

PROLOGUE

“You have just turned thirteen, you are a man now. It is time for you to make your own discoveries. Go! Don’t come back until the monsoon season is over.”

Those had been King Seumas’ last words to Sandokan, his son and heir to the kingdom, before he sent him away for a year to learn the ways of the world.

A bag of gold, a family ring and a dagger would be his only companions from now on. Sandokan wondered whether he had learned enough to survive in the wild lands outside of his kingdom.

He would soon find out.



CHAPTER I

THE DEVIL'S HOME

The China Sea.

Sandokan steered the tiller hoping to gain some speed, but he was not favoured by the wind, and his one masted outrigger was not cooperating. The calm turquoise sea blended with the intense blue sky on the horizon. That peaceful sight might evoke the image of Paradise to some, but Sandokan knew that only the foolish and lost wanderers could think of this as heaven. This sea was the hell of Borneo, souls cried as they died, destined to wander the black waters of the sea for eternity...

Pirates.

The wind whispered the names of terrifying pirates along the ripples of the sea surface; merciless assassins hunting and scavenging for treasures that would ensure them a reward of women and liquor, as well as any other sins they might want to commit.

Sandokan shrugged at the thought, and comforted himself caressing the handle of his dagger. His blade was not just any blade but his family one. The hilt was engraved with two eagles facing each other, the crest of his house and kingdom. Sandokan never knew how the two eagles were connected to his family nor had his father ever wanted to explain it to him.

You will have to find the answer within yourself, his father had often told him.

What was the reason for his year-long exile?

Was it meant to be a soul-searching journey, which would make him understand the meaning of his family emblem?

Maybe so, but at the moment Sandokan focused on surviving the sea voyage to the Island of Labuan. He pulled out a spyglass he had exchanged for a few coins at the busy market in Elopura, the city that was an important trading post and where one could get anything desired.

Sandokan had been to the city many times before with his father but never by himself, so this time he enjoyed the fact that nobody knew who he was. *Having a royal escort with you at all times can be tiresome and very frustrating*, he thought.

Sandokan looked through the lens, but after having sailed for three days, he couldn't be sure he was on the right route to the Island of Labuan. He had never been there, but the stories his wet nurse had told him about its beauty had excited his curiosity.

He was annoyed with himself. From a very young age he had been able to sail almost anything along the river, all the way to the Sulu Sea but now he wished he had listened to his tutors instead of having to rely on his own natural skills, which, at the moment, were failing him.1

Sandokan sailed on westward, studying a small sea chart, hoping he wasn't too far off course. He kept inspecting the sea around him through the spyglass, not so much to find the way as to avoid the dangers lurking in those waters.

Nothing in sight but better to be alert, this sea is damned, he reminded himself.

The China sea is the only route which connects the East to the West and all the ships, carrying goods to make the white people's empires powerful, had to sail across it in order to reach the Malacca straight.

In this part of the world everything was for the taking by the strongest predator, and the white man was exactly that. First the Portuguese, then the Spaniards had come, followed by the British and the Dutch, bringing their superior firepower to show their strength to the various kingdoms and sultanates in Borneo and beyond. Soon the greed of the kings and sultans took the better of them as they thought they could control the foreigners to their advantage and gain more power for themselves.

How wrong they had been.

The white people not only had a stronger military advantage but their greed was insatiable. They did offer their services to kingdoms struggling to keep their reign, but their friendship came at a great price. Soon many kingdoms and sultanates fell into their hands. These new lands, bursting with riches and placed in a strategic position for trading, fitted in perfectly with the greed of the western empires as they claimed ownership of anything within their reach: the sea, the land, and even the faith.