

*For Nancy,
Yet again...*

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Chapter One

FOUL DEEDS AND GREAT ADVENTURES.



THE NIGHT FULL UPON US, winds swept in serpents through the trees, low clouds dragged convulsing smoke along the shore as veiled lightning forked thunder in the mist. Rains in bleeding sheets fell against us and our barge, soaking our clothes and our sails. We glistened in the torrents in the dark.

The wind drove us into the bay, the fleeting candles of the lightning illuminating the silhouette of the blackened coast. Combed by the wind, waves in white spray tossed the barge in violence. We tied ropes about our waists to hold us to our places. We trimmed our sails to save our mast. Jonas at the tiller screamed orders, his words lost in the wind, his gestures frozen in the flashes of lightning. His only words to reach our ears were hymns to Drake's father, the timeless god of the sea.

Men wept, despairing of life. Through the breaks of lightning we could see an island's low roll of grass and earth that might offer some protection. In careful wheel, our sails in proper trim, our helmsman set course for its rough plate.

The island's gray shadow rose out of the dark, the winds in flow across its weeds, tossing them in waves, as if madness brushed them to their roots. Now there came a pair of clouds whose boiling strokes fled across the water's reach. The sky cracked fire, displaying in its flash a cloud sculpted in the figure of a man, his arm held forward, pointing in the direction of his flight, his face turmoiled in the tempest, his lips laughing thunder. The old mariner stood from the tiller, screaming, "It's Drake.... It's Drake.... He beckons us onward." Seizing on his passions, the old man now froze to his bone. The barge began to turn in helpless twist, coming sideways to the water's rush, listing as she rose into capsized. Below the ocean-calling waters, the breakers festooned in our liquid mortuaries threw me against the gunnels of the barge. My rope snaps. I slip upon the rising deck, falling toward the hungry waters. I grab at air. I am caught by nothing. Held by an arm, I am pulled to the deck. Everywhere we are awash.

“We’ll founder,” cried Todkill, the barge heaving on the push of the water. I roll against the cabin. The mariner still holds me by the arm. I look at him.

“Death is a wound of sorts.” Tasting my own bravery, I smiled.

“I don’t want you dead, nor even harmed, you fool...you fool,” the mariner smoothed in anger. “Armor your words not against yourself. In London, Willoughby gave you his doubtless trust.”

“Lord Willoughby, what do you know...?” Cataclysms rode upon the storm. The barge overwhelmed, a surf grinning in a white death. “We’ll founder,” the cry almost lost among the wind’s howls. Together, Jonas and I grabbed the tiller as I heard the scrape of rocks against keel. We steered toward the blackness as a surge of water pressed us forward into a strange gliding calm of a sheltered cove.

There, in exhaustion, we spread a sail as a tent hoisted on four poles above our deck to protect us from the rain, our wet clothes clinging to us in weight and cold. We shivered in our work. When finished, we sat beneath the low hang of the canvas and lit a fire.

“What secrets congress here that you speak of Lord Willoughby?” I asked the mariner.

“It is of nothing.” Jonas spoke calmly, as if to distant musings. “Let us pretend a meal,” dismissing my interruption with a wave of his hand. We cooked our spoiled food, ate, swallowing to forget the foul upon our tongue. Our throats in rebellion. The canvas dripped water on our necks and at our feet. Lightning spoke in flashed across the barge. Jonas Profit warmed his hands about the fire, his eyes catching the firelight. “I am,” he said, rubbing his hands against his cheek, as if massaging memories from his flesh, recalling life into his pallid blood. “Where are my magics now? My voices dumb. Inform me in your shadows, my fallen master,” he raged to himself, as if addressing Drake. The cloud in the shape of a man passed, evaporating into a dismembered spirit upon the turmoil that gave it birth. Then he quieted. “Some might have had the voices,” he whispered, looking at me.

“And does all this whimper point to madness?” asked Todkill.

The old mariner looked at him and said, “We have crossed this bay, brought new lines upon a new map; but without him who haunts us in his urgencies, we are all just evaporations, ghosts who strut their vapors.”

“And what is that haunting that beckons us?” Todkill questioned. His hand swept the landscapes of the dark.

“Drake,” said the old man. “We are a lesser Drake—we who could be more. We could be alchemies. We could succeed where... Blame not his failure, Drake’s murderer was success.” The old man gazed at me, then into the flames, as if in their golden heat the hills of some fabled El Dorado tore the fabric in the curtain of the fire. “The sight of my eyes fades when presented with too much light.” He blinked. “I was with him when he ripped back the sky and rounded this world with an English flag. I could tell you of things that even the darkness ever hides from itself. Fearful, these secrets are remembered,” he said. “But I could rest. The night finds solace only with the night. I am the spent bee, his honey lost.”

The storm now passed against the horizon’s rim. Flashes of lightning rose from the edge of the world like a distant battle. “Come,” said a voice, “shiver us with entertainments. Day hides its blushing face. Cold and misery are upon us. Tell us your merry history.”

“No history is a story only of itself,” said the old mariner. “I tell this tale for thee.” Old Jonas stared at me, his eyes swallowing an uncertain hate, then he looked away. “I shall bring it to you as a bloom, exposing first its root,” he said smiling. “Words have their souls in alchemies, such is a magic wrung from visions.” He nodded, approving of what he had said, then turned his eyes upon me. Was there anger beneath that glance? The intent hard but its rage restrained.

Oh Jonas, how little do you suspect, if you think I would slave myself upon a threat.

Jonas spoke again. “Two I followed. One the son, this Smith, who would claim the father but will not claim his path. A child not of the line, an orphan to all names. Such a son is bred to coward without his wounds. A wound is birth. Two is resurrection for us both. The tale of worlds your father held within his cup, and what drop have you mapped? Take the wounds, bring us peace. And still for years this new land lingered in its mysteries beyond the ocean sea. And how did Drake, by what chalice did he sanctify a marriage through this earth, and how did Drake perform the act? What spirit cracked the egg that loosed the power? To the alchemist, the words of men are words of a fallen state. Language had its Eden, man his garden. There, all things were named by their true essence, to know the name was to wield its power. All that perfection was lost in an apple. We, exiled to a kingdom not as pure, and I, a wizard, witness to the magic of this

shore, and still I cannot guess the power that made the earth and sea as one. How bright the mysteries before my eyes. But how or where did Drake come to know, or with such ease wield the power on his lips? Ideas have a silhouette, they congress in a shape. And where the likeness sits, philosophies at its feet, there is fate. Take up the dark, see Drake's profiles at its seat. A bath of shadows is our only claim. Drink my memory, swallow pain. Let this tale urge the plot, the path already lain. Murder not your father's grave. All history is a knife, its garden flowers blood. Take the voices from the air, they breathe in worlds, and be like Drake. Dare the gods, complete our destiny."

Wide-eyed in terror on the barge, the crew was aghast. The taunt not lost. But this taunt begged a child's pleading to my ears. *Indulge the wounded tear, and listen beyond the persuasions of the noise. Become the brighter sun.* All this unsaid, the mariner looked to me. I to stare at changing questions in myself. They looked at me.

"What madness is the jot that drives this pen?" Anis Todkill asked. The crew understood half, never suspecting the deeper half. The old mariner stammered, his story ready to his lips.

"WHEN DRAKE RETURNED FROM PANAMA, HE WAS A MAN HAUNTED, haunted by the deaths of his two brothers, haunted by that God he had shed and by that God he had acquired. The world had brought living phantoms to Drake's door, ghosts ever charged with secrets, yearning to tear back his flesh, leaving his raw bones white in an agony. We arrived in Plymouth on August ninth, 1573, a Sunday, the Sabbath of his father's god, Drake pledging his altar to another. We brought our treasures to the docks. I had now sworn to follow Drake, watching him in all his alchemies, perhaps to learn the substance to give my soul some peace. Who would not cast himself another life to cast out pain, fling havoc upon a stricken self? So struck dumb, how well my dramas weep my whole life to me again. Remembering is always wiser than to forget.

"Mary, devoted as she was to her husband, came to watch the ship before we had even cast a line ashore. Drake and she waved to each other, their time of separation fading as the distance between them closed. The ship locked, rolling against its berth. The gangplank set. The two met in each other's arms, embarrassed and loving, strangers to each other, yet knowing all.

"The England we came to was not pleased with our return.

Elizabeth and Philip of Spain were dancing that diplomatic dance of shadows which would, with all its grace and pivot, only lead to war. But at our arrival in Plymouth there was some hope of peace. Philip, needing the English Channel open to his ships, had promised no longer to persecute English merchants in Spain and give them over to the Inquisition. He conveyed our merchants certain trading privileges in the New World, the lack of which was, in its way, the cause of the battle of San Juan d'Ulúa, and the cause of John Hawkins's violent expeditions along the Spanish main. We were now in a cordial war with Spain. Even in the Netherlands, where English blood was spilled to aid our Protestant Dutch, there were words of compromise and reconciliation. Into this madness that seemed a hope, Drake and his private war had returned, and he was not welcome. Drake was a public embarrassment to the queen's diplomacy. But he was also a hero to the west country and the people of Devon.

“More to myself in the power with a better mood, I made some attempt to reclaim my abandoned life. Wealth is the salve that rarely hides the wound. I rode to Oxford, spent some hours among old friends. Adventures told, talk and discoveries, much was said but little that was meant. I visited my old home, empty as a forgotten skull, dust its clutter, the rooms, the bed on which I had murdered my salvation with a recipe. All around me now was as rotten as last year's cake. And I, the wizard by my own slavery chained to the weed. Better I should try a death, unlearn myself, the knives of sorrow snipping at my throat, always I the premonition that seeks a plan. Memories. And through their curtains I saw her questioning eyes. Her last gasp I heard again, worlds destroyed upon those sounds. I was betrothed to nothing when she died. Her last pleadings a farewell to me. ‘I am not a cure, my love?’ I wept accursed to find a demon. I smashed the table on which I brewed the drink. But I was known to me: there the truth condemns in all its furies. A torch in hand, I had tried to burn the house, frantic pyres to bleach the site. The midwife screamed, trying to save the child. She hit me with a boiling pot. The gardener tied me to a chair. My life for days a concentration in a blur. I lay numb, a sack of weight. For the ruined there is no easy death. And now I stood within the coffin yet again, the same litter on the floor. I had passed through all for this return. I sat in the same chair that tied me to this place. I walked about. My books dusty but still fresh, valuable, many rare, manuscripts saved from Bloody Mary's fires. Thoughts, worlds

and alchemies...and the heretical earth does revolve around the sun, not as the church and the ancients taught.”

The old mariner smiled sadly. “I found the pages of my old plays. What secrets there are within a word. All sentences must play a verb.” He looked at me.

“But what has this to do with Drake?” questioned Todkill.

“The nothing that is lost is everything.” So spoke the old mariner, as he continued. “Being now in search of a better mood, and some long lost conversations, I bought two carts, hired some local folk who could respect a book, packed my library in its hundred tomes in many crates as a gift to another memory, who was my teacher and my friend, a bribe to pass again into my youth.

“The road to Mortlake is miles by country mud. And by the lane where the queen rides on her frequent visits stands a cottage to clothe a sinecure and house, the charts, the mathematics, the science, the search for the multitudes of worlds and one lost heaven. There the greatest book collection in all England and its most famous wizard, the man who by stars, and by planets, and by calculations chose the day of our queen’s own coronation. My old friend, John Dee. In our student spring he played the ancient dramas all Greek in Aristophanes’ Englished words, but the devices Dee made in their mechanicals were in our eyes miracles that flew. In one play, *Peace*, a dung beetle conceived in pulleys, ropes and cloth, flew to the ceiling, wings buzzing, carrying a student to lord above the room, then to land on an imagined Olympus to feast upon the gods. Dee was famous when we met at Oxford. He played his illusions on my early plays. A fun by too much talent in his toys. Yearning to know what could then be known, in a year we farewelled school and walked the continent a bit. And now my cart is at his door, there ahead two fine coaches in their liveries. I am not so poor, my wealth struck on a different coin. Dee’s servant at my cart, looking up, his eyes the height of my feet. ‘Who do I say to master?’ I was asked.

“Say a memory has arrived that can quill a phrase and stage it on a windup clock.’

“I can’t have my head in that.’

“It is a sweet to please your master’s mood.’ The servant scratched his head, running toward the house. I now jumped from the cart, prizing the thoughts of a happy greeting. A good surprise, maybe my life to regain its path.

“A man in his wrinkles still youthful in his mask, Dee from the door, a house of smiles on his face. ‘Dear Jonas, how often I had hoped.’

“‘Old friend, I come from adventures bearing news and secrets and some gifts.’

“‘Some news and secrets, then you come on an errand burning in the planets and written in the stars. I have guests. One you know, my old student John Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. The other you should meet, the queen’s own spy, Francis Walsingham, but let’s be a little silent on that to be wise,’ Dee whispered behind a wink. Dee led me through the sanctuaries of the house, everywhere piles of books, children playing around the rooms, he and I walking toward the most quiet and secret place. There, two men sat.

“‘Good Jonas, you are an intrigue of wonderments.’ Leicester standing, turning to the scowling Walsingham, still sitting. ‘The learned always have an open door to me,’ said Leicester.

“‘I’ve had some word of you, Jonas Profit,’ Walsingham spoke, conspiracies weighted on his words. ‘And I have a few fascinations to bribe an hour of your time.’ I told what was good to tell of the Cimarrones and Drake, playing Drake as the only power on that coast.

“‘I hear Drake rests his head on heresy,’ asked Walsingham. The sea then I told, and of its worship in Drake’s mind. All eyes to Dee, who smiled, ‘It is within a theology of a larger sort. Be not concerned.’ And so Drake now had the pleasurable opinions of the court.

“We spoke for hours until the night, Walsingham rising, looking toward me. ‘I will tell the queen. Expect nothing other than her good wishes and a disinterested eye. What you have pruned from the Spanish tree will be reward enough.’ Walsingham almost smiled. ‘We are a poor country and soon we will be embattled. Do not spend foolishly the coin of the moment. What is true of men is also true of nations. You have Master Dee’s respect, wizard.’ Walsingham paused, tasting his own gloom. ‘No doubt this will not be our last meeting. You will court for yourself some intrigue of value, I am sure.’

“The Earl of Leicester, rumored to be the queen’s most favorite, stood. The blue iron of his eyes, like the skies in statuary, spoke. ‘Tell our Francis Drake. The queen will be informed with less snout than our Walsingham pretends. Keep us in all news.’”

ON THE CHESAPEAKE THE NIGHT HAD BEEN ECLIPSED BY A FURTHER storm. *Jonas Profit, by dirt and torn cloak you play a derelict, but you are more than the surface of the case. You had important friends, some power at court. Your history spends its wealth as insinuations in a mystery. But how in all these secrets do you converse, and why would you want me now proclaimed a damnation not sought by me?*

“Walsingham and Leicester went then to Barn Elms, Walsingham’s nearby estate. The Thames at Dee’s back door, the queen’s favorite estate close, a boat ride or a carriage to assume access to the world of court. Dee slept serene in the warmth of this power, not seduced by himself, and without the dramas of a noble pride.” One of the new supply asked of Leicester’s manner, his display of wealth, his bearing. “Gossip is always a theatre to the fool,” quipped the mariner. Then to his calm and his reflections.

“For two years Drake held to himself, and was anonymous in all public pleasures. He had been advised by our friends close to the queen to dress in silence and dissolve into memory. Be gone, yet be ready. With the profits from the Panama adventure he lived well. Always there were musicians in his house. ‘Eloquence floats upon the music in our ears,’ he would say. He became a successful merchant, usually having his commerce through agents. He bought and sold ships. The prizes he took in Panama he sold to John Hawkins, which added to the profits of both men. Everyone knew for a great risk a fortune could be made on the Spanish main. When every common luck was death, the sea could have no serpent grim enough to keep us home. Good fortune is the bible of each man’s belief. And then there was country. The merchant sailors of the west would certainly spice a little privateering into their patriotic brew. Ships began to sail. There were rumors of some trade between English corsairs and the Cimarrones, who were now raiding the Spanish gold convoy as they crossed the isthmus.

“Mandinga is a wily one. He cares nothing for gold,’ I said to Drake, ‘but he knows it is a way to entice allies to his nest, and a little trade for guns.’ I pushed the plot to cut its teeth. I knew Drake would sweep the broader stroke.

“Time is moving against us in Panama,’ was Drake’s reply. ‘That coast is probed and bloodied by those who would be us, the Spanish garrisons will be reinforced.’ He leaned forward. ‘Once, with two hundred men and the Cimarrones I could have taken Panama and

strangled Philip with his own gold. To fulfill our grace and have our profit we must now look west, beyond the main into the western sea, the Pacific. Surprise never boils in the obvious pot. All that would have been easy is now cast there.’

“Oxenham brightened, always about, listening, rehearsing himself to be the counterfeit of another. He sat his shadows lightly, his unimaginative eyes flamed by those inspirations half understood. ‘We must raid the unarmed Spanish treasure ships,’ said Drake, ‘as they sail on the Pacific side of South America. Philip believes that ocean is too far for English sails.’

“For two years we sang our plans to ourselves, while English sailors died along the Atlantic coast for scant gain, our words lost to a world deafened in its accustomed spin. Drake had become the invisible hero. Any who would be an English mariner would be him, as they followed a line they themselves had not the passions to draw.”

“IT IS BY INDIRECTION THAT THE WORLD SOMETIMES BESTOWS ITS GIFTS.” The old mariner smiled as he looked at me, then resumed. “The intrigues that would loose us again upon the Spanish now slumbered in an Irish nest of blood. In 1573, just days after Drake’s return from Panama, the Earl of Essex sailed with an expedition to subdue the county of Ulster, then being the most in revolt of all that country. Essex was a courtier of elegance and dash, ruthless in his pursuits, and the queen’s rising favorite. He had himself proposed the campaign to add to his prestige and deflect the whispers of his enemies at court. The queen had granted him huge revels of land in Ireland. From Belfast Lough to Lough Sidney to the lower Bann to the Glens of Antrim, all would be his. The wound was this: Essex was to raise an army from his personal fortune, borrow what he could. The queen’s interest would be only personal and political. English money and the queen’s army would not be involved. This was the way old Bess waged war. War by shares, war by private stock company. The plan was, as the fighting progressed and victories won, English country people and adventurers and farmers from our English planks would spill onto the Irish conquered lands. It little happened. It was a bloody war. Much English flesh rotted to manure. The Irish did not come quietly into death. Thousands served while hundreds led. I stood aside. I was a wander and kept myself to my own. And Drake to his Plymouth.” The old mariner wiped some sweat from his hands. The

rain fell smoothly through the monotonous dark, drumming upon the overhanging canopy of the sail. The Chesapeake Bay was forgotten momentarily until a cold bluster of wind awakened us again.

“Ralph Lane, who served in Ireland, was captain in Roanoke,” came a voice from the shadows. “He slaughtered the savages who fed him because of a stolen silver cup.”

“Lane had with him many who served in Ireland. What they did in Irish slaughter they did here,” I said, “but we are a different cast of gentlemen.” As I spoke the words came to me in riot. “These, our savages, will not be another Ireland.”

“All flowers bloom from the plants from which they spring. Even blood on salted ground blooms in flowers of a bloody meat,” was the mariner’s reply. “The war did not go well for Essex. Essex did not know the land; the Irish did. Never full face did the Irish come at him, but only from angles. The air birthed arrows. It is simply our pride that believes ownership changes on a word.

“For two years Essex battled, his personal fortune spent, his money gone. His troops, unpaid, mutinied and plundered. His gentlemen backers, interested only in quick victories and easy profits, were little inclined to the shackles and hardships of a long war. They grumbled their revolts in whispers. Essex called upon the queen for help. She sent him a title: governor of Ulster. It was just an empty mantle rounding a dry throat.

“Believing he had been betrayed at court, Essex had no choice now but to win in Ulster, and so he did. He brought war in massacre and such savagery that he drove back the lords of Tyrone, the O’Neills. He brought murder to the Glens of Antrim, where the Scots had a strong force of mercenaries, battering them until they weakened. Essex saw now the possibility of a complete victory. But the Scots would not fully yield. They would not break.

“What flea is this that specks our maps that in the mind casts dragon shadows on the wall? Essex believed an island three miles off the Irish coast called Rathlin was the source of men and weapons for the Scots. ‘Seize the island. Destroy the will!’ Easy phrases make small a murder. That island less than fifteen miles from the Scottish coast, too close their fleet would be upon its rescue in an hour.

“Many who served with Essex were men of Devon and Plymouth. They told stories of Drake’s West Indian adventures and of his ships that had sailed the dangerous shallows off the Panamanian coast.

It was Hawkins himself who recommended Drake for the Rathlin enterprise.

“Drake and his two frigates were hired, along with five ships of various sizes from several other captains. I to serve with Drake again. The whole fleet anchored at Carrickfergus in July of 1575.

“John Norris was granted by Essex overall command. His body was thin, his face drawn to the dagger point of his beard. His skin was pursed tight on his lips, as if his skull were pressing to break free from his living flesh. He had served with Coligny in France, and fought as a mercenary for the Huguenot cause. Drake asked if he knew Le Testu. Norris said he did. Drake told of Le Testu’s death in Panama.

“Norris closed his eyes to slits of white and was silent for a time. His head nodded. His mouth broke from its thin line into words. ‘For each our dead we will have them by multitudes.’ Ill words, the foreword to the presumption of the deed. So close his breath almost in Norris’s ear stood Thomas Doughty, personal secretary to Essex, to me a clod of no one but dressed to every display, a regal shadow, an embroidered dazzle in red and gold conceits. Maps spread now upon the table. The decision in cups and pints, its draft to be the fates of men. War as war comes upon us as a sport, its shadows in tomorrow’s light. There it was decided, on the coming of July twenty-second, we were to have our rendezvous with the others of our fleet.”

“THAT DAY THE SUN CAME GOLDEN FROM THE SEA, THE AIR TINCTURED. Rathlin’s two great cliffs rose from the sea like a flying bird of white rocks. Plains of grass were taut and low against the wide and easy slopes in ever-rising heights into the tips of lofty wings. On the northern summit, the castle erupted from the crags of stone. Sheep grazed upon the slopes, their bleats coming in sharp calls through the air. Dogs ran half circles in the grass, the herd flowing and twisting at the insistence of their barks. From the chimneys of stone cottages rose smoke. Children ran in sport, their parents at work, distant clothes in gestures on the land.

“Our fleet wallowed in the low surge of the waves. Drake took his sounding, guiding us slowly. In determined patience he brought us close upon the beach. We dropped our anchors. The troops were to their boats. We could hear screams in the hills, and voices. Sheep now ran loose in panic, as women with children in their arms waded through their butting wool, climbing toward the protection of the

castle, their men with swords and bows forming into a line, a rear guard, walking backwards up the hill, facing us in our boats.

“John Norris was ashore; the horses, his men, their swords in the air to toast their displays of war. Some held guns or pikes or crossbows. They set out in a run, a mob in full advance, the soldiers on horseback ahead to screen their march.

“Above them the hills were in panic. Figures ran confused across the slopes. Soon smoke began to rise from the firelocks, the echoes of their reports in balled thunder upon the sunlit air. Forms which once were living beings fell still to the earth like blown wash, the troops upon them, swords raised in desecrating blows. Torn rags they left, marching forward.

“The troops were now almost to the castle walls. Cannons and catapults, salvos of balled flames arced in meteors. The smoke now rose in suffocating vents.

“Distant ships now were on the horizon. We pulled our anchors to our decks, leaving the war behind to face a battle of our own. Eleven Scottish galleons bore down upon us. Slow and fragile, with light cannons, they were no match for us. We crushed them as if they were paper against our war. Drake took survivors as he could; sailors being sailors to him, no matter what their flag.”

“AT NIGHT THE FLAMES FROM THE BURNING CASTLE SPREAD A BEACON upon the silhouettes of its breached and ruined walls. The underbelly of the smoke billowed in red wash, fading in its rise to gray and tortured white and then to black. In the morning we heard the castle had fallen. Rathlin Island was ours. We cruised off the shore. What death we saw in scatter upon the land! What broken forms in litter and hacked confusions lay in flattened waste. What bits of rag that rolled, wind-driven, across the grass. Near the castle heights the white rocks were streaked with lines of whispered red.

“‘They threw the wounded from the cliffs,’ I said. About the rocks on which the sea flowed in hiss, clothes stretched upon the surf.

“Soldiers still searched among the rocks and caves for those who had escaped. Bodies thrown from the cliffs struggled in terrors in their anguished fall. A young girl, naked, stumbled near the castle pursued by men, her legs bloody. She held her stomach, falling to her knees as if to vomit horrors. She never saw the sword that took her life.

“‘This is not our Spanish war,’ cried Diego in disgust.

“‘This is not our war,’ Drake repeated in a whisper, hard and agreeing. ‘Murder does not cure the sickness of the soul, it only drives the sickness deep,’ were his words to me. Then he turned his back upon the slaughter and walked away.

“‘Within an hour we were out to sea again. Dark swells brooded in rush to the horizon, while the sunlight danced confetti on the tops of the waves. We sailed, the wind screaming in our ears. We sailed circles through the night, as if all our bearings had been lost. The moon rose, shivering through the vacant dark. We came alive again in the shadows, setting our tack for Carrickfergus. The waves smoothed. We sailed on moon meadows toward Ireland and its ruins.’”

“THOMAS DOUGHTY MET US AT THE DOCK WITH A MESSAGE FROM Essex filled with warm praise. Well dressed, as sincere as its shallows, the piles of his lace seemed his only bone. His roughly handsome face smiled and licked its lips, watching Drake read the letter.

“‘For the moment you are becoming the favorite of a court favorite. Enjoy the prosperity of your reputation.’ Doughty said. Thin his ingratiations, as if a mouse were playing to the humor of a cat.

“‘That island could have been had for no cost of lives,’ Drake said.

“‘Ah, yes,’ said Doughty, ‘but let not Essex hear you. He is something of a Roman. He weighs the size of his victories in the numbers of the dead.’

“Drake looked at Doughty, who shook Drake’s shoulder with his hand. ‘Let us think our humanities to ourselves. I feel we are upon great events. The court will ever battle in its cautions. Conscience, my captain, is a house of words rebuilt to any pleasure. I studied philosophy and the law and I can tell you as a friend the time is near when action will be the better thinking.’ Drake, the childless, smiled at the young man. At what moment do we birth the yearning for a son?

“We then rode by carriage to meet the legendary favorite of the queen. Essex was young and thin with a nervous charm, as if all that was living within him were but a surface, his center being rent, where frozen things played sport with frost. ‘I have sent dispatches to the queen to tell of your service to me, and, of course, to her,’ Essex said to Drake.

“We sat at a huge table. We were offered wine and food. Both Essex and Doughty smoked tobacco in long clay pipes. ‘We stole smoke, it being lighter than gold,’ Drake said, telling how he and Hawkins had

taken tobacco in their expedition to the West Indies before the battle of San Juan d'Ulúa.

“But not as easy to carry,’ laughed Essex, more relaxed, sitting encircled in the plumes of his breath.

“But we took gold as well,’ said Drake. He leaned forward. All that would be our history now held upon the speaking of a phrase. Drake, by courtier’s dance, played his success for his nation’s tomorrow and proposed an expedition by English sails against the Spanish treasure fleet in the Pacific. ‘And there is such wealth to feed an empire shipped along that coast of South America. All to be had for those with the courage to have it.’

“Essex’s eyes darkened with cold logic. ‘Why not attack in the Atlantic?’ he asked.

“In the Atlantic, all hostilities would come to war. In the Pacific, it would be glazed with adventure and fruited with sweet denial. The queen could easily complain no knowledge of it,’ replied Drake. ‘In the Atlantic, we would need a far larger fleet to face the armed galleons of the flota. In the Pacific, treasure ships are never escorted, and rarely armed. An attack there would be so unexpected, the revelation thrust so deep into Philip’s certainties, it would bring panic to his bankers and his entire empire.

“We will need a small fleet, so the profits to each will be greater. There is, in the Pacific, that trinity of moment where riches, victory and nation all meet conjoined. But it will not wait. All waters move in separate tides. Time, here, is not our friend.’ Drake leaned back into his chair. The hush spoke in eloquence. Essex thought, then he called for some sheets of paper and ink and quill.

“Show me here. Draw a map,’ Essex ordered. The paper spread upon the table in white landscapes, Drake rose and walked to Essex, who in his excitement, forgot his own words and began to sketch the world upon the blank page. ‘In the north’ — Essex drew as he spoke — ‘there is the northwest passage, which joins through common flood both the Atlantic and the Pacific. It is as yet undiscovered, but we are assured by the mapmaker Mercator and other knowledgeable authorities that it is there. It is said to open north in the Atlantic and pass southwest where it opens into the Pacific.’

“In the south’ — he drew the spine and bulbous portions of South America, down to its very tip — ‘is the southern flow, a place of perpetual storm, the Strait of Magellan, which is the only known

passage between our oceans. Far below is the continent of Terra Australis, seen only through our legend as vast and barren, and as yet unmapped. But it is there. Mercator so draws it. It is said that even the Spanish rarely sail into those waters. It is a place of giant savages and fierce winds. Only wreck and destruction follow there.’ Essex laid the quill on the table and turned to Drake, asking, ‘And how, then, do you propose to sail your fleet to the Pacific?’

“Drake touched his finger to the smudges of the map. ‘Through the Strait of Magellan.’

“‘But that strait,’ as Doughty spoke, his hands trembled,—‘of the three expeditions that have sailed it, Magellan’s own had five ships. Only one returned to Spain, Magellan himself being murdered in the Philippines. The next was that of Gracia de Loyasa. He lost two of his four ships in the strait, the rest through hardship by mutiny, disease and murder. There are only rumors of the last, yet it is said of the three ships, only one gained the Pacific. Of the twelve ships that have sailed those waters, only one survived. This is not a history to bring gold from eager investors, or the support of the queen.’

“‘War is waged best where it brings the greatest surprise. If the opportunity were easy, all would try. And some may. Better it be us,’ replied Drake.

“‘In life,’ smiled Essex to himself, ‘be constant in success. Only there will you be safe, my friend. The world is a predatory where reputation is weighed in carrion, and betrayal bites in love.’ Essex picked up the quill and began to write a letter.

“Doughty cleared his throat, ‘Drake, your plan has all the dash to bring destruction on our enemies. Imagination is ever the gesture to every great consequence. You will be envied.’

“Essex looked up from his letter. ‘Last year the queen herself heard a proposal from a stock company headed by our great soldier Richard Grenville, which desired to plant an English colony near the entrance to the Strait of Magellan, there to send trading voyages to the Pacific. The queen did approve, placing her seal upon the charter. But on further thought, the fear of angering Philip overwhelmed all, and the enterprise was stilled and the charter withdrawn.’

“‘Grenville is not a mariner, he is a soldier. Of his bravery there can be no doubt,’ observed Drake. ‘But he has not sailed much beyond the sight of any coast, nor have we English ventured much beyond our nation’s land. The great sea licks tombs around our feet.... No

books on navigation do we have, nor good maps. We English have few experienced to take up this enterprise and I am the one, the only who can see it through. Out there, where thought is the touch of the only shore, where instruments in brass and wood plumb time in degrees of assured immensities. Out there, where certainty moves in clicks upon a line, is where few can go and return with even a remnant of his command. I am your best hope. I am that one.’”

Chapter Two

THE QUEEN AND DRAKE. THE THREADS IN THEIR WEAVE.



THE OLD MARINER LIFTED his gaze from the fire to search the blackened coast of the Chesapeake. The deck of our barge was wet with rain falling in thuds and drum-roll rumble against our canopy. The coast flowered in black relief through the lightning’s spark. Someone threw another anchor toward the shore to bind us to the island and its beach. The thunder sang now in slow decline. We shuffled our feet on the wet deck to keep away the damp. “This air,” said the old mariner, “breathes spirits.”

The horizon stained with one burn of exhausted lightning, the thunder rolled dry beyond the hills. The rain had suddenly ceased. Lost, surrounded by an unfamiliar dark, fearing a renewal of the storm, we stayed the night.

“Richard Grenville—you shall hear more of him, Drake’s shadow and his heir in death.” Jonas gazed back into the fire, his eyes widening into white ghosts. “Drake knew that the command he proposed was usually reserved for men of rank or for those who could command the loyalty of men of rank. When Essex finished his letter, he leaned toward Drake, handing him a page filled with curlicues and scrolls in the decipherable melancholies of a man in slow decline. ‘You may read it. It concerns your enterprise. It is to Francis Walsingham, a provocative like yourself. But as a member of the queen’s Privy Council, and as her joint principal secretary, he is in position to argue your project before Her Majesty.’ Essex took back the letter from Drake’s hand, sealed it