

# O, pioneer

One : hang Zhou

“Quickly,” said Wei Li.

He kept his voice low and his tone even, though his heart raced in his breast, and perspiration glued the fine silk of his court robes to his back.

It took the entire strength of his arms to hold open the heavy wooden door while his family slipped through it and into the gloom beyond. There were over a dozen all told—each carrying whatever could be carried. Like Li, the other adults were secretly terrified. Their faces revealed nothing to the children, who regarded this midnight escape as high adventure.

His wife Yun Mei was last through the door, their baby asleep in a sling across her breast, a pack of clothing and small personal belongings in a satchel at her back. He stopped her with a hand on her arm and turned her to face him.

“Bear left,” he told her, “You will emerge beneath the docks. Xiang knows the way from there. Our ship is the *Oo Loong*, the *Black Dragon*. I will follow. There is yet something I must do.”

BY MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF

He held her for a moment, breathing the flower fragrance of her hair. Their child, pressed between them, wriggled in his sleep and made tiny sucking sounds. Li laid a hand on his son's head, then turned Yun Mei toward the open doorway.

"I will see you aboard the *Oo Loong*."

She nodded and slipped into the darkness. Li swung the door closed, securing it with a clever lock whose tiny levers allowed the bolt to be pulled if they were manipulated into a pattern known only to the emperor's most trusted servants.

He returned to the center of the palace complex. Past the armory. Past the treasury. Past the great hall, where he did not glance at the peaceful scene within. The emperor sat upon his throne, his wives and courtiers arrayed about him, just as Li had left him mere hours before. But now all slept the eternal sleep—serene, safe. And if the royal apothecary had done his job well, they did not suffer save in knowing that their empire was at an end and their people at the mercy of the invader.

Wei Li had been steward to the imperial family for over a decade, had been a close companion to the emperor's son—dead in battle a fortnight—but he mustn't think of that now. He had no time for the dead. His responsibility was to the living, to the future. Not the future of Hang Zhou, for it had none. It would soon be as dead as the household of its lord.

Wei Li made his way to the palace library, occasionally passing other palace inmates scurrying to secure or gather or destroy. Bao Ming awaited him there. Already the great, carved doors were flung wide and a dozen men toiled by lamplight, gathering up the casks that had been stacked in the center of the room.

Months ago Wei Li and Bao Ming had foreseen this day and had begun the agonizing task of sifting through the accumulated knowledge of centuries, selecting what must be preserved at all costs. The result was this miniscule collection of watertight wooden casks that held manuscripts on subjects as varied as music and religion, medicine and history, architecture and weaponry, agriculture and philosophy.

They were in the midst of their work when Li's eye caught upon the red light that squirmed across the ceiling of the long room, shadow-snakes gliding through the carved screens at the window. He knew that if he looked, he would see the walls of Hang Zhou burning. And beyond them, the

myriad pin pricks of light that were the camp fires of the enemy.

"We must go," he told Bao Ming. "There is no more time."

As he fled, encumbered by his precious burden, he thought of his family—of Yun Mei and their baby boy. All through the dark, cold, dank passages he thought of them.

They reached the docks without incident and found the ships moored there—eight of them, sturdy, sleek, long ranging, with experienced crews and captains. At the docks, the Imperial Steward and the Imperial Librarian divided the cache of manuscripts and dispatched them to their respective vessels. The two men exchanged farewells and hopes for a reunion on another shore.

Wei Li took his place aboard the *Oo Loong* with his family. As they slipped out onto the Western Sea, he stood beside Yun Mei at the dragon's head prow, struggling to see the future through the darkness. Behind them was light, but it was the light of the funeral pyre. He didn't look behind, for only the darkness held hope.

Among the knowledge that had come aboard the ship were charts, maps, and logs of seamen who claimed there was a new land to the West. A land that filled the horizon as far as the eye could see. A land that had never heard the name Chingis Khan.



When the new moon rose, Wei Li stood upon alien shores. Bao Ming was gone, along with his ship, along with the knowledge he had taken aboard to protect. It was the only vessel they had lost. Wei Li and his family faced their new world surrounded by the remnant of Hang Zhou.

Nearly six hundred of them had survived the voyage to disembark in a place that seemed a paradise. Forest-covered slopes rose from a sheltered bay whose waters harbored strange aquatic life and whose shores teemed with birds and beasts.

Looking back at the ocean they had traversed, Wei Li said: "I am now Wei Tai, for I have crossed the Great Sea."

There were people here as well. They were a handsome people with skin the color of burnished copper and hair as black and gleaming as a raven's wing. They looked so much like their visitors that he who now called himself Wei Tai had a momentary fear that they had gotten turned around at sea and landed in some obscure part of China. But in all of China, he knew

of no people who dressed as these did. They called themselves Oh Lan and introduced the refugees to their summer city. It was not a city as Wei Tai knew it; it was made of wood and stretched skins, and stone, but it was thickly peopled.

There would be much to learn, Wei Tai thought. And perhaps much to teach.

## Two : hispaniola

They had been at sea for nearly a month—a bit more if one counted the lay-over in the Canary Islands. Admiral Colón would count that in his logs as time at sea, but only to confound other navigators who might read them.

The weather had been fair, the seas calm, the voyage uneventful. Still the crews grumbled. Crews always grumbled; it was the way of sailors to expect the worst on any voyage. They grumbled about the quality of the food, the amount of ale and wine, the brevity of the stop in the Canaries.

His only fear was that the weather might change before they made landfall. He had no idea when that would be. Their course was untried, their destination uncertain.

They would find the West Indies, he was sure of that much; he simply could not say when. And so, he awaited a signal.

It was about two hours after midnight, and a gibbous moon poured milky light across the floor of the cabin. Unable to sleep, Colón sat at his desk and wrote. Letters, log entries, anything to occupy his mind. He was considering returning to his bed when the deep report of a cannon rent the air. He froze, ink drying on the nib of his quill. He took a deep breath and rose.

He had just opened his cabin door when his brother Bartolome appeared ghost-like from the gloom of the passage.

"The signal!" Bartolome said, eyes glittering in the half-light. "The *Pinta* has given the signal. They have sighted land."



### Admiral Colón's log Friday, October 12, 1492

*We have come upon islands with lofty mountains, most beautiful and of a thousand shapes, filled with trees of many kinds and so tall, they seem to touch the sky. Some were flowering and some bearing fruit. And the nightingale was singing . . . At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes and very handsome. Their hair was not*

*curly, but loose and coarse like horsehair. All have foreheads much broader than any people I have hereto seen. Their eyes are large and very beautiful. They are not black, but the color of the inhabitants of the Canaries.*



Cristóbal Colón wiped sweat from his brow before replacing his cap. He wasn't certain what he had expected of the West Indies, but whatever his expectations were, this place surpassed them. It was warm in spite of the season, and the air was humid and heavy with the tang of the sea and the perfume of vegetation.

He sat in the bow of the skiff, eyes on the welcoming party ashore. At least he hoped it was a welcoming party. Some of the scantily clad men carried spears while others had bludgeons dangling at their waists, but these fellows stood aloof; the main party was unarmed.

As they drew nearer the shore, Colón heard murmurs from his men, for they could now see that the figures at the heart of the native group had strange designs tattooed on arms and legs, shoulders, even faces.

"Gold," said Bartolome close to his brother's ear.

The Admiral had seen it by then—the telltale glint of metal at throat, wrist, ear, nose.

"Perhaps our hosts are kings," he said.

"I see no crowns," Bartolome returned. "Only feathered hats."

They saw more than feathered hats when at last they made shore. The Indios were indeed covered with vivid tattoos and wore ornaments of gold mixed liberally with the most common of seashells.

To a person, they had dark, tilted eyes, glossy black or reddish brown hair, high cheekbones and strong white teeth, which they now showed in smiles.

The smallest of them stepped forward, bowed his head slightly, and spoke in a soft but resonant voice that surprised Colón, for he had taken him for a young boy. There was something indefinably different about this one—a slight gold ~~caste~~ <sup>caste</sup> to his skin, a delicacy of feature.

"Uli-helisdi," he said, and held both hands out toward Colón, palms up.

The Admiral supposed it was a greeting and that the Indio intended to show he had no weapons, though he might easily have concealed one in the folds of the cloak he wore draped about his shoulders.

"Our thanks," Colón said. "We greet you on behalf of Fernando and Isabel, King and Queen of Spain."

The small man listened politely, then turned to his nearest neighbor and murmured a series of words Cristóbal Colón was certain no Iberian ear had ever heard. The thought gave him a shiver of exaltation. Of his entire race, *he* was the first to hear this alien tongue, the first to see this far country.

He gazed past their greeters into the thick forest behind them. What wonders lay hidden there?

The small man was speaking again. Tapping his chest, he said: "Chengru." Then he pointed, one at a time, at the three men closest to him, giving what Colón supposed were their names or titles. The word *cacique* was repeated for each man Chengru indicated. Colón assumed it was a title—"lord" perhaps. He felt a thrill of anticipation; little did they realize that he was bringing them new Lords.

"Cristóbal Colón," the Admiral said, pointing to himself. Then, he named his brother Bartolome, his son Fernando, and his master-at-arms Diego de Arana.



The Indios were bright and quick. They learned Spanish easily; Colón flattered himself that he and his men just as quickly picked up the native terms for the strange new things they encountered. Fernando and a youth named Michel de Cuneo seemed especially adept, possibly because of their age.

The Indio village provided sufficient opportunity for the Spaniards to learn new terms and concepts. It had a central building complex of local wood and stone with thatched roofs and elaborate carvings. Within the largest structure were council chambers, kitchen areas, sleeping rooms. But the floors were covered only with woven mats.

For beds, the Indios favored a woven reed contraption they called *hamoc*. In these they slept several feet above the ground, which enhanced air circulation on balmy evenings and frustrated vermin. They ate local fruits, cultivated vegetables, speared fish, hunted wild game. They had additional foods at table that they traded for with other tribal groups.

The largest chamber in the complex was of much interest to Colón. He had ample time to study it, for it was here their "talks" took place. The circular tiers of benches

arrayed against the walls betrayed no sense of where leadership lay. The only differentiation lay in the woven banners that hung upon the walls behind the benches.

The images on the banners varied, though all were approximately of the same size. Each hung vertically from a pole. There were depictions of animals both familiar and strange. There were also people, arrows, axes, flowers, the fish of the Sea.

The chamber had four entrances. Above each was a banner of larger size than the ones behind the tiers of benches. The first held a radiant Sun woven in a marvelous golden thread that Colón wished he could present to his Queen. The second depicted a human hand with a great, vivid eye at its center. The third displayed a great tree that looked for all the world like a cedar, though there were none on this island. Atop the tree was an eagle.

The fourth banner bore what could only be called a cross. It was nearly as elaborate as the one young Fernando Colón kept in his cabin aboard the *Santa Maria*. This discovery especially impressed Fernando who, more than his uncle and father, concerned himself with the spiritual welfare of the Indios.

"Do you suppose this is a lost tribe of Israel?" he asked his father as they sat in the meeting hall. "Can it be that they already worship our Savior and that this is their church?"

It was a perplexing question, and Cristóbal Colón chafed at the relatively slow speed with which their combined language skills allowed them to communicate well enough to ask.

He was not certain what answer he hoped for; if these persons worshipped the Lord, it would affect the way in which the Spaniards must deal with them. Already the men were beginning to eye the native women and envy the bright ornaments that adorned their hosts, and their Admiral wished to ask about gold, for clearly they had access to it in quantity.

"I've barely the words to ask for a cup of water," Colón complained to his brother, "let alone inquire about the gold—our very reason for undertaking such a dangerous journey."

"Fernando has the words," Bartolome observed, "but if you make him your messenger you had better let him assure himself of their souls before you bid him ask after their wealth. He would surely think it blasphemy to inquire about the gold first."

Fernando should probably have become a monk rather than follow his father to sea, thought Colón. "The cart before the ox, eh? True enough. This question of faith must be settled."

The day came, to the Admiral's relief, when Fernando was able to ask if the great hall was a place of worship.

"This is where we take council together. These are the signs of our clans." The one Chengru called Udo Ulagu (a title Colón understood to mean "Brother Leader") indicated the smaller banners with a wave of his hand.

"And the banners over the doors?" asked Fernando. "These are also clan signs?"

"These are spirit symbols," said the Indio leader. "The Tree of Life, the Sun, the Eye of God, the Four Winds."

"Then you do not worship the crucified Lord and Savior of mankind?"

The Indios looked from one to the other in evident perplexity before their chieftain spoke. "We worship Zemi—Bagua, the Sea."

Fernando said earnestly: "You worship the Sea, but we would have you worship the Maker of the Sea."

Again the Indios exchanged glances, then Chengru—whom the others referred to as a *behique*, or sage—said: "We worship Him who is *called* the Sea. We do not worship the sea from which we draw fish. It sustains us, but we do not worship it. We worship Maorocoti—which is to say, the Fatherless."

Fernando's eyes lit. "The Fatherless? How came your god to be called 'the Fatherless?'"

"He was born of Atabey," explained the *behique* patiently. "The Mother of the Waters. But He has no father."

Fernando turned troubled eyes to his own sire. "Mere coincidence?"

Colón shrugged. "Or a jest of the Deceiver. He called her 'Atabey' not 'Maria.'"

"Father, Santa Maria is not 'Maria' to the Jews among whom she was born. She was 'Maryam.' Perhaps this is merely their name for the Holy Mother."

Chengru, who had watched this exchange with interest, smiled broadly. "Yes!" he said in clear, unaccented Spanish. "The Holy Mother."

For a moment no one spoke. Fernando looked as if he had had a vision, Bartolome as if he had encountered a snake.

There was, among the Indios, a woman

named Anacaona. Just now she occupied the bottommost tier of the benches beneath a banner of a leaping fish. Colón had assumed she was wife, concubine, or slave to one of the Indio men. Now, surprisingly, as he struggled to formulate another question, she spoke.

"Today is a Feast day, and tonight it is the privilege of my clan to hold *areyto*. Come, and you will see how we worship."



There was no church. There was only a clearing among the strange trees, a fire pit at its center. Around it were posted standards bearing the symbols from the Council Chamber and which the Spaniards had discovered also adorned the doorposts of buildings, wooden implements, and the carved shells the Indios wore. It was jarring to see the native crosses on men and women so nearly naked.

About this fire pit, the islanders played instruments, sang, and danced. The celebration—for such it was—began with a paean to Zemi. It was chanted by the women, and Fernando translated it thusly:

He is in the heaven,  
He is immortal;  
None can contemplate Him.  
He has a mother  
But he has no beginning.  
His name is Maorocoti.

The Indios concluded their improbable mass with the telling of stories.

By the end of the evening, Cristóbal Colón was certain there would be no conflict in his mind when the time came to recite The Requirement.

The Spaniards returned to their vessel that night—the more securely to plan their next steps.



"Are you satisfied that our hosts are not Christian?" Colón asked his son when they had gained the privacy of his cabin.

"Folly to think it," said Bartolome.

Fernando turned to his father, eyes burning in the lamplight. "How can these people *be*?"

"What?" It was not a question Colón had expected. "What do you mean—how can they be?"

"Are these people of the blood of Abraham? Had these strange animals a berth on the great Ark? We who believe in the Book—how might we have expected

such a place and such a people? Where do they belong in God's world?"

Colón placed weathered hands on his son's shoulders. "These are questions for priests, not explorers. If they are not Christians is not their place clear?"

"How so? Surely we must teach them. That did not go so smoothly in the Canaries."

"We shall teach them. And I wager it will go more smoothly here, if for no other reason than that you are well-studied in these things and strong of faith. Already they worship a cross and a fatherless god."

Fernando returned to his cabin contemplating how to redeem the Indios' souls.

"Will we ask about the gold?" Bartolome Colón asked when he had gone.

"It is why we have come."

"This journey will make rich men of us, brother. Rich *and* respected."

"And not by gold alone. The riches of nature burst from every corner of this island. In the name of the Holy Trinity, we can send from here all the slaves and Brazil wood which could be sold."



In the morning, they asked about the golden ornaments. Where on the island had the metal come from?

"From streams high up," Udo Ulagu told them. "From other islands and from the Northern Land—Gadawahi. Some is gotten in trade with neighbors to the west." He indicated another of the *caciques*, a tall, angular fellow whose name translated roughly to Many Feathers, and whose mode of dress was different from that of Chengru and Udo Ulagu.

Many Feathers spoke then, apparently telling of the gold, but the Spaniards found the accents of his voice strange; they could understand little of what he said.

Chengru saw their perplexity and translated. "He tells of a range of mountains in the Parched Lands where this yellow metal is dug from the earth. His people, the Dineh, have learned to mine it."

"We would like to trade for gold as well," Colón told the Indios. "Gold is precious to us."

"It is sacred to us as well," said Udo Ulagu with seeming pleasure. "Let us make you a gift of it."

Before the Spaniards could guess their intention, the Indios had presented them with several baskets full of golden ornaments.

"Can we trade for more?" Colón want-

ed to know. "Our great King and Queen have urgent need of it."

The Indios seemed amenable to this, and so Colón sent to the ship for the goods they had brought to barter. But the Indios were unimpressed with glass beads and textiles, and would not trade for any of it. They were happy to give their guests a certain amount of their natural wealth, but they wished to trade for such things as maps and sea charts of the known world—the things the Spaniards would not part with.

After this, the *caciques* seemed elusive. They met for long hours in their council hall and seemed to have little time for their visitors. The common villagers, when asked what their leaders were about, simply replied that they were engaged in important talks.

This made the Lord Admiral uneasy. He ordered all crewmen to their vessels at night, an unpopular command, but one he thought necessary for the protection of his crew.



Cristóbal Colón thought it appropriate that they recite the Requirement on Christmas Day. He ordered his crew to sail the *Santa Maria* closer to shore, broadside to the native village so that he could bring her guns to bear if need be.

It was not an ill day, but that changed swiftly. As they approached the anchorage, the horizon darkened, the wind kicked up, and the ship was sent aground in a sudden pelting rain.

Vainly did the masters of the *Pinta* and *Nina* try to ship lines to pull their sister off the shoals. No line was long enough for them to maneuver in safety; were they to venture close enough, Colón knew, they would founder.

The thought of abandoning ship had occurred to him, when he saw, coming to them through the breakers, a small fleet of long, low-lying craft of a myriad bright colors with strange, painted faces on the tall prows.

The largest of these held Chengru and his *cacique* along with a crew of oarsmen. Others were crewed by men and women of the common caste who brought their long-boats close to the foundering carrack and played out lines to her.

It was neither an easy task nor a simple one, but some hours later, the *Santa Maria* floated freely offshore once again.

"Whence came the boats?" Bartolome asked when at last they took the ship's skiff

ashore. He tipped his head toward the northern peninsula that concealed the small bay in which the natives kept their fishing craft. "Surely there were not that many moored in that cove. Nor were they so seaworthy. These seemed to me ships of war."

"Those little boats?" Cristóbal Colón laughed, but still he asked about them as they shared the evening meal with a dozen or so Indio leaders. He was told that in these vessels the Indios moved about the system of islands and traveled north to Gadawahi—the Land.

"We are thankful for your assistance," Colón told his hosts. "Without you, my ship would have been lost."

"Bagua was merciful," said Chengru. "We thank Him for His providence."

"Rather you should thank Our Lord and Savior *Jesu Christe* for His providence," said Fernando quietly. "You have this day become the instrument of His mercy. He has allowed you to assist us so that you may know we are His chosen ones."

Colón was impressed. His son had rehabilitated an embarrassing gaffe.

"Chosen for what purpose?" asked Anacaona.

Fernando directed his response to Chengru and Udo Ulagu. "We are bearers of the Lord God's message. We have brought you the knowledge of His only Son."

Chengru's tip-tilted eyes glistened with interest. "Yes, we have heard the story. It is a very good story. We have eaten it."

Fernando went rigid. "Eaten it?"

"Yes. As the Lord says, 'Take it and eat it.' We have eaten of it—of the sacred Word."

Colón chewed his food with seeming disinterest, his eyes going from face to face around the fire lit circle. Inside, he was icy with exhilaration. He gave a thought to the armed men he had set about the camp and said in Spanish: "Then what I have to say to you will be easy on your ears."

He wore a cross of heavy gold about his neck on a thick chain. Now he took it in his hand, came to his feet, and carefully pronounced the words of the Requirement: "I implore you to recognize the Church as a lady and in the name of the Pope take the King as lord of this land and obey his mandates. If you do not do it, I tell you that with the help of God, I will enter powerfully against you all. I will make war every way that I can. I will subject you to the yoke and obedience to the Church and to his majesty. I will take your women and

children and make them slaves. The deaths and injuries that you will receive from here on will be your own fault and not that of His Majesty or of the gentlemen that accompany me."

He watched the faces of the gathered Indios as he spoke, and knew by the change in their expression that they understood him before Fernando uttered a word of translation.

"We have told you," Chengru said, after a protracted silence, "we have heard the sacred Word and have eaten it. We the People are your brothers and sisters."

"Then you will accept your servitude to our king and queen. You will embrace the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth and accept the Holy Catholic Church as the One True Church."

Udo Ulagu met Colón's gaze across the campfire. But it was Chengru who spoke.

"What does this servitude mean? Which do you wish us to serve, Ko-lone? This Pope, this King and Queen, this Church, or the Word?"

"They are one and the same."

"No," said the Indio, "they are not. We hold the Word as sacred, but we have no sovereign lords upon earth."

"You do now."

At this point Udo Ulagu whispered into his *behique's* ear. The other members of the strange native elite watched impassively, only the gleam of their eyes betraying unease.

Chengru rose so that he faced Colón eye-to-eye across the leaping flames. "You are mistaken, Ko-lone. We are the Haudenosaunee—the People of the Longhouse. We cannot pledge allegiance to your king and queen. As to your Pope—you say he is the vice-regent for Maorocoti. We must consider this before we can give answer."

"Perhaps you did not understand the Requirement," returned Colón. "You must submit now, without equivocation, or you will be imprisoned. You will also be required to pay tribute. In gold."

The Indios rose as one.

"Your Requirement is unacceptable to us," said Udo Ulagu in Spanish.

Colón smiled. "You have been warned."

He signaled the men waiting at the perimeter of the camp clearing. They came forward with muskets ready. The natives had seen the weapons fired—they knew their power. They docilely submitted to being herded into one of the cottages and placed under guard.

The next morning, Colón again made his demands, this time adding that the Indio leaders would order their people to pan from the river all the gold the Spaniards desired.

"We have taught your men to pan for gold," said Anacaona. "Can they not get it for themselves?"

Colón had her flogged as an example to the others, especially the women.

The morning after, every woman and child in the village had disappeared. The Spaniards searched for them without success. They took a handful of the common men out to the beach, where they would surely be seen by anyone hiding in the woods. These men they flogged.

The women and children remained hidden. The men still would not bring gold. Colón gathered another group of them on the beach. Each of them lost a hand.

The next morning, the women had still not returned and now the men were gone as well. Colón had only a hut full of tribal leaders. He determined to use them to his advantage.

To the silent woods, he bid Fernando announce that he would kill the hostages if the workers did not return. The Indios must accept the Requirement and should regard the work of acquiring gold for their new monarchs fitting penance for their rebellion.

As the sun was beginning to set, the male villagers returned, but for those Colón had maimed. Wordlessly they came to sit about their campfires, seemingly compliant. Colón put guards on them, but had no fear they'd try to escape again.

As the moon rose above the trees, the captive Indio leaders sent word to the Spanish that they wished to speak with them. With Fernando and Bartolome at his side, the Lord Admiral went before Ulagu and his ever-present amanuensis, confident that they would capitulate.

"You seek tribute," said the *cacique*. "We seek freedom. Let us treat."

"Freedom?" repeated Colón. "The only freedom is in our Savior and His Church."

"From the rivers, the men of this village can bring much raw gold," said Udo Ulagu. "If you release us, you shall have many times that amount in *wrought* gold."

Colón laughed. "And whence shall this wrought gold come?"

"My people shall bring it to you."

"Your people are huddled by their cook fires."

"My people from the Northern Land—from Gadawahi."

Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden outcry from the men posted in what Colón had taken as native watchtowers. Hastening to the foot of the northernmost tower, the Colóns saw their two guardsmen waving their arms in obvious excitement.

"Lights!" shouted one of the men, pointing north. "There are strange lights in the sky."

The three climbed the long ladders onto the covered platform and looked to the north. There were, indeed, strange lights in the sky. In colors of sun and flame and star, they soared to burst against the backdrop of darkness.

"What can they mean?" asked Fernando. "What are they?"

"I know not," said Colón. "But I know where to ask. Bring me the Chengru."

The *behique* stared at the lights for some time before he spoke. "Do you want gold, Lord of the Sea?" he asked Colón.

"Yes."

"Let us answer the lights in the sky and you shall have it in amounts you cannot reckon."

"Answer them? What do you mean: answer them? What are they?"

The golden-skinned Indio studied him through his strange slit eyes, then said: "They are spirit lights. The spirits of the North. They are the Lords of Gold. In truth, this is where our wealth arises, not from the rivers and streams. If we pay homage to the spirit lights, they will send more gold. If we do not, they will abandon us."

"How do you mean to answer them?" asked Colón.

"We must pray to *our* spirits that they will also make such lights."

Colón felt his son's hand heavy on his arm. "Father, do not allow it. It would be an affront to the Holy Ghost to treat with these alien spirits."

"Even for gold to feed the coffers of the Church?"

While Fernando hesitated, Colón turned his eyes back to where the lights flashed across the bellies of the clouds.

"Father, let us find the women and children. Let us take them as slaves. Forget the gold."

"Forget the gold? My son, the gold is why we have come. By God, he who has it does all he wants in the world and can even lift souls up to paradise."

The Indio watched this exchange expressionlessly.

Colón turned back to him and said:

"Summon your spirits. Speak to these lights. Bring the gold."

Chengru bowed and went about the business of summoning his spirits. He requested that Udo Ulagu be freed, along with Anacaona. They must perform the rite together, he told the Spaniards.

And so the three Indios climbed to the top of the watchtower, carrying a collection of odd wooden tubes, some staffs or sticks, and torches.

Colón stationed a ring of soldiers below the tower on the slim chance that the three meant to escape, and waited below.

There was much chanting and singing and waving of torches at first. Colón smiled and shook his head. He glanced at Fernando, who stared up at the tower, his rosary whispering through his fingers, whispers of prayer tumbling from his lips.

As the chanting reached a fever pitch, the gathering below heard a sound not unlike the rushing of water over rocks. Moments later, the sky above the camp exploded with light in a rainbow of colors. The rain of lights went on for some moments, the hues ever-changing.

Colón was mesmerized. He heard a murmur of sound from Fernando and turned to catch him crossing himself.

The younger man met his father's eyes and said: "We should not have allowed the Indios to talk to their spirits." He turned away and sought refuge in a hut.

From Chengru came the assurance that, "They will come with the third Sun with much gold."

"They?" Bartolome echoed when the Indios had been returned to their chambers. "Do we expect spirits or men?"

"I know not," Colón answered. "If they are spirits, we shall call down the wrath of God upon them. If they are men, we shall enslave them. Either way, we shall be prepared. We shall meet them with force and we shall have their gold."

But the Spaniards were not prepared when the moon rose on the second day after the Night of the Spirit Lights, and that was when the newcomers arrived.

They were not spirits, but men—which Colón had expected. They did not come in force, which he *had* expected. Instead, three men, garbed in woven garments, leather leggings, and long cloaks the color of pine boughs, simply walked into the village and asked to see the hostages before paying tribute. They displayed no weapons and made no threats.

Colón allowed it; from the position of

power, he could afford to be accommodating.

"Spirits, indeed," he murmured to his brother as the Indio delegation was admitted to the hostages' hut. "They are only men."

But he doubled the guard on the hut anyway.



The members of the envoy were distressed to see their *caciques* so ill used. They were unkempt, their minimal clothing was dirty and torn, and the elders among them were emaciated and dehydrated.

The head of the delegation was no diplomat, but a war leader called Asgaya-giga—Bloody Man. He first bowed to then embraced his chieftain.

"What form of creatures are these? Are they *anisgina*—bad spirits?" asked Asgaya-giga, still clinging to the arms of his *cacique*.

"They are only men," answered Udo Ulagu.

"Your sky writing spoke of tribute to their god. What god do they serve?"

"They claim to serve the Fatherless One," said Anacaona, lifting a hand to one abraded cheek, "but they do not behave as if this were so."

"They have a lord they love much and I will show him to you," said Ulagu. "You have the tribute?"

In answer, the war leader brought from beneath his cloak a water skin lumpy with the gold that had been stuffed into it.

Ulagu took the bag and, spilling some of the contents into his hand, held it up so that it caught the light of moon and torch.

"This is their lord whom they serve and adore. This is why they have made us suffer. For him they have wounded; for him they have killed. We cannot hide this lord from them for they will always find it. But we can return it to the God who gave it."

He returned the gold to Asgaya-giga, looking to each of his companions by turn. "Let us leave this place. Give the signal."

Asgaya-giga removed a torch from its stand at the center of the room and carried it to an eastern window where he waved it once, twice, three times. Before he had quite returned the torch to its place, they heard the sounds of surprise and conflict from without. The extra guards Colón had posted were drawn away.

Bloody Man favored his *cacique* with a grim smile, then drew from the belt beneath his cloak a stonebow the length of his fore-

arm. His two companions echoed the movement, following the war leader to the doorway of the cottage where they were swift in disabling the two remaining guards.



Inconceivably, the Spaniards found themselves surprised and overwhelmed, and as the moon rose to her zenith, Cristóbal Colón faced the Indio leaders across the fire pit at the center of the village.

Udo Ulagu spoke. "We the People of the Longhouse must disabuse you of the fiction that you can claim this land. It is claimed already. You would be wise to leave it."

Then they melted into the moonlit forest.

Disarmed and stunned, the Spaniards pursued them, but they were already at sea in their long, ornate boats, sails billowing in the moonlight.

In that moonlight, Colón watched as Udo Ulagu stood in the stern of his boat and dumped overboard basket after basket of gleaming metal. The Lord Admiral of the Sea could hardly believe he had seen aright until a handful of overzealous sailors found a leather skin filled with gold that had been dumped in the shallows.



"How can they have done such a thing?" asked Bartolome when they had sought the familiar haven of the *Santa Maria*. "What manner of men are they?"

"Perhaps they are spirits after all," murmured Fernando. "Only spirits would value gold so little as to consign it to the Sea."

"They worship the Sea," said the Lord Admiral. "They sacrificed the gold to their god. Most likely in thanks for their escape. They will have little to be thankful for when we have caught them."

"What?" Bartolome's exclamation trembled with disbelief. "You would track them?"

Colón rose from the table in his cabin and moved to look upon the village through the open transom. So peaceful now. And empty. Every Indio was gone without a trace. Colón did not expect to see them again.

"Would you let them escape the punishment they are due for their treachery? The night's business cost us more than gold, Bartolome."

Manifestly true. Seven men had been killed in hand-to-hand combat; thrice that many wounded by a weapon that hurled

pebbles and steel beads with deadly and silent accuracy; three more had drowned trying to retrieve the jettisoned gold; Martin Pinzón, captain of the *Pinta*, and several of his crewmen had disappeared along with the Indios. The men muttered of their defection.

"They bested us," Fernando reminded his father. "They had neither armor nor muskets, yet they bested us."

"They merely caught us by surprise. That will not happen again." The Admiral turned from the transom. "Fernando will take the *Pinta* and a detachment of men north across the waters. He will hunt these savages down and subdue them."

Fernando, though clearly unhappy with his assignment, made neither argument nor comment, but simply set his jaw and acquiesced.

### Three : gadawahi

They had been in these islands for five long months. In another week, Fernando would have been gone as long as it had taken them to sail here from Palos. The men were dispirited and cared little for the establishment of the fort Colón christened La Navidad. They had poor fortune in panning gold for themselves and there were no natives to teach them.

On the sixth week after the tiny *Pinta's* departure for Gadawahi, Cristóbal Colón decided it was time to follow.

They took the *Santa Maria* and the *Nina* to the northern island (for so they supposed it to be). They found no island, but a mainland whose forested shores seemed infinite. The *Pinta*, manned by a nervous and demoralized skeleton crew, rode at anchor in a great bay. Her acting captain pointed out the place where Fernando had taken his men ashore.

Colón did not forget his duty to God and country; in a conspicuous place upon the beach he planted the Spanish flag and claimed the place in the name of Church and Crown.

The land was lush, swampy in places, and teeming with wildlife. The first sign of the Indios was a series of markers that began above the beach. The markers were posts carved of wood, painted crimson, and bearing the symbols of the Indio spirit banners.

Seeing signs that Fernando and his company had tracked the markers inland, Colón followed suit, inching through the

thick forest. Late in the day, the Admiral stepped from a wooded verge and set foot upon a road. Its surface was of cobbles and flat, smooth paving stones. It ran northwest by southeast. The Spaniards made camp within sight of it as the sun lowered into the west.

Colón sent men along the edge of the road and, just at dusk, was rewarded with news of a marker that had clearly been left by Fernando. His son had traveled northwest.

As darkness fell, the skies from nearby to many miles distant went suddenly bright with the Indio 'spirit lights.' Colón was dismayed to realize how close the unseen enemy was. He posted guards and slept little.

The Spaniards were off with the sunrise, following the spreading day. They met no one on the road, but signs of the Indios were everywhere. Tended fields were first, some terraced and flooded with water, others fed by canals. Along the roadside, flowering plants and fruit trees flourished in the unseasonable warmth. Next, there appeared signage written in strange characters.

They had traveled for more than half the day when Bartolome said: "The road seems to be bound for that mountain."

And so it did. But it was unlike any mountain Cristóbal Colón had ever seen. It seemed too isolated and too symmetrical.

As they drew closer and details became clearer, his steps faltered and his heart quivered in his breast. He feared he was dreaming; then he feared he was not. For the mountain took on the form of a city, but like no city that the Spaniards had ever seen. The buildings seemed to grow out of the earth, supported upon a series of wooded hills that graduated in height to the place where there sat, like a jewel atop a crown, a great red-roofed house that could only belong to a king.

The road led up to a wooden stockade with massive gates. The stockade was deserted. The gates were open.

Colón called the column to a halt and waited. When many minutes had passed and no one had appeared within the gates or atop the stockade, he divided the column, leaving twenty men without and taking the remaining thirty-four into the city.

Every deserted street was paved or hard-packed, and buildings sat along them, some atop low earthen mounds. The buildings were of wood, stone, and tile, and were painted brightly and covered with vivid designs. Some had fantastic and even

grotesque wooden statues before them, others sported banners with a variety of images.

"Are these their household gods?" Diego de Arana, master-at-arms, murmured to his Admiral as they wended their way up a broad main avenue.

"More to the point," said Bartolome, "where are *they*?"

Colón looked up at the shuttered windows. A number of them were slightly ajar and the Admiral thought he espied movement behind them.

"They are hiding," he said. "Afraid of us. Fernando has had some success here."

Colón noticed that as they climbed upward, the mounds upon which the buildings sat grew taller. The roofs were more sharply peaked and supported by huge, curving beams. Trees, shrubs, and flowering plants co-existed with the buildings, and water flowed among them in musical fountains and narrow canals.

"There!" de Arana pointed up the broad central way. "There is a man."

Colón looked. Indeed, there was a man. He stood in the shadow of a massive arbor that formed a gateway to the palace. His brightly colored robes fluttered in the light breeze. It was Chengru.

Flanked by his brother and master-at-arms, he continued up the boulevard, unable to conceal his surprise.

The strange Indio bowed his head very slightly. "Please, if you will come with me, Udo Ulagu will see you."

Colón was stunned by the sheer audacity of these men. Here he stood at their very door with an armed force and they behaved as if they possessed no fear.

"Yes, I will see your *cacique*. To tell him I will retrieve my son. *And* I will extract from him a tribute equal to what he gave back to your heathen gods. This city . . ." He paused to look down at the gleaming tile roofs. "This city I claim in the name of God and His Son and the True Church and the sovereign rulers of Spain. You will take me to your chieftain."

Chengru's head tilted to one side, and Colón thought he sighed. "Come," he said and turned toward the palace.

The Spaniards moved forward, Colón drawing his sword. His men emulated him.

The Indio stopped, turned, and addressed him: "You may bring your captains with you, but your troops must remain without. They will be fed and given drink."

"I will bring with me whom I please," answered Colón.

In a heartbeat, a small host of natives appeared as if from the thin air and solid cobbles. The Spaniards were surrounded.

The Admiral blanched. For each man of his troop, there were at least two Indios clad in armor of odd patterned leather and tortoiseshell and armed with their peculiar stone-throwing crossbows.

De Arana looked to his leader for orders. With a gesture, Colón bid him stand down.

Chengru led the Colóns and their master-at-arms beneath the portico and up a flight of wooden stairs to the hall of the great house.

"This is the abode of your leader?" Colón asked, unable to suppress his admiration for the scale of the place. It had hewn floors, pillars as thick as century oaks, and richly woven tapestries.

"This is the House of the Nation."

Their guide led them down a broad hall into a vaster chamber. This room was not empty. Here gathered native men and women dressed in a variety of materials and colors. Many wore precious metals, smoothly polished agate gems in headband, bracelet, and necklace. Some even had them braided into their thick hair.

These watched the Spaniards impassively as they made their way to the end of the hall where stood Udo Ulagu in the company of several others they recognized.

"Cristóbal Colón," the *cacique* addressed him, "what do you seek here?"

"First of all, my son."

"And then?"

"The tribute you owe the Crown."

"What is he saying?" asked one of the others in the Indio tongue.

Colón barely understood him, so strange was his accent.

"He says we must pay him tribute," said Udo Ulagu.

"And further, you must accept the Requirement," continued Colón in Spanish. "This is obligatory upon you."

Ulagu translated: "He says we must accept his gods as our gods and that we must bow to his *cacique* and *behiques*."

Around the room, the natives responded in various shades of disbelief and even, Colón was angered to see, amusement.

"Why should we wish to do this?" the chieftain asked Colón.

He answered: "For the salvation of your souls and the welfare of your people. I have warned you. If you refuse the Requirement, we shall not be responsible for what will befall you and this . . . place."



"It is called Dagalosti Gigag-e," Chengru said. "Which, in your tongue, is Red Stick. It stands at the boundary between the lands of the Bayougoula and Houma."

"What do you expect will befall us if we do not accept your Requirement?" asked Udo Ulagu.

"We will . . ." Colón stopped, wondering if there were any threat he could now make that was credible.

"You will . . . ?" repeated Udo Ulagu, and the other Indios openly displayed their amusement.

The Indio leader took the Spaniards aside then, through a doorway that gave out onto a broad, sunlit balcony. From this balcony they were afforded a view of the Indio city and its surrounding gardens, pastures, and groves. And afar off . . . was that another mounded city rising above the distant trees?

"I apologize for your discomfort," said Udo Ulagu. "I did not mean for you to be humiliated, but I did mean for you to see what you speak of conquering. We have a government; it has served this confederacy well for uncounted years. We have no need of any other. We have a God; we call him by different names. We accept your names for Him, but not to the exclusion of our own."

"A confederacy you say," said Colón. "What confederacy?"

"The Haudenosaunee is made up of many nations. The Hasinai Caddo Confederacy, the Cherokee Nation, the Six Nations of the Iroquois, the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora Nations, the Atakapan Alliance, and the Natchez Nation to which my people—the Bayougoula—belong, as do the Houma, Timucuan, and Muskogean peoples. When you first encountered us, we were at a congress at which we were to vote among ourselves upon the admittance to our number of the people of the West who call themselves Dineh. You interrupted our deliberations. We have completed them here. The Dineh delegate will give his blessing tonight in thanks for admission to our union."

Udo Ulagu turned back to the view from the balcony. "That township to which I see your eyes turn is the capitol of our northern neighbors, the Natchez. It is half again as large as this city."

"You tell us this to frighten us?"

"I tell you this to forewarn you."

The *cacique* turned to the perpetually hovering Chengru. "Please take the Lord

Admiral and his companions to his son so they may see that he is well. We offer you a meal and will provision you for your return journey," he told Colón, "but you must depart these lands."

The chieftain left the Spaniards in the stewardship of Chengru. Colón's last glance from the balcony revealed that this city, which he had thought empty, was now teeming with people.

Their guide removed them to a chamber that held but one occupant. Cristóbal Colón held himself tightly in check when he saw that it was Fernando.

The young man sat at a table, eating from a selection of delicacies both familiar and strange arrayed upon a woven mat. He rose at their approach.

"Father! Are you now prisoners as well?"

"Not prisoners. In fact, our hosts wish us to take you and depart."

Fernando nodded. "I feared I might spend the rest of my days among these strange people, though they have shown me nothing but kindness."

"Of course they are kind," said Colón. "They fear us."

Fernando sat heavily upon his bench. "How can you believe that? They have no need to fear us. We are outmanned. I lost three men, Father, by choosing to fight them and then . . ." He shook his head.

Colón sat down opposite his son. "And then?"

"Two more would stay willingly among them. One has already married a native woman and become a member of her clan. You will not believe this, Father: here women own all. A man is not considered married until he has fathered a child. And he cannot pass down his heritage but through his daughters. That woman Anacaona was neither prodigy nor fluke. Here women govern and teach."

"That is their weakness," said de Arana.

Fernando spared him but a glance. "You've seen the size of their fighting force?"

Colón nodded, not trusting his tongue.

"It is made up of men from many tribes. Their leaders take council here."

"Then when they return to their own lands, this place will be ill-defended."

Fernando shook his head. "Their neighbors are within easy reach. Your arrival was heralded ere you left the shoreline, and flashed from beacon to beacon through their skywriting. I have seen those beacons, Father. I have seen them

ring the horizon at night, holding silent council."

Colón leaned across the table and lowered his voice to a whisper. "We have simply miscalculated how strong a force we must bring to take these lands. We will leave here, as these Indios have asked. But we will return with twice as many men. No, *three* times as many."

Fernando laid his hand over his father's. "Not enough, Father. I think we must find another frontier."

Colón rose from the table and went to the doorway, where he announced to the waiting Chengru their intention to leave. He accepted the offered provisions, gathered up his men, and departed the city.



Chengru left the Spaniards and joined his *cacique* in the beacon tower of the Great House. Together they watched the column of men march away from Red Stick on the Natchez Highway.

They stood in silence for some time, then Udo Ulagu said: "So, he returns to his country and his leaders. I wonder what tales he will tell them of us?"

"Whatever he tells them," his steward returned, "it will not be flattering. I do not think we have seen the last of these fellows."

Udo Ulagu turned to regard him solemnly. "No?"

"My people have seen their like before—men whose hearts were beguiled by the twin lights of greed and conquest. I would not be here, were it not for such men. We *will* see them again."

## four : MADRID

The Lord Admiral of the Seas was pleased. His report to his King and Queen had been better received than he had anticipated. He hefted the purse Isabel had bestowed upon him and glanced at his brother. He could hear Fernando's steps just behind as they descended the marble stairs to the courtyard below the audience chamber.

"A successful day, eh, Bartolome?"

"We have not returned to our royals empty-handed, that much is certain. We were fortunate to have retrieved so much of the Indio's squandered gold."

"We lied." Fernando's voice was subdued. "We told Their Majesties that the cities were paved with gold."

"They were paved at least."

“We described them as ‘weak-minded farmers.’”

Colón shrugged. “They farm, do they not? And they let women rule and toss bushels of gold into the Sea. What other evidence of weak-mindedness do you require?”

Fernando circled his father and uncle to halt them. “Do we not serve a Queen? Señor, you did not mention how we were overwhelmed, outwitted, and turned back. The Indios are not, as you described them, ill-prepared for invasion.”

Colón placed a hand firmly upon his son’s shoulder. “We will return to this new world we have discovered with a fleet of ships. Ships-of-the-line, not merchantmen. What weapons shall these primitives field against our cannon? Those peculiar little stonebows? Even their longbows have not the throw of a long nine.”

Fernando stared hard at the pavement between his feet. “Still, my Lord Admiral, these Indios are not the savages we mistook them for.”

“Perhaps not, but they are heathen and their disbelief is an affront to God. We will return to our New World, Fernando Colón. And this time we will not be turned back.”

## Five : Red Stick

Fireworks shouted the tidings from the islands of the Arawak to the coastal outposts of the Natchez Confederacy to the cities of Dagalosti Gigag-e, Cahokia, and Timucuan: A fleet of great ships almost as wide as they were long had lumbered over the horizon.

The Spaniards made landfall at the deserted fortress of La Navidad where they left a detachment of soldiers. The remainder of the armada made its way into the Great Bay of Gadawahi where they unloaded cannon, a pair of battering rams, horsemen, and infantrymen. Then they made for the Natchez Highway.

Midway between the shore and the road their overburdened wagons bogged down in the rain-swollen marshes. The battering rams had to be abandoned, and the horses led instead of ridden.

As they struggled through the wetland, an unseen spokesman called to them in Spanish and bid them return to their ships. When Cristóbal Colón refused, the spokesman called to them a second time, again requiring them to retire. Again, Colón refused, adding an insult.

A third time the Speaker for the People of the Longhouse requested that the

Spaniards go back. Again, Colón refused and had his men ready their weapons.

It was their last warning. Uncounted numbers of Haudenosaunee melted out of the woodland and surrounded the Spanish force. Colón ordered his soldiers to fire their weapons, but many fell before they could release a shot, and those who did not fall found the adversary impossible to locate in the riot of greenery.

In under an hour, the Spanish force was in full retreat. The Haudenosaunee ceased firing and followed them to the shoreline.

Cristóbal Colón, miraculously alive, looked back at the beach from the safety of his boat and got his first real glimpse of the Indio fighting force. The sands swarmed with warriors of every shade of brown, red, and ochre, the variety of their armor and ornamentation without reckon.



In the wake of the Spaniard’s retreat, the Haudenosaunee found a stunning array of armaments, supplies, and animals. Buried amid the barrels of food and clothing there was a leather pouch containing the Admiral’s papers—logs, journals, maps of the islands he had visited, of the expanse he had crossed, and of his own land. All was gathered, returned to Red Stick, and studied most carefully.

As the Haudenosaunee pored over the Spanish maps, lights played across the silver breasts of early morning clouds, bringing word from the coastal lookouts that the galleons had set sail . . . with some additional encouragement.

Digesting this news, Anacaona fingered a compass from Cristóbal Colón’s personal effects. “Have we seen the last of them this time?”

“I fear,” said her *cacique*, “there is only one way to be certain.”

## Six : CADIZ

Cristóbal Colón watched his great ship take shape and reflected on the peculiarities of fate. He had again returned from the New World in disarray to be rescued by his own powers of persuasion.

Now, he watched as his fortunes rose from the harbor mud. With this ship—his flagship—the New World Armada would be complete. An Armada that would not be repelled. An Armada that would firmly establish him as the governor of the land his Queen had named Colombia in his honor.

His reverie was disturbed by a sudden commotion further along the seaward parapet. He turned to see what had so excited the watchmen, raising his hand to block the late sun from his eyes.

There were sails upon the horizon—but such sails as Cristóbal Colón had never seen. They were blue, red, black, and the color of yellow clay.

Through a borrowed glass he saw they bore images that he saw at time in dreams—a leaping fish, a great eye, a cedar tree surmounted by an eagle, a cross. The ships that bore them were long, low, and brightly painted, their tall prows carved with terrifying faces. And in their sheer number they blotted out the horizon.

By dusk the vast fleet had choked off the entrance to the harbor. There they rode at anchor, the light of a thousand torches and lanterns seeming to set the waters about Cadiz ablaze.



Chengru stood in the bow of the Haudenosaunee flagship beside his *cacique*, who wore the paint of a warrior and whose name was now Danawa Ulagu—War Leader.

“Will we try to negotiate with them?” he asked.

“We shall try,” replied Ulagu. “But I am not hopeful of success. They are a strange people who put much store in trinkets and little in things of substance. You’ve heard the reports of the state of their agriculture—water courses broken and weeping onto barren earth, fields shriveling while they build a conquering fleet to seek new lands.” He made a rude noise. “They are poor stewards of the one they have.”

“The defectors say they exiled those who built and maintained the water courses. So, too, many of their medicine chiefs and teachers. These apparently refused to accept their Requirement even as we did.”

“Even the Chingis Khan of your great grandfather’s tales would not have done that.”

The *cacique* made a gesture of resignation, then held out his hands to his *behique*.

Chengru laid a long, fabric-wrapped staff across his palms.

Danawa Ulagu unwrapped the staff and shook it, unfurling the flag that Colón had planted on the shores of the Haudenosaunee—the totem of the Spanish Crown.

“Come, Chengru. Let us persuade our would-be conquerors to take back their staff of war.” ●