

ANNA ROSA

by Darren W. Pearce

THE BAY WAS QUIET, not a single cloud hung in the blanket of the sky above. A large galleon lay in the embrace of the cool water, dipping in and out of the waves ever-so-softly as the twin moons of Grimaton dappled the ocean below with long white fingers. Golden writing on the rear of the ship reflected the beams with the word: Moonsinger, perhaps somewhat aptly.

On the deck of the ship stood a woman, six feet tall and mahogany skinned. The wavy-curls of her long dark hair reached the midpoint of her back. Over her shoulders and down the waxy-leather of a coat which almost reached to the floor, just ending at the ankle of soft dark leather boots. Around her neck sparkled a small green crystal necklace shaped like a fox, which matched the color of her eyes. It was neatly tucked against the folds of a dark grey shirt, with nary a button loose to reveal her average build and slightly muscled body.

In her right hand she held a spyglass up to her eye and watched a small lantern on the shore, it shone a ghastly wan light against

the night air.

"Have they moved yet Captain Anna?" the speaker was a pale skinned hooded man with a sly smile, twinkling black eyes and short dark hair. He had a day's growth of beard and was dressed as corsair on Grimaton's waters - a simple shirt and pants ensemble, both cool during the day and not restrictive of movement.

"Not yet Darius," Anna Rosa smiled a little thinly. "You'd think these men would have better things to do than prey on the coast - especially considering the king's navy are out in force scouring the world for people who can 'help' the man in his causes."

Darius nodded. "What now?"

"We wait a little longer, like that fox we saw near the river the other day." Anna chuckled. "He caught that rabbit so quickly, but he must have waited hours."

"Patience has never been one of my virtues captain, you know that."

"Learn some Darius, honestly - it might just save your life one day."

"I think", Darius mused. "You did that already captain."

"I did," Anna Rosa patted him on the shoulder. "I shall never let you forget it either."

There were six men on the shore, all rough and ready gents of no fixed abode. They carried crates and boxes, barrels and other goods from a pile of wrecked boats near the jagged rocks. One of them held

a lantern up high and waved the others on.

"So tell me again captain, how we got this job?" Darius leaned on the side of the ship.

"A man in a tavern came up to me and whispered in my ear, I thought he was making a pass. So by the time we got to the room, I suddenly realised that he was actually trying to hire me to avenge his daughter's death." Anna Rosa grinned in the moonlight, her dark skin barely reflecting the soft shimmer.

"Really?"

"No, but it made a great story." Anna Rosa chuckled. "The truth is that I've known Byron Hallister a while now and his daughter was killed the day she sailed for Port Merton. It was her wedding day and the wreckers got her ship, there was a terrible storm sprang up out of nowhere."

Darius frowned. "Magic, you don't think one of the Awakened do you?"

"I know it was and who it was."

"Damn."

"Yes, damn and damn the dirty hound that would attack an unarmed ship in such a way." Anna Rosa's lips turned into thin menacing smile.

"Who was it captain?" Darius looked across to the men.

"He's not here, but we'll find out where he's gone."

Darius looked again. "So who?"

"Captain Wenlock," Anna Rosa narrowed her eyes. "I've never met

the man, but I have heard the stories - his ship never leaves survivors and he works with wrecking crews across the various coasts. He takes a percentage of the plunder and worse, any Awakened are taken to King Seward's jails and not seen again."

Darius nodded. "So, plan - we kill him and the wreckers. Do to them what they have obviously been doing to others."

"Ah," Anna Rosa tapped her fingers on the ship's port rail. "Do two wrongs make a right in this case Mister Darius?"

"The needs of the many outweigh the lives of those men, captain." Darius turned his back on them. "What say you?"

Anna Rosa pondered this and whispered. "Order the men to load the slingers, then bring them to bear on the beach. We'll give them a midnight greeting they'll not forget."

"No survivors?"

"One, someone important if at all possible."

"Right you are captain." Darius vanished below with a quick turn of speed, Anna Rosa could hear the First Mate's voice drifting up from there as he gave out orders.

She put the spyglass back in the pocket of her coat, then hung the coat onto the side of the mast hooking it there. She checked her pistol-crossbow (which was in a leather holster on her back) and checked over her two short swords with whale-bone hilts and sharp blades.

Darius returned from below decks and nodded, "All done captain."

Then he looked Anna Rosa over and grinned wolfishly in the dark.

"You're going over there aren't you?"

"I am."

"Want me to come with?"

"Do you want to?"

"More than anything."

Anna Rosa balanced on the side of the vessel and then turned to face the water. "You'd best be quick about it then."

Darius frowned. "I need to give the order to fire though, that is unfair."

"Corsair," Anna Rosa reminded him. "What part of corsair happens to coincide with being fair?"

"Point. FIRE!!!!" Darius yelled and the crew obeyed.

The slingers were a catapult-style mechanism, designed to hurl barrels of alchemical concoctions a great distance - sometimes the barrels were also full of nails or other projectiles to give the explosion a bigger kick. The slinger was also built with a small crossbow attached, a second gunnery system triggered a flaming projectile not long after the launch of a barrel. This ensured that both barrel and projectile struck home.

The Moonsinger's port slingers whispered in the darkness, and the sound of swooshing barrels followed the cacophony of soft booms. The captain dove into the water after the first volley and swam towards the shore like a dolphin.

Darius grumbled and followed, he was less graceful about it.

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AS THE SHORELINE LIT up with alchemical explosions and sudden bursts of return fire, both the captain and her first mate swam through the water towards the unaware wreckers. The wreckers were running back and forth, a few of them appeared at the mouth of their lair, a small cave not too far from the shore. They screamed orders and then retreated as arrows and small metal balls (shot from deck mounted slingers) peppered the cave mouth, dropping tiny bits of rock atop them.

Anna Rosa was the first out of the water, it seemed to flow away from her like a cloak as she rose wraith-like from the scudding waves. She caught the eye of two men close by and they turned their crossbows to her, only to be struck forcefully by a sudden crush of the sea. A massive wave rose up and slammed into them scattering both to the sand, knocking their weapons clean out of their hands.

Anna Rosa pulled both swords from her scabbards as Darius appeared off to her left; he ran out of the water and tackled a wrecker to the ground from behind. He piled the man into the shale beach until he fell unconscious from repeated contact with the sharp rocks.

"That's your one captain, the rest are of no matter." He tied the man up, gagged him and left him out cold on the beach.

"Aye Mister Darius," Anna Rosa drove the first sword into the belly of an adversary, twisting the blade slightly and kicking the

screaming man off it. The sword caught in the soft folds of his flesh, so she had to kick again. "Leave no one else alive."

Darius looked around for his next target, whilst the captain dispatched another wrecker with a deft cut of her blade. He saw a man armed with a heavy hammer bearing down on them both, it looked like the kind of hammer you'd use to whack in a wooden peg. The man was big enough to heft it too.

"Mine!" he yelled and charged towards the bigger foe.

Anna Rosa turned her head slightly to see, shrugged and ducked a wicked curved blade as it sailed over her head. She rolled forwards and sliced the sides of the man's knees with both swords, the sharp blades nearly cut his legs off. The ruined flesh quickly ripped and bone peeked through. He screamed and blood slaked the rocks.

She ended his life quickly and moved onto the next.

Meanwhile Darius was grinning as the big man's hammer kept on missing him. "Too slow," he taunted. "You need to eat less, so you might fight better."

"I'm going to feed your innards to the crabs!" the big man shifted tactics and caught Darius off guard, he reversed his hold on the hammer and brought it around to the side. It struck the first mate in the side and the blow bruised the skin there, attenuated by the man's toughened skin. Nonetheless Darius heard one of his ribs crack and he growled.

"That's more like it tubby."

Another blow only caught Darius slightly and the deft man rolled with it, he came up to see the hammer bearing down on him in an overhead strike. He stepped forwards and put the palm of his hand outward in a flat blow against the man's ribcage. Waves of muscle and thick flesh rippled a little and the first mate, cum killer frowned.

"Ok, so you're a tough one and you really are a challenge - good."

The big man snarled animal-like and his eyes changed. They were not human.

"Oh hells, he's Awakened. Captain, he's AWAKENED!"

With the fury of a bear the hammer wielding wrecker threw his weapon at the captain, she barely dodged the whirling massive head as it smacked into a man behind her, crushing his ribcage. The wrecker's strength surged and he attempted to grab Darius in a crude hug.

The lithe first mate rolled to the side. "I don't think so mate." Then for good measure he pulled a cutlass from his belt. "I don't think so at all."

The wrecker tried again and earned a cut across his left arm for his trouble. "I thought you to be a simple fellow, not a mountain of muscle and rage." Darius moved anti-clockwise around the man. "So I was going to have a little fun, however it seems that you are one of those fellows who has taken to abusing their gifts and murdering others."

"What is it you do?" the bear-strong man growled.

"Put people like you down for coin."

"You're no different than me!" the man raged.

Darius struck with a feint, then a deft swing of his cutlass and brought a hidden dagger from behind his back into the bear-strong man's throat. "I'm different to you mate, I'm not a dead man."

The bear-strong man screamed and slammed Darius away with a backhanded swipe, knocking the first mate a good six feet backward. Darius landed on his backside with a snort of pain.

"Stabbed with enough poison to fell an Ox and still not dead."

The wrecker clutched at his throat and felt like he was on fire, the poison began to work now and it slowly constricted the man's breathing until he wailed, cried and collapsed quite dead on the rocks from asphyxiation.

"Oh there we go." Darius stood up, casually crossed to his victim and plucked his dagger from the man's flesh.

The captain was faced with a good swordsman, he was obviously the leader of the wreckers. He wore quality clothes of excellent design and a large buccaneer's hat. He had a scar across his nose and several smaller ones criss-crossed under his chin. Their blades locked time and time again and their fight became more like a dance.

Darius watched the rest of the wreckers retreat to their island cave leaving only their leader out there to deal with the interlopers.

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AS THE WAVES HIT the rocks with a harsh thundering roar behind

him, the man turned to the dark skinned woman and sighed.

"Captain Anna Rosa," he shook his head. "Why did it have to be you, eh?"

"Because Maxime Wright, you and I have a score to settle, the fates decreed I'd have your head for what you did to Black Sal and the Carpenter. Or perhaps," Anna Rosa shrugged. "You have rotten luck at picking your associates."

Maxime Wright sighed and nodded. "It was regrettable that he didn't want to join up with us, but seriously - do you think you'll stand a chance for long on your own? The king's navy grows in strength day by day, week by week. Our time is coming to an end, we can either profit by the new order or be crushed by it - honestly Anna... which do you prefer?"

"Honor and integrity. Strange words for a corsair," she spat them out. "But I bloody well believe in them."

"Honor," the man smiled and pulled his pistol-crossbow from behind his back. "You always were a fool Anna."

There was a soft twang, Anna looked down at her chest expecting to see a spreading dark rose of blood and a bolt in her heart - nothing came.

Maxime's shot went wide, his throat perforated by a single well-aimed shot from Darius' pistol-crossbow.

"We're square now captain," he said grimly. "I'm sorry for interrupting your duel but the reaper isn't going to take you, and

nor are you going to the briny deep of the Locker."

He smiled and reloaded the pistol-crossbow. "Power is a tough master, and a violent lover Anna." He watched the body of Maxime Wright sink lower onto the ground as the man gurgled and died.

"No need to say sorry Mister Darius, you have done right be me and that's all that matters. So thank you." Anna Rosa gave the first mate a winsome smile before she cleaned off her swords.

A noise from the edge of the cave caught both their attention and they moved quickly, slinking around into the dark and ambushing a wrecker as he came to check on the explosions and screams from the shore.

Darius caught him and cut his throat before he could yelp a warning, he lay the body down off to the right side of the entryway and put the man's hat over his eyes.

"We going in?" he asked.

"Need you ask," Anna Rosa slunk into the shadow beyond the cave entry. She was quick, quiet and like a ghost as she waved Darius to follow. "Captain first."

He followed and kept to the left wall. In tandem they worked their way into the cool dark cave and eventually came to a rock shelf, down some wooden steps they found the heart of the wrecker's operation.

"We'll blow the entry." One of the wreckers said, he and his friends standing by a barrel of alchemical fire brew.

"Aye. That'll stop them in their tracks, then we can follow Smuggler's Run and be out of here before they can catch us up." Said another.

There were five men remaining and both Anna and Darius exchanged sudden glances.

"Yes?" Darius mouthed.

Anna Rosa nodded and drew her pistol-crossbow. It was unlike those which were seen commonly toted by pirates and the like, it was a beautiful thing of silver and steel with inlaid fine work. It had a triangle of three bolt-launchers and could fire one or all three missiles at once. The captain's bolts were tipped with an ingenious device, a tiny alchemical bolt-head with enough fuel to make a tiny explosion, lit by a flint-driven spark.

Darius grinned and pointed his own pistol-crossbow. As he and the captain shot the barrel of volatile liquid, the shock-wave dislodged rock from the ceiling and turned the men into chunks of meat, nothing more. Blood and fire rained down around their blasted corpses and quickly the cave became unstable, more rock fell and forced the pair to retreat. In a few moments the whole cavern was a cacophony of thunder, the ground rocked underfoot and the captain was the first out of the cave mouth.

"That was a little more impressive than I expected it to be." She said.

"I think you're right." Darius coughed stone-dust out of his

mouth. "I need a bath, perhaps a swim back to the ship might be in order...after we've had a word with our new friend over there."

Both captain and her first mate glanced at the unconscious and bloodied wrecker, he lay there sprawled on the beach where the bodies of his friends had begun to gather the attention of carrion birds which wheeled in the sky overhead.

The man started to move and then looked up to see Darius kneel by the side of him, "Hello there," the first mate said with a smile. "I'm Darius and this is the captain."

"I know who you are," he said with a grunt. "Your names are known to us."

"Us eh?" Darius looked at the man then to Anna.

Anna Rosa reloaded her three bolts idly whilst she listened, "Enlighten us friend and you won't share the same fate as your brethren. You have my word and if you know aught of me, well - you'll know I speak the truth."

The man propped himself up on his elbows, obviously still in pain. "I don't have much choice and I'm not a fool."

Darius thought on this, "Well, if you were no fool sir. You'd not have crossed blades with us in the first place, but we forgive you."

"Right."

Anna Rosa rolled her eyes. "What Mister Darius means is that we are in a forgiving mood as long as you can provide us with

information."

"What do you need from me exactly, what kind of information?"

"Explain 'us', for starters." Darius interjected.

"Oh," the wrecker frowned. "That would be Captain Wenlock and his cadre. He came here once a fortnight to collect his share of the take. I must have impressed him since he hired me and Krond, the guy with the hammer."

"The dead guy with the hammer." Darius corrected.

"Oh..."

"Go on?" Anna Rosa knelt down and put her pistol-crossbow away.

"Krond and me were sailors on Wenlock's ship, the Breaker, from that point on. He left us here last trip so we could wait for some big shot slaver to deliver a prize. He said it was an important gift for King Seward and it would cement his power for years to come."

"That's interesting." Darius nodded.

"Very interesting," Anna Rosa winked. "Got more?"

"Like a name, I can't really go around calling you wrecking scum, or Mister Wrecker. Even that wrecker who I nearly killed," Darius took out a flask of whiskey and sipped it. "Ah, good stuff."

"Alanik," he said. "I do have more, Wenlock said the ship would be here in a day's time and we've been preparing for her arrival since."

"So the ship is coming to this place?"

"Aye Captain Rosa," Alanik said. "This very rock."

Darius tossed the flask to Alanik. "Well done, you win. One prize, your life if the captain wills it and the whiskey is a bonus."

Alanik took it and drank from the contents. "Thanks."

Anna Rosa nodded. "I'm offering you a choice Alanik, join up with me and help me claim this prize."

Alanik considered this. "Well, Captain Wenlock isn't a man who takes failure lightly so I'm likely dead both ways if I don't."

"You are," Anna Rosa grinned a little. "You know too much about us for us not to kill you, no hard feelings about that though right?"

"I'm in, and as they say: no hard feelings." Alanik offered his hand and she shook it.

#

OVER THE NEXT FEW hours the crew of the Moonsinger cleared the shore of any signs of battle. They set up a false camp to cover the damaged entrance of the wrecker's cave and lit a couple of lanterns near a canvas tent, before sliding their covers into place to blot out the light. The two moons of Grimaton hung like eyes in the sky and around them the constellations bore witness to the captain's plan as the Moonsinger cut a swathe through the water to hide on the other side of a large group of rocky mountains.

"All is in order captain and our new recruit seems to be settling in. It turns out as luck would have it, he knows Old Mack and they go back a little ways to the Reaver's Bounty." Darius sipped from his whiskey again.

"Good." Anna made a face at the whiskey smell.

"Want some?"

"Oh gods no," she winced. "I can't stand the stuff, nor can I stand rum."

"Oh captain, rum keeps a good sailor in the grace of the ocean."

"A good captain does that too," she countered. "A sober captain. Now wine is more my thing, a nice bordeaux."

"I think I'll be going over here to be sick now." Darius teased.

Anna Rosa frowned at him. "Heretics," she muttered. "All of you."

He waved his hand for a moment, "Ah well some of us have to be, to make sure you look better by comparison."

Anna Rosa smacked him hard enough to knock him over, he landed with a crunch on the rocks and began to laugh. "You just proved me right!"

The captain was about to leap on the man when a yell caught her ears.

"Ship AHOY captain!" One of the crew bellowed. "She's a big one too, has to be a slaver."

"Places you lot!" Anna Rosa pulled Darius off the floor and winked at the man. "We will continue this argument later. If you're bold enough."

Darius blinked back and scuttled away for the time being.

"I thought so." Anna tucked herself out of sight and hid inside

the tent.

"I hope this works," Darius also hid himself elsewhere in the fake camp. "If Crinklethorn doesn't look the part of Maxime - we're whale-boned."

"He was a thespian once, he should be fine."

"Now he's a pirate," Darius yelled. "That doesn't give me much confidence."

"Corsair." Anna Rosa corrected.

"A pirate by any other name is still a pirate!"

"Shut up Mister Darius."

Darius grinned and watched the large ship come closer. It took the crew of that vessel a while, roughly half an hour to sail her through the dangerous reefs around this small coastal island cove. The mainland wasn't far away but the waters in the area were prone to sudden changes in current and the wind was a fickle mistress at best.

An hour later and a bulky little boat from the other ship bumped against the shore, two crew members got out and they dragged a teenager in chains with them. Alongside them and slightly ahead strode a short haired man dressed in elegant clothing, he had a pudgy belly and an over-sized shirt.

Waiting for them by the fake-camp was a man in a huge hat, slightly bloodstained clothing and he looked imperiously down his nose at the three figures.

He folded his arms and nodded, "Gentlemen," he said. "Welcome to our little operation."

"Maxime Wright?" Captain Crewe asked.

"I am yes," the man in the hat grinned. "You must forgive me though, I don't remember your name and if we have met...I meet a lot of people, as you know. Working for Captain Wenlock as I do."

"Oh yes, yes." Crewe nodded. "I'm Captain Crewe and I'm here to deliver our prize as stated for the good Captain Wenlock. Quite a nice little camp you have here, any chance I could get a peek at the operation?"

Crinklethorn shook his head. "No time I'm afraid, I have to get the prize to King Seward's finest before they sail from our meeting spot. Nor can you follow in your ship either, you know the King's agents are leery of any change in plans what-so-ever."

Crewe looked dejected for a moment but nodded. "Give my regards to Roland then."

Anna Rosa gritted her teeth, and narrowed her eyes.

"Roland?" Crinklethorn shook his head. "Have you forgotten the name of our good Captain Wenlock? Or are you testing me, in which case I could consider that you intend to impugn my honor."

"Forgive me," Crewe said. "It was but a small test, Captain John Wenlock would approve I am sure."

"James!" Crinklethorn snarled. "Leave our prize and get off my island Captain Crewe, one test I can forgive but two in a row is

downright insulting!"

Anna Rosa and Darius nodded at the same time, Crinklethorn was good.

Crewe gulped and pushed the chained boy forwards towards the man. "I'm sorry good sir, I'll be gone now."

"Captain to you, Captain Crewe!" Crinklethorn moved his hand to his pistol-crossbow as he saw the other two crew members twitch their hands against their own weapons. "Go before I lose my temper and report your error of judgment to Captain James Wenlock himself when we meet in a few hours."

Captain Crewe scuttled backwards and retreated to his boat with his two men, leaving the teenager to glare at the man before him.

"When I get free," the youth said. "I'm going to kill you and your crew. I can do it without having to lift a finger."

Crinklethorn slapped the youth so hard he nearly knocked him out cold. He rolled backwards and lay there sobbing. "Not so brave now are you boy?" he growled.

Anna Rosa knew it had to be done, nothing could break their ploy until the other ship was well out of sight. So she watched Crinklethorn load the sagging youth into her tent and return back to the shore.

She put a hand on over the youth's mouth and shook her head. "Silence lad, you don't want to ruin our hard work."

He growled under her hand and tried to bite, so she gagged him

with a rag she pulled out of a bag in the tent.

#

THE FALSE CAPTAIN MAXIME ploy had worked and Crinklethorn watched the other captain return to his vessel, shout orders and make best sail away from the little coastal island. He folded his arms and waited until the night swallowed the other ship, then he vanished into the command tent. Took off his hat and coat, stowed them safely and removed his disguise completely. He was a bald headed man, dark eyes and fairly generic features - this served him well when it came to becoming someone else.

Darius wandered into the command tent and threw him a bottle of dark rum, "Here, you've earned this old son."

"Thanks Darius," Crinklethorn's lips turned into a sly grin. "How was I?"

"Marvellous mate, I nearly killed you again - you were that much like him."

"Flatterer."

"Honestly though, you did that dead bastard justice. Crewe nearly wet himself and I was trying not to laugh hidden away as I was." Darius sat down on a box.

Meanwhile inside the tent where Anna Rosa remained, the youth struggled against his bonds and glowered at the woman. She let the gag out slowly and tossed it aside.

"Sorry about that," she said. "I couldn't risk you tipping

Captain Crewe off. We're not his associates, we killed those."

The youth was about to let rip with a vicious diatribe, the words fell off his lips and his eyes went wide. He slowly stopped struggling and lay there breathing heavily, obviously frightened.

"Every man-jack of them save for one, who told us that Crewe's ship was coming here. Otherwise we'd have just left this spit of rock and not returned." Anna Rosa fixed him with an unflinching stare. "So I would appreciate it if we had no more talk of murdering my crew, or anyone on this rock."

"Your crew," he coughed and spat from the gag. "Your crew?"

"Yes," Anna Rosa replied. "My crew, my ship and I'm their captain. Anna Rosa of the Moonsinger."

The youth made a goldfish-like gaping motion with his mouth.

"Don't you dare ask how a woman can be a captain, we don't sail with that kind of misconception aboard my ship in these waters."

"I wasn't." He lied.

"You were, I can see it in your eyes. So what's your name?"

"Simon," the youth said. "I'm Simon Maurau."

"Sounds fancy, what did the men want with you Simon?"

"You wouldn't understand." Simon's lips drew into a half-sneer.

"Ah yes," Anna Rosa rolled her eyes. "Young lad, try me before you judge me incapable of comprehending how a teenage boy's mind works."

Simon stuck his jaw out. "I can burn you with my magic."

Anna Rosa laughed. "Oh so you're Awakened, welcome to the club. I can drown you with mine."

Simon cocked his head to the side and blinked. "You're Awakened as well."

"That's what I said. You're not the only one, there are more of us than you'd know and we keep it hidden from King Seward's men as much as we can. There's not a day go by when in port that we don't have one eye turned over our shoulders to watch for them."

Simon nodded to this, "What happens now?"

"I let you go and we try and get you someplace safe. A friend of mine will be close to one of my favoured ports fairly soon. With luck we can sail the Moonsinger there and try and meet up with him. He's Awakened like us, has a wolf as his pack-mate." Anna Rosa looked at the manacles on the boy's wrist. "Ok. Follow me out and I'll get those off you."

She left the tent and a few moments later Simon followed her, he shadowed the woman like he was a little duckling out for a walk.

Anna Rosa found Darius and Crinklethorn in the command tent and smiled at both men. "You are a magnificent actor Mister Crinklethorn."

"Why thank you captain," Crinklethorn blushed a little. "All in a day's work. And is this the young gent who threatened to murder me?"

Simon nodded.

"Good lad, made things even more intense. Sorry about the slap but I had to put on a show for that simpleton Crewe." Crinklethorn apologised.

"I understand." Simon winced at the memory of the blow.

Darius rubbed his chin. "So why are you so special then lad?"

"Simon," Anna Rosa told the first mate. "His magic has to do with fire." "Oh, nice." Darius grinned. "So you could melt those manacles off?"

"No, Crewe kept me drugged with some kind of sedative. I can't draw on the power yet." Simon replied.

"Yet the bugger never gave us any, perhaps he was hoping you'd murder us...then he could recapture you and deliver you to Wenlock himself." Darius mused.

"That's not a half bad thought Mister Darius," Anna Rosa became suddenly wary again. "Mister Crinklethorn, get the crew packed up and ready to sail."

"Aye captain." Crinklethorn left and started to yell orders.

"Darius, use your talent with any mechanism to spring this young fellow and let us put this island to our rear. We need to make sail for Port Farrow and find our friends there."

Darius opened his small pouch and took a few thin metal rods from it, he stood up and invited Simon to sit. "Take a box lad," he said. "Put your back to me and show me those hands."

Simon did as he was asked and proffered his hands to Darius,

the man wrinkled his nose at the manacles and their lock.

"Won't take me but a moment to crack these captain."

"Good," Anna Rosa turned away from them both to look out to sea. "I have a feeling that our Captain Crewe might be waiting for us out there."

Darius turned his picks over in his fingers before he began to work them into the mechanism of the lock. He chuckled. "If he is, he'll find our slingers are waiting for him."

"That he will Mister Darius."

Simon listened to the exchange and kept his breathing measured, he could feel the flicker of flames at the edge of his mind.

Within a few minutes Darius had sprung Simon from his bonds and he tossed the manacles aside, throwing the chains with them. Simon sat back and rubbed his wrists.

"The feeling will come back pretty soon, lad." Darius put the picks away and began to help the rest of the crew dismantle their fake camp. "Pitch in then and we'll get this done twice as fast."

Simon stood up and began to help.

#

IT TOOK LESS TIME for the crew of the Moonsinger to dismantle their false camp, return to the ship and get underway than it did for them to setup their ruse. Captain Rosa retrieved her coat before she bellowed the order to 'make sail' and then set about striding to her cabin.

"Mister Darius," she said on the way. "Make our new guests comfortable and then wake me if anything interesting happens."

"Aye captain." Darius patted Simon on the shoulder. "Come along mister, let's get you into a bunk and settled with the crew."

Anna Rosa retreated to the simple luxury of her cabin, grabbed a bottle of Velanes red and poured herself a glass as she felt the ocean swaying under the boat. She could sense the wind and the water, it was as though the sea was part of her and she in turn was part of it. As she rolled onto the bed and lay looking up at the wooden ceiling, she wondered if Simon had that connection to fire and heat.

As the Moonsinger bobbed there, caressed on the waves, the sea breeze died and the ship slowed down as it made its way to the little port. It was an ill omen for some of the crew and Darius especially didn't like the idea of being on the sea without much wind. Crew had died in worse conditions and the first mate wrinkled his nose.

Simon was asleep in a hammock and the first mate had given orders for the lad to be well looked after, the crew obeyed.

"He'll be like one of us mate," said Big Mack.

"Aye Darius, like one of our own he'll be." Crinklethorn added.

"You are fine gentlemen of the sea to be certain," Darius said and left the men alone as he made his way to the top deck. "All is well I trust?" he questioned an older man with broad shoulders who stood looking out at the waters off the starboard side.

"Aye First Mate," the big man's name was Jalbrek and he was a

huge soul with a massive beard. "Nothing much for a Boatswain to do but smoke a pipe and have a tot of rum."

Darius chuckled. "I'm sure the sea will provide."

"You think that dog Crewe is shadowing us on an intercept course don't you?"

"Don't you?"

"I do."

"Then we have an accord and you and I are on the same parchment," Darius stopped chuckling and propped up the big mast. "The captain seems to think he will, and I trust her judgment."

Jalbrek nodded. "So do I, or else I'd not sail under her."

Darius grinned slyly and nodded, the wind dipped in the sails and the Moonsinger began to lose speed rapidly. "Ah cursed luck, the wind decides to flirt with some other lovely lass on this night."

"SHIP SIGHTED!" one of the crew bellowed from above.

"That'll be Crewe no doubt," sighed Jalbrek. "No rest for the righteous."

As Darius pulled a curious rope aboard the ship, smaller bells sounded down below in the muffled spaces of the vessel. It was a nice system that let the crew know there was trouble, but often didn't tip the aggressor ship off that the sailors of the Moonsinger knew that something was wrong.

The captain was roused from her semi-slumber by a soft ringing in her cabin, in moments she was awake and out of the door moving

slowly across the deck keeping out of sight and low.

"Captain Crewe?" she said as she spied Darius stood by the mast.

"Aye. Looks that way."

"Run out the slingers and prepare to give him our friendliest surprise." Anna Rosa grinned and then stood up.

"Aye captain." Darius bellowed down a hatch into the slinger deck. "Make ready to fire, captain's order. Load some barrels to the back of the ship, let them go on my mark."

"Aye!!!" came the reply from below.

"What about the wind, we're sitting ducks in this low breeze," Darius glowered at the sails. "It's like a gnat's breath."

"Leave the ocean winds to me my friend," Anna winked at the man and moved to the prow of the ship. "Just get ready to hang on to something, it might get rough."

"Promises, promises," Darius whispered under his breath and hooked his arm into a rope. "Report crow's nest, Galley! What's she doing now?" he yelled upwards.

"Ready to engage sir, she's coming about and she's opened up her slinger ports to fire on us."

Anna Rosa trusted her crew, she trusted her helmsman and waited for the opportune moment.

Alanik had been sequestered in the slinger deck and he helped the men load, he smiled as he put a nail filled alchemical fuel-barrel in. "This is payback for every time that rat-bastard Crewe insulted

me."

"Good, but keep your mind on the job." The slinger gunner told him, he was a thin man with weasel features and a hooked nose.

Up on deck the captain watched her adversary think he had an easy time of it, and slowly with her Awakened magic she began to call on the sea wind. Her eyes rolled back a little and the air began to stir, summoned by the mahogany-skinned woman's will.

Darius smiled at Jalbrek and the wind, he sniffed the air. "Now that's a change in fortune I like. MARK!"

Several splashes followed and into the water went the 'trap'.

The merchant ship under the command of Captain Crewe used the new found wind change to its advantage and slowly the ships got closer. Naval warfare, especially piracy was more a matter of 'head' tactics than outright fighting. The way that Crewe's navigator plotted the course would lead him into the trap waiting in the water.

Behind the Moonsinger and right in Crewe's trajectory several barrels stuffed with nails and overflowing with highly volatile liquid waited, they were covered in water-resistant pitch and had just enough air to be buoyant.

"He's crossing the line about now lads," Darius said to the men down below. "Wait for it."

Crewe's ship bumped the first of the pitch soaked barrels, the sticky substance connected with the hull and clung there.

"Crossbowmen, fire!!!" Darius ordered a rank of bowmen, who had

lit crossbow-bolts - just hiding out of sight at the stern of the Moonsinger.

So they did, a sudden flash of light from flaming bolt heads appeared before the sound of gentle whickers hurtling towards the merchant vessel. The crew of the enemy ship braced for a volley of bolts but they were taken by surprise when the pitch-soaked alchemical flame-fuel roared to life, tearing into the hull of Crewe's ship and sending nails flying into the inner hold.

"She's turning, fire again!" Darius yelled.

The second set of crossbowmen at the rear of the Moonsinger ignited the other traps, and the ocean was now ablaze along with the ship. A cheer went up.

Crewe's vessel was not done yet and the ship turned to present her cannons, opening up with a volley of sixteen slingers armed with metal balls and rocks.

"Brace!" yelled Darius.

Captain Anna Rosa let her magic go at that point and the Moonsinger was caught by a wave of gigantic proportions which plucked the ship upwards, the cannon fire from the enemy vessel peppered the water and nothing more. The huge swell carried the captain's ship into the air and then set it roughly down back where it was.

"Fire," Anna Rosa screamed. "All slingers, now!!!"

Just like on the beach there was a great cacophony of sound which rose from the exploding barrels. They scored several direct hits and

exposed the sub-structure of Crewe's galleon to the harsh salt water which now churned around it. It helped to put out the flames but several men were swept into the ocean and one died impaled on a jagged stump of hull wood. He thrashed like a rag doll before he was pulled off and under.

"Reload!" Anna Rosa's eyes were lit with a fury that Darius had seen only once before.

The men below deck reloaded the slingers as fast as they could, they beat the other crew to the reload by seconds and as the captain yelled, "Fire!" again it was obvious Crewe's vessel was not going to survive the third assault.

The second volley left the man's ship crippled and listing badly in the water. Anna Rosa could see many of the sailors already heading to the wooden lifeboats and nodded.

"Cease fire!" she yelled and let her magic relax, pushing more wind into the sails as the spell collapsed in on itself. "Helmsman, help the others I'll guide the ship for now." Anna Rosa went to the stern and took the ship's wheel in hand herself, feeling the rough and smooth wood. "We leave this dog to flounder."

#

THREE DAYS AND NIGHTS the Moonsinger made good headway back towards the coast, back to the waters patrolled by King Seward's men. The flag was changed, the Corsair's Colors removed and as the welcome lights of the port sailed into view on the third evening Anna Rosa

stood looking through her spyglass as Port Farrow grew larger and larger.

It was a small port on the edge of the coast, a spit of land where a few ramshackle buildings connected to the dirt and rock. It was under the very nose of the king and only a few of his men ever went there willingly.

Anna could see the various pirates and corsair ships docked there, many of them had a beef with the king and openly sacked his merchant vessels and agents' ships when they could.

"Does my heart good to see that little port again," she said to Darius. "Who do you think will be there we can trust with Simon?"

"No idea. It'll take a day or two to find someone I reckon, so we'd best be careful about asking." Darius answered.

"I suppose you're right."

The Moonsinger drifted towards the port and finally arrived just after ten, the ship was secured and moored - the captain paid the docking fee and returned to the vessel, she met Darius in her cabin by lamplight.

"Darius, I think this might be a good job for you. Go carouse and see if you can find someone we know well enough to look after Simon. I want the lad to go to the other Awakened who've managed to slip the king's leash." She leaned over the table and sipped her wine. "I am putting a great deal of faith in you for this, don't let me down."

"Like I would," Darius grinned. "I'll even limit my carouse to the menfolk."

"I'm serious," Anna Rosa glared at him. "One mistake and we could be in more trouble than we've known."

Darius nodded. "Worry not captain, you'll have to fear no slip-ups from me."

Anna Rosa smiled then and nodded, "Just what I like to hear."

Darius left the captain in her cabin and wandered across the deck, before he strolled down the gangplank and alighted on the wooden pier. He quickly made his way up into the port town proper and walked with the air of a man who had nothing to hide, so he flipped his hood back and swaggered as all good corsairs can do.

It wasn't long before he caught the eye of various women who plied their trades on the streets, as well as some of the men who did the same. Port Farrow wasn't fussed when it came to gender and it showed.

"Hey love, fancy a bit of rough and tumble. I've got the time if you have the coin"?

The speaker was a red headed slim-hipped narrow-eyed and slight-chested lass. Darius smiled at her. "I would, but I am thirsty as all hells and in need of a drink. Not as though a bit of female company would go amiss. So how about I escort you to the tavern and we have a mug or two of the good stuff?"

"Sapphie," the woman said and swished her hips. She was wearing

what could have passed for a dress, it was perhaps a little too see-through and short but Darius obviously didn't care. "You?"

"Darius," he said and hooked his arm around her waist. "What a lovely name Sapphie, goes with your gorgeous blue eyes."

The woman blushed and patted his arms, "Oh I like you, can I keep you?"

"Hah, I doubt I'd make much of a keeper. I'm a sailing man, and I leave with the tide." Darius grinned.

"Oh so you know your way around a good hull then, strong arms too I bet. Feels like it." She snuggled closer.

Darius led the woman to a fairly well built red-stone building, with fine looking windows and a small garden at the back. The sign revealed the name, it was the Fox Tavern.

"Oh the Fox," Sapphie beamed. "I love this place, got some good custom here the other day."

He steered her inside the tavern and found a table, a quick scan of the taproom revealed a man in the far corner with a hood and a quiet animal friend. A big quiet animal friend, a massive wolf sat with its nose covered by its paws and just dozed next to the gentleman's feet.

"Wait here," Darius said to the woman and headed towards the bar. "Tender!"

A short man with a sour expression and a big scar on his bare right arm looked around. His thick leather apron stained with beer

and blood. "What?"

"Two mugs of your finest brew and a word in your ear?"

The bartender nodded and dipped a couple of tankards into a nearby barrel. "Go on?" he opened his hand for the coins.

Darius dropped more than he needed into the man's hand, so quickly it was hard for anyone to see how much he'd paid.

"I find myself wondering of the man with the dog there?" Darius hooked his thumb casually. The gesture didn't go unnoticed though.

"It's a wolf, not a dog." The bartender said and shrugged. "Came in a few hours ago, decked a couple of King Seward's men. Run them clear out of the port with the help of some friends."

"You don't say?"

"I do say."

"Go on?"

"Don't know, keeps himself to himself." The bartender answered. "You'll more than likely have to ask him yourself."

"I might at that, thanks keeper." He tossed the man two more coins and returned to the woman's table with the two tankards.

"Thought you weren't coming back," Sapphie pouted. "Would have been a shame to find another young man here."

"You might have to, I have some talk to do with the hooded gent over there." Darius was suddenly all business. "If I was in port for a few more days, I'd show you a fine time honestly."

Sapphie drank her drink and gave Darius a sulky-growl. "Yeah,

you and everyone else who I think is good for a bit of fun." She stomped away from the table muttering about 'customers' and 'being shortchanged by the cute ones.

Darius grinned and walked right up to the hooded man's table, now he could get a good look at the fellow in question. He was one of those men who didn't really stand out, dressed in forest colors and leather... all business and armed with a sword and bow.

"Sorry to trouble you fellow," Darius' shadow fell across the man's table. "I'm wondering if you might have a minute. See, I was talking to the 'tender over there and he said you ran a few of Seward's agents out of the port?"

The man nodded, the wolf with him, the medium sized grey furred, amber eyed Ash just growled in the back of his throat.

"Careful Rook," he said in the back of his friend's mind. *"Might be a trap."*

Rook Ordain waved the man down and kept his features hidden inside that hood. "I did and what business is it of yours, unless you're a friend of theirs?"

"No," Darius shook his head. "I'm naught but a humble pirate in need of a man like yourself."

"Whorehouse is three streets down." Rook said frostily.

Darius laughed hard and shook his head. "No mate, I'll level with you since you have a big wolf there and that's curious to me."

"Ash," Rook said with a nod. "Is my friend, what of it?"

"I'm first mate of the Moonsinger, under Captain Anna Rosa - heard of her?"

"I have," Rook relaxed his guard and watched Ash settle down too. "That changes things, what do you need of me?"

"Just like that?" Darius blinked.

"Your captain has a reputation in our circle of being someone who is not only one of us, but a captain we can rely on to help bypass Seward's blockades in times of need."

Darius tapped his chin. "Mind if I set up a meeting at our ship?"

"Not at all, where are you docked?" Rook watched the other man.

"South dock, pier two. Can you be there in an hour?"

Rook Ordain nodded and smiled a little under the hood.

"Excellent. I'll run along and give the captain the good news!"

Darius left Rook's table and vanished into the throngs of people in the tavern, swallowed by the crowd.

#

UNDER THE SOFT LIGHT from the various lanterns, Darius made his way back to the ship and ran up the gangplank. He crossed the deck and knocked three times on the captain's cabin door.

"Come in?" her voice drifted from inside.

Darius opened the door and entered with a big smile on his face.

"We struck lucky, got a fellow who can help us."

"Get a name?"

"No, I thought it'd be best if he came here and you and he talked

a spell." Darius frowned, he'd screwed that bit up.

"Well, what makes you trust him?" Anna Rosa adjusted her posture in the chair.

"He has a wolf, a pretty big one. Called him, Ash."

Anna Rosa's eyes lit up and she sat forwards for a few moments, "Ash you say?"

"Yeah, that's what he said - you know him, because," Darius added. "He knows you."

"I know of Rook Ordain. He's Awakened, he talks to that wolf through his mind and the wolf answers back. The pair of them are tough fighters and he's one of the few men who beat me at arm wrestling."

Darius whistled softly. "The bartender said he and some friends threw some of Seward's agents out of the port."

"That would be Rook."

Darius breathed a sigh of relief and then turned to leave. "I'll leave you to talk to him alone. I don't want to get in the way."

"Thanks Darius, you have earned a bottle of rum." Anna Rosa tossed the man a big bottle. "And some shore leave till afternoon. Go find a nice woman and have yourself some fun, or two or three."

Darius' lips curled into a big smile. "I might just do that captain, I might just do that."

He left Anna Rosa alone in the cabin with her own smile, she leaned back and closed her eyes for a while just feeling the sea around her.

"Come in?"

The door opened and Rook walked in as bold as you please, he sat down on one of Anna's chairs and kicked one foot over the other. "Hello Anna," he said with a chuckle. "Your man Darius said that you needed someone to help you."

"I do," she stood up and folded her arms. "It's good to see you Rook."

He stood and pulled the woman into a long and warm embrace before their lips met for a short time.

"That good to see me too?" Anna asked.

"Always," he answered. "How are you?"

"Happier for seeing you my friend," Anna Rosa poured two glasses of wine. "Drink this, I've found another Awakened and this one was going to be sold on to King Seward."

"Sounds like the same old story I hear across the realm," Rook took the wine and drank from it. "You want me to take him from you?"

"It's too dangerous for Simon on my ship. Having me is bad enough, two of us would be easier for the King's tracker Dartmoor to catch us."

Rook nodded at this. "I hear you. So, fine...I will take the lad."

"No more than twenty years old," Anna Rosa sighed with relief.

Rook gave the captain a sly smile and chuckled. "I know some friends who can help me get him to someplace safe. I won't be able

to contact them till morning though."

"Stay here with me then, we can talk over old times?" Anna Rosa grinned fox-like.

"How about we do more than just talk?"

"I'm not averse to that idea."

"Nor am I."

They embraced again and tumbled to the floor in a frenzy of clothes and limbs.

Ash sat on the docks, he rolled his ears down and put his paws over his nose. He focused his thoughts on a nice piece of juicy steak or a freshly killed rabbit. As the night caressed the day and the moons vanished from the heavens, he ignored the sounds from the rear of the Moonsinger and grumbled off to sleep.

He knew that when afternoon came he'd be off on some other adventure with Rook Ordain, and the gods only knew where that would take them.

That however is a story best left for another tale entirely...