

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE SEVEN DEATHS OF EVELYN HARDCASTLE

STUART
TURTON

'Wildly inventive'
SUNDAY TIMES



'Irresistible'
GUARDIAN

'Glorious'
VAL MCDERMID



THE
DEVIL
AND THE
DARK
WATER

RAVEN BOOKS

'Turton summons a terrifying portrait of a ship run by a cut-throat crew with little to lose ... Think of a Holmes and Watson-style duo operating in a *Pirates of the Caribbean*-style universe, complete with a demon with a love for Faustian pacts, a secret invention called The Folly and a leper who has seemingly survived being consumed by flames' *Metro*

'No novel this year was more fun to read than this baroque tale ... Stuart Turton's extravagant imagination conjures up ever more bizarre plot twists' *The Times*

'*The Devil and the Dark Water* is all about narrative pleasure. A maritime mystery with fantastical overtones ... Turton has got his world up and running inside the first two pages; thereafter, deceptions and diversions multiply until the ultimate, outrageous reveal, at which point the dark water turns out to be rather darker than you imagined' *Guardian*

'Turton's prose is jaunty and vivid. And unlike most whodunits I wouldn't recommend it for pre-lights-out reading – not just because of the spooky bits, but because such a lovingly complex construct needs readers who are fully awake' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Compulsively readable ... Pippas and Hayes are such charming company that I was happy to travel with them for the extended journey' *New York Times Book Review*

'An absolute treat from the most original voice in crime fiction'
Ragnar Jonasson

'Turton has a fantastic time laying out the details of his intricate plot, leaving the reader wondering if it is something human or supernatural causing the devilry on the *Saardam*' *Observer New Review*

'Like in his bestselling debut novel, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, there are red herrings galore, and Stuart Turton carries the reader through his fantastical plot with irrepressible narrative glee' *The Times*

'A huge, boisterous, at times silly, but always gripping page-turner that mashes up *Sherlock Holmes* with William Golding (or maybe the maritime stories of William Hope Hodgson) and adds several pungent flavours of its own ... Expect mystery, murder, red herrings and knife fights' *Herald*

'A superb historical mystery: inventive, twisty, addictive and utterly beguiling. I fell for this book (and its characters) in a big way. Beautifully crafted escapism for fans of *Sherlock* and *Master and Commander*. A TRIUMPH' Will Dean

'[An] outstanding whodunit ... Fans of impossible crime fiction won't want to miss this one' *Publishers Weekly*

'The desperate life on board an Amsterdam-bound Dutch Indiaman has never been so vividly painted. Throw in a demon (who may or may not exist), a cast of beautifully realised, compelling characters along with a series of locked room mysteries and the result is one of the most extraordinary books being published this year' M. W. Craven

'[Turton's] second book is an even more exuberant demonstration of his storytelling skills ... Wildly inventive, Turton's tale defies definition as either historical fiction or crime novel, but provides all the pleasures of both genres and more' *Sunday Times*

'Turton flits between characters with trademark intricacy, the plot tossing around on the high seas. Each crest and fall adds to the bewilderingly compelling story, culminating in a completely unpredictable yet thoroughly satisfying ending' *i*

'I can think of few writers who conjure up twists and mysterious happenings with such unflagging gusto and sheer infectious pleasure ... It's a great read' *Sunday Express S Magazine*

'Stuart Turton has done it again. *The Devil and the Dark Water* is mind bending, genre bending, intricate, vivid, intelligent and with one of the most gloriously grizzly cast of characters ever. An absolute razztwizzler of a novel!' Ali Land

STUART TURTON's debut novel, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, won the Costa First Novel Award and the Books Are My Bag Readers Award for Best Novel. A *Sunday Times* bestseller, it has sold over two hundred thousand copies across the UK alone, been translated into over thirty languages, and is currently being adapted into a major TV series.

The Devil and the Dark Water, his follow-up, won the Books Are My Bag Readers Award for Fiction, and was picked for the Sara Cox Radio 2 Book Club and the inaugural BBC Two Between the Covers Book Club.

Stuart lives near London with his wife and daughter.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle

THE
DEVIL
AND THE
DARK
WATER

STUART TURTON

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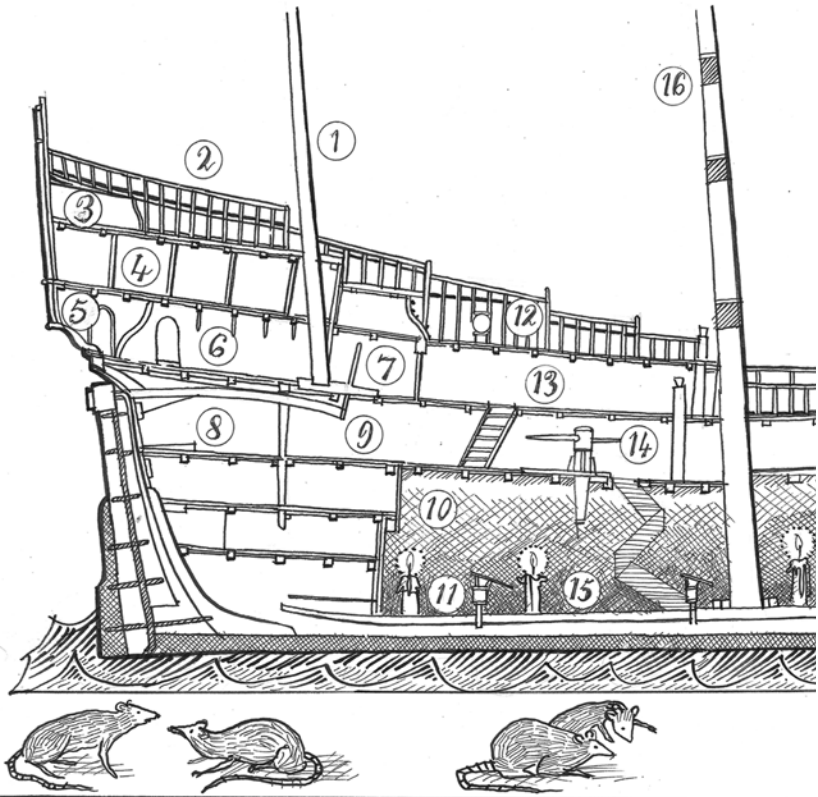
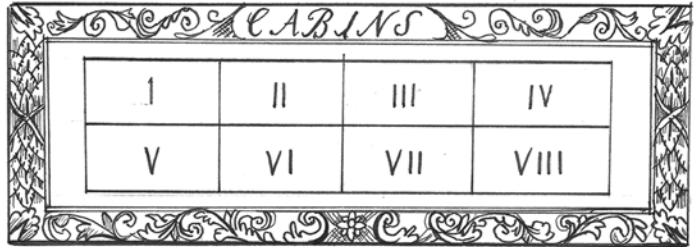
To Ada.

Right now, you're two years old, asleep in your cot. You're very strange and you make us laugh a lot. By the time you read this, you'll be somebody else entirely. I hope we're still pals. I hope I'm a good dad. I hope I don't make too many mistakes and you forgive the ones I do. Truth is, I have no idea what I'm doing. But I'm always trying hard.

I love you, kid. This is for you. Whoever you've become.

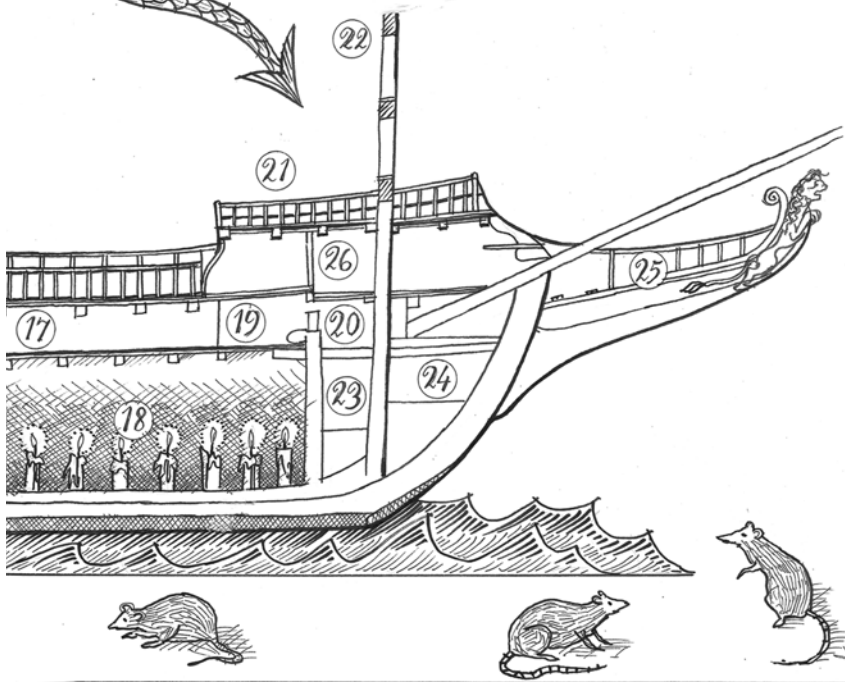
Layout of the Nobles' Cabins

I	Chamberlain Cornelius Vos	V	Sara Wessel
II	Captain Adrian Crauwels	VI	Viscountess Dalrhair
III	Lia Jan	VII	Creesjie Jans
IV	Morons and Osbert Pieter	VIII	Chief Merchant Reynier Van Schooten



Saardam 1634 - My Lord, as requested

1	Mizzenmast	14	Capstan wheel
2	Poop deck	15	Staircase
3	Animal Pens	16	Mainmast
4	Passenger cabins x 8	17	Orlop deck sailor half
5	Governor general's cabin	18	Cargo hold
6	Great cabin	19	Wycks' cabin
7	Helm	20	Sailmaker's cabin
8	Gunpowder Store	21	Forecastle deck
9	Orlop deck passengers	22	Foremast
10	Cargo hold	23	Sailmaker's store
11	Bilgepump	24	Pipp's cell
12	Quarter deck	25	Beak prow
13	Compartment under half deck	26	Compartment under forecastle



PROLOGUE

In 1634, the United East India Company was the wealthiest trading company in existence, with outposts spread across Asia and the Cape. The most profitable of these was Batavia, which shipped mace, pepper, spices and silks back to Amsterdam aboard its fleet of Indiaman galleons.

The journey took eight months and was fraught with danger.

Oceans were largely unmapped and navigational aids were rudimentary. Only one certain route existed between Batavia and Amsterdam and ships that strayed beyond it were often lost. Even those that kept between these 'wagon lines' remained at the mercy of disease, storms and pirates.

Many who boarded in Batavia would never make it to Amsterdam.

*Manifest of notable passengers and crew sailing aboard the
Saardam bound for Amsterdam, as compiled
by Chamberlain Cornelius Vos*

Dignitaries

Governor General Jan Haan, his wife Sara Wessel &
his daughter Lia Jan
Chamberlain Cornelius Vos
Guard Captain Jacobi Drecht
Creesjie Jens & her sons Marcus and Osbert Pieter
Viscountess Dalvhain

Notable passengers

Predikant Sander Kers & his ward Isabel
Lieutenant Arent Hayes

Saardam's senior officers

Chief Merchant Reynier van Schooten
Captain Adrian Crauwels
First Mate Isaack Larme

Notable crew

Boatswain – Johannes Wyck
Constable – Frederick van de Heuval

The prisoner

Samuel Pippis

ARENT HAYES HOWLED IN pain as a rock slammed into his massive back.

Another whistled by his ear; a third striking his knee, causing him to stumble, bringing jeers from the pitiless mob, who were already searching the ground for more missiles to throw. Hundreds of them were being held back by the city watch, their spittle-flecked lips shouting insults, their eyes black with malice.

‘Take shelter for pity’s sake,’ implored Sammy PIPPS over the din, his manacles flashing in the sunlight as he staggered across the dusty ground. ‘It’s me they want.’

Arent was twice the height and half again the width of most men in Batavia, including PIPPS. Although not a prisoner himself, he’d placed his large body between the crowd and his much smaller friend, offering them only a sliver of target to aim at.

The bear and the sparrow they’d been nicknamed before Sammy’s fall. Never before had it appeared so true.

PIPPS was being taken from the dungeons to the harbour, where a ship waited to transport him to Amsterdam. Four musketeers were escorting them, but they were keeping their distance, wary of becoming targets themselves.

‘You pay me to protect you,’ snarled Arent, wiping the dusty sweat from his eyes as he tried to gauge the distance to safety. ‘I’ll do it until I can’t any more.’

The harbour lay behind a huge set of gates at the far end of Batavia’s central boulevard. Once those gates closed behind them, they’d be beyond the crowd’s reach. Unfortunately, they were at the tail end of a long procession moving slowly in the heat. The gates seemed no closer now than when they’d left the humid dampness of the dungeon at midday.

A rock thudded into the ground at Arent’s feet, spraying his boots with dried dirt. Another ricocheted off Sammy’s chains. Traders were selling them out of sacks and making good coin doing it.

‘Damn Batavia,’ snarled Arent. ‘Bastards can’t abide an empty pocket.’

On a normal day, these people would be buying from the bakers, tailors, cordwainers, binders and candlemakers lining the boulevard. They’d be smiling and laughing, grumbling about the infernal heat, but manacle a man, offer him up to torment, and even the meekest soul surrendered itself to the devil.

‘It’s my blood they want,’ argued Sammy, trying to push Arent away. ‘Get yourself to safety, I’m begging you.’

Arent looked down at his terrified friend, whose hands were pressing ineffectually against his chest. His dark curls were plastered to his forehead, those high cheekbones swollen purple with the beatings he’d received while imprisoned. His brown eyes – usually wry – were wide and desperate.

Even maltreated, he was a handsome sod.

By contrast, Arent’s scalp was shorn, his nose punched flat. Somebody had bitten a chunk out of his right ear in a fight,

and a clumsy flogging a few years back had left him with a long scar across his chin and neck.

‘We’ll be safe once we reach the docks,’ said Arent stubbornly, having to raise his voice as cheers erupted ahead of them.

The procession was being led by Governor General Jan Haan, who was stiff-backed on a white stallion, a breastplate fastened above his doublet, a sword clattering at his waist.

Thirteen years ago, he’d purchased the village that had stood here on behalf of the United East India Company. No sooner had the natives signed the contract than he’d put a torch to it, using its ashes to plot out the roads, canals and buildings of the city that would take its place.

Batavia was now the Company’s most profitable outpost and Jan Haan had been called back to Amsterdam to join the Company’s ruling body, the enigmatic Gentlemen 17.

As his stallion trotted along the boulevard, the crowd wept and cheered, stretching their fingertips towards him, trying to touch his legs. Flowers were thrown on the ground, blessings bestowed.

He ignored it all, keeping his chin up and eyes forward. Beak-nosed and bald-headed, he put Arent in mind of a hawk perched atop a horse.

Four panting slaves struggled to keep pace with him. They were carrying a gilded palanquin with the governor general’s wife and daughter inside, a red-faced lady’s maid scurrying alongside it, fanning herself in the heat.

Behind them, four bow-legged musketeers gripped the corners of a heavy box containing *The Folly*. Sweat dripped from their foreheads and coated their hands, making it difficult to hold. They slipped frequently, fear flashing across their

faces. They knew the punishment should the governor general's prize be damaged.

Trailing them were a disorderly cluster of courtiers and flatterers, high-ranking clerks and family favourites; their years of scheming rewarded by the opportunity to spend an uncomfortable afternoon watching the governor general leave Batavia.

Distracted by his observations, Arent allowed a gap to form between himself and his charge. A stone whistled by, hitting Sammy on the cheek, bringing a trickle of blood and jeers from the crowd.

Losing his temper, Arent scooped up the stone and hurled it back at the thrower, catching him on the shoulder and sending him spinning to the ground. The crowd howled in outrage, surging into the watchmen, who struggled to hold them back.

'Good throw,' murmured Sammy appreciatively, ducking his head as more stones rained down around them.

Arent was limping by the time they reached the docks, his huge body aching. Sammy was bruised, but mostly untouched. Even so, he let out a cry of relief as the gates swung open ahead of them.

On the other side was a warren of crates and coiled ropes, piled-high casks and chickens squawking in wicker baskets. Pigs and cows stared at them mournfully, as bellowing stevedores loaded cargo into rowboats bobbing at the water's edge, ready to be transported to the seven Indiaman galleons anchored in the glistening harbour. Sails furled and masts bare, they resembled dead beetles with their legs in the air, but each would soon teem with over three hundred passengers and crew.

People rattled their coin purses at the ferries rowing back and forth, pushing forward when the name of their ship was

called. Children played hide and seek among the boxes, or else clutched their mothers' skirts, while fathers glared at the sky, trying to shame a cloud out of that fierce blue expanse.

The wealthier passengers stood a little apart, surrounded by their servants and expensive trunks. Grumbling under their umbrellas, they fanned themselves futilely, sweating into their lace ruffs.

The procession halted and the gates began to close behind them, dimming the sound of the braying mob.

A few final stones bounced off the crates, bringing the assault to an end.

Letting out a long sigh, Arent bent double, hands on his knees, sweat dripping from his forehead into the dust.

'How badly are you hurt?' asked Sammy, inspecting a cut on Arent's cheek.

'I'm fair hungover,' grunted Arent. 'Otherwise, I'm not too bad.'

'Did the watch seize my alchemy kit?'

There was genuine fear in his voice. Among his many talents, Sammy was a skilled alchemist, his kit filled with the tinctures, powders and potions he'd developed to assist his deductive work. It had taken years to create many of them, using ingredients they were a long way from being able to replace.

'No, I stole them out of your bedchamber before they searched the house,' replied Arent.

'Good,' approved Sammy. 'There's a salve in a small jar. The green one. Apply that to your injuries every morning and night.'

Arent wrinkled his nose in distaste. 'Is that the piss-smelling one?'

‘They all smell like piss. It’s not a good salve if it doesn’t smell like piss.’

A musketeer approached from the direction of the wharf, calling Sammy’s name. He wore a battered hat with a red feather, the floppy brim pulled low over his eyes. A tangle of dirty blond hair spilled down his shoulders, a beard obscuring most of his face.

Arent examined him approvingly.

Most musketeers in Batavia were part of the household guard. They gleamed and saluted and were good at sleeping with their eyes open, but this man’s ragged uniform suggested he’d done some actual soldiering. Old blood stained his blue doublet, which was dotted with holes made by shot and sword, each one patched time and again. Knee-length red breeches gave way to a pair of tanned, hairy legs riddled with mosquito bites and scars. Copper flasks filled with gunpowder jangled on a bandolier, clattering into pouches of saltpetre matches.

Upon reaching Arent, the musketeer stamped his foot smartly.

‘Lieutenant Hayes, I’m Guard Captain Jacobi Drecht,’ he said, waving a fly from his face. ‘I’m in charge of the governor general’s household guard. I’ll be sailing with you to ensure the family’s safety.’ Drecht addressed himself to the musketeers escorting them. ‘On the boat now, lads. Governor General wants Mr Pipp’s secured aboard the *Saardam* before the –’

‘Hear me!’ commanded a jagged voice from above them.

Squinting into the glare of sunlight, they craned their necks, following the voice upwards.

A figure in grey rags was standing on a pile of crates. Bloody bandages wrapped his hands and face, a narrow gap left for his eyes.

‘A leper,’ muttered Drecht, in disgust.

Arent took an instinctive step backwards. From boyhood, he’d been taught to fear these wasted people, whose mere presence was enough to bring ruin to an entire village. A single cough, even the lightest touch, meant a lingering, dreadful death.

‘Kill that creature and burn it,’ ordered the governor general from the front of the procession. ‘Lepers are not permitted in the city.’

A commotion erupted as the musketeers peered at each other. The figure was too high up for pikes, their muskets had already been loaded on to the *Saardam* and none of them had a bow.

Seemingly oblivious to the panic, the leper’s eyes pricked every single person gathered before him.

‘Know that my master’ – his roaming gaze snagged on Arent, causing the mercenary’s heart to jolt – ‘sails aboard the *Saardam*. He is the lord of hidden things; all desperate and dark things. He offers this warning in accordance with the old laws. The *Saardam*’s cargo is sin and all who board her will be brought to merciless ruin. She will not reach Amsterdam.’

As the last word was uttered, the hem of his robe burst into flames.

Children wailed. The watching crowd gasped and screamed in horror.

The leper didn’t make a sound. The fire crawled up his body until he was completely aflame.

He didn’t move.

He burnt silently, his eyes fixed on Arent.

AS IF SUDDENLY AWARE of the flames consuming him, the leper began beating at his robes.

He staggered backwards, falling off the crates, hitting the ground with a sickening thud.

Snatching up a cask of ale, Arent covered the distance in a few strides, tearing the lid free with his bare hands and dousing the fire.

The rags sizzled, the smell of charcoal singeing his nostrils.

Writhing in agony, the leper clawed at the dirt. His forearms were terribly burnt, his face charred. Only his eyes were still human – the pupils wild, thrashing against the surrounding blue, driven mad with pain.

A scream wedged his mouth open, but no sound passed his throat.

‘That’s impossible,’ muttered Arent.

He glanced at Sammy, who was straining against his chains, trying to see better. ‘His tongue’s been cut out,’ Arent hollered, struggling to be heard over the din of the crowd.

‘Stand aside, I’m a healer,’ came an imperious voice.

A noblewoman pushed past Arent, removing a lace cap and shoving it into his hands, revealing the jewelled pins glittering among her tight red curls.

No sooner was the cap in Arent's possession than it was snatched away again by a fussing maid, who was trying to keep a parasol over her mistress's head, while urging her to return to the palanquin.

Arent glanced back towards it.

In her haste, the noblewoman had yanked the curtain off its hook and spilled two large silk pillows on to the ground. Inside, a young girl with an oval face was watching them through the torn material. She was black-haired and dark-eyed, a mirror of the governor general, who sat stiff on his horse, examining his wife disapprovingly.

'Mama?' called out the girl.

'A moment, Lia,' replied the noblewoman, who was kneeling beside the leper, oblivious to her brown gown piled up in fish guts. 'I'm going to try to help you,' she told him kindly. 'Dorothea?'

'My lady,' responded the maid.

'My vial, if you please.'

The maid fumbled up her sleeve and removed a small vial, which she uncorked and handed to the noblewoman.

'This will ease your pain,' the lady said to the suffering man, upending it above his parted lips.

'Those are lepers' rags,' warned Arent, as her puffed sleeves drifted perilously close to her patient.

'I'm aware,' she said curtly, watching a thick drop of liquid gathering on the rim of the vial. 'You're Lieutenant Hayes, are you not?'

'Arent will do.'

'Arent.' She rolled the name around her mouth, as if it possessed an odd flavour. 'I'm Sara Wessel.' She paused. 'Sara will do,' she added, mimicking his gruff response.

She gave the vial a slight shake, dislodging the drop into the leper's mouth. He swallowed it painfully, then shuddered and calmed, the writhing ceasing as his eyes lost focus.

'You're the governor general's wife?' asked Arent disbelievingly. Most nobles wouldn't leave a palanquin that was on fire, let alone leap out of one to aid a stranger.

'And you're Samuel Pipp's servant,' she snapped back.

'I –' He faltered, wrong-footed by her annoyance. Unsure of how he had offended her, he changed the topic. 'What did you give him?'

'Something to ease the pain,' she said, wedging the cork back into the vial. 'It's made from local plants. I use it myself from time to time. It helps me sleep.'

'Can we do anything for him, my lady?' asked the maid, taking the vial from her mistress and putting it back up her sleeve. 'Should I fetch your healing sundries?'

Only a fool would try, thought Arent. A life at war had taught him which limbs you could live without and which nicks would wake you in agony every night until they killed you quietly a year after the battle. The leper's rotting flesh was bad enough, but there'd be no peace from those burns. With constant ministrations he could live a day, or a week, but survival wasn't always worth the price paid for it.

'No, thank you, Dorothea,' said Sara. 'I don't think that will be necessary.'

Rising to her feet, Sara gestured for Arent to follow her out of earshot.

'There's nothing to be done here,' she said quietly. 'Nothing left except mercy. Could you ...' She swallowed, seemingly ashamed of the next question. 'Have you ever taken a life?'

Arent nodded.

‘Can you do it painlessly?’

Arent nodded again, earning a small smile of gratitude.

‘I regret I have not the fortitude to do it myself,’ she said.

Arent pushed through the whispering circle of observers towards one of the musketeers guarding Sammy, gesturing for his sword. Numb with horror, the young soldier unsheathed it without protest.

‘Arent,’ said Sammy, calling his friend closer. ‘Did you say the leper had no tongue?’

‘Cut out,’ confirmed Arent. ‘A while back, I reckon.’

‘Bring me Sara Wessel when you’re finished,’ Sammy said, troubled. ‘This matter requires our attention.’

As Arent returned with the sword, Sara knelt by the stricken leper, reaching to take his hand, before remembering herself. ‘I have not the art to heal you,’ she admitted gently. ‘But I can offer you a painless escape, if you’d have it?’

The leper’s mouth worked, producing only moans. Tears forming in his eyes, he nodded.

‘I’ll stay with you.’ She looked over her shoulder at the young girl peering at them from inside the palanquin. ‘Lia, join me, if you please,’ said Sara, holding out a hand to her.

Lia climbed down from the palanquin. She was no more than twelve or thirteen, already long-limbed, her dress sitting awkwardly, like a skin she hadn’t managed to quite wriggle out of.

A great rustling greeted her, as the procession shifted to take her in. Arent was among those curious onlookers. Unlike her mother, who visited church each evening, Lia was rarely seen outdoors. It was rumoured her father kept her hidden out of shame, but as Arent watched her walk hesitantly towards the leper, it was difficult to know what that shame could be.

She was a pretty girl, if uncommonly pale, like she'd been spun from shadows and moonlight.

As Lia drew closer, Sara flicked a nervous glance at her husband, who was sitting rigid on his horse, his jaw moving slightly as he ground his teeth. Arent knew this was as close to fury as he'd come in public. By the twitching of his face, it was obvious he wanted to call them back into the palanquin, but the curse of authority was that you could never admit to losing it.

Lia arrived by her mother's side and Sara squeezed her hand reassuringly.

'This man is in pain,' she said in a soft voice. 'He's suffering and Lieutenant Hayes here is going to end that suffering. Can you understand that?'

The girl's eyes were wide, but she nodded meekly. 'Yes, Mama,' she said.

'Good,' said Sara. 'He's very afraid and this isn't something he should face alone. We will stand vigil; we will offer him our courage. You mustn't look away.'

From around his neck, the leper painfully withdrew a small charred piece of wood, the edges jagged. He pressed it to his breast, squeezing his eyes shut.

'Whenever you're ready,' she said to Arent, who immediately rammed the blade through the leper's heart. The man arched his back, going rigid. Then he went limp, blood seeping out from underneath him. It was glossy in the sunlight, reflecting the three figures standing over the body.

The girl gripped her mother's hand tightly, but her courage didn't falter.

'Well done, my love,' said Sara, stroking her soft cheek. 'I know that was unpleasant, but you were very brave.'

As Arent cleaned the blade on a sack of oats, Sara tugged one of the jewelled pins from her hair, a red curl springing loose.

‘For your trouble,’ she said, offering it to him.

‘Aint kindness if you have to pay for it,’ he responded, leaving it sparkling in her hand, as he returned the sword to the soldier.

Surprise mingled with confusion on her face, her gaze lingering on him a moment. As if wary of being caught in such naked observation, she hurriedly summoned two stevedores who’d been sitting on a pile of tattered sailcloth.

They leapt up as if stung, tugging a lock of hair when they were near enough.

‘Sell this, burn the body and see his ashes receive a Christian burial,’ commanded Sara, pressing the pin into the nearest calloused palm. ‘Let’s give him the peace in death he was denied in life.’

They exchanged a cunning glance.

‘That jewel will pay for the funeral with enough left over for any vices you seek to indulge this year, but I’ll have somebody watching you,’ she warned pleasantly. ‘If this poor man ends up in the undesirables lot beyond the city walls, you’ll be hanged – is that understood?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ they muttered, tipping their hats respectfully.

‘Can you spare a minute for Sammy Pipp’s?’ called out Arent, who was standing next to Guard Captain Jacobi Drecht.

Sara glanced at her husband once again, obviously trying to weigh his displeasure. Arent could sympathise. Jan Haan could find fault in a bold table arrangement, so watching his wife dash through the dirt like a harlot after a rolling coin would have been unbearable to him.

He wasn't even looking at her. He was watching Arent.

'Lia, return to the palanquin, please,' said Sara.

'But, Mama,' complained Lia, lowering her voice. 'That's Samuel Pipp's.'

'Yes,' she agreed.

'The Samuel Pipp's!'

'Indeed.'

'The sparrow!'

'A nickname I'm sure he adores,' she responded drily.

'You could introduce me.'

'He's hardly dressed for company, Lia.'

'Mama –'

'A leper's quite enough excitement for one day,' said Sara with finality, summoning Dorothea with a lift of her chin.

A protest formed on her daughter's lips, but the maid stroked her arm, encouraging her away.

The crowd melted from Sara's path as she approached the prisoner, who was busy straightening his stained doublet.

'Your legend precedes you, Mr Pipp's,' she said, curtsying.

After his recent humiliation, this unexpected compliment seemed to take Sammy aback, causing him to stumble on his initial greeting. He tried to bow, but his chains made a mockery of the gesture.

'Now, why did you wish to speak with me?' asked Sara.

'I'm imploring you to delay the departure of the *Saardam*,' he said. 'Please, you must heed the leper's warning.'

'I took the leper for a madman,' she admitted in surprise.

'Oh, he was certainly mad,' agreed Sammy. 'But he was able to speak without a tongue and climb a stack of crates with a lame foot.'

‘I noticed the tongue, but not the lame foot.’ She glanced back at the body. ‘Are you certain?’

‘Even burnt, you can see the impairment clearly within his bandages. He would have needed a crutch to walk, which means he couldn’t possibly have climbed up on those crates without help.’

‘Then you don’t believe he was acting alone?’

‘I don’t, and there’s a further cause for concern.’

‘Of course there is,’ she sighed. ‘Why would concern want to travel alone?’

‘Do you see his hands?’ continued Sammy, ignoring the remark. ‘One is very badly burnt, but the other is almost untouched. If you look carefully, you’ll notice a bruise under his thumbnail and that his thumb itself has been broken at least three times in the past, rendering it crooked. Carpenters accrue such injuries as a matter of course, especially shipborne carpenters, who must contend with the unsteady motion of the boat while they’re working. I noticed he was bow-legged, another common trait of the sailing class.’

‘Do you believe he was a carpenter on one of the boats in the fleet?’ ventured Arent, examining the seven ships in the harbour.

‘I don’t know,’ said Sammy. ‘Every carpenter in Batavia likely worked on an Indiaman at some time. If I were free to inspect the body, I might be able to answer the question more definitely, but –’

‘My husband will never free you, Mr Pippis,’ said Sara sharply. ‘If that’s to be your next request.’

‘It’s not,’ he said, his cheeks flushing. ‘I know your husband’s mind, as I know he will not hear my concerns. But he would hear them from you.’

Sara shifted her weight uncomfortably, staring at the harbour. Dolphins were playing in the water, leaping and twisting in the air, disappearing back beneath the surface with barely a ripple.

‘Please, my lady. You must convince your husband to delay the fleet’s departure while Arent investigates this matter.’

Arent started at that. The last time he’d investigated a case had been three years ago. Nowadays, he kept out of that side of things. His job was to keep Sammy safe and trample underfoot whatever bastard he pointed his finger at.

‘Questions are swords and answers are shields,’ persisted Sammy, still staring at Sara. ‘I’m begging you: armour yourself. Once the *Saardam* sets sail, it will be too late.’

UNDER BATAVIA'S BURNING SKY, Sara Wessel walked the length of the procession, feeling the scouring eyes of the courtiers, soldiers and sycophants upon her. She went like a condemned woman: shoulders square, eyes down and fists clenched by her sides. Shame reddened her face, though most mistook it for heat.

For some reason, she glanced over her shoulder at Arent. He wasn't hard to spot, standing a clear head and shoulders taller than the next man. Sammy had put him to work inspecting the body, and he was currently picking through the leper's robes with a long stick that had previously been used to carry baskets.

Feeling Sara's gaze upon him, he glanced at her, their eyes meeting. Embarrassed, she snapped her head forward again.

Her husband's damnable horse snorted, kicking the ground angrily as she approached. She'd never got along with this beast. Unlike her, it enjoyed being underneath him.

The thought drew a wicked smile, which she was still wrestling from her face as she came upon him. His back was to her, his head bowed in hushed conversation with Cornelius Vos.

Vos was her husband's chamberlain, foremost among his advisors and one of the most powerful men in the city. Not that it was obvious by looking at him, for he managed to carry his power without charisma or vigour. Neither tall nor short, broad nor thin, his mud-coloured hair topped a weathered face devoid of any distinguishing features, beyond two luminous green eyes that always stared over the shoulder of whoever he was speaking to.

His clothes were shabby without being ragged, and there hung about him an air of such potent hopelessness one would expect flowers to wilt as he walked by.

'Is my personal cargo boarded?' asked her husband, ignoring Sara.

'The chief merchant has seen to it, my lord.'

They didn't pause, didn't acknowledge her in any way. Her husband couldn't stand being interrupted and Vos had served him long enough to know that.

'And matters have been arranged to ensure its secrecy?' asked her husband.

'Guard Captain Drecht attended to it personally.' Vos's fingers danced at his sides, betraying some internal calculation. 'Which bring us to our second piece of important cargo, my lord. May I ask where you wish to store The Folly during our voyage?'

'My quarters seem appropriate,' declared her husband.

'Unfortunately, The Folly's too large, sir,' said Vos, wringing his hands. 'Might I suggest the cargo hold?'

'I'll not have the future of the Company packed away like an unwanted piece of furniture.'

'Few know what The Folly is, sir,' continued Vos, momentarily distracted by the splashing oars of an approaching ferry.

‘Even fewer know we’re bringing it aboard the *Saardam*. The best way to protect it might be to act as though it is an unwanted piece of furniture.’

‘A clever thought, but the cargo hold remains too exposed,’ said her husband.

They fell silent, puzzling the matter over.

Sunshine beat at Sara’s back, thick beads of sweat gathering on her brow and rolling down her face, clogging the white powder Dorothea applied so liberally to conceal her freckles. She yearned to adjust her clothes, to remove the ruff around her neck and tug the damp material away from her flesh, but her husband hated fidgeting as much as being interrupted.

‘What about the gunpowder store, sir?’ said Vos. ‘It’s locked and guarded, but nobody would expect something as valuable as *The Folly* to be housed in there.’

‘Superb. Make the arrangements.’

As Vos walked towards the procession, the governor general finally turned to face his wife.

He was twenty years older than Sara, with a teardrop head, which was bald except for a tonsure of dark hair connecting his large ears. Most people wore hats to shield them from Batavia’s harsh sunlight, but her husband believed they made him look foolish. As a result, his scalp glowed an angry crimson, the skin peeling and collecting in the folds of his ruff.

Under flat eyebrows, two dark eyes weighed her, as fingers scratched a long nose. By any measure, he was an ugly man, but, unlike Chamberlain Vos, he radiated power. Every word out of his mouth felt like it was being etched into history; every glance contained a subtle rebuke, an invitation for others to measure themselves against him and discover the ways in which they were wanting. By merely living, he thought

himself an instruction manual in good breeding, discipline and values.

‘My wife,’ he said in a tone that could easily be mistaken for pleasant.

His hand jerked to her face, causing her to flinch. Pressing a thumb to her cheek, he roughly wiped away a clot of powder. ‘How unkind the heat is to you.’

She swallowed the insult, lowering her gaze.

Fifteen years they’d been married and she could count on one hand the number of times she’d be able to hold his stare.

It was those ink-blot eyes. They were identical to Lia’s, except her daughter’s glittered with life. Her husband’s were empty, like two dark holes his soul had long run out of.

She’d felt it the first time they’d met, when she and her four sisters had been delivered overnight to his drawing room in Rotterdam, like meat ordered specially from the market. He’d interviewed them one by one and chosen Sara on the spot. His proposal had been thorough, listing the benefits of their union to her father. In short, she’d have a beautiful cage and all the time in the world to admire herself in the bars.

Sara had wept all the way home, begging her father not to send her away.

It hadn’t made any difference. The Bride Price was too large. Unbeknown to her, she’d been bred for sale and fattened like a calf with manners and education.

She’d felt betrayed, but she’d been young. She understood the world better now. Meat didn’t get a say on whose hook it hung from.

‘Your display was unbecoming,’ he rebuked her under his breath, still smiling for his courtiers. They were edging close, wary of missing anything.

‘It wasn’t a display,’ she muttered defiantly. ‘The leper was suffering.’

‘He was dying. Did you think you had a lotion for that?’ His voice was low enough to crush the ants crawling around their feet. ‘You’re impulsive, reckless, thick-headed and soft-hearted.’ He flung insults the way rocks had been thrown at Samuel Pippis. ‘Such qualities I forgave when you were a girl, but your youth is far behind you.’

She didn’t listen to the rest; she didn’t need to. It was a familiar rebuke, the first drops of rain before the fury of the storm. Nothing she said now would make any difference. Her punishment would come later, when they were alone.

‘Samuel Pippis believes our ship is under threat,’ she blurted out.

Her husband frowned, unused to being interrupted.

‘Pippis is in chains,’ he argued.

‘Only his hands,’ she protested. ‘His eyes and faculties remain at liberty. He believes the leper was a carpenter once, possibly working in the fleet returning us to Amsterdam.’

‘Lepers can’t serve aboard Indiamen.’

‘Perhaps the blight showed itself when he reached Batavia?’

‘Lepers are executed and burnt by my decree. None are tolerated in the city.’ He shook his head in irritation. ‘You’ve allowed yourself to be swayed by the ramblings of a madman, and a criminal. There’s no danger here. The *Saardam* is a fine vessel, with a fine captain. There isn’t stouter in the fleet. That’s why I chose her.’

‘Pippis isn’t concerned about a loose plank,’ she shot back, quickly lowering her voice. ‘He fears sabotage. Everybody who boards today will be at risk, including our daughter. We already lost our boys, could you really

stand to ...' She took a breath, calming herself. 'Wouldn't it be wise to talk to the captains of the fleet before we set sail? The leper was missing his tongue and had a maimed foot. If he served under any of them, they would certainly remember him.'

'And what would you have me do in the meantime?' he demanded, tipping his chin towards the hundreds of souls sweltering in the heat. Somehow the procession had managed to edge within eavesdropping distance without making a sound. 'Should I order this procession back to the castle on a criminal's good word?'

'You trusted Pipp's well enough when you summoned him from Amsterdam to retrieve The Folly.'

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

'For Lia's sake,' she continued recklessly. 'Might we take quarters aboard another ship, at least?'

'No, we will travel aboard the *Saardam*.'

'Lia alone, then.'

'No.'

'Why?' She was so confounded by his stubbornness she failed to take heed of his anger. 'Another ship will do well enough. Why are you so intent upon travelling –'

Her husband slapped her with the back of his hand, raising a stinging welt on her cheek. Among the courtiers there were gasps and giggles.

Sara's glare could have sunk every ship in the harbour, but the governor general met it calmly, retrieving a silk handkerchief from his pocket.

Whatever fury had been building inside of him had evaporated.

‘Fetch our daughter, so we might board together as a family,’ he said, dabbing the white powder from his hand. ‘Our time in Batavia is at an end.’

Gritting her teeth, Sara turned back towards the procession.

Everybody was watching her, tittering and whispering, but she had eyes only for the palanquin.

Lia stared out from behind the tattered curtains, her face unreadable.

Damn him, thought Sara. Damn him.

OARS ROSE AND FELL, sunlight sparkling in the falling drops of water as the ferry made its way across the choppy blue harbour to the *Saardam*.

Guard Captain Jacobi Drecht was in the centre of the boat, a leg either side of the bench on which he was seated, his fingers absently picking out flakes of salted fish from his blond beard.

His sabre had been unhooked from his waist and laid across his knees. It was a fine weapon, with a delicate basket of metal protecting the hilt. Most musketeers were armed with pikes and muskets, or else rusted blades stolen from corpses on the battlefield. This was a noble's sword, much too fine for a humble soldier, and Arent wondered where the guard captain had come upon it – and why he hadn't sold it.

Drecht's hand lay lightly on its sheath, and now and again he would cast a suspicious glance at his prisoner, but he was from the same village as the ferryman, and the two of them were talking warmly of the boar they'd hunted in its forests, and the taverns they'd visited.

At the prow, chains coiled around him like serpents, Sammy fingered his rusted manacles wretchedly. Arent had never seen his friend so dejected. In the five years they'd worked together, Sammy had proven himself vexing, short-tempered,

kind and lazy, but never defeated. It was like seeing the sun sag in the sky.

‘Soon as we board, I’ll talk to the governor general,’ vowed Arent. ‘I’ll put sense before him.’

Sammy shook his head.

‘He won’t listen,’ he responded hollowly. ‘And the more you defend me, the harder it will be to distance yourself once I’ve been executed.’

‘Executed!’ exclaimed Arent.

‘That’s the governor general’s intention once we reach Amsterdam.’ He snorted. ‘Assuming we make it that far.’

Instinctively, Arent sought out the governor general’s ferry. It was a few strokes ahead of them, his family sheltered beneath a curtained canopy. A breeze pushed at the gauzy material, revealing Lia’s head in her mother’s lap. The governor general sat a little apart.

‘The Gentlemen 17 will never let that happen,’ argued Arent, recalling the esteem in which the rulers of the United East India Company held Sammy. ‘You’re too valuable.’

‘The governor general sails to take a seat among them. He believes he can convince the rest.’

Their ferry passed between two ships. Sailors were hanging from the rigging, firing bawdy jokes at one other across the gap. Somebody was pissing over the side, the yellow torrent narrowly missing them.

‘Why is this happening, Sammy?’ demanded Arent. ‘You recovered The Folly, as you were asked. They held a banquet in your honour. How is it a day later you walked into the governor general’s office a hero and were dragged out in chains?’

‘I’ve thought on it and thought on it, but I don’t know,’ he said despairingly. ‘He demanded I confess, but when I told

him I didn't know what I was confessing to, he flew into a rage and had me tossed into the dungeon until I reconsidered. That's why I'm begging you to leave me be.'

'Sammy –'

'Something I did during this case brought his wrath upon me, and without knowing what it is, I can't hope to protect you from it,' interrupted Sammy. 'But I swear, once he's finished with me, our good works will count for nothing and our standing in the United East India Company will be undone. I'm poison to you, Arent Hayes. My conduct was reckless and arrogant, and for that I'm being punished. I won't compound my failure by dragging you into ruin.' Leaning forward, he stared at Arent fiercely. 'Go back to Batavia, let me save your life for once.'

'I took your coin and made my promise to keep you out of harm's way,' responded Arent. 'I've got eight months to stop you from becoming a crow's banquet, and I mean to see it done.'

Shaking his head, Sammy fell into a defeated silence, his shoulders slumping.

Their rowboat approached the creaking expanse of the *Saardam*, its hull rising out of the water like an enormous wooden wall. Only ten months had passed since she left Amsterdam, but she was already ancient, her green and red paint flaked, the timbers warped from her passage through the freezing Atlantic into the steamy tropics.

That something so large could float was a feat of engineering akin to devilry, and Arent felt immediately diminished in its presence. He stretched out a hand and dragged his fingertips along the coarse planks. There was a dull vibration in the wood. He tried to imagine what was on the other side: the

warren of decks and staircases, the stray beams of sunlight piercing the gloom. A ship this size would require hundreds of souls to sail her and would carry that many passengers again. They were all in danger. Even chained, even beaten and maltreated, Sammy was the only one who could help them.

Arent conveyed this thought as eloquently as he was able. 'Somebody's trying to sink this boat, and I swim like a bag of rocks. Any chance you can pull your head out of your arse and do something about it?'

Sammy grinned at him. 'You could lead an army over a cliff with that tongue,' he said sarcastically. 'Did your search of the leper's body turn anything up?'

Arent withdrew a piece of hemp he'd hacked off a sack on the docks. Wrapped inside was the charm the leper had been holding when Arent killed him. It was too charred to make out any detail.

Sammy leant forward, eyeing it intently. 'It was snapped in half,' he said. 'You can make out the jagged edges still.'

He pondered it a moment, then swivelled towards Guard Captain Drecht. His voice was filled with authority despite the chains. 'Have you ever served upon an Indiaman?'

Drecht squinted at him, as if the question were a dark cave he didn't want to enter.

'I have,' he answered, at last.

'What's the fastest way to sink one?'

Drecht raised a bushy blond eyebrow, then nodded towards Arent. 'Get your mate to ram his fist through the hull.'

'I'm serious, Guard Captain,' said Sammy.

'Why?' he asked suspiciously. 'Not a pleasant thing you're going to, but I'll not let you drag the governor general into hell with you.'

‘My future is in Arent’s hands, which means I’ll fear for it no longer,’ responded Sammy. ‘However, a threat’s been made against this ship. I’d like to ensure it comes to nothing.’

Drecht looked past Sammy to Arent. ‘Is that truly his intent, Lieutenant? On your honour.’

Arent nodded, causing Drecht to stare at the ships surrounding them. He frowned, adjusting the bandolier slung over his shoulder, the copper flasks rattling.

‘Put a spark to the gunpowder store,’ he said, after a long pause. ‘That’s how I’d do it.’

‘Who keeps watch on the gunpowder store?’

‘A constable behind a barred door,’ responded Drecht.

‘Arent, I need you to find out who has access to that room and any grievances our constable may hold,’ said Sammy.

Arent was encouraged to hear the eagerness in his friend’s voice. For the most part, they investigated thefts and murders, crimes long committed and easily understood. It was like arriving at the theatre after the performance had ended and being asked to work out the story using pieces of discarded script and the props left on stage. But here was a crime not yet undertaken; a chance to save lives rather than avenge them. Here, at last, was a case worthy of Sammy’s talents. Hopefully, it would be enough to distract him until Arent secured his freedom.

‘You’ll need to get permission from Captain Crauwels,’ interrupted Drecht, flicking a drop of seawater off his eyelash. ‘Only his good word will get you inside. Not that his good words are easy to come by.’

‘Then start there,’ Sammy told Arent. ‘Once you’ve spoken to the constable, see if you can identify the leper. I’m treating him as a victim.’

‘Victim?’ scoffed Drecht. ‘He was the one raining curses down on us.’

‘How? His tongue had been cut out. All he really did was give us something to stare at while another voice issued the threat. We have no idea whether the leper shared its malice or not, though I’m certain he didn’t climb those crates by himself or ignite his own robes. His hands didn’t move from his sides until he hurled himself off the crates, and we all saw his panic as the flames consumed him. He didn’t know what was going to happen to him, which makes his death a murder – and a heinous one at that.’ A small spider was scurrying along Sammy’s chains and he made a bridge of his hand, letting it crawl on to the bench. ‘That’s why Arent’s going to find the name of the leper, then talk to any friends he had and piece together his final weeks. From those fragments, perhaps we’ll understand how he came to be on those crates, whose voice we heard and why it harbours such hate for those aboard the *Saardam*.’

Arent shifted sheepishly. ‘I’m not certain I can do any of those things Sammy. Maybe we can find –’

‘Three years ago, you asked me to teach you my art and I made you my apprentice,’ said Sammy, irritated by his reticence. ‘I believe it’s time you acted as such.’

Old arguments rose up between them like noxious bubbles in a swamp.

‘We gave up on that,’ said Arent heatedly. ‘We already know I can’t do what you do.’

‘What occurred in Lille wasn’t a failing of intellect, Arent. It was a failure of temperament. Your strength has made you impatient.’

‘I didn’t fail because of my strength.’

‘That was one case, and I understand that it dented your confidence –’

‘An innocent man nearly died.’

‘Innocent men do that,’ said Sammy, with finality. ‘How many languages can you speak? How easily did you collect them? I’ve watched you these last years. I know how much you observe. How much you retain. What was Sara Wessel wearing at our meeting this morning? Boots to hat, tell me.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Of course you do,’ he said, laughing at Arent’s instinctive lie. ‘You’re a stubborn man. I could ask you how many legs a horse has and you’d deny having ever seen one. All that information, what do you do with it?’

‘I keep you alive.’

‘And there you are again, leaning on your strength when it’s your mind we need.’ He lifted his heavy chains. ‘My resources are limited, Arent, and until I’m free to pursue my own enquiries, I’m expecting you to protect the ship.’ Their boat bumped into the hull of the *Saardam* as the ferryman brought them alongside. ‘I’ll not have some bastard drown me before the governor general hangs me.’

FERRIES SWARMED THE *SAARDAM*, crossing the water in a long chain, like ants attacking a dead ox. Each one teemed with passengers clutching the single bag they were allowed to bring. Hollering for the rope ladders to be thrown down, they found themselves mocked by the sailors high above, who made great show of being unable to find the ladders, or of simply not hearing the requests.

They were forgiven their sport by the *Saardam's* officers, who were waiting for Governor General Haan and his family to finish boarding at the aft of the ship. No other passengers would be allowed up until they were comfortably housed.

A plank attached to four pieces of rope was currently hoisting Lia serenely upwards, with Sara watching below, hands clasped, terrified that her daughter might spill, or the rope would snap.

Her husband had already ascended, and she would follow last.

In boarding, as all other things, etiquette demanded she be the least important thing in her own life.

When her time came, Sara sat on the plank and gripped the rope, laughing in delight as she was raised into the air, the wind plucking at her clothes.

The sensation was thrilling.

Kicking her legs, she stared across the water at Batavia.

For the last thirteen years, she'd watched from the fort as the city spread like melting butter around her. From that vantage, it had felt huge. A prison of alleys and shops, markets and battlements.

But, at this distance, it seemed a lonely thing: its streets and canals clinging tight to one other, its back to the coast, as if afraid of the encroaching jungle. Clouds of peat smoke hung above the rooftops; brightly coloured birds circled overhead, waiting to descend on the scraps of food left behind by the market traders, who'd soon be packing up for the day.

With a pang, Sara realised how much she was going to miss this place. Every morning Batavia screamed itself awake, the trees shaking as thousands of parrots came screeching out of their branches, filling the air with colour. She loved that chorus, as she loved the strange, lyrical language of the natives and the huge spicy pots of stew they cooked on the street of an evening.

Batavia was where her daughter had been born and where her two sons had died. It was where she had become the woman she now was, for better and for worse.

The seat delivered Sara to the quarterdeck, which lay under the shadow of the towering mainmast. Sailors were climbing the rigging like spiders, tugging ropes and tightening knots, while carpenters planed warped planks and cabin boys threaded caulk and slopped tar, trying to keep from a scolding.

Sara found her daughter at the railing overlooking the rest of the ship.

'It's remarkable, isn't it?' said Lia in admiration. 'But there's so much unnecessary effort.' She pointed to a group of

grunting sailors lowering cargo through a hatch into the hold, as if the *Saardam* were a beast that needed feeding before the voyage could begin. 'A better pulley and joist and they'd need half the labour. I could design one, if they'd –'

'They won't, they never will,' interrupted Sara. 'Keep that cleverness in your pocket, Lia. We're surrounded by men who won't take kindly to it, however well intentioned.'

Lia bit her lip sulkily, staring at the unsatisfactory pulley. 'It's such a small thing. Why can't I –'

'Because men don't like being made to feel stupid, and there's no other way to feel when *you* start talking.' Sara stroked her daughter's face, wishing she could ease the confusion she saw there. 'Cleverness is a type of strength, and they won't accept a woman who's stronger than they are. Their pride won't allow it, and their pride is the thing they hold dearest.' She shook her head, unable to find the right words. 'It's not something to be understood. It's just the way it is. You were sheltered in the fort, surrounded by people who loved you and feared your father, but there's no such protection on the *Saardam*. This is a dangerous place. Now heed me and think before you speak.'

'Yes, Mama,' said Lia.

Sara sighed and pulled her close, her heart aching. No mother wanted to tell their child to be less than they were, but what use was it encouraging a child into a thorn bush. 'It won't be like this for very much longer, I promise. Soon we'll be safe, and we'll live our lives as we wish.'

'My wife!' hollered the governor general from the opposite side of the deck. 'There's somebody I wish you to meet.'

'Come,' she said, linking her arm through Lia's.

Her husband was talking to a fleshy, sweating man with a face overrun by veins. His eyes were bloodshot and watering.

Evidently he'd risen late and attended his toilet carelessly. Though dressed to the fashion, his ribbons were dishevelled and his cotton shirt only tucked into one side of his belt. He was unpowdered and unperfumed, and in dire need of both.

'This is Chief Merchant Reynier van Schooten, the master of our voyage,' said the governor general.

Dislike squirmed beneath his words.

Van Schooten's glance put Sara on a scale, weighing and evaluating, pinning a price to her ear.

'I thought the captain was in charge of our ship,' said Lia.

Van Schooten stuffed his thumbs in his belt and puffed out a perfectly round belly, summoning whatever dregs of pride were left to him. 'Not on a merchant vessel, my lady,' he explained. 'Our captain's role is merely to ensure our ship arrives safely in Amsterdam. I'm responsible for all other matters.'

Merely, thought Sara. As if there could be some grander ambition for a ship than to keep it from sinking.

But, of course, there was.

This was a merchant vessel flying United East India Company colours, which meant profit went before every other consideration. It wouldn't matter if the ship made it back to Amsterdam if the cargo had spoilt, or if the trade at the Cape had been handled badly. The *Saardam* could drift into port full of bodies and the Gentlemen 17 would still call it a success so long as the spices weren't damp.

'Could I show you around our ship?' asked Reynier van Schooten, extending an arm to Lia and making sure every one of his jewelled rings were on display. Unfortunately, they couldn't distract from the sweat patch under his armpit.

‘Mama, would you like a tour?’ Lia asked, turning her back to the merchant and screwing her face up in revulsion.

‘My wife and daughter can acquaint themselves with the vessel later,’ interrupted the governor general impatiently. ‘I’d like to see my cargo.’

‘Your cargo?’ Confusion became realisation. ‘Ah, yes. I can take you directly.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘My daughter, you’re in cabin three.’ He waved vaguely to a small red door behind them. ‘My wife, you’re in cabin six.’

‘Cabin five, my lord,’ corrected the chief merchant apologetically. ‘I had it changed.’

‘Why?’

‘Well ...’ Van Schooten shifted uncomfortably. The shadow of the rigging made it appear he’d been thrown under a net. ‘Cabin five is more comfortable.’

‘Nonsense, they’re all identical.’ The governor general was infuriated that any order of his – however small – should be so overruled. ‘I specified cabin six.’

‘Cabin six is cursed, my lord.’ The chief merchant spoke quickly and blushed with embarrassment. ‘In our eight months from Amsterdam, it had two occupants. The first was found hanging from a hook on the ceiling and the second died in his sleep, eyes wide with fright. Steps sound from inside at night, even when it’s empty. Please, my lord, it’s –’

‘I care not!’ interrupted the governor general. ‘Take whichever cabin suits you, my wife, and consider yourself at your liberty. I’ll have no further need of you until this evening.’

‘My husband,’ acknowledged Sara, inclining her head.

Sara watched Reynier van Schooten lead him down the steps, then she clutched Lia’s hand, dragging her as quickly as

their cumbersome skirts would allow towards the passenger cabins.

‘Mama, what’s the rush?’ fretted Lia, almost tugged off her feet.

‘We need to get Creesjie and the boys off this ship before it sets sail,’ she said.

‘Father will never allow it,’ argued Lia. ‘Creesjie told me she wasn’t meant to leave Batavia for another three months but Father wanted her here. He demanded it. He even paid for her cabin.’

‘That’s why I’m not going to tell him,’ said Sara. ‘He won’t even know Creesjie’s disembarked until we’ve set sail.’

Lia planted her feet, clutching her mother’s hand with both of her own, forcing her to stop.

‘He’ll punish you,’ said Lia fearfully. ‘You know what he’ll do, it will be worse than –’

‘We have to warn Creesjie,’ interrupted Sara.

‘You couldn’t walk last time.’

Sara softened, cupping her daughter’s cheek. ‘I’m sorry, dear heart. That was ... I wish you hadn’t had to see me like that, but I can’t allow our friend to be put in danger because your father is too stubborn to hear reason from a woman.’

‘Mama, please,’ pleaded Lia, but Sara was already tearing her ruff off and ducking through the low red door.

On the other side lay a narrow corridor lit by a solitary candle, guttering in an alcove. There were four doors on either wall, each marked by a Roman numeral scorched into the wood. Trunks and furniture were being delivered by grunting stevedores, cursing the weight of wealth.

Sara’s maid harried them, pointing and arranging on behalf of her mistress.

‘Which cabin is Creesjie in?’ asked Sara.

‘Seven. It’s opposite Lia’s,’ said Dorothea, before stopping Lia to enquire about some small matter, leaving Sara to press on alone.

A harp twanged under its protective cloth as Sara pushed through the confusion, only to find herself blocked off by a large rug tied with twine, which was being manoeuvred into a cabin far too small to house it.

‘It won’t fit, Captain,’ whined one of the sailors, who had it on his shoulder and was trying to bend it around the door-frame. ‘Can’t we put it into the cargo hold?’

‘Viscountess Dalvhain won’t be without her comforts,’ came the captain’s vexed voice from inside. ‘Try standing it up.’

The sailors strained. There was an audible crack of wood.

‘What in the seven hells have you done?’ barked the captain angrily. ‘Did you break the doorframe?’

‘Wasn’t us, Captain,’ protested the nearest sailor. A thin rod slid out from the centre of the rug, clattering on the floor. One end was snapped.

One of the sailors hastily kicked it away with his heel. ‘It’s only to keep the rug straight,’ he explained, a small grimace betraying his uncertainty.

‘Bugger this,’ growled the voice inside the cabin. ‘Just lay it corner to corner. Dalvhain can find a place for it when she comes aboard.’

As the rug was swallowed by the cabin, a broad-shouldered, well-muscled man stepped into the corridor, coming face to face with Sara. His eyes were ocean-blue, his hair lopped short to fend off lice. Ginger whiskers covered his cheeks and chin, leaving a face that was sun-browned and angular, fadingly handsome, much like the ship he commanded.

Seeing Sara, he bowed floridly, as if at court. 'I apologise for my language, madam,' he said. 'I didn't realise you were out here. I'm Adrian Crauwels, captain of the *Saardam*.'

The corridor was narrow and busy, forcing them to stand awkwardly close.

His pomander draped him in the smell of citrus, and his teeth were unusually white, his breath suggesting he'd been chewing on water mint. Unlike the chief merchant, his clothing was expensive, his doublet dyed rich purple, golden embroidery catching the candlelight. His sleeves were paned, and his trunk hose tied above cannons with silk bows. The buckles of his shoes shone.

Such fine dress suggested a successful career. Fleet captains earned a percentage of the profits they safely delivered. Even so, Sara wouldn't have been surprised to discover Crauwels was wearing his entire fortune.

'Sara Wessel,' she said, introducing herself with a dip of the head. 'My husband speaks highly of you, Captain.'

He beamed in delight. 'I'm honoured to hear it. We've sailed together twice before, and I've always enjoyed his company.'

He nodded to the ruff clutched in her hand. 'The tight quarters of the *Saardam* aren't best suited to fashion, are they?' From somewhere outside, a coarse voice hollered for the captain. 'I'm afraid my first mate requires my attention. Will you be attending my table tonight, my lady? It's my understanding the chef has prepared something special.'

Sara's smile was a brilliant thing, trained by endless, unwanted social engagements.

'Of course. I'm looking forward to it,' she lied.

'Excellent.' Raising her hand, he kissed it politely, then took himself into the light.

Sara rapped on the door to cabin seven. Behind the wood, she could hear her friend's laughter and the squeals of delight coming from her two sons. The sound was like a breath of wind carving through a pestilent fog, her mood lifting immediately.

Footsteps approached from within, a young boy opening the door carefully, his face brightening when he realised who it was.

'Sara!' He threw his spindly arms around her.

Creesjie Jens was rolling around on the floor with her other son, oblivious to her silk nightgown. Both boys were in their undergarments, their skin clammy and hair wet, sopping clothing discarded on the floor. Evidently some mishap had befallen them on the crossing, which didn't surprise Sara at all.

Marcus and Osbert were mishap bloodhounds. Marcus was ten, older than his brother by two years, though not nearly so quick-witted. It was Marcus who was clinging to Sara, forcing her to shuffle into the cabin.

'You've raised a barnacle,' she said to Creesjie, stroking the boy's hair affectionately.

Creesjie pushed Osbert away from her face, examining them from the floor. Her hair formed a messy blonde halo on the wood, and her deep blue eyes sparkled in the sunlight, her face soft and round, her pale cheeks blushed with exertion. She was the most beautiful woman Sara had ever seen. It was the only thing she and her husband agreed upon.

'Hello, Lia,' said Creesjie to the dark-haired girl, as she trailed her mother into the cabin. 'Are you keeping Sara out of trouble?'

'I'm trying, but she seems terribly fond of it.'

Creesjie tutted at Marcus, who was still pressed to Sara's skirt. 'Leave her be. You'll soak her through.'

‘We went over a wave,’ explained Marcus, ignoring his mother’s instructions as usual. ‘And then –’

‘The boys stood up to greet the next one,’ supplied Creesjie, sighing at the memory. ‘They nearly tumbled over the edge of the boat. Thankfully, Vos caught hold of them.’

Sara raised an eyebrow at the mention of her husband’s chamberlain. ‘You travelled with Vos?’

‘More like he travelled with us,’ said Creesjie, rolling her eyes.

‘He got very upset,’ supplied Osbert, who was still lying on his mother, his naked belly rising and falling. ‘But the wave didn’t hurt, really.’

‘It hurt a bit,’ corrected Marcus.

‘A little bit,’ re-corrected Osbert.

Sara knelt down, passing her gaze between their earnest faces.

Watery blue eyes, guileless and merry, fixed upon her. They were so alike. Sandy hair and red cheeks, their ears waving to the world from either side of their head. Marcus was taller and Osbert broader, but otherwise there was little to separate them. Creesjie said they took after their father, her second husband, Pieter.

He’d been murdered four years ago, something Creesjie didn’t like to talk about. From the stumbled-upon stories, Sara knew that he’d been loved dearly and mourned fiercely.

‘Boys, I need to speak with your mama,’ said Sara. ‘Would you go with Lia? She wants to show you her cabin, don’t you, Lia?’

Irritation wrinkled Lia’s brow. She hated being treated like a child, but her fondness for the boys was enough to drag a smile out of her.

‘More than anything.’ She became deadly serious. ‘I think there’s a shark in there.’

‘No, there isn’t,’ protested the boys in unison. ‘There are no sharks on land.’

Lia feigned bafflement. ‘That’s what they told me. Shall we find out?’

The boys agreed readily enough, dashing out in their undergarments.

Sara closed the door as Creesjie got to her feet, dusting her nightgown off. ‘Do you think they’d let me wear this around the ship? I had to put it on after the wave soaked –’

‘You need to get off the *Saardam*,’ interrupted Sara, tossing her ruff on to the bunk.

‘It usually takes at least a week before people start asking me to leave places,’ said Creesjie, frowning at a dirty spot on her sleeve.

‘The ship has been threatened.’

‘By a madman on the docks,’ replied Creesjie sceptically, walking over to a rack on the wall that held four clay jugs. ‘Wine?’

‘There isn’t time, Creesjie,’ said Sara, exasperated. ‘You need to get off the ship before we set sail.’

‘Why are you giving the ravings of a madman any credence?’ replied her friend, filling two cups and handing one to Sara.

‘Because Samuel Pippis does,’ said Sara.

The cup stopped halfway to Creesjie’s lips, her face showing interest for the first time. ‘Pippis is onboard?’ she asked.

‘In manacles.’

‘Do you think he’ll attend dinner?’

‘He’s in manacles,’ stressed Sara.

‘He’ll still be better dressed than most of the other guests,’ said Creesjie, thoughtfully. ‘Do you think I can visit him? They say he’s exceptionally handsome.’

‘When I saw him, he looked like he’d climbed out of a midden.’

Creesjie made a disgusted face. ‘Perhaps they’ll clean him up.’

‘He’s in manacles,’ repeated Sara slowly, putting down her untouched cup. ‘Will you consider departing?’

‘What does Jan say?’

‘He doesn’t believe me.’

‘Then why is he letting me go?’

‘He isn’t,’ admitted Sara. ‘I ... wasn’t going to tell him.’

‘Sara!’

‘This ship is in danger,’ exclaimed Sara, throwing her hands in the air and smacking them into the beamed ceiling. ‘For your sake and the boys’, please go back to Batavia.’ She tried to shake the sting from her pained fingers. ‘There’ll be another voyage in four months. You’ll be home in plenty of time for your marriage.’

‘Time isn’t the problem,’ argued Creesjie. ‘Jan wanted me on this ship. He bought my berth and had my ticket delivered by the household guard. I can’t depart without his blessing.’

‘Then talk to him,’ she pleaded. ‘Ask for it.’

‘If he won’t listen to you, why would he listen to me?’

‘You’re his mistress,’ said Sara. ‘He favours you.’

‘Only in the bedroom,’ replied Creesjie, draining her wine and starting on Sara’s. ‘It’s the curse of powerful men to heed only their own voices.’

‘Please! At least try!’

‘No, Sara,’ she said softly, dousing Sara’s passion with calm. ‘And not because of Jan. If there’s danger on this ship, do you truly think I’d abandon you to it?’

‘Creesjie –’

‘Don’t argue with me, two husbands and a court full of lovers has taught me stubbornness. Besides, if there’s a threat to the *Saardam*, surely our duty is to stop it. Have you told the captain?’

‘Arent is doing it.’

‘Arent,’ she cooed lasciviously. Sara suspected that somewhere on the ship Arent suddenly started sweating. ‘When did you get on first-name terms with the brutish Lieutenant Hayes?’

‘On the docks,’ said Sara, ignoring her suggestive tone. ‘How am I supposed to save the *Saardam*?’

‘I don’t know, I’m not the clever one.’

Sara scoffed at that, snatching her wine back and taking a big gulp. ‘You see a great deal more than most.’

‘That’s a polite way of calling me a gossip,’ responded Creesjie. ‘Come now, stop being a worried friend and play at being Samuel Pippis. I’ve seen you play-act his cases with Lia and try to solve them.’

‘They’re games.’

‘And you are very good at them.’ She paused, peering intently at her. ‘Think, Sara. What do we do?’

Sara sighed, rubbing her temple with her palm. ‘Pippis believed the leper was a carpenter,’ she said slowly. ‘Possibly on this ship. Somebody must have known him. If so, they might have more information on this threat we’re facing.’

‘Two ladies won’t be safe tromping into the depths of the *Saardam*. Besides, the captain’s forbidden any passengers from going beyond the mainmast.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The tallest mast, halfway along the ship.’

‘Oh, we don’t need to go that far,’ replied Sara. ‘We’re nobility. We can make the information come to us.’

Flinging open the door, she gathered her voice and hollered imperiously, ‘Somebody fetch me a carpenter, I’m afraid this cabin simply won’t do!’

SAMMY PIPPS DANGLED IN the air, hands and feet poking through the cargo net hoisting him on to the *Saardam*.

‘If you try to leap out, the weight of those manacles will drown you,’ warned Guard Captain Jacobi Drecht, squinting up at him from the boat below.

Sammy smiled tightly. ‘It’s been a long time since anybody mistook me for stupid, Guard Captain,’ he responded.

‘Desperation makes us all stupid from time to time,’ grunted Drecht, removing his hat and leaping on to the rope ladder.

Arent followed him up, though much more slowly. Years at war had taken more than they’d given and each rung caused his knees to crack and his ankles to pop. He felt like a sack of broken parts clattering together.

Eventually he dragged himself over the gunwale and on to the waist of the ship, the largest and lowest of its four weather decks. His eyes swept left and right, searching for his friend, but there was far too much commotion. Clusters of passengers waited to be told where to go, while sailors poured buckets of water into the yawls and stuffed the cannons with hemp to keep the weather out. Hundreds of parrots were screeching