

THE MALTESE DRAGON • 1

CAPTAIN MORTIMER MEACHAM, master of *The Maltese Dragon*, trained his spyglass on the distant horizon. The sun rode high in the cloudless sky, and the sea was awash in bright sunlight in every direction. Something caught the captain's attention. He scanned the western horizon with his spyglass, and he found what he was seeking. His back stiffened, and his breath came quickly. He examined the horizon for several long minutes. Then he turned to Amos Strasbourg, who was standing nearby and watching him with keen interest.

"You had better go below, rabbi," he said. "You'll be safer there."

Amos leaned against the ship's rail and strained to discover what the captain had seen, but he saw only the ripple and sparkle of gentle blue waves stretching off into the distance.

"What's happening, Captain Meacham?" he said. "There's nothing but water out there. Water, water and more water."

The captain shook his head and offered him the spyglass. "Here, rabbi. Take a look for yourself, and then tell me what you see."

Amos put the spyglass to his eye and pointed it in the direction the captain was indicating. At first, he saw nothing, but then he noticed a tiny black speck. As he watched, it grew perceptibly larger, and Amos thought he could see the outlines of a ship with black sails. He had never seen a ship

with black sails before, and he found the sight disconcerting and even frightening.

"I see it," he said as he handed the spyglass back to the captain. "Who is it, and what do they want?"

"It's *The Black Widow*."

Amos felt a shiver run down his spine. "The pirate ship? Mad Dog Kelly's pirate ship?"

"That's right."

"But what is he doing here? We're practically in Morocco. Doesn't Kelly usually stay close to his hideouts in Ireland?"

"That he does, old Mad Dog Kelly, may his black heart be eaten by sharks and may whatever the sharks miss rot at the bottom of the sea. Mad Dog fancies himself an Irish patriot protecting the Emerald Isle from the British, French and anyone else that might set foot there. But it's all a sham, mark my words. He's just a greedy scoundrel, and now he's coming after us."

Amos was about to ask another question, but the captain held up his hand for silence. He signaled to the first mate and issued his orders in rapid English that Amos did not catch. The first mate hurried off to execute the captain's orders, and the captain returned to his scrutiny of the western horizon. The black spot had grown larger as the speedy pirate ship closed the distance between them, and it was now recognizable as a seagoing vessel even without a spyglass. Finally, he put down the spyglass.

"Rabbi Strasbourg, I like you," he said. "You're an intelligent man, and I've enjoyed conversing with you and our occasional games of chess. But I have a crisis on my hands right now. What is your question? I'll answer one question and one question only, and then you have to go below."

"What's going on, captain?"

The captain chuckled. "Clever question. All right. There was a rumor going around the harbor of New York that our

ship is carrying a vast treasure in gold and silver and that we're sailing without a naval escort. Mad Dog Kelly must have heard the rumor and decided to go after the treasure."

"Is there really such a treasure on this ship?"

"No, but Kelly thinks there is."

Amos caught his breath. "Then he'll attack us for sure. All we have is one cannon in the bow. We don't stand a chance against a fully armed pirate ship."

"We'll do our best, rabbi," said the captain. "Why don't you go below and do something useful? Say a few prayers. Maybe that will help."

Amos nodded to the captain and headed for the passageway to the lower decks, but then he changed his mind and found an unobtrusive spot not far from the aft deckhouse from which to observe the activity.

On the main deck amidships, there were large mounds of cargo covered with canvas tarpaulins. As Amos watched, two dozen sailors armed with pistols, knives and cutlasses gathered around the tarpaulins and remained standing silently at attention while they awaited further instructions. The posture of the men indicated to Amos that they weren't ordinary sailors. They carried themselves with a military bearing that spoke of training and service in the Royal British Navy.

In fact, thought Amos, upon reflection Captain Meacham and the ship's officers all seemed to be naval people. Had they all left the navy and found new employment on merchant ships? Or were they actually naval people disguised as ordinary sailors? But why would they do such a thing?

Amos looked up and saw that *The Black Widow* was gaining rapidly on the port side of *The Maltese Dragon*. The black sails billowed out like evil demons, straining against the wind that drove them forward. There was a white insignia on one of the sails that Amos identified as the skull and crossbones favored by seagoing buccaneers. He could see lookouts high

in the crow's nest training their spyglasses on *The Maltese Dragon*. Minutes later, he could make out pirates on the deck of their ship watching through their own spyglasses.

The pirate ship drew closer, and Amos could see very clearly the row of cannons bristling from its starboard side, and he had no doubt there was a similar row of cannons on the port side. He saw pirates milling about on their main deck, shouting and brandishing their weapons in the air. Amos could sense their excited bloodlust and greed across the narrowing expanse of open sea between the two ships, and he shivered.

"Now!" shouted the captain.

The sailors instantly sprang into action and scrambled over the mounds on the starboard side of the deck, which could not be easily seen by the pirate ship approaching on the port side. They snatched away the tarpaulins, revealing an array of huge cannons, piles of cannonballs and sacks of gunpowder. They wheeled the cannons to the edge of the starboard deck and secured them in place. Then they loaded and primed all the cannons.

The pirate ship loomed large on the port side, and blood-curdling screams of the eager pirates reverberated across the waves.

"Get ready, mates!" shouted the captain. "As soon as we come around, secure the cannons on the port side. There's not a moment to waste. They're smaller and faster, but we're bigger and meaner. All right, mates, now!"

The helmsman spun the wheel, and *The Maltese Dragon* turned into the wind. Amos could see the pirates on the deck of *The Black Widow* laughing at the clumsy merchant vessel trying to elude capture by turning around. As *The Maltese Dragon* went deeper into the turn, the sailors on the other side of the deck pulled away the rest of the tarpaulins and set up the second battery of cannons on the port side of the deck.

The ship came full turn until the starboard cannons were pointed almost directly at *The Black Widow*. The pirate captain, the notorious Mad Dog Kelly, stared at the huge cannons with alarm, then he screamed his orders to pull away.

“Fire!” shouted the captain of *The Maltese Dragon*.

Twenty cannons belched flame in unison, firing at the pirate ship at little more than point-blank range. The cannonballs flew across the open water with a horrible screeching noise and ripped mercilessly into the black ship. As Amos watched, one cannonball struck the forecastle of the pirate ship and instantly reduced it to a pile of splinters. Another cannonball ignited a magazine of gunpowder amidships, causing a massive explosion and setting the ship on fire. The torn and bleeding bodies of dead pirates littered the decks.

But Mad Dog Kelly was not ready to give up the fight. Amos could hear him shouting orders and encouragement to his men. “Bring her around, laddies. Their cannons are on the starboard side. We’ll board them from the port side.”

The burning pirate ship spun away and maneuvered to the other side of *The Maltese Dragon*, but to the horror of the surviving pirates, the port side was also bristling with cannons. The English captain gave the order, and a new barrage of cannonballs smashed into the blazing pirate ship. The sailors quickly reloaded and fired another salvo. The masts of the pirate ship came crashing down, and the raging flames licked at the deflated black sails.

The pirate ship was destroyed, writhing in its death throes amid the screams of the dying and the shouts of the desperate men lowering lifeboats into the water. But even as it lay mortally wounded, the pirates managed to fire off one salvo at *The Maltese Dragon*.

Most of the pirate cannonballs fell harmlessly into the water either in front of *The Maltese Dragon* or beyond it. But one of them struck the center of the aft deckhouse with dev-

astating force, blowing it apart with such explosive energy that debris flew in all directions like small pieces of cannon shot.

Amos had been watching the engagement with the pirate ship from his vantage point near the deckhouse, and when it exploded, he was hurled across the deck. His body slammed against the ship's railing. A flying piece of planking struck him across the back of his neck, and he blacked out.

When he came to his senses, he saw everything in a red haze. He moved his limbs gingerly one by one to make sure they were all intact. They were painfully sore, but nothing seemed to be broken. He tried to stand up, but he was overcome by dizziness and fell back.

As his vision cleared and came into focus, he saw the pirate ship through the railing against which he lay. The ship was ablaze bow to stern. Two lifeboats had been lowered into the water, and twenty men, most of them blackened and bloodied, were crowded into each of them. The lifeboats pulled away from the burning ship and moved toward *The Maltese Dragon* several hundred feet away.

From his vantage point, lying in a heap on the deck, Amos saw the English captain standing ramrod straight against the railing amidships.

"Fire!" shouted the captain. "Blow them out of the water!"

The cannons roared, and after the sailors reloaded, the cannons roared again. Most of the cannonballs fell harmlessly into the water, spewing tall fountains of sparkling seawater, but a few of them found their mark. Both lifeboats were smashed to smithereens. Most of the pirates were killed instantly. The few that survived sustained grave injuries. They flailed about in the water, screaming for help. Captain Meacham watched impassively as their cries grew weaker and weaker until they slipped below the surface of the sea and disappeared from view.

The captain turned to his sailors with a tight smile on his lips. He touched the tips of his fingers to the brim of his cap in a casual salute.

“Well done, men,” he said. “And good riddance. Carry on. We’ve got a ship to sail. You can leave the cannons where they are. There’s no more need for deception.”

Amos struggled to his feet, holding the railing for balance, but another wave of dizziness swept over him. As he staggered forward, he felt himself slipping into a pool of blackness, and he lost consciousness.

When he awoke, he was no longer on the deck. He lay on a narrow cot in a cabin redolent with strange smells. The fading light coming through the porthole told him that several hours had passed. The ship’s doctor was looking down at him.

“Lie still, my good man,” said the doctor. “Welcome to the sick bay. There don’t seem to be any parts missing, so I expect you can go back to your cabin in a few hours.”

The door opened, and the captain came in. He sat down on a chair, crossed his legs, pulled a pipe from his pocket and stuck it between his lips.

“So how are you doing, rabbi?”

“Could be better, but could be worse. The doctor says I’ll be fine.”

“Good,” said the captain. “I’m in the mood for a game of chess.”

“Right now?”

“I wouldn’t mind that. It would increase my chances of winning. But I’ll wait until tomorrow. So was this the first sea battle you ever saw?”

“It wasn’t much of a battle, was it?” said Amos. “More like an execution.”

The captain’s eyes narrowed. “Mad Dog Kelly was a menace to sea travelers. We spread a rumor about treasure and

lured him into following a defenseless merchant vessel, and then we blasted him out of the water. Do you have a problem with what we did?”

Amos shook his head. “No, I don’t. I’m only sorry I stayed on deck to watch. If I’d listened to you and gone below, I wouldn’t be lying here now.”

“And if you’d been any closer to the deckhouse, you wouldn’t be lying here now either. We’d be scraping what’s left of you from the deck. There were two men inside the deckhouse, and you wouldn’t have enjoyed the sight of them. We sewed up their remains in two bags and buried them at sea.”

Amos shivered. “Those cannonballs are like black devils, screaming as they fly through the air until they smash into their targets.”

“Aye, that they are, rabbi. That they are. Beautiful black devils with long tails of fire. I love the sight of them.”

“Well, I hope never to see them again.”

“Not much chance of avoiding it, rabbi. Not these days. Maybe if you’d stayed in New York, maybe you could have avoided battles and cannon fire. Maybe. But you’re going back to Europe, and mark my words, rabbi, Europe will be in flames for many years. You’re from Amsterdam, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“So what are you doing on a ship headed for Venice?”

“It’s a long story,” said Amos.

The captain lit his pipe and leaned back. “We’ve got time.”

“Well, we have a cousin in a small town in Poland called Pulichev. His name is Rabbi Shlomo Strasbourg. He is old and very wise, a great man and a famous scholar. My father wrote to me from Amsterdam that he heard our cousin was in poor health and that he was going to visit him, perhaps for the last time on this earth. He suggested I meet him in Poland and pay my respects as well. But he didn’t want me to travel through Amsterdam and across Germany, because

he was afraid that Germany was on the verge of becoming a battleground. He believed he could get to Poland before hostilities broke out, but he was afraid that by the time I got to Amsterdam, it would be too dangerous to travel across Germany to Poland.”

“Your father is well-informed,” said the captain. “King Louis XIV of France is way too powerful, and he’s out to conquer as much of Europe as he possibly can. According to my information, Austria, the German states, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain and Portugal are forming an alliance against France. And there’s talk that England might join as well. It’s going to be all of Europe against the French, and even so, it won’t be easy to contain them. Europe is a powder keg, and it’s about to explode.”

“That’s what my father wrote,” said Amos. “Instead of traveling across Germany, he suggested I go north to Poland through the Balkans. My plan is to disembark when you stop in the port of Dubrovnik on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea and head overland through Bosnia, with perhaps a quick stop in the Jewish community of Sarajevo, to Belgrade in Serbia and then north to Budapest and on to Poland.”

“You know, there’s risk of war in the Balkans as well,” said the captain. “The Turks have drawn back after their defeat at Vienna three years ago, and the Imperial armies haven’t pursued them too far. But that could change any day. You could be heading directly into a war zone.”