the visage of an ugly old man with a scraggly beard, staring at him out of sunken hollow eyes.

And then came the crushing darkness of the water; and then nothing.

The captain gasped aloud as if he had woken from a nightmare. He realised that he had experienced yet another vision from his past, a memory. Only this time, Elbé had not

been there to call him back from the trance-like state he seemed to enter, and so he had gone further and seen more than ever before. What had he seen, though?

He'd seen Johannes impaled on a spar, but he knew for a fact that Johannes was alive and well. He'd seen his ship wrecked against the rocks. That didn't make complete sense, either. Sure, the vessel was a little the worse for wear at the moment, but if it had indeed run aground like he saw happen, it would've been in no fit state for sailing. And how was he to interpret the way his vision had ended? He felt sure that he had drowned. But that could not be right, either. It just couldn't be.

Van der Decken heard voices and noticed that two groups of people had arrived at the beach. They gave him a few curious looks, but he soon left the bench and began the walk back to the harbour. As he walked along the main road, he reviewed in his mind all that had occurred over the past five days, as well as what he thought he knew about his life before he woke up lying on the deck of his ship in the middle of False Bay.

His crew and he all seemed to be suffering from a mysterious collective amnesia that made them forget certain things but not others. They had ended up in a port called Simon's Town, a place none of them had ever heard of and which looked so outlandish and foreign that it seemed to belong to a different era to their own, whenever that was.

The ship's sails were ruined in the storm, he remembered. They were in absolute tatters, and yet the crew had managed to sail the ship to the harbour without the help of oars. How was that possible? And why had he not been able to kiss Elbé, not been able to touch her at all? He'd touched people since arriving in Simon's Town. He must have!

Paul Jones and Martin Abrahams; he must have shaken their hands when he met them. Or did he? He did not have any clear memory of doing so, but then his memory wasn't at its best at the moment. He had touched things, for sure: food, rum tankards, door handles. But people? He could not say that he had, not with certainty.

And then there was the fact that nobody among his crew, including himself, had been able to sleep a wink during the past four nights. What possible reason could there be for that? Every man alive needed sleep, to give the mind and body rest.

By the time the captain found himself standing on the wharf beside his ship once more, his mind had reached a conclusion, but it was not one that he was willing to accept.

It's impossible, he told himself. *Totally preposterous!* He had to push it out of his mind as much as he could, although now that it was there, it would be harder to forget.

But then something interrupted his thoughts; he heard shouts and sounds of a struggle coming from the ship. He turned to his left and stomped up the gangplank in a few massive strides. When he reached the main deck, he found himself in the middle of an apparent mutiny.

All of the sailors were standing in a circle around Pieter and Johannes, who were facing off against each other. The crew cheered equally for the two fighters, but it did not seem a fair fight at all. Pieter had in his hand a cutlass which van der Decken recognised as his own, which he usually kept in his cabin. The fiend was swinging it at Johannes, who had only a wooden spar to defend himself with.

The spar was unwieldy and Johannes was struggling to swing it in time to parry Pieter's wild flails. Pieter at last forced Johannes to retreat towards the mainmast, which was at his back. Johannes didn't know it was behind him and so the rear end of the spar jammed hard against the mast; it fell from Johannes' hands. Pieter took advantage of the moment and jumped in front of Johannes. He held the blade against his neck.

The captain pushed two sailors aside and entered the proverbial arena. "*Stop it!*" he shouted.

A silence fell among the other crew members when they saw van der Decken. Many of them lowered their heads in submission. Clearly they had not expected to see their captain back so soon. Pieter, however, pushed the blade even closer to Johannes' neck.

The captain looked at Pieter and asked, "What the hell are you doing?"

The sailor's face was a mixture of contempt and rage as he spat at the captain, "I'm taking charge of things on this ship."

"You openly challenge my command?"

"Your *command*? I piss on your command! You gave up your command to this little whelk so that you could chase some girl around the town!"

Van der Decken's temper flared at the mention of Elbé. "You think you can do my job better than me? Then kill me, *now!* Leave Johannes alone and run me through with that sword in your hand! I wager you haven't got the guts. Come on, do it! *Kill me!*"

With a cry, Pieter turned around and plunged the cutlass into the captain's belly halfway to the hilt. The rest of the crew let out a collective gasp as he let go of the handle.

Van der Decken was surprised: first that Pieter had actually had the nerve to put a sword in him, and second that he hadn't felt any pain. The captain grasped the handle of the cutlass with his right hand and slowly levered it out of his stomach. Once he had fully removed it, he held it up for the crew to see. The blade was clean. Not a drop of blood.

The sailors saw this and were amazed, and they all, even Pieter, kneeled before van der Decken as if he were the Saviour Himself. Only Johannes remained standing against the mast.

The captain looked into his eyes and thought, *I saw you die, and yet here you are.* Van der Decken turned to examine his clean cutlass blade and realised that this lent credence to the theory he had come up with before he returned to the ship. He found the loop in his belt from which the sword usually hung and slid the blade through it. Then he felt his abdomen with both hands. There was a hole in his clothing, but when he touched the skin beneath, it was smooth and unbroken.

He looked up and cast his eyes over the crew, his crew. In a way, Pieter had made a good point. He was their captain, and he had failed them. He had not stood by them; he had spent too much time "about town" with Elbé. Well, now he saw how things were, he saw what had to be done. He had to be their captain now. He was done with Elbé; there was no hope for them in this world.

"My shipmates," he addressed the crew in a confident tone, "please stand up. I am no different than any one of you, I assure you. Please stand up and face me. We have much to speak of."

Chapter 6:
Revelations

The padre looked out over his meagre congregation; there were only five sailors sitting in the pews this time. It was early on a Monday morning, and the sunlight shone through the windows and illuminated the inside of the church. The long, dark wooden benches glowed as if newly varnished, and dust motes floated in the air above the centre aisle.

The chaplain was in his fifties, with a kindly face and grey hair. Although the day and time contributed to the poor turn-out, the padre had to face the fact that church attendance, and organised religion in general, was on the decline. He found that very few people showed up this early in the week.

These five pious souls sitting before him were all the more sacred because of it, and so the chaplain knew that he had to work hard to keep them coming back every Monday, to pray for forgiveness for any sins committed during their weekend revelries, and also for the strength to face the week ahead.

For that reason, the topic for his sermon that morning was a little unusual.

“Some, if not all, of you would no doubt have heard about the aura of mystery surrounding the date of the twenty-first of December twenty-twelve, just over ten days from now. As far as I understand it, it is the day on which the Mayan calendar, which was devised as much as five centuries before the birth of Christ, inexplicably ends. Some people believe that this augurs the end of our world; others simply believe that the ancient Mayans could only project so far into the future, and so all this amounts to is little more than a clerical error on their part.”

The padre smiled at his own little joke, although the sailors listening to him did not seem to appreciate it. He cleared his throat, retrieved his reading glasses from the lectern in front of him and prepared to read from an open Bible.

“The question remains, however, what are we as followers of God to believe in this time of doubt? In the Book of Revelations, chapter twenty-two, verses ten to twelve, the angel who delivered the word of Jesus to John, said: ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still

be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy. Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay everyone for what he has done.’ ”

He removed his glasses, closed the Bible, and thought about what he was going to say next.

Did he have doubts? Of course he did; he was only human, after all. The Gospels spoke of the Second Coming as if Jesus’ disciples would live to see it. *How many people, how many souls, had lived and died since then?* he wondered. Every generation seemed to think that theirs would be the last, that they would bear witness on Judgment Day. Whenever the world was rocked by natural disasters, fanatics started prophesying the End Times. But then, nothing happened. Nothing ever happened. The Apocalypse had still not come, and the chaplain could not help but wonder if it ever would.

“Jesus said that He would return for us, the believers, one day. He did not say when. He did not say ‘on Friday twenty-one December twenty-twelve’. He simply said *soon*. And so we must conduct ourselves every day as if it could be our last, because it might well be. If we want Him to see us as righteous when He comes, then we must do ‘right’ unto others, every day, regardless of whether it is the end of the world or not.”

He brought the sermon to a close with these words and stepped down from the pulpit. He approached each of the sailors present and shook hands with them before they put their caps back on and left for work. When they had gone, he noticed that one African man was still sitting in the back row; the man seemed troubled. The chaplain sat down beside the sailor and greeted him in isiXhosa. “*Molo. Kunjani?*”

“*Ndiphilele, enkosi.*”

“You don’t look fine to me. What’s on your mind, my son?”

The man shifted in his seat a little. “Father, I want to be a Christian. I believe in God and Jesus. But, you must understand, I was brought up in the Eastern Cape, and the Xhosa traditions and beliefs are very different.”

The chaplain nodded. This was a concern that he had encountered among sailors in his congregation before. “Believe me, I do understand. Is there anything in particular you would like me to speak on?”

The man hesitated. “What does the Bible say about spirits?”

“Well, what I think you are referring to is the idea of a person’s soul remaining behind here on Earth after they have passed on. This is not possible.”

The padre stood up and retrieved the Bible from the pulpit. He returned to the sailor’s side and read from the beginning of the book. “In Genesis, chapter three, verse nineteen, it is said of Man: ‘for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.’ What this means is that our bodies are but shells that fall away on our deaths, and our soul, the life-force which God gifted us with, either returns to Him or goes to the devil, depending on whether you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour or not. There is no room for any state in-between the two. The scriptures are clear on this.”

“But I was brought up to believe in and pay tribute to the spirits of my ancestors, who I could call on when I was in need,” explained the sailor. “Is it not possible that God and Jesus are real, but so are the ancestors? Can they not work together?”

“Unfortunately not; believing in God comes with the need to reject all other gods as idols. Most belief systems are predicated on the exclusion of others. Once you have been presented with the Gospel, you have to set all other beliefs aside, and put your faith in God alone. It is not easy, but it is possible, if you are committed enough. Are you willing to try this, my son?”

The man nodded. “I’ll try.” He stood up and took the chaplain’s hand. “Thank you, Father.” Then he turned and walked out of the church and into the light of day.

The chaplain returned to the pulpit to retrieve his notes. As he did so, he heard the ringing of a bell which signalled the beginning of another day, another week of work, for the South African Navy in Simon’s Town. He was about to head off to his office when he heard a set of heavy boots announce the presence of someone entering the church.

He turned to see who it was, and almost dropped his papers in surprise. A dark forbidding figure stood silhouetted in the doorway; its face could not be seen.

As the figure stepped into the church, it became more defined: it was a tall man with broad shoulders, dressed in a long brown trench coat with a large buckled belt around his waist. He looked middle-aged and had a thick red beard that was beginning to grey in parts. He had very pale skin, and sharp blue eyes glared out from under the brim of a black tricorne. Everything about him looked dirty and weather-beaten.

“Good morning to you, sir,” the chaplain said. “You are, of course, welcome in this House of God, but I must ask you to please remove your hat. Thank you.”

The man did not oblige. He just kept walking towards the chaplain, his face like thunder. The padre backed away. He felt a strange compulsion to run and hide from this man, but he couldn’t do that; what if the man needed his help?

Then the other man spoke in accented English, and his voice sounded like waves breaking on the shore. “I think God is long past caring whether or not I wear my hat indoors, Priest.”

“And why do you say that?”

The stranger stopped in front of the chaplain. “What year is it?”

The chaplain grinned. “You’re joking.”

“Does it look like I am?”

The chaplain stared into the other man’s face, which did not betray even the hint of a smile. “No, you seem serious. It’s twenty-twelve.”

The stranger looked away and shook his head. “Over three hundred years?” he said almost under his breath. Then he turned back to the chaplain and asked, “What do you know about ghosts, Priest?”

The chaplain could not help but chuckle.

“Do I amuse you?”

The chaplain recovered himself. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I had another sailor in here asking me the same question just before you arrived.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“I told him that there’s no such thing. The Bible doesn’t allow for it.”

“But what do *you* believe?”

“I believe what the Gospel says.”

“Huh,” the man spat. “Blind faith.”

“It’s not blind at all. I base my beliefs on my own experience of life. I have lived on this earth for over half a century and not once have I seen any proof that ghosts exist.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I am.”

“Would you even know a ghost if you saw one?”

“I’m sure that I would.”

The other man bowed his head. “I’m not so sure. You see it is *my* belief, recently acquired, that a spirit would not take the form one expects it to; they are a lot more subtle than that. Take me, for instance. Would you say that I am a ghost?”

The chaplain gave the stranger an up-and-down look. “No, no. You seem pretty solid to me.”

The sailor laughed a deep, throaty bellow. “Oh, so it’s a matter of substance, is it? Well then, just you try and shake my hand. Go on,” he said, holding out his right hand.

The chaplain reached for the other man’s hand with trepidation, but instead experienced a strange sensation. No matter how hard he tried, their hands could not touch. They did not pass through each other like mist, as he had seen happen in a film once; they just seemed to miss each other every time, as when one tries to push together the like poles of two magnets. It was both frightening and fascinating.

The stranger smiled. “You see? We cannot touch because I am not really here at all. And yet normal people like you can see me, and converse with me. I have also had no trouble eating or drinking whilst I’ve been here, and I can touch and move inanimate objects, if I want to. It’s a most curious thing.”

The old sailor stepped back a pace and said, “So, there you go, Priest. You’ve met your first ghost, and along with it, proof that the Bible is wrong. And, if it’s wrong about one thing, why not others as well?”

The chaplain felt a bead of sweat run down his forehead. “I admit it is possible,” he said, “that there are things on this Earth that the writers of the Gospels did not or could not have foreseen. But then, I cannot claim to be an authority on them.”

“Let me tell you a little story, Father,” the stranger said as he paced back and forth. “Five days ago, I woke up on the deck of a ship out in the bay, with no idea who I was, where I was, or how I got to be there. My crew and I sailed into your Navy’s harbour, and we started to remember some things, little by little. But, everything here looked so very different to the world that we remembered. We knew something was off, but we couldn’t say what. There was just too much to take in.

“Another unusual thing was that I couldn’t fall asleep, no matter how hard I tried. Well, no one in my crew could. For four nights I simply lay in my bunk staring at the

ceiling for seven or eight hours. My crew and I never felt the need to sleep, either, which also aroused our suspicions. I mean, who doesn't feel tired now and again?

"In the meantime, I'd met this young woman in the town, and she looked just like my Senta, who I'd left behind in Amsterdam when I sailed for the East Indies. *Finally!* I thought. Here was someone I recognised from my old life, someone to help me remember who I was. After speaking with her, however, I realised that she was not Senta. Her name was Elbé, for a start.

"And yet, I could not let her go. So I followed her home, and convinced her to spend some time with me, and to speak with me. And you know what? Despite her not being Senta, she *was* helping me to remember things. Every time I saw her, I experienced a memory of my past, which helped me to piece together what happened to me and my crew. But besides all that, I began to love her as much as I had loved Senta. Yesterday we were on the beach together, and she tried to kiss me. I wanted to kiss her back, too, but we just couldn't connect; just like you couldn't shake my hand just now."

The chaplain saw true despair in the stranger's eyes.

"After Elbé and I parted," the old sailor said, his voice cracking a little, "I experienced the most devastating vision of all. It seems that my crew and I were involved in a shipwreck several leagues south of here over three hundred years ago. I am dead. Or, at least, I should be. Yet I am still here; unable to live, to die, or to love. If I cannot be with Elbé, then I want to be released." The words boiled in the captain's throat. "I want to be free from this curse that your God has laid upon me."

There was a long silence between them after that. As the stranger's story sunk in, the chaplain began to feel light-headed, as if all of the blood in his head had drained down to his feet. When he spoke again, his voice was a little croaky from the dryness in his throat and mouth, "That may all be so, but what do you think I can do about it?"

"Tell me all that you know about ghosts and curses."

"I told you already. I know nothing."

"You lie. There must be more to it than that."

"There isn't, I swear to God."

“Careful, Priest; you don’t want to end up cursed like me. I may not be capable of inflicting any physical pain, but you of all people should appreciate the idea of spiritual torment. Of being haunted?” the stranger said as he leaned towards the chaplain.

“I, I don’t –” The chaplain’s whole body began to shake as he struggled to speak.

“Think harder. Think!” The stranger raised his voice.

“Um, there’s, there’s unfinished business!”

“How do you mean?”

“I read somewhere once that, some believe, spirits remain on Earth due to some matter that was left unresolved during their lifetime. They cannot find peace until they resolve it.”

“An interesting idea, but how do I find out what my unfinished business is?”

“I have no idea.” But when the chaplain saw the murderous look on the stranger’s face, he decided to ask: “Why is it that you hold God responsible for this so-called curse, in any case?”

“Well, all the evidence suggests that I was not much of a God-fearing individual when I was alive. We set out on our final voyage on Good Friday sixteen-seventy-nine, even though one of my crew warned me of divine retribution. I also took the Lord’s name in vain numerous times during the storm that wrecked us, and some sort of spirit visited our ship shortly before we sank. It may have been an angel, judging by its appearance.”

At the mention of an angel, the chaplain felt that he was on solid ground once more. “That sounds important. At many points in the Bible, God sent angels as His ambassadors to speak with Man. Did this angel you saw say anything to you?”

The stranger hesitated. “Not exactly,” he replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I never gave it the chance to speak. I shot at it with my pistol, and then it vanished.”

“So, it may have been preparing to speak, but you rebuked it. I guess now we’ll never know what message it had for you.”

“Do you think that this could be my unfinished business? To hear what the angel had to say to me?”

“I very much doubt it. Had God wanted to speak to you, He would’ve summoned you to Heaven right away. No, this is something else entirely. It may even involve the Devil, although I usually try to avoid dealing with him. You didn’t make a deal with the Devil, did you? You may have heard the story of Doctor Faustus?”

The old sailor slammed his fist down on the pulpit and the wood reverberated with the hit. The chaplain let out a short cry and fell over on to his back. He lay looking up at the stranger who leaned over him.

“Damn you, Priest! I told you I wasn’t a very religious man one way or the other! Now, the way I see it, my crew and I have been forsaken and cursed by God, and all for no good reason. Why is He punishing thirteen different souls if I was the only one who had sinned against Him? This seems to be the nature of our ‘unfinished business’, and the only way we are going to resolve it is to confront God about it, face-to-face. The only question is, will you help me or not?”

“I’m afraid it’s impossible,” the padre said. He felt a sharp pain shoot across his left pectoral like a lightning bolt. Was he having a heart attack? Was he going to die? “I can no more give you a face-to-face with the Lord than you can release yourself from your curse. To be honest, I have no proof that God even exists! That is what Christianity hinges on, faith without guarantees. I doubt there were many arguments against God’s existence in the sixteen hundreds, but there are quite a few today.”

The old sailor gave the chaplain a severe look. “Some priest you are,” he muttered before he turned around and marched out of the church, his boots smacking the floor as he went.

The chaplain remained where he’d fallen, his heart pounding; was he going to die lying on the floor of his church? He massaged his chest with his hands and took several deep breaths as he waited for his heart-rate to return to normal. He didn’t know how long he lay on the cold stone floor, but the pains in his chest stopped at last, although the heart palpitations did not. When he tried to stand up, his knees buckled beneath him and he sat down for a little longer. *What on Earth had just happened?* Had he really been visited by a spirit, or was it just a very convincing actor in a very convincing costume?

But, what about the handshake-thing; you can’t fake something like that, surely? In any event, he couldn’t think of why anyone would go to such trouble simply to play a

prank on him. There seemed to be no other explanation; the sailor must've been an actual ghost! However, if the chaplain believed that, then what did that mean for his faith? The chaplain felt ashamed. This spirit may have been sent to test him and, although he had held out quite long against it, at the very last he had been forced to admit his own doubts, going so far as to say that God may not exist. He had failed.

After a time he managed to get to his feet and not feel faint; he headed straight for his office. He slumped into the swivel chair in front of the table beneath the window. His heart-rate was still way above normal and his hands were trembling. He continued his deep breathing and tried to calm his nerves, but his mind was racing.

All right, he told himself, if I accept that the man who visited me was in fact a ghost, do I not have an obligation to tell others? Or will they just think me mad?

Of course they would think him mad. He would have thought the same in their position, without seeing the proof first-hand. But, the spirit that had just visited him was a volatile one, and could well be dangerous. He had to tell *someone*.

Then he remembered that the stranger had talked about sailing into Simon's Town harbour on his ghost ship, which apparently looked real enough and was able to be seen by others. That means the vessel and its crew would've been received by someone at the wharf, and that someone was usually Commander Paul Jones.

He knew Jones a little, and he knew that he was not the type of man to reject another person's words without some investigation first. If he had to tell someone he'd been visited by a ghost, he stood the best chance of being believed by Jones.

The chaplain picked up the phone on his desk and dialled the Naval Switchboard. The receiver shook in his hand. "FOC Liaison Office, please," he asked.

They put him through.

"Commander Jones, FOC Liaison Office, good day," said the voice on the other end.

"Good day, Commander," he said, trying to steady his voice. "It's Padre Brouwer here."

"Uh, good morning, Padre; look, I know I haven't been to a service of yours in quite a while, but I've been a little busy. I promise I'll come to one soon –"

“That’s all right, Commander,” he interrupted. “That’s not the reason for my call.”

“Oh, it isn’t? Oh well, fine. What can I do for you, then?”

“I needed to ask you, is there a foreign vessel currently visiting us?”

“Just the one from the Netherlands. Haven’t you seen the old sailing ship tied up in the harbour?”

“No. I haven’t left the West Yard much since last weekend.”

“It’s quite incredible. The crew all wear period clothing, claim not to understand or speak English, except for their captain, and just generally act like they were sailing the seas hundreds of years ago.”

“Their captain, what does he look like?”

“Van der Decken? He’s tall, late-twenties to early-thirties with long ginger hair and a beard.”

Brouwer hesitated. “That sounds like him, although I’d put him at forty, at least; possibly older.”

“What? What are talking about?”

“I had a visit from him, this very morning, in fact. He came to the church.”

“Oh. What did he want?”

“To ask me what I knew about ghosts.”

Jones laughed. “Why on earth would he ask you that?”

Brouwer exhaled deeply. “Commander, you know that I am a reasonable man, a man of God. I wouldn’t bother you with this unless it was something I thought that you deserved to know.”

“Yes, of course. Now, just tell me: why did he want to know about ghosts?”

“Because he thinks that he is one.”

Silence; then, “Come again?”

The words came flowing out of Brouwer; he recounted as much as he could remember.

“This van der Decken character told me that when he arrived in False Bay five days ago, neither he nor his crew had any memory of who they were or how they had got here. However, he says that he has been remembering things bit by bit as the days went

by, and that yesterday he had some sort of revelation and realised that he and all his crew had in fact died in a shipwreck over three hundred years ago. But, he now believes that God has cursed him and his crew to be ghosts, never able to find rest.”

More silence. “Commander? Are you still with me?”

Jones cleared his throat on the other end. “Um, yes. I am.”

“Do you understand what I said?”

“Yes, I understand it. But my question is, why do you believe him?”

“Tell me, Commander, have you actually touched van der Decken in the time that you’ve known him? Shook his hand, patted him on the shoulder, anything like that?”

Jones thought about it. “I must have. No, maybe not. I think I offered my hand to him when we first met; but he didn’t shake it, and I just thought he was being rude, or that Dutch customs were different. Why do you ask?”

“Because I tried to shake his hand when I saw him earlier today, and I couldn’t, try as I might. It was like we were both wearing invisible gloves! It was, without a doubt, the most supernatural experience of my life so far. I am almost convinced that he is what he says he is: a *ghost*.”

Jones was silent. “It would certainly explain a lot of things,” he said at last.

“Well, Commander,” Brouwer said, growing more confident as he began to adopt his usual sermonizing tone, “I trust I can leave this matter with you. I don’t know what you and the admiral will do about it, but I hope that you will do something soon. This issue should not be left to fester. We’ve had a damned ghost ship moored in our harbour for five days already, while its damned crew mingle with the local population! This van der Decken even told me that he’s fallen in love with a woman he met in the town!”

“Wait, what? Did he mention a name?”

“Yes, Elba, or something like that.”

There was the sound of Jones grabbing some paper and scribbling something down on the other end.

“Thank you, Padre. And what did you tell him in the end? You know, about being a ghost? Why exactly did he seek you out?”

“He believes God is responsible for the doom placed upon him and his crew and he wants to know how to lift this doom. Unfortunately, I told him that I could not help him, and neither can God, as God does not deal in such curses.”

“All right, Padre. Thank you again. Best leave this with me. And for now, please don’t tell anyone else. We don’t want to start a panic in the town.”

“Yes, of course, Commander. God be with you.”

Padre Brouwer put down the receiver. He lifted his gaze to the window above his desk; it had a view of the Simonsberg hillside. *No*, said a voice inside him, *this is far too serious a matter to leave to the likes of Jones and Ledwaba.*

He decided then that he would give Commander Jones and the admiral a little less than twenty-four hours to resolve this issue. Tomorrow he would go out for an early morning walk up to Waterfall barracks; from there he should be able to see this ghost ship for himself. And, if the ship was still in the harbour at that time, then he was going to take matters into his own hands.

Chapter 7:
Myths and Legends

Paul Jones parked his military or M-vehicle outside the Simon's Town Public Library. He got out of the car and, as he entered the building, took out his cellphone and put it on silent mode. He passed by the loans desk, smiled and nodded at the librarian, a young African woman, and approached the shelves. Now his search began.

After hanging up on Padre Brouwer, Jones had sat in the chair behind his desk, deep in thought, for the best part of ten minutes. As preposterous as the padre's story had sounded, it made everything else that Jones knew about van der Decken, his crew and his voyage, seem perfectly plausible, whereas before it had always seemed more than a little suspicious.

In light of the padre's phone call, a lot of things which had seemed like nonsense before now made sense: van der Decken's claim that their ship was carrying spices from Batavia en route to Holland; his calling cars "carriages"; the fact that none of the ship's crew had ever answered anything he'd said to them. Perhaps they really did not speak any English after all.

However, what had sent Jones running to the library and not to the admiral was a memory he had of reading a story similar to van der Decken's in a book once. It was a story, a legend, known to many sailors, and the commander could not believe that he had not remembered it sooner. At last he found the book that he was looking for; it was entitled *Tales of Shipwrecks of the Cape of Storms*. Its cover was adorned by a beautifully painted portrait of a tall ship listing to port in rough seas.

Jones opened the book and turned to its contents page. The chapter he wanted was near the beginning. He flipped through the book's early pages until the image of another sailing ship caught his attention. This painting was of a more supernatural nature, the ship having a red hull and tattered red sails, as it sailed through a storm with lightning-crossed skies behind it.

He scanned the text in a column beside the picture, and then kept on turning the pages, his mind soaking up the details of a tale he'd last read many years ago. When he reached the end of the chapter, he closed the book in triumph and headed for the counter.

“Good morning. I’d like to take this book out, please,” he told the librarian. He handed her the book and a small colourful card he’d just removed from his wallet.

She scanned a barcode on the card, as well as one on the book, and stamped the return date on a small slip of paper stuck inside the book’s front cover.

“Thank you. Have a good day,” she said, smiling at him.

“Thanks, you too.” Jones put the book under his arm and returned to his car. Once inside, he placed the book on the passenger seat, started the car and returned to the main road. Soon, he was passing once more through the dockyard gates and, at the T-junction, rather than turning right towards his office, he turned left towards the harbour basin.

The commander drove along the wharves until he reached O Berth, where van der Decken’s ship was moored. Despite the padre’s revelation, that this was in fact a ghost ship, the vessel looked just the same as it always had, and still missing its foremast. Jones wondered whether van der Decken would still require a replacement.

He parked his car, got out and approached the vessel. He walked towards the bow and inspected the nameplate once more. *D-LIE-NDE-LAN-R*. Yes, this was the same ship!

The ship was quiet, except for the creaking of the wood as it moved in the water, and the fluttering of some loose canvas in the breeze. Then he noticed the foremast: it had been fixed, but by whom? Jones could not see anyone up on the main deck.

“Hello!” he shouted. “Van der Decken! Captain!”

There was no reply or movement after two minutes, so Jones headed towards the gangplank. Would he be able to board a ghost ship like he would any other? He raised his right foot and held it in the air over the bottom of the gangplank. He brought it down, and he felt his shoe resting against what seemed like solid wood. Jones took another step, and then both his feet were off the wharf, and he had not fallen into the sea.

He continued upwards, but just before he reached the deck, he found his way blocked by a figure. It was a member of van der Decken’s crew, and he had in his hands a curved sword, a cutlass. The sailor’s face contorted in anger and he raised the blade above his head.

Jones held the book he’d brought with him in front of him and said, “Wait! No! I’m unarmed, except for this book!” Then he remembered that none of the crew could understand English.

“*Jou kaptein! Waar’s jou kaptein?*” Jones cried, hoping the sailor would at least understand Afrikaans.

The sailor hesitated, and when Jones looked again he saw that more crewmembers had appeared on the deck behind him. They all looked a little older than when he’d last seen them. Jones stared at them and they stared at him; no one knew how to proceed.

A moment later, there came the sound of heavy boots on the deck and Jones saw a tricorn rise above the heads of the crew; and then Captain van der Decken stood before him. Jones was shocked to see that Padre Brouwer’s description of him had not been exaggerated. He did look like a man in his forties now, and not youthful like before.

“Commander Jones,” the captain said, at the same time turning away from him, “this is really not a good time. My crew and I are grappling with a very complex issue at the moment.”

“I know,” said Jones. “I think I can help you.”

“You *know*? What do you think you know?” van der Decken said, turning back.

“I spoke to Padre Brouwer this morning, after you visited him.”

“The priest?” van der Decken scoffed. “He couldn’t help me. What makes *you* think you can?”

Jones held up the book for him to see. “It’s all in *here*. The truth about your past, who you were and what happened to you.”

The captain seemed intrigued and waved a hand at his crew.

The sailors at the top of the gangplank stepped aside to let Jones pass. The commander took the final couple of steps and walked onto the main deck, which seemed just as solid and real as the gangplank had. He stared about the ship in wonder.

“Come with me,” said van der Decken in English.

The captain walked towards the quarterdeck, and Jones followed him. Van der Decken opened the cabin-door and held it open for Jones. The commander hesitated; if Padre Brouwer was to be believed, a ghost was now holding a door open for him! He marvelled both at van der Decken’s presence of mind for his mortal guest and the captain’s ability to move the door, which Jones assumed was as real and solid as the rest of the ship looked and felt.

Jones crossed the threshold, knocking his fist on the door as he went. It was solid wood! He looked back at van der Decken, but he was unfazed.

Once inside, the captain went over to his desk, opened a drawer and removed a bottle and two small glasses from it. He decanted some of the liquid into both glasses and gestured at the chair.

“Please, Commander, sit down and have a drink. You and your Navy have shown such hospitality to me, it’s time that I returned the favour.”

Jones approached the captain’s desk, all the while looking around the cabin and taking in every detail. It was all so incredible, like he had travelled through time.

“After all, you showed a lot of courage in coming here,” said van der Decken. “It couldn’t have been easy, now that you know what I am. What my crew are.”

Jones took a sip from the glass and grimaced; it was the strongest rum he had ever tasted. “Ghosts, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“You’re convinced that’s what you are?”

The captain looked angry. He rummaged through the papers on his desk until he found the one he was looking for. He slapped it down in front of Jones. “Have a look at the dates on that document, if you please, Commander.”

Jones picked up the scroll and examined it. The paper was thick, and brown and stained. The writing was in a flowing script, but even so he could tell it wasn’t English. However, there were numbers on it that he recognised; some of them looked like dates, and one that stood out more than any other was: *1679*.

Van der Decken knocked back the last of his rum. “Of course, if I’d scrutinised these papers properly on the day we arrived, I might’ve realised all this much sooner.”

“They could be forgeries,” Jones said.

That seemed to anger the captain further and he was on the opposite side of the desk in a split-second, standing in front of Jones and holding out his hand to him. “Shake my hand! Go on! Just try to do it!”

This will be the moment of truth, thought Jones. He reached out his hand towards van der Decken’s, but they did not connect. The captain’s hand seemed further away

now, although he appeared not to have moved. Jones stood up and grabbed for the hand, but it seemed as though there was an invisible wall around it. The padre was right.

“Well, there you go,” van der Decken said as he backed away and returned to his chair on the other side of the desk. He slumped into it.

Jones looked across at him. “You look a lot older than the last time I saw you. You must have noticed.”

“Yes, one of my crew, Johannes, told me so. And I told him that he looks older, too. It seems now that we *know* we are ghosts, we are starting to look our age.” He smiled a grim smile. Then his gaze fell on the book in Jones’ lap. “So, what is this book you’ve brought to show me, and why exactly am I featured in it?”

Jones looked down. “Ah, yes; right,” he said as he opened the book to the chapter he wanted. “Well, there is a story sailors sometimes tell, of a ghost ship called *The Flying Dutchman*. In Dutch, that would be ‘*De Vliegende Hollander*’. I checked the nameplate of this ship just now before I came aboard, and, although a few of the letters are illegible or missing, the name fits. The legend goes that the ship got its name from its captain, who used to complete his voyages in record time. Does any of that sound familiar to you?”

Van der Decken sat up straight. “Yes, it does, although I feel like I’ve only just remembered it. What else does it say?”

The commander scanned the pages in front of him. “Well, sources differ on the name of the captain, although the most common one used is ‘van der Decken’. The story tells that the captain left Batavia on Good Friday of a year to return to Holland, and that it was done against the advice of his crew. However, while passing the Cape of Good Hope, his ship ran afoul of a storm which hindered his progress. It is said that he cursed God, and swore that he would round the Cape, even if it took until Doomsday. Then the ship was wrecked on the rocks and many believe that the captain sails the seas still.”

Jones was about to ask the captain whether the legend bore any similarities to his own memories, but he could just tell from the old sailor’s stricken expression that every single word had meant something to him.

After a moment of silence, van der Decken spoke. “That’s *me*, that’s *us*; that is exactly what happened to me and my crew. What does it say about undoing the curse?”

“Um,” Jones said, turning to the end of the chapter, “it doesn’t say anything. Just that God cursed the ship and its crew to sail the seas around the Cape for eternity, doomed never to reach its destination.”

The captain stood up and held out a hand. “Let me see that!” he shouted.

Jones put the book down on the desk and turned it so that it faced the captain.

Van der Decken leaned over the book and scrutinised the words; Jones wondered if the Dutchman could read English as well. After less than a minute, the captain started to flick the pages back, returning to the beginning of the chapter. When he got there, he stopped and his eyes seemed to focus on something specific. He laid his right index finger down on the page and said, “Who or what is that?”

The commander stood up and leaned over the desk to see what van der Decken was pointing at; it was an illustration of the face of an old man, with deep-sunken eyes and a long beard. The face seemed to be surrounded by clouds, or constituted of them, as if he were Zeus or some similar God-like character. The illustration showed the face looming large over a sailing ship while a wind issued from his mouth, blowing the ship onto the rocks. The picture was on the page opposite the one which began the chapter on “The Flying Dutchman”.

“May I?” asked Jones, holding the sides of the book.

The captain lifted his finger and Jones picked up the book. He flicked back a page or two and found the heading for the preceding chapter. One word stood out, although it was an unfamiliar one: ADAMASTOR. Well, not wholly unfamiliar; he remembered the Navy had used it as a codename for a training exercise a few years back, but he hadn’t known then what it meant.

Jones scanned the page, picking up key phrases as he went. “It’s Adamastor.”

“Adamastor.” Van der Decken breathed the name, as if he’d heard it somewhere before. “What does it say about him?”

“I’m paraphrasing quite a bit here, but they say that he was a Titan, a Greek god, who fell in love with a woman who was already promised to another. When he tried to take her by force, he was exiled to the southernmost tip of Africa as punishment.” Jones read faster. “Some say that when Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape on his way to India, Adamastor himself rose out of the sea and spoke to him and his crew. He said that he was

angered by all of the voyages and conquests made by the Portuguese people, and that over time he would exact his revenge on them and any other nation who dared to sail past the Cape. Ever since then, many a ship passing the Cape has been lost to a sudden storm, and one has to wonder whether Adamastor is not the cause of it.”

Jones reached the end of the chapter and closed the book. He looked up at the captain, who was staring at his desk.

“I saw Adamastor when my ship sank,” said van der Decken. “I saw his face, the same face in that book, with those empty eyes and that damn long, dirty beard. I saw him in the rocks and in the sea and in the rain; I just didn’t know who he was until now.” He looked up and met Jones’ gaze. “Will you take me to him?”

The commander laughed. “I can’t *take you to him*; it’s all just a legend.” He felt stupid as soon as he’d said it.

Van der Decken’s face looked like thunder. “And when you woke up this morning, Commander, you thought that the story of the Flying Dutchman was also *just a legend*; and yet here I sit. Now, where does that book say Adamastor resides?”

Jones sighed and opened the book up again. “Well, as I told you before, he’s just a mythological figure, so it’s not certain that he ‘resides’ anywhere in particular. But, if we are to take the story of Adamastor literally, then he could, in theory, be found at the Cape of Good Hope, at Cape Point.”

“Very good; can you take me there?”

“Today?”

The captain’s eyes widened. “Yes, today. I’ve got nothing else to do. Do you?”

“Well, officially, I’m still liaising with you on behalf of Admiral Ledwaba.” Jones was thinking aloud, as if he were trying to convince himself of something. “It is my duty then to attend to your every need during the course of your visit –”

“Exactly,” van der Decken interrupted. “And I *need* to go and see Adamastor.”

“I don’t know. It’ll probably turn out to be nothing but a wild goose chase.”

“Commander,” said the captain as he stood up, “I am going to this ‘Cape Point’ place with or without your help, even if I have to walk all the way there. If you agree to take me in your metal carriage, you’ll save me some time and perhaps you will get to see this Adamastor with your own eyes. Maybe then you will believe.”

Jones made up his mind. “Oh, okay, I’ll take you. But I honestly don’t think anything will come of it.”

Half an hour later, Commander Paul Jones approached the main gate to the Cape Point Nature Reserve in a car full of ghosts. Captain van der Decken sat in the passenger seat, while two other crewmembers from *The Flying Dutchman* occupied the back seat. The captain had insisted that they come along to bear witness to his meeting with Adamastor, so that they could testify to the remaining crew later as to what was said.

The one crewmember was quite a good-looking man, while the other was simply not. Johannes and Pieter were their respective names, van der Decken had told Jones earlier. They also had differing viewpoints on how much responsibility their captain should bear for their collective misfortune, which made them ideal witnesses. Not a word had passed between the four sailors during the drive from the harbour to the nature reserve.

When they reached the gate, Jones wound down his car-window and greeted the ticket-seller. “Good afternoon. Can I have tickets for four adults, please.”

The woman’s hands moved fast over her keyboard. “That’ll be three-hundred rand please, sir,” she said.

Jones sighed as he handed the money over. He wondered if he’d get a discount if he told her that his three passengers were actually ghosts. In any case, it was coming out of his petty-cash account.

He took the tickets and receipt from the woman but left his window halfway down. The boom in front of the car lifted and they drove through. The road ahead rose steadily up a low hill. When they reached the top, the road descended once more, and they could see the entire reserve stretching out before them, all the way to Cape Point.

This was where the two coastlines of the Cape Peninsula tapered and came to a point. It was partly cloudy with some wind, and the sun reflected off the surface of the sea, turning it white against the grey of the land.

It was a glorious sight, and it caused van der Decken to break his long silence. “This place is beautiful, but why do you have to pay to go in?”

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” Jones worried that the captain might question his use of idiom, but he did not.

“But it is a natural area, is it not? It’s open country, no one should have to pay to enjoy it.”

“If it was open to anybody, then it wouldn’t stay beautiful for long. Somebody would’ve come in and settled here, built homes and businesses. It’s a ‘nature reserve’, which means exactly what it sounds like: it’s an area set aside to preserve the natural features within it, under the protection of the government.”

“And you’re sure that this is where Adamastor will be?”

“No, of course I’m not sure! Hundreds of people visit Cape Point every day – I’ve even taken my family there a couple of times – and no one’s ever seen a giant storm-god hanging around there! We’ve just got to hope that this time, seeing as you’ll be there too, that he’ll show himself in some or other way.”

“But I mean, are you sure that this ‘Cape Point’ is the right place? What did the book say?”

“The book said ‘the southernmost tip of Africa’. In the time that these legends were first told, it was believed that the Cape of Good Hope was the tip of Africa. It has since been proved, with modern mapping, to only be the most south-westerly tip.”

“So, Adamastor may not be here?”

“He may not, I told you that. But I believe that if he is anywhere, he will be at Cape Point. The true southern tip of Africa is called Cape Agulhas; it’s roughly a hundred miles away from here and doesn’t look nearly as spectacular as Cape Point does, hence the confusion over the centuries. In any event, all of the stories about *The Flying Dutchman* and Adamastor mention Cape Point, not Cape Agulhas. If your ship had sunk near Cape Agulhas, you surely would’ve washed up in one of the coastal towns there and not in Simon’s Town.”

Van der Decken seemed satisfied with that explanation and did not speak again.

They soon arrived in the parking lot outside the Two Oceans Restaurant. It was situated on a small plateau between two hills. Jones parked the car and the four of them got out. There were a couple of groups of tourists walking past just then, and the motley crew of sailors drew some stares. A few of the tourists took photos with their cellphones.

Jones had to wonder if van der Decken and his companions would even show up in the photos.

“So, this is Cape Point?” asked the captain.

“Not yet; this is just as far as cars can go. We can walk the rest of the way.” He pointed up the hill to the south. There were neat stone walkways marking the path up the hillside. At the crest of the hill was a lighthouse tower coloured in white and blue with a red top. Jones had only thought as far as taking them up there; if Adamastor did not magically appear after that, then he didn’t know what he’d do.

They began the climb, the commander leading the way. Jones did not tell the old sailors about the funicular that could’ve had them at the top in a minute or two, mainly because it would’ve been too difficult to explain to them just what a funicular was.

Also, the Cape Point funicular happened to be called *The Flying Dutchman*, and the irony of Captain van der Decken and two of his sailors travelling on it would’ve been too much for Jones to bear. Besides, it would’ve been full of tourists, and the commander did not want to have to field any questions about his strangely-dressed companions.

In the ten to fifteen minutes it took to reach the lighthouse, the sky overhead had grown considerably darker. Jones checked his watch and saw that it was only about mid-afternoon. The clouds that before had looked non-threatening now seemed storm-like and were moving northwards. A strong wind whipped at the four sailors as they climbed the steep paths near the top of the hill, and there was some moisture in the air.

At last they came to the platform with the lighthouse tower in its centre; it was encircled by a low wall constructed from large brown rocks. Because of its position on the crest of a hill, the tower did not require much more elevation, so it was not very tall, as lighthouses went. Jones leaned against the wall to catch his breath while the captain walked around the lighthouse, looking left and right as he went. Johannes and Pieter just stood on one side, admiring the view.

Van der Decken reappeared on the western side of the lighthouse. “There’s no one here but us! Not a soul. Commander, are you sure this is the right place? Does the path go no further?”

Jones looked up at him. “There is a narrow path that continues towards the new lighthouse,” he gesticulated over his shoulder. “But I wouldn’t recommend going down

there in this wind. Anyway, this is the original lighthouse; it's the oldest, and I thought seeing as we're looking for a character from ancient mythology, the *old* lighthouse would be the place to look for him. Let's just wait here a bit."

The captain muttered an indignant noise that sounded something like *harumph* and continued to pace about.

Minutes went by and Jones continued to worry about what he was going to do or say to van der Decken when it came time to leave and Adamastor had still not appeared. He turned around and looked over the wall facing southwards; except for the jagged knife of Cape Point stabbing out into the ocean, there was nothing but water stretching out into the distance. It was amazing to think that one could continue in that direction until one reached Antarctica, right at the bottom of the world.

It was also incredible to think about all of the hundreds and thousands of ships, and probably millions of souls aboard, that had sailed past Cape Point over the centuries. Even now, to his right, Jones could see a lonely container ship making its way eastwards. He moved to his left until he could see Cape Hangklip at the other end of False Bay; its peak, together with Cape Point, were like a set of pillars marking the entrance to the bay, although they were quite far apart.

When he turned to look northwards, he noticed a tall man standing to the right of the lighthouse. At first Jones thought it was van der Decken, but then he saw the captain standing off to his left with Johannes and Pieter. This other man was wearing a long navy raincoat and an oilskin cap. He had a wooden pipe in his mouth and he was trying to light it with one hand while shielding it against the wind with the other.

Once it was lit, he turned to face Jones and the commander saw that he looked to be very old, perhaps even in his eighties. He had a thick white beard that extended down to the upper part of his chest, and a prominent nose that was in contrast with his sunken eyes. As he chewed on his pipe, Jones noted that his teeth were yellow and crooked.

Van der Decken soon became aware of the extra presence around the lighthouse, and turned to see who it was. His eyes widened at the sight of the old man. "*You!*" he said through clenched teeth.

“Wait!” Jones interrupted. He had to admit that the resemblance to the drawings of Adamastor in the book was uncanny, but they had to ensure that this wasn’t just some old man in the wrong place at the wrong time. “Who are you, sir?”

“Me?” said the old man. “I’m a lighthouse keeper, of sorts.” The way that he said “of sorts”, seemed to suggest a lot more.

“The hell you are! You’re Adamastor!” said van der Decken.

The old man grimaced at the name. “Yes, I believe that is what men call me.”

Jones was surprised both by the man’s admission and how easily he had given it. Now that van der Decken had what he wanted, a face-to-face with Adamastor, Jones decided to stand back with Johannes and Pieter and let the two old enemies have it out. That was why Jones and the two sailors were there, in any case: to bear witness.

Van der Decken scrutinized the old man. “You don’t look all that different from a man yourself.”

Adamastor continued to puff away at his pipe. “It’s the form I choose to assume from time to time. One gets tired of being a storm-god filled with bitterness and impotent rage.”

“So, the legends about you are true.”

“It depends. What do they say?”

“That you were a Greek god who fell in love with a woman not meant for you. You were exiled here as punishment, and have been here ever since.”

The old man removed the pipe from his mouth. “Huh!” he scoffed. “That’s not even the half of it. I wasn’t always as I am now. I was young once; just as ugly, maybe, but I had a young man’s desires. The woman I loved was Thetis, a sea-nymph. The first time I saw her, I happened upon her bathing naked on a beach. She was the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen, with her flawless, sun-kissed skin, sea-blue eyes and long golden hair. However, as much as I wanted to take her there and then, I decided to go about things in the traditional manner.

“I asked around and found that Thetis had no father. Her father was the Aegean. But she had a mother, Doris, who I then approached to ask for her daughter’s hand. She told me that Thetis was already betrothed to Peleus. However, Doris seemed sympathetic to my plight. A few days later, she sought me out and told me that although I would never

marry her daughter, she could arrange for me to spend one night with Thetis, if I wished it. Of course, I agreed.”

Jones noticed that van der Decken seemed annoyed by Adamastor’s extended oration, but his story was an intriguing one, and it kept his audience of four interested.

“Well,” continued the old man, “Doris told me to return to the beach where I’d first seen her daughter, and Thetis would be waiting for me there. When I arrived on the beach, Thetis was nowhere to be seen. But she soon appeared, rising naked from the sea and walking up the sands towards me. She smiled at me and I rushed forward to embrace her. I took her in my arms; *at last*, I thought, *my dreams had been fulfilled!* But, even as I caressed her body I found that her soft, warm skin had turned to stone, and her long, wavy hair was nothing more than thorny bushes. When I opened my eyes I was alone, clinging to this rocky promontory at the bottom of the world.”

Adamastor put his pipe back in his mouth. “So, you see, Captain, I too am the victim of a curse.”

“You know who I am?” van der Decken looked surprised.

“Of course I do. I’m not likely to forget the sea-captain that I cursed to sail the seas for eternity, now, am I?”

“So, it was you!” van der Decken slumped against the side of the lighthouse-tower. “But, why curse me? If the stories are true, you’ve sunk many ships over the centuries; you didn’t turn all their crew into ghosts as well, did you?”

“True, I didn’t.” Adamastor smiled his crooked smile. “Well, a few. But you were a special case; you were extremely – stubborn. The storm I created to wreck your ship was one of the greatest I’ve ever made. It was a labyrinth with rainclouds for walls, and at its centre I placed a whirlpool. No man alive could’ve navigated his way out of it, I was certain.

“But somehow you did. I threw everything I had at you, yet you still came out the other side unharmed. That was when I knew that I couldn’t let you die like an ordinary man. You had provided me with the most entertainment I’d had in millennia. You were a challenge. Who knew if I would ever encounter a soul like yours again? So I decided to keep you around. It was a bit selfish of me, I know, but perhaps you could see it as a form of immortality?”

“I see it as a form of torment,” said van der Decken, angry. “I too had a woman I loved: Senta was her name. But, you kept me from returning home to her, and now she is long dead. I have been fortunate enough, even in my current state, to find another woman I love, and yet I cannot touch her, cannot be with her, all because of your curse!”

“Do you honestly think I care about what you’ve lost and what you want but can’t have?” The old man spat while holding his pipe in one hand. “It’s one of the few things I draw comfort from, knowing that I am not alone in my heartache. You think it unbearable not to be able to have a woman you’ve only known for a few days? Try being stuck on this promontory for thousands of years, surrounded by the ocean, in whose waves flows the spirit of your beloved. That is what it is like for me! Thetis is all around me, almost within reach, taunting me; but I remain impotent.”

“That may all be true,” said the captain, “but why put my crew through this punishment, too? You must know that they had nothing to do with my *stubbornness*, as you call it. You can have my soul for all eternity, if you would only release them from this curse.”

Commander Jones turned to look at the faces of Johannes and Pieter, but they were unmoved. *Of course*, he realised, *they can’t understand English*. If only they knew what van der Decken was willing to sacrifice for them; Jones felt pride on their behalf.

Adamastor laughed until it gave way to a hacking cough. Then he said, “That’s very noble of you, Captain. Unfortunately for you and your crew, I can no more lift the curse than I can uncrack a broken egg. That’s just how these sorts of curses work; once they’re cast, that’s it, I’m afraid.”

“You lie!” cried van der Decken as he knocked Adamastor’s pipe out of his mouth and grabbed the old man by his coat lapels. “You cast the damned curse, there must be some way you can undo it!”

The sky over their heads darkened and a gust of wind buffeted the five men standing around the lighthouse.

The captain was still holding Adamastor, but the old man did not look concerned. Instead, he sighed. “You know, van der Decken, I used to find you amusing, but now I just find you tedious. Although you may not know it, this cycle has been repeating itself for decades.”

“*Cycle*? What do you mean?”

“Do you really think you died in sixteen-seventy-nine and only woke up a week ago, in twenty-twelve? This has all happened before, more than once. Once every seven years you wake up on the deck of your ship with no memory of who you are; after some time, you realise that you’re under a curse and then you set out on a quest looking for the person responsible. Eventually you work out that it’s me; then you come here and confront me about it. We argue for a while, until I grow tired of the game; then I smite you with a thunderbolt, erasing your memories once more, and return you to your ship. Then you sail the seas in blissful oblivion until it all starts again.”

Van der Decken let go of Adamastor and stepped back a pace or two. There was a look of absolute incredulity and horror on the captain’s face.

“However,” continued Adamastor, “I must say that this is the quickest you’ve ever come to confront me before. Only five days since waking up? Well done! I’d love to know how you did it. Perhaps you had a little help from this mortal man?” The old man stared at Commander Jones.

Jones met his eyes for a second, but soon felt he had to look away. Instead, he arched his head back to see that the sky was darker than ever. He thought he also heard the rumble of thunder, but it may just have been the waves crashing against the cliffs below them. He closed his eyes and found himself praying that Adamastor did not zap him with lightning and erase his memories, too.

“No matter,” said the old man and turned his attention back to van der Decken. “As I told you earlier, Captain, I’ve grown tired of our little routine, and so I think the time has come to break with tradition. Tomorrow afternoon, I will conjure a storm at the entrance to False Bay, the like of which has never been seen before in this part of the world. The deal I am prepared to make with you is this: if you can successfully sail your ship through my storm and into the open waters beyond, I will lift the curse on you and your crew.” The old man held out his right hand to the captain.

Van der Decken gave Adamastor a guarded look. “I thought you said you could not lift the curse.”

“I lied.”

“And how do I know you’re not lying about this deal as well?”

“Honestly, Captain. What have you got to lose?”

Van der Decken thought it over. He looked to Johannes and Pieter, but their faces betrayed very little emotion. The captain’s gaze fell on Jones, who heard the silent questions aimed at him: *Should I do it? Should I trust him?*

Commander Jones gave an uncertain smile and shrugged in reply, as if to say: *The choice is yours. You know what you have to do.*

Captain van der Decken turned back to face Adamastor. Reaching forward, he took the old man’s hand in his and shook it. At the same time the captain pulled closer to him and said, “It’s a deal. But heaven help you if you wrong me again.”

Adamastor scoffed and released van der Decken’s hand. Then the old man turned to his right and retrieved his pipe from where it lay on the stones. He inspected it for damage as he walked away around the eastern side of the lighthouse-tower.

Jones stepped forward and walked around the western side of the tower, hoping he would see where Adamastor was going; but there was no one there. He kept walking until he had come full circle and was standing in front of van der Decken.

“He’s gone,” Jones said.

They took the funicular on the way down as it was late afternoon and there weren’t many people about. Van der Decken was so busy relating, in Dutch, to Johannes and Pieter, all that had passed between him and Adamastor, that none of the old sailors questioned the mechanics of the strange vehicle. Neither did Jones draw their attention to the irony of the funicular’s name. Instead, Jones stared out the west-facing window, where he noticed that the clouds had dissipated and the sun was shining once more.

The captain’s discussion with Johannes and Pieter continued during the drive back to Simon’s Town. Jones listened out for any words that sounded similar to their Afrikaans counterparts and tried to divine some meaning that way, but he failed for the most part. At a point near the end of van der Decken’s narration, both Johannes and Pieter got quite agitated and raised their voices almost to the level of shouting. Jones guessed that they were debating the merits of accepting the deal made by Adamastor.

Van der Decken eventually placated the other two sailors and silence fell in the car. When they passed the side-road to Boulders Beach, Jones decided to voice a theory that had been gestating in his mind for the past twenty minutes.

“You know, Captain, I was thinking about curses; they are quite a common theme in fairy tales. Not sure if you’ve heard of fairy tales. Often in those stories, the only way to break a curse is through being kissed by one’s true love. This is just a crazy idea on my part, but perhaps that girl you met – Elbé, was that her name? – she could be the key to breaking your curse.”

The captain was quiet for a moment, staring out the front windscreen, as if he’d not heard Jones. Then he said, “I’m not sure what is meant by ‘true love,’ but I definitely love Elbé. And she did try to kiss me, although we couldn’t touch each other. So, no Commander, I don’t think that is the way to break my curse.”

“Ah, but you see, in fairy tales, sometimes the hero has to do something to prove that he really is a woman’s true love. It could be that Elbé had simply not risked enough to be with you yet. Maybe she still needs to do something further to prove that she is your true love.”

Van der Decken pulled in a deep breath before he spoke again.

“Commander Jones, I appreciate all that you’ve done for me and my crew, especially what you did today. That was invaluable. But I must ask you to do one more favour for me, and after that, I don’t want you to ever mention Elbé’s name again in my hearing.

“I’d like you to go to Elbé’s home this evening. I believe you know her father, Martin Abrahams? I want you to tell her that I’m leaving Simon’s Town tomorrow, but that I don’t want to see her. Don’t tell her why, just make it clear to her that she is not allowed anywhere near my ship, and make sure her father knows it, too. Will you do this one last favour for me?”

Jones was speechless. At last he found his voice. “Uh, yes, Captain. If you’re sure that’s what you want?”

“I am sure.” Van der Decken turned away from Jones and looked out the window again. “Elbé has given me enough, and she has risked enough for me. She needs to move on with her life. It’ll be better for her if she pretends that I never existed.”

Chapter 8:
Strange News

When Elbé Abrahams returned home after a long shift at “The Salty Sea Dog”, she liked to drop her bag and all her clothes on her bedroom floor, as if she were unburdening herself of the day’s concerns, and then take a hot shower.

Afterwards, once she was wearing her Hello Kitty pyjamas, she would lay back on her bed with a book and listen to some music on her cellphone until her parents called her downstairs for supper. Her current playlist was full of Lana del Rey.

Her bedroom had plain white walls, but they were covered with movie posters she’d put up during her high school years, among them *High School Musical* and *Step Up*. Sometimes she thought she should take them down, but she also hated the thought of bare walls. Besides, she had good memories of going to see those films with various friends and a boyfriend or two; plus, Zac Efron and Channing Tatum were hot!

Her room also had a window, but it looked out on a whitewashed wall; if she wanted a real view, the balcony was just down the hall. The rest of her room consisted of a single bed, a clothes cupboard, a small bedside table and a desk and chair where she used to do her schoolwork.

Next year, she would probably be writing her assignments and essays at that little desk, too, as she was not planning to stay in residence. She would’ve liked to, but she had only been able to save enough money for her tuition fees and her textbooks.

No, it would be the daily commute for her. The Simon’s Town railway station was only a six-minute walk away from her front door; she would buy a monthly ticket to Rosebank, where there were shuttles to take her to campus. She’d seen the shuttles on her visit to UCT on the open day she’d attended. The train journey was about an hour, one way, but it would give her time to read through her psychology textbooks, or to read a novel.

As she lay on her bed that night, she was between novels. She’d just finished a certain erotic novel the night before, the one everyone was going crazy over. Elbé had found it not to be as badly written as people said; it was an easy read, a page-turner.

She had not yet decided what to read next, so for the time being she was looking through an old book of South African folk tales that she'd been given as a child. It had been sitting on her bookshelf, untouched, for over a decade, so she was not sure exactly why she felt drawn to it now.

As she scanned the contents page, she recalled her favourite stories: that of van Hunks, who had a pipe-smoking competition with the Devil and made the clouds that often cover Table Mountain; and Antjie Somers, the cross-dressing bogeyman who would catch naughty children and throw them in the sack he/she carried over his/her shoulder.

There was also the tale of Wolraad Woltemade, a Dutch farmer who rode his horse Vonk into the sea to rescue fourteen sailors from a shipwreck in the late 1700s. Elbé believed that that one was a true story, but it certainly sounded mythical enough to be included in a book of folk tales.

The last story in the book was titled *The Flying Dutchman*; she remembered it was about a blasphemous Dutch ship-captain who had –

She closed the book and tossed it onto the duvet at her feet. She didn't want to think about her own Dutch captain, Heinrich van der Decken, at that moment. The memory of his rejection of her the previous day was far too painful.

Every time she tried not to think about it, she *thought* about it, and then she couldn't stop thinking about it. She had tried to kiss him, and he hadn't responded at all. Instead, he had just looked confused. Could she have really read the signs that badly? *He's been eager to spend time with me ever since he first met me; he took me on a romantic picnic, and he said I was beautiful!*

Her mistake had probably been bringing up the question of Heinrich's love life. Everything had been going fine up until that point.

Elbé considered how strange she thought he was when they had first met – well, he was still strange, but in a good way. She'd never known anyone like him. A man who was gentle and courteous with her, but who, one got the sense, could be violent and ruthless in the face of a perceived threat.

The night after their picnic, she often caught herself thinking about his sea-blue eyes, his rusty-red beard and his strong brown sailor's hands. He was quite tall, too, with

broad shoulders hiding under his heavy coat. *That ridiculous costume!* If only she could see what he looked like underneath it all –

There was a knock at her bedroom door. “Elbé?” came her father’s voice.

For a brief moment she thought her parents had somehow overheard her lusty thoughts. She checked the digital alarm clock on her bedside table and saw that it was still too early for supper. She tried to keep her voice steady as she answered. “Yes?”

“Honey, can you come downstairs, please? There’s someone here to see you.”

Someone? Could it be him? Could he be coming to apologise and admit that he had some noble reason for not kissing her yesterday?

“Okay, I’m coming!”

Elbé leapt off her bed and checked her appearance in the mirror behind the bedroom door. She grabbed a lilac-coloured gown to conceal her pyjamas, and then she opened the door. She halted in the hallway outside her room and thought, *No, let him wait a little longer. He’s made me wait, after all.*

She took her time descending the stairs. She reached the landing and walked through the doorway on her right, into the lounge area. There sat her mother on the couch, with her father standing next to her. Beside her father was the visitor, with his back to her. He was wearing dark clothing; her heart rose.

Wait, he’s not very tall...

The man turned to face her and she took in his leather jacket and the motorcycle helmet in his hands. It was not Heinrich van der Decken. The visitor looked at her and smiled a little. She guessed he was in his late thirties; not handsome exactly, but he had a wholesome look about him.

“Elbé,” said her father, “this is Commander Paul Jones. He would like to talk to you about something.”

“I won’t take up much of your time, I promise,” Jones told everyone present. “Once again, I’m sorry for the intrusion. I’m here on behalf of Captain van der Decken.”

He’s sent me a message! she thought. “Mami, Daddy? Could you give us some privacy, please?”

Her parents’ faces both took on scandalised expressions, but Jones spoke up. “Actually, the captain wanted your parents to hear this, too.”

Now Elbé was worried.

“Captain van der Decken asked me to tell you,” Jones said, addressing Elbé, “that he will be leaving Simon’s Town for good tomorrow, but he doesn’t want you to see him off. In fact, he doesn’t want you coming anywhere near his ship. That is all.”

The relief of Mr and Mrs Abrahams was palpable.

Elbé couldn’t speak for a few moments. Then she asked, her voice frantic, “But, what? Did he say why?”

“I’m afraid that’s all I know,” Jones said, looking at front door. “I was asked to deliver the message to you. That’s all. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must be going.”

“But, you saw him today, didn’t you? Did he –”

“Honey,” Martin Abrahams interrupted his daughter as he put a hand on her shoulder. “I think we should let Commander Jones go home to his family now.” Over his shoulder he told Jones, “Thank you, Commander.”

Jones nodded at Mrs Abrahams and backed away towards the door. “Again, I’m sorry; so sorry.”

Elbé made as if to follow Jones. “No, wait! I don’t understand –”

Her father restrained her while Commander Jones closed the door behind him. “Honey, honey,” Mr Abrahams kept saying.

Tears welled up in Elbé’s eyes and she fought against her father’s tight grip. She managed to get free but her mother was already locking the front door. They heard a motorcycle start up outside and then drive off into the distance.

“Honey,” said her father, “didn’t I predict this would happen? Didn’t I tell you to be careful around that Dutchman? Well, it’s done now, and there’s no point crying over spilt milk. This is for the best, believe me.”

Then her mother asked, “What happened between you two yesterday? Did he try to force himself on you? I said from the start, he’s too old for you.”

Martin’s words echoed Elbé’s own fears and doubts, but Miriam’s accusation was so far from the truth that Elbé felt a lump rise in her throat and knew that she was about to start crying. Not wanting her parents to see her, she twisted in her father’s arms and broke away from him. She ran back up the stairs to her bedroom.

She heard her father pursue her, so she locked the door once she was inside.

“Elbé?” her father shouted as he pounded his fist on the door. “Unlock this door now! You know I don’t like you locking it! It’s not safe! Elbé?”

She threw herself on her bed and curled up into the foetal position. She pulled a pillow under her head to catch the tears as she gave in to her emotions and sobbed. Her father stopped knocking after a while, but she lay like that until she fell asleep.

When Elbé woke again, it was light outside. She sat up and saw that she’d slept on top of her duvet all night; fortunately, it was summer and it didn’t get very cold at night. She also still had the gown on from the night before. She looked at her alarm clock: it was 09:30. She had a sudden thought that she might be late for work, but then remembered that it was Tuesday and she was always off on Tuesdays.

She recalled the night before, and she felt her face burning. Why would Heinrich send someone to humiliate her in front of her parents like that? Okay, he had at least informed her of his departure, instead of just leaving without a word. But why also forbid her from seeing him off, as if he knew that she’d want to? *The presumptuous bastard!*

The truth was that she did want to see him again, even if it was only for a few minutes. She couldn’t bear the thought of him sailing away with things left unresolved between them. However, at the same time, her embarrassment over the kiss that hadn’t happened held her back. How could she look him in the eye ever again after *that*?

She stood up and stretched. Her stomach rumbled, and she realised that she’d missed supper the previous evening. Without changing out of her pyjamas, she unlocked her bedroom door and stepped into the corridor. Curious, she went to the balcony and looked out towards the harbour. Well, van der Decken’s ship was still there; of course, he hadn’t said *when* exactly during the day he’d be leaving.

She also noticed a couple of large white vans parked across the road from her front door. One of them had the letters EWN painted across the side in black.

Elbé tip-toed down the stairs and approached the kitchen, where she could hear her mother washing dishes in the sink. She knew that her father would have been at work for a couple of hours already, but her mother was home most of the time. Elbé walked into the kitchen and muttered a “good morning” to her mother, not making eye-contact.

“Morning,” said Mrs Abrahams before continuing with the dishes.

Elbé moved around the kitchen quickly, making herself some porridge as she put a slice of bread in the toaster. It was not a big kitchen, and there was a small table in the centre of the room which you had to manoeuvre around in order to reach the various cupboards and appliances.

When her toast was ready, Elbé put some honey on it and sat down at the table to eat. Her mother then surprised her by offering her some coffee. Elbé accepted and Mrs Abrahams boiled the kettle for both of them. When the coffee was ready, Miriam joined her daughter at the table.

They sat in silence for a while. At last, Elbé's mother spoke again. "So, you're not going out today."

Elbé had finished her porridge and was half-way through her piece of toast. "Well," she said, "I'm not working at the restaurant, but I may go out later."

"It wasn't a question."

Elbé looked at her mother and saw her stern expression.

"Before your father left for work this morning, he told me that I was not to allow you to leave the house today, under any circumstances."

"What the hell?" Elbé blurted out.

"Please don't use language like that in front of me."

"I'm sorry, mami, but you can't just 'ground' me! I'm nineteen years old, for ... goodness' sake!"

"Young lady, while you live under this roof, you abide by our rules. One day, when you have your own home and children, then you can be in charge."

Elbé was speechless. "Huh," she said as she stood up and took her bowl and plate to the sink. She washed her dishes in a fury and banged them onto the dish-rack. Then she picked up her cup of coffee and went to sit in the lounge with it.

She sat in her father's armchair with her feet curled up underneath her. She sipped her coffee angrily and mused that she actually would've preferred working a shift at the restaurant today; at least then she'd have something to keep her mind off van der Decken. Now she was stuck at home all day with a storm of thoughts in her head and nothing to distract her from them.

Her father had a hi-fi stereo in the lounge, and during the day Mrs Abrahams liked to listen to the radio on it. Miriam couldn't stand modern music, and so her favourite station of recent years had become 567 Cape Talk. The sound of people reading the news and discussing current affairs was a common background noise in the household during the week.

Elbé was close to finishing her coffee when a single phrase on the radio caught her attention. "*Simon's Town...*" she'd heard someone say. She reached for the remote control on the coffee table in front of her and increased the volume a few notches. At some point, Mrs Abrahams came to the lounge to listen as well.

"*That's right, John,*" a female voice was saying. "*I'm here in Simon's Town, where one of the South African Navy's chaplains, Padre Brouwer, has a very interesting story to tell us. He claims that he has been visited by the spirit of a long-dead sea-captain, a spirit which, for all intents and purposes, looks and sounds just like a normal living man; and all this coming from someone who has never believed in ghosts.*

"*I am standing with the padre now. Padre, tell us about this man you met.*"

The voice that spoke next was an eloquent one that seemed to carry much wisdom with it: "*It was early yesterday morning, here in this church where we now stand, and he looked as real to me as you do, Sasha. He looked like he'd stepped straight out of a pirate movie. He came into my church, and asked me what year it was. When I told him, he seemed upset and then asked what I knew about ghosts. When I told him that I didn't know anything, that I didn't believe in them, he proved to me that he was one.*"

"*And how did he do this?*" Sasha, the journalist, asked.

"*He held out his hand and told me to touch it. I reached for his hand, but despite him not moving, I was unable to make contact. It was as if he was not really there at all. He believes that he died in a shipwreck sometime during the seventeen-hundreds but was cursed for some reason to never find rest. Now, he is determined to find a way to lift the curse, because he's fallen in love with some girl he met in Simon's Town!*"

"*And, padre, you say that this old sailor is not alone?*"

"*No, indeed; it seems that he is part of a crew, all cursed, who sailed into Simon's Town harbour almost a week ago on the same ship that sunk in a storm centuries before. The old sailing ship I showed you, Sasha, just now from the main road.*"

The radio host interrupted. *“Just to clarify, Sasha; you saw the vessel?”*

“Yes, I did, John. It’s just as the padre says, an old wooden ship with sails.”

“Very well; please continue.”

Sasha spoke again. *“One final question, padre: you must appreciate that this all sounds more than a little hard to believe. So, why then did you want to speak to us on air, possibly risking your reputation in Simon’s Town as a respected naval chaplain?”*

“I wanted to speak to you because, whether this man I met was truly a ghost or else a demon sent from Hell, I believe that he and his crew may be dangerous and pose a potential threat to the people of Simon’s Town and possibly further abroad. I am telling you this because over twenty-four hours ago I informed the admiral’s office that they have a ghost ship moored in their harbour, and they seem to have done nothing about it.”

“Thank you, Padre Brouwer, for your time and your courage in coming forward with this. Well, there you have it, John. I must also tell the listeners that we contacted the admiral’s office here in Simon’s Town before we began this interview. We spoke to a Commander Paul Jones there, but he was unable or unwilling to give us any comment at that time. This is Sasha February, reporting live from Simon’s Town.”

“Yes, thank you, Sasha,” said the radio host. *“I must say that in nearly thirty years of broadcasting, I have never been on the receiving end of a report like that. A regular Flying Dutchman-story, it sounds like to me. Rest assured, listeners, that we will keep you apprised of any developments in Simon’s Town as and when they happen. We now return to the Radio 702 studios in Johannesburg to resume normal programming.”*

Mrs Abrahams and Elbé sat in stunned silence. After about two minutes, it was Miriam who spoke first. *“An old sea-captain,”* she said. *“Do you think the padre was talking about Captain van der Decken?”*

“Yes, I think so,” Elbé replied. She had not moved.

“And the girl he’s in love with – are they talking about you?”

“I don’t know, mami, maybe.” Elbé rose from the armchair. *“I’m going to read in my room, okay?”*

Mrs Abrahams just nodded.

Elbé made her way upstairs. She went to the balcony once more to check that van der Decken’s ship was still in the harbour; it was. Then she returned to her bedroom and

locked the door quietly. She put her back to the door and allowed her feet to slide until she was sitting on the floor.

What had she just heard? Heinrich was a *ghost*? It was impossible; Heinrich had always seemed so real to her, so down-to-earth. The padre had said that he tried to shake van der Decken's hand, but made no contact. Elbé tried to think of the time she'd spent with the captain; she was sure they'd touched each other at some point, held hands or sat shoulder-to-shoulder.

However, the more she thought about it, the more she realised that they had in fact never made physical contact. Heinrich was far too old-fashioned to make an advance without her permission –

Two thoughts came to Elbé at that moment, and she could not say which one had come first. Heinrich was “old-fashioned”, perhaps not only in a figurative sense, but also in a literal sense. Maybe he was not “acting” like he came from another century; maybe he really did! It would explain his insistence on dressing the way he did, as well as his fascination with technology that had been around for the last hundred years.

The other thought rang through her mind like a foghorn: *the kiss!*

Perhaps the rejection that she had agonised over for the last 36 hours had not been a rejection at all. What if Heinrich had held himself back from responding to her kiss because he'd found her behaviour to be “too forward” for a young woman? Or, what if he had wanted to kiss her back, but found himself unable to do so due to the fact that he was a ghost? The padre couldn't shake hands with the captain. By the same reasoning, maybe Heinrich could not physically kiss Elbé, even if he wanted to?

There was only one way to find out the truth, and that was to see van der Decken again. But, he was leaving Simon's Town today; his ship could leave at any moment! Elbé didn't have a second to lose.

She got up off her bedroom floor and went over to her cupboard. She pulled off her pyjamas and changed into a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt, over which she wore a faux-leather jacket. The shoes she chose were a simple pair of takkies.

She hesitated as she considered going to the bathroom to brush her teeth and put on some make-up. She wanted to look good when she saw Heinrich, but she was also in a

hurry and couldn't risk her mother discovering what she planned to do. In the end, she made do with the cosmetics she kept in her bedroom.

Elbé opened her bedroom window and leaned out over the window sill. Being on the second storey, it was too high for her to jump safely. However, there was a small ledge she could stand on and a drainpipe she could shimmy down. She'd never tried leaving her house this way before, but then she had never been grounded by her parents before; they had forced her to resort to this.

She put her right leg through the open window first and straddled the frame. Then she pivoted her whole body outside while holding onto the window sill with both her hands. She lowered herself until she felt her feet find the ledge below her.

Elbé almost slipped as she realised the ledge was a bit narrower than it had looked. She countered this by turning her feet side-on to the wall. With both feet now on the ledge, she held onto the window frame with her left hand and started to move.

However, she soon found that, in order to reach the drainpipe, she would have to let go of the frame and risk falling with nothing to grab hold of. *Argh, this was stupid*, she thought. But she had come too far to go back now. Elbé took a deep breath and let go of the window, at the same time reaching for the drainpipe with her right hand. Her feet moved and there was a moment when she felt nothing but air beneath her shoes.

She made it to the pipe and pushed herself as flat as she could against it, hugging it with both hands. Elbé looked closely at the pipe and noticed metal struts securing it to the wall. She decided to use these as handholds, and it worked almost as well as a ladder. Soon, she was in the alleyway behind her home, which led onto the main road near the petrol station.

Elbé dusted herself off and looked at the pavement opposite her front door. The white vans were still there, and had now been joined by a couple more with different logos on the side. She now realised they were news vans from various radio and TV stations. The padre must be from that church under the clock-tower.

She observed the people walking in the street; they seemed calm and unfazed, for the most part. She had been expecting news of a ghost ship docked in the harbour to cause mass panic.

On the other hand, there was a definite buzz in the air, and it could be that the news had not yet filtered through to the streets. After all, how many people listened to talk radio when there were so many music stations?

Elbé turned to her right and started to jog in the direction of the dockyard gates.

Chapter 9:
Decisions, Decisions

As he parked his Honda CBR1000 outside Admiral Ledwaba's office building, Paul Jones knew he was walking into a shit-storm. He had not been prepared for the phone call he'd received from the reporter an hour ago. She'd asked him if the admiral was aware that the old sailing vessel moored in Simon's Town harbour was possibly not a real vessel at all, but rather a ghost ship manned by a ghost crew.

The commander had been caught off-guard by the fact that someone aside from himself had discovered the truth. However, the absurdity of the journalist's question, combined with the matter-of-fact way she'd asked it, almost made him laugh. Jones could not confirm the reporter's story before he'd notified the admiral, and he was still trying to think of a way to broach the subject with her. He could've denied the story, but what if the reporter asked more questions? He needed more time to devise a cover story, time that he didn't have; he had to give her an answer now.

He panicked and, before he knew it, that stock-phrase he was taught never to say, the one you hear in all the movies and television shows, came out of his mouth.

"Uh, no comment."

He'd said it almost as a joke, in answer to the outrageous nature of the question he had been posed. A split-second later he wanted to take it back, to formulate a better response, but the woman had already hung up.

Jones wondered how this reporter had learned the truth. It could only have been Padre Brouwer who'd talked; it seemed the seal of confession did not apply to spirits. Stranger still was the fact that any journalist would give credence to such a wild rumour. How does one even begin to do a "fact-check" on a story like that?

The commander assured himself that the reporter would not be able to take the story any further with only the padre's word to go on. Besides, *The Flying Dutchman* would be leaving Simon's Town for good in the next hour or two. By the time anyone heard the padre's strange tale, van der Decken's ship will be long gone, and no one but Brouwer and he will ever know that it was true.

Then Jones got a call from the admiral's secretary.

“Commander, the admiral needs to see you ASAP. Come on your bike if you can; there’s some unexpectedly heavy traffic in the main road this morning.”

Jones knew it was bad when the admiral wanted to see him in person and didn’t just speak to him over the phone. The commander rode his motorcycle through town, as ordered, and saw four or five white news vans parked near the petrol station. He felt his heart sink as he realised that he may have misjudged the situation with the press.

When he entered Admiral Ledwaba’s office, he stood to attention and saluted. She rose from behind her desk, removed her reading glasses and gave a quick salute all in one fussy movement. She did not ask him to sit down.

“Commander Jones,” she began, “I honestly don’t know where to begin. How the hell can you answer a call from the press and then decline to comment? Don’t you know that’s tantamount to a denial? You’re a liaison officer, for God’s sake!”

“Admiral, I know. I’m sorry. I panicked –”

“I told you last Wednesday to keep an eye on these Dutch sailors and report back to me on their movements. Instead, I have had to call you for updates, and you always tell me there’s nothing to report. Now I hear through the media that Padre Brouwer thinks the captain’s a fucking ghost! Would you mind telling me just what the hell is going on?”

“Admiral, I assure you there was nothing of value to report until Brouwer called me early yesterday morning –”

Ledwaba threw her hands in the air. “Oh, so you knew about this?”

“I did, but his story sounded so unbelievable that I didn’t wish to bother you with it until I’d had time to check the veracity of his claims.”

“And how did you do that?”

“I did some research, and then I went to speak to Captain van der Decken.”

“*Research?* What kind of research? Just get to the fucking point, Commander! Do we really have a ghost ship in our harbour or not?”

Jones saw no point in lying to the admiral and making things any worse than they already were. “Yes,” he said. “I believe it is a ghost ship.”

The admiral put her hands on her desk, palms down, and leaned over them. She stared at Jones as if she thought he should be consigned to Ward 11, the psychiatric wing of Wynberg Military Hospital.

The commander elaborated. “You see, Admiral, this is precisely why I did not tell you all this yesterday. I had just learned it for myself, and I had no clue as to how I would explain it to you. When Padre Brouwer told me of his suspicions, it triggered a memory I had of an old legend, a ghost story, that of *The Flying Dutchman*. That was the research I did, and I found that the legend matched, almost exactly, what Captain van der Decken remembers of his past.”

Jones approached Admiral Ledwaba’s desk. She was too stunned to move. He picked up a pen and checked the admiral’s computer monitor for the Post-it note she’d put there during their meeting the previous Wednesday; it was still there.

He pulled the note off the screen. The incomplete name of van der Decken’s ship was written on it. He filled in the missing letters and stuck it down in front of Ledwaba.

“See? The ship’s name is *De Vliegende Hollander*, or in English, *The Flying Dutchman*. It all fits. And when I tried to shake van der Decken’s hand yesterday, I felt the strangest sensation, like I was trying to touch something invisible. As hard as it may be for you to believe, I really think that he is a ghost. The legend is real.”

The admiral looked down at the note, stared at it for a few moments, and then stepped back a pace. She lowered herself into her swivel chair. She remained silent as she put the tips of her fingers together in her favourite “thinking”-gesture.

“Admiral?” said Jones, uncertain. “There’s more, but I don’t know if you’re ready to hear it just yet. It’s about Adamastor, the storm-god. Have you heard of him before? Anyway he’s –”

Ledwaba raised a hand. “Stop talking, Commander. I think I’ve heard enough.”

“But, Admiral –”

Just then the phone on the desk buzzed; it was the admiral’s secretary. “Ma’am, I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’ve had over twenty calls from various media groups now. What am I to tell them all?”

Admiral Ledwaba looked at the telephone and, in that moment, she seemed to regain her composure. She reached out to the phone and held a button down. Then she said, “Get ready to take this down. Tell them that: *a special naval task-team under the leadership of Rear Admiral, Junior Grade, Tina Ledwaba, Flag Officer Commanding, is currently investigating the veracity of the claims made by Padre Brouwer earlier this*

morning. Irrespective of the team's findings, the people of Simon's Town and the Western Cape can rest assured that the South African Navy will do everything in its power to keep its citizens safe from any potential threats."

The admiral let go of the button on the phone. She looked up at Jones. "Now that, Commander, is how you talk to the press."

Jones had no reply. He took a seat in front of the admiral's desk and hung his head. They were both silent for about a minute; then Ledwaba seemed to make up her mind about something. She stood up.

"The thing is, Commander," she said, "this is but the latest blunder in a long string of mistakes you've made as my liaison officer. Only this time the stakes were higher."

Paul Jones stood to attention. "Ma'am, I assure you –"

"Please remain seated." She pressed another button on her desk-phone and then started to walk towards her office door. "The truth is, Jones, I've always felt like you didn't trust me. Like you resented me for my position, and thought me incompetent. That is why you didn't inform me yesterday of the padre's phone call; because you thought you could deal with things on your own and only tell me about it when the task was done, if you were going to tell me at all."

Ledwaba had now reached the door. She put one hand on the knob as she looked back at Jones. "I order you to stay in this office until I return."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Had you reported Brouwer's call to me yesterday, I would've had the time to properly investigate the padre's story. However, as things now stand, with all the trouble this Dutch ship has caused, I have no choice but to expel Captain van der Decken and his crew from South African territorial waters, by force if necessary."

"Ma'am, please trust me when I say that you should just leave this alone. The ship is leaving Simon's Town today, in any case. Van der Decken intends to sail out beyond Cape Point where he will confront Adamastor, the storm-god I tried to tell you about. If you interfere with their contest, who knows what will happen!"

The admiral still had her hand on the doorknob. She gave Jones a condescending smile. "Commander, you had your chance to handle this situation. Now it's my turn."

She opened the door and Jones saw two military policemen standing next to the secretary's desk. They stood at attention and Jones' gaze went to the firearms on their belts. Ledwaba pointed at the commander and told the MPs: "This man is not allowed to leave my office until I return. If he does try to leave, shoot him in the legs."

Jones could not believe what he was hearing. He'd always suspected the admiral had a despotic streak, but he never thought he'd ever see it displayed so publicly. Ledwaba closed the wooden door and Jones heard a key turn in the lock.

He stood up and started pacing the office. The admiral had said she was planning to "expel" *The Flying Dutchman* from South African waters. But how exactly would she do it? Surely she wouldn't take one of the MEKO frigates out against a 17th century brigantine? Well, considering that she was now ordering MPs to maim her colleagues, he wouldn't put it past her.

However, what would modern naval weaponry do to a ghost ship? Jones hoped it would have no effect; but, on the other hand, he had gone aboard *The Flying Dutchman*, had sat in the old wooden chair in front of van der Decken's desk, and had supplied the Dutch sailors with materials to repair the ship's storm damage. The crew might be ghosts, but the vessel they sailed on was definitely as real as could be.

Nevertheless, Jones felt that he need not worry about what the brig could do to the frigate; clearly it posed no threat.

What he was worried about was Adamastor. If what the old man at the lighthouse said was true, he was responsible for countless shipwrecks around the Cape over the centuries. Bulk carriers and oil tankers have been known to run aground or sink along the peninsula's coastline; a 120-metre long frigate would be easy work for Adamastor.

As much as Jones despised Admiral Ledwaba, he feared for the lives of the one hundred or so sailors who would be aboard the frigate the admiral decided to send out. He had to stop her; but first, he had to get out of her office.

Jones looked to the large window behind the admiral's desk. There were burglar bars on the outside, but he reckoned he could fit between them if he turned side-on. The office was on ground-level, so he wouldn't have to jump far. However, that still meant he'd have to break the glass.

He cast around Ledwaba's office for something he could use, and soon came across the knobkerrie and assegai lying in the upright cannon shell next to the desk. He picked up the knobkerrie and approached the window. Was there any way he could try and cover up the noise? Then Jones saw the mini hi-fi stereo on the other side of the office. He turned up the volume and the sounds of cricket-commentary filled the room.

Well, Jones thought, hopefully the MPs will just assume I got tired of the silence and not suspect anything.

The commander stood by the window and waited for a particularly loud point in the cricket match before he smashed the knobkerrie into the window; it did not break on the first blow. Four more blows were required, three in a triangle pattern and one in the centre, before the glass gave way and Jones could climb through. As he forced himself through the burglar bars, he heard the MPs trying the door to the office.

The admiral must not have left them the key, Jones thought as he landed on the lawn outside the broken window. They'd soon come outside to investigate; he didn't have any time to lose. He ran around the building with his head lowered so that his escape wouldn't be spotted through any of the other windows.

Jones soon reached the parking lot where he'd left his bike. As he mounted it and started the engine he realised he'd left his helmet and leather jacket with the admiral's secretary. Just then the main door to the admiral's building burst open and the two MPs emerged. They saw him and drew their side-arms.

The commander put his body flat against the bike and kicked off. Jones heard two gunshots; one hit the wall on his left, while the other hit the tarmac on his right. *Their hearts must not be in it,* he thought. Even though he was moving, there had not been much distance between them. It should've been an easy shot.

The wall on Jones' left came to a corner up ahead where the road joined with St. George's Street, the main road through Simon's Town. Once he was around the corner, the MPs would no longer have a line-of-sight with him. However, they might have motorcycles of their own and would soon pursue him.

Jones pulled into the traffic on the main road and made his way as quickly as he could to Cole Point, the entrance to the East Yard. As he passed the petrol station, he noticed that the news vans were no longer parked outside. He wondered where they were

now; maybe they had given up on the story after all. He also wondered which frigate the admiral would send out. The South African Navy had four: the SAS *Amatola*, *Isandlwana*, *Spioenkop* and *Mendi*. On weekends and after hours, only one of the ships would be on stand-by, ready to sail within eight hours of an order being given.

However, around noon on a Tuesday, all four of the vessels would have their full complement aboard; Admiral Ledwaba could choose any one of them.

As Jones approached Cole Point, he noticed an increase in the number of cars and people in the area. He took a left-turn before the police station, and braked on the downhill towards the dockyard gates. Then he saw where all the news vans had got to.

They were parked in a lager formation in the traffic circle before the gates. Several groups of reporters and their camera crew were trying, in vain, to convince a cordon of military policemen to let them into the harbour. *Don't they know that these men are the muscle?* thought Jones. *They're not here to negotiate.*

Jones wheeled around the right-hand side of the cordon of MPs, and made for the small boom where two male gate-guards stood arguing with a woman whose back was to him. The commander parked his bike and approached the boom. Now he noticed that the woman was dressed in casual clothes and had long dark curly hair. She was really giving the gate-guards hell! The one guard was tall and thin while the other was stockier.

Jones checked his left shirt pocket and was both amazed and relieved to find that his harbour ID card was still clipped onto his shirt.

He stood next to the woman and held out his ID card to one of the gate-guards. "Sorry to interrupt, miss, but I need to enter the harbour rather urgently, on Admiral Ledwaba's orders."

The woman turned to look at him and Jones saw the pretty face of Elbé Abrahams staring at him. First she frowned, probably at the memory of the news he'd delivered to her the previous evening; but then her expression changed and she grabbed one of Jones' hands with both of hers.

"Commander, please tell these men that I have to see Captain van der Decken before he leaves! The other gate-guards let me through on Sunday morning; I don't see what's changed now."

The tall guard said, “I don’t know who let you through before, *sisi*, but civilians with no official naval business are not just allowed to enter the harbour whenever they like. At the very least, they should be accompanied by a naval employee.”

Jones felt Elbé’s tight grip on his hand and saw the distressed look on her face. His mind returned to the conversation he’d had with van der Decken on the way back from Cape Point less than 24 hours earlier. Jones had had the thought then that Elbé may be the captain’s true love, and that her kiss could break the curse on him and his crew.

Of course the captain had cited their already failed attempt at kissing as evidence against this. But Jones still believed that there was a way out of this curse that did not involve Adamastor, whose promises were like the wind: elusive and changeable.

The commander had a gut feeling that the way to undo this curse was far simpler than anyone imagined, and that Adamastor, in making his storm-challenge to van der Decken, wanted to draw the captain’s attention away from that fact.

What if this curse is like those in the fairy tales featured in books and films? Jones wondered. What if Elbé has to go on a quest, has to risk something, before she and van der Decken can share true love’s first kiss? Is that not what Elbé is seeking to do right now? Is this her quest?

The more he thought about it, the crazier it sounded. However, even on the level of reason, Jones could see that Elbé clearly loved the captain, and that she was distraught at the possibility of never seeing him again. He knew what he had to do.

“This is the daughter of Warrant Officer Abrahams,” Jones told the gate-guards. “I will vouch for her and accompany her into the harbour.”

The tall guard raised an eyebrow. “Commander, you say you need to enter the harbour ‘on Admiral Ledwaba’s orders,’ is that correct?”

“Yes, it is.”

“But the admiral drove through here about ten minutes ago. She ordered me not to let anyone else into the harbour after her.”

Jones was caught in a moment of pause. “Well, obviously she was talking about civilians, not naval personnel.”

“The admiral didn’t make that distinction,” the other guard chirped.

Jones faced the other man. Military gate-guards often like to wield the little bit of power they've been given. "Why would she want you to deny naval personnel access to the harbour? You must've heard we've got a little bit of a crisis on our hands?"

The first guard spoke again. "Please wait by your bike, Commander, while I call the admiral and clear all this up." The tall guard retreated to his little gatehouse where Jones saw him pick up a phone.

The commander turned around and walked towards his bike. He also grabbed Elbé's left hand and pulled her along with him. "Elbé, listen to me," he told her as they went. "I'm going to get you to Captain van der Decken's ship, but you have to trust me and do exactly what I say, all right?"

She smiled at him. "Yes, I will. Thank you, Commander."

"Don't thank me yet," Jones said as he got on his bike. "Now, sit behind me and hold on to my waist as tight as you can. Do it now!"

Elbé climbed on behind him. She was effectively sitting on the rear wheel cover, although there was a small cushioned area for a passenger. She put her arms around his waist and her head against the back of his neck.

"Keep your legs flush against the sides of the bike for the next thirty seconds," Jones shouted. Then he started the engine and the bike roared to life.

Jones saw the eyes of the gate-guard widen as the bike surged forward, straight at the gatehouse. In fact, Jones was aiming for the narrow gap between the lowered boom and the gatehouse. Of course, a manual boom would've spanned the entire roadway, but this was an electronic one of the sort you saw at shopping malls.

As he approached the gap, he slowed down and twisted the handlebars left and then right while leaning the bike slightly. In this way, he avoided hitting the side-mirror on the end of the boom. Jones accelerated for a moment and then had to contend with a second boom. He repeated his earlier manoeuvre and nothing made contact.

After that, his path to O Berth was clear, and if the gate-guards shouted anything at him, he couldn't hear it over the roar of the engine as he sped away into the harbour.

Elbé couldn't believe her luck. She had been pleading with the gate-guards at Cole Point for almost five minutes when Commander Jones had shown up. The moment she saw

him, she knew that he was her only hope of getting into the harbour; and he had agreed to help her, which was strange considering the message he'd delivered to her the previous evening.

Now she was on the back of his bike, racing down the wharf as if she were in an action movie! She'd never been on a motorcycle before, and she felt both awkward and excited by the intimacy between her and this man she barely knew.

Elbé raised her head and looked over his right shoulder; the Dutch ship was still moored where it had been for the past six days. She could not see anyone on deck, but the gangway was still down. She was not too late!

Jones brought the bike to a stop in front of the ship's bow and Elbé got off.

"Thank you so much for your help, commander," she said.

Jones' gaze went to the ship's sails, which were still reefed. "Listen to me, Elbé," he told her. "We don't have much time, so I'll tell you what I know. Captain van der Decken died over three centuries ago in a storm off Cape Point, but he has been unable to find rest because he is under some sort of curse."

The story in Elbé's book of South African folklore and the radio report she'd heard earlier came together in her mind. "I know," she said. "He's the Flying Dutchman."

"Exactly. That's why he asked me to go to your house last night and forbid you from seeing him again. He was trying to protect you, because he wants you to be with someone who can love you the way you deserve to be loved."

Elbé felt a great weight lift from her as she heard these words. *He does love me!*

"Now, the captain thinks that the only person who can bring an end to his curse is Adamastor, the storm-god of the Cape. They've agreed to confront each other out beyond Cape Point later today, and if the captain survives, Adamastor says that he will lift the curse. But I don't believe he means to keep his promise.

"I believe there is another who has the power to lift the curse, and I believe that person is you, Elbé, because you really love him. You need to convince van der Decken to forget about Adamastor, and then you need to kiss him. I know you tried to kiss him once before and nothing happened, but I think this time will be different, because you've had to overcome obstacles to be with him.

“I also don’t want you to be surprised, but the captain looks a little different from when you last saw him. He looks older. It seems that since he learned that he’s a ghost, the knowledge has taken a toll on his appearance. But he is still the same man you know and love underneath; you’ve just got to see past his looks. I know this all sounds crazy, like it’s something out of a fairy tale, but remember that the story of the Flying Dutchman was also ‘just a legend’ until last week!

“Now, I know I’m asking a lot of you, but can you do this?”

Elbé hesitated as she tried to take it all in. She thought she understood: she needed to find Captain van der Decken before the ship set sail and kiss him, and then the curse would be lifted. “Yes, I can do it,” she replied. “I will do it.”

Jones smiled at her. “Okay, good.” He started to turn his bike around so that it faced back towards the rest of the harbour.

“But wait,” said Elbé. “Isn’t this a ghost ship? How will I get aboard it without being a ghost myself? Won’t I just fall through it into the sea?”

“I thought that, too,” Jones replied. “But I assure you the ship’s quite solid. I was aboard it myself yesterday.”

“Couldn’t you come with me, Commander?” Elbé felt sorry to be losing a friend that she’d just made.

Commander Jones was probably the only other living person in Simon’s Town who knew Heinrich van der Decken as well as she did. Jones had clearly spent a lot of time talking to the Dutch captain, and had earned his trust. And he seemed to understand her and her feelings for Heinrich, despite the extremely brief amount of time they’d spent together. What he was telling her about storm-gods and curses sounded crazy, but they were also the only things that made any sense to her right now.

“I wish I could,” Jones replied. “But I think the admiral is about to do something very foolish, and I need to stop her before she puts any of our sailors’ lives at risk.”

She just nodded.

Jones turned his bike around to face back towards Cole Point. “I believe in you, Elbé,” he said as he smiled at her over his shoulder. “You can do this. Good luck!” Then he faced forward and accelerated down the wharf.

Elbé turned and walked towards the ship. She was a couple of meters away from the gangway when it started to lift off the dock of its own accord. She didn't have time to think about how it was being raised without any ropes attached to it; she had to act. She took two large strides and then leapt onto the gangway. She made it, and indeed did not fall through the wood and into the water below.

The gangway slid over the gunwale and stowed itself on the main deck. Elbé stepped off it and looked around the ship; still she saw no signs of the crew.

There was a noise above her head and she looked up to see the sails unroll and set themselves without any assistance from sailors. She watched in awe and terror as the rigging moved like a hundred snakes around the masts and tied itself into various knots. The vessel began to move away from the wharf as the wind caught the sails.

They were leaving! She had to find the captain.

Elbé looked to her left and saw an open doorway. She walked through it and found herself below decks, completely surrounded by wooden bulkheads, and the light was surprisingly dim. She kept moving forward.

Then she started to shout: "Captain? Hein? Captain van der Decken? *Kaptein?*"

There was a sound up ahead. Someone was coming towards her. As his face materialised, Elbé saw that the sailor was middle-aged, with an unkempt black beard.

"Hein?" she whispered. Could this be him? Commander Jones had said he would look older, and not like himself.

But no; Hein's beard had been red and his eyes blue. This man's eyes were dark in colour, and yet now they seemed to recognise her and they burned with an angry light. *Hein would never look at me in that way*, she thought.

This man looked vaguely like one of the sailors she'd seen on Sunday morning, watching her over the side of the ship. But, he looked too different now to be sure.

There was a *whoosh* as something moved through the air and Elbé felt something hard slam into the right side of her skull; and then everything really went dark.

Chapter 10:
Convergence

Fortunately, Jones saw the MPs before they saw him. He was halfway back to Cole Point when he noticed two military policemen on motorcycles enter the dockyard. They looked to be the same two he had evaded at the admiral's offices. Jones slowed down and stopped next to a 20-foot white shipping container that was sitting on the wharf.

He moved his bike behind the container and waited. There was only a metre and a half of space between the container and the edge of the wharf, but Jones was thankful it was there at all. After a minute or two, he heard the MPs' bikes rumble past the front of the container and he dared a peek at their backs as they drove up the wharf, towards the berth where *The Flying Dutchman* was moored.

The MPs had almost reached the vessel when Jones noticed that its sails were unfurled and that it was slowly moving away from the dock. The bikes made turns and then came back down the wharf, the two riders looking left and right as they went. Jones remained flush against the container, with the Simon's Town marina at his back.

He waited until the sound of the MPs' bikes had receded into the distance, off to search another section of the dockyard, before he came out of hiding. Jones stood on the wharf and looked towards O Berth. *The Flying Dutchman* had turned its bow to the east, and was now well out into the bay.

"Come on, Elbé," Jones found himself saying aloud. However, as the ship sailed further and further out to sea, he began to question his own sanity in putting a nineteen-year-old girl aboard a ghost ship in the hope that she might break a legendary curse.

Whether she breaks the curse or not, he thought, I allowed her to get on that ship and so I must follow her and make sure no harm comes to her. At the same time, I need to stop Admiral Ledwaba from sending out a frigate to attack The Dutchman and thereby incur Adamastor's wrath.

The idea occurred to Jones that if he were aboard the frigate that pursued *The Dutchman*, it would give him a way to follow Elbé. It would also allow him to persuade the frigate's captain to disobey the admiral's orders. But, which frigate would she choose to send out? From where he stood, he could see all four of them. They were mostly

identical and could only be distinguished by the alphanumeric designation painted in black on each of their bows.

Right in front of him was F148, the *Mendi*. Further down the wharf was F145, *Amatola*. Across the basin, next to the harbour master's offices, was F146, *Isandlwana*. Jones could only see the superstructure of the fourth frigate, rising above the low roof of a workshop close to the dry dock. That would be F147, the *Spioenkop*. They were known as Valour-class frigates, because all but one were named after battles in South African history; the exception was the *Mendi*, which commemorated the valour of sailors on a sinking ship with the same name.

Jones was stumped. There were no criteria by which he could rule any of the vessels out as unlikely choices. He examined each ship once more, and when he looked at the *Mendi*, something fluttering above the bridge caught his attention.

It was a small flag, royal blue with a white rectangle in the centre. Jones thought back to his basic training in seamanship and recalled that this was the flag that indicated the letter P, or "Papa", in the NATO phonetic alphabet.

The flag also communicated a message: "Ship is about to leave port, all personnel report aboard." When Jones had studied the meaning of the flags, he had remembered this one by linking the P from *personnel* with "Papa" in his mind. *Thank God some sailors still kept the old traditions alive*; he'd found his ship!

Jones left his bike parked behind the container and walked up the brow and onto the *Mendi*. No one stopped him. He could hear some sailors' voices coming from the far side of the ship, but there wasn't a soul in sight. He found an open hatch and was about to walk through it when he heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up on the wharf. He stole a look over the gunwale. It was a grey Hyundai Tucson.

I know that car, he thought. But before he could develop the thought any further, one of the back doors opened and out stepped Admiral Tina Ledwaba, dressed in a full white uniform, as if for a parade. She even had her medals pinned to her chest and a ceremonial sword hung at her side.

Jones stepped back out of her line of sight. *My God, she really is delusional! She's not content to simply give the order to chase The Dutchman out of False Bay: she wants to do it herself!*

He stepped through the hatch. He knew the layout of the frigates very well after taking several government ministers and foreign dignitaries on tours of the ships over the years. The “arms deal” in which they’d been acquired was an eternal bone of contention in South African politics, and people always want to see what the fuss is about.

Jones would find a space on the ship that was not being used by anyone, perhaps the helicopter hangar down aft, and hide there. Then, every fifteen minutes or so, he would try and get out on deck so he could check on the progress of *The Dutchman*.

His primary hope, of course, was that Elbé would succeed in her mission, and that there’d be no need for the Navy to get involved. But, if things didn’t go according to plan, he had to be prepared.

After about ten minutes, he heard a horn blast and felt the ship start to move in the water. They were leaving the harbour.

Captain Heinrich van der Decken stood at the helm of *The Flying Dutchman* as it sailed out of Simon’s Bay, but he did not lay a hand on the ship’s wheel; nor did anyone else, and yet the wheel moved when and as it needed to. This was all thanks to an interesting discovery that the captain had made the previous afternoon upon returning from his trip to Cape Point.

He had boarded the ship and headed straight for his cabin. He’d slumped in his chair and sat there for a time, not doing anything, just staring at the floor and thinking about his conversation with Adamastor. Then Johannes had appeared at his door, asking permission to come inside. They’d had a disagreement in Commander Jones’ vehicle on the way back to the ship from Cape Point, and van der Decken didn’t feel like continuing the argument. The captain wished he’d closed the cabin-door behind him. Then the door had slammed closed, in Johannes’ face, all of its own accord!

Van der Decken had been surprised, of course. Had he really just closed the door simply by wishing it, with the power of his mind? Well, he was a ghost, and he was on a ghost ship, so it didn’t seem like too much of a stretch. He then tried thinking/wishing that he had a tot of rum in front of him and, sure enough, the bottle and glass removed itself from his desk drawer and decanted itself in mid-air, right before his eyes.

After finishing the drink, he left his cabin and walked out on to the main deck. Johannes was waiting for him outside, but before he could say a word, the captain used his newfound ability to move a pail from one side of the deck to the other, the wooden bucket passing in the air between the two sailors. Van der Decken then confided his discovery to Johannes and they wondered if the rest of the crew now had the same power.

Johannes looked up at the foremast and tried to change the rigging just by thinking about it, but he couldn't do it. The captain then attempted to exert his telekinetic powers on objects not connected with the ship. He tried to move a small crate on the wharf beside the ship, but to no avail. It seemed that, in their ghostly form, van der Decken and *The Flying Dutchman* were one, the ship an extension of his mind.

Later that evening, the captain gathered his entire crew together below-decks, and in the lantern-light he told them about his meeting with Adamastor.

“And so I got this storm-god to admit that it was he who'd cursed us to sail the seas forever,” said van der Decken, as he paced up and down. “And I told him that the time had come to release us from his eternal torment; but he said he could only do that if we overcame a challenge first. Tomorrow, we will leave this town behind us and sail out of the bay. There, we will encounter a very bad storm. That is Adamastor's challenge. If we can survive whatever rough weather he throws at us, he will lift the curse.”

Some of the sailors made murmurs of approval while the others looked to Pieter and Johannes, who were standing on either side of their captain, for confirmation.

“It's true,” said Pieter. “Adamastor promised, and the captain made the deal.”

“I saw it, too,” said Johannes, although he did not sound optimistic.

However, one of the sailors had doubts, and he spoke out.

“But, Captain. Yesterday you told us that the reason we're dead is because our ship sank during a storm caused by Adamastor. Now, if we couldn't survive that storm the first time, what makes this one any different?”

“The difference is,” van der Decken began, “when we were alive, the first time, we had everything to lose. Now, we're ghosts, and we know that Adamastor cannot hurt us in any real way again. Also, there's this...”

The captain stopped talking, and the crew seemed confused. But then, the sailor who'd spoken earlier looked to his left and saw one of the wooden barrels stacked against

the hull lift into the air all on its own. Then the rest of the crew saw it, too, and they gasped. From their right, a line of rope floated through the air and coiled itself around the barrel in mid-air, tying itself into a reef knot.

“I am master of this ship,” van der Decken said as he clenched his right fist. “I can control any part of the ship with the power of my thoughts. Tomorrow, I will steer us through Adamastor’s storm, and I swear to you all that, this time, we will come out the other side and see the sun set on this dreaded curse! We shall all go home at last!”

The crew burst out in simultaneous applause and cheered their captain on.

Now van der Decken stood, staring out at the sea while he steered the ship with his thoughts. Because the captain was wholly in command, there was little or no work for the rest of the crew to do, and so they congregated on the deck, waiting for the storm that they knew was coming. There was no sign of it yet; the skies were blue and clear, but there was a strong north-westerly wind that was gaining in strength.

The sun had passed its zenith about an hour ago and had now started its descent towards the mountainous peninsula on the ship’s starboard side. Even so, the captain was cooking under his many layers of clothing. The wind helped to cool him down a bit. *How can I be dead, and yet still feel the heat like this?* he wondered.

He removed his tricorn and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his left hand. As he did so, he moved his hand upwards to massage his scalp. *Aah*, he thought, *I’m sure I had a full head of hair yesterday, and today I’m as bald as an egg!* To be fair, he still had hair around his ears and the back of his head, but it was thin and scraggly. He was sure it was all part of Adamastor’s plan, to make van der Decken look more like him.

Johannes left the rest of the crew on the main deck and climbed the stairs to join his captain by the helm. Van der Decken was shocked by Johannes’ appearance: the youngest member of their crew today looked like a man in his fifties! *What must I look like then, I wonder?* the captain mused. Then he noticed that Johannes was holding something.

“What’s that? In your hand?” he asked.

Johannes looked down as if he were unaware that he was holding anything. “Oh, this? I found it in one of the cargo holds last night.” He held it up for van der Decken to

see. It was a small packet of letters, written on brown parchment and tied up with a frayed piece of string.

“Letters?” asked the captain.

“Yes. I’ve had a look through them. There’s at least one here written by each of the crew to their families back in Holland. Except for me; I must’ve not had any family to write to. I think I remember now. My father died at sea. You were my family after that.”

Van der Decken stared right ahead and kept his face impassive. He coughed. “Yes, I think that’s true.”

There was a moment of silence, then Johannes spoke: “Captain, I was thinking that, if I gave these letters to each of the crew who wrote them, and they read them... well then, maybe they’d get some of their memories back?”

“It’s a nice thought,” van der Decken’s voice was hard, “but it doesn’t matter. Once I’ve steered us through Adamastor’s storm, the curse will be lifted and we’ll all have our memories back. And then we can all rest in peace at last.”

“Captain, with respect: I told you yesterday, and I’ll tell you again. This is a mistake. You should never have made a deal with Adamastor. He is a god, answerable to no one. He will not keep his word.”

Van der Decken turned on Johannes. “What was I meant to do, then? Nothing? Just wait around for another three centuries for things to change on their own? We’ve tried that already, and it didn’t work!”

“What did Commander Jones think about Adamastor’s deal? Although I couldn’t understand your conversation with him, I could tell you didn’t agree with him.”

“It doesn’t matter what Jones thought. He’s done all he can for us, and now he’s gone. We’re on our own now.”

“The commander spoke about Elbé, didn’t he? I heard him say her name.”

The captain pointed a finger in Johannes’ face. “Don’t say her name in front of me again, do you hear me?”

“But, I just don’t understand why you would leave without seeing her one more time, without saying goodbye? I thought you loved her!”

“I *do* love her!” van der Decken shouted. “You think that was easy for me? I left her behind precisely because I didn’t want her to be involved with all this!”

At that moment there was a rumble of thunder above their heads. Johannes and the captain looked up and ahead to see that the weather had changed drastically in a very short space of time. The sky in front of the ship was as dark as the oncoming of night, and the wind was blowing in gusts so strong that the sailors had to fight to stay upright.

Johannes looked off to starboard and saw that they were passing Cape Point. At the apex of the cliff face, he could just make out the lighthouse that he had stood beside twenty-four hours before.

“This is how it starts,” van der Decken grimaced, but with a hint of pleasure.

Johannes resumed his argument: “But what if there’s another way to break the curse; a way in which you and Elbé can be together?”

The captain’s eyes went wide and then he moved with a speed that belied his decrepit appearance. He landed a left hook across Johannes’ chin and the sailor fell to the deck and lay prostrate.

“I warned you not to say her name again, didn’t I?”

The crew below on the main deck turned their attention from the coming storm to focus on Johannes and their captain: they’d never even heard a hostile word pass between the two before today, so a fistfight was definitely something new for them.

Johannes remained lying on the deck, but lifted the packet of letters up to van der Decken. “There’s even one in here that you wrote to Senta; just read it! It might help you remember just how much you loved her!”

“I don’t want to read your goddamn letters!” the captain cried as he stepped forward and swatted the packet out of Johannes’ hand. The letters flew over the side of the ship and disappeared into the choppy waters around them.

There was a sudden *boom* that reverberated all around them, and a large spout of water rose in front of the ship.

“It’s Adamastor!” one member of the crew shouted.

“No,” came Pieter’s voice. He leaned over the ship’s port side and pointed. “It’s the South African Navy!”

Van der Decken, along with the rest of the crew, followed Pieter’s gaze and saw one of the Navy’s massive grey metal ships ploughing through the waves a mile or two off their port side.

Johannes pulled himself to his feet in order to get a better look at the ship. He turned to his captain: “We must turn back! They’ll sink us before Adamastor even gets the chance!”

“They cannot hurt us,” van der Decken said without emotion. “We are the Devil’s own crew. You cannot kill what is already dead.”

Paul Jones knew the time had come to make his move when he heard the gun fire for the first time. *What was Admiral Ledwaba thinking? Earlier, she’d said she was going to escort The Flying Dutchman out of False Bay, not try and sink it!*

Jones had been monitoring the gap between the *Mendi* and *The Dutchman* at intervals ever since they’d left Simon’s Town. The frigate had a top speed of around thirty knots, and the admiral didn’t seem to be holding back at all. Even with a head-start and the wind behind her, the old sailing vessel shouldn’t have been able to outpace the *Mendi* like she was doing; however, Jones knew that *The Dutchman* was not a normal brigantine.

Only now, as they passed Cape Point, were the paths of the two ships converging. Jones observed that the *Mendi* had not followed *The Dutchman*’s exact course, but had instead taken an easterly loop so as to bear down on the brig’s port side. The admiral may have done this to avoid detection, but it also gave the *Mendi* an excellent position from which to attack *The Dutchman*. Was that Ledwaba’s intention all long?

As Jones approached the door to the bridge, he heard the gun fire once more. It was coming from the Oto Breda 76mm situated on the bow. He looked to his right to see the shell land in the water in front of *The Dutchman*. He felt his pulse quicken; *what has happened to Elbé? God, I hope she’s all right...*

Commander Jones took a deep breath, opened the hatch in front of him and then stepped onto the bridge.

Every sailor on the bridge turned to look at him. Jones searched the faces, looking for the admiral or the captain, but instead his eyes met the gaze of Warrant Officer Martin Abrahams. Jones was stunned. *What the hell is he doing here?* Then he remembered: Abrahams was the *Mendi*’s coxswain.

Admiral Ledwaba stepped forward to reveal herself. She looked like a peacock what with her short stature and ceremonial uniform. Word must've reached her of his escape from her office, but she still seemed perplexed to see Jones aboard the *Mendi*, of all places.

"Captain Kgotse," she said, her voice calm, "please have Commander Jones removed from the bridge. He is here against my express orders."

The captain of the *Mendi* stood between Jones and the admiral, looking uncertain. He was a tall African man with a goatee, perhaps in his early thirties, and Jones had heard good things about his abilities as a captain.

"With all due respect, Admiral," Jones said, taking advantage of Kgotse's hesitation, "why are you firing upon a vessel that you were only meant to escort out of South African territorial waters?"

Ledwaba did not answer. Kgotse looked at her and said: "*Escort?* You told me that this was a matter of national security. That these foreign spies had stolen classified documents from the naval base. Isn't that true?"

"It is true," the admiral said, sounding a little exasperated. She folded her arms and planted her feet in front of the captain, trying to convey her impatience at the delay.

"That's a blatant lie!" Jones cried.

"Commander," Kgotse said, turning back to Jones and holding out his left hand, palm facing downwards. "Rest assured that all the correct procedures were followed. We have repeatedly tried to hail the vessel on the radio, telling them to heave to so we could come aboard. But there has been no response and they have not slowed down. Only then did we start firing the warning shots across their bow."

Jones started to get a sense of what was going on: Captain Kgotse was apparently unaware of the rumours of a ghost ship in Simon's Town, and the admiral was keeping him ignorant. After all, if she told him what she knew, or at least what others believed, he might've thought her mad; so she concocted a story about the sailors being spies who'd stolen state secrets. That meant that Jones had to also argue sensibly. "But, Captain, that vessel is not equipped with radio, and the admiral knows it!"

"Is that true, Admiral?" Kgotse looked at Ledwaba again.

“Of course it’s not! What ship today sails without even the most basic radio equipment?”

“They’re historians, Captain,” Jones said. “They’re recreating a voyage from the time of the Dutch-East India Company. They believe in authenticity above all, and so they don’t have anything aboard the ship that didn’t exist in the seventeen-hundreds. I’ve met these men; I’ve been liaising with them for the last week!”

“*Kak!*” the admiral swore, which drew some strange looks. “They are foreign spies ‘posing’ as historians, and they stole documents from naval headquarters! I have them on camera!”

“I don’t suppose you have this footage with you, ma’am?” asked Jones.

“Of course not! It’s back at my office,” the admiral said.

“Oh, right, your office,” said Jones, “where you locked me up and told a couple of MPs to shoot me if I tried to leave!”

“You hear this man! He is crazy! *Pambene!*”

Kgotse raised an eyebrow at both Jones and Ledwaba. Then he turned to look out the bridge windows towards the brigantine. The weather was really bad now, and the wave crests got higher and the troughs lower the further south they sailed. The wind howled against the windows and it was just starting to rain. “Maybe I should see this video of the alleged document theft before we do anything else.”

“No, captain,” said the admiral. “Time is of the essence and they’re escaping! I believe I am allowed one final warning shot? I order you to shoot across their bow!”

“Captain,” said Jones, “the sea is rough and the visibility is worsening! What if the warning shot hits them?”

“I would rather see that ship on the sea-floor than allow them to hand off those documents to whoever’s waiting for them out in international waters!” Ledwaba said.

“My God!” Jones cried. “What’s on these documents that makes them worth the lives of twenty innocent sailors? Hey, Admiral, can you tell us that?”

“I can’t. They’re classified.”

“They don’t even fucking exist!”

There was a flash of lightning and a loud thunderclap overhead, and then the rain began to fall in earnest. Captain Kgotse put himself, once more, between the admiral and the commander. “Stop it! I will order one last warning shot to be fired.”

“But, Captain!” said Jones. “The admiral is lying –”

Kgotse raised a hand to silence Jones. “Commander, even if that ship has no radio aboard, as you say, then they still could not have misinterpreted the two warning shots we gave them. Something strange is going on here, and I must know what it is.”

The captain picked up a hand-held radio and spoke into it: “Gunner, this is the bridge. Prepare to fire another warning shot across the target’s bow. Wait till we’re in the trough of the next wave and the ship is as level as possible before firing, over.”

“Captain, wait!” Jones said. “There’s something else that you need to know.”

Kgotse gave him a sideways glance. “Gunner, bridge: stand down for now, over,” he said into the radio. “All right, Commander; I’m all ears.”

Jones knew that the moment had come to play his final card, as much as he had hoped not to use it. “There is a South African citizen aboard that ship, sir. By firing upon them in this unpredictable weather, we put that citizen in danger.”

“And this citizen’s name is...?” asked the captain.

For a second, Jones considered lying. He considered making up a name. But instead he chose the truth. He knew that by doing so he might incur Warrant Abrahams’ eternal anger, but at least this way he would gain a supporter in the argument against Ledwaba.

“Her name...is Elbé Abrahams.”

For a brief time, all that could be heard was the sounds of the storm battering the ship. And then Martin Abrahams took a step towards Jones. “Elbé’s on that ship? No, she can’t be! She was meant to stay at home today. I forbade her from leaving the house. How do you know this, Commander?”

Jones replied, “I saw her board the ship before it sailed.”

Martin’s face twisted in disgust. “Did that damned Dutchman kidnap her? I knew I should never have let him into our home! And you, Commander; you saw them, and you didn’t stop them? You did nothing?”

“Yes, Warrant. You see, I put her on the ship myself.”

“*You did what?*” Martin growled as he lunged for Jones. The warrant officer grabbed the commander’s shirt lapels and shook him back and forth as he shouted: “Why? After you stood in my lounge last night and told her to stay away from van der Decken! What was that – some kind of sick reverse psychology?”

Kgotse was forced to play referee again as he got between the two men and levered Martin’s hands off Jones’ clothing. Then he shoved the two apart and ordered Abrahams to stand at attention on the far side of the bridge.

“Now, Warrant. Am I to understand that your daughter may be on that ship?” Kgotse said.

“It seems that way, Captain.”

“If that is the case,” Kgotse said, looking at Jones and the admiral, “then I cannot, in good conscience, allow any more warning shots to be fired at the target. But, we still need to get the other ship to stop somehow so that we can transfer the warrant’s daughter off, and search their vessel for the stolen documents.”

There was silence on the bridge once more. Then at last there came an eerie sound. It was soft at first, and repetitive. But it soon increased in volume until everyone realised that someone on the bridge was laughing in a maniacal fashion. Kgotse and Jones turned to see that it was the admiral.

Her laughter got louder and louder until she could go no higher. As the ship pitched and rolled in the stormy sea, it made Ledwaba resemble a bizarre sort of jack-in-the-box. Then she pointed at Jones and said, “Now who’s lying to the captain, Commander? You and I both know that that ship out there, *The Flying Dutchman*, as you called it, is a ghost ship! Humans cannot sail aboard her, and so Elbé Abrahams cannot possibly be on that ship!”

Every sailor on the bridge stared, dumbfounded, at their admiral. In his heart, Jones rejoiced: this whole time, he and Ledwaba had been playing a game where you had to lie in order to keep playing. Now, she had called “ghost” first, and as long as he continued to sound rational and logical, her arguments and orders could not stand!

“Admiral,” Kgotse said, “did I hear you correctly? You believe that the target we’ve been pursuing on this voyage is a *ghost ship*?”

“Yes, correct! It’s *The Flying Dutchman*, and its captain is van der Decken. You must’ve heard of the story before. He and his crew have been haunting our coastline for centuries!”

“I think perhaps, Admiral, that you should go below and have a lie-down in my cabin. We will wake you up once we’re back in Simon’s Town,” said Kgotse.

Ledwaba’s gaze darted back and forth as if she were a cornered animal. Then she pushed herself away from the bridge window she’d been leaning against. She grabbed the hand-held radio lying on the console in front of Captain Kgotse. Holding the button on the side down, she spoke into it: “Gunner, bridge. Fire warning shot at target, over.”

As soon as the captain saw what she intended to do, he also went for the radio. He grappled with her and tried to get it out her hands, but by the time he did, it was too late. The ship shook as the gun fired and everyone looked to see if the shot had hit the other ship. Visibility was bad, but the radar told them that they’d missed it.

Kgotse pulled away from the admiral; he now had the radio in his hands, but Ledwaba had drawn her sword and was brandishing it at him. It was only a ceremonial one, and so the edges were not as sharp as those on a real sword. Nevertheless, she could do some damage to a person if she used it effectively.

“Right!” the admiral cried. “They’ve had their three warning shots; they’ve had their chance to surrender! Now I want them sunk with an Exocet surface-to-surface missile! Give the order, Captain, or you’ll taste this steel!”

“Admiral Tina Ledwaba,” said the captain, “put that sword away! You are not thinking clearly.”

“Oh yes I am! That’s *The Flying Dutchman* out there! Can you imagine how famous we’ll be if we can destroy that ship and bring the legend to an end? Our names will go down in maritime history and be remembered forever!”

Then a strange thing happened. The rain and the wind started to ease, the thunder stopped and for a moment even the sky grew a little lighter.

“We must be in the eye of the storm now,” one of the sailors on the bridge said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a loud *crack* sound up forrad and a massive column of water rose from the sea in front of the *Mendi*’s bow. As

the spout of water subsided, all the crew on the bridge saw a gargantuan humanoid figure emerge from the sea.

Its muscular body resembled that of a young man's, although it was difficult to say what its body was made out of. Its torso and hands might have been stone, while its thighs and arms consisted of sinews of flowing water. There were grey clouds where you'd expect to see a head, and yet a face could be made out within them: a long beard, angry arching eyebrows and two dark holes beneath them.

"Mary Mother of God," Martin Abrahams swore.

It stood knee-high in the ocean, and yet was still twice the height of the *Mendi*. The figure started to move around the port side of the frigate, its gaze not leaving the bridge windows. Everyone on the bridge watched in an awed silence. However, when Adamastor stopped amidships, Paul Jones realised with a sickening jolt what was going to happen next.

"He's going to capsize the ship!" Jones shouted. "Everybody hold on tight! Captain, call general quarters, for what it's worth! Tell all men on deck to get below!"

Kgotse, along with the rest of the crew on the bridge, reacted as fast as they could. Bells started ringing on the bridge and the ship's horn blasted above them. The captain made a quick announcement over the ship's intercom, and then their time was up.

Adamastor leaned over the frigate and pushed his hands and arms under its keel. Jones felt the deck beneath him shudder, as if they'd just run aground. Then he felt the vessel start to rise in the water, and the ship's hull groaned with the strain.

The commander had chosen his spot, with his shoulder against the radar console, holding onto a handhold. Looking to his right, he saw that Admiral Ledwaba had dropped her sword and was holding onto the railing in front the bridge windows. The defiant look of minutes before had gone from her eyes, and she now seemed genuinely terrified. Jones knew that he could not look all that confident himself.

His final thought was: had Elbé kissed Captain van der Decken yet? But then he realised that whether she had or she hadn't, nothing she did could save him and the sailors aboard the SAS *Mendi* now.

Then he felt gravity disappear and the sea became the sky.

Chapter 11:
The Storm

For a long time there was nothing but oblivion. At last, something intruded. A distant *boom*, a whining that grew louder and louder, and then an almighty *splash* that she somehow felt in her chest. As soon as Elbé Abrahams opened her eyes, her head began to pound. She winced, lifted her right hand to her head and felt for the source of the pain. She found it on the left half of her skull: a lump as big as half a golf-ball under her hair. She felt dried blood.

That damn sailor, whoever he was, hit me with something! How long have I been out? she wondered. For a ghastly moment, her hand went down to her jeans as she contemplated the possibility that she'd been raped while unconscious. However, there was no pain down there, and if the rest of van der Decken's crew had the same limitations as he did, then they couldn't touch her, even if they had wanted to.

She looked around and saw that she was still in the same part of the ship . A glowing lantern swayed above her. *It couldn't be night already, could it?* She tried to stand up, leaning against the hull for support. The ship pitched upwards and she was thrown back on the deck.

Elbé raised herself again. Her father had been in the Navy since before she was born, and so she had had her fair share of ship-visits. However, not all of those visits had involved the ship leaving port. Nevertheless, she had developed a decent pair of sea-legs. Her father had always taught her not to try and stand still and upright when at sea; the key was to move with the ship's motion. And that's what she did now.

She looked to her left and saw the ship's hull narrowing towards a point. "That must be the bow," she said aloud. "Guess I'm going right then. Back the way I came."

It didn't take her long to find her way out of the forecastle and back onto the main deck. When she did, she found herself in the middle of a storm, surrounded by the entire crew of *The Flying Dutchman*.

The sailors all became aware of her at the same moment, as if they could sense a living female presence among them, and they turned to look at her. One or two of the crew recoiled, while the rest muttered to each other in Dutch, but none of them seemed

pleased to see her there. She was sure she even glimpsed the face of the sailor who'd attacked her earlier, and he looked the most angered by her appearance.

Commander Jones had warned Elbé that Heinrich would look older, but she was surprised to see the rest of crew looking older as well. Having fifteen or so geriatric men stare at her would not usually have freaked her out; however, the knowledge that these men were cursed sailors added an extra level of creepiness to the experience.

Stop it! she told herself. *Get a grip; if these old men freak you out, how are you going to handle kissing Heinrich, if he looks the same as them or worse?*

Once again, she heard a *boom*, followed by a whine, and then a great crash up forrad. The sound had originated on her right, off the ship's port quarter. She looked over the gunwale and, across the heaving waves, she thought she could make out the shape of another ship, although it was grey and so was everything else. Someone was firing at them and, by the sounds of it, they were using modern weaponry. It could only be the South African Navy; but why? Because of what the padre said? Had his radio interview really lead to this?

She started to make her way across the deck, which was difficult as it was covered in water and constantly in motion. She held on to the side of the ship as she moved; none of the crew tried to stop her. Elbé climbed the wooden stairs that led to the quarterdeck and she emerged at the top to see Captain Heinrich van der Decken standing in front of the helm, with his hands behind his back, while the ship's wheel seemed to turn by itself.

Despite Jones' warning, she couldn't stop herself recoiling a little at Heinrich's appearance. He was still as tall as he'd ever been, although his shoulders now had the hint of a stoop to them. His skin was paler than ever and his face looked sunken, like a skeleton's. Both his hair and beard, which now came down to his chest, were grey with only patches of red.

The only aspect of his appearance that had not changed was his eyes. They were still bright blue, although they reminded Elbé now more of ice than steel. She knew that if she was going to look past all his other imperfections and kiss him, it was his eyes that she would have to focus on. His eyes would remind her of the time they'd spent together over the past week, of the man that she'd got to know and fall in love with.

With that in mind, she started walking towards him. He hadn't noticed her yet, and so she shouted over the howling gale: "Heinrich!"

He turned to look at her, and then looked away again, as if he thought she, too, was an illusion. But then his gaze returned to her and he seemed stricken. There was an old sailor standing near van der Decken. The name "Johannes" came to Elbé's mind; Heinrich must've mentioned him before. Johannes seemed pleased to see her, at least, as his face broke into a wide smile at the sight of her.

The captain held his head with his right hand and held out his left arm towards Elbé, waving his hand at her. "No, no, no," he said. "You can't be here. You're not supposed to be here!"

"Well, I am," she said.

"Damn that Commander Jones!" van der Decken said as he started to pace the deck, keeping his eyes averted from Elbé. "He's betrayed me; I asked him to do me one favour and –"

"Don't blame him! He did come to my house yesterday."

"He spoke to you?" The captain stopped pacing. "He told you that I didn't want to see you, and that you weren't allowed anywhere near this ship?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing here? This is exactly the situation I wished to avoid!"

"Oh, what situation was that? Having to see me again? Having to face up to me and tell me the truth?" Elbé knew that she was straying from the mission Paul Jones had given her, but only now that she was standing in front of van der Decken did she realise just how angry she was with him.

"I wanted to avoid you risking your life like this, a girl stuck on a ship during a massive storm! I wanted to avoid you risking your soul!"

"My *soul*? What do you mean?"

"I am cursed, and if there is a God, I don't want you to lose your chance for heaven because you threw your lot in with me! What's more, you have your whole life ahead of you, while mine is already over."

Before Elbé could respond, the ship lurched and then started to roll to starboard. She reached behind her, grabbed the side of the ship and held on tight. She noticed that the ship's helm was spinning.

Van der Decken took two steps and was back behind the helm. He reached out his hands and stopped the wheel. Elbé could only imagine what strength an ordinary person needed to do that. She wondered if it was any easier for Heinrich, and if he felt any pain. The expression on his face suggested that it wasn't, and he did. The ship slowly resumed an upright position.

The captain said something to Johannes in Dutch, and Johannes relayed the order to the rest of the crew by shouting at them over the railing. Elbé then saw the sailors spread out across the ship and take up various positions.

"How was the ship steering itself earlier?" she asked Heinrich. "You weren't even touching the wheel."

"It's something that I discovered after I learned I was a ghost; I could control the ship with my mind. But it seems that I lost control just now, while talking to you."

Elbé relaxed. His voice was also calmer now. She moved across the deck and stood against a railing in front of and to the right of the captain.

"So that's why you didn't kiss me when we were on the beach on Sunday?" she asked. She had to know for sure. "Because you're a ghost?"

Van der Decken stared straight ahead, not looking at her. "Believe me," he said, "I wanted to kiss you! I tried to, but nothing happened; we just didn't connect. I was as confused as you were after that."

"So when did you find out that you were a... well, you know?"

"After you left, I tried to follow you, but you were gone so quickly. I sat on the beach for a while and I had a daydream, more of a memory, about the day I died. I was on this ship in a storm not too different from this one. But we didn't make it through; we crashed into some rocks and we all drowned. Of course, I could not believe it. I felt and looked alive, after all. However, when I returned to the ship, one of my crewmates mutinied and stuck a sword through my stomach. It didn't affect me at all. That's when I knew that I wasn't among the living anymore."

Elbé shook her head. “You were never going to tell me the truth, were you? You were just going to sail off into the blue, leaving me to think that I had scared you away or that I meant nothing to you! How could you do such a thing, if you really feel the way you say you feel about me?”

This time, van der Decken looked her in the eyes as he spoke. “Elbé, the time we spent together was truly wonderful, like something out of a dream. But, once I learned that I was cursed, I knew there was very little hope of us ever having a future together, and so I set about trying to find a way to break my curse. First, I thought God was to blame for my plight, so I went to a priest in Simon’s Town, but he could not help me.

“Then, Commander Jones brought to me a book which detailed the story of me and my crew’s fateful voyage over three hundred years ago. In that book, there was also an illustration of Adamastor, and I knew that I’d seen his face somewhere before!”

At that moment, as if at the mention of the storm-god’s name, a massive wave crashed over the ship from the port side and almost washed half the crew off the main deck. However, when the water subsided and the spray cleared, the old sailors were still there, holding on tight to various parts of the vessel.

“I was certain that Adamastor was responsible for my curse, as I’d seen his face during my vision on the beach. Commander Jones helped me locate Adamastor, and he confirmed that he had indeed damned me for eternity. But, he also told me that he had the power to end my torment, and that is why I am out here; he is the storm, and if I can get through it alive, then it means I would’ve bested him. He will have no choice then but to lift the curse.”

“Even if you do survive this storm,” Elbé shouted over the wind, “and if he holds up his end of the bargain, do you know what will happen to you when the curse lifts?”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought,” the captain replied. “There is a small chance that I will return to the age I was when I died, and I will have the chance to live my life over, in which case I would’ve returned to Simon’s Town to find you. However, the likelihood is that I will die, and finally pass on to whatever judgment awaits me beyond the bounds of this world. That is why I had to leave you, and leave without saying farewell; because I could not bear to be near you if I was unable to touch you, to hold you, and be one with you. And if I was to die, then I knew that the best thing for you would be to continue with

your life as if you'd never met me. I did not want you to waste any time or energy mourning for me, or trying to find out where I went to. I wanted you to live."

Elbé bowed her head and was silent. Even with the rainwater pelting her from all sides, she felt hot tears running down her cheeks.

"My dear Hein," she said at last. "There is no way now that I can ever forget having met you."

This time, no one heard the *boom* of the other ship's gun. Neither could the whine of the incoming round be discerned from the frequent gusts of wind whistling about the ship. But, everyone saw the spout of water rise in front of the brig's bow, closer than ever before. The resulting wave made the ship pitch up with its stem in the air and its stern in the water.

Caught unawares, Elbé found herself thrown forward towards the ship's helm. She was going to miss it by a foot or two, and possibly keep going as gravity conspired to throw her overboard. However, Captain van der Decken stepped to his left, keeping his right hand on the wheel, and grabbed her as she went by. Then he pulled her in towards his chest and held her there.

We're touching! thought Elbé. *That's impossible; it shouldn't be possible!* She looked up into his eyes, and he stared back at her with an intensity she had never seen in any man's gaze before. She stared back, and tried to block out his pale, blotchy skin and his greying beard. *Those are my Hein's eyes,* she told herself; *his soul is in those eyes. The eyes never lie.*

Then she closed her eyes, raised herself up on the tips of her waterlogged shoes, and she kissed him. There was a moment of resistance when she felt his old, cracked lips against hers, but she persevered and soon there was a magical explosion that caused all negative feelings to dissolve and to be replaced with good ones. Stars were born and collapsed on the inside of her eyelids, but she dared not open her eyes just yet, not while this incredible feeling of love and peace was passing through her.

However, all too soon she felt her feet grow weak from their little balancing act and she pulled away from Heinrich. Then, she opened her eyes.

Van der Decken's eyes were still closed after their kiss, but then they snapped open and he gasped. Elbé couldn't tell whether the sound indicated pain or pleasure. The

captain arched backwards and lifted his hands to his head; as Elbé watched him with concern, his face began to transform. His beard and hair grew shorter, less wiry, and its usual copper-red hue returned to it. All signs of age disappeared from the skin around his mouth and eyes, and when he stood erect again, the stoop in his shoulders was gone.

He looked just as he had on the day they'd first met. She reached forward and held his arm, thrilled by the physical contact. "Hein? Are you all right?"

"Elbé," he said, "I remember everything! I remember my childhood in Delft. I remember my father who first introduced me to the sailor's life. I remember when my mother told me he'd been lost at sea. I remember my days as a deckhand, before I slowly worked my way up to captain; I remember all the strange and far-off places I've visited!"

Then she noticed that the rain had stopped, the wind was less strong and the sun was beginning to shine through the clouds. For the first time since she'd woken up on the ship, the deck of *The Flying Dutchman* was more or less level. Then something else occurred to her. "Do you remember Senta, too?"

He replied, "I do remember her. But, I am also painfully aware that she has been dead for over two hundred years, and I shall never see her again. As sad as that fact makes me, I know that you are here now with me and that I love you. This is my second chance. Elbé, you did it; you broke the curse!"

She embraced him and they kissed again. Elbé felt giddy, as if she'd drunk a large glass of red wine on an empty stomach. *Commander Jones was right!* she thought. *This is a fairy tale, and I'm living through it!* They separated and looked to their right to see Johannes smiling at them. He looked even younger than Heinrich now.

Together, the three of them moved over to the railing that overlooked the main deck. The rest of the crew were talking amongst themselves; some looked bemused and some were smiling, but all of them looked young again. The curse had lifted from them as well, and it seemed that all their memories had returned to them.

Elbé looked at van der Decken and saw that his gaze was on his sailors; his eyes were wet with tears. After a minute or two, the crew stopped all conversation and turned to face their captain. They stared at him with looks of gratitude and relief. Elbé sensed that Heinrich was about to make a speech of some sort.

However, before he could utter a word, there was a sound like a lightning-strike and a spout of water went up in front of *The Flying Dutchman's* bow. For a moment, Elbé thought that the Navy were firing at them again, but then something emerged out of the water, a huge figure with the body of Michelangelo's *David* and the head of an evil-looking wizard. It was strange to behold, a Titan of the Sea with a body constituted from the elements: stone, water and air.

This must be Adamastor, she thought. *Oh, shit! He's an absolute monster!*

The giant towered over the ship, even though the ocean only came up to his knees. The sailors of *The Flying Dutchman* seemed uneasy, but they stood still and stared up at Adamastor defiantly. Then he spoke, and rain and wind issued from the gaping hole that was his mouth as he did so.

"How is this possible?" he blared. "I wasn't done with you yet, van der Decken! How is it you've ended the curse and broken my hold over you?"

The captain did not answer him. Instead, he put an arm around Elbé's shoulders and pulled her closer to him. Adamastor seemed to notice this, but did not appear to make the connection at first. Elbé felt that she knew the answer, and she also felt empowered to speak, so she did.

"It was love!" she shouted up at him. "Our love for each other has overcome your curse! There are more powerful forces in this world than your anger and your spite!" She sounded brave as she said it, but she felt terrified.

Adamastor's face contorted in apparent pain and disgust. Then his mouth opened like a hole in a storm-cloud. He said, "So, van der Decken: what are you now, then? I see you look younger and are able to touch your beloved now, as you'd hoped to do. Are you among the living once more? Are you mortal?"

The captain replied in English. "I'm done with you and your deals, Adamastor, as if you ever intended to keep up your side of the bargain! I'm free of you now! You don't control my life or my fate anymore!"

"That may be so," Adamastor said, his voice rumbling. "But I still control the ocean around Cape Point. What did you think would happen now, captain? That I would simply admit defeat, and let you and your beloved sail off back to Simon's Town? I told

you before: your soul is mine, and I am determined to make you suffer as I did. If I can't have Thetis – and Zeus knows I deserved her! – then *you* can't have anyone, either!"

A sound issued from Adamastor that was like both laughter and a cry of anguish rolled into one. His figure receded from the ship's bow as he sunk back into the sea. The crewmembers on the main deck ran over to the gunwale to see where he'd gone.

For a few moments, there was complete calm. But then one of the sailors saw something off the port bow and pointed at it. He shouted a single word back at Heinrich. Elbé looked at the face of the man standing beside her and saw his expression turn from confusion to fear and then to one of resolve.

"Hein?" she asked. "What is it? What did he say?"

Then she heard it. There was a roar as of waves crashing upon rocks up ahead. At first, the sound had barely been noticeable, but it grew louder as the moments passed.

"I think the word in English," answered van der Decken, "is *whirlpool*."

Elbé didn't want to look; she didn't want it to be true. However, before she could stop herself, her gaze flicked upwards and she saw a great broiling mess of wave crests in a circle about a kilometre or two wide. It had appeared directly in *The Flying Dutchman's* path in a matter of minutes; Elbé didn't know much about sailing, but it didn't look like there was any way they could avoid it now.

However, she had not reckoned on the skills of Captain van der Decken and his crew. Heinrich got behind the helm once more and spun the wheel hard to starboard. When it could turn no more, he held it in place. Then he shouted at Johannes in Dutch, who in his turn relayed his captain's orders to the rest of the sailors on the main deck.

Various crewmembers then started to climb the rigging while others remained below, but working together all the while. Adamastor had disappeared, but elements of the earlier storm were beginning to return: droplets of rain fell, the sky darkened again and the wind began to gust. Fortunately for them, Elbé noted that the wind was coming from the south-east, which would help blow them away from the whirlpool. That's what the crew were doing: maximising the sails to catch the most amount of wind possible.

As the ship came about to face north, back towards Simon's Town, there was a moment when Elbé felt the vessel being pulled astern, as if it were about to be sucked backwards and into the vortex. She looked at van der Decken and saw him straining as he

held the ship's wheel in position with both arms. Then she felt it: the wind grew stronger and caught the sails, and with a sudden lurch they ploughed ahead through the waves.

They were sailing free! There was no longer any pull from behind!

Elbé heard the crew raise their voices in cries of triumph, and saw them shaking their fists in the air. She left the railing she'd been hanging on to and embraced Heinrich at the helm. He put his left arm around her and kissed her on the head as he straightened the wheel with his right. Elbé buried her face in his chest, taking shelter from the rain and enjoying the warmth coming from beneath his clothes.

But then she heard the noise again; the noise that she thought they'd left behind. The crew must've heard it, too, because their voices fell silent and van der Decken muttered something in Dutch: a curse, no doubt. The roar grew louder and Elbé raised her head to look ahead once more. Sure enough, there in front of the ship's bow was a whirlpool not dissimilar from the one they'd just escaped.

This cannot be happening, she thought and, for one shameful moment, she wished she'd listened to her parents and stayed at home that day.

"Careful now," Heinrich said as he held Elbé away from the wheel. Then he spun it hard to starboard again, until the ship was facing east. *Was he going to try and sail between the two vortices?* she wondered. *Was that possible? Would it work?*

The captain gave his orders to Johannes, but the wind that had helped them to escape the first whirlpool was now pushing them in the direction of the second. Elbé saw the sailors in the rigging hurriedly reefing the sails to try and avoid this, but it was no good; they were still drifting to port, towards the second whirlpool.

Elbé saw that van der Decken had successfully positioned *The Flying Dutchman* in the corridor between the two vortices; however, the diameters of the respective whirlpools seemed to be growing, churning up the water in the narrow gap between them.

The ship rolled and yawed as the captain's gaze went left and then right. Elbé looked, too: the vortex on their starboard side was turning anti-clockwise, while the water in the whirlpool to port was running in a clockwise direction. Elbé knew from her Matric geography classes that this shouldn't be possible in the same hemisphere, but, she guessed that when Adamastor was involved, anything goes.

There was nowhere for the ship to turn now. Either way, they were going to enter one whirlpool or the other. Heinrich pulled Elbé close and told her, "I'm really sorry."

She smiled back at him, her eyes shining. "It's not over yet."

He held her even tighter, and she clutched his shoulders. Then she realised that he'd let go of the wheel. *The Flying Dutchman* started to spin on its own axis like a toy duck in a bath. Moments passed, but for Elbé they felt like an eternity. When was it going to end? When would the crushing darkness come?

At last, she chanced a look around the captain's coat, but all she saw against the grey of the whirling sea and sky was Johannes hanging onto a railing. She heard screams coming from further away, from the other sailors. Then van der Decken shouted something at them in Dutch and the screaming stopped. In fact, at that moment, a great peace seemed to descend on the ship, and she felt weightless, as if she were on a dipping rollercoaster.

"What did you say to them?" she asked Heinrich.

"I told them not to have any fear. I told them that they are all my brothers, and that we are going home at last."

Elbé nodded. She felt comforted; but most of all, she felt loved.

Chapter 12:
Witnesses

Commander Jones imagined what would happen to the frigate when it capsized. One thing was certain, the damage would be far worse had they been aboard an older vessel. The MEKO frigates had a sleek, streamlined design that minimised their radar signature. That meant no right angles and less nooks and crannies where water could get in.

Of course, water could still get in, but when it did, the ship was divided below decks into eleven sections by ten watertight bulkheads. The frigate also had four Damage Control Zones, which were independent of each other in terms of power and ventilation. It was not going to be easy, but Jones was confident that he and the rest of the sailors aboard stood a good chance of survival.

But then a strange thing happened. When the ship reached a list of about sixty degrees to starboard, it stopped. A few moments passed while the frigate was suspended, seemingly in mid-air. Then the ship started to move again, however it was tilting back towards the left. It was returning to an upright position!

Only once the vessel was level in the water once more, and had been for at least a minute, did the sailors on the bridge feel confident enough to stand up and look out the windows. Martin Abrahams pointed off the port bow and said: “There goes the bastard, whatever he was! He’s gone back under the water!”

“You saw it, too, Warrant?” Captain Kgotse asked.

“God help me, sir, yes I did,” Abrahams replied.

“You all saw it?” the captain asked everyone on the bridge. They nodded.

Admiral Ledwaba was still sitting on the floor with a shocked look on her face. Her sword had slid to the opposite side of the bridge while the ship was listing.

“I know *you* saw it, Commander,” said Kgotse to Jones. “It was you who told me to sound general quarters. That was quick thinking.” The captain looked out the window and asked no one in particular, “What the hell was that thing?”

Now that Kgotse had seen evidence of the supernatural with his own eyes, Jones saw no point in keeping up the pretence.

“That, Captain, was Adamastor,” he said. “You may have heard the name before used in naval operations. An old Cape legend tells us that he was a Greek god, exiled to the tip of Africa as punishment. The first Portuguese sailors to pass the Cape claimed that he was the cause of the storms common in this area. Based on what we’ve just seen, I think we can safely say that the legends were true.”

Kgotse stared at the commander, dumbfounded. He said nothing in response, but instead turned his gaze out to sea, towards the position they’d last seen the brigantine in.

Jones looked as well and saw that Adamastor was now standing beside the *The Flying Dutchman* in much the same way that he had towered over the *Mendi* not long before. As relieved as Jones was that the storm-god had lost interest in capsizing the frigate, he wondered what could’ve happened aboard the brig to draw his attention away. Could it be that Elbé had broken the curse at last?

“Well, commander,” said Kgotse, “I would call you crazy, except that I feel crazy myself, considering what I’ve just witnessed. But, does that mean what the admiral said about the legend of *The Flying Dutchman* is also true? Is that ship out there really a ghost ship? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Unfortunately, sir,” Jones answered, “there’s a lot I haven’t told you. Yesterday I made the discovery that the antique vessel in our harbour was in fact under a curse, and that Adamastor was responsible for that curse. I knew that today the ship and the storm-god would meet each other out beyond Cape Point to settle the matter between them. I chose not to tell the admiral about my discovery for, well, obvious reasons.

“Despite my efforts, this morning it came to the admiral’s attention that I was hiding something from her and she forced me to tell her the truth, as I saw it. I was not sure at first whether she believed me or not, but now we all know that she really took the story to heart. However, she could clearly not tell you the real reason for your voyage, hence her accusations of espionage against the Dutch crew.”

Both Kgotse and Jones looked at Admiral Ledwaba sitting on the deck. She did not return their gaze, nor did she say a word to contradict Jones. Her chest was heaving as her eyes darted right and left.

Jones concluded, “I counselled her not to pursue the brigantine. I told her to just let things sort themselves out. I knew that if she allowed this frigate to get caught up in

Adamastor's contest with *The Dutchman*, she would be putting you and your crew at risk. That's why I sneaked aboard, to stop her from dooming you all."

Kgotse stared at Jones with a look of awe on his face. "Commander, you deserve a medal for this, my friend."

"No he doesn't!" Martin Abrahams said as he approached Jones with tears in his eyes. "You may have saved us, but what about my Elbé? Why the hell did you have to put her in harm's way? Tell me that!"

"I never intended for her to get hurt –" Jones began.

"I don't give a shit what you *intended*, you son of a bitch!" Martin raised his voice and everyone on the bridge was quiet. "What makes you think you could use my daughter, my *only* daughter, as a pawn in your sick, twisted game? You don't have any children of your own, do you? You have no idea what it means to be a father!"

Then Martin approached Jones and held his right index finger inches from his face. He was trying to come across as intimidating, but the words caught in his throat. "I'll tell you one thing, though," Martin said. "If Elbé never comes back, her death will be on your conscience, and my wife and I will never forgive you."

There was a moment's silence, and then Jones replied.

"If you believe in curses," Jones said, looking at Abrahams as he spoke, "then you must believe that curses can be broken. I believed that Elbé was the only person who could bring this curse to an end. That's why I put her on that ship. I never meant for her to still be on the ship once it left the harbour. She was supposed to go aboard, break the curse, and then get off again, but something must've gone wrong.

"You are right," Jones concluded. "I don't have any children, and I can only imagine what you are going through right now, as a father. But if anything happens to Elbé, then that is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life."

Just then, the sun disappeared behind a cloud, and rain started to pelt the bridge-windows once more. Everyone turned to look out to sea towards *The Flying Dutchman*. Adamastor was gone, but the brig was still there. She'd turned about and was sailing towards the *Mendi* with all her sails set.

"Captain," said Abrahams, "we have to get my daughter off that ship! Please, I'm begging you!"

Kgotse stared at his coxswain for a moment before nodding. “Very well,” he said. “Make for *The Dutchman* with all available speed.”

Abrahams got behind the wheel while the captain picked up a radio and began checking in with the various departments aboard to see if they’d suffered any damage during the Adamastor incident. The reports soon came in, but there were no major issues.

“Um, Captain,” said a younger sailor standing at the radar console. “I think you should see this.”

Kgotse took two strides and was standing at his side. The sailor said, “I’ve never seen anything like it, sir. If I didn’t know any better, I would say that it was a... a...”

“It’s a whirlpool,” the captain confirmed. “Two of them. Wonders never cease.” He looked at Abrahams. “Cox’n, reduce speed.”

Martin did not comply, nor did he say anything. He simply stared ahead with his features set in a grim expression. His knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel.

Kgotse moved to stand beside Abrahams and told him in a calm tone, “Warrant, I understand you’re upset and angry, but take a look out the window. There is a massive whirlpool between us and *The Flying Dutchman*. We cannot reach her now, and if you don’t slow this ship down, we’re going to end up in that maelstrom, too. Think about the hundred other people aboard this frigate, and their families. Think about your wife.”

Martin’s bottom lip trembled for a moment as the captain’s words reached him, and then his arms started to shake and he let go of the wheel. Kgotse stepped in and took over. The *Mendi* began to slow in the water.

Jones walked up to the bridge window and stared out at the sea. Sure enough, he could see a vast circle of wave-crests breaking a few miles ahead of the frigate. Add it to the list of legendary phenomena he’d encountered over the past twenty-four hours. He could also see *The Dutchman* trapped on the other side of the whirlpool. Then the brig turned to face east, and Jones saw what van der Decken was doing.

“They’re going to try and ride it out!” Jones told everyone on the bridge.

Kgotse and Abrahams both looked hopeful as they followed Jones’ gaze. But then the young sailor at the radar console said, “It looks like the diameters of both whirlpools have expanded. They’ve converged, and *The Dutchman* is caught in the middle of it.”

Jones looked more closely at the water around the hull of the brigantine and he saw that the radar operator was right. Then the sailing ship started to spin like a top, and Jones felt all hope leave him. He watched helplessly, along with the other crew on the bridge, as the three masts of *The Flying Dutchman* disappeared below the waves.

The sailor at the radar examined his console and announced, “She’s gone.”

The foul weather abated within minutes, as if God Himself had flicked a switch.

There was complete silence for some time; it was broken at last by the sound of Martin Abrahams sobbing.

Before returning to Simon’s Town, Captain Kgotse sailed the *Mendi* through the waters in which *The Dutchman* had been lost. He ordered all available crew to stand on the main deck and help search for survivors in the water, especially Elbé. None were found. There was no trace that a ship had even sunk there, no flotsam or jetsam.

Kgotse had not expected to find any wreckage of a ghost ship, although Jones reasoned that if Elbé had succeeded in breaking the curse, then the vessel may have returned to its corporeal state. After remaining at the site of the sinking for a little over an hour, the captain noted the GPS co-ordinates of their position and then decided to return to port. Warrant Abrahams was unable to perform his duties for the remainder of the voyage and was relieved from his post on compassionate grounds.

The sun had set and it was almost dark when the *Mendi* docked in Simon’s Town harbour. By that time, Admiral Ledwaba seemed to have regained her old composure. Before anyone was allowed off the ship, she spoke to the senior crew on the bridge and addressed the rest of the sailors aboard using the ship’s PA system.

“Whether you believe the ship we saw sink today was a ghost ship or not, doesn’t matter,” she began. “Based on all the evidence available to me this morning, I deduced that the Dutch ship and its crew posed a threat to our Navy and to the citizens of Simon’s Town. I had no choice but to pursue the vessel, and in a way, I was right to do so.

“What we cannot deny is that today we were all almost drowned by a monster that Commander Jones calls Adamastor. However, I think we can agree that telling anyone about what we saw would not be in the public’s interest, or in our own. Anyone who claims to have seen a massive storm-god that attempted to capsize a frigate would be

immediately subjected to psychological scrutiny, and not be permitted to hold any job involving responsibilities such as ours.

“What I propose, therefore, is an official story which goes something like this: there was never a ghost ship in Simon’s Town. The ship was an antique vessel crewed by historians which, after a week-long stay in Simon’s Town for repairs, was escorted by the SAS *Mendi* out of South African territorial waters.”

“What about my Elbé?” asked Martin in a broken voice. He was sitting slumped in the captain’s chair, massaging his head with his right hand.

Jones hung his head and stared at his shoes.

“Tomorrow, we will send divers to the site of the sinking to search for her body, or for any evidence of *The Flying Dutchman*. We can also hope that she might wash up somewhere along the coastline by morning, however the chances of that happening are slim. The South African Weather Service will, no doubt, call the adverse weather of this afternoon ‘a freak storm’, and if it comes to it, we can always say that she was swept out to sea while swimming.”

Elbé’s father covered his face with both his hands and started to cry again.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Warrant,” said the admiral, who remained where she was standing. “Really, I am. As distasteful as this sounds, there is absolutely nothing to be gained by telling the public the truth here. However, there is a lot to lose.”

Jones cleared his throat. “What about Padre Brouwer? Won’t he talk?”

“Not if he wants to keep his job and his sanity,” said Ledwaba. “I will approach him first thing in the morning and request that he publicly recant his story about being visited by a ghost. If we stick to our story and there is no one else to give credence to his words, I don’t see how he can persist in speaking out. He’s not even supposed to believe in this supernatural stuff. He will be reprimanded enough by his own church superiors as it is.

“So,” she concluded, “are we all agreed on this course of action?”

The sailors on the bridge were silent. Many of them looked to Captain Kgotse for guidance. He scratched his chin and stared at the deck. At last, he sighed, looked at the admiral and nodded.

“Yes,” Kgotse said in a hoarse voice. “We will say what you want, Admiral. Just as long as you know, we’re not doing it because it makes us feel any better, or because we think it’s the right thing to do. It’s clearly not. We’re doing it because... well, the world is just not ready to believe our story.”

After the crew were dismissed, Jones left the ship without a word to anyone. He could not stand to be around Martin Abrahams any longer. He found his motorcycle on the wharf, mounted it and raced off home, hoping that the ride would help him clear his head.

It didn’t.

Epilogue:
The Stories We Tell...

Jones went to work the following day, but it was a complete blur and he found it difficult to focus on anything. On the way home, he stopped at a café opposite Jubilee Square and picked up the afternoon edition of the *Cape Argus*. On page three, he found an article featuring the admiral's version of events concerning the departure of the Dutch ship.

There was also an apology from Padre Brouwer concerning the outrageous claims he'd made on a radio interview the previous day. He explained that his ghostly visitor had, in fact, come to him in a dream; however, it had felt so real that he'd been unable to distinguish fantasy from reality.

That evening, Jones called a contact at the naval diving centre to enquire after their search for Elbé's body or any evidence of a shipwreck. They had found nothing, but assured him that they were returning to the site the next day for one last look. His contact promised to call him if anything turned up. The call never came.

Two days after Jones had seen *The Flying Dutchman* sink beneath the waves, the media carried the story of the disappearance and presumed drowning of nineteen-year-old Elbé Abrahams. The article described how she'd been swimming off Miller's Point on the afternoon of 11/12/2012 when a freak storm had suddenly blown in to False Bay out of the south. The line that hit Jones hardest concerned her plans for the future, now lost forever: "A matriculant of Simon's Town High School in 2011, she'd been accepted to study psychology at the University of Cape Town in 2013." The article ended with the footnote that a memorial service was to be held for her that weekend.

Before Jones could contemplate whether he should go or not, he received a call from the admiral.

"Commander," she said, "Warrant Abrahams has requested that I strongly discourage you from attending his daughter's memorial. Whatever your opinion may be on the matter, I think it would be wise to stay away."

Jones ended the call without saying a word. After thinking about it for a while, he had to admit that Ledwaba was right. There would come a day when Jones would have to ask forgiveness of Martin Abrahams, but now was not the right time.

The week before Christmas, Jones was summoned to the admiral's office. When he got there, he found Captain Kgotse sitting in the foyer. They had not seen each other since the day of the storm. Jones saluted him before taking a seat beside him. A minute later, Ledwaba opened her door and invited them inside. Once they were in her office, she had them both stand at attention while she picked up two small boxes from her desk and presented them to the two officers.

"You have both been awarded *Nkwe ya Gauta*, the Golden Leopard, for your actions last Tuesday," she said. "For acts of valour and devotion to duty in the face of an enemy, for putting your own lives at risk in order to prevent the loss of others, and for perseverance under extremely difficult circumstances. Congratulations to you both."

"What, no parade?" Jones said flippantly.

"No, Commander," Ledwaba replied. "Unfortunately, this is the only ceremony you will get. The medals are yours. However, as we agreed, the circumstances under which you earned them can never be recorded anywhere or made known to anyone."

"Did you give yourself one as well, Admiral?" asked Kgotse.

Ledwaba looked hurt. "These medals are not trivial things, Captain, to be handed out willy-nilly. You can only receive one by being nominated by a superior. I nominated you two gentlemen. One cannot nominate oneself."

Jones and Kgotse left the admiral's office with slightly more respect for her. It was twelve-thirty, the beginning of the Navy's lunch hour, so they decided to have some coffee and a bite to eat at a café in the main road.

While they waited for their food, Jones opened his medal case and examined what was inside. The medal was a golden convex cross with five arms. In the centre was a light blue roundel with a leopard's head overlaid in gold. The ribbon attached to it was sky-blue with gold edging and it came with an anchor emblem.

"I know I said that you deserved a medal for what you did," Kgotse said, looking at him. "But now I feel like we are simply being bribed to keep a secret."

Jones grimaced and closed the case. For a long while he said nothing. Then he asked Kgotse, "Did you go to Elbé's memorial?"

“Yes, I was there,” the captain replied. “It was a nice enough service, although it felt a little, what’s the word, *stiff*? Because no one could talk about what really happened to her, you know?”

Jones nodded. Kgotse had the tact not to ask Jones why he hadn’t attended.

Their food arrived and they started eating. About halfway through, the captain said, “You’re not married, are you, Commander?”

Jones’ mouth was full. He shook his head.

“Seeing anyone?” Kgotse asked.

“No.” Jones swallowed and gave the captain a strange look. “Why?”

“I was just wondering if you’d talked to anyone, you know, about the storm? You can’t go through an experience like that and act like everything’s fine. Especially for you, you know, with the added complication of Elbé? If you keep it all in, that stuff will eat you up and mess with your mind.”

Jones looked out the window at the traffic moving up and down the main road. “I don’t have anyone to talk to,” he said.

“There’s always the psychologist at Sick Bay,” said Kgotse. “Major Rutter, I think her name is? I’ve sent one or two of my sailors to her before. She’s very good.”

Jones put his knife and fork in the centre of his plate and pushed it away from him, half his meal untouched. “What would I tell her? We’re not supposed to talk about what happened that day to anyone who wasn’t there.”

Kgotse took a sip of his coffee. “Sometimes, there is a way to talk about things without actually being specific. You omit certain facts, or you change the story around a bit. A few nights ago, I told my wife about the storm. Not about Adamastor or *The Flying Dutchman*, of course, but I told her about the whirlpools, which was easier for her to believe. I immediately felt better, just knowing that there was someone else close to me who knew what I’d been through. It was comforting.”

Jones nodded. They paid the bill and left the café. Standing on the pavement outside, Kgotse asked the commander, “You taking any leave soon?”

“Yes,” said Jones. “I’m off from this Friday until the middle of January.”

“See how you feel by then,” Kgotse said. “If there’s no change, promise me you’ll go see Major Rutter?”

“I’ll think about it,” said Jones.

Jones did not enjoy his time away from work. He had been planning to take a bike trip up to Saldanha Bay, but he turned back at Malmesbury and returned home. He could not get the thought of Elbé out of his head. Every time he was on his bike, he imagined he could feel her sitting behind him, with her arms around his waist. In fact, the feeling hit him so strongly while he was passing Century City that he almost careered off the highway.

Although they had only known each other for a short amount of time, they had met under intense circumstances, which only served to heighten his memories of her.

Jones did not leave his house for the remainder of his time off, except to buy food. He spent most of his days on the couch in front of his television, watching whatever sport was on: cricket, tennis, even golf. When he tired of sport, he switched to the movie channels. Images of soldiers and policemen shooting people flashed across the screen and he put the TV off. He’d enjoyed such *skop, skiet en donner* films in the past, but now it bothered him just how much killing went on in them. And hardly a fuss was made about the deaths; the hero never had to deal with guilt. It just wasn’t realistic!

It also worried him that he had no desire to go outside, as he was normally a person who preferred being outdoors. He even used to go camping from time to time. He usually treated his house to a “spring clean” during his December leave every year, but this time around, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He felt listless; on his dinner table was a stack of papers that he could’ve sorted through and filed away, but he didn’t.

In the evenings, Jones would yawn and struggle to keep his eyes open. However, once he was lying in bed, ready to sleep, sleep eluded him. He would spend hours staring at the ceiling, a million thoughts running through his head, none of them good.

On one particular day, he started writing a letter to Martin Abrahams. He had no intention of posting it, but he hoped that getting all that had happened down on paper, and his feelings about it, would make him feel better. Two hours later, ten unfinished drafts of the letter lay in the waste basket next to his table, and he felt the same.

During the last week of his leave, Captain Kgotse’s advice echoed in Jones’ mind, and he made an appointment to see the military psychologist in Simon’s Town. She was

not what Jones had expected. Major Charlotte Rutter was in her late-thirties, petite with red hair in a pixie cut, and a sharp but friendly face.

Jones knew that the point of seeing a psychologist was so that he could discuss Elbé. However, he had to do it in a way that would not arouse any suspicion and reveal too much of the truth. Jones decided that the story he would tell Major Rutter was this: that in October last year, he had been driving his motorcycle down Simon's Town main road, when suddenly a girl in her late teens had stepped off the pavement and run across the road. He couldn't stop in time, and he hit her. She died en route to the hospital.

He told the major that although he had been cleared of any wrong-doing by the authorities, he still felt responsible for the girl's death, and that she haunted his every waking moment. He couldn't stop thinking about the life this girl might've had, the career she may have embarked on, the children she may have had.

"I sympathize with your situation, Commander," Major Rutter replied. "I really do. I also have a motorcycle, and have often wondered how I'd feel if I were to cause an accident. However, from what you've told me, it sounds like that's all this was. It was an *accident*. No one's to blame, no matter how guilty you may feel."

She spoke in such an even, measured way that it was difficult to disagree.

"But, it could've been avoided," Jones continued. "If I'd been driving slower, I would've seen her earlier, and I could've swerved or stopped in time."

"*If* is one the most dangerous words in the English language, Commander," she told him. "You must remember that there was a choice on the girl's part as well. She *chose* to cross the road at that particular moment. She *chose* not to check for traffic before she put herself in harm's way. She must've really wanted to get across the road, and that choice had nothing to do with you. Are you religious?"

"Not for a long time," Jones said. He hung his head and looked at the carpet.

"This was not fate or destiny," Major Rutter concluded. "There was no grand plan by an omnipotent God to make you hit that girl with your bike. There was just your choice, and her choice, and you happened to collide. I hope I've given you a different perspective on things."

Jones looked up and he smiled at her just a little. "Yes, thank you. You have."

She gave him some homework and they set a date for a follow-up appointment. As Jones left her office, he remembered thinking: *Kgotse was right. It's good to talk.*

Paul Jones only needed two follow-up sessions with Charlotte Rutter. When he stopped seeing her as her patient, he started seeing her socially. During their talks, they had discovered that they had a lot in common, such as their passion for motorcycling, Indie Rock and camping. A little over a year later, they were engaged.

Paul was as surprised as everyone else at this unlikely turn of events. He had been unlucky in love for most of his life, and was resigned to being an eternal bachelor.

Charlotte told him that she'd been married in her twenties, but that it had ended badly. Ever since, she had shied away from men, never letting them get too close. But, Paul had come to her through her work, where there was no pressure or expectation of romance. She had seen him at his most vulnerable, when he had opened up to her about an issue that had weighed on his mind and soul, and she had helped him through it.

Of course, Paul felt bad that he had lied to her, but he had fallen in love with her, and he was afraid that the truth would scare her away, or make her doubt his honesty. Besides, what he had told her in their first session was not a complete lie: his actions had led to the death of a young woman; it was only the circumstances that differed. One day, Paul thought, he might tell Charlotte the whole story: about van der Decken, about Elbé, about Adamastor. Or he might not.

Two years into the marriage, they began to talk about the possibility of having a child together. Charlotte had just turned forty, so time was running out. They decided to start trying, and, six months later, Charlotte was pregnant.

When the ultrasound told them that it would be a boy, the name-debate began. Charlotte liked *Shaun* after Shaun Pollock, a famous South African cricketer she'd had a crush on. The only name Paul could offer was *Heinrich*. When Charlotte asked him why, all he could say was, "It was the name of an old sailor I met once."

Charlotte raised an eyebrow and said, "*Shaun* it is then!"

Shaun Heinrich Jones turned eleven years old on 11 December, 2027. Paul wanted to do something special for his son's crown birthday, so he decided to take him camping at

Rocklands, a camp site just south of Simon's Town. It was where Jones had suggested van der Decken take Elbé when the Dutch captain had planned his romantic picnic. It was also not too far from their house, in case Shaun complained too much and wanted to go home. Charlotte had almost joined them, but in the end she thought Paul and Shaun needed some father-son time together.

Paul and Charlotte had tried to instil their love of the outdoors in their son, but he had grown up in a world where technology was viewed as the most important thing.

"Sucks that you made me leave my phone at home," Shaun said. He had curly blond hair, green eyes and a hint of freckles on his nose and cheeks. "I mean, there's no TV here, and you made me leave my tab at home. What are we supposed to do?"

The sun had just dipped behind the mountainside that loomed over them. "What people did before all that stuff was invented," Paul replied.

"What was that?"

Paul looked around them and lifted his arms up. "They enjoyed nature! Oh, and I guess they told each other stories."

Shaun picked at the grass-stalks where he was sitting. "Well, do you know any? Stories?"

"I suppose I do know one," Paul said, and then he hesitated. How long had it been now? Fifteen years ... to the day, in fact. Was it okay to talk about it now? Would his son think him crazy? Then he told Shaun the story of *The Flying Dutchman*, leaving out his own part in it.

He started in 1679, with what he knew about Captain van der Decken's fateful final voyage as a mortal. Then he skipped ahead, to December 2012, when *The Flying Dutchman* magically appeared in False Bay, and her crew had no idea what had happened to them. Paul told his son how the Dutch captain had met a beautiful waitress who looked exactly like a woman from his past, how he fell in love with her, and how she slowly helped him to regain his memories.

He explained that Adamastor was actually responsible for the curse laid upon the ship, and that the Dutch captain made a bargain with the storm-god in order to get the curse lifted. However, it turned out that Adamastor never meant to honour his promise.

When Paul got to the end of the story, he had to guess what had transpired on the deck of *The Flying Dutchman* during the storm. He truly believed that Elbé had broken the curse by kissing the captain, and that Adamastor, in a rage of jealousy and bitterness, had created the twin whirlpools that had swallowed up the ship and all aboard her.

Shaun had remained quiet throughout his father's tale, but he seemed to have taken it all in. When Paul finished talking, his son said, "It's a pretty cool story. But I don't like the ending. It's sad that they didn't survive and get to live in our world, even for a little while."

Jones cleared his throat. Thoughts of van der Decken and Elbé had brought up a lot of old emotions. "Yes," he said. "I suppose it is sad."

The twilight was deep by then, but the moon was rising over the bay. Paul sat on a log, surrounded by a carpet of leaves, as a gentle breeze rustled through the branches above his head. They could also hear the sound of a stream running somewhere nearby.

He stared off, past his son and noticed movement among the tree trunks across the glade. Then he saw them, two figures walking hand-in-hand up the hill. Even in the dim evening light, he could see every detail of them so clearly, as if they were glowing.

A tall, strong man with red hair and a red beard, strolling beside a beautiful dark-haired woman; he was wearing clean clothes, and she had on a dress. For a moment, they both turned to look in the direction of Paul Jones, and it seemed to him that their gazes met with his.

Then the red-headed man nodded at Jones, lowering his shoulders as he did so; a formal mannerism that was unmistakably van der Decken's. The young woman cocked her head to one side and smiled a wide smile, her lips red against her caramel skin.

Paul smiled in return, and as he looked at their happy faces, he felt a great weight lift from him and float away over the trees, into the night sky.

The couple turned to face their front, and continued to walk among the trees. Paul Jones watched them for as long as he could. At last, they faded into the shadows and were gone.

Paul never saw them again, but to the end of his days he believed that they were somewhere in the world, or beyond it, sailing *The Flying Dutchman* to new and exciting places, meeting new people and having adventures.