Prologue

> *In the name of God, Amen.*
>
> *In the year 1497, did the king, Dom Manoel, first of this name in Portugal, send out to discover four ships, which went in search of spices. The Captain-General was Vasco da Gama, and of the others, in one his brother Paulo da Gama, in the other Nicolau Coelho.*

So begins the informal diary of the expedition, the only surviving account of the journey to Calicut. It was a hot, July morning, a Saturday. Tradition held that the evening before departure should be spent in prayer, and so it was on this occasion. Captains and pilots had spent the night at the little chapel of Santa Maria of Bethlehem, ten minutes' walk from the *Cais Novo*, or New Quay, where the fleet was berthed. Apart from the higher-ranking saints, captained by the Gama brothers, there was a smaller saint, the *São Miguel*, and the inevitable supply ship, which would be sacrificed along the way. Men and victuals would be distributed across the other vessels at the time when both had disappeared in sufficient quantity.

In the end, the voyage took two full years and laid waste to half the crew. The hand of death came down evenly on officers, seamen, and soldiers; as usual, the deportees were the hardest hit. Of the four ships, only two returned, limping back to Lisbon, the few remaining carpenters and caulkers working day and night to keep the vessels afloat. The diary of Álvaro Velho ends abruptly midway through the return journey, just shy of the Guinea coast, where the author may well have perished.

This is the story of a journey made possible by men who read the stars, played the games of politics and war better than anyone today, and dared to risk the future of an entire nation for Marco Polo's pot of gold. It is the story of the rise of a small country, with a population of just over one million people, onto the world stage. It is the reason why both the Chinese and Portuguese words for tea are *chá*, and why key in Kikuyu, a major tribal language in Kenya, is the Portuguese word *chave*. It explains why the Indian word *vindaloo* bears a striking resemblance to *vin d'alho*, the wine and garlic marinade of the Madeira Islands, and why the Portuguese for seasoning, *tempêro*, appears in Japanese as *tempura*.

Any successful journey has two parts: planning and execution. For each month Vasco da Gama spent at sea, twelve months of preparation had taken place. When the royal pilot Pero de Alenquer blew his whistle on the flagship on that hot July morning in 1497, leading the fleet into the vast waters of the North Atlantic, he

knew that the great adventure had begun twenty-five years before, in the mind of the Perfect Prince, then a young man of seventeen.

The Perfect Prince

On August 25, 1471, a young man looked out from the window at the North African dawn. He saw the souhks of Asilah, quiet now after the battle, faint plumes of smoke rising here and there from the pillaged wasteland. Despite the thrill of the day before, the adrenalin pump still churning, this new dawn brought with it a leaden weight. His gaze turned west in the direction of the Atlantic, toward home. Responsibility; leadership; vision. So much lay on his young shoulders. And after the events of the day before, so much more was expected.

John was a proud son, Crown Prince of Portugal, the only male heir of Afonso the African. There had been a baby brother, born in 1451, who died at the age of one, and an older sister, who had recently entered a convent in Aveiro. On that bloody August Saturday, the prince had ridden into the ancient Moorish city beside his father with an army of thirty thousand men. Over the previous week, he had watched helplessly as Moors and Christians skirmished on the beachhead, the Atlantic gale opposing the landfall of the invading fleet. But he had learned the value of maritime artillery. Two decades later, the Portuguese took that lesson east, battering enemy positions in Mogadishu and Calicut.

Three years later, John still kept the twisted sword that he had used in those bloody hours when, with his father at his side, he had scythed and thrust a red trail from the walls of the opulent city to the final moments at the keep. The Berbers who survived had been left to the bloodlust of the soldiers. Then as now, the ravages of rape and torture spoke louder than emotions of mercy, the primeval flames of human nature erupting in the oxygen of religious fire. John watched as Afonso's reign declined, and understood that soon he would be called upon to step up to the throne. He did not share his father's consumption with the North African crusade; his vision was loftier, and it harked back to his great-uncle, Henry the Navigator.

The young prince was the great grandson of King John I, who had started Portugal's Atlantic expansion by taking the strategic port of Ceuta, opposite Gibraltar, in 1415, forty-six years to the day before the conquest of Asilah. And he was a direct descendant of John of Gaunt, whose daughter, Philippa of Lancaster, had wed the Portuguese king, cementing the oldest alliance in Europe.

By 1474, John was already known as the Perfect Prince, and the following year he was named regent. He was well aware that his father had allowed the nobility to become a parallel power to the monarch, and in particular that the House of Braganza had established itself as a serious rival to the king. The arranged marriage between the Perfect Prince and his first cousin Leonor of Braganza did little to heal

the widening rift. Even the birth of their first son in May 1475 was not enough to stop the conspirators who sought to undermine John's ascent to power. He saw his marriage the way most nobles did, as a strategy to promote political alliance. But the young regent soon understood that his new spouse, although young and beautiful, was also cool and calculating. John realized that Leonor followed her own agenda, heavily influenced by her father and brothers, to keep the monarch weak.

My weakness will be their strength, the Perfect Prince reflected, and their strength will become my undoing. I must find force in those who support me, since it is my own uncles and cousins who plot my demise.

The youngster learned quickly as he watched his father make yet more mistakes, ending with a prolonged absence in France that only served to fortify his opponents at home. "When I am crowned, they will seize their chance. I must strike first, and I must hit hard."

And all the while he pondered the lessons learned from Prince Henry, the navigator of the oceans. The Perfect Prince knew that the future of his small kingdom was not in North Africa. It lay to the east: in the Indies, in the Celestial Empire, in Marco Polo's Cipango, and in the riches of the spice trade. For his dream he needed scientists—astronomers to guide his ships. He needed priests and lawyers, wily men who could win a kingdom with the stroke of a pen or conquer a foreign land with a well-placed clause. And brave men: captains, sailors, prisoners. But only some would do. No nepotism, no effete nobility, no favorite sons. The hard men, the second sons, the ambitious, clever, and ruthless ones, who would fight to the ends of the earth to fulfill their king's orders. And he needed spies.