

OLOFF THE PIRATE SERIES

12. Ravishing Armada



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RAVISHING ARMADA

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SUMMARY

Oloff van Wagenaar, once a notorious pirate feared across the seas, now seeks only one thing, namely redemption. Haunted by a past steeped in violence and plunder, he envisions a future free from blood and a tranquil life with the woman he loves. But to claim that future, he must first confront the source of his torment, Deelen Bay, a lawless haven for the most ruthless pirates in the Indian Ocean.

Oloff hatches a daring plan to destroy Deelen Bay from within, leveraging his fearsome reputation to gain the trust of its cutthroat captains. He enlists the help of Admiral Rynhardt te Hoogen, a childhood friend whose loyalty is tested when Oloff's pirate past resurfaces. As Oloff navigates the treacherous waters of deception and shifting alliances, he finds himself caught in a web of betrayals, where friends become enemies, and enemies become... perhaps allies? A web of characters conspire to destroy him. Admiral Te Hoogen is caught in a web of suspicion and as he is then forced to choose between justice and loyalty. Oloff finds himself betrayed by his oldest friend, and forced into a deadly fight for survival.

Amidst the chaos, Oloff clings to the hope of reuniting with Rynette du Bois, the fiery aristocrat whose love has the power to heal his wounded soul. But their reunion is threatened by treachery, by another man. Long-buried secrets also threaten to tear them apart, and their love is accordingly caught between the tides of duty and vengeance. As the Dutch fleet prepares for a desperate assault, Oloff finds himself a hunted man, forced to rely on his cunning, his skill with a sword, and the unwavering loyalty of a select few. With the fate of Deelen Bay and his own soul hanging in the balance, Oloff has no choice than to confront the ruthless pirates he intends to destroy.

EXTRACT

“What is wrong, Rynette?” he inquires softly.

“They will not allow me to visit Oloff,” she answers, brokenly, as if she is looking for someone to whom she can pour out her grief.

He takes her by the arm and leads her out onto the side stoep. There is no one in the vicinity.

“Why are you so foolish, Rynette?” he says, and his voice is slightly hoarse. “Do you still not believe that he is a scoundrel?”

“No.” The word is simple, but there is no passion in it. Yet, it sounds withdrawn to him. Her entire attitude is, however, one of despondency, as if she cannot resist anything. This spurs him on.

“You are not even married to him, Rynette! Do you expect that he will ever really do so?”

“Of course.” Through the tears, she looks at him, half challenging.

But again, he gets the impression that he has deeply hurt her. “As soon as all these things are over, Oloff and I will have a house somewhere...”

“And you will most likely be the housekeeper,” Gerhard says scornfully. “When I was in the Cape of Good Hope, I heard a different story.” He becomes serious. His eyes burn into hers. “Why do you think Rynhardt te Hoogen is trying to protect a pirate like Oloff? Have you ever heard of his beautiful sister? Do you know that she is waiting for Oloff in the Cape?”

The raw sorrow in her eyes slowly disappears. The tears dry up. Gerhard is slightly startled because, when the fit of jealousy subsides, something remains that is so belligerent that for a moment, he is under the impression that it is directed at him. Nevertheless, she says.

“That is a lie!”

“Why do you not find out? Ask Rynhardt! Ask Oloff!”

“I will!” she exclaims quietly, and then she pushes past him and runs into the residence.

12. RAVISHING ARMADA

Chapter 1

“But what if it’s a trap, Oloff?” Henning Roux sounded concerned. His tall, lithe form was slightly bent forward. The rowers rested on their oars as he gently asked them to cease rowing. The ship’s boat glided silently through the still water of Hout Bay. Only the roar of the breakers on the beach was carried to them by the evening wind from the land.

“I don’t understand your attitude at all, Henning,” Oloff responded. His soft, cultured voice sounded cheerful as he dismissed his friend’s fear, but he too anxiously tried to see the beach through the darkness behind the white fringe of foam. The dim starlight reflected in his blue eyes and cast a faint glimmer on the flaming red hair that was neatly tied back in his neck with a ribbon. His broad shoulders were back, and he stood upright in the stern of the boat with the rudder in his right hand. His left hand rested comfortably on the butt of a pistol in his wide belt where he had pulled back his cloak.

“It’s been a few years since you last saw Te Hoogen, Oloff,” Henning persisted.

“And why would he, in those few years, decide that it is necessary to set a trap for me?” Oloff countered calmly. “He knows that I trust him. He could easily have approached me openly and apprehended me.” He shook his head almost as if he wanted to convince himself too. “Row,” he urged his crew, and at the same time, he steered the boat to the left towards the dark beach below the high peak that enclosed one side of the bay.

“Perhaps he never knew how to get in touch with you, Oloff,” Henning said gloomily. “Now you have asked him to meet you. Maybe he is seizing his chance...”

“Admiral Rynhardt te Hoogen is an honorable man, Henning,” Oloff rebuked his friend almost formally. “He was sent to chase me from the sea back then. It wasn’t very difficult to convince him of my honest intentions at the time. He himself promoted me to captain of the Dutch fleet. Why would he suddenly now?”

“Back then, you were engaged to his sister, Oloff,” Henning

interrupted. "Since then, your engagement has been broken, and you haven't seen her again. Before, she was your advocate."

"We didn't part as bitter enemies, Henning. She wasn't willing to accept my wanderer's life. For me, it was impossible to stop it at that stage when the urge and the resentment that I harbored against the pirate community was still so much stronger in me than it is now. Then..."

"I know all of that, Oloff." His friend rested his hand on Oloff's shoulder. "But you are married today, and feelings could have changed. It's for your sake that I am concerned."

"I know that, Henning," Oloff answered sincerely. "I appreciate it. But I don't believe that Rynhardt or Anna are so petty that, in the event they did receive news about me, they would change their opinion of me and their trust in me as a result." He laughed softly, but cheerfully, as if to end this depressing conversation.

"Why are you coming up with all these objections at the eleventh hour? From the beginning, I consulted with you step by step. We agreed that it was a good plan to call on Rynhardt's help."

"I know." Henning sighed. He looked ahead because they already felt the swell of the first breaker under them, and the foam splashes from the white breaker fringes were spiteful in their faces. "I'm wondering now if we shouldn't have just continued with our plans on our own."

"You're nagging like an old woman, Henning!" Oloff exclaimed softly. "The destruction of Deelen Bay is a huge task. With Rynhardt's help, we will be able to reach our goal so much sooner. And that's not all. You constantly forget that after the eradication of that nest of robbers, we can once again enter civilized society with clear consciences and settle down somewhere as normal citizens of a peaceful community. Before we can do that, however, we must prove our innocence in the eyes of the world. We need witnesses, Henning, not just one, but hundreds so that they can spread the truth about us. Rynhardt te Hoogen and the crews of his fleet will fulfill that role. Therefore, perhaps more than for any other reason, we need their help."

Henning Roux shrugged. He owed his own life to his friend and leader, because he would have died in the slave camps of Deelen Bay if Oloff had not freed him. He would express his opinion, but after that, he would follow Oloff to the death.

The oars were taken in and laid silently inside the boat. The only sound was the soft scraping of metal as one of the men did not pull his saber carefully enough through the iron grips. They already had their orders, and not a word was spoken.

In the bow, the pilot waved, and Oloff could just barely see the movement against the white beach in the background. Because he now knew that there were no rocks ahead, he steered the boat straight onto the crest of the breaker that lifted it up and pushed it high onto the beach. Scarcely had the keel scraped in the sand when the ten men were knee-deep in the water, and with their sabers in their right hands, they grabbed the side of the boat with their left hands and dragged it a little further up.

Then they stood still. Lightly, Oloff jumped out and with Henning beside him, they looked along the beach and up against the slopes where the Twelve Apostles began. They could not see Table Mountain, but for a moment, Oloff's thoughts went back to a few years ago when he had first arrived at the Cape of Good Hope. His father had been murdered here, and here his life of wandering had begun.

But he shook off the thoughts. He had arranged with Rynhardt te Hoogen to meet him here in the bay. A few months ago, he had sent a letter to the young admiral in Holland. He left an address to which the reply could be sent, and his fondest expectations were exceeded when the letter informed him that Rynhardt had departed for the Cape almost at the same time.

Oloff considered the Cape to be the most suitable place for their meeting because the greatest secrecy was essential for the success of his plans. Although he did not want to admit it to Henning even once, he could not disregard the fact that he had seen Rynhardt so long ago and that much could have happened in the meantime.

"You must wait here, Henning," he requested softly.

"I'm coming along, Oloff."

Oloff shrugged. It was already late, and there was no time for arguing.

"Come on then." After a few muffled commands to the crew, they walked along the outer edge of the beach under the cliff faces. "I hope you notice that I'm being rather careful," Oloff said dryly.

"Always loud-mouthed," Henning answered and laughed softly, "but

also careful, right?”

Where the beach turned inward, they ran crouching over a sand dune. Occasionally, Oloff imagined that he saw a figure near the water's edge, but then he determined that it was just a piece of black bamboo.

He came to a standstill and leaned closer until his lips were almost against Henning's ear.

“It's strange,” he whispered. “They should be somewhere around here. Against the white sand, we should have seen them by now.”

“I told you, Oloff,” Henning answered anxiously. “They might be waiting...”

“Don't start with your premonitions again,” Oloff cut him off. “Let's go deeper inland and then explore back across the beach. We will soon enough find out what kind of reception has been arranged for us.”

Over each dune, they peered long into the shadows of the hollow on the other side. Then they slithered over them like snakes and slid down the sand embankment. It was when they were lying behind one of the dunes that Oloff heard the soft whispering. He shifted close to a clump of reeds so that his head and shoulders would not be visible above the edge against the starlight when he looked over.

His eyes had already become accustomed to the darkness. He dimly distinguished the three figures that were lying stretched out against the sand in the ditch between the dunes. From here they could see the open beach in front of them, but Oloff knew that their view was limited to the breaking breakers.

“Are you perhaps waiting for us?” Oloff called out just as casually. Because they had come here by a winding path over the dunes, he knew that there was no one else hidden in the vicinity. These three men were alone. He had his pistol ready.

The three men jumped up. Oloff saw the exposed weapons in their hands. He immediately recognized the neat, powerful figure of the young Admiral Rynhardt te Hoogen.

“That depends on who you are,” Rynhardt answered cautiously, but dryly.

“Rynhardt!” Oloff exclaimed with warm friendliness, while he and Henning jumped up and slid-slid down the steep, loose bank. “Why are you hiding here like a thief in the night?”

“When one is dealing with such notorious creatures as you,” Rynhardt retorted laughingly, “one must take all possible precautions.”

“You don’t mean to say that you mistrust me!” Oloff grabbed his hand in a firm handshake.

“How could I even know that none of your murderous hordes were hiding behind the dunes here?”

“You don’t sound worried.”

Oloff turned to Henning. “You still remember my friend, Henning Roux?”

“Of course.” Rynhardt greeted Henning heartily. “But you’re still laughing, Oloff,” he continued. “Yet I’ve heard such bloodcurdling stories of your activities in the Indian Ocean since we last saw each other that I sometimes had to deliberately convince myself of the truth. How do you manage to build up such a terrifying reputation?”

Oloff glanced quickly at the two men with Rynhardt. They had politely stepped back.

“These are two of my crew,” Rynhardt said immediately when he noticed Oloff’s gaze. “You can trust them. But really, Oloff, it’s beyond my comprehension how you manage to wage a fight against the pirates and yet virtually every atrocity on the trade routes to the East is attributed to you.”

“It’s just coincidence, fate.” Oloff laughed. “As you know, I’ve been living in Deelen Bay for some time now, where most of the biggest pirates come to rest after their raids. From there I follow their movements, but often I don’t manage to get to them in time where they attack innocent merchant vessels. It’s at such times that the survivors see me, my two ships are easily recognized, and that’s why the stories are spread.”

“You can tell me everything later, Oloff,” Rynhardt cut him off. “I’m burning with curiosity, especially about the things you mentioned in your letter. Did I understand correctly that you plan to destroy Deelen Bay?”

Oloff couldn’t suppress a laugh when he heard the disbelief in the other’s voice. He nodded.

“That’s the plan, Rynhardt.”

“But it’s practically impossible,” Te Hoogen insisted. “It has been

discussed numerous times, and just as many times, the mere thought of it has been rejected. It would require a fleet ten times the size of mine to even attempt that task. Deelen Bay is a mighty fortress, and there is always a fleet of privateers in the harbor. The crew are some of the most skilled seamen that exist today. They will fight like animals to the death.”

Oloff held up his hand. He was still smiling.

“You forget, Rynhardt,” he said softly. “That I’m regarded as Deelen Bay’s most powerful pirate captain. I am fully aware of these things. I have already destroyed the fleets of two of the strongest captains, first the notorious Captain Haak and then the feared Red Mark. In doing so, I have given the pirate power a severe blow so that the complete destruction of Deelen Bay has now become possible for us in one fell swoop.” He laughed slyly. “In any case,” he continued. “You wouldn’t have come here if you believed it wasn’t possible.”

Rynhardt lowered his gaze. It was as if he was aware of the eagerness and conviction with which Oloff accepted his cooperation. Slowly, he shook his head, but then he suddenly looked up and said vehemently.

“That’s not why I came, Oloff.”

“But... but...”

“I couldn’t explain in my letter,” Rynhardt interrupted. “It’s purely coincidental that I received instructions to undertake an inspection tour to Batavia at this particular time.”

“An inspection tour?” Oloff was dismayed. “Can that then be more important than the removal of an evil that causes the Dutch East India Company countless thousands of guilders in damage every year?”

“That... you don’t understand, Oloff.” Rynhardt sighed. “I tried to get in touch with you once or twice, but of course, I never knew where to find you.” He continued hastily. “When I promoted you to captain of the fleet back then, your rank was recognized by the Lords Seventeen. As you yourself know, however, for your own good, so that you could continue with your work in your own way, we had to keep the whole matter secret. At that stage, the most powerful director was well-disposed towards your cause, and although there was opposition from several other directors, it was carried through. Unfortunately, that friend, you know of course that I was raised by him as an orphan, is no

longer there. The man who holds the reins today regards you as the greatest danger on earth. The file containing your documents has been taken out and destroyed. A reward of twenty thousand guilders has been placed on your head.”

Oloff wiped his hand over his forehead. He looked at Henning and laughed dryly.

“So,” he said laconically. “And how many times have we not put our heads in a noose with that assurance in our subconscious that if we were caught by one of you, we would at least be saved by the highest circles.”

“I’m sorry, Oloff,” Rynhardt said seriously. “I can’t do anything about the matter.”

It was as if he was apologizing for having let Oloff down.

“Of course, you couldn’t,” Oloff assured him cheerfully. “I was actually just making a joke. We live just a few steps from death every day. That rank meant little to me. It’s your friendship and trust that count. It was also just the bond through which I could prove my eventual innocence when my task was completed. But it doesn’t matter. We can still solve all these things. This is your chance, Rynhardt, to make your name live in history. Together we can destroy Deelen Bay! How large is your fleet?”

Again Rynhardt shook his head. Gloomily, he turned slightly away from Oloff.

“My movements are hampered, in that respect,” he said then. “One of the captains of my six ships is the son of the man who has more influence today than anyone else, precisely that lord of the seventeen who has declared you an outlaw. This young fellow, Gerhard Rheedert van Rynland, is the apple of his father’s eye. He imagines that the world was created for his exclusive use and that everyone who exists on it with him for one reason or another has a certain obligation towards him. He is spoiled to the core, and in everything, he gets his way. In one respect, however, the old man was firm. He had to have training as a seaman, and immediately, young Gerhard assumed that he was destined to take over the entire fleet very soon. It is my bitter fate to have this young whippersnapper in command of one of my ships.” Rynhardt made an apologetic gesture with his hands. “In any case, that’s not all that is at stake. The fact remains that I am in a difficult position. If I do