

PART | ONE

EIGHTEEN MONTHS EARLIER

CHAPTER ONE



*Aboard HMS Resolute, somewhere in
the English Channel, September 1585*

It is a late summer's day, with a stiff wind from the southwest blowing across a fast-running sea the color of split flint, and under a full press of spanking new canvas, Her Majesty's Ship *Resolute* tacks hard to cut behind the French privateer *Neaera*. Doctor John Dee stands balanced on the rear deck, smothered in an oiled-cloth cloak, and he grins at Sir Francis Walsingham, who is just then vomiting vivid green bile onto the toes of his boots. A few paces away the shipmaster stands, teeth clenched, grappling with the wheel, and beyond him, braced easy against the gunwale, stands John Hawkins, Her Majesty's Treasurer of the Navy, who considers Walsingham with disgust.

Meanwhile, on the deck below, *Resolute's* gun crew is gathered about the ship's single armament—a particularly large culverin of unusual design—watching suspiciously as John Dee's laboratory assistant, Roger Cooke, loads it with the first of his newly invented missile canisters. When it is done—from the rear of the cannon,

rather than down the length of its muzzle; and with what looks like a brass tube rather than the usual ball and black powder—they run the cannon out over the starboard gunwale and then every man aboard steps back to leave the deck clear for Cooke to stand alone with hammer and pin.

From the rear deck Dee gives him an encouraging sign.

You'll be fine, he mouths.

Cooke scowls at him, but they've made the cannon much stronger since those first tests back in June, in Thomas Digges's garden in Mortlake, haven't they? And they've lengthened the thread on the breech block, too, so really, it should be fine.

Now all eyes turn to the *Neaera*, two hundred paces off the port bow, every scrap of sail up, running fast for the safety of Honfleur, but the *Resolute* is closing thrillingly fast.

"Wait for it!" the bearded gun master advises Cooke from behind his water barrel. "Wait for it! On the upward roll! Fire as you bear!"

But Cooke doesn't need to hear this, for these new missiles are of his own design, and he knows that when the pin hits the canister's tail, the powder within explodes instantly, and the missile in the canister's nose is forced at an impossible speed along the cannon's barrel, in which Dee has had machined grooves to set the missile spinning, so that when it emerges from the muzzle it cuts through the air like a screw rather than a nail. If it then hits its target, a second chemical reaction will occur, similar to the first, and the actual missile itself will fragment and tear itself—and everything within a ten-foot circle—to shreds.

So goes the theory, in any event.

They've tested the cannon on dry land, of course, at home in Thomas Digges's garden in Mortlake—shooting across the river with admittedly mixed but not absolutely disastrous results—but this is the first time they have hoisted her aboard a ship and taken

her beyond prying eyes out to sea, where famously anything can happen. Dee has spent six months cajoling John Hawkins, the Treasurer of Her Majesty's Navy, to attend this trial with a view of impressing him into ordering more of the cannons—ten? twenty?—so as to equip each of the navy's newly designed race-built galleys with at least one. The English navy could not only blast the Spanish galleons out of the water, but also provide him with a fortune enough to last him the rest of his life.

Again, so goes the theory.

Until half an hour ago they'd been towing an old pinnace, which they intended to set free and use as a target, but then the lookout saw a ship he recognized as the *Neaera*, which had recently attacked Lyme Regis and had been harassing English shipping hereabouts, so, despite only having this one untried cannon aboard, Hawkins ordered the shipmaster to abandon the pinnace and set off after the privateer, and now here they are, closing on the sleek stern of what is to all intents and purposes a powerful French warship on which its name is picked out in red letters.

"She'll maybe have four guns on each side," the master warns, "and a couple out back, so keep your heads down."

Just then a puff of gray smoke appears above that sleek stern and a moment later something dark skips across and dips into the heaving waves ahead.

"Falconet," the master announces. "Small caliber."

"Harmless," John Hawkins confirms. "Unless it hits you."

Well, quite, Dee thinks.

Roger Cooke is crouched below the gunwale, peering along the length of the cannon, hammer and pin at the ready. He has to make this shot count. If only because the canisters are so dauntingly expensive—especially for a natural philosopher of uncertain means, recently returned from Bohemia to find his house ransacked and his possessions carried off by creditors—that they

only have two. If Cooke misses, it will destroy any credit Dee has left with Hawkins and Her Majesty's navy. And now, since they've picked a fight with the *Neaera*, the stakes are suddenly higher still.

The *Resolute* is now within a bowshot of the *Neaera*'s stern. It will be a difficult shot in a rising sea, and Dee can only pray as he watches Cooke, who is waiting . . . and waiting . . . before *whack!* Cooke hammers the pin into the cannon just as the *Resolute* rises from a deep gulley between two rolling waves and instantly there is a deafening retort. The cannon leaps back in a billowing froth of gray cloud, and a stout spike of thick brown smoke erupts from the ship's side to leap across the span of sea toward the *Neaera*.

Roger Cooke is thrown back and lies stunned on the deck for a moment, so he is the only man unable to watch the missile's trail of smoke as it rises and shoots straight over the privateer's stern castle through the mess of her unbroken spars to vanish somewhere beyond.

The groan from Dee outdoes all others.

The master swears lustily and grapples with the wheel, turning the *Resolute* hard to port, away from the privateer's portside battery, but there's another puff of smoke in the privateer's stern and a moment later a crash and a cry of pain from above. A sailor tumbles from the ratlines to bounce on the deck mere feet from Roger Cooke.

Hawkins ignores him.

"About we go, Master English," he instructs, "and spill the wind, if you will?"

Walsingham looks ever more sickly.

"Can we not just leave her be and find that pinnace again?" he begs.

"No one ever died of being seasick, Sir Francis," John Hawkins barks.

THE QUEEN'S LIES

“The thought of dying is the only thing keeping me alive,” Walsingham tells him, retching again. Up in the rigging the other sailors are at work letting out some sails, furling others, and the *Resolute* slows to a dawdle, and the *Neaera* once more pulls ahead, but then on another command from the boson those sails that were let out are hauled back in, and those that were furled are unfurled, and so the *Resolute* once more takes wing after the privateer, steering a course back across her stern to the windward side. The master laughs, delighted at the speed and agility of this new ship.

“We’ll get her this time, Roger,” Dee shouts to encourage his laboratory assistant, who has loaded a new canister and is busy straightening the silver pin.

“Hit the pin harder/softer/sooner/later/on the down-roll/on the up-roll,” and so on comes all sorts of advice from men behind cover, and Roger Cooke crouches once more to sight the cannon as the *Resolute* gains on the privateer, and just before they are broadside to broadside, and just as the *Resolute* is coming down from the crest of a swell, he hammers the pin.

This time he gets it right.

The cannon leaps, and the smoke billows, and once more Cooke is thrown back, but the trajectory of the missile streak is fast and flat, and it strikes the privateer’s rudder just above the waterline with a flash of dirty orange flame. When the smoke of that explosion clears, a great bite is taken from the privateer’s stern. Her name and steering are gone, but there then follows a second explosion, even louder than the first, and then even a third within the ship, deep and rumbling, and the *Neaera* seems to almost swell, to expand beyond its space, and then it flies apart in a thousand individual pieces: masts and spars and planks and God knows what else are flung flaming from the center of the blast, hard and fast across the sea, and then the wave of the blast reaches

OLIVER CLEMENTS

the *Resolute*, removing Hawkins's hat, dishing the sails, setting the ship's bell ringing.

For a long moment every man is silent, staring agape at where the *Neaera* used to be until Hawkins speaks.

“Fuck me!”

