

This document is comprised of three chapters: The start on the royal barge, a party at the palace and a visit to Shakespeare's home and is 4600 words long. The full work is 93000 words.

This is a work of fiction based on historical events. I am looking for feedback on the story, style and content. As this is a first draft there are typos and punctuation errors, please feel free to point those out as well.

Everyone who helps will be acknowledged

Many thanks

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Sample only

The Royal Barge

"Majesty." The Lord Mayor of London doffed his hat and bowed as Elizabeth strode past.

"Sir Martin." The Queen gestured for the Mayor to follow on behind. "My barge is ready?"

"It is, your Majesty, all of the entourage and consort are in place awaiting departure."

"Good." Elizabeth walked down the ramp onto the barge through the corridor of oarsmen in their brilliant white jackets and bright red trousers, holding their oars at arms. Snatching up a cushion from her seat she turned around and flung it at Leicester, the Earl caught it in one hand, plumped it and promptly sat beside his queen. "What has your goat now, my goodly Majesty?"

The queen's eyes narrowed for a breath which she released in a huff of impatience. "As if you have no idea." She forced a smile.

The oarsmen took up their seats, nine to port and nine to starboard. The starboard contingent kept their oars high while the port side men pushed the barge out into the muddy waters of the River Thames. Two Yeoman Warders stood at the entrance to the royal enclosure ensuring Her Majesty and the Earl of Leicester would not be disturbed by anyone, not even the Lord Mayor of London. A string quartet of Black Moors began to play at the prow, filling the barge with their soft melodies. The gold work roses on their red velvet jackets glittered in the sun, sending light dancing across the deck.

"It pleases me much." Elizabeth waved a hand at the musicians who continued with their eyes lowered so as not to displease their monarch.

"Elizabeth, why do you tease?" Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, stroked his greying beard. "I have been as loyal as a man could ever choose to be. And yet and I was not to be yours," he sighed.

"Perhaps, were it not for your scurrilous Commonwealth," Elizabeth leaned across Leicester gesticulating wildly at the southern bank of the river. "Such magnificent animals." She clasped her gloved hands to her mouth. "Who would keep such fine stock on the Marsh?"

"Are we going to discuss that matter at hand or are we just going to ignore it?" The Earl tugged his hat straight again.

Elizabeth slid her hands down her dress, resting them on her knees. She tapped her fingers twice, inspected the delicate stitching of her purple gloves, then snapped her head toward her good friend.

"I... never... wanted... this," the Queen enunciated every word with a tilt of her head. "I wanted Dover." She pushed herself back into her seat and folded her hands in her lap with her nose toward the sky.

"God's strength," the Earl muttered to the swirling eddies of the oars.

"Bridge approaching!" the Mayor cried out.

Shadows played upon the water, masking the excrement flowing on the tide. Bobbing corpses of cats and dogs made edible rafts for the sleek furred rats that feasted upon them. The ebbing tide could not drag the foul stench of yesterday's London out of the city no matter how hard it tried. Buckets of filth poured from the triple-storied shops and tenements bordering the two lanes of traffic across the spans of London Bridge. Carts piled with goods from every city of the known world vied for carriageway alongside the dung-carts of the street cleaners. Two hundred thousand beating hearts fought for space on the overcrowded streets as England reveled in its triumphal glory.

"Gloriana, Gloriana," the cheers of the peasantry hailed Queen and country as the Royal barge slipped beneath the bridge eastward toward Tilbury below the death gaze of the severed heads atop crude pikes.

"I shall be glad when we pass beyond the city limits with the Tower to our back and the green fields of England unroll before us." Leicester winced as he adjusted the pillows in his ornately carved chair. "Was this seat meant to be sat on by noble blood?"

"Are you going to gripe all the way or must I issue a decree of silence?" Elizabeth scowled at her companion. Her eye was drawn to the plight of three men hanging from chains along the Southwark shore. "Clearly, the Liberties come at a cost."

The Queen turned her attention to the opposite bank where the grey towers thrust up at the sky warded by the dark stone bailey, a challenge and threat to all would be invaders.

The Thames River meandered through the English countryside pulling the royal barge toward the sea. The number of traders and ferries dwindled as the city faded behind them. The sun slipped across the August sky, heading into the afternoon wastes as the royal party dined on hampers of provisions. Queen Elizabeth sipped wine from a golden goblet while the Earl of Leicester, her long-time consort, and suitor, regaled her with tales of heroism and conquest and of the young Lord Essex who even now was readying her troops at Tilbury.

"Tell me." Elizabeth peered into the distance where small barges were aligning across the half-mile width of the Thames. "What are they doing? Why are so many assembled?"

The Queen reclined in her seat as the barge angled toward the northern shore and the sight of Tilbury Fort sitting amongst its spike palisade.

"Before I left here to collect you in person, I had them set a boom across the Thames. Should the vile Spanish make passage up the river, they will strike the anchored masts."

"Will it work?" Elizabeth smiled.

"I hope not to find out." The Earl of Leicester rose to his feet as the barge nested against the jetty. "Take care, my Queen, the moorings are not fastened, and the lands here are soft underfoot."

"I would like to inspect the troops before traveling to Saffron House," Elizabeth strode from the barge toward the main gate.

"Essex will have everything ready for the morrow, Majesty, will it not wait until then?"

Elizabeth spun around, "It may." Glaring at Leicester, she snapped, "I will not."

"As you wish," Leicester lowered his head, allowing Elizabeth to continue on foot to the Blockhouse.

Sample only

Late Arrival

Everything was ready. The banquet hall was an ocean of gold and white except for the Queen's Table. The ash floor had been polished to a liquid sun finish. Every table was draped in a fine golden silk spread inlaid with a tapestry of pure gold depicting the monarch in her youth. Golden candlesticks stood at the centre of every table, each one burning 12 candles of purest white. Mirrors lined the walls, angled to amplify the light to ceiling where the chandelier glittered with diamonds.

Minstrels played Greensleeves while choristers harmonised their voices to a single voice. The Queen's table was dark contrast pulling the eye, demanding everyone's attention. A black velvet cloth carrying the weight of the world in a web of pearls hung over the table tumbling down the two shallow steps to the dance floor. Everything was ready. The banquet hall was an ocean of gold and white except for the Queen's Table. The ash floor had been polished to a liquid sun finish. Every table was draped in a fine golden silk spread inlaid with a tapestry of pure gold depicting the monarch in her youth. Golden candlesticks stood at the centre of every table, each one burning 12 candles of purest white. Mirrors lined the walls, angled to amplify the light to ceiling where the chandelier glittered with diamonds.

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Guests from across the globe were announced and led to their seats by jesters, fire breathers and jugglers. Acrobats tumbled across the floor passing trays of drinks between them. In three corners of the room a lion sat tall and proud tethered with a heavy chain. Once seated the food arrived on gold and silver platters. Roast Hogs stuffed with apples were lifted onto the tables followed by a hind of deer and flanks of beef. Meats of every kind smothered the tables. Elizabeth rose to her feet followed a scraping of chairs as the guests turned to bow and curtsy. "Let the feast begin." Elizabeth flung out her arms to a fanfare of trumpets and a herald from the choristers. Meats were carved, bread ripped open as the

chatter and clatter of rich dining began. The minstrels continued to play as Essex entered the room heading straight for the Queen's table.

"Majesty," Essex bowed as low as his broad ruff allowed, his long beard almost touching his knees as he bent forward.

"Late," Elizabeth did not look up. "Fashion or rudeness, I can barely tell the difference anymore."

"I was held up, unforeseeable," Essex gave a polite cough.

"Go on," Elizabeth wave a hand at Essex. "How was the whore saved?" She looked at him, her mouth a sliver of flesh.

"I," Essex floundered, his eye met with Raleigh, grinning. "I have working on something at the theater." He brushed his beard against his chest.

"Yet William is here," Elizabeth pointed to Shakespeare at the next table. "If you are staying, there are seats by the door. If not, leave," Her words cold.

"Majesty, it would not be right for me to sit... such."

"Why not? You flaunt my favor as though it were nothing. Your mother rides in my carriage as though she were Queen and you permit the she-wolf. Is there anything you are not telling us?" Elizabeth placed her cutlery beside her plate.

Essex glanced at Lateece, then his sister at the side of the smirking Raleigh, "it would appear my seat is already taken." His gaze bore into Lateece.

"She earned it," Elizabeth entwined her fingers. "Now sit among the Blackamoors or leave." The queen unfolded her hand, stretching out her arm as swan reaches to its mate she pointed to the door.

"Very well, if that is where I am to be," Essex enunciated every word before turning to take up his seat.

"Another time, Sir Walter, try not to grin like a fool," Elizabeth picked up her fork prodding at the food on her plate. "I have an idea. A chance for Essex to redeem himself." Elizabeth sunk her fork into some venison and lifted it to her lips. "A tournament. Arundel, in the spring. Something to look forward to. Among all the usual revelry we will have three challenges. Archery, the sword and a joust." Elizabeth looked at Raleigh as she popped the meat into her mouth. "What say you?"

"If I must, for your honour I would lay waste to the Venetian empire," Raleigh raised his cup to the Queen.

"Try not to groan next time," Elizabeth beckoned a serving girl. "Fetch me a plate of sugared almonds and marzipan. I am in need of sweetening." She turned to Lateece, "have you tried marzipan my dear?"

"I have not your Majesty," it is not found on the streets where I grew up."

"Quite. My apologies, I forget your humble childhood," Elizabeth leaned in to whisper. "You wear your disguise well, at all times." Elizabeth sat up smiling. Lateece nodded

politely returning the smile. "I need entertainment," Elizabeth called out, "where are my midgets?"

A troop of dwarfs ran into the room to be greeted by rapturous laughter and equal applause. Soon they were wrestling one another while the guests wagered on a winner. Essex slipped from the room his ardor rankled beyond repair. "I fear the boy may lose his head if he does not learn to control it." Raleigh jabbed a fork in the direction of the departing guest.

"Impudent, but adorable nonetheless." Elizabeth selected a pink almond from a tray. Three huge candelabras lit the table with a golden light radiating the hue of the Queen Elizabeth's gown. Her red hair flowed about her shoulders as a shoal of shimmering fish turning in a moonlit ocean. Raleigh sat to her left his gold and black outfit a perfect match for Elizabeth. To her right, having won her place on the hunt, Lateece, dressed to kill in a low-cut gold dress of woven silk scarves each fastened with a diamond brooch. Her blonde hair was a coiled plait pinned through with her favourite knives.

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New House

Standing at the door to his own family home he paused to smile and take in the street. Stratford was pleasant, a very comely village, full of charm and good people. He adjusted the lamb upon his shoulder and knocked thrice upon the door. At the sound of familiar footsteps on the other side of the door William adjusted his doublet and stood tall.

"William," Anne, his wife, threw her arms about William's neck kissing him deeply. "I wasn't sure, at first, whether to kiss you or your lamb," she said, taking the animal from his shoulder. "How was London? Is the city as busy as they say? Have you met the Queen yet?"

"Please, Anne I am barely across the threshold and I am assailed with questions. First, pray tell, how is everyone?" William chortled, as he followed Anne through to the rear kitchen where she laid the lamb upon the table and gave his shoulder a deft rub. "London is as London will ever be; a seething mass of humanity in a simmering cauldron of ethnic diversity, a world renown city of sin."

"You obviously like it there, and it suits you," Anne said, positioning an iron spit over the fire.

"You don't sound entirely happy with it all," William opened a drawer beneath the table taking out a small curved bladed knife set in a stag horn handle. "I'll skin this while you prepare the fire."

"I notice our daughters are nowhere to be seen." Anne snatched up an apron tossing it to William. "You won't want to get your doublet filthy."

"I almost forgot," he put the knife down and set about unfastening his doublet. Anne watched him from across the table where she began to knead dough in a trough. "The girls told me my parents will be coming for supper?" William twisted the embroidered buttons one by one carefully releasing their hold on the embroidered fabric.

"Take care my love," Anne said, squeezing the dough through her fingers. "You'll get that blessed animals wool all over your breeches. Which I must add fit in a very manly manner." She blushed.

"Then I shall remove them also," William popped the cufflinks on his sleeves and slipped the doublet from his shoulders. Without taking his eyes from his wife he stepped over to the door, hung up his doublet and dropped the latch on the door.

"Why sir, I have no means of escape, what if..." Anne's words were cut off by William's tender kiss.

"I should not want you to," he kissed her deeply, tasting of her mouth as he pulled her tight to him.

The fire cracked, hissed and spat as the flames licked up the sap from the green wood.

"Welcome home, my love," Anne rested her head against him, breathing in time with the rise and fall of his chest.

William kissed her lightly upon her brow holding her in the loop of his arms. "Perhaps when the Globe is built the family could come and see a play. I can hire a sloop and we can cruise the Thames from Southwark to Richmond, to the Tower and back again."

"I would very much like to do that," Anne said slipping from William's embrace. "But for now, we have a meal to fix before the lamb decides to get up and return to its mother."

William adjusted his dress and returned to his skinning duties. He spun the knife in his hand contemplating the first cut. "Where to begin." He tapped the blade upon the lamb's chest. "But, soft! methinks I do digress too much," he said slipping the knife into the chest cavity slicing all the way up to the throat where he cut around the neck. "I would prefer to have done this while the kill was fresh. But alas, it is not be so." William inserted the knife under the skin sliding up the leg to the hoof. Humming softly to himself he proceeded to open up the other legs and then peel back the skin slicing away the fat layer keeping as much as possible on the meat.

"You're making a fine job of that animal, my dear," Anne said, separating the dough into smaller loaves. "Quite the skilled man with your hands," she said biting her lip.

"What could I compare to thee," William let the words flow softly from his lips. "For though I travel to the corners of this great nation whereupon I illumine the stage with my craft. There is no other place I would rather be than in your arms." William walked around the table. He took Anne in his arms, lifting her chin, he kissed away the tears and held her close. "Never, shall I be seen in the embrace of another woman. Though men may accuse me, I will be yours unto my dying breath. For none have known me as you. You are mine and I am yours, my soul weeps when we are apart. Every time I return to London it gets harder to leave you. Though I have many friends among the rich and poor alike, none hold my heart as you do."

"William," she wept, not of sadness but of unconditional love.

"Mother?" the girls were at the kitchen door rattling the latch. "Is everything well?"

"Your father locked me in," Anne lifted the latch allowing the two girls into kitchen. "You know how he likes to jape."

"Indeed we do, he even suggested that we eat vegetables!" Judith stressed, throwing her arms around her mother's neck. "Could you imagine such a thing?"

"Vegetables aren't so bad, my dears," Anne stifled her laughter. With enough meat on your plates you would not even know they were there." With a huff the girls turned and left the kitchen leaving William and Anne to laugh away the afternoon.

By the time the rest of the family had arrived the dining room table was already set. The two girls, Susanne and Judith, had worked hard polishing the silverware and folding napkins. The house was filled with the smells of cooked meats and buttered pastry. John Shakespeare, now quite elderly, checked the table together with Mary, his wife before taking up a seat.

"I s'pose I must doff my hat to my son as he is master of this 'ouse," John said, groaning as he sat down. Mary took her seat beside her husband where they waited as the Shakespeare sisters began ferrying food to the table.

William followed Anne into the room, carrying the goose on a platter. He waited for everyone to be seated before placing the bird in the centre of table. He then took up his seat at the head of the table and lead them in the grace of the Lord.

"Mind if I carve?" John was already out of his seat with a carving knife in his hand.

"Please do," William gestured with an open hand to his father who proceeded to carve the goose with skilled precision. As he was serving his own portion there was a loud knock at the door. "I'll see to that," He waved William back to his seat. "You enjoy yourself." John walked out of the dining room closing the oak panelled door after him.

"Evening squire," the gentleman at the door spoke with a learned Yorkshire accent with a hint of Latin. "The master at the Inn said I might find you here."

"John," John Shakespeare shook the offered hand. "John Johnson, how might you be?"

"I am well," John Johnson stepped back with his arms spread wide. "As you can see. Traveling the world has been kind to me," a large wooden crucifix swung about his neck.

"What brings you out this way in these plagued times?"

"I have an order for muster from London, do you have any reprobates who would benefit from a sojourn in Ireland?" John Johnson offered the scroll with a flourish.

"Oh, I'm not the sheriff any more, but I'm still an alderman. I'll pass this on to Quayney in the mornin' he'll get it sorted. There's a couple of rough lads in holdin' they'll be a start.

"Where are my manners. We're just sitting to supper, would you care to join us. My son is up from London, I'm sure you two would have much to talk about."

"Er, you must excuse me, I need to get to my father's estate. I still have a long night ahead of me," John Johnson doffed his hat revealing his auburn locks.

"Quite the picture you are, young Johnson. You get on your way now and I'll get this muster started first thing," John waved his visitor a fond farewell, he closed the door fastening the latch for the night.

"Who was it father?" William asked, his mouth bulging with food.

"John Johnson, on his way to see his family in York. Dropped this off from London, got a fancy seal on it for muster papers."

"Let me see, I might know from whom it came," William said, washing his food down with a slug of ale. He wiped his hands on a napkin and took the scroll from his father. "I know this without any doubt. This is from the hand of Essex. Why would a commoner be carrying such papers, and to be allowed to travel through plagued lands. There is more to this man than meets the eye. Tell me off him." William returned the scroll to his father.

"Oh, his a big fellow, strappin'. Over six feet tall, got a fine beard and a mass of auburn hair."

"Wears a wooden cross," William held his hands close together. "About this size."

"You know him, then its a wonder he didn't want come and have some supper," John Shakespeare cut himself some more meat from the platters, which he smothered in thick sauce.

"I know him as John Johnson," William wiped his mouth. "I know him only as Guido."

Sample Ends

Sample only