

The Cabin Boy

Álvaro walked into the *Bairro Alto*, the high quarter, and followed the narrow streets, leaving behind him the great sweep of the Tagus, flashing blues and oranges in the sunset. Sensible folk did not willingly venture into this part of town after nightfall. The *Bairro* was full of color and life, as all such neighborhoods are, but the combination of sailors, soldiers, whores, and desperate men made for a heady mixture. The tavern was dirty and dimly lit, already crowded, and smelled of sweat, fried fish, and bad wine.

“Wine, *patrão!*” the soldier called out. Álvaro had heard that the king was sending Dias south, following on from Cão, in his push to round the end of Africa. He was in the bar to sign up, for the master of one of the vessels was drinking here tonight. He spotted him sitting in a corner, legs either side of a rough wooden stool. In front of the master was a plate of fried fish, tiny horse mackerel no longer than a pinky finger. On his right was a young woman, and both of them were eating heartily, using their hands to take the fish, eating them whole with chunks of cornbread mopped in the oily plate. He saw the master take some powder from a pocket and sprinkle it on the food.

Paradise pepper from Africa, I’ll bet, he thought to himself.

As Álvaro was making his way across, an old drunk bumped into him. The soldier was a coarse and brutal man who abused anyone who crossed his path and most who didn’t. He grabbed the weaker man by the throat. “Look what you did to my wine, fool,” he shouted. The old man trembled. “My apologies, sir, I was distracted. Let me buy you another cup to drink,” he said in a conciliatory tone.

“I’ll have two for my trouble, old man.”

“I’ll have nothing left!”

The grip tightened. “And you won’t have a broken head!”

The man sighed and headed toward the counter. Álvaro pushed his way to where the master was sitting and greeted him, his manner now fawning. “Good master, you remember me from the journey with Cão? You are keeping well?”

Cão’s fleet had taken six months to reach Mayumba Bay, a perfect harbor on the southern tip of Gabon. Cão had left the Congo, having weighed the sun at 6° 07’ S and continued south, but a small party remained as an expedition of ambassadors to the Congolese king. Contrary winds and currents dogged the fleet as it sailed down the Angolan coast, the tropical forest thinning into savannah, the heavy rains gone.

“Álvaro, you old rogue! Trust you to show up just when I could do without you!” he glanced sideways and winked at the girl. “Look at him. Built like a shithouse, smells like a cesspit.” The master roared with laughter. He was a heavyset man with a full beard. A gold earring hung from his right ear, and he had the dark complexion of twenty years at sea. The soldier turned and grabbed the two drinks off the old man without a word of thanks. He put his ruddy face inches away from the trembling drunk, daring him to move away from the foul breath. “Shove off, *velho*—you got off lightly this time.”

“*Vai à merda*,” he added for extra humiliation as the old man went skulking off. Feeling better, he turned back to the table, hiding the hate in his eyes. Bending toward the master, he smiled through rotten teeth. “Red wine, to help with your fish, sir!”

“Mother of Christ, you being generous? What do you want?” The soldier’s reputation was solid: a mean, brutal man who saw only himself and had no interest whatsoever in the welfare of others. Thin-lipped, piggy-eyed, ruthless. The master had him in one line: tough and foul.

“Word is you’re shipping with Captain João Infante,” Álvaro said. “You need soldiers on board, experienced men. I’ve come to join up.” He drew himself up to his full height. “I’m in robust health and have oft spilled blood for King John. Mostly of others!” he grinned again, a lopsided grimace of black teeth. “I’ve planted corpses all over the lands of Africa.” The girl looked at him and shuddered.

If you weren’t with him, the soldier thought, I’d give you something to shudder about.

“Come to the dock next Monday at dawn. We’ll see about signing you up then.” The master’s dislike for the man was intense, but soldiers like this one were the hard cases they needed for what lay ahead. Cruel and amoral, Álvaro had no qualms about the abduction, torture, or killing of the local natives, and he discharged his terrible duties with perverse zeal. The master had seen him in the Congo and knew of his skills with sword, dagger, and crossbow.

Álvaro thanked the master, finished his drink, and tarried a while, planning the next steps. A fight had broken out: two sailors were arguing over a prostitute. As her pimp stepped in, fists flew, and soon a knife was flashing. The soldier seized a stone brick used to heat the bread and struck the pimp a roundhouse to the back of the head. The man dropped to the floor, poleaxed. The knife clattered to the ground.

The whore was long gone, and the two suitors were reconciled. They wanted to buy the soldier a jar, somewhere else, maybe eat some sardines at Antonio’s on Rua da Barroca. They walked the two streets across and sat down. Felisberto, the

older man, was enlisted on Dias's vessel. The younger was a caulker who worked in the *Ribeira*, the river of ships.

"I, too, am thinking of shipping, one of these coming years." He had the red face of a drunk, capillaries already hemorrhaging purple on the upper cheek. "I have five children and can't provide for them."

Álvaro knew exactly where the man's money went—straight down his gullet. A fool too, always ready to buy you a drink so he could shoot another. After three or four *bagaços*, the fiery grape dregs from wine fermentation, the drunk started lamenting once more. "My wife left me for another. I have only one son, and he is frail. My daughters are worthless—would I were rid of them!"

"If you have a pretty one, I'll take her off your hands," the soldier joked with a lewd grin.

This wretch clearly had no self-respect. "I would surely sell you my eldest— young and fresh, only fourteen."

Álvaro had kept some gold from his last voyage with Cão, smuggling it back from Elmina. The talk turned serious and a price was settled, conditional on seeing the girl herself.

Late the next morning Álvaro walked down to the *Ribeira*, where the craftsmen were busy in the shipyard. As the noon bell rang, a young girl appeared to bring her father his lunch. The caulker had arranged to meet on a corner at the rear of the yard, away from prying eyes. The soldier eyed the youngster approvingly; she was slim and pale with small, high breasts and a serious face framed by close-cropped hair. A small cloth of gold pieces was handed over, the father turned on his heels, and the uncomprehending girl was seized by the arm in an iron grip. Álvaro walked her away from the shipyard. She resisted once and started crying, and the soldier backhanded her twice across the face. Her eyes were scared and red from weeping as the pair made their way through the warren of streets to his rooms.