

Chapter 2

1499 – Sea of the Antilles



A month out of Hispaniola and a week since passing the mouth of the Orinoco, Paco Carabaja pushed his crew harder than at any point on their journey. Warned by ominous portents and the experience of his helmsman and close friend, Manolo Senior, he had ordered every sail unfurled and drawn tight in a desperate effort to outrace the storm that sucked hard at their heels, already washing one man overboard.

His hopes, the lives of his crew, and the fortune and reclamation of the honor of his mentor, Governor Cristobal Colon – all rested in his skill at guiding their caravel as near the shore as possible, until a safe haven could be found.

Carabaja was not the first to cast eyes upon this new paradise that lay to port. That honor had gone to the Great Navigator, Colon himself, though it was the arrogant interloper Alonso de Ojeda who had christened it ‘Little Venice’ for the canal-like tributaries and stilted native dwellings he’d encountered. Even so, Carabaja and his men would be the first to seek deliverance there.

Or so he hoped. In the cramped and fusty chartroom, Carabaja,

Senior and Juan-Nunca de Arabá, his second most-trusted officer, poured over the few maps and sparse drawings they possessed of the land to their south, their trepidation mounting as it seemed no suitable inlet could be reached in time. That unnerving reality, charged with de Ojeda’s reports of savages unfriendly to their Christian goodwill – and exceedingly skilled with bow and arrow – left the Captain but one option, a remote chance to which his helmsman and lieutenant agreed with an enthusiasm drained of any conviction.

They would bleed themselves of reason, turn hard into the wind and throw every inch of canvas onto mast in an attempt to outrun the storm. Earlier on this, their third expedition to the New World, de Ojeda had charted a large island whose reckoning, Carabaja believed, lay not a dozen leagues north of this Venezuela coastline. They would succeed in reaching the island de Ojeda had christened Curaçao, or make peace with their God and sleep forever in His sea.

Every crewman was on deck, half flying from the riggings, releasing one sail here and drawing another taut there, in a precise dance that belied their fear. With three masts under sail – even the lanteren on the counter-mizzen whipped full – the caravel strained upwind, her innards creaking and groaning as Helmsman Senior threw all his weight into the starboard turn. Heaving so hard her gun ports kissed the water, the ship suddenly lurched ahead as if shot from a sling.

For four tense hours, amidst thundering seas and deafening winds, no mortal sound could be heard as even the men’s prayers were torn from their mouths. Hope flickered in a few hearts when the small ship drove north at more than eleven knots and it appeared their Captain had outwitted the storm. But then, like an insatiable predator regaining sight of its prey, the storm latched upon them once more, bearing down and threatening to devour all trace of them in its ominous black maw.