

## ***Dias Days***

As the expedition passed the river Geba and reached Sierra Leone, the trades died off and the ships fell into the doldrums. The Canary Current dies here and turns into the North Equatorial, which flows west in a slow and diffuse fashion.

For days the vessels drifted, the supplies of fresh produce taken on board in the Canaries long gone.

“The only wind is inshore,” Álvaro told his mates, “but there are waves breaking offshore, in shallows of three or four fathoms.”

“And mists, which can wreck a ship,” another added.

“Out here the wind is weak and variable,” Álvaro continued grumpily. “Like an old man’s piss!” he spat on the deck.

The ship smelled rank as the biscuit and salted meat in the casks began to rot.

“Such a stench. The bilges are shipping water and are muddy with rotten meat, waste, and rats.” The man who spoke was a newcomer, a fisherman from Lagos.

“Don’t pray for a clean hold,” Álvaro told him enigmatically.

“But why?”

“You’ll know soon enough!”

At least I have the gold now, and no worries for the girl, the soldier thought. It had been easy to discuss his business proposal with the slavers, and on the second meeting he had brought along the girl. Inside the thatched hut, she was ordered to strip, her eyes wide with fright.

The tribal chief was a fat, dissolute man; he stared lasciviously at the firm young body, the pert breasts in stark contrast to the drooped offerings of his wives. Álvaro knew he had a deal, and sealed it with a cup of fermented palm alcohol. It burned as it passed his throat, and his grimace made the assembled blacks laugh uproariously. He took his bag of gold and smuggled it on board. Later, he borrowed some carpenter’s tools and prised open a small compartment hollowed out belowdecks. The gold safely wedged inside, he refitted the wooden cover, nailed it in place, and used the abundant dirt from the floor, mixed with spit, to smear the wood, giving it the same appearance as the surrounding fittings.

Captain Dias took on board two Negroes and four Negresses from the Guinea coast; strict orders were given to avoid conflict with natives and to gain confidence by means of gifts. The four Guinea women were to be landed at various places, handsomely dressed, with samples of gold, silver, and spices. These were used to

indicate what the Portuguese sought to trade. The explorers thought the use of women would be less aggressive, seen always by local natives as an offering rather than a threat. And although the dialects differed, at least the ambassadors would be the right color, seen to be already accustomed to the pale, bearded strangers.

As they tacked south past the mighty Congo, progress slowed with the opposing trade winds, blowing steadily from the southeast, and the increasingly strong northerly current, running parallel to the coast. The decision not to stop at Elmina had been badly received by the crew, which was hoping to resupply there.

The capes were christened after the saints' days of arrival and gave the mariners a good idea of the duration of the trip ahead. They were already short of food, with a good many suffering from scurvy and disease, and spirits on board were sinking. "*Angra do Salto*, captain!" a cabin boy shouted from the crow's nest atop the mainmast. Captain Dias had ordered him up as a lookout, since the pilot reckoned this was a safe place to put in. It was a very unusual bay: the harbor mouth faced east, sheltering the fleet from the winds, the bay itself shaped like a clamshell, with a broad sand ridge running along its northern side.

The caravel of João Infante led the way into harbor, the pilot at the prow with two sailors taking soundings as they sailed in on the flood tide. Alenquer had made the fleet wait, remembering Behaim's advice on the prediction of tides along the coast. Next to the shoreline was a small village, and in the bay, natives were fishing from wooden canoes. The mood of the crew had lifted with the prospect of fresh food and water, firewood, and perhaps other blessings. Alenquer and the other pilots weighed the sun using a brass astrolabe and consulted Zacuto's almanach. After repeated measurements they placed their position at 16 degrees south, getting very close now to the point reached by Cão over four years earlier.

They stayed a few days here at Port Alexander, already at the limit of southern Angola, and the captain ordered two of the Negroes put ashore. The store ship was left behind, together with nine men, and the rest split between the two caravels, to replace the dead. The climate was more arid now, with desert winds blowing sandstorms from the south. The crew fished and the ships were repaired and caulked, preparing for the venture into the great southern unknown. Fresh meat was salted and taken aboard, traded with the natives who herded sheep and bullocks on the karoo.

Dias gathered his officers together as the fleet prepared to depart. "We have awaited our autumn, and it is now the southern spring. From here onward our lives are in the hands of our Lord. From here we are heading off the chart. Alenquer, what is your counsel?"

“Captain-General, it was wise to wait for better weather. Nevertheless, it will be much colder to the south, as we can see from the waters.” The icy Benguela Current, which comes up from the Antarctic, suggested precisely that. And as it moves offshore, impelled by the southeast trades and the earth’s rotation, the coastal waters become even colder, upwelled from a depth of hundreds of fathoms.

“From here to Cape Cross, where Captain Cão died, we sail one hundred and fifty leagues. After that we do not know. The current to the north is strong, the winds prevail from southeast. We will tack all the way down, against the currents. I do not know, neither does any man, when we can turn east.”

The assembled group was somber. “No resupply, no fishing, no warmth as we make way,” said Infante, “and bad weather—no sun, no stars, no bearing. There will be much discontent in the crews, disease, fright, maybe mutiny.”

“We could trust Abraham the Astronomer.” Alenquer pointed west on the chart. “And do the ‘Guinea Turn.’ Out to sea, past the Benguela, riding the trades until wind and current turn us to the south. And then head east on a friendly wind.”

“Never!” shouted Dias hoarsely. “What do those bookish Jews know? I am not leading my men to their death, and my expedition to disaster, for some Jewish mumbo-jumbo!”

The other officers were perplexed. Dias had never spoken a word of his discussions with Abraham, and no one had any inkling of an alternative route. They looked at Alenquer expectantly.

Alenquer stretched out his neck. “Captain, those Jews, as you call them, came to us by order of King John. The declinations in the *Almanach Perpetuum* of Zacuto have been perfectly correct so far—the book has been precious.”

Bartolomeu Dias turned pale with anger. “Pilot, know your place, or I shall know my duty.”