

## ***The Second Caravel***

Álvaro was leaning on the starboard gunwale of the *São Pantaleão*, waiting for the turn of the tide. Docked in front of his caravel was the *São Cristovão*, the ship of the Captain-General, and immediately behind, the store ship. A soldier, veteran of many expeditions, he knew that the store vessel, presently under the command of Pedro Dias, Bartolomeu's brother, would not return. Too many men died, the stores were consumed, and invariably the fleet shrank.

All the crew had been at dawn mass in Belém, said in the small chapel. The atmosphere was circumspect, and now women and children were gathering at the quayside, many in tears. They, too, knew the odds of not seeing their men again.

In the poop castle of the *São Cristovão*, Captain Dias spoke to his pilot, Alenquer. "Pilot, I have here a chart made by Ortiz, Master Moses, and the king's physician Rodrigo." Alenquer put down his dividers and set aside the compass and astrolabe he had been preparing on the table. Together, they unrolled the map. The west coast of Africa was accurately drawn, known from Cão's days as far as Cape Cross in the middle of Namibia. Farther south the chart became more artistic, and East Africa was an educated guess. King John had great hopes that the spy, Pero da Covilhã, would provide better intelligence on that part of the route upon his return from the Indies. The lines on the map were crisscrossed for navigation, since on a plane projection a rectangular grid does not follow latitudes and longitudes because of the curvature of the earth.

"A good chart," Alenquer observed. "That, together with the almanach of the Jew Zacuto, will guide us to safe harbor."

Stowed below decks were three *padrões*, ten handspans in length, taller than a man: good ballast, and ready to mark new discoveries. Cão had erected one at the mouth of the Congo. The limestone pillar, twice the height of a man and erected to mark the landing, read:

*In the year 6681 of the World, and that of 1482 since the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most serene, most excellent and potent prince, King John II of Portugal did order this land to be discovered and these padrões to be set up by Dom Cão, an esquire of his household.*

Diogo Cão had continued south and placed another *padrão* in southern Angola, at the Cape of St. Mary. But these new pillars aboard the fleet of Bartolomeu Dias were made of marble from Estremoz, unlike the limestone ones carried by Cão.

Álvaro stood watch as the *degredados* were brought on to his ship, shackled together. It fell to him and to the other soldiers aboard to guard over them. His commander, João Infante, ordered the escort to remove the chains and disembark.

“Deportees,” the captain said, “you are here to do the king’s duty. Your shackles are gone, for now you are shackled to us. There are only two ways out of here: honor and redemption, or death.”

Álvaro remembered the words of King John: “What a waste to put an able-bodied man to death, with so many islands to colonize, so much dangerous work to be done overseas!”

Infante continued his speech. “You will be chosen for the most hazardous missions—your lives already belong to the state. Aboard this vessel I am second only to the Lord God Almighty. We rank: captain, master, pilot, bosun, purser, carpenter, caulker, barber, artillerymen, sailors, cabin boys, and pages. Behave yourselves, be pious and not venal, be respectful and obedient. Álvaro will enforce discipline.” The soldier grinned at them cruelly, showing yellowed and black teeth.

It was a good spring tide, the September equinox only two weeks away. The ebb was now running well, with a strong northwesterly breeze rippling the gleaming surface of the Tagus. An order from the *São Cristovão* was quickly repeated to the rest of the fleet. Gangplanks hauled, moorings slipped. Aboard the flagship, Alenquer drew two prolonged sounds from the pilot’s whistle that hung around his neck on a thick gold chain. On the shore women wailed, and gulls cackled excitedly overhead. The men hoisted sails on the mizzenmasts, and the mainsails furled as the caravels tacked to windward, carried west by a thousand million tons of water that the great estuary empties into the Atlantic over a spring ebb.

The water turned a deep green, the ships rocking more now as they gave port to the sandspit at the mouth. As they entered the Atlantic, the small fishing village of Cascaes a shining glitter of whitewash to starboard, the fleet set a course for the Fortunate Islands, from where the northeast trades and Canary Current would make for plain sailing down to Cape Verde.

Álvaro was one of a crew of about twenty-five, including craftsmen, who would carry out all repairs. A couple of men had sailed with Cão and were well known to Álvaro from that previous journey. They huddled together belowdecks, husbanding their rations of wine.

“Not a bad ship, as they go. And a fair captain, so far.”

“We should put in at Mina, where we can trade some gold.” Pay was trivial on King John’s ships, and most men shipped for other reasons: some of the officers for fame and glory and the sailors for adventure, for smuggled spices and gold, or to escape from a debt, a woman, or a dagger.

“What will you trade?” All sailors had something stowed—borrowed, given, or stolen—that could be exchanged for gold, paradise pepper, and other valuable goods.

Álvaro’s laugh was chilling. “Ah, you may find out soon enough.”

“When I was at the helm over the first night watch, Pilot Martins was speaking to the master. He thinks the captain will not stop at Mina, only here in Guinea to pick up some negroes.”

Álvaro’s face turned ashen. “No stop at Mina? That’s impossible!”

His plan had been carefully crafted. In the weeks prior to sailing, he had prepared the fourteen-year-old girl for what lay ahead, using the soldier’s brutality as the weapon of choice. For the first few days after he got her home, she was chained to his bed like an animal, fed little, and regularly beaten. He raped her, and forced himself on her in a variety of ways. Then he sold her sexual services to others, all in preparation for what was to come. For Álvaro planned to smuggle her aboard the *São Pantaleão* as a cabin boy, with the objective of selling her at Elmina. The fortress of the Gold Mine, São Jorge da Mina, was garrisoned by hard cases, ex-convicts and soldiers, who profited openly from gold and slaves. The Portuguese ran the slave trade throughout West Africa, but, as the soldier knew from experience, it was not the ship crews who captured the slaves. The local *sobhas* hunted down men and boys from other tribes to trade with the white man in exchange for European goods.

At Elmina, a young white girl would fetch a premium price, and Álvaro planned to put her ashore, then sell her for gold. The cabin boy would be listed dead or missing, and that would be that. After a few years in Mina she would most likely be dead anyway, from abuse, fevers, or venery. Now this changed everything!

Álvaro had shielded the young girl on board; she knew that at the first sign of trouble he would toss her over the side, blame one of the deportees for conspiring to bring her on board, and have him killed. A woman aboard the caravels, with the opportunity of sexual favors for the crew, would be executed on the spot if discovered. But with her slim body, close cropped hair and dirty clothes, she was indistinguishable from the young boys on board.

The only thing to do was to unload her in Guinea and sell her to the local chiefs for gold. A white girl would be a rarity, and he would certainly profit from the sale, though not as much as at Mina.

There would be less danger, too, he thought, of her being found out when the ships becalmed in the doldrums, which would inevitably happen after Guinea as they proceeded south. He had no human feelings for the girl, but he had no wish to kill her: he would lose his investment.