

MOREVI

The Chronicles of Rafe and Askana

A Magical, Sensual, Swashbuckling Adventure
— Christine Morgan, *Sabledrake Magazine*



Lisa Lee & Tee Morris

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The Chronicles of Rafe & Askana

by
Lisa Lee & Tee Morris

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“Where there is a sea, there are pirates.”

Greek Proverb

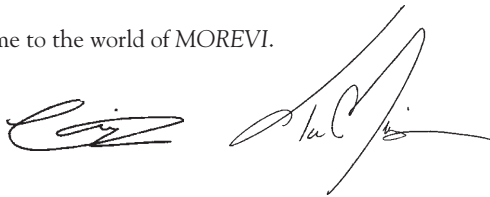
Table of Contents

A Leap of Faith	i
Meeting of the Minds	1

Welcome to an introduction to *MOREVI: The Chronicles of Rafe & Askana*, the historical-fantasy epic written by Lisa Lee and Tee Morris. Amidst the grandeur of King Henry's court and the mystery of this parallel realm, *MOREVI* is set in a time when a kingdom hangs in the balance, and a queen's most trusted ally is a pirate from a far-off land called England.

We invite you to join us online at www.morevi.com for the latest news and appearances related to *MOREVI*. You will also find free downloads, links of history and fantasy, and the story behind this story. Order your copy of *MOREVI*, now available from Dragon Moon Press at www.dragoonmoonpress.com, and from Barnes and Noble.com and otheronline and local bookstores.

Welcome to the world of *MOREVI*.

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Lisa Lee, and the signature on the right is for Tee Morris. Both signatures are stylized and cursive.

P R O L O G U E
A Leap of Faith

The Captain could hear the roar of powder kegs in his ears, but he could not move from where he fell. He wondered how long he had been there. He tried to remember if it was the sudden lurch the vessel took that sent him to the deck. He was having a problem recalling anything. His mind was jumbled, lacking focus. He lost track of time. The deck shuddered underneath him. *That was a well-placed volley*, he thought as he worked harder to catch a breath. It was taking the same effort to hoist a sail, to breathe. *My ship*, he repeated silently, *my beautiful ship. Please forgive me, my King. I have failed you.* The Captain closed his eyes. It was just too much of an effort to keep them open. Suddenly he found his awareness peak. It was an apex of all sensations at once. It did not overwhelm him. It did not hurt him. There was a strange comforting feeling in this place of sound, and slowly the thunder of cannons grew farther off.

Farther off than they were in truth.

"The Captain is dead!" cried one of the privateers over the fire raging below decks, "The Captain is dead!"

"The First Mate is down as well!" another sailor bellowed as he passed a full water bucket to another.

"Mind the fire!" shouted a third from the top deck, "If them powder kegs catch fire, we will have done the Spanish a good service! Keep them buckets comin'!"

It was in 1492 when "The New World" was discovered. From this land of legends, legends that included cities of pure gold, mountains of gemstones, and exotic delicacies not found even in the travels of Marco Polo, explorers of the land mass called Europe launched brave and bold expeditions to bring back treasures for royalty. Some of these men sailed around the world. Some never returned. Still, Man was embracing the arts and sciences with a new-found passion, instilling fear in the religious leaders of this world. It was an age of enlightenment, a new dawn of humanity that was being dubbed as "The Renaissance."

Part of The Renaissance was an ingenious new tactic of reaping the New World's treasures without hazarding costly voyages across the Atlantic. Rival nations called it "common piracy" but the King of one particular realm called it by a different, more civilised trade—*privateering*.

King Henry the VIII of England looked upon the open seas as just that—open. Open to all nations. Open to opportunity. As privateers, these "common pirates" were agents loyal to and pardoned by King Henry. They possessed Letters of Mark that specified what ships they were allowed to engage and which were free to navigate the oceans of the Atlantic. The latter were usually King Henry's own. This "gentleman's piracy" came with a price. If privateers were captured, there would be no rescue, no ransom, or no return voyage home. The "Letters of Mark" were worth less than the rope used to hang privateers for crimes of piracy.

This is why the Captain filled a good portion of his hold with powder kegs and cannon balls. He always wanted to assure escape if under fire. Now the English faced the added challenge that their advantage did not turn against them and blow the *King's Calling* out from under their feet.

Sanders watched the men heed his earlier advice and now they tamed the fire for the time being. The Spanish warships were still closing. In his eyes, there was little to be gained from this voyage. "We should abandon ship! We've lost the Captain! The First Officer is dead!"

"No, we will not leave the ship, Mister Sanders!" a deep voice sounded over the chaos of the deck. It was distinguishable for two reasons. It carried with it a bass deep as a thunder clap. It also carried a sharp-edged accent, thick and not of the usual dialects found in England. "The Captain would have wanted us to stand and fight! It would also grant the wishes of Allah to send these Spaniards to a fiery death for firing on His children!"

He was a Moor. He towered over most of the Englishmen within the ship's complement, but his size coupled with his powerful voice did nothing to elevate his standing. The Moor's ebony skin and his beliefs made his status as "outcast" and "heathen" amongst the crew apparent.

"I think, Moor, your brain's been cooked after too much time a' sea!" snapped Liam Sanders.

Sanders stood eye-to-eye with him, his own height equal to the Moor's. The man was far from any lofty position of leadership on the *King's Calling*, but his stature, sunken eyes, and gaunt-like features gave him an intimidating look apart from the other Englishmen. Many times he was asked to "speak for the crew" although the Moor hardly felt this man spoke his mind. He could never share his opinions with the others, but he suspected the man to be nothing less than a coward. For a "heathen," his instincts were quite accurate.

The main sail turned sharply, its massive form suddenly billowing to its full shape as the wind trapped itself within the weave of the fabric. The crew siding with Sanders watched in amazement as the second sail shifted to catch the same breeze. They could feel the ship's hull shift forward as their course changed abruptly.

"Again, lads, heave!" a voice rang out over the thunder of cannons and volley of fire that slammed against their starboard side. "I did promise my sister, Serena, I would be present for dinner two days from now. I will be damned if I keep her waiting!"

The small band of privateers tugged against an array of thick, heavy ropes while another secured the cables to hold fast the sails. The self-appointed leader then assumed the Captain's Podium of the *King's Calling*, wiping away the blood from the maps with the cuff of his shirt. He muttered co-ordinates to himself as he made light charcoal marks against the charts. His actions were hurried as another volley of cannon fire came from the pursuing ships. A smile crossed his face as he could hear the cannonballs splash into the water, showering the deck harmlessly with water and foam.

"And jus' what do you think you're doin', Snotty?"

Sanders hated being challenged on what he considered was *his* ship. This young whelp seemed to relish in doing just that. "Snotty" was the nickname Sanders dubbed him as he carried himself a little better than the rest of the crew. Snotty's first month on board bought him a few floggings from Sanders that left his face and parts of his body black-and-blue. Still, the boy stood up to him. He became untouchable when he was promoted to the position of Ship's Navigator. Now that the Captain and First Mate were dead, nothing could keep Sanders from openly challenging him, as well as calling him "Snotty."

"Ensuring our return home to England, or are you so blinded by fear you did not notice that?" The navigator shoved him against the deck and drew a modest foil from his side, the tip resting against Sanders' neck. "We have no captain. No boatswain. I, for one, do not wish to live out the prime of my life in a Spanish prison, provided we are not executed for piracy! Now stand down and let me plot this course!"

"They have matched our course and draw close!" the Moor shouted as he saw the Spanish ships catch their breeze.

"We have a course plotted." The navigator stomped hard on the planks underneath his feet and shouted down to the whip staff's crewmen sharp commands that eventually led to the ship's rudder. Once more the *King's Calling* shifted as the navigator sheathed his sword. "Now let us hope the Spanish are not as mad as we are!"

Sanders followed the light marks against the navigation chart, his eyes widening upon their destination, "You have plotted a course for the Graveyard of Lost Ships!" The lumbering man grabbed the navigator by the cuff of his doublet and tossed him aside. "You there!" his voice boomed, freezing two young sailors in their tracks. "Fetch us a white banner! We're surren—"

The chill of the iron barrel pressing against the back of his neck cut his orders short. Sanders turned slowly to find the giant Moor aiming the ornate rifle at his head. The Moor's training in the weapon was merely a formality. He was never permitted to handle it in combat. A lack of trust that neither the Captain nor First Mate would acknowledge openly. He would have never thought his first chance would be used in an act of mutiny. Or was it mutiny? They had no one in command.

Only this navigator, still very green in his time spent upon this vessel, seemed to have a direction they all needed. It would be a direction that would get them home.

"Master Navigator has a plan I think would work better than facing a death sentence in Spain!"

"You savage!" Sanders snapped, "Lower that rifle before I whip you soundly."

"I crave a pardon, Mister Sanders, but I am on the better end of this rifle."

Over the sounds of deck fires and Spanish cannons, the successive "click-click" of the rifle's hammer pulling back to a firing position sounded clear in their ears.

"You wouldn't dare, Moor," he spat.

"I have made my peace with Allah." The Moor slipped his finger around the trigger, "Have you?"

The collection of privateers, their faces bloody or blackened by the smoke of battle, had gathered on either side of the gangway at the sight of Sanders held at gunpoint by the ship's outcast and young navigator. The mighty sea breeze that pushed them across the waters widened small tears in the sails but still they managed to keep a lead from the closing ships. A few ears caught what words were exchanged at the Captain's Podium, and these words were quickly passed from crewmember to crewmember. They were tired, they were afraid, and they waited for an order. Now only the wind catching the torn sails sounded in their ears.

"Our navigator means to take us to the Graveyard of Lost Ships!" Sanders announced, "This is madness, to be certain, for the Moor sides with 'im! If we surrender with no fight, we might find mercy in the hands of the Spanish!"

"I doubt that!" the navigator snapped. "Do you forget what we do for King and country?"

The enemy ships were closing. Fast. It was clear they did not intend to take them back to Spain to face a trial. It was the Laws of the Sea they would answer to with three Spanish captains serving as judge, jury, and executioner.

There was a hint of uncertainty as the navigator walked onto the gangway, his eyes looking at the crew and then at the closing ships. Then, in a moment, the fear and doubt were gone. In their wake, resolve and determination.

"Lads, we have not known one another long enough to build a trust, but the Captain trusted my talents in navigation. I know where we head may unleash more dangers upon us. Rest assured. You have the word of your navigator, Rafe Rafton, that I shall get you all home." His blood coursed through his veins. The excitement in his tone gave his words an edge that made them appear hasty and erratic. "If we dare the Graveyard, the Spaniards will break off from pursuit. This is a leap of faith I ask of you all. If you grant me this boon, I promise you all a round of good English ale at the Anchor. Come along, lads, what say you?"

They could not hide their apprehension. What did this lad know of strategy upon the ocean? He did not even have a proper beard upon his young, fresh face. Still, without a captain, it was this bravado upstart that rallied a handful of the crew to fix the sails. Now they sailed into an area of the North Atlantic Ocean that no one would dare to chart. It was off Ireland's Emerald Coast, where arctic winds would send ships into a patch of sea that opened up and swallowed them whole, so the legends told. Any ship seen heading in The Graveyard was never seen again. Be it rocks, fog, or sea monsters, no one would ever know for certain what claimed them.

The privateers looked to one another with knowing grins. No better time to find out what secrets were in the Graveyard than now.

The Moor lowered the rifle and smiled, "Guess we are following you, Master Rafton."

The *King's Calling* had taken a pounding from the Spaniards but she still managed to float. Yet their speed was decreasing as the sail's numerous tears were widening from the wind's force. The crewmen made ready weapons in case of another attack, but once more the powder made their situation dire. In fighting the fire, many of the kegs were now wet, rendering the powder unreliable. They had to keep their distance and hope to lose the Spanish in this daring, dangerous escape ploy of Rafe's.

"Master Rafton, we draw near the Graveyard." The Moor said, keeping the rifle close. His Persian accent sounded harder now, cut and sharp in its enunciation. "There is a smell in the air not like the sea."

Rafe nodded, his eyes peering forward, "I would agree...forgive me, man, but your name?"

The Moor gave Rafe a friendly smile and said proudly, "I am Nassir A'Lass Jallahammad, Master Rafton."

"Nassir." Rafe smiled back, "Good to have an ally in someone as *large* as you. Do me this service, and watch my back. I cannot tell if this crew—Sanders, in particular—would trust me in what lies ahead."

"You see trouble in the Graveyard?"

"If I am fortunate, no. If I am wrong," Rafe looked back at the closing Spanish ships, "at least I enjoyed a taste of leadership before passing into the next world."

"Snotty!" Sanders barked as he peered at the compass, "Look a' this."

North. Southwest. Northeast. The dial bobbed and spun wildly. Sanders glared at Rafe as the compass became less and less reliable, finally giving no bearing whatsoever. They were now in the Graveyard of Lost Ships.

Rafe snatched up a telescope and stood at the aftercastle, focusing on their pursuers. "Good." Rafe smiled, speaking to Sanders over his shoulder, "It seems our Spanish friends are also having problems with their compass."

The billowed sails of the lead Spanish vessel collapsed into a wrinkled mass of cloth, its sisters doing the same. Rafe's smile broadened as the ships abandoned their pursuit, the space between them widening with each passing moment.

"Looks like I will be making good on my word in buying everyone a round, eh, Mister Sanders?" Rafe's answer was nothing more than the sound of rushing water within his ears, perhaps coming from their speed as the wind remained strong. "Mister Sanders?"

Rafe turned to see what kept Nassir's and Sanders' attentions. The boundary rose high above the *King's Calling* and continued to grow in diameter as they approached it. A circular barrier of water and light. Solid, yet not an obstacle such as coral reef or crags. They could see jagged rocks shimmering behind it, but they knew whatever towered before them was no illusion. Despite the calm oceans surrounding it, a strong current rushed towards this wall of liquid brilliance only to disappear inside a canvas of ripples. *No*, Rafe thought, *not a wall. A portal. A gateway. And perhaps, a means of escape.*

He did not know where the voice originated from inside him, but it reached the crew to their basic instinct upon the sea. "Secure the ship and hold on to something!" Rafe shouted.

"Now I know you are mad, Rafton!" Sanders grabbed the rifle from Nassir's loose grasp and held them both at bay. The fuse was still lit and the hammer pulled back. He screamed over the growing thunder of water and air now surrounding the ship, "I am assuming command of this ship!"

"And where shall we go, Sanders?" Rafe stepped forward, his chest pressing against the barrel of the gun, "Go on and pull the trigger. Perhaps the crew shall back you in your order to surrender to the Spanish."

An invitation. Lovely. "Suit yourself, Snotty!" he said with a dry, hard smile as he pulled the trigger.

Rafe's own smile widened as he followed Sanders' eyes to the pan. The wind from the portal had blown it clean of powder. Nothing remained to ignite the chamber. Sanders lurched forward suddenly. He fought to stand but then realised he could not as he was being lifted off the deck. A stinging sensation removed itself from his back, returning his feet to the wooden planks. He turned to see Nassir behind him, the dagger in his grasp now decorated with his blood. He fell to his knees before the Moor, his laugh a grotesque gurgle before falling face down on the deck.

Was this to be an option for them? Turning on one another? Taking their own lives? It was either death by their own blades or the Spanish rope, or challenging this rift reaching from the depths of the Atlantic before them.

No, Rafe thought as he looked to the crew, *today is not their day to die.*

"I said secure the ship and hold fast to something!" he called again. "Steady the whip staff! I would rather chance what resides here than face the Spanish magistrates!"

The bowsprit of the *King's Calling* was an impressive carving of Poseidon that bore a striking resemblance to King Henry. It was majestically pointing forward into the unknown horizon and was first to pierce the doorway of water and light. Ripples extended outward, a site hypnotic and mysterious, from the point of entry as they continued to slip forward. Some of the crew ran for the lower decks while others held tight to masts and secured fixtures of the ship, their curiosity overriding their fears. Rafe could hear the twisted hemp stretch as the sails billowed full, the tears now gaping holes. Still they moved forward, faster than they ever sailed before across the open waters.

Hold fast, Rafe thought as the ship continued to disappear in the void, *hold your course until we reach the other side*.

His skin tingled lightly as he felt himself pass through the portal. The roar of air and water surrendered to an abrupt silence. It was not marred by any other outside noise or echoes, not even the natural sounds of wood creaking or sails catching an Atlantic breeze entered his ears. Total, complete silence. Rafe then realised he was holding his breath, his eyes lost in a brilliance that did not hurt to look straight into as sunlight would. The white light surrounding him grew in its intensity, washing over everything around him. Perhaps this was a final destination for him and his frightened crew. Could this rift be a gateway to Heaven itself?

He remembered uttering the place by name, shattering the silence. "Heaven," he said with a smile.

Then, an abrupt darkness and Hell erupted around him.

Lightning tore through the grey and black cover above them and the ship leaned sharply. A mighty wave struck the *King's Calling* as if it were Poseidon's very hand itself, his fingers of water and foam slamming hard against the deck. Rafe heard a snap behind him and saw the bonaventure mast topple towards him. A strong hand reached out from the darkness and he felt himself in Nassir's embrace as they slid along the water-drenched top deck. The crew cried out for mercy but the storm refused their pleas as it twisted the seas underneath them.

Deep in the ship's hold, a crew of ten struggled to keep the whip staff steady. That was their order. They could not see what was happening topside. From what they heard, they did not want to know.

"Master Rafton," Nassir bellowed, "where do you think we are?"

"Wherever we are, we are on the right path! Note the sails. They are not struggling against the wind. We must stay on this course!"

Another wave swept over the deck, and Rafe could feel himself pulled from Nassir's arms and towards the dark waters below him. Then came a stinging sensation around Rafe's wrist as a dark hand wrapped around it. With a growl rivalling the storm's voice, Nassir pulled Rafe back on to the ship. He could not help but laugh. It was reassuring to know that even if his decisions in navigation were questioned, his taste in allies never would be.

They both watched the bow of their ship disappear into a darkness, a wall of shadow. Another portal. As the *King's Calling* had slipped into a shimmering brilliance it now vanished within an inky blanket and Rafe could feel the undercurrents against the rudder subside. A similar chill passed across his skin and then another brilliance surrounded him for a moment. This light had sound. Within Rafe's ears played a symphony of waves, the occasional seagull, and the comforting sounds of the ship's hull creaking lightly. The chill passed and now there was a heavy, humid warmth. Rafe and Nassir rose to their feet and looked around them, taking in a deep breath of the sweet sea air.

Behind the *King's Calling* was the portal they had passed through. Following the tide and currents, the oceans carried the ship farther and farther away from this rift. High above their heads, birds cawed to them as if offering to be their guides to land. There were no other ships in sight.

"He has done it!" Nassir trumpeted, his massive arm wrapping around the navigator's shoulders, "We have survived the Graveyard!"

The crew coming from the belly of the ship raised voices with their comrades as Nassir supported Rafe Rafton to the rail overlooking the main deck. "Hip hip huzzah!" resounded. Rafe remained pensive. He looked about their lone ship. There was no sign of the Spanish. The breeze was a touch warmer than off the Ireland coast. It would not be challenged that they lived to fight another day for King Henry Tudor, but a new challenge presented itself.

Where the hell were they?

The fear he denied before crossing the strange portal now consumed him like a fire. "Someone man the topcastle," Rafe snapped. "We need to know where the coast is."

The men silenced abruptly and one young, eager sailor leapt to the thick rope netting leading to a small outpost high above the ship's deck. He had just taken his place up in the watch when suddenly he cried out, pointing off into the horizon.

"Ship ahoy!" the watch called, "Ship to starboard!"

Through the telescope, the details of the ship told Rafe they were no longer in the North Sea. The modest vessel resembled "junk" trade ships from China. The sails were a series of rectangles linked together, far less attractive or intimidating than one of King Henry's warships. This ship had a more interesting enhancement unlike its sister ships of the Far East – rowers. Arms of wood extended from the sides of the ship, giving a hint of assistance to the warm sea wind. It bore colours of brilliant green and white. The insignia in the centre of its banner was not of any king or country Rafe knew. He studied this ship's banner for a long moment, quietly committing himself to discover the holder of this strange crest. Any ship bearing such an impressive banner could only come from a house of nobility or influence.

"Captain, shall we fly the colours of King Henry?"

Rafe continued to watch the ship through the spyglass. The junk stayed its course, the oars still keeping a steady pace.

"Master Rafton." Even at a light whisper, the Moor's voice was powerful and ominous. Rafe turned sharply to the sound of his voice and was eye to eye with Nassir. The grin worn by this Moor, a *seasoned* privateer, was obvious. Rafe was in need of some coaching in his new position. "The men are turning to you. We go nowhere without your word."

Rafe looked about himself nervously. *I am a navigator*, he thought quickly, *not a captain*. Then he saw the crew assembled on the main deck, all eyes on him. Waiting on his word, as Nassir said. Whether he was ready for it or not, Rafe was the victim of a sudden field promotion.

Captain Rafe Rafton, the navigator thought to himself. *What will Serena think of this?*

"No, we fly the signal for distress." Rafe looked across the deck, the once fine wood and ornate carvings of the *King's Calling* now blackened with soot and chipped by explosions of the Spaniard's attack. "Not a far cry from our current state." Laughter. It was a delightful sound. "Set fires on the deck. The rest of you, prepare the cannons. If we are not welcomed to where we are properly, then we shall make our presence known by more aggressive means."

"Well done, my Captain," Nassir whispered.

"I hope you approve." Rafe smiled, a sense of relief washing over him, "It would be an ill sight if my First Officer questioned his Captain's initial order."

It took a moment for Rafe's words to register in Nassir's mind. Another promotion granted from actions in battle. The Moor straightened his posture proudly by Rafe's side, adding another foot to his height. Now with a First Officer, Rafe could begin his first command. Hopefully, it would hold long enough for him to find out where they were in the world.

Banners snapped against the strong breeze pushing them closer to the foreign ship still a good distance from them. Warm winds carried off their deck plumes of dark smoke from two small, contained fires. The semblance of distress, a tactic that had served them well in the past. It would be a common practice of ships to aid others in distress. It was maritime code. Sailor's ethics. Nautical courtesy. Yet this foreign ship was, in Rafe's brief time at sea, the most discourteous vessel he ever met on open waters.

"We are closing on them," Nassir stated, the telescope lowering slowly from his eye, "but the rowers are only quickening their pace."

Rafe's eyebrows raised slightly as he looked ahead to the other ship, "Most ill-mannered, would you not agree, Nassir?"

"Indeed, my Captain," Nassir said, shaking his head ruefully, "Allah blesses those who help others. It would seem these children of His have lost their way."

"Well as Mercury failed to be an efficient messenger, perhaps Mars will do better." Rafe motioned to Gunner Williams, "Fire a volley to get their attention."

Three cannons sounded. Only three of the eight, simply as a warning that splashed their decks harmlessly. At their closer distance, Rafe no longer needed a spyglass to see the hurried activity on the junk. By the reaction of the crew, cannon fire was not customary in their travels.

The oars halted and withdrew. The odd sails slowly lowered.

"Well, that etiquette lesson went well received," Rafe said with a grin. "Master Gunner, reload those cannons and await my word. We shall see if this crew is in earnest."

As they neared the vessel, Rafe grabbed the doublet of his dead captain. Fortunately, the bloodstains would not be visible within its finery and dark colours. While wearing the clothes of a dead man unsettled him, the doublet would give Rafe a more authoritative look aside from the rest of his crew. Regardless, the garment would make him hard to miss on deck.

"Ahoy, Captain," Rafe called. "Surrender your vessel in the name of King Henry the VIII of England." He saw only ten rowers and the Captain, none of these men with a "seafaring" look about them. They looked as he did when first joining the *King's Calling*. Green. Seasick. They also looked terrified. Not of Rafe so much as for Rafe. "Mon Capitán, parlez-vous anglais?" Still nothing. "Señor Capitán, se habla ingles?"

As Rafe attempted to recall his Latin, the archers appeared. Their movements were as swift as a fox on the hunt. Rafe managed to dive for cover as the first wave of arrows sailed through the air. Arrowheads poked through the hull of the *King's Calling*. The bows must have been of amazing tautness and quality, matched only by their archers. A few sailors were lifted off their feet, landing hard on the deck. Their bodies convulsed sharply as blood, mixed with saliva and spittle, gushed from their mouths.

"Poisoned arrows. Just lovely." Rafe sighed, shaking his head as the second volley of arrows pounded rhythmically against the side of the ship. "Williams, send them a proper English greeting!"

The line of archers disappeared with a roar of flame and smoke as cannon fire ripped away part of the junk's side. With a single gunshot from Rafe's pistol, the first boarding party threw grappling hooks into the air and heaved, bringing the two ships closer together. The air filled with howls and cries. The second boarding party's charge was answered by the shrill piercing cry of birds. Feathered creatures of metal, leather, and fabric were appearing from thin air, wrapping themselves around their attackers. Death for these privateers was swift. The first party, safely on deck of the junk, took full advantage of their entrenchment and picked the supernatural harbingers of death out of the air with rifle and pistol fire. Rafe led the third team as they swung from ship to ship, a barrage of pistol fire preceding them. A high-pitched whistle cut through the battle. Rafe called for his men to drop to the deck. Another privateer fell. This time, instead of an arrow, a large disc-shaped blade had buried itself in the man's chest.

"All right, lads," he called over the cries of battle, "Have a care! Make your aim true and your blade swift. God save King Henry!"

Rafe and several other privateers fired reserve pistols into the fray while the remaining party drew swords and charged. There were sounds of metal striking metal. Screams of agony. The shrill cries of hawks and falcons. Rafe motioned for the rest of the party to go on while he attempted to raid the Captain's Quarters. His rapier extended from his left hand while a dagger resided in the tight grip of his right. The young privateer ran into the darkness of smoke and black powder, his eyes fixed on the largest cabin above the hold.

Then it appeared. A feathered creature of metal, red leather armour, and silk, brandishing an odd weapon similar to a halberd. The blade of this staff appeared much longer and far deadlier, though. Rafe continued to knock away the blade with the dagger, his rapier useless at his distance from the assailant. He could feel himself pushed back into the battle, losing ground quickly. The soldier thrust the weapon forward, but Rafe leaned sharply to one side, his dagger and rapier catching the staff and binding it down to the deck. With a powerful axe kick of his leg, he snapped the staff in two and slipped around his feathered opponent, holding the attacker on point.

"Remove your helm, good sir," Rafe huffed. "I prefer to look you in the eye before running you through."

The helmet was off in a moment and Rafe stepped back, his sword's tip dropping slightly. She was a striking, exotic beauty. Dark eyes slightly tilted as he had seen women of far-off realms of silk, tea, and a Great Wall that spanned across a nation. *Did this rift take us to the other side of the world?* Rafe pondered as he looked upon this breathtaking maid.

The kick lifted Rafe off his feet and was followed up by a hard strike across his back from the remaining staff left in her hand. She moved in to kick him hard in the ribs, but Rafe brought his foot around in a low sweep that caught her ankles and knocked her to the ground. The savage merely lifted herself up with a light push off the ship's deck. Rafe fought to keep his balance, his back still pounding from her attack. She spun on her feet, sending him flying across the deck again with a powerful sidekick. He felt himself crash through a door and slide across wooden planks.

Rafe glanced up. He was inside the Captain's Quarters.

"How fortune smiles on me," he groaned.

His humour was short lived as the woman charged at him, a small dagger now in her hand. This time, the privateer was prepared. He quickly pivoted to her side and blocked the incoming blade with his rapier. She could not pull back fast enough as he

drove his own dagger deep into her belly. Her knife fell. Rafe did not hesitate to pull his dagger back and then slowly drag it across her delicate throat. There was a slight hint of satisfaction in knowing she would feel her death for a time. The men in his company were not dying gracefully. Why should this savage?

As he reloaded his pistol, his eyes searched wildly for anything that would hold charts. Across from a modest bed was a small chest with a lock hanging and swaying open with the motions of the ship. He quickly threw open the chest and released a sight of relief. Its contents were a sight more welcome than a ship's hold full of gold or spices from the New World. Charts. Books of letters. Maps of foreign lands. He had found what he needed, but this raid was not a success yet. They were still on board a foreign vessel, fighting an unknown foe.

As he thought of an escape, he froze. Only the creaking of the ship, the sounds of the ocean, and wind filling the sails of the *King's Calling* could be heard. Rafe pulled back the hammer of his pistol as footsteps resounded on the opposite side of the door. The hatch flew open as a shadow pointed a rifle at Rafe's primed pistol.

"Nassir!" Rafe snapped and then gave a delighted sigh to his comrade, "My God, you are a more beautiful sight than Aphrodite herself!"

"If that is so then you are in need of some shore leave, my Captain," chuckled Nassir as his own rifle lowered. "The ship is ours."

"We are most fortunate, Nassir." Rafe smiled, handing him the books. "A different kind of bounty—knowledge. We have here what appears to be several books of letters as well as a Ship's Journal. We can at least attempt to familiarise ourselves with this realm. And charts, Nassir! Blessed charts! At a glance, we have much to discover."

Nassir's face went blank suddenly, "Charts and maps are not needed for that, my Captain." Nassir motioned behind him, "You will know we are in a foreign land when you see the prisoners."

The smoke cleared to reveal some of his own crewmates covering the deck of this strange vessel. From the number of dead savages to dead English, it was merely surprise and number, not their skill or prowess, that had won them this junk. It was not his dead crew that made his eyes grow wide. It was the regiment of soldiers, all decked in armour of red leather, silk, and brilliant silver. They stared at him, committing his face to memory, silently cursing him for the death of their comrades, and promising swift retribution. Rafe looked back at the green and white banner flying high overhead. Then he returned his eyes to the soldiers. His eyes went right to left over each of them, still refusing to believe what they saw.

"Nassir," Rafe whispered, "where are all the men?"

C H A P T E R O N E

Meeting of the Minds

The morning crowd at The Barrier Reef was a good size today. Not too large, not too small. Most talked quietly about politics and new arrivals to this haven between realms, or bent over the bar closer to what mattered. No fighting today, fortunately for the bartender. Osgood had already replaced countless broken chairs and tables, and mended numerous holes in the roof *and* the walls in this past week. He was a big, beefy fellow with his remaining black hair tied back with a leather thong and a rotund waist resting incongruously over a stained, yellowed apron. The tavern master and innkeeper already faced a robust day as newly vacated rooms were in need of tidying up and the more aristocratic patrons were demanding personal attention. It was enough to keep Osgood and his three barmaids exceedingly busy.

The burly man wondered for a moment as he wiped a mug clean of dishwater if he was growing too old for this business. The daily duties, it just seemed of late, were growing beyond his control. Just as one of his customers reached a point of bliss and satisfaction, two others would find something wrong with their rooms or their afternoon tea cakes. Perhaps it was time to sell The Barrier Reef and settle for an easier life. The passing thought made him chuckle to himself as he looked around him. They were all explorers, swords-for-hire, sailors, and rogues. From different realms. Different worlds. Different ages.

Since when has time ever mattered here?

The tavern's comforting mix of candle and firelight was suddenly pierced by the brilliance of afternoon sunlight. Osgood recognised the silhouetted figure in the doorway before the door closed behind him and with a smile he watched the approach of the rogue's hat adorned with peacock feathers and a black leather rose in its band. The hat's wearer tossed his cloak to one of the barmaids, exchanging with her a glance too warm to be appropriate. Osgood's serving maids smiled for him as women always did for a ladies' man, but today only one other was expecting his arrival.

A bottle was placed on the bar for the newcomer. White wine, still covered with frost droplets. An aged vintage from the Royal Vineyards of Anderis. The man was dressed in burgundy and black, a fine ivory handled rapier by his side and a duelling dagger sheathed in the small of his back. He smiled widely as his eyes studied the wine bottle's seal. It was a reminder of a chance meeting two days prior. It was a token of interest for his particular talents. It was, more importantly, her olive branch. In her realm, the price on his head was steep. She would know as she was the one who continued to raise it an additional one hundred gold sovereigns for every ship of hers he claimed on the open seas.

The bartender smirked, motioning to the bottle. "Your class of lady has improved, Captain."

"Nothing at all amiss with your lovely barmaids, Osgood," he replied brightly. "This lady, much like this wine, is exceptional. She is truly unique. Worthy of my special attentions and talents."

"Well, you must've made quite the impression on this one. The Lady is waiting upstairs, Captain," he said with a surreptitious wink as he provided trysting places in the tavern for enamoured couples. This time, however, the Lady had taken the initiative in reserving the room.

Osgood motioned to one of his barmaids, removing her from the lap of a potential customer. The shapely tavern wench led the pirate down one of the inn's dimly lit hallways to a heavy oak door. Crudely made, but stout and protection enough from prying eyes and ears. It opened on hinges that cried out for a lubricant's touch, its creaks ripping through ambient tavern talk. The barmaid gave the rogue another inviting look, touched perhaps with a hint of jealousy towards the awaiting woman. She knew this Privateer Captain's abilities and always held her breath when he would first enter The Barrier Reef. He paused and gently stroked the wench's cheek with a gloved hand. She tipped her head towards his touch, her smile widening at the gentle gesture. Opening her eyes for one last look at him, she gave a soft sigh and then slowly shut the wooden hatch behind him.

At the far end of the room, the lady knelt, her court robes gathered around her waist. The Pirate Captain could not help but be impressed not only by the lack of modesty from this queen, but also for the faith in her abilities to sit so confidently with her bare back to the door.

"Well met, Askana Moldarin, Bla—"

"A moment, privateer," the woman snapped, neither her head nor her figure moving from its position.

Her pale skin stood out against the shadows of the room. As she had her back to him, the privateer was deprived of a more provocative view. Her back still granted an impressive display of muscles and sinew rising and falling through the soft, supple casing of a woman's flesh. Beginning at the centre and working its way down her back was a magnificent tattoo of a serpentine dragon, intertwining through a collection of Morevian characters, a brilliant white tiger, and a bird surrounded by flame clutching a delicate flower. This, he surmised, was her family crest. The canvas for this particular picture was far from perfect, marred by the scarring souvenirs of her bloody ascent to the throne. The Morevian characters reminded him somewhat of Chinese writings he had seen in his travels across Portugal and Italy. He did recognise with some difficulty the characters were her family name and title.

Askana of House Moldarin, First Queen of Morevi.

Such beautiful strokes, he thought as he surrendered to their hypnotic movement on living flesh. He supposed that was the attraction of tattoos: living art. The Queen's title writhed on her back as she performed the movements of prayer. The Captain peered around her to catch sight of a small statue, three female forms merging into one, a flame cradled in its centre. He could not hear what she whispered but was certain her words were Morevian.

Slowly her head bowed and a single motion of her arms slipped the robes back over her shoulders. The Queen secured the fine silks around her body and took one final, deep breath before rising from the tasselled cushion on the floor. She turned to face him, her tilted black eyes looking him up and down boldly with a coldness he was not used to receiving from women. Her eyes were unmistakable, unforgettable.

She had caught his attention days before dressed in simple battle armour, a beautiful woman adorned in armaments as ladies of his realm would wear gold bracelets, bejewelled necklaces, and pearl pendants. The fierceness of her attire then matched her natural radiance. She now appeared so different that, for a split second, the Sea

Captain wondered if he had entered the correct room. Now she wore the traditional court-dress of flowing green and white robes embroidered with the Turi flower, a key ingredient in the making of fine perfumes in his and the *other* realm. The embroidery matched the flower in the tattoo and the wine label.

And, of course, the emblem matched the banners of ships he attacked in open waters.

The Captain had grown familiar with this sigil and now chance had brought him before the woman it represented. Her hair was piled high on her head behind a stiff, winged creation of green and gold brocade, her eyes lined with black paint, her mouth a shimmer of red in her face. Not the full regalia of "court-paint" he had caught glimpses of in his covert visits to her cities, but just enough make-up to accent her grace and beauty. The Captain smiled with approval for she was a breath-taking woman, just as unique as the perfume she wore. An unseen signature of sandalwood, jasmine, and lily with a touch of blue tea.

She remained, however, an adversary not to be underestimated. An adversary that called for his head on a pike. A bottle of wine and a business arrangement were far cries from making an enemy into an ally.

"I hope you find the wine pleasing to your taste." The tone of the Queen was very different now from when he had entered. It was as if she was quashing down impatience to make herself more approachable.

"I am quite fond of your realm's vineyards. Morevian vintages have complex but pleasing characteristics. This one, in particular, is one of my favourites." He considered the bottle as he spoke, "Yes, this particular label pulls a fine price for me on the black markets. Always a banner day when I pillage this particular vintage from your ships."

Askana remained motionless, no trace of a reaction to his obvious insult. Assessing this privateer, if he continued to prim with this heavy dose of arrogance, pomp, and bravado, would be far easier than she anticipated. He was transparent as men were by nature. Brash. Overbearing. Revealing their intent and agenda clumsily in their posturing to be the dominant male of the pack. These traits would also make him easy to manipulate.

Nothing in her face betrayed these thoughts, even when her eyes turned to the delicate porcelain cup and saucer on the table. She had hoped a relaxing cup of *chocha*, one of Morevi's prized natural resources, would calm her nerves before this interview. It had done little to blunt her edge. For that she had prayed to Nadinath, the Supreme Goddess.

"Please, sit." She sank down onto the red cushion behind the table into a posture that would prove impossible for most, gesturing to the green cushion she had occupied earlier in prayer. With a cordial nod, the man removed his hat and placed it by the offered seat. Long nails tapped on the table's surface as the Captain knelt in a manner similar to the Queen's. "I requested this meeting because I have a proposition for you. One that will pay well, have no fear."

A fan snapped open. The privateer did not flinch, but merely enjoyed its lovely artwork depicting the Palace of a Thousand Suns, a place he knew only from a distance. Perhaps one day he would actually summon the courage to see this place *from the inside*.

"But first a matter of trust." The Queen's tone returned to its sharpness from their first meeting. "I must be able to expect a certain degree of loyalty from those who take pay from me. Of course, I am not fool enough to expect total loyalty from a man—in particular, one of your base station. If I am to employ your services, however, you will

agree to my terms." The fan shut gently, and she caressed it with her fingertips for a moment before letting it fall by her waist. "No more raiding ships bearing the Morevian marks. As you know, Morevi is landlocked. It has only been in recent years that we have invested into trading ships and ports from the neighbouring lands of Arathelle. While they are not sworn allies but merely benefactors in open trade, they do respect that these ships residing in their ports belong to the occupant of the Throne of the Thousand Suns. This is recognition you lack but must adopt before we are to do business together." Her voice turned wry. "As long as you are receiving monetary compensation from me, I think it would be awkward if you—how do outlaws in your trade put this—'take a share' of my land's trade as well.

"I have a task for you, one that should not be too onerous. Our neighbour to the west, Eyrie, has a new king on their throne, a young whelp of the Goradan line. According to my contacts there, King Cedric wishes to claim Morevi for his own. I understand that Eyriener lords have approached you to take arms against me. I do not doubt in their offer you discovered names, positions, perhaps even plans. And no doubt, Cedric is massing this conquest as he has established contacts of his own, high in my regime. I want this information. Therefore, pirate, I have a course of action for you to take."

Her dark eyes narrowed slightly, the hint of a devious smile appearing across her face.

"My spies inform me that you have declined their offer, but I desire you to arrange one last business transaction with them. Present to these Eyriener merchants a shipload of Morevian tea presumably hauled off in one of your frequent raids upon my trade ships. You will sell it to them for half your price. Then proceed to tell them the reason you declined their earlier offer is that you received a similar offer from a higher bidder within Morevi. However, the nameless bidder abruptly withdrew their offer. Now you fear civil war, revolt, or a sudden change that will affect Morevi's shipping trade. With this cargo as a sweetener they will assuredly drink down the tale. I will expect spies in my court a few weeks later—Eyriener ambassadors and emissaries approaching nobles whom they believe likely to oppose me." Abruptly, she laughed. "Then shall the Black Widow set her traps and reveal the traitors, Eyriener and Morevian, to our New Age."

The Black Widow. The name, if he remembered correctly, had been given in sarcasm to a woman who had never married and yet was always "in mourning" over the deaths of her lovers. There had been many culminating in the death of a king and, it was whispered, half a nation. Her mourning attire then had been armour stained black with blood, hence the name.

Sitting there before him, she looked deceptively fragile in her heavy robes, the high headdress making her face seem small. Many men had thought that of Askana Moldarin. That she was a precious doll to be owned and displayed for all to see. And from the stories he had heard of her, precious few lived to remember or regret such a thought.

This should have been a warning to the Pirate Captain, but he did so love a challenge.

She awaited his answer, her long pale fingers returning to the folded fan. "As for the price, you shall tell me what you think is worthy pay for this task."

Now it was his turn.

The man's carriage and poise might have deceived her into believing him to be well-born, one who possessed all the answers to The Great Game, or so he wished the Queen to believe. Something in him reminded her of the many "potential suitors"

from far-off lands she had once received with puffed-out chests and inflated opinions of self-worth. Such men believed a capital city and a queen would offer themselves without question or resistance. A smile crept across her face in fleeting memory of one suitor who dared to take her hand in a bold gesture, trying to convince her of the status and strength he would bring to Morevi if she accepted him as her king. He returned to his homeland minus a hand.

This man, however, was no gentleman of high breeding, regardless of his outward polish and refinement. "*Maritime Opportunist*" he had called himself when they first met. A pirate was nothing more than a common thief of the open waters, no matter how much he would try to disguise himself in gentleman's fashions. This particular pirate was above the common thief, perhaps considered exceptional by some as he was a thorn stubbornly stuck in her side for many moons. He remained out of the Queen's reach, her spies and assassins always returning in disgrace at their inability to capture this man possessing the cunning and ferocity of a wolf that prowled the oceans of Naruihm.

And this is what had earned him a moniker of his own—*The Sea Wolf*.

Deep hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair gave sharp contrast against his pale English skin. His reckless arrogance suited him too. This man seemed to revel in his audacity, looking at her directly as if he were her equal, not even averting his eyes when he had greeted her in that chance meeting days before. The Privateer Captain was obviously a believer in his own fables of invulnerability.

Brash and overconfident enough to get himself killed, the Queen thought with some amusement.

"Your Grace." His voice was pleasant to her ear, a deep baritone hinting at a purr similar to the felines who had the run of the Temple of Nadinath. There was, however, a touch of darkness in his smug words. "You have placed me in a very delicate situation. I have developed strong ties with the Eyriener lords. In their eyes, I am what your people would call a *kasam-de-nim* in the privateering business."

Askana's eyebrow arched sharply as he spoke the Morevian words for "hero of great renown." A "*living legend*."

"Perhaps King Cedric would not care to acknowledge my popularity, but I have brought them prosperity since my arrival to your realm." His eyes seemed to twinkle with a hint of mischief as he smiled wickedly. "But worry not, I pillage their ships as well as yours."

"Indeed." The chill in her voice softened his over-confident smile a bit, "You show a certain foolhardy courage, pirate, that may prove useful. Or it may hasten you to your death. Perhaps from your benefactor. Keep in mind, this covert action I charge you with in no way pardons you for your crimes. Do know that my decree still stands—if you ever set foot upon Morevian soil, I will have you killed upon the spot." Her steady hands cradled the cup of chocha as she took a sip. "Nothing would please me more, knowing of your indignities against Morevi, than to skin your carcass myself."

"But, Your Grace, what good would that do you at present? You are in need of a servant with particular talents. I am in a constant need for a tidy profit. So as we are in need from one another, we can do business." The rogue reached into a small pouch attached to his belt and produced a small, slim tobacco stick from the "New World" of his realm—she had heard someone call it a "cigar"—and dragged it slowly underneath his nose. He had retained his kneeling position for a time that would have most Morevian men squirming in discomfort, but his discipline appeared strong enough despite his rash nature. He had passed every test presented to him so far. "I will do

Your Grace's bidding and sell this Morevian tea to plant the seed of deception for you, possibly at the cost of my most profitable Eyriener connections. If the folklore is true, I am most certain you will take full advantage of what your intriguing scheme reveals. But I digress..."

The Captain's eyes searched about the room until the flicker from the small statue's tiny, steady flame caught his attention. No larger than a man's forearm, this triple-faceted figurine was the Goddess Nadinath, the focus of the religion of her people. The tiny shrine with its 'eternal flame' signifying woman's inner light had been burning faithfully throughout their entire conversation.

The Queen's breath ceased for a moment as he gently tilted the statue in his direction and used its flame to light his cigar. As the High Priestess of Nadinath's Order it took effort not to react to this intentional slight. *Indeed*, Askana's words echoed in her mind, *nothing would please me more than to skin your carcass myself*.

The rogue leaned back, savouring the first puff with delight. "We were discussing payment."

She recognised this for the baiting game it was, each taking turns to force the other's patience. What stoked her anger was his pure brazenness. A man of his station should not presume the right to test a queen. It was a true miracle that Askana found her voice. Miraculous to them both was how calm it sounded as she spoke. "Very well," she stated in a flat, business-like tone. "I believe two thousand in gold for your services in this—"

"I crave a pardon, Your Grace," he said, cutting her off in mid-speech, "but did you say two thousand?" Askana could feel her demeanour slipping by degrees as he continued, obviously caring very little that he had interrupted her. "I would not piss in King Henry's chamber pot for two thousand." He leaned forward, the cigar smouldering between his fingers as he spoke. "I can make twice that from *one* of your ships! For my talents and personal sacrifices to your crown, my price is ten thousand. Two thousand now, and payment of eight thousand in gold once my transactions with the Eyrieners have concluded and I deliver to you what your plans have yielded."

"Ten thousand?!" The Queen's sharp, incredulous laughter filled the private chambers of the tavern. "You confess to pillaging my ships, you eye me like some paramour with no regard to my standing, and now you dare make such a financial demand upon the Morevian treasury? You insult me with such an offer!"

"Perhaps I do, your Majesty," Effortlessly, the Captain stood from the cushion with hat in hand. "But my price is non-negotiable. Therefore, as we cannot seem to agree on this presently, I will no longer pillage from your personal cargo hold the precious bounty of time. I am certain you will find someone better suited for this task."

"There is no one better suited for the task," Askana conceded with unusual honesty.

Placing the cigar in between the crossed weapons carved at the little idol's feet, he sighed in rapture, "Oh, such sweet music those words are to my ears. Especially when uttered by the fairer sex." He donned his hat and spoke over his shoulder, "Best of luck to you, Your Majesty."

The unending disregard. His flippant attitude. The flowery speech. And now, departing without leave. Askana Moldarin had endured enough.

The dagger sailed by him and embedded itself firmly into the door his hand was about to open, the hilt vibrating slightly from the force of its journey's end. The Privateer Captain calmly turned to face her, his smile obviously reflecting pleasure taken from breaking her control. He expected to see her face twisted with a rage that

could mottle even the noble visage of King Henry, but he would find no such satisfaction. The dagger might have been a rose thrown at a favourite from the blank expression on her face.

"I was told you were the only mercenary who refused the Eyriener lords." She said, tucking silk folds closer around her as she spoke. An unhurried woman, as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

"I know ladies. Call it a character flaw of mine," he stated with a hint of pride as he returned to the cushion before her. "And I recognise powerful allies. To not acknowledge a powerful woman such as you would be a true crime against God. I am no fool, Your Grace." The Captain reached for the cigar wedged between Nadinath's weapons and gingerly wiped the statue free of any trace of ash. Askana's stare hardly softened as he lowered his eyes in a silent apology before the tiny statue. After a moment, he continued. "I know I am most fortunate to have lived this long out of reach of your trained assassins. I know that this is a mission for profit, not pardon, but any effort to win the favour of the Black Widow of Morevi will hopefully be taken into royal consideration. And I also know," he said, taking a final puff from the cigar and then crushing it under his boot, "with a healthy financial investment in my particular talents, your plan will yield an economic windfall."

Askana's head tilted slightly, her ornate headdress catching a glint of sunlight as she studied the man who now poured himself a cup of chocha. Again, without leave. In an unexpected move, the pirate refreshed her own cup as she asked, "And what do you mean by that?"

"The men of Eyrie who conspire against you are no doubt rooted within The Merchants' Circle. I do not know if you are aware of this syndicate, Your Grace. They are comprised of traders and select noblemen, and are said to be the true keepers of power in Eyrie, the crown merely a figurehead who answers to them." The Captain blew lightly at the chocha and took a deep sip of the sweet liquid. His eyebrows raised slightly at its delightful taste, a bittersweet flavour much like the New World's chocolate, only much smoother. "Once you discover who in the Merchants' Circle plots against you, I am most certain the 'persuasive demeanour' that you are renowned for will most assuredly bring a benefit to your treasury by whatever influence you hold over them. Be it a ransom for their lives, depending on who is involved, or if you decide to use the involved parties from within to divert profits or trade from Eyrie to your own realm. Whatever the outcome, Morevi will prosper. Rest assured."

It grew quiet in the room save for the flickering of Nadinath's tiny flame. This privateer's services carried a price much higher than Askana had anticipated and there would be opposition from the Council of a Hundred Turi given the state her forebears had left the Treasury. He was correct as to how she would use 'persuasion' to funnel the gains from this intrigue back into Morevi. But could she truly trust him in this? He was a known enemy of the state. An outlaw. Unpredictable. The last person expected to come to the aid of Morevi.

He was perfect.

"Two thousand now." Askana stated with finality, motioning to a small chest to the right of the table where they sat. "Another thirteen thousand when I have this Merchants' Circle kneeling before me in my Grand Hall."

"Fifteen thousand for the delivery of the Merchants' Circle?" The Captain was caught off guard by this unexpected bonus in his fee. He smiled brightly, "For fifteen thousand, I would trade in every favour I have with my realm's nobility to gain you an audience with King Henry the VIII himself!"

"With one slight change in your plan." Askana picked herself up off the cushion and stood over the Privateer Captain, "I will accompany you upon this journey."

"Excuse me, Your Grace?" His cup was set down so firmly its saucer split. He quickly brought himself to his feet, "You will what?"

"Listen to me, pirate," her voice cut through the silence with an edge as sharp as her dagger's. "You are, as you said, Morevi's financial investment in this gamble. I merely intend to keep an eye upon my investment in case a more lucrative opportunity should attempt to present itself."

It was as if she had struck the man in the back. Askana almost smiled at his sudden flush. All part of The Great Game and no one was better at it than she. Victory over a man was always sweet, capable of wiping out years of memories under their dominance. She noted the light in his eyes dim for a moment, but a moment was all he spared for her as he removed from his finger a signet ring. With a polished bow, the privateer presented it to Askana. She noted the details of the sigil—a sword criss-crossing a black rose under a playing card. An Ace of Spades, if she remembered correctly. She had always preferred games of skill and strategy as cards and dice were too reliant on chance for her liking.

"You have the word of Captain Rafael Stringfellow Rafton," he proclaimed. "True, I am a pirate. A rogue by every account, but I never go back upon my word." He looked honest, sincere, but so could the best of liars. "You have my services—and my loyalty—for fifteen thousand, as agreed."

It was a noble and heart-felt pledge. Regardless, as he could see in the Queen's face, there would be no compromise.

"Very well, Your Grace," he resigned. His voice then sharpened, matching the tone she had taken earlier with him. "If you are to accompany me on this voyage, take to heart these steadfast rules: I am captain of my ship and I have the last say. Anything you do to jeopardise the outcome of this venture will rest solely on you and have no bearing on my cost to the Morevian crown. Be expected to dirty those delicate hands of yours for this will not be an easy journey before us."

She was beyond surprise. This pirate's presumption appeared to have no limits. He behaved as if his word was actually worth something; and because of this proud display, it actually might be. She could have laughed at his words portraying her as some doll that would shatter at the most delicate touch. Did he have any inkling as to how much blood had directly 'dirtied her delicate hands' in the past? It was clear he was knowledgeable of Morevi, its culture, and its history, but only enough to hold her interest through this meeting. He knew nothing of her life, her history.

He stepped back, perhaps to give Askana a better look at him. "Keep that ring as collateral. It is my banner and my promise to Your Grace."

"A strange sigil," she said, pulling up a fine cord from around her neck. As the ring was far too large for any of her slender fingers, she slipped it into a small silk pouch at the cord's end. Her eyes continued to stare into the privateer's own as she returned the pouch under her collar, back to its resting-place against her skin. "One day I will have you tell me the story behind it."

The Captain could not help but smile, envious of where his signet ring now rested.

She turned away from him, sending a whiff of perfume wafting through the air. Her hand reached into her sleeve to feel for the amulet. The artefact, upon touching her palm, triggered a memory. She was uncertain as to why, in all times, this particular memory returned to her. It had been many years since she recalled the old witch, but her face appeared so vividly that she would have sworn she could reach out and touch

the Caillech. "I know you must have some way of reaching my world. A Rift, if my people tell me rightly. But once across it, can you reach Morevi, and more importantly, me?"

"I have my ways," he assured her with a smile.

"Privateer—"

"Please," the Captain purred with a charming smile, "call me Rafe."

Askana looked at Rafe afresh, musing. The Morevian Queen knew how to use flirtation as a weapon, a means to achieve what she wanted, and to size up her target. It was a game Askana excelled at, part of protocol in her position as queen. And it was always easier to play opposite handsome men. He was taller and heavier in build than the men of her realm. Yellow hair was rare among Morevians, and highly prized in slaves. *Yes, pleasing to the eye*, Askana mused, *but since when does trust rest in beauty?*

"Privateer, you surprise me with your vow. Your profession—a profession of choice, I should add, and one that has cost my country dearly—is based on deception and duplicity." Words could be used to subtly slap a man in the face so that he felt ashamed of himself. Something else she excelled at. Rafe, this time, never faltered. She continued, "I do not know how familiar you are with my realm but there is a forest south of my nation."

Rafe nodded, "I know of it. I know talk from the tradesmen and sailors who say that particular area of your realm is best avoided."

"And they are wise who avoid it. But, privateer, days will come when children must cease their fear of darkness." She produced from her sleeve the amulet, a smooth, brush-polished silver pendant with a brilliant green stone suspended above its criss-cross knot-work pattern. "I went to find the Caillech of the Tangled Southern Wood. This amulet of her making grants me and another passage between realms. She is half-mad and will not allow most to seek her out. If you need the means to reach me, I will take you to her now for an amulet of your own." Askana's tone changed slightly, "Otherwise, the death sentence I passed upon you may prove to be a hindrance."

"Rest assured. I am a resourceful lad."

Askana nodded, her fingertips gently tracing the pattern in the amulet. Behind her, the walls and floor of the room appeared to fold into themselves until the fold spread apart to reveal a dark void of black, violet, and grey.

Rafe gripped the handle of his signature rapier tightly. He knew sorcery was practised in and across The Rift and was accepted as part of nature, but it always unnerved him.

Noting the pirate's sudden uneasiness to the magic, Askana smiled mockingly. "We will see, privateer, exactly how resourceful you are in this venture." And with another long look over her shoulder, she stepped into the dark void.

As Askana disappeared through the portal, Rafe considered her final words. It was challenge after challenge with this dangerous woman. He continued to stare at the space where the portal had been, already charting in his head their course across The Rift and then across the lands of Naruihm to Morevi. A shipment of tea, as well as one of the riskiest endeavours he had ever agreed to undertake, awaited him. He wondered if his crew, knowing the price on his head in her kingdom as well as her reputation, would think he was truly insane. The payment of fifteen thousand in gold, though, justified any dangers he or his crew would face.

As far as Askana Moldarin's reputation and hatred for men, it was no matter to him. *She is a woman like any other*, he thought flippantly.

He never could lie to himself well.

Rafe also knew he would have to tread lightly with this fine lady as she was not an easy one to read. The dagger had surprised him. It was a sign that Askana, manipulative and commanding as she appeared to be, had a low tolerance for defiance, particularly from men. Something to commit to memory and live by as one of God's Ten Commandments.

Rafe dislodged the dagger from the heavy oak door. The blade was stronger but much lighter than any other he had the pleasure of possessing. Its engraving was in Morevian of which he knew very little, enough to survive in the streets, deal with select merchants, and sack her ships. Perhaps this was her family motto. He would have someone translate it for him. The blade's handle was not ornate like most weapons of royalty, the handle a dark redwood that twisted between the crown pommel and the dagger's hilt. Rafe knelt by the cushion she had once occupied and rested the dagger's pommel gently against his lips. A dangerous smile crept across his face.

She was as beautiful as a fine rapier, and just as lethal, too.

"And what do you think, old girl?" Rafe smirked, addressing the tiny statue of Nadinath who still nursed the flame in Her basin. "Have I stepped in over my head this time?"

Rafe had always been a God-fearing man. He knew God existed from the numerous close calls he lived to tell about. There were moments he should have clasped hands with Death only to have it averted by some Divine Intervention. As for the Goddess Nadinath, he knew only this—it was a woman's religion and the beliefs of its sovereign Queen. He gave it no credence whatsoever.

Still, there was a sense of foreboding when the flame, as if posing an answer for Rafe's question, snuffed itself out of existence.

A knock sounded from the heavy door giving Rafe a start. The thick oak hatch swung open and his First Mate breathed a sigh a relief, lowering his primed pistol.

"My Captain," Nassir said. "I was worried for a moment." Rafe could tell his Moorish friend was agitated as his speech was quick and sharp, thickening his Persian accent so much that he was almost unintelligible. "I did not see the Queen leave and I was afraid you had been taken by—"

"Calm, Nassir, and ease that hammer back into place before you pull the trigger and shoot your foot off!" The privateer motioned to where the portal had been. "She left through the back way."

"But, my Captain," Nassir said, much slower and more deliberately now. "There is no back way."

"Exactly, Nassir," Rafe said with a wink. "Best to keep Askana's exit a secret. Now back to the *Defiant* with you. We set sail across The Rift."

The dark giant began to relax finally, his words better than before but still given by his accent a sharp lilt contrasted by his deep bass voice. "Are we returning to England?"

"No," Rafe smiled clasping the giant Moor's shoulder. "We must ready the ship for a crossing not into our realm but Queen Askana's. We have been hired for a particular job. I shall explain the details once we are away. Now go, my friend, go. Your Captain is well and right behind you."

From the doorway of the room, Rafe watched Nassir motion to his fellow crewmates at one table. They had seen Queen Askana arrive, pay for the room, and then they waited with pistols primed as their Captain conducted business behind closed doors. They were the Captain's Watch and always kept a close eye on Rafe, especially when his business involved those who wanted him dead. He could overhear Nassir assuring them the Queen had left through a "back passage." It was difficult enough getting his

crew to accept The Rift. Rafe's ability to navigate it like any other stretch of ocean gave them the confidence it was not "magic" but "God's Work." No need to stir superstitions telling them about Askana's unorthodox exit. Her amulet and use of it stayed with him.

The privateer slipped Askana's dagger into his belt pouch and tried to recall if in this seaport there would be a craftsman who could sell him a proper wrist-sheath for it. He was about to leave when his eye caught something by the window. A long scarf of fine silk, a deep green as that of a grove upon the eve of night contrasted by various Morevian characters in a brilliant white. Embroidered in the centre of this beautiful, sheer material was the Turi flower, the signature flower of Askana Moldarin. The fabric still carried a trace of her perfume.

Rafe felt reassured as he tied the silk scarf around his calf, physically binding his new commission to him. A gleam flashed in his eyes as he looked about the room one last time, reflecting on this pact between himself and the First Queen of Morevi.

This, Rafe thought with a smile, is going to be an unforgettable adventure.