

NO DIWATAS AT NIGHT

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PART I  
Lines Drawn on Water

### Chapter III

Fernão departed Lisbon eight years ago in tears. He returned, still in tears.

Plague doctors prevented him from going inside the patients' room in his childhood home. Their wide-brimmed hats shadowed over half their faces. Their ankle-length overcoats swept across the rundown, wooden floor like they also swept misfortune inside. An ominous crow—in Fernão's troubled mind—cawed from their bird-like beak masks.

One doctor punctured the veins on his brother Diogo and his sister Isabel's forearms. The sound of their gurgling blood crawled into the back of Fernão's head. His eyelids quivered. A bloodletting, bowls filled to the brim with their blood. Another doctor fumigated the suffocating room with a torch of burning aromatic herbs. Nothing could ward off the ashy smell, no matter how hard Fernão pressed his nose shut with his weatherbeaten hand.

His relatives crowded around the entrance to the room. Aunts and uncles recited prayers in a singsong manner, lamentations already a part of their routines. Some of their cousins, like his childhood comrade Álvaro de Mesquita, slyly stepped backwards with handkerchiefs on their noses. Fernão swore he caught murmurs, about their cowardice from possibly contracting the disease, about their ignorant guesses on whom his siblings contracted it from.

Diogo and Isabel's respective spouses comforted their toddlers with lies about their recuperation. The kids stuck their fingers in their mouths and peeked inside the room, death still alien to them. But Diogo and Isabel wheezed in pain. Their cries shattered their spouses' fortitude. In turn, their children sobbed as well, until they grasped the gravity of the occasion.

Fernão shoved his way through his relatives, as if his mourning held the most substance. A physician blocked the entrance with his arm. Fernão clutched their elbow but they kept their arm firm and straight.

“Malum signum, malum signum,” a plague doctor inside murmured.

“Apologies, Senhor Magalhães, we can’t let you in for your safety,” the physician said.

“No, it’s my family.” Fernão slammed his palm against their shoulder and jostled.

The physician staggered one step back but he remained committed. “They wouldn’t want you falling with them.”

“But, I—”

Despite the doctors’ best efforts, a priest already uttered the first words of the last rites.

Fernão’s broken left knee shuddered. That limp the Moors scarred him with had never been more acute. He leaned on the jamb to support his bearing, sweat sticking to his clothes. He wanted to slap the priest’s mouth for calling for his siblings’ deaths. He wanted to steal the doctor’s fleam and perform the bloodletting himself, anything to preserve their dignity.

But the cripple hobbled away from the room.

All he had to show upon his return was his injury and his most or perhaps only valuable merchandise—his captured slave Henrique. The young mulato lived in Malacca, newly baptized as a Christian Português, out of his loincloth into a white blouse and breeches, his long hair cropped to the formal style of this country he was to serve. He followed his master with dazed eyes. Fernão’s fourteen-year-old “page” Cristóvão Rebêlo caught up, crying and brushing his master’s arm. But Fernão clicked his tongue against his sympathies and scoffed at his tenderness.

Magalhães limped towards the façade of their family’s estate here in Porto. There it bore his coat of arms on a stone. Upon sighting it, what he suppressed within threatened to burst out

into a flood. He clutched the edges of the shield as if to embrace it. But after his first tear rolled down his cheek, he grunted and shook it. He shook it hard, any way to expel his rage.

“Cousin!” Álvaro caught them outside and rushed towards Fernão. He attempted to hug that rage away. “It’s going to be alright. You’ll get back up again like you always do.”

But sorrow took over Fernão until he let his cheek touch the escutcheon. His tears slid freely down the shield. He embraced it as he did his emotions and wept like nobody watched nor listened. Could it be him who carried the plague from Malacca? Why did God punish him so?

Letters of condolences bestrewed the table. But Fernão had no wish to read them.

Except for one. From a dear, far-flung friend named Francisco Serrão.

Cristóvão kindled a candelabra as Henrique set up their dinner. Fernão scratched his unkempt, salt-dried black beard. He burned the letter lying on the table’s center with his red-rimmed eyes. Beside it sat a grimy, wooden box Francisco also sent. As if a lock wasn’t enough, Francisco carelessly twisted ropes and ropes around it. Fernão couldn’t open either of them. The undue amount of hope he pinned on their contents stirred his fingers into tapping on the table.

Fernão fiddled with the couple of reis scattered atop the letters. He counted them on his palms, dropped them, then counted them again. He invested most of the fortune he earned from the Conquest of Malacca in some merchant who died from a bout of the plague. How ironic that his siblings met the same fate. He must be cursed. Nothing came out of begging King Manuel to recuperate his losses. His lifelong service to the crown held no meaning. His reputation inside the royal courts of Portugal dwindled into nothing.

But Fernão's sister Isabel would just playfully pinch the knife scar on his cheek. With her pathetic martyrdom, she'd tell him not to worry. She'd whine about his desire to sail away again for money. Yet she'd needlessly parade her threadbare clothing to signal her destitution. Then his brother Diogo would say he was proud, regardless of whether Fernão returned with all the riches of the Orient or not. Yet with his flagrant passive-aggressiveness, Diogo would goad Fernão into sailing again until he returned with something to be actually proud of.

So if that letter screaming at Fernão to read it dashed all his hopes...

To the devil with it! He sprung up from his chair and ripped it open.

"You ought to be here, my friend." Fernão read the first words he caught and sighed with relief. Fragmented memories flashed before his eyes. There he rowed... back to land to save his blood brother Francisco when everyone thought the latter was already doomed.

"Should have never bid me farewell back in Malacca," Fernão continued reading and smiled. "Doughty enough to swim back to save your blood brother but not to continue his adventures with him. Malacca is only the gateway to the Spice Islands. Sail further and you will have Tidore, Amboina, Banda, and my new home Tarenate. Blood brother, my beautiful copper-skinned wife and our little mixed children would love to meet you someday. I found a new world here, richer and greater than that of Vasco da Gama. Leave Portugal and join me here."

Fernão side-eyed his page as the boy crept his hands towards the box. Cristóvão cut through the ropes, glancing at Fernão to check his temper. With a toothy grin, he swiped the key inside the envelope carrying the letter and unlocked the mysterious package.

What lay inside wiped out that grin.

Fernão tossed the letter aside and snatched the box. He hung the candles close to brighten what he already saw but couldn't believe. Indeed, it was a strange-looking skull. A gilded arrow wrapped in leafy vines impaled it. From the parietal to the occipital bone, the skull resembled that of a human. But from the maxilla to the mandible, it appeared more akin to a dog snout. The remains stunned Henrique that a plate slid off his hand and clanged on the table.

“Feast your eyes on this strange fiend we found lurking in Tarenate,” Fernão read out loud for his servants. “Even the islanders were petrified at the sight. They’ve only heard rumors of this legendary beast. But to behold them was not something they nor I was prepared for. What better adventure this could be than serving that ingrate sitting on the throne of Portugal.”

Henrique gulped down and murmured with his improving Portuguese. “Asuwang.”

Fernão furrowed his brows to belittle his fears. “A what?”

“Asuwang. Cursed human. They danger.”

“I’ve heard of stories from the Far East.” Fernão’s lids drooped with disinterest. “Mothers molded their infants’ skulls to make them ‘moon-faced.’ This is far from the moon I’m familiar with. But did you happen to grow up amongst people who had this kind of skull?”

“Believe me, master.” Henrique nodded with dilated eyes. “I know them.”

Fernão paused seeing the young brown man’s sincerity. But his lips eventually curved up. “A stupid myth. One the devil fooled you with.” He closed the lid on the fossil.

Only the prospects behind the letter mattered. Fernão could already imagine it—sailing across the sea to the other side of the world with his own ships. Diogo and Isabel would live through him and sit on the yardarms of his flagship. And they’d witness their brother in his highest glory as he etched his name—their family name—in the pages of history.