

Excerpt from **A PIRATE'S DAUGHTER** by Theresa M. Moore ©2018, all rights reserved.

Prologue

"Well, some say it's true, and some say it ain't, but there's something mighty peculiar about The Black Witch and her crew. She runs shallow in the draft, and when she puts into any port she does so in the middle of a fog. And her captain, he never sets foot off her decks. The crewmen have been seen from time to time haulin' supplies and such from town to the ship but I swear on me uncle's barnacles down in Davy Jones's locker they never go near a tavern or inn. It's damned peculiar, says I. It just ain't normal."

The man took a healthy swig of rum when he had finished speaking and then wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. He was tanned and gristled, with a grey stubble about his face and a squint that kept his left eye closed. He had seen better days but chose to spend the rest immersed in drink and good times when he could afford them. A corn-cob pipe dangled from his thick lips.

"Normal?" his drinking companion asked skeptically. His face was pale, and his grey eyes looked silver in the yellow light of the lanterns. He had wild longish dark hair tied back in a queue with a deep maroon ribbon, and he wore a pendant of Spanish silver dripping from his left ear. He was dressed for the sea and resembled a hodg-podge of naval officer mixed with nobility; and his manner was too refined for a scalawag. His voice was melodic, smooth and warm as silk, and his diction was perfect English but the accent leaned a bit toward Italian or Greek. "What ship or crew can be called normal in these dangerous times?"

The sailor could not place that voice, nor conjure the memory of where he had heard it before. Still, he was not discomfited by it, having been charmed somewhat by the man's solicitous and affable nature when they had first met on the street.

He was grateful for the timely intervention of the stranger, for he was already in his cups when the young man stopped him to ask for directions to the apothecary, then quickly pulled him aside before the barrel wagon's horses trampled him underfoot as it rushed pell-mell down the street.

As a reward he had insisted he would buy the stranger a drink, and he had a story to tell in his heart as gossip was a common pastime. But the stranger patted him on the back and said it was more like he was the one who would do the buying, and that warmed the cockles of the old sailor's heart more than anything he had heard in a good long while.

The man leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "Aye, but what if I was to tell ye that wherever she puts into port, she goes away trailin' rumors?"

The younger man started a little and regarded him with that steely-eyed gaze, then leaned forward with interest and asked, "what kind of rumors?"

"People comin' down with some kind of strange weakness and dreamin'. Strange things goin' on in the middle of the night. Dogs howlin' like someone's gone and died."

"The cholera, you think?" the man suggested. "There was a run of it in Barbados last year."

The rummy waved a hand and looked from left to right, not wanting to be overheard. "Nah, nothin' so horrible. I've seen the cholera so it can't be that. They recover right enough in time, but it only seems to happen when The Black Witch puts down anchor."

His companion shook his head with disbelief. "Perhaps it is mere coincidence. Such rumors are common when ships come in to harbor after a long voyage."

"Ghost ships, more like," the rummy insisted. "I say The Black Witch is one such, though I've never seen it meself. Oh, she must be a fast one to slip around the Royal Navy and the Costa Garda." He made a motion with his hands in the air like a swimming fish.

The man leaned back in his oaken chair, tipped it back, and placed his boot against the table's edge as he began to laugh. He raised his pewter mug to his lips and took a sip of his honey mead.

His drinking buddy's face went dark with indignance. "You think I be funnin'?" the sailor growled, the squinty eye closing.

The other repressed his smile quickly, then said with an amiable shrug, "no, of course not. I just think it's the influence of rum that has caused these rumors to spread about, and a man with little else to do is prone to believe anything. No, there may be a more rational explanation for these stories."

"Then how do you explain the legend gettin' started? Is there no truth to be told in it?"

The mate regarded the man with another wolfish stare. "You want to believe something fantastic and magical. I'm not saying it's not possible, just that a little imagination can go a long way in a place where strangers meet." He glanced up at the clock on the wall, whose pendulum was silent against the din of celebration and plotting in the room. He put down his mug and rose, shifted his rapier and pistol straighter and straightened his black oilskin waistcoat; swept up the broad brimmed leather hat and smoothed down the large grey ostrich feather tucked in the black band as he placed it on his head. He tossed a silver coin onto the ale soaked wood, winked at the man and said, "got to be goin' now. Thanks for the story."

The sailor glanced down at the coin. It was a Spanish doubloon, shiny and clean as if it had been minted the day before. "Here now. Where did you get that?" he asked as he picked it up and peered at it closely. "Is there more where this come from, ay?"

"That, my friend, is a very long story, which I've neither the time nor the inclination to tell you just now." The tall young man collected his long black cloak and walked toward the tavern door. Waving farewell to the innkeeper, he pushed his way out the front door into the darkness beyond.

The sailor took another gulp of rum to steel his resolve, then rose and followed.

At first he could not see the tall young man walking away in the darkness of the cobbled street. The rum blurred his vision a bit and he tottered dizzily, but he was determined to find treasure and he was not going to let the drink stop him from reaching his goal. Then he spotted his quarry already about a block away turning down the lane to the left, heading for the apothecary in question. He hurried after, but not too closely.

The stranger's pace was unhurried and steady, yet kept gaining ground no matter how fast the sailor walked. When he reached the door of the apothecary's shop the stranger stopped and turned to look behind him. The sailor quickly flattened himself against the wall of the pie shop and waited until he entered the shop.

After a few minutes passed, his quarry emerged and resumed walking. The sailor followed him until they arrived at the docks. There the man in black walked up the gangplank of the dark ship anchored at one of the piers and spoke to two men who nodded and resumed the watch. Then he disappeared into the captain's cabin at the stern.

The rummy looked closely at the ship and his mouth fell open. No fog, nor mist, nor rum, could make her less sharply defined in the moonlight. She was real all right, a frigate rigged for stealth and darkness, all sharp angles and points like a sea urchin. She had a sleek hull, painted black down to and past the water line. Her black sails were furled and tied off on the yardarms. She had three masts and her bow sprit was long and sharp looking. She had twenty guns.

He saw the wooden mascot carved in the shape of a woman with wild hair and eyes stretching her long arms back to embrace the hull attached to her back, and her skin was black as pitch. A chill went through him as he saw the red letters painted on the black wood with the name, matching the long red flag fluttering in the tropical island breeze atop the main mast. The Black Witch.

Then he saw the door to the captain's cabin open again, and he saw the man come out followed closer by a slimmer man, who had long dark hair and wore dark clothes like the stranger's. He heard a reedy voice that told him the man was a woman as she barked, "Rise up, ye dogs! Raise anchor! We're leaving now!"

He watched the deck come alive with activity as the crew made preparations to set sail. He knew he could not get closer without being seen and challenged by the men on the deck. They did not look like ghosts but honest God-fearing men. He stayed where he was and watched the sails unfurl and swell with warm island wind. The great iron weight was raised to the scuppers as the ship eased away from the pier on the gentle swell of the tide.

He saw her disappear into the darkness of the sea and the mist rising from its surface, and now he knew why she did so readily. No lamp was lit on the deck. The men were working by the light of the moon.

Nodding his sudden understanding, the sailor abandoned his post and made his way back toward the inn, where he would drown his wonder in more rum, saving the sight for future telling.