THE SUNKEN BRIDE



RADIM KAUFMANN

The sea buried the treasure.
Not the truth.

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The sea buried the treasure. Not the truth.

A historical adventure novel

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This is a work of fiction inspired by historical events. The principal characters, their stories, the modern expedition, and its discoveries are invented.

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The Vanished Shore

On a chart, a shipwreck can be a single point. In a shipping record, a few lines. To someone standing below deck, listening to water move beyond a timber wall, there is no point on a chart. There is a way out, a hand in the darkness, and a decision for which there is very little time.

In 1511, the Portuguese captured Malacca, a port linking the trade routes of the Indian Ocean with East Asia. Goods changed hands there; languages met across weighing scales; an agreement could matter as much as a weapon. The conquest meant more than a new flag. It disrupted households, commercial ties, and the lives of people whose futures were now being decided by someone else.

After the conquest, the Portuguese carrack Flor de la Mar sailed toward India with Afonso de Albuquerque aboard. Early accounts associate the vessel with a rich cargo taken from the city. She was wrecked off Sumatra. The precise day, the sequence of the disaster, and the scale of the losses are not consistent across every source. Certainty ends well before the most colorful legends begin.

This novel enters the space between those surviving accounts. Suraya is not a forgotten princess whose biography has emerged from an archive. Duarte is not a knight discovered in a recovered journal. They are invented people living within a real world of trading ports, conquest, and hazardous voyages. Their story asks what an entry in a cargo record might mean to someone whose own life had been reduced to a line.

Five centuries later, maritime archaeologist Klára Sequeira faces another kind of uncertainty. A letter can be genuinely old and still tell an incomplete story. A drawing can depict a real object without proving where it came from. And the person

willing to fund an expedition may want something very different from the people conducting the research.

The two timelines are separated by centuries, but both turn on questions of trust. Whom do you give a name to? Whom do you allow near an irreplaceable document? When does silence protect someone, and when does it help a person counting on everyone else to remain quiet? The answers will cost both Suraya and Klára. Neither will have all the information when she must choose.

There is room for love in this story, and for work: reading a difficult hand, translating, testing one clue against another, and helping people who cannot simply walk away. The sea offers no easy confirmation. What remains underwater cannot be mistaken for what we hope to find, and what survived on land deserves just as much care.

Before the first chapter opens, imagine the harbor while its inhabitants still have no idea which events will enter the chronicles. Cloth folded for a wedding. A fresh entry in an account book. A child being called home. Behind the story of a sunken ship begins the story of people who are still standing on shore.



CHAPTER 1

The Last Silk

Malacca, 1511

The Marriage Bargain



“Count it again,” Suraya said.

Her father gave her the look he usually reserved for a servant who had broken something valuable in front of a guest.

“It has been counted.”

“Then it will come to the same number.”

Across the mat, the man sent by her intended husband's family rested his fingers on the folded silk. “Is there a fault in the cloth?”

“No.”

“In our word?”

“There are seven pieces. Your man said eight.”

The room went quiet enough for her to hear Mariam chewing behind the screen.

The visitor lifted the upper fold. Beneath the red silk lay green, yellow, two shades of blue, undyed cream, and a dark length whose pattern appeared only when it caught the light. Seven. Suraya had watched each piece come from the chest.

Her father turned toward the doorway. “Perhaps the eighth was left downstairs.”

“It was not cloth,” the visitor said.

He took a small object from beneath the darkest piece and set it on the mat. A wooden token, polished by hands, with a cut across one edge and three shallow marks on its face.

Suraya reached for it.

The visitor's fingers closed first.

“An acknowledgment,” he said.

“Of the east warehouse?”

Her father's eyes moved to her pendant, as though the blue stone at her throat required inspection. He had given her that same look when she was twelve and asked why a debtor had brought rice instead of money.

“You know our marks,” the visitor said.

“I help keep the accounts.”

“A useful skill in a wife.”

“Whose acknowledgment is it?”

“Suraya,” her father said.

She kept her eyes on the token. The cut identified the building. The three marks identified the men whose goods were inside. She had checked two of their balances herself. Those

goods were not hers to receive as a gift, nor her father's to give away.

The visitor smiled. “We had hoped for a pleasant morning.”

“So had I.”

Behind the screen Mariam stopped chewing.

Her father laid his palm flat on the mat. “My daughter asks because she wishes to understand the arrangement.”

“Then I am glad to explain it. Our house will take responsibility for the goods held under this mark.”

“And the charges against them?” Suraya asked.

“They follow the goods.”

“Even if the goods cannot be delivered?”

The visitor glanced toward the river. From this room it was possible to see a narrow strip of water between two roofs. A boat crossed the strip, empty except for its rower.

“Trade continues,” he said.

“Your family is sending vessels away.”

“As is every prudent family.”

“But you want ours to remain.”

Her father spoke before the visitor could answer. “Bring us fresh water.”

Suraya looked at the untouched cups.

“Please,” he added.

She rose. The red silk caught beneath her knee, and she freed it carefully before stepping away. At the screen Mariam caught her hand.

“Did you count me?” the child whispered.

“What?”

“You counted everything else.”

Suraya bent. “You are not part of the gifts.”

“Neither are you.”

“Finish your cake.”

“I have.”

“Then stop chewing it.”

Mariam showed her empty mouth. She was nine and had discovered that adults sometimes laughed when they meant to be angry. Suraya pressed a finger to her lips, but the child had already noticed the effort not to smile.

In the passage their aunt waited with a fresh jar. She had heard enough to hand it over without asking why the water was needed.

“Must you question him in front of the visitor?”

“Would he answer afterward?”

“He is trying to protect this house.”

“By giving it to another house?”

“By making sure there will be someone to speak for us.”

“I can speak.”

“You know what I mean.”

Suraya leaned her shoulder against the wall. Below them, men carried a chest toward the landing stage. They had carried the same chest in that morning, full. Now two of them could manage it without resting.

“Did you know about the warehouse?”

“No.” Her aunt lowered her voice. “Your father has slept very little.”

“That does not change a debt.”

“No. It changes what a man will promise to make it go away.”

Suraya took the water back herself.

The visitor had drawn the token close to his knee. Her father was speaking about departure, a word he abandoned when she entered.

“I can wait outside,” she said.

“There is no need,” the visitor replied.

“Then leave the token.”

Her father closed his eyes briefly.

“If it acknowledges a transfer,” she continued, “someone should write down what is being transferred. The bales, the claims against them, the charges for storage. Not simply the name of a building.”

“Would you have your marriage reduced to a warehouse account?”

“You brought the warehouse.”

He looked at her father. “Perhaps we should return another day.”

“Will your vessels still be here?” she asked.

The visitor rose.

Her father stood with him, making the movement an act of courtesy instead of a dismissal. “Leave the cloth. We will send our answer.”

“And the acknowledgment?”

“That too.”

The man hesitated, then put the token on the red silk.

At the stairs, voices rose from the courtyard. A gate latch rattled. Someone called for Suraya's father without adding the customary greeting.

The visitor stopped.

A young warehouse porter came into the passage, breathless. One side of his tunic was black with river mud.

“The lower crossing,” he said. “They say it has fallen.”

“Who says?” her father demanded.

“People coming from there.”

“Have you seen it?”

“No. But the men at the warehouse are leaving.”

Outside, a deeper sound traveled across the roofs. The visitor flinched before he could hide it.

Suraya's father turned to his servant. “Take him to the landing. Find out whether his boat is still waiting.”

The visitor had already begun to move.

“And our answer?” he asked from the doorway.

Her father looked at the abandoned silk.

“You will have it when there is time to give one.”

After he was gone, Suraya picked up the token.

“Put it down,” her father said.

“You were going to accept.”

“I was going to get you out.”

“Without Mariam?”

“No.”

“Without my aunt?”

“No.”

“Then say what you were promising.”

He took the token from her hand and put it beside the cups. His fingers shook. She had never seen that before.

“I will tell you on the boat.”

The Broken Gate



“Nothing that requires two hands,” her father said.

A servant stopped with a lacquered box against his chest.

“Leave it.”

“The household seals—”

“In your sash. Leave the box.”

The man put it down so gently that Suraya wanted to shout at him. Instead she went to the inner room and pulled off the heavier outer layer of silk. She folded it once, saw what she was doing, and left it on the mat.

Her aunt stood in the doorway.

“Where is Mariam?” Suraya asked.

“With the women.”

“Which women?”

“Downstairs. Put this on.”

She held out a dark cotton wrap. Suraya took it and fastened it over her lighter clothes.

“The pendant,” her aunt said.

Suraya reached behind her neck.

“No. Inside.”

She tucked the gold beneath the cloth. The repaired edge of the setting caught for a moment at a loose thread.

From below came her father's voice. “We go now.”

Suraya caught her aunt's hand. Together they hurried down the rear stairs, where the air smelled of hot oil and wet timber. Two servants waited beside the kitchen door. Neither had brought the cooking pots. One carried a jar of drinking water against her hip.

At the landing a narrow boat strained against its line. Her father stood in it, arguing with the boatman.

“Not through the main channel,” he said.

“I cannot go through a wall.”

“You know another way.”

“With this many aboard?”

“You will be paid.”

“If I cannot row, who will pay me?”

“Suraya.” Her father held out his hand. “Help your aunt.”

She guided her aunt down the wet steps. A servant gave them the water jar. The boat tipped, and her aunt gripped Suraya's wrist until it steadied.

“Where is Mariam?” Suraya asked.

“In front,” the servant said.

There were bundles in front. A small boy crouched beneath one, his face turned away.

Suraya bent. “Mariam?”

The boy looked up. He was the cook's son.

She turned toward the house.

“Who has her?”

The servants looked at one another.

“She went for her other sandal,” one said.

“When?”

“Before we came down.”

Suraya was already climbing the steps.

Her father caught the edge of her wrap. “Wait. I will send—”

“I know where she keeps it.”

“I said wait.”

She pulled free without meaning to. The cloth slipped through his fingers.

“Suraya!”

She ran through the kitchen. In the courtyard the porter was trying to close the front gate, shoving against a warped leaf while an older man lifted its lower edge. The street beyond was crowded. A woman tried to get through with a child, then gave up and moved on.

“Mariam!”

No answer.

She took the stairs two at a time, lifting the wrap above her knees. At the top, the red silk lay where she had left it. The wedding gifts were still arranged around the cups.

“Mariam, answer me.”

A sound came from the room beside the screen. Suraya pushed the curtain away.

Her cousin sat on the floor with one foot bare. A sandal lay just beyond her hand.

“I told them,” Mariam said.

“Told them what?”

“That I couldn't stand.”

“Why not?”

“My foot.”

Her ankle was swollen above the heel. The skin was grazed along one side.

“What happened?”

“I went down the front steps. There were people. A man pushed me.”

“Can you put weight on it?”

Mariam tried. Her breath stopped in a small, sharp sound.

“Don't.” Suraya crouched and turned her back. “Arms around my neck.”

“I am too heavy.”

“You are not.”

“Father says—”

“I am not your father. Hold on.”

The child's arms closed around her. Suraya stood carefully, one hand beneath each of Mariam's knees. Her cousin's breath was hot against her ear.

“Did I spoil it?” Mariam whispered.

“What?”

“The wedding.”

“No.”

“Because I said you were not a gift?”

“You were right.”

At the stairs Suraya stopped to shift her grip. Something struck the gate below. The noise shook dust from the stair wall.

Mariam tightened her arms.

“Not so hard. I need to breathe.”

“Who is it?”

“I don't know.”

The porter shouted to the older man. A second blow landed before Suraya reached the kitchen.

“The river,” she said, though nobody had asked.

The kitchen door stood open. She carried Mariam through it and stopped at the top of the landing steps.

The boat was gone.

For an instant she could see nothing beyond the empty space where it had been. Then she found it farther out, caught among other vessels. Her father was standing, one hand on the boatman's shoulder. Her aunt's dark head moved beside him.

“Father!”

He turned.

Suraya raised her voice. “We are here!”

He said something to the boatman. The man shook his head and pointed downstream. Another boat struck theirs sideways. Her father stumbled and caught the gunwale.

“Come back!” Mariam called.

The boatman bent to his oar.

Her father cupped a hand beside his mouth. Suraya heard her name, then something about the house. He pointed toward it. She could not tell whether he was ordering her to wait or warning her away.

“Come back,” Mariam said again, more quietly.

The gap widened.

Suraya looked along the landing. Another boat was tied two houses away, but men were already climbing into it. Between

the houses the walkway had broken loose. She could not cross with Mariam on her back. She could not leave her on the steps.

Her father was still pointing. Then another vessel passed between them, carrying a bundle of poles so wide that it hid his boat entirely.

When it cleared, she could no longer find him.

“Mariam. Listen to me.”

“Are they coming?”

“We have to go inside.”

“Will they know?”

“We will leave the door open.”

She carried the child back to the kitchen. The cook's low bench stood beside the wall. Suraya lowered Mariam onto it and knelt in front of her.

“If someone asks, you stay with me.”

“I know.”

“You say it. Whatever they ask.”

“I stay with you.”

“Good.”

“Are you afraid?”

Suraya put the sandal beside her cousin's good foot.

“Yes.”

Mariam watched her.

“But I am here,” Suraya said.

The porter appeared in the courtyard doorway. Blood ran from his palm to his wrist. He looked past Suraya toward the river, saw the empty landing, and stopped.

“Is there another way out?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Then come here. Let me see your hand.”

He did not move.

From the street came a shout in a language she did not understand. Another voice answered closer to the gate.

“Please,” Suraya said.

The porter crossed the kitchen. She tore a strip from the end of her wrap and pressed it into his hand.

“Hold that.”

Behind him the older man stepped away from the gate, breathing through his open mouth.

The next blow broke the crossbar.

Suraya stood between Mariam and the courtyard.

The gate came inward.



CHAPTER 2

A Letter Without a Shore

Eva’s Papers



“You've signed in as a visitor,” Beatriz said.

“I am visiting.”

“You have a reader number.”

“I haven't used it in two years.”

“It still works.” She slid the register back across the counter. “And it saves me entering you twice.”

Klára crossed out the line and wrote the number. Beatriz watched her, then retrieved a gray box from the trolley behind her chair.

“One box today.”

“You said there were four.”

“There are four. You requested one.”

“I requested my mother's papers.”

“You requested the first box of your mother's papers. I have your email.”

For a moment Klára wanted to argue. Then she remembered writing it at an airport, between a canceled flight and a call from someone who needed a signature she could not provide.

“All right. One box.”

Beatriz set it on the counter rather than handing it over.

“You can order the next one before lunch.”

“Is this how she talked to you?”

“Your mother knew the request system.”

The answer was so immediate that Klára laughed. Beatriz allowed herself a small smile.

The reading room occupied the second floor of a narrow building in Lisbon. A ceiling fan turned without improving the air. Three readers sat beneath the tall windows; someone had left a cardigan over a chair to keep a place. Klára chose the table farthest from the copying desk. She took a pencil from her bag, put her phone on silent, and lifted the box lid.

Her mother's name appeared on every folder label. Eva Sequeira: research papers. Donated by the family. An accession date from the year before.

Eighteen months since Eva's death, after the illness that had made every visit a negotiation over how much help she would accept. Eleven since Klára had delivered the papers. Long enough to make today's visit an act of work rather than grief, she had told herself on the way here. Then she opened the first folder and found a paper clip bent into a shape she recognized. Eva had never thrown one away if she could persuade it to grip again.

Beatriz arrived with a foam support and a small weight.

“For the folded sheets,” she said. “Not on the handwriting.”

“I know.”

“I tell everyone.”

“Did you tell her?”

“Repeatedly.”

Klára unfolded a coastal map. A proposed search area off Sumatra had been crossed out in blue pencil. Beside it Eva had written: *Conclusion unsupported by cited passage.*

Below that: *Ask what shore is being described.*

“Was she planning to publish this?” Klára asked.

“She never submitted it to us.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“It is what I know.”

Beatriz adjusted the support and moved away.

The next folder contained reproduction orders, travel receipts, and a letter to a journal that Eva had never sent. Its opening paragraph concerned the loss of the Flor de la Mar after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511. Klára knew the broad story: Albuquerque's return toward India, a valuable cargo, a wreck off Sumatra, and generations of people improving the story by increasing the amount of gold.

Eva had crossed out her own second paragraph.

Klára read the surviving line beneath it.

This does not establish a new location. It establishes a problem in the argument for the old one.

“You really knew how to sell a paper,” she murmured.

A man at the next table looked up. She mouthed an apology.

Inside the folder lay a modern transcription beside photographs of an old handwritten letter. The catalog entry

described it cautiously: *Private account attributed to Duarte de Sá; surviving copy, date to be assessed.* Eva had circled *copy*.

Klára read the transcription first. The writer had survived a shipwreck. He referred to reaching shelter on land and to people who had helped him. He did not name the place. Part of the page was occupied by money, obligations, and an explanation of why he could not return when expected.

Then she found the child.

The little girl who was kin to her remained with her.

In the margin Eva had written two possible readings of the word translated as *kin*. Under both she had added a question mark.

Klára reread the passage. She knew enough old Portuguese to recognize where familiarity became a trap. Modern meaning could lie neatly over an older word and conceal the difference.

“Beatriz?”

The archivist glanced up from the copying desk.

“Does this transcription belong to the photographs?”

“According to the folder list.”

“Who checked it?”

“Your mother.”

“Anyone else?”

“Not that I know of. What's wrong with it?”

“I don't know that anything is wrong.”

Beatriz came over. Klára moved her hand away from the page.

“Here. She's marked a relationship. Not a designation in a list.”

“A family relationship?”

“Possibly. She hasn't decided how specific.”

“And you have?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Klára looked up. “You can stop waiting for me to turn into her.”

“I wasn't.”

“You're doing the face.”

“What face?”

“The face people made when she corrected them.”

Beatriz pulled out the empty chair opposite. “Your mother once spent forty minutes explaining why I had used the wrong folder heading. She was right. I still wanted to hit her with the folder.”

Klára laughed again, less easily this time.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“For the heading?”

“For not coming sooner.”

“You brought us the papers. You signed the deposit. There wasn't an examination you failed.”

“I kept telling her I'd look at this work.”

“Then look at it.” Beatriz tapped the support, clear of the photographs. “Tell me what you need.”

Klára drew the transcription toward her.

“The source volume. And whatever description existed when she ordered these photographs.”

“That may take time.”

“I have today.”

“Today isn't always enough.”

“I know.”

Beatriz studied her for a moment, then wrote down the reference.

Klára returned to the child. The writer had not described a quantity, a valuation, or a person assigned to a household. He had described a girl through her relationship to a woman. That did not tell Klára whether he was kind, truthful, or even the man named in the catalog. It did give her a reason to read his words rather than the summary someone else had made of them.

She opened her notebook.

Who is “her”?

Below it she wrote:

Why omit the shore?

Then she crossed out *omit* and substituted *not name*. An omission presumed he had known what a future reader would want. He might simply have been writing to someone who already knew.

At the bottom of the folder was a drawing of a pendant. An oval stone sat in an openwork setting. Eva had colored it blue, lightly enough that the pencil strokes showed. A small repair interrupted the lower-left edge of the goldwork.

No inscription. No coordinates. Beside it, only a note:

Do not use as identification without independent provenance.

“Then why did you keep it here?” Klára whispered.

This time the reader at the next table did not look up.

The Unpublished Drawing



Beatriz returned after lunch with a bound volume on a padded trolley and two printouts.

“I'm going to disappoint you,” she said.

“You found the wrong one?”

“I found the right one. Which does not mean I can let you take it apart.”

“I wasn't planning to.”

“People say that just before they point at a binding with a pen.”

Klára held up her pencil. Beatriz did not smile.

Together they checked the reference against Eva's order. The photographs in the folder had been made years before the papers were deposited. A printed list recorded twelve leaves in the relevant section. The current description recorded eleven.

“Recounted?” Klára asked.

“Possibly.”

“A blank leaf removed?”

“Possibly.”

“Or a mistake.”

“Yes. Let's start with those before we accuse anyone of stealing history.”

“I didn't say stolen.”

“You were getting there.”

Klára leaned back while Beatriz opened the volume on its support. The letter occupied only part of the section. Other documents had been bound around it: accounts, copies of correspondence, a short list in a different hand. They followed the old numbering until the sequence jumped.

“Six,” Beatriz said. “Then eight.”

“Could seven be on the back?”

They checked without forcing the binding. It was not.

Beatriz turned to the older printout. “The earlier description includes it.”

“What does it say?”

“Incidental drawing. Ornament. No separate title.”

Klára laid Eva's pendant drawing on the table beside the support.

“Something like this?”

“It could be. The description isn't enough.”

“Her photographs?”

“Your folder has images of six and eight. Nothing numbered seven.”

“So she didn't order it.”

“Or it wasn't supplied.”

“Or it was supplied and she put it somewhere else.”

Beatriz nodded. “Now you're making a useful list.”

Klára looked at the gap again. No torn edge announced an answer. She could not tell from the way the section opened whether a leaf had been removed, detached long ago, or misnumbered before the documents were bound. Beatriz would ask someone qualified to inspect the structure. Until then, *missing* meant missing from the available sequence. Nothing more.

“May I photograph the numbering?”

“Yes. With the reference in the frame. No flash.”

“And the drawing?”

“Your mother's drawing belongs to the deposit. Same rules.”

“Has anyone published it?”

“Not through us. The finding aid lists a drawing. It doesn't reproduce it.”

“Any image online?”

“I would have told you.”

Klára photographed both, then checked Eva's notes for a link between them. There was no statement that the pendant had belonged aboard the Flor de la Mar. No confident identification of the stone. The only reference to its origin led to a private collection, followed by Eva's familiar square around a question mark.

A loose page bore a sentence in Czech.

Nejdřív zjistit, kdo smí s kým mluvit za koho.

First establish who is entitled to speak for whom.

It was not a warning to her daughter. It was a working reminder, impatient and practical. Klára could hear Eva saying it over a table full of people who had mistaken permission to examine something for permission to dispose of it.

Her phone vibrated.

Beatriz glanced at it. “Outside.”

“I know.”

“You keep saying that.”

Klára stepped into the stairwell and answered.

“Dr. Sequeira? Adrian Vale. I emailed you yesterday about an archival research proposal. Is this a convenient moment?”

“I haven't read it.”

“Then I've called too soon. My apologies.”

“What kind of proposal?”

“Portuguese material relating to Malacca. Some papers in a private collection may overlap with your mother's research. I understand you administer her unpublished work.”

“I administer her estate. That isn't quite the same thing.”

“No. Thank you for correcting me.”

His voice was unhurried, with an English accent. Nothing in it demanded that she be impressed.

“Who gave you my number?”

“Your university profile. If this should go through an administrator instead, I'm happy to do that.”

“No. You can tell me what you're asking.”

“An initial conversation. After that, if the material warrants it, a funded assessment by appropriate specialists. We would cover access costs and reasonable travel. I can send a brief outline.”

“We?”

“A research foundation I support. The details are in the email.”

“Does the foundation own the papers?”

“Some of them are privately held. I don't want to misrepresent the arrangements before you've seen them.”

That was a better answer than a quick assurance would have been.

“I'm in a reading room,” she said. “I can't discuss terms now.”

“Of course. Would tomorrow suit you?”

“I haven't agreed to a meeting.”

“Then may I send enough for you to decide whether to agree?”

She watched a strip of sunlight move across the stair rail.

“Yes. Send the source description, the ownership of the material, and what you expect from me.”

“I'll do that.”

“And please don't use my name in connection with a project I haven't joined.”

“I won't.”

They ended the call without setting a time.

Inside, Beatriz was closing the source volume.

“I need to return this,” she said. “You can request it again tomorrow.”

“Someone wants to fund an assessment.”

“Of what?”

“Private papers.”

“Do you know him?”

“No.”

“Then you know what to ask.”

“I asked.”

“Ask again when there are answers on paper.”

Klára gathered her notes. A message arrived before she had finished checking the image files. Adrian Vale's subject line was plain: *Materials for an initial discussion.*

She opened the attachment showing the source description. It was a scanned sheet, not a photograph of a jewel. An oval stone, an openwork setting, a repair at the lower left.

“Beatriz.”

“What?”

“Don't put my box away yet.”

The archivist stopped beside the trolley.

Klára laid Eva's drawing next to the phone. The attachment was more detailed. It included a partial view of the reverse and the broken flourish of a pen stroke at the top. Eva had copied that same flourish into the corner of her page, then crossed it out as irrelevant.

“Is it the missing leaf?” Beatriz asked.

“I can't establish that from this.”

“Then what can you establish?”

Klára enlarged the scan. There was enough of the repair to rule out a merely similar design. Enough of the pen stroke to suggest that Eva had worked from this image, or another image of the same sheet.

“This drawing wasn't in anything I published.”

“Perhaps he found your mother's work somewhere else.”

“Perhaps.”

The email still called it an initial discussion. Nothing about it sounded improper. Nothing explained why a stranger could send her a more complete version of an image her mother had never released.



CHAPTER 3

Names on a List

The Holding Room



“Your hand,” Suraya said. “Give me your hand.”

Mariam was close enough for her to see the sweat along the child's upper lip. Between them, two men carried a broken door with a wounded soldier on it. Suraya waited for the door to pass, reached again, and caught a handful of someone's damp sleeve.

The sleeve tore out of her fingers.

“Mariam.”

A guard shoved her toward the warehouse. She turned under his arm, looking for the small brown face, the uneven braid. A sack fell from a porter's shoulder. Men shouted at him to lift it. In the opening beyond their bodies, Mariam stood beside an overturned basket with one foot held above the ground.

“Stay there,” Suraya called in Malay. “I can see you.”

The guard pushed again. This time she stumbled against a timber post, and the door closed behind her.

She seized the latch. Someone outside struck the wood with a weapon.

“Open it. There is a child.”

No answer came in words she understood. She tried Portuguese, drawing each sound from the short phrases she had heard beside her father's scales.

“My little cousin. Outside. Hurt foot.”

The latch lifted. She backed away to make room for Mariam.

A man entered with two rolled mats.

He dropped them beside the door and left.

Suraya lunged after him, but the guard caught her wrist and turned it until she had to bend. He spoke close to her face. She recognized *quiet* and *inside*. His thumb pressed the bones together.

She stopped pulling.

The pressure eased. He released her with a short motion, as though throwing something away.

Across the warehouse, a woman with a gray head covering moved her feet to make a place. Suraya stayed at the door. Through a gap between the planks she could see a patch of dusty ground, the edge of a basket, a man's bare heel. No child.

“She will come,” the woman said in Malay.

“Did you see where they took her?”

“No.”

“Then don't tell me that.”

The woman lowered her eyes. Suraya wanted to take the words back, but footsteps sounded outside, and she pressed her cheek to the wood instead.

By the time the doors opened again, the bright patch beneath them had narrowed. Two clerks entered behind a man carrying a low table. The guards drove the people nearest the entrance backward. Suraya counted seventeen women and children before the crowd hid the far wall. There had been others outside. Mariam could be among any of them.

The warehouse still smelled of pepper. Torn sacks lay along one side beneath strips of matting. Above them, a row of hooks held nothing. Someone had swept a clear space for the table and left the sweepings against the wall: husks, string, a broken wooden scoop.

One clerk set down papers. The other put a small inkpot on the table and wiped its rim with his thumb.

A thin man followed them in. He wore a dirty cotton tunic and carried no weapon. A guard called him Yusuf. When the clerk spoke, Yusuf answered in Portuguese, then turned toward the people against the wall.

“You will give your names,” he said in Malay. “One household at a time. If you have a craft, say what it is.”

“Where are the children?” Suraya asked.

Yusuf glanced at the guard.

“Names first.”

“My cousin came through the gate with me. She hurt her ankle. Where is she?”

“Many came through the gate.”

“Her name is Mariam. Nine years old. Her braid is tied with yellow thread.”

He looked at her torn cuff, then at the gold she had not managed to cover at her throat.

“Keep your voice down,” he said. “And put that away.”

She drew the edge of her wrap across the pendant.

“Will you ask?”

“I will ask when someone will answer.”

The clerk rapped his pen against the table. Yusuf left her and began with the woman in gray.

Names moved across the room. Sometimes the clerk asked a question. Sometimes he waved the answer away before Yusuf had finished translating. One woman said she embroidered. He marked the page. A boy said his father was a boatbuilder and was told to speak only of himself.

When Suraya's turn came, she gave her name and her father's.

The clerk asked something quickly. She caught *house*, then a word she did not know.

“He wants to know where your father is,” Yusuf said.

“If I knew that, I would be with him.”

“Do you want me to say that?”

She looked at the guard beside the door.

“No. Say we were separated.”

The clerk wrote. His companion brought a folded sheet from outside and laid it beside the inkpot. Across its lower edge ran a series of short strokes and figures.

“That is wrong,” Suraya said.

Yusuf did not turn.

“The sacks. Ask what he counted.”

The clerk followed her pointing finger and pulled the paper closer to himself.

Yusuf listened to his answer. “Twenty-four.”

“There were twenty-four bundles,” she said. “Six of those bundles held two small sacks. You have thirty sacks.”

He translated. The clerk shook his head and tapped a line.

Suraya tried the Portuguese numbers herself. “Twenty-four bundles. Thirty sacks.”

She held up six fingers, folded them into three pairs, then pointed toward the wall where two small sacks remained tied together. The clerk's companion went to look. He cut the string and brought back its two ends.

The clerk said something that made the guard laugh. He crossed out a figure.

Suraya watched the pen.

“My cousin,” she said. “Will you ask now?”

Before Yusuf could answer, a man in a dark coat stopped in the doorway. The guard straightened. The newcomer looked at the table, then at Suraya.

“What does she say?” he asked in Portuguese.

His words were slow enough for her to understand them.

Yusuf explained the bundles. The man stepped inside and took the corrected sheet. A heavy seal hung from a cord at his belt. On the table, when he set down his hand, Suraya saw that his left little finger ended bluntly before the others.

“Who taught you to count our goods?” he asked.

“Her father's household trades,” Yusuf said before she could assemble an answer.

The man looked at her more carefully.

“Your father has stores near the water?”

“Had,” Suraya said.

She knew that word in Portuguese. She had learned it from men explaining why they could not pay.

“Perhaps still has.” He put the sheet down. “I am Rui de Vasconcelos. You will help Yusuf.”

“My cousin is outside.”

Yusuf translated the rest: Mariam's name, her ankle, the yellow thread.

Rui listened without looking at him.

“Work first.”

“Let me see her first.”

He touched the cord of the seal. “You have not understood.”

Yusuf repeated the words in Malay, very quietly.

Suraya looked from Rui to the clerk. On the table lay the names of everyone who had been counted. Somewhere outside, on another table, there might be Mariam's.

“What work?” she asked.

A False Entry



They placed her beside Yusuf, close enough to the table to smell the sour ink.

She was to give the names of cloth and distinguish a length from a folded piece. The clerk had recorded both alike. Yusuf knew more Portuguese than she did, but he did not know what a trader meant when he spoke of the contents of a bale rather than its wrapping.

“No,” she told him when a porter pointed to a heap of blue cloth. “Not twelve pieces. Twelve folds in each piece. Ask him to open one.”

The porter protested. Yusuf raised his hands.

“If I make him open all of them, they will say we are delaying.”

“One,” Suraya said. “He can count the rest against it.”

“Will your cousin be nearer if these men become angry?”

“Will she be nearer if I give them a wrong number?”

He repeated the request. The porter spat to one side and opened a piece. The clerk measured it with a cord, counted, and changed another entry.

Rui returned before they had finished the bale. He stood behind the clerk and read over his shoulder.

“The child,” Suraya said.

“Which child?”

She waited for Yusuf to translate, although she understood the question.

“Mariam. My cousin.”

Rui rubbed a dark mark from his thumb. “There are children in the next store.”

“Take me there.”

He glanced at the doorway, where another soldier waited with a folded order.

“There is no time to carry you from room to room. The work is here.”

“Then bring her here.”

He looked at her covered throat.

Yusuf stopped moving.

Suraya could feel the pendant against her breastbone, warm from her skin. She gripped the edge of her wrap.

“It belonged to my mother.”

Rui spoke to Yusuf too quickly for her. Yusuf answered in the same language. The soldier at the door shifted his weight.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“That help can be remembered,” Yusuf said.

“That is not all he said.”

“No.”

Rui held out his hand.

Suraya thought of Mariam alone, trying to keep her injured foot off the ground. She loosened the cloth at her neck. Rui's fingers opened a little farther.

“Bring her to the door,” she said in Portuguese. “I see her. Then we speak.”

He lowered his hand.

“Finish the cloth.”

After he left, Yusuf let out his breath.

“He would have taken it and told you to wait,” he said.

“Then why did you translate?”

“Because he has my brother unloading boats.”

She looked at him. He kept his eyes on the open bale.

“Is your brother hurt?”

“I have not seen him since morning.”

For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Yusuf picked up the cord.

“Tell me the next number.”

They worked until the porter brought water in a narrow-necked jar. Suraya took two swallows and tried to pass it through the people toward the woman in gray. The guard caught her elbow and pointed at the table. She set the jar down where the woman could reach it when the clerk turned away.

A second sheet arrived with four people listed together. Yusuf read the names under his breath, trying them against the clerk's spelling.

Suraya heard *Mariam*.

“Again.”

He did not answer.

“The fourth name. Read it again.”

Yusuf bent closer. “There may be another.”

“Read it.”

“Mariam. About nine. Ankle bound.”

Suraya put both hands flat on the table.

“Where?”

The clerk reached for the page. She did not touch it. She kept her hands where he could see them and forced herself to wait.

Yusuf asked a question. The clerk pointed through the open door toward a low building across the yard.

“There,” Yusuf said.

Suraya moved. The guard stepped in front of her before she had taken a second pace.

“My cousin is there.”

“Back.”

She knew that word, too.

The low building's door stood open. A woman emerged carrying a bowl. Behind her, in the shade, a child lifted her head.

“Mariam!”

The child tried to stand and sat down sharply.

Suraya started forward again. The guard put the shaft of his weapon across her body. She could have caught it, pushed, made enough noise to bring Rui back. Instead she raised her hand where Mariam could see it.

“Stay sitting,” she called. “I have found you.”

Mariam raised one hand. Yellow thread dangled from the end of her braid.

The guard drove Suraya back into the warehouse.

Yusuf waited at the table. He would not look at her.

“What else?” she asked.

“What?”

“On the paper.”

He glanced at the clerk, who was arguing with the porter over the water jar.

“They are together for the count.”

“Who is together?”

“A woman. Two boys. The girl.”

“Under whose house?”

Yusuf rubbed the side of his nose.

“Tell me.”

He said a name she did not recognize.

“That is not her house. She is my mother's sister's child. You heard me give our names.”

“The clerk did not make this list.”

“Then who did?”

Yusuf looked toward the yard.

The corrected cloth sheet lay beside the other page. Suraya drew it toward her as though checking a number. Near the bottom, beneath the last quantity, was a patch of unused paper no larger than her palm.

“Give me the pen.”

“No.”

“I will write the cloth names for you.”

“You said I could ask you.”

“If I am sent away, who will you ask?”

The clerk noticed them. Yusuf spoke before Suraya could. He pointed at the blue bale, then at her.

The clerk considered. He pushed the pen across the table but kept the inkpot beside his own hand.

Suraya dipped the point carefully. She wrote the cloth names as she had been taught at home, leaving space after each for Yusuf to speak the Portuguese equivalent. Then, in the narrow gap between the last two lines, she made a smaller note.

Mariam. Her mother's name. The strange household name Yusuf had given. The mark beside the group, copied slowly enough to remember its shape.

She could not copy the whole sheet. She did not know what some of its words meant. The name, the grouping, the mark: those she could carry away and show to someone who might make the clerk change them.

Yusuf's hand covered the lower edge.

“Enough.”

She lifted the pen.

A shadow crossed the table. Rui had returned with the soldier from the doorway. The man was young, though exhaustion made his face seem harder. Dark hair curled against the linen at his neck. A thin scar broke one eyebrow.

Rui took the sheet bearing Mariam's name.

The soldier pointed to its heading and asked a question. Rui answered. Suraya caught *household* and then *together*. The soldier looked across the yard at the child with the bound ankle.

Yusuf said something in Portuguese.

Rui cut him off.

“Translate,” Suraya whispered.

Yusuf's hand tightened over the paper beneath hers.

“The soldier asked whether they belong together.”

“And you told him?”

“I said the girl's kin is here.”

The soldier was looking at Suraya now. She pointed at herself, then toward Mariam.

“My cousin,” she said. “My family.”

He spoke to Rui again, slower this time. Rui answered in a low voice and held up the order he had brought from outside. There was a seal on it.

The soldier's mouth closed.

At the other end of the table, the clerk pulled the cloth sheet toward him. Suraya pressed a finger over the little space where she had written. A damp edge caught against the rough tabletop. She let the paper pull and tear.

The clerk cursed. She held up the larger piece, apologizing in the few Portuguese words she possessed. He snatched it and pushed her aside.

The small torn corner remained beneath her palm.

Across the yard, Mariam was being helped to her feet. The woman with the bowl lifted her under one arm. One of the boys took the other side.

Suraya folded the scrap once and slid it inside her torn cuff.

“Duarte,” Rui called.

The soldier turned.

Rui gave him the list. He took it, checked the doorway across the yard, and motioned the guard to move.

Suraya stepped toward him.

“Wait.”

He looked back. For a breath she thought he would return to the table and ask her to say the names again.

Then Rui touched the sealed order, and Duarte walked into the yard with Mariam's name in his hand.



CHAPTER 4

Terms of Access

The Offer



Adrian Vale stood when she reached the table. He was taller than Klára had expected, neatly dressed in a pale shirt with the cuffs turned back. His coffee had not been touched.

“Thank you for coming.”

“You wanted to talk.”

“I did. Will you have something?”

She ordered coffee from the waiter and put her bag between her feet. The café was filling slowly. Two women were sharing a newspaper near the door; behind Adrian, a man in a bicycle helmet was trying to persuade a little girl to finish her toast. She had suggested this café in her reply the night before. People worked here without listening to one another. Now she was not so sure.

Adrian waited until the waiter had gone.

“I owe you an explanation.”

“Start with the drawing.”

He looked down briefly, as though arranging the answer.

“My father collected papers. Shipping correspondence, bills of sale, private letters. Not especially valuable material, most of it. When he died, I inherited rather more boxes than I knew what to do with.”

“And one had a drawing of a pendant.”

“One had a reference to an object that interested your mother.”

“That isn't the same thing.”

“No. You're right.” He moved his cup away from the edge. “I saw a reproduction of the drawing in her research material. She wanted to compare it with something in the collection.”

“When?”

“Several years ago. I'd need to check the correspondence.”

“Please do.”

“Certainly.”

He seemed prepared for suspicion. That irritated her more than an objection would have. She took out her notebook but left it closed.

“Did you give her access?”

“To a small group of papers. Yes.”

“All of them?”

“All the ones I understood to be relevant.”

“Who made that decision?”

“Initially, I did. Later, your mother asked for particular items.”

The waiter brought her coffee. She thanked him and waited while he rearranged the sugar packets. Adrian watched her without trying to resume.

“Mr. Vale, I don't know what my mother showed you, and I haven't established what any of it means. I won't be able to help you by this afternoon.”

“I wasn't going to ask you to.”

“Then what are you asking?”

He opened a slim folder. Inside were a letter and a few sheets clipped together. He put them on the table facing her, leaving room beside her cup.

“Permission to make a proposal.”

She read the heading. His foundation's name meant nothing to her. Below it were her own name, her university affiliation, and a project title referring to maritime networks in the early sixteenth-century Strait of Malacca.

“You've already written it.”

“A starting point. Nothing has gone anywhere.”

“Who chose that title?”

“A researcher I consulted.”

“Do they have a name?”

“It's in the accompanying note.” He tapped the folder, then withdrew his hand. “I'm not trying to conceal the process. I'd rather give you something concrete than waste your morning talking about what might be possible.”

There was a figure on the second page large enough to pay for work she had spent two years trying to assemble into smaller applications. It covered archival reproduction, travel, a research assistant, and a preliminary technical review. A further stage was labeled separately.

“This doesn't buy a survey,” she said.

“No. It buys time to decide whether a survey is justified.”

“Whose time?”

“Yours. Other people's, if you want them involved.”

She turned the page. A paragraph allowed publication of the research findings. Another gave the foundation an opportunity to review material before release.

“How long is this review?”

“We put thirty days in the draft.”

“And what can you stop?”

“Disclosure of private information unrelated to the research. Addresses. Personal correspondence.”

“An unfavorable conclusion?”

“No.”

“No ship?”

“No ship would be disappointing. It wouldn't be a breach of contract.”

“I want that in the version my institution sees.”

“Of course.”

“And there can't be a requirement to name a wreck before the evidence supports it.”

He nodded. “I can put that in too.”

She looked up. It had been too easy. Or she had come prepared to fight someone who knew it was cheaper to agree.

“I'm not signing anything today.”

“I didn't bring a pen.”

He smiled, then let the smile go when she didn't answer it.

“I'm sorry. That sounded glib. Have the papers checked. I expect you to.”

A child dropped a knife behind him. It struck the floor loudly enough to make Klára flinch. Adrian glanced toward the sound, giving her a moment to look at him without being observed. Nothing in his face helped her. He could have been a donor enduring an unusually awkward meeting. He could also have rehearsed every word.

“Did my mother ask you to fund her work?”

“No.”

“Did you offer?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“That she wasn't ready.”

“Why?”

“She didn't tell me.”

Klára rubbed a drop of coffee from the saucer with her thumb.

“She might have meant no.”

“She might.” He waited. “I don't presume you owe me a different answer.”

For the first time, he sounded tired rather than patient. She wondered how many people had said that to her mother, and how many Eva had believed.

“I need the relevant correspondence,” Klára said. “Including anything that explains what she thought she was looking at. Copies first. If there's a document to examine, I choose the specialist with you, and we agree on access before anyone travels.”

“Reasonable.”

“Please stop telling me my requests are reasonable. Tell me whether you'll agree to them.”

“All right. Yes.”

“And I keep my copies.”

“Subject to the collection's reproduction terms.”

“There we are.”

He leaned forward slightly. “Some papers contain living people's names. I have responsibilities to them as well.”

“Then separate those restrictions from the research results. I won't discover after six months that I can't show my evidence to another scholar.”

“I understand.”

She wasn't sure he did. But he wrote the point on the blank back of the letter, in small, unhurried handwriting.

“There's another thing,” she said. “If this leads to work in Indonesia, you don't send a boat out because we've signed an agreement in Lisbon.”

“I hadn't imagined it would be that simple.”

“People imagine all sorts of things when they pay for boats.”

“Then let's agree not to.”

His phone vibrated. He glanced at it, silenced it, and returned his attention to her. She had no reason to resent the courtesy, yet she did.

“Who else has seen this proposal?”

“The foundation administrator. The researcher named in the note. Nobody at your institution. Nobody in the press.”

“I'll speak to a colleague before I answer.”

“May I ask who?”

“You may. I haven't asked him whether he wants to be involved.”

Adrian accepted that with a small inclination of his head. He slid the folder closer.

“Take it. I'll send an editable copy and the supporting material. Look at it in your own time.”

He asked whether she wanted another coffee. She said no. As they stood, he reached for the bill before she could, then stopped with his hand above it.

“Would you prefer—”

“It's coffee, Mr. Vale.”

Outside, he went toward the square, leaving her to take the narrow street downhill. She waited until he had turned the corner before opening the folder again. The money was still there. So was the offer of access to papers Eva had wanted to see.

She put it away. She had asked plenty of questions. She had not yet asked herself how badly she wanted his answer to be yes.

A Research Partner



Idris answered on his laptop, his face briefly divided into squares before the connection steadied. A fluorescent light shone above him. Through an open door Klára could see shelves, a wet jacket and someone carrying a cardboard box.

“Is this a bad time?” she asked.

“You're going to tell me.”

“Do you have twenty minutes?”

“Probably ten. If it's the reference for your student, I haven't forgotten.”

“It isn't the reference.”

He took off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt.

“Then I should get tea.”

“I can call later.”

“No. Wait.”

He disappeared from the frame. She heard him asking someone a question, then a laugh and a chair dragging across

the floor. When he returned, he had a mug and had closed the door.

“All right.”

They had last worked together three years earlier. Bad weather had confined their team to shore for most of a week, and she remembered Idris patiently helping her disentangle equipment invoices while she insisted they ought to be preparing for the next clear morning. In the end he had done both. She had slept through breakfast.

“I've been going through my mother's papers,” she said.

He set the mug down.

“I wondered how that was going.”

“Slowly. I've found material I didn't know she had.”

“What sort?”

“Copies of letters, some transcripts. Her own notes. There's a possible connection with Flor de la Mar.”

His expression didn't change, but he put his glasses back on.

“What does possible mean?”

“That I haven't ruled it out.”

“That's quite a large category.”

“I know.”

“Does anyone else?”

She told him about Adrian. Not what she thought he was hiding. What he had said, what he had offered, and what she had asked to see. Idris interrupted only once, to ask her to repeat the distinction between the inherited papers and the drawing.

“He hasn't shown me the correspondence yet,” she said.

“Then we start there.”

“We?”

“If that's why you called.”

She had been about to tell him he wasn't under any obligation. She could hear how it would sound: as though she needed to release him from a debt he had never acknowledged.

“It is.”

“Good. Send me the proposal.”

“I should warn you about the title.”

“Does it say treasure?”

“No.”

“Does it mean treasure?”

She looked at the closed folder.

“I haven't asked him that directly.”

“Ask.”

“I will.”

“Before either of us asks anyone here for their time.”

She sent the draft to his institutional address. They waited while it arrived. He opened it on another part of his screen, and his eyes moved away from the camera.

“Your name is already on this.”

“That's one of the things I'm changing.”

“And mine isn't.”

“He doesn't know I've called you.”

“I mean the place for someone here. There's no place at all.”

She found the project structure on her copy. Principal investigator, consultants, technical services. She had read it over coffee without stopping at the hierarchy.

“You're right.”

“If we investigate a question here, it becomes a question for a joint project. Not an expedition that hires us when it needs permission.”

“Co-directors,” she said.

“If the institutes agree, and if we can put together a question worth answering.”

“What would you need first?”

“The documents. Their history. Enough money for somebody to find out we shouldn't go to sea.”

She smiled despite herself.

“I asked for the right to publish a negative result.”

“Ask for the right to stop before you create one. A funded boat starts making decisions for you.”

“Adrian said this stage doesn't include a boat.”

“Then keep it that way.”

Someone knocked. Idris covered the microphone, spoke briefly toward the door, and nodded. When he turned back, the mug was still untouched.

“I have a meeting in five minutes.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't apologize. Tell me what your mother thought.”

“I can't. Not yet. Her notes don't give me a single conclusion. There are crossings-out, alternatives. A few pages I still need to match to their sources.”

“Send the uncertainty with the papers. Don't tidy it up for us.”

She glanced at the envelope of reading-room reproductions beside her laptop. There was an intimacy in passing on Eva's unfinished thinking that she had not expected. It was easier to share a result. Results could stand in a room by themselves.

“Some of it's personal.”

“Then keep that. I'm not asking for all your mother's things.”

She looked back at the screen.

“Thank you.”

“Klára, I need you to hear something before this becomes an answer you rely on. I can review documents. I can talk to the institute. I can't promise a project, or authorization, or a survey season.”

“I know.”

“And I won't write a letter saying we expect to find that ship.”

“I wouldn't ask you to.”

“Good. Then we can work.”

After they disconnected, she wrote the changes to Adrian in a plain email. Two institutional partners. Joint scientific direction. Decisions on any fieldwork through the appropriate review and authorization. No commercial claim on finds. Access terms agreed in advance. Publication of results, including results that disappointed the donor.

She read it twice, removing a sentence that sounded as though he had already refused. Then she sent it with a request for the correspondence he had promised.

His reply arrived as she was making something to eat. She left the pan on low heat and brought the phone to the table.

Understood. Several of these provisions are already intended, but I agree they should be explicit. Here is the supporting brief. The collection correspondence will follow once the relevant files have been brought together.

There were three attachments. She opened the budget, then a list of proposed work. In the third was a map.

A shaded oval lay off Sumatra. Beside it was a cropped image of an older chart. Klára enlarged it. She knew the sloping pencil marks before she reached the handwritten place name.

She took the folder of copies from the chair and spread a reproduction of her mother's working sheet beside the screen. The shore had been drawn differently in each version, but the little bend in the line was unmistakable. So was the proposed location.

Eva had crossed it out.

Not a hesitant question mark. Two firm strokes that almost hid the lettering. Klára brought the reproduction closer. Below the crossed-out name her mother had added a word, then underlined it.

After.

The smell of hot oil reached her from the kitchen. She went to turn off the stove, came back, and called Idris.