



The LEAVES *of* FATE

In the Land of Whispers



BOOK THREE

The LEAVES *of* FATE



a novel by

GEORGE ROBERT MINKOFF



McPherson & Company

*For Nancy,
yet again...again*

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Endsheet map: *to come*

One hundred copies of the first printing have been specially bound,
numbered, and signed by the author.

How all occasions do inform against me . . .

HAMLET, ACT 4. SCENE 4

PART ONE

*Angels in Their
Silent Gather*

THE ALCHEMIES OF THE RIVER

*Shadows float through me on their wisps of blood. In salted
storms, in bleeding clouds their currents swirl. A flesh of vapors
dissolves. I hear new words. Constantly now. No longer
as fleeting leaves. There are men of new silhouettes.
The light drowns. The moon bears a strange glow.
The life through me craves in an ancient hunger,
as I am born into a new forgetfulness.*

Chapter One

LOVE BY TOOTH AND FIRE.



BY WHAT CONSEQUENCE am I foretold! Death now my company, I sat alone. The old mariner stiffened in his decay, worms soon his alchemies. What magics to digest his course? His clock has sprung the winding spring, the phantom pendulum now swings confined in its ghostly orbit. Who guides you now, my mariner? Which demon, ship or seer shall map thy journeys through the air? What haunted wind to bloom a specter's sail? Your rumored boat to heel upon a rumored sea. By what nothing do you blank in this your final passage? Presume the wind, old friend, its motion is the soul. All directions are its gate.

I, the exile, had returned alone to feast my desolations into quest. In the distance, through canticles of air, the birds flew in darkening sheets of pantomime. Blanket me in feathers now — your light wanders in shadows upon the earth. Be at my feet and squabble crumbs. War thimbles on your beaks. Am I that castaway to think in masquerades? For in the woods the tribes might call me son. I, the heir of voices; I am a *werowance*, the voices still sound for me. Oh, Pocahontas, my forest love, what adoptions were in your glance? Should I flee to you? I, alone, now less a danger to your father. Would he rather give me a little food, or a little taste of death? All our plagues are in the choice. What lethals seat in my love's caress? Shall I rise now and seek that bliss in some parting from myself? Into what tombs my rebirth; into what mortuaries am I reborn?

I was about to stand. A darkness at my side, I turned. Above me stood the ruins of a man, his beard half balding on his cheek, his skull against the tight drums of his skin. What skeleton this, that walks its rattles upon my earth? His eyes had sunken into bony caves. His clothes fell in threads down the hollows of his chest. Both of his thumbs were missing. At their lower joints were nubs and shards and splinters of broken bones protruding through the scarlet of raw flesh. He sat at my side, stared into the bay. The sky hissed its

gloom through the serpents of its rolling clouds. “You goin’ to have a chew?” he said. “Got a barrel...for the proper curin’.” At first I did not understand his words. “Not yet fresh gray, tight boned...shame it’s an ancient gristle of not much meat,” the man repeated, almost annoyed, directing his boot toward the dead mariner.

The day was warm. The man shivered in his strange excitements. He stroked the old mariner’s hair, pinched his arm. He smiled, his scurvy gums bleeding down the spaces between his teeth. His mouth smelled of death. “A two-day kill brings its own spice. We could stew a mite with rabbit for the savor.”

The wind ran its teeth across my face, hinting at the reek of putrefying flesh. The man spoke. “I got salt. I’ll do most the work if I get a bit...none’s to waste...worth its weight.” Enticing me, he moiled in his own thin laugh. I looked into the claw of his face, the stubble on his cheek, its wreck, the bald spots of his beard. Behind the desperate pulls of leathery skin was an apparent face, so familiar in drift that I searched it for a recognition. “You’re John Laydon. You married Anne Burras, Mistress Forrest’s servant. I’m Smith. I’m Captain Smith.”

The man buried his face in his hands and wept, his tears sliding in drops to the wounds of his missing thumbs. “You never would have done...what Percy done.” Around me contagion beckoned.

“Hung me by my thumbs, he did,” John Laydon nodding to his own witness, “putting weights on my feet, till my thumbs broke loose my hands. The ground came to me. I ran...they too weak and lazy to follow.” The man hysterical in remembrance now. “I ran into the forest, rubbed dirt into the wounds. Mud stops the oozy. I ate birds raw and rats, dug roots. Vermin made in fleshy cakes. Rot sweets the meat.” The man giggled, his hands to his mouth, holding to his lips a thought. “Percy...cruel...in jealousies tore me hurt.” Laydon laughed. “Me, the apostle, me that made conclusions. Percy could not eat his jealousies so he spiced his angers upon my thumbs. The food was gone, we victualled on the horses, ate the hogs. The savages murdered us in the woods, killed our mares. We cooked our dead horses. War came upon us in its fists. For war better provides the meat. I ate the dead savages, buttered them on my fires cured with salt and bubbled on the heat. No one ate but me in secret, and envious Percy waited his time to strike. All were boned and starved and me still fit. Dead flesh is stale. Fresh ripens for a better fit. All goodness to

the blood. It is a slander to say killing those that are to die is murder. It be said love sweet tongues its sweetest meats, then why not heat it with a little fire? My wife blessed me when I struck her dead. By God our flesh now better joined. I cut the child from her womb. To eat oneself is a cannibal and doubly cursed. No heaven on that stew. I gave the child to the river as a royal gift. Percy hung me to confess, but I still live. No more cannibal than saint. I did my right.”

There was a silence for a time. All I had sacrificed had come to this. I thought to the pistol at my side. I could kill him, have some peace. I looked to John Laydon. He was mad. Madness cradles a cruel comfort. Behind the mask, the deeper mask cracks in sorrow. Laydon spoke again, his chin thrust forward, his own blood upon his lips. The words then came in secret deaths “I am alive and yet you accuse me with your eyes.” John Laydon licked the blood from his lips. “I have fed upon the apple of my own blood. I have healed myself. I have eaten of my own. What foods make your cure, John Smith? Do you not think men would eat their brains, had they the reach?” He looked at me. “Who has not eaten of his own forbidden fruit? Each man thrills that orchard through his spine to the chilled excitements of his brain. What shell the skull that lusts to its own forbidden meat?” Laydon smiled to a violence seeping beneath his stare. “All dead but me, and you accuse and look away. I have tasted of salvations, pierced myself in flames and resurrections, and you were not what you supposed. At best, you were ignored. While you lay wounded, Martin and Percy sought vengeance by murder on the savages and were you told? Were you? You filled your books with halves, and you confess to what? Another book. How cracks your hollow wafer now?”

Laydon, a smile upon his blood-rouged lips, parceled his tale. Martin, flexed in anger, marched his men by stumble overland. “Sneaked they did,” by Laydon’s account. At Nansemond, they sent two messengers to the savages with greetings and words that they wished to buy a small island off the main, offering copper and hatchets to pleasure any trade. The messengers not having returned, the company waited. “Martin, eaten on a coward’s panic, he was, sent men to seize the island by force. On their way, seeing some savage in a canoe, the soup not salted yet, we asked after the missing two. The savage fled, saying they were dead, their heads cut off, their brains beaten out and scraped from their skulls with mussel shells. The savages made an oyster’s bloody porridge, it is said.” Laydon

now danced the story as he sat, swaying back and forth. What license madness brings when we loosen the chains of all restraints.

The company now anointed itself right and wholly just. Martin and Percy came upon the savages with war, burning their village, stealing the pearls and copper bracelets from the mummied corpses of their long-dead kings. They destroyed their tombs and threw their ancient bodies in the fire. Smoke to dust and smoke, all their ancient death now gone. The walled village they kept as their fort, reinforcing the *palisado* with fresh logs.

Percy returning to Jamestown, reporting all was well, but for some small assaults. Martin following in a few days with talk of war. Seventeen starving fled in a stolen boat to Kecoughtan, pretending to come in trade. All were murdered. Lieutenant Sicklemore and those who remained at Nansemond were found dead, their mouths stuffed with trading beads, their bodies butchered in contempt. "All this while Martin and Archer and Ratcliffe still conspired for your death, and you and your mariner gone."

Percy, made president, sent Ratcliffe to build a fort at Point Comfort. Soon after, Captain West abandoned the settlement at the falls and returned, his men mostly dead or dying of starvation and fevers. Captain Daniel Tucker was appointed to calculate and divide the stores, which amounted to half a cup of meal a day a man. These starvation victuals to last three months, the company made last four. This disaster down their throats, there being no hope of resupply from England before the spring. It was now November. Percy requested Captain Ratcliffe to sail to a meeting with Powhatan at Werowocomoco and have commerce with him and trade for corn. Ratcliffe ventured some fifty in a pinnace, accompanied by a boy and a girl Percy believed to be Powhatan's son and daughter, "although I thought they were but common savages. They being sent as hostages to keep Powhatan at peace, Ratcliffe having his thoughts on the girl for other matters." Laydon licked his crusted lips.

Powhatan received Ratcliffe and his men with all the grand gestures of a peace. And so the savages fight their wars by stealth, their armor wrapped in corn and furs. Ratcliffe, to show himself great, released his hostages. Captain Fettiplace and his few, Laydon among them, were to stay with the pinnace, while Ratcliffe and thirty-six walked through the cool, resisting waters to the shore. Into the village Ratcliffe and his company swept in thoughts of hunger

and its greeds, running to the savage huts, tearing at the furs hanging in the doorways, searching for food. Their weapons forgotten or left or stolen. Screams soon in muffled conquests. Ratcliffe, realizing too late his danger, called his men to stand as one. The few still living answered, stumbling to his side, unarmed.

“Taste blood and awaken, eat the drips upon the claws of war and savor then the eggs of slaughter.” Laydon’s eyes now wild. “Ratcliffe was taken alive as prisoner, bound naked to a tree, a great fire lit before him. The women of the tribe carved away his skin with mussel shells, scraping the slabs of meat to the bone, white, and glazed blood beneath the butchery. Ratcliffe still living, they threw his pieces into the fire before his eyes. Then, tied to a tree, bleeding in fountains, the savages burned him as a torch, the flames rising all around as his cloak.”

He who once said that God was flesh had died a death befitting of himself, I mused.

“Only one escaped to the pinnacle. There, with William Fettiplace, they held back the assaults of the savages, returning then to Jamestown with the bitter news. No victuals brought back. We could have had trade for Ratcliffe’s shoes. That sweet leather is not so base.

“Although defeated, our chance at vengeance kept its dish for another time. So weak we were, our angers lazy. Our stomachs pained, our thoughts upon ourselves and our own relief. Pain and pleasure are the only eye the Cyclops hunger knows.”

John Laydon giggled in a passing smirk to death. His skin so tight to his bones, it seemed a frozen stone sculptured to his face. Again his tale he spoke. “We all moved through a haze of madness. Those we thought healthy by daylight died by night. Death so common, the living seemed the fraud. My wife giving her life to me. Her salted bits of meat her gift, her love, salted in its wooden barrel. Men turn beast and wild when they starve. Percy then mad. I danced on the end of ropes by my broken thumbs for his cruelty. I fled into the woods, stole the dead at night. By day men cried and denied their God, driven mad by suffering. They ran to the savages but I was always true and kept the Sabbath in the woods.

“The weather warmed. Of the five hundred only some sixty now breathed at Jamestown. The company so weak and lazy I could in daylight steal to the open gates and hear the news. Captain Tucker was building a large boat with his own hands, and with some little help from the colony.

“No one had been to Point Comfort for months. Such was the trial of our indulgence, no communication from that fort and none we sent. Men sat and died while I labored greasy fingers at my feasts. Percy went to organize an expedition against the savages who had murdered ours on the Nansemond River. It was guessed that the silence from Point Comfort meant they too were starving, or had butchered each other over crumbs. But on arriving, Percy found a healthy colony, well fed, with foods in such plenties they fed their hogs with the victuals from their stores. They lived on oysters and fish and what fowl they could shoot. Percy, seeing men fat, raged, calling down treason on their heads, to let Jamestown starve while they had sufficient for tenfold their number.

“Men wallowed in fat, their belts tied hard against their girth, which oozed in sacks to the cover of their waists. Percy would have had all their heads, but ate his fill, promising to bring half of Jamestown to Point Comfort by next tide.

“As plans were made for his departure, two sails in soiled gray grimed the scene, patched in weathered tatters. Two boats, open pinnaces. Foolish men, fearing a Spanish fleet, took to their weapons. The boats approached, white wake, the bow pushed waters. A lover’s slight of hand, the water parting as an open slice, a voice from its deck came, saying, ‘The lost have returned.’ It was Sir Thomas Gates, Sir George Somers, Captain Newport and their company, presumed drowned in the hurricane’s wild flung swells. After ten months of shipwreck in Bermuda, they had built two boats and made the Chesapeake. A hundred new colonists to the feast. By next tide they came to Jamestown. I climbed a tree to better vantage Gates’s face at the sight of our ruin. Everywhere the smell of death, a hollow wreck, the town’s wooden boards drummed to hanging fragments.

“Men knelt and prayed. Bread was baked. Now a little food. I watched from the corners and heard the words: the colony was to be abandoned. Stores put aside and packed on the boats. They would sail for England.

“Jamestown was to be burned, but at the last the fort was reprieved. ‘Let it be a sanctuary for any goodly men as we who chance this way in need,’ said Gates. And so by wind they left, not hours before you arrived.”

Broken in speech, I looked at John Laydon. The vistas of my world had come to this. But trumpets sometimes call their fanfares

into sight, their sound too whispered to raise the ear. The soft curve of the horizon now transfixed in sails. A fleet of ships bearing where I stood. My eyes teared, my mouth tasting rescue. Bloom your fabrics, resurrect the tatters of my dream. John Laydon stood, stepping back from the water's edge toward the ruined fort and the forest. The ships making toward the shore, Laydon moved further into the cape of his own darkness, walking toward the fort, repelled by the rescue that was not his. He disappeared, running toward the forest as if fleeing into his own ghost. I never saw him again. Whether he died by savages or starvation, or if he still lives, the question marked! For what his self-made tale? Laydon now orphaned to the air, a path to wayward memories, a course to words.

Trumpets called from the ships to the empty fort, flags waving, banners of noble houses—the crests, the heraldries of England had come to this beach, and I, dressed in deerskin clothes, stood by a corpse, my only herald, the only armor for my cause. I waited. Hundreds to the deck, new colonists and three pinnaces with the survivors of Jamestown. The world is a slip to befuddle the wise. Lord De la Warr's fleet had met the pinnacle of Gates and Somers and Newport in the Chesapeake Bay before they ever made the open sea. So simple the conspiracies of fate, and to such wide effect. He brought them back.

The ships tethered to the beach, ropes tied to the trees, our simple dock. Wooden planks laid down so his lordship could walk unsoiled upon the land. How many flags to address the wind? Trumpets lacing calls in proud announcements. Swords and polished brass, silks shining like armor fabric. His marshals by his side, Lord De la Warr walked to the beach and knelt, praying among the splendor of his flags. Those flags rising above him in the spires of their heraldries, their eagles turned on vaulted wings, and cherubs sang pink through wind-puffed cheeks.

LORD DE LA WARR STOOD AND WALKED TO ME. BY HIS SIDE, PERCY and Captain Argall, whom I had not seen since August last when his ships came by a shorter northern route to the Chesapeake. Argall still seemed to me my twin, same beard and face, but better dressed and of somewhat larger size. He nodded to me a distant welcome. Lord De la Warr, inspired of his station, calm, feeling all eyes upon him, he looked at me a look of vague surprise.

“Heathen or gentleman?” he asked.

“Captain Smith,” replied Lord Percy.

“Ah, yes.” Lord De la Warr motioned with this hand, the procession to continue and I to follow, included in the group. Percy cleared his throat to gain some attention of his lordship, who in stately disregard walked on toward the fort. The two hundred colonists in a wandering mass gathered behind the banners of the parade. They stepped over the mariner in his seated death. As we walked, his lordship asked, “And who’s your friend, the dead one on the beach?”

“Jonas Profit, an old mariner, loyal to our cause, rounded the world with Drake,” I said.

“Oh, didn’t everyone?” smiled his lordship. “Seafarers have always made an easy entertainment of the truth.”

THROUGH THE BROKEN GATES OF THE FORT, ITS SPRUNG HINGES, ITS rude wrecked planks cast aside, we in fetid squabble pushed along the narrow streets, the thatched roofs of collapsed dwellings, sunken into an empty dark. The road strewn with fresh debris, a vacancy confettied by neglect. At the church, a hovel now, water ran along the trough of the slaughtered roof, walls pitched inwards, staggering on their rotten pins. Before the place his lordship faced the crowd. Pastor Buck, our new minister, gave a sermon, thanking the lord on this tenth day of June, 1610, his eyes upon his employer, Sir Thomas Gates. All those sentiments to efface the dread. Anthony Scott, cousin to Samuel Argall, read Lord De la Warr’s commission from the king, and the new charter also voiced. The colony now no longer the king’s, but a private enterprise, separate from his sovereign rule, but governed at his bequest by others made regent through his divine authority. The new governor having all power to make and change laws, directions, instructions, forms and ceremonies of government; appoint any and all to the offices he created; to abrogate, revoke or change whatever was necessary within the precincts of the colony and even unto the surrounding seas. He was by the king’s own signature made an almost sovereign under English law, only limited by the precedents of that law, the king and English common practice. *But England’s a long way off*, I thought. Around his lordship, his banners waved their separate frames, their faces in colored toss and furrowed snaps roll upon the breeze. Now this desolation’s all emblazoned in stands of colored tints. Music fanfared in drums and rhapsodies of

blind asides. His consorts rounded in their silks cheered as Lord De la Warr stepped forth to speak.

“All that are destruction and miseries in this place have come by vanity. All who have idled are its cause, and all who have put station before the future of this enterprise.” So he spoke, his hands in gold-laced cuffs, gold braided, in shining reds. A lesser king, made by his sovereign a king, a crease upon the paper fold of state to what tear of nation I did not know. After the speech, I was brought back through the town to the Governor’s ship, named after himself, the *De la Warr*. I surmised myself being held to some judgment...justice here always writ on the gallows of a fickle mood. On the beach I did not see the body of the mariner. It was taken to some barren hill and buried, I was later told. In mysteries we live our lives, to die into mysteries, our bodies cast into mysteries. All that we are, forgotten upon the turning of a spade of dirt.

By the Jamestown walls near the river, men were lifting black lacquered cannons, strung with dirt and vines and ooze from the pit into which they were thrown when Gates and Somers and Newport abandoned the place. “Well hid, this heavy booty,” laughed one of the diggers as I passed. The cannons set upon their carriages again. Men staggered under their weight. Around me a world seemed to awaken to its grave.

I was led to De la Warr’s cabin. There I was told to sit. Thin rays of light broke through the windows in frozen shafts. The colors of the room held to the nervous shadows, their darkness insinuating opulence. Shortly, De la Warr entered, followed by Newport, Percy, Argall, Martin and the recorder for the colony, a William Strachey. They did not talk. Newport nodded in my direction. Martin smiled a smile of some sinister delight. De la Warr spoke—his age, but a few more years than mine, hanging in tallow skin down the flats of his face. His eyes, blue in surface of a watery fire, told the tale of a refined madness. “Captain Smith, there are many serious charges brought against you here, contained in this letter, a copy of which Captain Martin has given me, and testified to by Captain Newport”—De la Warr smiled in Newport’s direction—“soon to be my vice-admiral Newport. These charges include crimes committed when you were president and after. The most serious is fleeing to the savages before a proper justice could be brought against you, inciting the savages to war and barring them by force from trading with the colony, so

leading to the death of five hundred and forty Englishmen during the time of starvation. How say you?" De la Warr leaned back into his chair, trying to dust an indifferent crumb from the lace of his sleeve with a whisk of his hand.

"These are slanders. I fed this colony when gentlemen and their servants idled. I explored this bay, drew maps, when others played. I left Jamestown, true, but with the king's own commission to find his abandoned subjects from Roanoke, discover Raleigh's lost. And so I made my expedition, even wounded. Even treacheries against me, I have held to the purpose of this enterprise."

Lord De la Warr nodded to his own silence, looking to the others. The breath of this enterprise holding its judgment upon me. Captain Newport spoke to the truth of the accusations, "though there is some overstatement here." Their venom spent, Martin and Percy succumbed to an exhausted quiet, Percy, uncomfortable in his seat, adding a kind word about the difficulties of the presidency. Then Samuel Argall rose to speak. "I have had some witness of the man here accused, and I believe all these charges false," he said. He looked to me as a mirror into a second self. To hear me plead for me by a second voice. What glory found to glory. Then William Strachey, whom I had never met, spoke. "My lord, by all the reports and letters here gathered, both by written word and tongued discourse, idle, lazy men and fouled plans brought this colony to its corpse. To blame the innocent is to birth another folly. In your speech today, my lord, you named the cause with its own name...be in that guilt enough for all to share." Cool, the reasoned Strachey to his seat again. Lord De la Warr licking his teeth, as if to sharpen every fang. Then his lordship spoke. "The cause of these accusations may have been informed by some misjudgments. The balance is not upon the tongue but in the substance. I will take some advisements and some council. Till then Captain Smith is to be imprisoned in my ship's hold. So it is ordered; so let it be."

As Lord De la Warr stood, the others stood. Hands upon me then, I into darkness. Words whispered to me by Argall I did not hear. Strachey to his lordship's side. The others assured, relaxed into vengeance.