

PART 1 - BEFORE THE ARRIVAL (1498)

CHAPTER ONE

The year was 1498, on the mainland shore of the Ocean located off the eastern coast of Venezuela, around the same region as the islands of Coche, Cubagua, and Margarita. The settlement at the seashore bore a pacifying feeling of paradise, with an abundance of palm and coconut trees, shiny sand that glittered, a lovely clear blue sky, and a soothing blue body of water surrounding the island. A gentle and warm ocean breeze moved the majestic palm trees with their dark green foliage, like the invisible waves of a rhythmic concert. Below the palm trees tucked between bushes at the line of where the rainforest ends, are tiny straw huts seemingly in disarray but upon closer analysis, reveal a certain formation – a semicircular arrangement.

The paradise environment of the shores encouraged a high-spirited hullabaloo amongst the children playing around, and amongst the loud chatty adults, especially the womenfolk. It was a peaceful, serene environment, beautiful to behold. The island was a real paradise. The water at the shores of the ocean was blue and crystal clear – one could see the bottom of the water. The shoreline had a beautiful golden-colored sand beach, and little children ran from one end of it to the other end in carefree enthusiasm. There was much laughter and playfulness everywhere. Looking around, everyone related well with everyone, everyone wanted to help everyone, and everyone shared everything in common. There was a sense of oneness and unity. It was a utopian society. Such was the delightful state of the inhabitants of the Mainland of the Venezuelan Ocean – the Guaiquery tribe originally known as the Cumanagoto tribe.

A bird's eye view of the island registered a coastal settlement of over 15 to 25 straw huts built-in groups across a region of the island, each group arranged in a semi-circular pattern. The women of the island were cooking in open-fire pits, and each pit was found in front of each hut. They made use of natural elements like the total shells as cooking pots and hand-carved shells as spoons.

12-year-old Charaima opened his eyes to the bedazzling light that shot through the crack in the palm-frond-made window covering. Squinting to accommodate the light that interfered with his vision, he yawned tiringly, while simultaneously stretching the entirety of his torso. The cracks of his vertebrae were audible enough as he stretched. He seemed to have regained cognition of his immediate environment after the stretch. As soon as he relaxed, it was as though his ears popped open, and he could hear the screams outside; children shooting across the door outside of the moderately spacious enclosure within which he lay. It was then that it dawned on him that the morning had gone far. His demeanor gave away a hint of disappointment in himself, having overslept that morning. As was their custom, each hut had a sacred corner where wooden carvings of Atabeira—the creator god and Yucahu— her son were kept. That corner was to be kept neat at all times and even the smallest of children knew that it wasn't a play area. Every morning before the Guaiqueries went about their daily activities they made offerings and supplications to these gods to make their day a fruitful one. Charaima poured some water from a clay jar sitting near the doorway of his fathers hut into his palm and rinsed his face. He knelt before the gods and implored them to protect him, his parents, his siblings, his Cora, their people

and their home. He also implored them to help the men catch good games and grant them a good planting season.

The moment he was done with his supplication, the young chap sprang up and headed for the doorway. Outside, he could see the parrots flying around, flapping their wings proudly as they mimicked the shouts of the children running around and shouted out random words from the adults' conversations. The parrots on the Island were resplendent; some of them a light green, others whitish, and others inter-mixed with red and yellow. One of the hauntingly beautiful red and yellow parrots briefly perched on Charaima's father's hut's roof and after some seconds it flew away causing Charaima to smile to himself.

Just in front of his father's hut he could see his mother Alohi and his father's other wives preparing cassava bread. They were grating yuca roots into paste, shaping the bread, and cooking it on a fire-heated burén, their daughters sitting nearby offering the little help they could. Other women were also in front of their huts cooking; those who had finished cooking shared their meals with the ones whose meals were not yet done as it was customary for the Guaiquery tribe to share food among themselves.

Just like most of the women on the Island, Charaima's mother was innately beautiful. She was Charaima's father Guamá's first wife. She had very long hair which pooled at her voluminous behind. Alohi and the other women wore strings of beads about their arms, some of which were very fine pearls. Around her neck was a necklace with fragments of bones and shells and a pearl pendant all carefully held together by a string.

Most women bared their breasts, and only had a covering over their lower body, just like the men. Only the chief's wives, a few of their acquaintances, and some older women covered up the chest area with some ornaments and some coconut-bark-derived clothing. Some ornaments were bluish, and some women had bangle-like ornaments around their legs. All the girl children on the island ran around with nothing on. But the common thing found on the women was a set of shiny pearls either hanging from their necks or dangling from their waists, amongst some other ornaments. These eye-catching ornaments were mostly gifts from their men, and the women wore them with pride, apparently cherishing them over cloth coverings. Unlike the men, their women didn't have the scarifications the men had all over their bodies. They were more adorned with shiny stones and ornaments.

To his right he saw his Father Guama. He was the 'Cacique' of the town; like a tribal chief. He was seated on his Duho— a ceremonial seat reserved solely for Caciques. This small wooden seat was made in the form of a man on all fours. The head was decorated with gold and the figure was carved with male genitals underneath.

A hat made mainly of dried and well-processed animal skin sat tightly on the Cacique's head. It was decorated with a couple of colorful bird feathers, coconut fibers, and some shiny beads. The hat perfectly matched the roopy piece of clothing that ran from his left shoulder, across his bare torso, down into his string-like lower-body covering. He was the only man in the area who had that piece of clothing across his chest; the other men on the island went about their activities

completely bare-chested, wearing only a piece of clothing made from coconut fibers, which barely covered their 'guyuco' – private areas. Every man had a scarification on his skin, especially on the torso and thighs, drawn in such a way as if to suggest that it represented something. It was as if they were keeping score of something on their skin. Seated around him in a semicircle were Charaima's younger brothers listening keenly as their father told them one of his legendary stories. As Charaima was wondering which of his famous stories he was telling this time around, his father beckoned him to come sit with them which he hurriedly did after he had greeted the women in their native language.

As he joined his brothers at their fathers feet, he instantly recognized the story his father was telling. It was the story of his Great uncle, his father's father's brother who was an extraordinary hunter and who was said to have killed a wild boar that attacked him with his bare hands. No matter how many times Charaima had heard his father tell that story, it still intrigued him and he aspired to be as brave and as fearless as his great uncle.

The men of the island were hunters. Every morning, these skilled skinny-looking men would venture into the bushes to hunt some game. After some time, they would emerge from the bushes with a large wild deer hanging over their shoulders. Each man was armed with the 'cerbatanas'; a 5- to 7-foot long bamboo-made blow dart, whose poison was strong enough to neutralize any animal. Some of them used bows and arrows all forged from the wood and stones in the area. Strapped to their backs were wicker baskets for their stone tools. The Guaiquery men were excellent swimmers, fishermen, farmers, and craftsmen.

When the children would see the men emerge from the bushes with the animal they killed, they would abandon the games they were playing and cheer them on as the men would approach their huts, smiles laced with pride written all over their faces. They would walk swiftly and quietly towards their women, beaming with smiles as their women uttered words that happened to pay tribute to them for their heroism.

Shortly after Charaima had sat down to listen to his father, his oldest sister approached them and dropped a plate made of clay before them. Inside it were two large pieces of freshly made cassava bread. Charaima took his share and passed the plate to his brothers who each took some bread and began devouring them hungrily.

Later that evening, everyone on the Island could be seen excitedly getting ready because that evening was the Cohoba ceremony. Cohoba is a ceremony in which the ground seeds of the cojobana tree are inhaled by the Shaman, who is the people's spiritual leader and their connection to the Zemís— the gods of the island. After he had inhaled the cojobana tree seeds, the shaman would go on a spiritual journey or fall into a trance to hear from the spirits. The goal of this is usually to direct spirits or spiritual energies into the physical world for the purpose of healing, divination, or to aid human beings in some other way.

Being that it was almost planting season, the motivation for this particular Cohoba was for the people to seek the counsel, guidance and blessings of their Zemís as well as offer them gifts for their benevolence before any crop could touch the soil.

That evening, men, women and children all bearing gifts of different kinds trooped down to the Shamans shrine and waited for him to come out. The hut that served as a shrine for the shaman was also made of straws but unlike the other residents' huts, there were some unique white markings on the walls and strewn all around the hut were ancient looking skulls some of which had amulets on their foreheads. The people were to remain silent till the Shaman had emerged from the shrine and then the ceremony would begin.

Suddenly, a particularly tall lanky looking man emerged from the shrine. He had this unearthly look about him and looking into his eyes was like staring into a deep hollow space. Perchance it was all the years he had spent conversing with the gods and the spirits of the dead and being his peoples only interconnection with their departed ancestors that gave him his terrifying look. The Shaman was fully clothed in his ceremonial attire, tied around his waist was a multi-colored cloth which covered his male parts. Around his arms, wrists and ankles were small amuletic Zemís, covered in cowries and small bones. He had black and red markings on his face and body and sitting on his head was a hat covered in white feathers.

He carried in his palms a clay plate with white markings on the exterior and inside it was a ground substance known as yakoana— derived from seeds of the Cojobana tree. He announced in their native tongue that the ceremony had commenced and then using his Y-shaped nasal snuff, he sniffed all the contents of the clay plate into his nostrils. In an instant, his pupils rolled back into his head and only the whites of his eyes were visible. His entire frame stiffened and he fell into a trance and hit the ground, the entirety of his body shaking profusely like one under an epileptic seizure. He kept shaking on the ground, muttering incoherently. Then with the agility of a cat he sprang up and dashed towards his left but quickly turned to the right as if an invisible force had pulled him back.

All this was terribly exciting and fascinating for twelve year old Charaima who was still learning the historical and traditional practices of his people. As the next Cacique after his father, he was always attentive during such ceremonies.

The Shaman who was still muttering what the people famously referred to as “the language of the spirits” fell out of his trance as quickly as he had fallen into it and with a thunderous voice he announced to them that Atabeira— the Creator and her son Yucahù had accepted their gifts and promised them a bountiful harvest.

As soon as the people heard that, Guama the Cacique let out three loud howls and the others did the same before they proceeded to set down their gifts before the shrine. After that, the festivities commenced.

There was a surplus supply of meat, cassava bread and wine. The women formed a circle and danced to the drums shaking their derrières vigorously; their exposed breasts swaying from side to side as their men watched delightedly arguing amongst themselves whose wife was the better dancer. Men and women were knocking back calabash after calabash of liquor. They drank a liquor as white as milk, and another that was green, made of fruit and maize.

Meanwhile groups of children could be seen eating and playing with their friends. Charaima's eyes darted about as if in urgent search for something or someone and as soon as his eyes fell on Cora, his face lit up with beaming smiles. He quickly closed the gap between the two of them by striding over to where she was standing. He tapped her shoulder and she turned around and jumped on him, playfully hugging him. He gave her the chunk of meat that was supposed to be his share and they both flopped down on the sandy ground.

Cora was a young girl about Charaima's age. This lovely girl of about eleven was unlike other girls in the town. Most girls her age were not as lively and energetic as she was, especially around Charaima. The two had been slated to be married when they grew up, so they began early on to get fond of each other. Cora, just like other inhabitants of the town, had a homogeneous brown skin tone. She had long hair and perfect white teeth. Of course, her chest was bare, both of clothes and breasts, although, with proper scrutiny, one could observe the budding process gradually setting in. Cora was slender, a feature that may have contributed significantly to her unusual physical agility.

As the night grew darker and darker, many of the natives began to disperse. Charaima bade Cora goodbye and soon there were only men left at the festivities. They drank and exchanged hunting stories far into the night until gradually one after the other, they all retired to their respective huts.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning Charaima woke up to the whole Island already bustling with activities. Despite the festivities of the previous day, everyone was already up and about before the crack of dawn. The sun was still hiding behind the morning clouds but the Guaiqueries were early risers and most times they were up before the sun.

An elderly woman was seated outside her hut in the corner, drilling a shiny pearl squeezed into the fibers of an opened coconut; her hands moved quickly despite her age. The women of the tribe, apart from cooking, would gather shellfish and shells from the shore. They would then turn the shells into utensils used as knives, spoons, and body ornaments. Some of the Women were good at drilling pearls and shell fragments to be used as necklaces, bracelets, and anklets.

Charaima grabbed a hoe from behind his father's hut. The Cacique lived in a larger rectangular hut in the center of the village, rather than the peripheral circular huts of other villagers. This was one of such privileges that he enjoyed being the leader of his people.

Charaima met his mother and other women hard at work in the farm. His father usually took him along to the bush to hunt but that morning he had taken one of his younger brothers instead so Charaima settled on going to the farm to lend his mother a helping hand.

A certain area of the town was dedicated to agriculture. A considerable area of land was used to raise native crops. The most common crop of the Guaiqueries was the root known as cassava but they planted other crops like maize, millet– mostly crops that didn't need plenty of water to thrive. Farmers would bury statues of Yucahu to bless their fields in the hopes of assuring good crops and yielding bountiful harvests. Typically, women were the primary agriculturists on the Island but the men assisted them periodically. Charaima enjoyed coming to the farm, the primeval tales the women often traded as they tilled the ground, their backs glistening with sweat enthralled him. He also especially enjoyed the peppered sea creatures they consumed when they stopped for a breath, finding shelter underneath the nearby palm trees.

Not a ways off from the gardens, domesticated animals could be seen roaming freely – a couple of domesticated boars with quite chatty parrots perching on their backs; a Tapirus could be seen grazing; chickens clucked loudly as their females swung their humongous waddling bottoms. Adjacent to a hut was a playground-like area with a pair of strings suspending a horizontal bar. This setup served as a playground for little monkeys and mid-sized parakeets.

Shouts of children nearby signaled Charaima and the womenfolk that the men had returned from their hunting. Charaima quickly dropped everything he was doing and dashed towards the uproar; his heels touching his buttocks in a zigzag like manner as he ran as fast as his tiny legs could carry him. He was always eager to see the size and type of game the men had brought home with them.

Charaima was especially fast on his feet and strangely strong for his age. His father often told him that he was sure the spirit of one of their warrior ancestors had returned through him. Charaima's strength and vigor was a source of joy to his parents, especially his father considering that Charaima had been very sick, almost to the point of death as a child.

One morning when Charaima was barely three years old, Alohi, his mother, had woken up to find him lying beside her half dead. She had let out a loud cry which drew her husband and some others to their hut. Guama carried him and they raced to the Shaman's shrine where he had spent seven days laying almost lifeless, with convulsions wracking his tiny body at intervals. The Shaman had exhausted all the healing rituals he had knowledge of on him and it had all seemed futile but providence had been on Charaima's side and he unexpectedly took a dramatic turn for the better on the eighth day. In just a few weeks he recovered fully and had never fallen ill ever since.

The boar his father had killed that day was one of the largest he had ever killed. Charaima met his father surrounded by Children eager to see the game he had hunted down. Beside him was his younger brother excitedly recounting how Guama had shot at the boar, his poisoned arrow hitting him right in the center of his forehead and how the bear had started running and they followed in hot pursuit. Eventually the boar had tired out and succumbed to his fate with a heavy thud.

Charaima was glum that such an interesting hunt hadn't happened when he was in the bushes hunting with his father but he could deduce how excited it made his brother with the way he was chattering on and on like a broken chatterbox so he was happy for him.

The Cacique announced to the happy children that it was time for him to dismember and prepare the meat so they soon began to disperse in their twos and threes. Charaima turned around and saw Cora sprinting towards him. She too had gotten word of the unusually large game Charaima's father had returned with and she came to see for herself.

Charaima proudly recounted to her in detail how Guama had defeated the boar as if he had been present. While he was talking, one of their neighbors' children brought a plate of well prepared meat to Guama. On the Island, no hunter was permitted to eat the meat of the game he had hunted down. So he would wait for another family to offer him some meat and he would do the same.

Cora and Charaima were soon joined by three other playmates – boys who had been up since the break of dawn. They suggested that they should go play by the water and Charaima was about to reject their suggestion so they all ganged up on him and began pulling him by the arms towards the water body ahead of them.

Across the sun-kissed bright blue sky, a group of large and colorful macaws flew over the settlement, chorusing loud screeches, as if excitedly discussing the fun time they had all had last night and were now heading home to catch some rest. They sounded like they were playfully mocking each other as they fluttered along to the other end of the sky. In the crystal-clear water, some shimmery sand could be seen. Some seahorses lined up one behind the other as they moved along. An octopus was jet-propelling its eight-tentacled body across the floor of the water body. A school of fish and a parrot fish dispersed to avoid getting stomped to death by the children playing and chasing each other in the water.

Charaima was standing at the beach with his four friends and seemed to be negotiating with them about going into the water. He seemed a bit disinterested, yet he didn't want to offend his friends. The boys had black-colored hair that was also shiny. The beautiful brown skin on them matched the perfect white of their dentition anytime they laughed. They barely had any clothing on, except for the pieces that made fair attempts to conceal their boy-organs.

The four boys, as vivaciously instructed by Cora, picked Charaima from the ground and headed towards the water. Charaima was laughing, as he pleaded with them playfully to let him go. But his pleas fell on deaf ears, as the boys ran with him on their shoulders and dumped him into the water, with a heavy splash! Charaima sank into the water and didn't appear bothered by the underwater environment, being an excellent swimmer. While he was down there, he sighted tiny seahorses moving along the underwater current. Charaima briefly admired the beautiful sea creatures, and one of the seahorses, as if trying to befriend him, separated itself from the shoal and swam close to Charaima. The boy put forth his little finger to exchange pleasantries with it, and the friendly seahorse wrapped its curly tail around the little finger. For a brief moment, their eyes locked, and Charaima may have felt a connection with the tiny creature. Soon, it uncurled its tail and wiggled back to the others. While he watched the seahorses depart, Charaima realized that he hadn't taken a breath, and quickly swam his way back up to the surface.

Charaima emerged from the water, wiping his face with his palm, and feigning annoyance with his friends for "betraying" him. But to make it worse for him, Cora ran towards him, leaped into the air with a joyful holler, and plunged into the water, quickly followed by his three other friends. Charaima swam away for his life just before they hit the body of water. The quint was soon having fun in the water, splashing one another and taking dives underneath in a bid to hide from the opponent; a futile attempt considering how clear the water was. But the children found a way to create fun even out of the "unfavorable" situations. Some children on the side were gathering sand to build sand huts. Some tried to use sand to create their favorite animals. The older children sat back in the sand, leaned against the trees, and appeared to have been discussing life, laughing, and making gestures while conversing in their language.

Soon, Charaima was tired of playing. He came out of the water and started walking towards his father. As he walked on, he would turn on occasion to watch his friends who did not seem to be even close to any form of exhaustion from all the playing. Charaima was not the carefree, playful type. As the son of the tribal chief, he felt a sense of responsibility towards his people. He was always looking for ways to help his father in his leadership responsibilities, in preparation to assume the position of leadership of the tribe after his father. It was his peers that would compel him to join them in playing. He even preferred to watch them than to join them. As he came out of the water, Cora came out of the water and ran after him to persuade him to come back. Charaima was however really done and tried to make it clear to Cora that he was no longer in the mood. But the girl refused. She ran in front of him to prevent him from moving forward.

Even though Charaima really didn't want to play any longer for some reason he never knew how to refuse Cora so soon enough his resolve faded and they both ran back to the water instinctively engaging in a race of who would get to the water first. Of course Charaima beat Cora to it and holding hands, they both dove into the water gleefully.

This was one memory Charaima would remember often and cherish so much in the coming years because his life as he knew it was about to change; but none of the Guaiqueries knew this so they all basked in the bliss of oblivion.

PART TWO: THE ARRIVAL

CHAPTER THREE

The day began like every other day on the Island. The men had gone into the bushes with their bows, arrows and spears to hunt game, many women were seen preparing breakfast for their families while some were sorting the cowries and shells they had gathered from the water.

Children were running around, falling and getting up again while some others played games. The parrots were gabbering on as they always did, the birds were singing and other domesticated animals could be seen roaming about in search of food. Some children could be seen picking up shells and cowries and running to deposit them with their mothers who smiled at them in encouragement even when they brought back garbage.

Charaima, Cora and their friends were at the beach playing. As usual Charaima had needed some convincing before he had agreed to join them but with the way he was thoroughly enjoying himself one would never guess he initially hadn't wanted to be there. He and his friends were playing a game of who could get the largest splash by jumping in the water. Each of them would go back as far as they could, run as fast as they could, jump as high as they could and then drop into the water creating as big a splash as possible. This was a game they took very seriously because whoever emerged the winner would eat everyone else's meat for that day.

Charaima was often their toughest competition so when it had gotten to his turn to jump, he turned around to go back as far as he could and Cora stood in front of him in a bid to try to stop him from taking his turn and then they playfully started struggling with each other, but after a little while Cora stopped struggling, as her eyes caught something across the ocean. Charaima pushed through her easily and walked on, but having realized that the girl was hugely distracted by something to have been shoved so easily, he turned to see what it was. Drawing closer beside Cora and tracing her eye line to the direction of the ocean, he tried to figure out what was distracting her. Just then, as if she knew Charaima was trying to see what she was seeing, she directed his right index finger towards a floating object far into the high sea. The closer it got, the bigger it became. Two other objects of the same caliber would emerge behind the first object. These three mighty vessels pulled closer and closer to the island. The children stopped playing, having been distracted by these objects that were fast closing in. Some of the children began to alert their busy parents about what they were seeing. There was a bit of panic.

Cacique noticed the unusual behavior and sprang up from his seat to see what was going on. He began to walk toward the ocean to gain clearer visuals of what was happening on the sea. To keep his people safe, Cacique began to beckon loudly on the children in the water to get out of the water and run to the huts. Charaima beckoned his friends quickly to leave the water body. Then he held Cora's hand and began to run towards the huts with her, the other boys following them.

Cacique signaled the able-bodied men of his tribe to retrieve their weapons and prepare to defend their town against whatever was trying to invade their land. The agile men of the village jumped into action following the order of their chief, and in a few minutes, they reappeared, armed with their spears, and bows and arrows made of sharpened stones and wooden handles. They reconvened a few meters away from the shoreline, where the Cacique stood, looking on across the ocean as the mighty vessels pulled closer to the island. The women began to drag their children into the huts for safety, at the instruction of their husbands. They put out the fires with which they cooked, quickly retrieved their clothing materials from the lines on which they were hung to dry, and headed hurriedly with their children to their various huts. Charaima, who had led

Cora to her parents, wanted to go back to join his father and the other men, but his mother pulled him into the hut and shut the door.

There stood the men of the village, putting their heads together and contemplating the next line of action to prevent the invasion, each man's eyes fixed on the vessels approaching. In the hut, Charaima shifted the palm-frond curtain to have a good view of what was happening, and what the men planned to do. He saw the men spread out over the seashore in warrior mode, his father standing in the center, as they prepared for the invasion. Six of the men suddenly dashed towards a certain direction on the right, as Cacique had pointed out to them. Charaima knew they were going for the canoes. His father had ordered them to get these canoes so that they would go into the ocean to meet the strangers, far away from their wives and children, to keep them safe. Before the men returned with the canoes – each canoe dragged along by two men – the ships had dropped anchor and come to a halt.

Pushing the canoes into the water, the Cacique led twelve of his armed men into the canoes, and they paddled towards the boat. Each man had his spear handy while he paddled, just in case of an unforeseen ambush by whoever occupied those ships. They kept their eyes on the ships as they advanced towards the frontmost ship. The chief began to stretch his neck to see if he could catch a glimpse of the interior of the vessel. The canoes came to a halt at the base of the first ship, and Cacique stood up, armed with his specially made spear. Then he signaled one of his men – his right-hand man – to join him aboard the ship.

The two men climbed into the ship and realized that they were surrounded by quite an unkempt group of people – mostly men, but also a few women and children – with stinky, smelly, dirty clothing. They were Spaniards; Conquistadores.

Cacique made a slow 360-degree turn to get a good look at each man standing close to him. His face expressed some concern about the unusual appearance of these men, who, by their clothing, easily gave away the fact that they were from a more modernized society, only that they were unkempt. Some of the men had on the soldier's full armor – a metal morion helmet, heavy breastplate, arm and leg greaves, a metal skirt, and the gorget for the neck. Some of the men had their helmets in their hands, looking all worn out. Each man had a musket handy. Cacique became curious as to what such men were doing around their beach. Some of the men had sunk into a pile of ropes at one corner of the boat, taking a breather. Some women had their arms wrapped around weak children to protect them. They must have come from a far place, or they were lost, the Cacique seemed to wonder, judging by the perplexed look on his face as he looked around. Then he directed his glance towards his right-hand man, pulled in close to him, and interacted in the language of their understanding as if saying:

"What do you make of this?"

The native shrugged his shoulders in response, as clueless about the situation as his leader. The two natives just kept looking around, as if trying to spot one or two clues in the big boat that would suggest a way to decode the mystery before them.

"Uhh... Hello..." a voice came from behind them. The natives, startled, spun around and took a defensive stance, the well-sharpened part of their spears held defensively in front of them, ready to strike. The man who had startled them emerged through a small door and raised his hands towards them, to signal peace. So the natives gradually lowered their weapons, fixing their gaze on the heavily bearded man that had just come through the door. Unlike the soldiers, he didn't have a soldier's armor on. He looked more like a high-ranking official; a tricorn hat on his head, a padded undercoat with puffy sleeves, a pleated overcoat, a girdle, soft dirty shoes, and breeches (gregüescos) for pants. There was a sword strapped to his left thigh. The stench from his apparel was strong enough to cause the natives to lose their coordination momentarily. This offensive odor was sure to render the ocean uninhabitable for the sea creatures if a piece of it made contact with the waterbody. It was an unbearably powerful, unpleasant smell. The poor natives might have been wondering when last these men had a bath – quite the irony, considering that if anyone could have been that smelly, it was the natives. This was strange. Additionally, the fellow had weird red eyes and looked as though he was struggling to see. He had a bit of a stagger in his gait, as he was exhausted from what seemed to be quite a long journey.

"Sorry to startle you. I'm Columbus... Christopher Columbus. Nice to..." Columbus had stretched his hand for a handshake and had barely completed his verbal exchange of pleasantries before the men withdrew quickly from him by a few steps. At this reaction, Columbus seemed to deduce that the natives didn't know the language he spoke.

The other men around watched on. It was not clear if they were rejecting the handshake because they didn't understand what the gesture meant, or because Columbus was a walking piece of smelly garbage. But the former was the most likely, as the natives had kept their focus on his extended arm like it was a rejected piece of cursed antelope meat. He turned to his crew, looking for his interpreter.

"Where is this fellow? Arasibo. Please come help me out here." Columbus said, still looking around. From the people in the boat emerged an Indian man, who looked as drained as everyone else on the boat. He was from the Taino tribe. When Columbus first arrived at La Hispaniola in 1492, he had taken Arasibo with him to Cadiz, and as such, Arasibo had become fluent in Spanish, having lived with them for six years.

"Peace!" Columbus screamed at the natives, making strange gesticulations, and then turning to Arasibo for translation. "We are travelers!... Oh please, Arasibo, help me out here." Columbus moved back and allowed his translator to try to convey the message of peace. Arasibo was familiar with the Guaiqueries language as they and his people spoke similar languages so he began to convey Columbus' message to them.

"Food!... Water!... Sleep!" Columbus briefly took over again, trying to hasten up. He seemed in a rush, despite being exhausted.

Arasibo explained to the tribal chief that they had been traveling for months and they needed a place to stay, get some rest, possibly load up on supplies and treat most of their men who were terribly ill. Guama cracked a noticeable smile of approval, and the men around him heaved a sigh of relief. He assured Arasibo that he and his men were welcome to stay with them and they would get everything they needed.

"What did he say then?" Admiral Columbus inquired impatiently.

"He said we are welcome to stay here and we will get everything we need". Columbus beamed from ear to ear "O thank heavens" he gestured towards the sky then he sniffed his shirt "I don't think this shirt had one more day in her"

The natives looked at their canoes and then looked around at all the men on the ship.

"It seems they're wondering how we will all get to shore, seeing that they came with a limited number of boats." Arasibo interpreted.

"Oh no, don't worry," Columbus assured them. Then he pointed to some corners of the ship to show that they had their boats. So the natives headed back to their canoe, as the men in the ship lowered their small boats into the water to follow the natives to the shore.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLUMBUS AND THE GUAQUERY TRIBE

In a few minutes, the boats – the natives' and the conquistadors' – reached the shore. The men of the tribe were still at the shore, waiting for their chief and the other men to arrive. Their spears

as well as arrows fixed loosely on bows, remained ready to strike, even though they had relaxed faces. Columbus and his men were armed with their muskets and a few other tools they thought they needed. Columbus was distracted by the beauty of this isolated region. He kept turning everywhere, trying to catch a good view of his entire surrounding, as his men paddled towards the shore. His bad eyesight as a result of his infection would not let him enjoy this view.

"Do you see that?" Columbus asked Arasibo who was sitting on his right while pointing up at the tall coconut trees which were standing at perfect distances from each other.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" He added, turning over to the little boy who was sitting on the other side in the boat. The ill-looking young chap, who was about Charaima's age— he looked about three years older – sized up the trees with his eyes and nodded in agreement. He then directed his gaze at the locals standing at the seashore.

Approaching the shore, Cacique made a wave with his hand towards his men, a signal that they should come to help them. The men dropped their weapons and went to meet the approaching boats in the water, to pull them to shore, and to help the people they had just rescued. The women in the huts began to creep out of their huts, followed by their children, most of them hiding behind their mothers' buttocks. Charaima walked through the door behind his mother and watched as the boy who sat with Columbus, who didn't seem to want to be touched by any of the natives, was nonetheless picked up from the boat by one of them, who dropped him on the sandy shore and went to help out other people. Some of them had to be carried, as they were too weak to walk. A few of those who could walk helped those who couldn't. As they approached the village square, Charaima's father screamed out to his wives to begin to make necessary preparations for the visitors, and just like the head wife of any leader, Alohi sprang into action and began to instruct other women about what they needed to get. The Cacique instructed Charaima to go fetch the Shaman and to tell him to come with his healing herbs so Charaima ran off to do as he had been told. The children were sent out with containers to get fresh water, fruits, and cassava. Other children were deployed to the huts to fetch mats for those who needed to lie down. The women began to ignite the fire to heat water. Some men accompanied the Shaman into the bushes to gather some medicinal herbs for the sick ones among them. Everything was done quickly but in the most orderly fashion. Columbus, aided by one of the locals as he walked towards the hut, watched as the people of the tribe swept past him swiftly as they made preparations to help their visitors. This tribe was different from the one he had met years ago. At one end of the square, a deer was being butchered into bits by some men, and afterward handed to the women to prepare the meals. There was a massive intervention for the Conquistadores, organized by the natives.

Columbus was amazed at such an unexpected organization of labor by these unlearned people. As he watched on, he sank into the seat right in front of the tribal chief's hut – the one he had sat on earlier. Columbus coughed out loudly; it was a dry cough. Cacique retrieved a container of fresh water he had saved for himself and offered it to Columbus, who took it and went to work on it like a man who hadn't drunk any fluid in seven years. Having emptied the contents of the entire container into his belly, his beard drenched with the water, he wiped his mouth with his left arm.

"Thank you." He said, returning the container to the tribal chief, who nodded as though he understood what he said. It was common sense even in a remote place like this, to express gratitude when someone extended a kind gesture to you. So, the native gave him the "you're welcome" nod, as he returned the container to the place from which he pulled it. The little boy who had been with Columbus walked to him and sat beside him. Arasibo sat on the seat on the other side of Columbus.

Soon, everyone who had gone on an errand began to return. First, the mats were readily made available for the invalid among them. Next, the shaman and other men who had gone to gather herbs went to work quickly to extract the juice. Then they passed doses of the juice around, first, to the sick ones, and then to the others, for quick recovery. It was bitter, whatever that was, but they had no choice if they wanted to get well. Then, the children who went to get fresh water, fruits, and cassava soon returned. Fresh water was given to all the visitors – men, women, and children. Next, fruits of different types were passed around – papayas, mangoes, passion fruits, bananas, oranges, and soursop. Some were cut up, and others were left whole. The Spaniards devoured the fruits with reckless abandon, grateful they had met a friendly tribe not some flesh eating savages.

Cacique withdrew from Columbus after ensuring he was feeling better, moved back to the square, and observed everyone. Then he called on Arasibo to help him pass along a general message. Having understood, Arasibo called everyone's attention:

"Ladies and gentlemen, he said we should be patient while they prepare us a meal."

Cacique turned every one of his tribal people into nurses. None was left behind, as all hands had to be on deck. Even children were not spared. They at least had to pass around water. The Cacique ordered that his men and women pay close attention to the needs of their visitors. The women who were tending to the Spaniards looked really uncomfortable around them but they had to obey the Cacique nonetheless.

The day was far spent. The sun which had graced the skies earlier was now beginning to indicate that it wanted to retire for the day. The Spaniards had had much rest. A good number of them were revived by that time and even began to attempt to make interactions with the natives. The rest of the Spaniards that needed more rest remained laid on their backs while still trying to interact with the natives, who were either tending to their ailments or trying to communicate with them. A Guayguery young mother, seated beside her fireplace was seen gently pushing her baby's head to her breasts, as she instructed her other children to help her with what she would have been doing were she not nursing her baby. Some women who also had babies had them strapped securely across their exposed torso with a piece of clothing. Children who were no longer babies amongst them did not hide their envy for their younger baby siblings, who apparently were given more attention than they themselves. They wished to climb onto their mothers' bodies to receive the same care as their baby siblings. Some Spaniards stood at a corner with some natives, admiring the well-dried processed hides of a wild pig.

Charaima was inside his father's hut with Cora, as the both of them looked around from within at the strangers who had visited them. The two were exchanging words on their observations as they looked on. Then Cora pointed at the boy sitting close to Columbus, and they both seemed to be trying to figure out if the boy was okay. Charaima suggested they go and check, but Cora did not really buy the idea. Their little hiccup was interrupted by Columbus' hoarse laughter which soon switched into a paroxysmal cough. He tried to subdue his cough by gulping down copious amounts of the coconut water in his hand.

On another part of the square, a few Guaiquery men were having a good time with some conquistadores, teaching them how to make 'Masato' – cassava beer. The Spaniards had tasted the alcoholic drink, and being alcohol-loving people, the Spaniards wanted to know how the drink was made. Another group of Spaniards were teaching the natives how they could use salt to preserve their fish and keep them fresh. It was a mutually beneficial relationship between the two groups, and they seemed to be learning a great deal from one another.

Charaima came out of his father's hut accompanied by Cora who he later persuaded to come with him, his eyes fixed on the boy who sat with Columbus. He gently lowered himself beside the Spaniard boy, who adjusted himself to avoid any contact with Charaima. The boy looked uncomfortable in that environment. His face looked like he was disgusted by the natives. Charaima was not sure how to relate to the boy, but he had to try something. He slowly and carefully reached for the boy's hand, who gave a bit of resistance, but finally succumbed, seeing that Charaima was not giving up. So, Charaima picked the boy's hand, pulled it towards his chest, and said, "Charaima". Then he pushed their hands to the boy's chest and waited for a response. This happened to be a cultural way of greeting for the Guaiquery people. But the boy was confused.

"I think he is introducing himself. Go on lad, tell him your name." Columbus, who had turned to watch them, chipped in.

"Oh." the boy said, having gained clarity. Then he turned to Charaima and said, "Pedro". Charaima repeated the name in his funny accent, and the boy just couldn't hold back his smile. He pointed at Cora and said "Cora" to which Pedro said "Hi Cora". Cora looked down immediately, still seemingly uncomfortable. Charaima then reached for a hole in the wall behind him, pulled out an oyster shell, and gave it to Pedro. The shell was quite shiny. It looked polished. Pedro took it from him, looked all over the shell, and said a hearty but low-spirited "thank you" as if he had been handed treasure. Pedro had begun to warm up to Charaima.

Charaima stood up from the floor and extended his arm to Pedro to help him up. Pedro understood that he wanted to take him somewhere, so he planted his firm hand into Charaima's firmer hand and was pulled up like a loose piece of cassava being uprooted from the ground. It left him wondering how strong Charaima was. Charaima pointed towards the water and looked at Pedro with a smile. The latter understood and started walking with him to the water. Columbus observed that the boy who was with Pedro was the spitting image of the chief.

"It must be his son. There's an uncanny resemblance." He pointed out to one of the men beside him, who nodded in affirmation. Charaima asked Cora to come with them but she declined and watched as Charaima took Pedro down to the beach. She seemed suspicious of their budding friendship being that Charaima literally just met the young lad. She wanted to join, but she may have figured to give the boys their space.

Just then, one of the Spaniards drew Columbus' attention to the shiny necklace around Alohi's neck.. She had other ornaments on just like every other native, but the pearly necklace was the most illecebrous. The woman was quite focused on dishing out food for the Spaniards. It was then that Columbus and his men looked around and realized that all the natives had it on one part of their body or another – around the neck, wrists, waist, and ankle. They hadn't noticed until then. He concluded in his mind that the island must be filled with such glorious ornaments.

"People!" He exclaimed in his tired voice, drawing everyone's attention. "We have arrived at the land of riches!" He pulled out a small cross from his person and went on his knees. "Let us praise the Lord!"

All the Spaniards went down on their knees wherever they stood and they expressed immense thanks to God. The natives were not quite sure how to react to this, but since it posed no threat to them, they just watched on. After the brief prayer, everyone returned to what they were doing. One of the Conquistadores pulled out a beautiful piece of Valencian earthenware – a blue-colored clay pot – he broke it and showed a fine fragment of the pot to the native woman who had advanced towards him with a drink. The woman loved what she saw, and tried to take it, but the Spaniard denied her the piece, pointing at the shiny necklace around her neck. The native woman, interpreting this gesture as his desire to have the necklace in exchange for the shiny object in his hand, removed her necklace and handed it over to the Spaniard, who gave her the piece of earthenware. She snatched the piece of earthenware from his hand and ran to show her friends, who gathered to admire the beauty of this earthenware. The fellow who had received the necklace began to examine it closely, and soon, his fellow Spaniards joined him in examining this interesting ornament, amazed by its uniqueness.

"Let me see that." Columbus requested, stretching his hand towards the necklace. The man reluctantly handed it to him. Columbus pulled the necklace close to his face for closer examination. Then he reached for the magnifying glass in his pocket and placed it between his right eye and the shiny stones.

"Mm. Never seen anything quite like this." He said, fascinated.

The pearls were of different shapes and sizes. Many of them were not round, but baroque-shaped. Some of them were as large as pigeon eggs. Columbus observed the imperfect holes that were drilled through the stones which, in his opinion, had compromised the value of the pearls.

"I wonder where we could find these pearls here." Columbus wondered. So he decided to ask the Cacique to inquire about the whereabouts of these pearls. He turned to Arasibo to assist him with

interpretation but Arasibo seemed highly distracted ogling the firm breasts of a young native girl attending to one of the Spaniards.

'Oy' Columbus interrupted him "Like what you see eh?" Arasibo bent his head, obviously embarrassed that he had been caught in the act.

"Ask the man where we can find more of these beauties, would you? These" he muttered showing him the pearls "not those" he nodded to the breasts of another native.

Arasibo inquired of Guama and informed Columbus that he said they could be found in the ocean. "Ask him how many of these can be found in the ocean" Arasibo muttered something to Guama and then he turned to Columbus smiling "He said there are thousands and thousands of them in the ocean"

This information significantly piqued Columbus's interest, you could see his face light up with joy "I never thought I would see the day, I have dreamt about this day since i was a little boy" He coughed severely and continued "my boy seems like my journeys have finally paid off"

"Congratulations sire" Arasibo said, not sure what else to say to the Admirals declaration.

The exchange of earthenware for pearls that had taken place that night, was the beginning of the short lived trade-by-barter system between the Guaiqueries and the Spaniards. Fresh food and water were exchanged for needles, earthenware, buttons, and other desirable items.

Meanwhile, Charaima was on his way to the sky blue ocean with Pedro. As they walked, Pedro looked around in admiration of the environment. He could hear the gurgling of water coming from the back where a crystal clear stream of fresh water flowed in a curve through the bushes and ultimately ended in the open ocean on the east side of the village and adjacent beach. The environment oozed a nearly tangible serenity that calmed a troubled mind. Just then, Charaima took off without warning, towards the crystal-clear water body, and with a smooth tumble, he dove into the water, remaining submerged for a few seconds before resurfacing. Pedro, who had seen the entire move as he approached the water, was impressed. He let out a chuckle under his breath, accompanied by a smile of approval. Charaima smiled back and beckoned Pedro to join him in the water.

"Oh no no no. I can't swim." Pedro said, making hand gestures to reject the offer.

But Charaima responded with hand motions that assured him that he was safe with him. So Pedro, though hesitant, got rid of his shirt and long pants, and slowly entered the water. Charaima held on to him, assuring him that he wouldn't let him drown. Then Charaima began to show Pedro how to kick in the water, how to hold his breath under water, and how to propel one's body therein. A couple of hours later, Pedro, who was a fast learner, had already begun to swim as if he had always known how to. The two began to have fun, quite unlike Charaima who was usually withdrawn and seemed not to like playing without a little convincing. But with Pedro, it was different. He enjoyed his company even though the language was a barrier.

As the sun sank behind the clouds, the two returned to the village square, where preparations were already being made for a feast that night. Sticks were gathered at the center of the square

and set on fire. There was an abundance of Masato, which they'd be drinking that night. Fruits of different kinds were provided too, and freshwater was enough to go around. There was enough meat to quench a two-day hunger. Each dish contained a combination of tomatoes, onions, cassava flatbread, and sugar cane.

As the night grew darker, and the moon gradually replaced the sun in the sky, dancers, all women, young and old, emerged from nowhere, led by Viti, and began to dance to the rhythmic claps of the people. The Guayqueries loved dancing, almost every ceremony they had involved some sort of dancing. The dancers had their bodies painted with colored pigments, as it was part of their festive rituals. The dancers moved in perfect unison, their waists vibrating in the most enthralling manner, leaving some Conquistadores glued to them from the beginning to the end. Maybe it was the liquor they had drunk that eased them up or just the spirit of the festivities, but after a while of the entertaining display, each lady dispersed into the seated crowd to find a male dance partner amongst the foreigners. Viti went straight to Arturo, extending her slender hands to him for a dance. Arturo wasted no time joining her, and the two began to dance heartily. One of the native ladies approached Columbus, but he declined playfully, looking a bit distracted. Disappointed, the lady turned to go, and one of Columbus' men ran up to her and began to dance with her. Amongst the ecstatic crowd, everyone exchanged laughter and hugs like one big family. There was much eating and drinking, and some of the Spaniards were already drunk from the Masato. The natives made fun of them for not being able to handle their liquor.

Meanwhile Columbus, who had refused the offer of the native woman to dance, indulged in a little chit chat with some young children including Charaima who had gathered around him and were teeming with questions. With the help of Arasibo, his translator, he answered some of their questions about where he had come from, if he had wives and children and why he hadn't come with them. He patiently answered all their questions and soon enough he brought out a neck piece covered in beads made from gilded copper with the inscriptions and ornamentation rendered in colorful enamels all leading to a cross in the middle— a rosary and showed it to the children. Fascinated by this neck piece, Charaima stretched out his hand and Columbus handed it to him. He studied it carefully and handed it to the other children who were also curious as to what it was. Columbus told them stories of a God who he called 'the only true God' and his son Jesus who had died to save the world and risen from the dead after three days. He also told them of his mother Mary who had conceived him without knowing a man physically. The children stared at him, their bright eyes wide with confusion.

"But the dead can never come back to life" one of the children protested and Columbus explained to him that his God was an exception.

Charaima who was always keen on such matters was about to ask him some questions when he was interrupted by some womenfolk who had brought him food and drinks. As it was considered impolite to speak to visitors while they ate, the children quickly dispersed.

Charaima took his portion of food to a more quiet part of the environment and lay back on the elevated portion of the ground to admire the stars that had replaced the sun in the sky. The reflection of the bright twinkly skies made gentle romantic contact with the ocean ahead, creating a colorful illusion of Shangri-la. As soon as he lay down, Cora, carrying her own portion of food

with her, joined him and lay beside him. He looked at her, and they both smiled at each other, before returning their gaze towards the beautiful black starry sky. They soon began to joyfully evaluate the contents of the sky as they ate, pointing out which object, shape, or animal that may have been formed from the arrangement of the numerous stars up in the sky. Some stars blinked randomly across the sky, as if trying to aid the reflecting power of the crescent moon resting at the far end of the heavens. The two continued to watch the stars until sleep crept up on them.

Columbus was distracted because he had something else on his mind. He wanted to know the exact location of these pearls. He hadn't yet succeeded in getting the answers he wanted. So he went with Arasibo in search of Cacique to get him to explain better to him. They sat beside him, and the 'conversation' commenced. Arasibo asked the chief where they could find more of the pearls and The chief told Arasibo that the beautiful ornaments could be found in the waters of an Island not too far from them. He added that he could order some of his men to show them this wonderful Island the next day if they so pleased.

Arasibo conveyed the message to Columbus who quickly nodded his head in approval to show that he was ready to visit this Island as soon as possible. Charaima sat beside his father, and watched him interact with Admiral Columbus, trying to see if he could figure out what they were discussing.

“As for tonight, let us eat, drink and be merry” announced Guama in his native tongue and Arasibo interpreted this to Columbus who agreed by raising his cup to the skies.

CHAPTER FIVE

PARADISE OF PEARLS

Charaima opened his eyes to the crack of dawn, the sun gradually reemerging from behind the clouds to take its place at the center of the sky. Cora had slept on his tummy having fallen asleep from the night before while they watched the stars. Pedro was sleeping beside the chief's seat, and everyone else was either sleeping alone on a mat or holding on to a family member or friend. Viti was fast asleep on Arturo's chest. At the far end of the square, Columbus and Arasibo were already up, eager to be taken to the location of the pearls as promised by the Cacique the

previous night. Each man had his cohorts behind him, as they readied to leave. Charaima wondered if they even slept at all. Just then, Pedro woke up too.

After they had gathered a few of their men, Guama signaled Columbus and his men to follow him. They took a certain path, and after walking for a while, the Cacique stopped and pointed North-west at a small and flat island that could be barely seen over the horizon. His finger still raised towards the island, he said the word, "Cubagua". Columbus squinted to accommodate the sight of the island.

"Oh! This must be where these beautiful ornaments can be found. Cubagua is an Island." Arasibo exclaimed

"Magnifique", Columbus muttered. "Do you see that?" He asked Arasibo without turning to him. The man moved closer to him as if to take a closer look.

"What should we do now, sire?" The soldier behind Columbus asked. The natives were standing behind him.

"Well, I wish I could go there, but as you know I must get to La Hispaniola. It is urgent. I'm on the King's assignment." Columbus replied, not taking his eyes off the island afar off. Then he turned to the man who was farthest from him.

"Are the men done picking up supplies for our journey? We must embark on our journey to La Hispaniola as soon as we can. Quickly check."

The soldier who was instructed nodded, turned, and went back to the town.

"But what about the pearls, sire?" The man standing beside him asked.

"We can always come back for it, don't you think?"

"But sire..."

"Come now, soldier. There is an important journey ahead. We must set sail soon."

"Admiral, you know that some of our men are yet to recover from their illnesses. I know that you have urgent business at La Hispaniola, but could we at least let them recover first before we can continue." The first soldier kept trying to convince Columbus.

"I understand. We can wait for them to recover. Maybe just one more day, and we're off. I have no time to waste." Columbus replied.

"I have another suggestion, Admiral, sire." The second soldier spoke up.

"Yes?"

"As we know, one of our ships is damaged. It is taking in much water, and would need repairs. Perhaps it would be wise to leave it here with some crew members. We'll find means to repair it while you carry on with your assignment at La Hispaniola. While we're here, we can try to locate the pearls, and soon join you."

"Mmm... I see." Columbus said nothing else, still looking over at Cubagua.

"Well, sire?"

"I suppose that's not entirely a bad idea. Let us go and make solid plans for this." Columbus turned around and walked right through everyone. He almost ran into a tree while trying to get back to the square hurriedly.

"My eyes also need medical attention. This is also why I must get to Hispaniola." Columbus pointed out. "I can barely see a thing now. Where is this chief..." He turned to look for Guama. "Please lead the way, lest I lose my head trying to locate my path." He requested, creating a path for the natives, who understood and quickly went ahead of the Spaniards.

As they arrived at the square, the natives were already helping the Conquistadores carry some provisions back to the ships: Freshwater, fruits, some herbs, meat, and freshly-made Masato.

Charaima entered his father's hut and came back out with a spear in his hand. He swayed his arm at Pedro with the "come-hither" motion. Pedro knew it was going to be another fun adventure with Charaima. He sprang up and joined him down to the seashore. It turned out that Charaima intended to teach him how to catch fish using a spear – spearfishing, as it is called. As the duo went into the leg-deep blue, Charaima raised his spear, ambushed a small fish, and with one strike, pierced through it! Then he raised the spear and brandished it proudly for Pedro to see. Pedro was amazed at how easily Charaima did this. Having pulled the fish off the spear, Charaima stretched out the spear towards Pedro, for him to try catching a fish. Tons of small fish were visible in the shallow areas of the water, so one would assume that this is what made it easy for Charaima to catch the fish, but this was far from true. Pedro took the spear, targeted a small fish, and forcefully drove the spear right into the sand, completely missing the fish which wiggled away, as if thanking the 'Fish Lord' for saving its life. Every other fish spread in different directions, away from their predator. Charaima chuckled and then began showing Pedro how to position himself in order not to miss.

Picking up the spear to start his practical illustrations of spearfishing while Pedro watched keenly, just then, the sensitive ears of Charaima caught a subtle sound over the water. Charaima directed his gaze over the ocean, and saw a group of men coming towards the beach, looking angry. Pedro then took his attention towards the ocean, where Charaima had attentively fixed his stare. Charaima began to gradually push Pedro out of the water, signaling him to move quickly. Pedro was still not sure what was happening, but he had to agree if he would be safe. Once they were

out of the water, Charaima took to his heels. Pedro panicked and dashed after him at a nearly equal speed. Barely had they taken off, when the strange armed savage men dropped from their boats into the water without waiting to reach the shore, chanting like monkeys as they pursued. The men were similar to the Guaiquery men, but they had a smaller stature and shorter hair. Also, unlike the Guaquieries whose teeth were perfect, these strange men had teeth shaped like those of a shark; dirty, brown teeth. Their skin was darker. They had bloodshot eyes and looked ready to kill. They were aggressive, and fierce in their pursuit, with an unmistakable intent to kill. This was Charaima's motivation to maintain his full speed towards home. Pedro, even though he wasn't fast enough, was terrified enough to keep up with him. What scared him the most was, seeing how it was as if the strange men were deliberately letting him run, even though they were faster than he was. It was as if they were letting their prey relish his last days.

The boys increased their speed as they ran towards the square. Charaima beckoned his father, and Pedro called out for his captain, as both men were pursued ferociously by the violent-looking savage men. Both Columbus and the Cacique burst out of the hut, each followed by his men. Columbus recognized these men. They were a different tribe – the Carib. He had met them during his first voyage six years prior. The chief, understanding the situation, deployed his men as he went to retrieve his own weapon. Just before Pedro entered the square, he tripped and fell. Scared, he tried to jump on his feet to continue, but he missed his step and fell again. Three of the strange men just stood and walked behind him, as he attempted to drag himself forward, frightened like he had never been before, and screaming for help. Looking back at the ruthless men that were standing over him, the three 'animals' kept turning their heads in different directions, as if checking out where to bite first. Then one of them grabbed Pedro's legs to restrain him, but Pedro wouldn't give up, as he kept kicking and crying for help. Charaima had reached the square, but turning around he saw that his friend had been captured, he turned to go back for him, but Cora pulled him back at the same time his mother verbally restrained him. He watched his friend helpless, while the men played with him, like a spider playing with the prey caught in its web.

The other savage men kept approaching the square, walking confidently as if they were familiar with the environment. Charaima kept watching as Pedro called out for help. He just couldn't take it anymore and had to do something. By the time he was about to move, his father emerged from the hut, and before he could instruct him not to go anywhere, Charaima ran to a corner, retrieved the jawbone of a deer in the shape of a boomerang, and with a perfect shot, flung the bone at the man who was holding on to Pedro's leg. The bone swung swiftly in the air, in a boomerang-like fashion, went straight to the man's temple, and delivered a blinding blow that distorted his orientation. The savage man lost grip of Pedro's leg, the latter scampering towards Columbus and hiding behind him. The man whose head had been rocked by the impact staggered for a while, and then fell unconscious, the other two watching as one of them fell. Then they directed an angry gaze towards Charaima, who stood fearlessly, fuming and waiting for them. Even from afar, it was clear that the strangers had eyes filled with rage and vengeance.

Cacique, who had witnessed the impressive shot made by his son, seemed to have been motivated by it, as he let out an inspiring war cry. The Guaiquery men joined in on the war cry as

they charged for battle against the intruders. Cacique ran forward and led the charge, as his men courageously followed their leader towards the intruders. The fight soon commenced, and for some reason, the strangers had an upper hand in the collision. Some of the Guaiquery men were injured during this collision. Cacique leaped forward, ran to some of the attackers, and knocked them down, but was soon subdued and surrounded. The strangers were now closing in on the chief before Charaima jumped into the circle and positioned for a fight in defense of his helpless father, the men laughingly pulling in closer.

But just before they pounced on them, they heard several loud startling sounds and made for the bushes and the river. Columbus had deployed his armed men as backup, to help the Guaiqueries, by shooting their muskets in the air. One of the savage men tried to run to one of Columbus' men to knock him out, but the soldier pointed his musket at the man and fired a shot, hitting his thigh. The savage man screamed in pain, fell backward, and without wasting time, retreated with the rest. The man who had been knocked out by the jawbone was dragged towards the canoe on the ocean by his fellow savage men.

Guama stood up and watched surprisingly as the strangers scampered away like rats into their canoes. He turned to Charaima, and the two nodded at each other, their stares laced with familial love and oneness. Then he went to help some of his men up, and they approached Columbus and his men. The chief kept examining the firearms in the hands of the Conquistadors that scared the intruders away, and all he could do was bow before Columbus in gratitude. His men joined him.

"Oh, no worries." Columbus smiled, putting his hands on Guama's shoulders. Columbus explained that he had met the tribe years ago when he was on his first voyage. Then he placed four of his armed men on guard outside the huts, just in case the intruders returned. Then he and the others went back into the hut where they had been devising plans for their voyage to La Hispaniola. After lengthy contemplations that lasted into the night, they decided that they would make the trip to La Hispaniola with two ships, while the last ship would stay behind for repairs, with a few Spaniards to explore the area for the pearls. That night, Columbus decided to document his experience in the town, so he wrote in his logbook:

"After passing the serpent's mouth (the Orinoco River delta) which is a clear indication that this is a very large continent, we saw fish and fire and signs of a beach settlement with mountains in the back covered with monkeys....We have arrived at the land of the riches... let's praise the Lord. The Natives wore many pearls, some as large as pigeon eggs, others as small as mustard seeds, but drilled in a rudimentary manner."

Three days later, just before sunrise, the Spaniards were ready to set sail. Columbus let Pedro remain with the last crew, seeing that he had grown fond of Charaima. He also reluctantly let 'loverboy' Arturo stay behind, for him to be with his new lady, after much persuasion from the young soldier and of course he let Arasibo stay back being as he was the only one who could understand the two languages.

“You have to stay back here my boy. Help Mateo and Arturo find out as much as you can about the pearls from the natives”

“Okay sire” responded Arasibo. He appeared saddened by the news that he wouldn’t be leaving with Columbus

Columbus patted his cheek lightly “O cheer up lad, I’m sure you’ll blend right in. These are after all your people”. “Welcome home,” he added sarcastically.

So Pedro, Arturo, Arasibo and some other Spaniards were left behind with the ship that needed some repairs, while Columbus and the rest were set to depart with two ships, to La Hispaniola. As Columbus stood in front of the ship taking a last look at the Island as if to soak it all in before they departed, the Cacique came up to him with two of his men and his son Charaima carrying some bags of some sort. He handed Columbus the animal skin like bag he was carrying and said it was to show appreciation for how they helped save him and his people from the hands of the savage Caribs. Columbus opened the bag and saw pearls inside. His jaw dropped with surprise and he bowed to the Cacique in appreciation and the Cacique bowed to him too. His men handed the bags they were carrying which also contained Pearls to Columbus’s men who also showed their appreciation by bowing to them. Columbus brought out his Rosary from where he always kept it in his coat pocket and handed it to Charaima, “Keep this safe for me would you?”

Arasibo interpreted and Charaima nodded in affirmation and thanked him by bowing. Guama bid them safe travels and left with his men.

After they had left, Guama, who had seen Columbus showing Charaima and some other children the same neck piece he had given him, asked him what the Admiral had said to them the previous night. Charaima recounted to his father how Columbus spoke of a ‘true God’ and his son who died to save humanity and his mother who conceived him without carnal knowledge of any man. Cacique laughed and asked him if anything Columbus had said made any sense and Charaima shook his head.

“The dead don’t come back to life my son and it is impossible for a woman to get pregnant without the help of a man. The only true gods are Atabeira the Creator, her son Yucahu and our other gods. We don’t worship the gods of strangers”

He collected the neck piece Columbus had given his son and threw it into the ocean.

That same morning, Guama the Cacique appointed four Guaiquery natives to accompany three Spaniards to the 'Promised Land', among which were Charaima and Pedro. They gathered supplies and left for the island.

CHAPTER SIX

CUBAGUA ISLAND

Upon arrival at the said island, tiny and arid, the Spaniards could not believe what their eyes beheld. Oyster beds upon oyster beds! Oysters saturated the environment, all the way from the shore to the deep waters along the entire coast. They were unable to even walk without stepping on and cutting their feet on the sharp shells. The Spaniards had never beheld such a glorious sight! Charaima took a deep dive into the water, swam to the bottom, and resurfaced with a handful of shells that he deposited in the canoe. Pedro observed the smoothness and ease with which Charaima achieved this feat. Laughing, he decided to try it out. Pedro dove deep, and

equally retrieved a good number of shells from the water – not as many as Charaima, but still something. Charaima was impressed that Pedro had learned to swim that fast.

Charaima leaped off the canoe again, and again, and again, each time, coming back with more oyster shells. One of the Spaniards in the canoe where Charaima dumped the shells, picked up one of the shells, and admired it. He had never seen anything like it all his life. He hit it against the canoe wood to determine if it had the content or if it was just hollow. While he wondered where the pearls came from, a native in the boat picked up another shell, called his attention, and forcefully pried the shell open, revealing a peanut-sized, oval-shaped pearl. Surprised, the Spaniard fellow who saw what he did applied the same principle and opened the shell. There! He had opened the shell of an egg-sized pearl. He picked it up and showed it to the other Spaniards on the other side of the island. They were all astonished by what they had just encountered. The excitement on their face was of such expression, "finally, we are rich!" It was even difficult to hide this. For every fifty to seventy shells they pried open, they found one pearl.

As the men walked carefully about the island, one of the Spaniards had his attention drawn to an area of the water that had an unusual appearance. The area did not look like it contained normal water. It was black and shiny. He came closer to see if he could recognize it, but he couldn't. He beckoned on the other Spaniards on the other side who were still looking around at the shells and fantasizing about how rich they were about to become. Upon reaching the black, shiny area, they recognized that it wasn't water; one of them scooped it up and it felt slimy so they concluded it could be an oil of some sort. More of them scooped the black liquid up and they observed its viscosity and wondered what they could do with it.

"I wonder what we could do with this." The first man, Mateo said, looking at his crude oil stained fingers, trying to see if he could assign a valuable function to the black substance.

"Who knows how profitable this could be. Maybe if we get it to Hispaniola,, we could be rich! I could purchase a house for my mother, get married and settle down!" The second fellow, Alejandro, followed up, laughing.

"Indeed! I could buy myself a new horse and carriage! With this sort of wealth, surely I can get any woman I want! I could comfortably retire on this! How amazing!" Mateo added.

"You'll never change, Mateo." A third guy, Carlos chipped in, laughing.

"You know there's more to life than sleeping around with women and consuming liquor. Why not think of settling down with one woman? That should be more fulfilling." Alejandro advised.

"You ain't talking to me, my friend. What is life without women and good wine? I can't just settle for one woman. I am too young for that. I've got time, sire!" Mateo replied, scanning the vast crude oil-producing land with his eyes, not knowing anything about its function but still extremely excited.

"I mean, look at all this, my good friends. Do you realize how rich this is probably going to make us?" Mateo continued, putting his arms over the shoulder of the one standing by his right.

"I know, right?" Alejandro replied, looking over the land again as if trying to assimilate the possibilities of this discovery that would favor them.

"Oi, maybe we could use this to repair our ships. I mean, it's thick and kind of sticky, so it could hold the wood together and prevent leakage." Carlos observed, highly elated by his theory.

"You may not be wrong. We shall give it a try. Time to collect!" Mateo let out aloud.

Thus began the all-day collection activity. The men pleaded with the locals to help them dive to collect the pearls since they were better swimmers and they gave them linens, shirts and other items in exchange for the pearls. One of the native men gave Alejandro some pearls he had collected and the latter gave him his shirt as payment. He wore the shirt with such pride and when they returned to the Island, he paraded himself like a peacock while his friends looked on in envy. The Spaniards went on to the other side and started collecting as much crude oil as they figured they needed to repair the impairments on their boat. By evening, having gathered just about enough, they were ready to go back to the square.

"It was a beautiful sight to behold!" Mateo narrated happily as they arrived at the square. "I wish I could live here forever, but how can I get my money, you know what I mean?" He laughed and gave one of the soldiers standing close by a significant nudge. The soldier forced laughter. Mateo was the soldier Columbus put in charge to oversee the affairs of the discovery and the harnessing of the potential of the island. Being in charge, it seemed everyone was trying not to piss him off, except for those who rose in rank with him from the beginning – like Arturo.

"I feel you, man," Arturo replied to Mateo's cheesy remarks, quickly prying open some of the shells and taking out the pearls within them. "My God, look at all these sweet pearls. What more do I want?" He added.

"This is the life, my friend. This is the life. Admiral Columbus has no idea what he has missed." Another soldier who was also opening the shells commented.

"The old man is too busy discovering the world. He's nearly blind... So blind that he didn't see the treasure right under his nose. It's a pity." Mateo said.

On the other side of the hut, Charaima and Pedro were trying to open some of the oysters they had brought back from the small island. They were doing it so happily together. They kept separating the pearls by size, which was fun for them to do. The bigger ones, he took to his mother, and the rest they kept for themselves. Charaima then started drilling holes into his share and Pedro watched him do so wondering what he wanted to use the pearls for. It was as if Charaima read his mind because he raised one of the drilled pearls up, said Cora and then made a gesture of wearing a necklace to which Pedro nodded understanding it was for Cora. Later that evening, Pedro accompanied him to go give Cora the necklace and he watched enviously as Charaima put the necklace around her neck and she smiled at him lovingly and hugged him tightly.

Much later that night, the Spaniards discovered that the crude oil served as an excellent source for fuel for their hand torches, which could only be safely used outdoors. They would later nickname the crude oil 'Devil's manure' probably because of its dark color and thick texture.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Over the subsequent weeks after Columbus' departure, there was relative peace, as the Guaiquery tribe and the Conquistadores found a way to coexist in that small environment. The Spaniards used the crude oil to repair the damages on their ship, and continued to get the help of the natives in diving for shells and relieving them of their pearls, and in turn, the Spaniards would exchange the natives' services for items that they still had in their possession. Once in a while, they would hold a party; the same as that which they held on the day of their arrival and on some other nights, the Spaniards would try to indoctrinate the natives by talking to them about God and the church. They convinced Arasibo to use his connection as one of them to convey how much his life had changed since he renounced their gods and began worshipping the 'One true God'. Converting the natives to Christians was a duty they took very seriously because from childhood it was ingrained in every Spaniard that the only obligations they had were to the three

G's: God, Gold and Glory. So wherever they went, they tried their very best to fulfill those obligations nevertheless, the natives continued their devoted worship to their gods, offering them sacrifices as and when due.

One of those nights that they partied, Mateo got particularly drunk from a wild and uncontrolled consumption of the Cassava Beer, and continued to spill gibberish that not even his own men could understand. Many of them were drunk, but Mateo seemed the drunkest that night. Midway through the party, he stood up to find a place to relieve himself of the urine that had accumulated from all the excess liquor intake. He staggered to the edge of the bush and unzipped his pants. When he finished relieving himself, and turned to go, he heard a sound at the other side of the bush, and went to check it out – quite typical of a drunk fool, as opposed to a sober man who would actually run the opposite way at the perception of possible danger. But no, not Mateo, who had been awarded a level of bravery by his alcohol-impaired judgment. Arriving there, it was a native girl who was trying to remove clothings from the line next to the farm.

"Well who do we have here? Look at the bosom on this savage girl." Mateo was too inebriated to filter his words, as he used his drunken eyes to fully undress the partially naked native girl, most of his attention on the girl's chest area.

"How do you do, savage beauty? You're too lovely to be a savage girl." He added, coming even closer. The kind girl had no idea what he was saying, but was polite enough to smile at him before attempting to leave him there.

"Now hold on a moment there, lady... I mean... savage... I mean..." He burped. There's no need to rush. Now how would you like to get some of my sweetness?" Mateo began to invade her private space, which made the young lady uncomfortable, so she gave him a push. Mateo staggered backwards and laughed.

"Well well well. In this life would I never have imagined that a mere savage girl would reject me. You're a feisty little one, aren't you now?" Mateo went in again, this time, strengthening his legs on the ground to avoid being shoved like that a second time. He reached out to her perky breasts and grabbed them, before the girl began to hit him, but it was difficult to get through. Mateo seized her and refused to let go. In an attempt to free herself of his human bondage, she let out a silence-tearing scream.

Mateo didn't give up. He kept fondling her breasts, while trying to get the girl to shut up. In a very short time, some natives came galloping towards the area where the scream had emanated from, closely followed by some Spaniards. When Mateo heard that someone was coming, he let go and started laughing. Arturo arrived and dove in between them, not really knowing what was going on.

"What happened? Everything okay, Mateo?" Arturo turned to ask, as the victim went to meet her people who had come too.

"But of course, my man. We were just trying to have a little conversation." Mateo replied, a coy smile on his face. Arturo pulled in close to him and reduced his voice to a whisper, as if trying to ensure that Mateo alone got the message.

"Mateo, I have never seen you attempt to converse with any local, and definitely not the opposite gender. So what could you possibly be trying to discuss with her, in a dark place, and more so in a drunken state?" Arturo pointed out.

As the two soldiers exchanged words in their privacy, one of the natives, who happened to be the father of the young girl, walked up to Mateo, muttering angry words as he shoved Mateo so hard, sending him to the ground. The girl had explained what happened and he got really angry! The man tried to move in to pounce on Mateo, the natives in the place braced for a fight, but Arturo jumped in and pleaded on Mateo's behalf, causing the man's anger to die down, and for the natives to lower their weapons. After a while, they turned and left, leaving behind just Mateo and Arturo.

Arturo turned to help Mateo up. "What did you do to that lady?" He asked. Mateo jumped back defensively.

"Let go of me! I said I just wanted to chat with her, that's all."

"It didn't seem like the man hit you for trying to have a chat. Look, whatever it is you did, I beg of you not to repeat it. For all we know, next time, I might not be here to defend you like I did now. These people have been good to us. We shouldn't do this to them." Arturo advised.

"Arthur, these are savages. They are not as intelligent as we are. Don't be so nice as to forget that we are superior to them. They should feel so lucky to have us here" Mateo staggered back towards the square, rubbing his painful cheek as he went.

The next morning the man whose daughter had been harassed, accompanied by Cacique, two other men and some women including the victim came to knock on Mateo and Arturo's hut. The duo came out still rubbing their eyes from their interrupted sleep and as soon as they saw the man and his daughter they realized what this visit was about.

"What the hell is this now?" Mateo spat

"Calm down man. Don't agitate them"

The Cacique then proceeded in the best way he could to let them know that the native women were off limits. He brought all the native women together and shook his head vigorously to which Arturo bowed in acceptance but Mateo hesitated and only nodded his head when Arturo nudged him twice with his elbow.

Arturo bowed again first to Guama and then to the victims father as if to say he was sorry so Cacique and the girl's father also bowed and they all left.

“Savages the lot of them. That savage girl ought to thank me but what do I get? Can’t wait to gather as much pearls as I can and get off this God forsaken Island”

“And who do you suppose would help us gather those pearls you desire so much eh? I suppose you can dive into the sea and get them for yourself can you? I implore you to act civilized with the natives”

With that, Arturo went back into the hut and left a still fuming Mateo outside and that was when Mateo saw Pedro coming towards him.

“Where have you been?” inquired Mateo

“I was playing with Charaima and Cora and I slept at the Caciques house” the lad responded Mateo reaches out and pulls him by the left ear “This friendship that you have with that savage boy must end now you hear me?”

“But he’s my friend” Pedro retorted

“We ain’t no friends with savage unbelievers. I don’t want you hanging with him no more.”

“O let the boy be” Arturo uttered from inside the hut sounding frustrated with Mateo “Pedro come in here”. Pedro did as he was told by Arturo more because he was afraid of what Mateo would do to him if he remained outside.

Later that morning, the Spaniards convinced the natives to take them back to Cubagua Island. They agreed but told Arasibo to inform them that they would only exchange their pearls for more gifts from them.

Mateo signaled Pedro and another soldier to go to the boat and get more gifts for the natives. The two went to the Boat and gathered as many things as they could find and brought them back to Mateo.

“Is that all?” Alejandro asked confused

“Yes sire,” the soldier responded

Arturo scratches his head “This might be a problem since the natives won’t hand their pearls to us without getting something in return”

“Why do you keep calling it their pearls?” Fumed Mateo “They didn’t know the value before we got here! The fools were just sitting on riches and had no inkling”

Arturo threw him a glance before adding “Well whatever the case, we have enough items to exchange with them for today so let’s get going.”

The Spaniards commandeered four boats and each boat had two natives on them. When they got to Cubagua the natives started to dive in the water, open up the oysters and hand the pearls they found in them over to the Spaniards who in turn gave them more gifts. The natives collected them happily and because not every oyster had a pearl, they would let out a shout of joy whenever they found one. This continued till the evening when the natives started complaining that they were tired.

“But we have more gifts for you” cried Mateo and Arasibo conveyed this to the natives but they shook their heads in refusal saying they would come back tomorrow to continue.

“At this rate, we will never get all the riches I imagined before we leave.” Alejandro muttered looking very disappointed.

The natives got on the boat and they returned to their Island.

The following day, Mateo was up before the sun. He stretched himself, knelt on his mat and said his morning prayers which he ended by making four signs across his face— the sign of the cross. The Spanish were ardent Catholics who revered the church, their king and queen above all else. He had barely slept the night before, having tossed all night in anticipation of their visit to Cubagua Island the next day. He decided to gather as many pearls as he could because no matter what, he had to leave this Island as a very wealthy man. As he was perambulating, picking up some supplies he would need for the day's adventure, he decided to count the pearls he already had. He counted and discovered there were only twenty nine pearls in his possession of which twenty were tiny ones. He scrunched up his face in displeasure. “This would barely make me a rich man” he thought “I have to find a way to get more”

All his walking about soon woke Pedro, Alejandro, Arasibo and Arturo up. The Spaniards all shared one hut which the Cacique had made one of his wives and her children vacate for them. If there were any sacrifices to be made for the Spaniards, Guama was always the first to make them, after all he welcomed them into their home.

When the Spaniards were set to leave for Cubagua, they went to seek out the natives that would go with them but on coming out they noticed that the natives who were often up and about by this time all looked forlorn. They were seated in groups of eight to ten in semicircles singing melancholic songs.

“What’s going on with them now? Arasibo quick go find out.”

Arasibo approached one of the natives who told him something and he walked back to the Spaniards “It’s their annual day of Remembrance today” the Spaniards looked confused so Arasibo explained further “It’s the day they are allowed to openly remember and speak about their dead relatives and ancestors”

“Okay, when will they be finished so we can go get our pearls?” Mateo asked impatiently

“Not today sire. They don’t do anything or go anywhere on the day of Remembrance”

Mateo throws his hands up in frustration “At least they can spare one person even if it’s that lad Pedro’s always frolicking about with”

“No sire. No one is exempted”

“Maybe we should join them, show them we respect their beliefs” Arturo suggested but quickly added “Or maybe not” when he saw the dirty looks he got from his fellow Spanish men.

The annual day of Remembrance was one the Guaquieries took very seriously. It was the only day they were permitted to speak of their dead openly. They often exchanged stories about their

fondest memories with their departed relatives, women cried which often made their daughters cry with them. Then by evening the feasts began. They would eat, drink and dance till the moon seemed full in the skies.

The Spaniards who loved drinking joined them including Mateo and some other sailors who had done nothing all day but condemn their beliefs stating that they were wasting valuable time practising devil worship instead of making them rich.

Pedro immediately went to look for Charaima but he was stopped in his tracks when he saw him and his Cora lying on the sands stargazing. Their left fingers were intertwined while they counted the stars with their right hand. Pedro stood and watched in anger as they whispered to each other and giggled, Pedro decided he had seen enough and walked away unnoticed by either Charaima or Cora.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In late 1498, Admiral Christopher Columbus's ship arrived in Hispaniola. One of the sailors alerted Columbus of their safe arrival and the Admiral came out on deck to take it all in as they slowly pulled into the shore.

Hispaniola was the second largest island of the West Indies, lying within the Greater Antilles, in the Caribbean Sea. It was the site of the first European colonies in the Americas founded by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and 1493 during his second voyage. The original inhabitants of Hispaniola were the indigenous Taíno, an Arawak-speaking people but when Admiral Columbus arrived on the Island he colonized the natives and claimed the land for the Spanish empire. The mountain surrounded Island was habitually hot which was mainly the reason taverns thrived; the people were always thirsty. Taverns were strewn all around the city, you couldn't walk ten paces without seeing a tavern tucked into a corner; full of thirsty and horny men drinking and chatting up beautiful women.

Columbus heaved a sigh of relief and took a deep breath of air, the air was so humid you could almost taste it.

“Ah beautiful as ever. We are home”

The gigantic ship dropped her anchors and gradually came to a halt at the dock. Columbus ordered his men to start offloading the ship; he was particularly interested in the pearls that the Guaiqueries had gifted him so he ordered his most trusted officer to carry two of the three bags of pearls he had gotten to his home discreetly. He held onto the third bag and hit one of the local taverns. Whenever Columbus came home from his voyages, his first port of call was always a tavern to have his favorite drink Tortuga— This was a very delicious drink made with iced tea and brown sugar, garnished with cinnamon and a lime wedge. He also loved knocking back his whiskeys and he knew just the place to go.

“Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand can wait for a report on my findings” he thought to himself Columbus exchanged pleasantries with some acquaintances on his way to the tavern, he also got a few salutes here and there from subordinate soldiers.

As soon as he stepped into his beloved tavern, shouts of “Admiral Admiral” filled the air. The tavern keeper raised a cup to Columbus “Hear hear welcome back Admiral Columbus” everyone raised their cups in response then Pedro Alonso Nino walked up to him and beckoned him to come sit with him and his quite intoxicated friends.

“Ah! welcome Admiral Columbus sire, we thank the Lord for returning you to us safely. Drink whatever you want tonight, I’m paying” he said, patting Columbus on the back and then he added sarcastically “What great treasures have you brought back for the crown this time?” His friends all laugh.

Columbus, who had ordered a shot of Tortuga emptied the contents of his cup into his mouth, he followed that with a shot of whiskey, neat without pausing to breathe. Then he dipped his hand into his bag, grabbed a big pearl and placed it in Pedros right palm.

Pedro closely examined the object in his palm and one could see the realization of the value of what he was holding down on him.

Columbus watched as this realization set in and beamed proudly “I found the Paradise of pearls my friend”

“How many of these did you find over there?” Pedro asked, his mouth still ajar.

“O thousands upon thousands my good man”

Pedros uncertainty was written all over his face so Columbus showed him the remaining pearls in the bag. Pedro’s gluttonous eyes almost popped out of their sockets on seeing the bag almost filled to the brim with shiny pearls

“You gathered all these just from one trip?”

“These were a gift from the natives I met on an Island close by”

“That’s impossible,” Pedro interrupted. “They give away what could make them ultra rich as gifts?”

“They are blissfully ignorant of the wealth they’re sitting on” he signals to one of the barmaids to pour him another shot of whiskey before adding “Bunch of primitive dimwits”

Pedro Alonso clears his throat, by now he was too engrossed with the information the Admiral was giving him to remember to ask for a refill “So pray tell, where can I find this Paradise of Pearls?”

Columbus turns to him “I will draw you a map of this Island my friend but under two unnegotiable conditions. You must promise to return with pearls for the king and Queen. I would do it myself but...” he points to his infected eyes “I’m almost as blind as a bat. Secondly, you must carry on with my promise to the King and Queen to keep spreading Christianity to the citizens of the new world.”

“On my honor Admiral Sire, I promise to present the crown with so many pearls they wouldn’t know what to do with them.”

“Except you have no honor Captain Pedro Alonso. Just make sure you present a larger percentage of your findings to the Crown, that’s an order!”

Pedro Alonso staggered up into a salute “Yes sir! I’ll also make it a top priority to convert as many natives as I can into Christians for God and for the church.”

“Good, good. Now if you would excuse me, after such a long voyage I need a magnificent woman to give me a proper welcome home”

“Of course sire” Pedro excused himself and walked to a seductively dressed temptress, whispered in her ear and pointed to Columbus. The lady of the night walked straight to Admiral Columbus who gave her a pearl and gestured for her to join him.

“There’s so much more where that came from but how hard are you willing to work for it?”

The lady of the night leaned in and whispered “Very hard” so Columbus emptied his remaining drink down his throat and walked out of the tavern with his conquest on his arm.

Fourteen days later in early 1499, armed with a detailed map of the Guaiqueries Island, Captain Pedro Nino Alonso and thirty three of his men set sail for Venezuela.

After his meeting with Columbus that night at the tavern, he had gathered his men the next day and debriefed them about the extraordinary discovery Columbus had made. He told them that the journey to the Island would be a very difficult and long one but he assured them that anyone who decided to come with him would come back to Hispaniola with more riches than they could ever imagine. Thirty three of his men volunteered to go with him while five others chose to stay back in Hispaniola.

Captain Pedro Alonso and his men had spent several days on the open waters, battling with savage storms, shark attacks and pirate ships. On the eightieth day, his second in command Commander Lorenzo came to his Cabin to consult with him.

“Captain sir, we have been on the sea for several days now and there’s still no sign of life or any Islands in sight. The men are tired and hungry but we have to ration our food since the last pirate ship that attacked us made away with most of our food and valuables.

“So what do you want from me?” Pedro blurted out impatiently

“Many of the crew members are beginning to wonder if this Paradise of Pearls is actually real or if Admiral Columbus had imagined it”

“Are you questioning the Admirals sanity officer?”

“Of course not sire but...but...”

“Get out of my sight” Pedro thundered and tell the rest of the crew that anyone else who complains will be finding warmth in the belly of a shark.”

Pedro Alonso Nino was a ruthless and incredibly greedy man. His mother had died at a very young age so his father who was a drunk had often beat him to stupor. When he was seventeen, he finally summoned the courage to stand up to his father, after which he ran away from home and joined the navy.

His ruthlessness and greed were legendary which was part of the reason Columbus had chosen him to go to Cubagua. Columbus knew the Captain would employ whatever means necessary to get his hands on those pearls and bring some back for the crown. Pedro had a jagged scar, the shape of a half moon on his chin that made him look even more menacing. He stood at 5 feet 7 but whatever he lacked in height, he made up for in his sturdy build. Some of his crew members had agreed to come on this voyage with him because they had been afraid of what may happen to them if they said no.

A sudden uproar jerked Pedro Alonso from his nap.

He hurried out on deck and met his men looking into the horizon with a telescope.

“Captain I think we are here” one of the men announced gleefully

“Gimme that” he said, grabbing the telescope from the man's hand. He peered into it and ordered one of the men to go get the map. With the map Columbus had sketched in his hands, Pedro Nino Alonso announced “My fellow countrymen, we are finally here!”

“Let's thank the Lord” another Crew member said so they all got on their knees and raised their hands to the skies.

Meanwhile on the beach young Pedro who was playing with Cora and Charaima spotted a ship coming towards the shore of their Island. He stopped playing and watched the ship closely as it advanced towards them, tearing through the body of water seamlessly.

“That's our ship, that's our ship” he screamed pointing out the ship on the water to his playmates but when he realized they didn't really understand him, he took off towards the hut he shared with the seven other Spaniards who Columbus had left behind.

Charaima and Cora immediately ran off with him not sure if they were in danger or not but not waiting to find out.

Arturo and Mateo who were outside the hut conversing immediately got up when they saw Pedro running towards them.

When he got to them he could barely speak because he was out of breath

“Ssh... shi... ship” he stuttered

Arturo encouraged him to stop and catch his breath. By then Alejandro, Arasibo, Juan and Fernando had all gathered in front of the hut also.

"I saw a ship coming to our Island and I believe it's one of ours"

"What? Are you sure?" Mateo asked looking towards the open ocean

"Yes I'm sure" Pedro confirmed pointing towards the sea

"Perhaps it's Admiral Columbus, maybe he has come back for us" added Arasibo

Some natives who had seen the raucous were already advancing towards the water ready to defend themselves from any impending danger but Arturo with the help of the interpreter Arasibo told them that there was no need to panic as the ship was carrying their fellow Spaniards.

Together the Spaniards went to the beach to meet their comrades on the ship.

When the anchors of Captain Pedro Alonso's ship dropped into the water and came to a halt, he ordered his men to disembark from the ship and then he stepped down to meet Mateo and his crew who were already standing at attention ready for a salute.

"Captain sir" they greeted

"At ease. I'm Captain Pedro Alonso Nino, Captain of this ship"

"I'm Mateo Garcia, these are Arturo, Alejandro, Juan, Fernan..."

"Yeah yeah" the Captain cut in "I don't really care about your names. Is it true? Is the Paradise of Pearls real?"

Alejandro and Mateo smile "O yes it is sir! Thousands and thousands of Oysters with pearls in them"

Captain Pedro's men who had by then debarked their ship started screaming ecstatically until Captain Pedro shot them a 'Cut it out' look.

"Admiral Columbus told me about the Paradise of Pearls and I had to come see it for myself immediately. We also need to get as many of these precious stones as we can by the order of the King and Queen.

Arturo glanced at their ship "I suppose you brought more items which we can give to the natives in exchange for the pearls?"

"No we didn't" responded Captain Pedro, his demeanor as if to say he was disappointed at the question.

"So how do we get the natives to aid us in diving for pearls?" Alejandro asked confused

With an air of finality Captain Pedro said "We make them"

He turned around to make sure both his men and Mateo's men could hear him.

"We have been ordered by the King and Queen to gather as many pearls as we can and bring them back to Spain by any means necessary. Our ship is loaded with whips, guns, gunpowder and chains which we will absolutely use if necessary".

You could see the horror on Arturo and Arasibo's faces but the other Spaniards seemed pleased with this new development, especially Mateo who had a sinister smile on his face.

Just then, Guama the Cacique and some of his men approached Captain Pedro and his men, welcomed them to the Island and offered them the same hospitality he had shown to Columbus and his men when they first arrived.

Once they had eaten and drank to their hearts' satisfaction, Captain Pedro Nino Alonso announced to his men that the next day would be a very busy day as they would be going to the Island of Cubagua to collect pearls from sunup to sun down.

PART 3: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

CHAPTER NINE

Cora was dreaming of the ocean, she sat on the coastline and gazed over the beautiful waters not wanting to go in and get herself wet. Just as she was about to get up and leave, the ocean waves hit and splashed water all over her and in that instant she opened her eyes. The piercing rays of sunlight that hit her eyes, still tender from just waking up, made her instinctively shade them with her palms while giving them a second to adapt to the intense brightness the morning had brought. As she came outside, she noticed that her mother wasn't at the fireplace making breakfast like she habitually was. She asked her younger sister who by a stroke of luck had woken up before her that morning where their mother was and the ten year old told her that their parents had gone to visit Charaima's parents. Immediately she heard this, she knew without any further clarification the purpose of their visit. She had recently turned twelve and according to their tradition, she was now eligible to get married to her betrothed which meant her parents had been summoned by the cacique and his people to discuss the marriage arrangements.

Marriage ceremonies on the Island were one of the Guaiqueries most popular rites of passage because it marked the transition of young boys and girls into adulthood and it also meant they got to dress up, eat, drink and dance to their heart's content. It was a most welcomed opportunity for the womenfolk to show off their most cherished jewelry and make the other women envious of them while the men reminisced on their individual marriage ceremonies and shared stories of how they had gotten through the early stages of their marriages.

The ceremony typically started off with the people singing to and blessing the bride and groom. Then a smudging ceremony which is a purification ritual would be done with sage to get rid of any negative energy and wishes surrounding the couple. After that, the families of the couple would adopt each other in the presence of everyone making them all related by marriage and therefore one big family. They would then proceed to the giving away of the bride and groom to each other with the permission and blessings of the tribe and everyone in attendance. The six directions prayer ceremony invoking the elements and the spirit of their ancestors would be done by the Shaman and then eating, drinking and dancing commenced and carried on till they couldn't afford to stay awake any longer.

That morning Charaima and his friend Pedro were on their way to Cubagua Island with Pedro Alonso, his men and some other natives to collect Pearls blissfully unaware of the development with Cora. The two young lovers had been waiting impatiently for her to turn twelve so they could become eligible to get married and belong to each other forever.

When Pedro Alonso Nino and his men stepped foot on Cubagua Island, they couldn't believe what their eyes beheld. Just as Columbus had told him, there were beds of oysters everywhere, you could barely move five paces on the shore without stepping on a shell.

"All these are pearls?" he asked Mateo his mouth agape in shock

"Not all sire. You have to open at least thirty to fifty Oysters before you find a pearl"

"Let's get to work then" he ordered his men "Make me rich."

The natives including Charaima dove seamlessly into the water and came up with shells which they handed over to the Spaniards to open. One of the natives gave Pedro Alonso some pearls and stretched out his hand for the gifts which they were now accustomed to receiving in exchange for the Pearls but the Captain lied to him and the others through the translator Arasibo that they forgot the gifts on their ships and that as soon as they got back to the Island, they would receive even double of the items they were owed.

Not having any reason to mistrust him, this inspired the natives to dive for more pearls. By evening when all the Oysters gathered had been harvested, Pedro and his men counted a hundred pearls.

"Only a hundred?" Pedro Alonso inquired angrily

"How are we supposed to leave this Island mindlessly wealthy at this rate? We have to do better, much better!"

Soon, the natives insisted that they were tired and hungry so they headed home. Not a moment sooner than their boat had docked on the shore did Charaima see his younger brother running towards him.

“Come! Come quickly” he said, dragging him towards their hut.

Charaima sprinted alongside him till they got to the hut. He saw Cacique -his father, his mother and Cora's parents seated in front of their house. He became a bit worried that maybe something had happened to Cora but he mustered courage and asked his father what was going on.

“Cora's parents are here so we can discuss your marriage to their daughter”

Charaima blushed so hard that if it weren't for his honey colored cheeks, one would have seen the blood rush to his face.

“Son you know Cora has journeyed twelve times around the sun so it's time to make her your wife” his father gently reminded him “You should sit down and listen to our plans” he suggested so Charaima sat down on the ground beside his father.

They then proceeded to discuss how and when the marriage rites would be carried out. They concluded that five days later, the ceremony would be held to join the both of them in marriage. After Cora's parents had left, Cacique sat his son down and told him the story of how he had become a husband and father himself. Charaima's mum had just completed her twelfth journey around the sun and he was barely fourteen at the time. He had been very scared but the teachings of his father on how to hunt, fight and be a man had helped him survive.

“I have taught you well my son and I'm sure Cora has learnt a lot from her mother. The two of you will make us proud. Congratulations my son, welcome to manhood.”

That night Charaima couldn't sleep, he tossed and turned on his bed pondering if he was indeed ready to become a husband and ultimately a father. He thought of Cora and how she was feeling about becoming his wife. He wondered if she was as scared as he was at the thought of starting a family. He asked himself how two children who were just jumping and playing in the ocean were expected to become adults overnight. The only thing that abated his fears a little was that he and Cora loved each other very much and he knew their love would see them through.

Charaima woke up to a noisy commotion the next morning. He had eventually drifted off to sleep after lying awake for hours thinking of Cora and their hopefully splendid future together. The commotion outside his fathers hut was getting increasingly rowdy, and this wasn't the typical rowdiness of playing and screaming children he usually woke up to, this was something else. He quickly sprang up from his sleeping mat to go investigate the cause of the commotion that early in the day.

On getting outside he saw his people and the Spaniards in a screaming match, he made out one of his people say “We won't give you anymore pearls till you give us the items you owe us, we don't dive for free!” in their native tongue.

As he walked closer to the crowd, he saw that his father was at the helm of this commotion. He was trying to settle the dispute but no one in the crowd was paying any attention to him.

Pedro Nino Alonso was growing quite impatient with the defiance of the natives so he turned to Arasibo “tell these primitive animals that I want pearls and they must get them for me whether they like it or not”

As soon as Arasibo translated what the Captain had said to the natives, one of them picked up a stone and flung it in the direction of the Captain. The stone missed Pedro Alonso by a breath and struck Mateo right in the chest. He immediately took out his whip and lashed the native across his ear. Mateos reaction threw the already agitated crowd into a frenzy, natives and Spaniards began to exchange blows recklessly while some others used their whip to flog natives. Charaima, seeing what was happening, swung into action. He flew into the crowd and began hitting any Spaniard his small but strong hands could get a hold of. From the corner of his eye he saw Pedro cowering behind Arturo, not wanting to get too close to the fight but Arturo pushed him roughly into the mayhem just as he was delivered with a stunning blow to the head.

As the Spaniards and Natives were exchanging blows, Pedro Alonso Nino raised up the musket that had been hanging on his shoulder and mindlessly fired a warning shot into the air. Terrified by the musket shot, the commotion came to a momentary halt.

Pedro Alonso Nino and his men were ready to kill anyone who stood in their way of amassing riches for themselves and for the crown of Spain.

“Arasibo! Tell them to get on the boat and go get me pearls or I’ll start shooting.”

Arasibo conveyed his message to them and one of the natives, Cacique's second in command Ahiga spoke up and challenged him “We are not your slaves, we won’t gather pearls for you anymore, go back to where you came from”.

Chants of “yes! Yes!” filled the air as the natives furiously agreed with Ahiga. Soon enough, they began dispersing to their various huts but Captain Pedro Alonso, afraid that he had lost control of the situation, pointed his musket at one of them and fired a fatal shot. The native who had been shot screamed out in pain and collapsed to the ground instantly lifeless, blood oozing from his side.

The others, seeing what had happened to one of their own attacked the Spaniards with a vengeance but before they could gain the upper hand, the Captain reloaded his musket and shot two more people. He then grabbed the Cacique and pointed the muzzle of his gun into his back

“Tell them to stop or I’ll empty the remaining balls into your spine”

Cacique raised his hands in surrender and ordered his people to stop fighting. When Charaima saw that his father had been captured and was in mortal danger, he raised his hands to the sky in surrender and one after the other, all the other natives surrendered.

Captain Pedro and his men rounded the natives up and forced them to sit on the ground. He personally sent his most hostile men to go fetch the Shaman from his shrine. The Shaman already knew they were coming so he didn’t flinch nor show any signs of panic as they apprehended him and brought him before Pedro Alonso. He just kept muttering inaudible words and his eyes remained shut. The Spaniards stripped him of all the amuletic Zemís and body jewelry made from cowries and bones that he wore and made him sit on the floor with the others.

"Where are your gods now to save you eey?" He looked around, mockingly as if in search of them "gods that can't even wipe their own asses". This statement was received with a robust laughter from his men.

The Captain then instructed Mateo, Alejandro, Arturo and four of his own men to take some natives with them to dive for pearls. He held the Cacique and the remaining natives hostage and threatened to kill them if anything went wrong with gathering his pearls or any of the natives going to Cubagua tried to rebel.

Mateo and his men took the natives including Charaima with them and sailed off for Cubagua. The Captain had armed Mateo and Alejandro with a musket and all his other men had whips with them in case the natives wanted to prove difficult. Captain Pedro ordered them not to return unless they had at least five hundred pearls.

As soon as they got to Cubagua, they put the natives to work. Each native was made to dive into the water numerous times; any oyster shells he gathered were dumped on the floor of the boat and the other natives onboard were made to open them up to check for pearls. As they hurriedly checked the Oyster shells for pearls, Charaima who was on Alejandro's boat mistakenly dropped a pearl into water. Alejandro lashed at him with his whip about three times "Don't drop my pearl you dimwit" he barked.

Charaima instinctively made to lunge at him but one of the natives placed his hands firmly over Charaima's and stopped him from retaliating.

It was clear from the look on Arturo's face that he didn't approve of the treatment that the natives were being subjected to but he was a soldier and soldiers were meant to follow orders from their superiors without questions so he did as he was ordered.

Dusk was fast approaching and the pearls weren't yet up to five hundred like the Captain had ordered. At intervals Mateo would ask for the pearl count and they would shout out the numbers to him from their separate boats. If the pearls weren't yet up to five hundred, the frustrated men would force the natives to go back into the water and get more pearls, motivating them frequently with lashes from their whips. The natives dove until it was so dark that they couldn't see one another in the clear waters. At that point Arturo suggested they head back to their Island with the pearls they had and continue looking for more the next day, the exhausted natives got into the boats and they headed back to their Island.

On getting back, Mateo and his men took Charaima and the other divers to join their people who were still seated on the ground with muskets pointed threateningly at them.

Charaima who hadn't eaten all day slumped into his mother's waiting arms as she soothed him. He felt another hand gently touch him which prompted him to look up. Looking down at him was Cora, her big black eyes filled with what he knew was fear for their unfortunate situation and concern for his well being. He managed a smile which she returned through teary eyes.

Mateo and his men took the pearls they had gathered to Pedro Alonso who had seemingly made himself comfortable in Cacique's rectangular hut. He was seated on the Caciques Duho smoking a pipe when Mateo and his men walked in. They handed him the pearls and when he heard how many they were he shrugged and said "We go harder tomorrow."

Some native women were instructed to prepare a meal for the Spaniards under heavy supervision. When the Spaniards had eaten and drank to their heart's content, they took native women of their choosing, not caring if they had husbands and forcefully had carnal knowledge of them. Mateo picked the native girl who had refused him before and violently raped her while her father watched helplessly.

The natives were piled into three huts which had barely enough space to contain them for the night so they were forced to sleep and they profusely sweated on top of one another. Each of the huts were guarded by three armed Spanish soldiers.

When the night had gone deep and so quiet you could clearly hear a pin drop, Cacique who hadn't slept a wink, woke the people in the hut with him. He inspired them with words telling them that they were a brave and fearless people and they couldn't stand back and watch as these pale skinned Spaniards raped their wives and daughters and took over their home. They planned their revolt in whispers and by morning they were ready to attack.

"Bring out those savages, it's time to get to work" Pedro Alonso ordered the soldiers who had guarded the huts all night.

The soldiers opened the doors and ordered the natives to come out, whipping them at intervals to hurry them along.

Without hesitation, Guama let out a deafening war cry which his people quickly understood and aggressively attacked the Spaniard soldiers. The women grabbed their daughters and younger children and ran back into one of the empty huts while Charaima and some other teenage boys chose to stand behind their fathers.

Overwhelmed by the unexpected attack, many of the Spaniards lacked the chance to reload their muskets so they didn't easily have the advantage of shooting the natives.

In the center of all the mayhem, Charaima spotted Pedro getting beat up by one of the teenage boys who had stayed back so he quickly ran to help him. He pounced on the boy and pried him off of Pedro telling him in their native tongue to leave Pedro alone. He then extended his arm to Pedro to assist him in getting up but Pedro refused his help, got up and shoved him so hard that he fell back into the sand and rolled over. In the split second before Pedro had [shoved him, Charaima saw a look in Pedro's eyes that he would never forget. It was that of pure hate and disgust, identical to the one he had on his face when the Spaniards had first arrived with Columbus.

Meanwhile Guama, the Cacique was attacking the Spaniards ferociously, he snapped the neck of one Spaniard soldier, then he grabbed Alejandro by the neck and choked him out till he was lifeless. He looked around and as soon as his eyes spotted Pedro Alonso Nino, he took off towards him, menacingly, like a starved lion who had set his sights on his first prey. Pedro saw the Cacique advancing and immediately swung into action, he reloaded his musket with the speed of lightning and released a shot into Guama's right knee. Due to the heightened adrenaline coursing through his body, the shot slowed him down but didn't stop him so Pedro Alonso fired another shot into his left knee and the tall and audacious Guama buckled and fell to the ground. Charaima, seeing what had happened ran to his father who was lying on the ground groaning in pain "Father, father please get up and fight."

Mateo seized Charaima off his father and threatened to blow his head off if the natives didn't stop resisting.

With the last strength in him, Cacique cried out to his people to stand down. They conceded defeat and the Spaniards restrained them with chains not wanting to take any more chances. After they had been constrained, Pedro Alonso instructed his men to bring the Cacique to him. The Cacique who by then was experiencing excruciating pains could barely keep his eyes open as they dragged him before his people including his wives and children. Despite shouts and pleas from a desperate Charaima, Pedro Alonso Nino loaded his musket, pointed it at the Caciques temple and executed him.

"Let this serve as a warning to the rest of you, the same fate will befall anyone who defies me or my men"

The natives remained in chains, in the scorching sun till evening without food or water.

"Please allow us give our leader and dead brothers a proper burial or their souls will not rest in peace" Ahiga told Arasibo who explained what he said to Mateo

"Tell him not to worry, that there's no rest in hell where his heathen brothers are going!" Mateo spat.

Charaima was in anguish as he watched his father lying lifeless, his corpse carelessly left in the open like a nonentity and hot tears flowed down his face. He couldn't believe that this was happening, if only the Spaniards hadn't found their Island, his father would still be alive. He couldn't believe that what he had hoped was going to be the beginning of a bright and happy future for he and Cora had become this nightmare that he would give anything to wake up from. Three natives were forced to dig graves and the Spaniard soldiers who had fallen were buried in those graves. They went into the natives' homes including the Shaman's shrine, brought out all the statues of their Zemis both big and small and piled them in a heap.

As for Cacique and the other dead natives, crude oil was poured on them and their bodies were set on fire.

With the same fire from the natives burning flesh, the place Charaima and his people called home was razed to the ground. Standing before the heap of the zemi statues, Pedro Alonso condemned the beliefs of the people and told them that their brothers were currently burning in hell— *a furnace that never stops for all eternity* because they had died as heathens. He told them that the same fate awaited them if they didn't turn away from their gods and serve the 'one true God'.

Ahiga stood up and spoke in his native language "Our people never took anyone's property, they never invaded anyone's lands or raped their wives and daughters. If there's truly a fire that burns for eternity, it's you and your men who will burn there not my people"

Pedro ordered Ahiga to be brought to him "You're quite the brave one aren't you?" He said pulling back his hair forcefully "I guess you'll be meeting your people in hell sooner rather than later." With that he pointed his musket at Ahiga's head and while the native man muttered his last prayers, he shot him, his blood splattering on Pedro Alonso and the natives who were sitting on the floor close to him.

“Anyone else care to be brave eh?” No one? Good. Anyone who challenges us and the one true God will face a worse fate than this.”

Afterwards he and his men had a swell time pissing on and doing all sorts of vile things to the Zemis before throwing them in the raging fires.

They stripped the women of all the ornaments that adorned their necks and arms, their pearl necklaces which were immensely valued items gifted to them by their men became spoils for the Spaniards.

Thus began the phase during which the Spaniards came to a supposed savage land, and turned into savages themselves.

CHAPTER TEN

Charaima awakened to a very quiet environment. For as long as he could remember the first thing that greeted him every morning was the cheerful sounds of his buoyant people but looking around him, the Guaiquery natives were the picture of a broken and defeated people.

Children who were normally playing in the sand or in the clear waters now lay in the arms of their mothers, shackled and afraid. Even as the women and children cried for their dead, their lost village and their innocence that had been so brutally ripped from them by these invaders, the heads of their men were bowed in shame that for all their prowess they couldn't protect their families and their home against these outsiders who had overrun them.

Metal shackles were put on their hands and feet and they were loaded into boats bound for Cubagua Island, leaving behind painfully fresh memories of their once simple yet happy and carefree lives.

The days that followed their arrival to the uninhabited Cubagua island was a brutal one for the natives. The Spaniards needed fresh food, fresh water and huts to live in so Pedro Alonso appointed Fernando to take charge of sourcing for them. Fernando and some other sailors took natives in boats in search of any nearby inhabited Islands where they could find fresh food, water, wood and other construction materials. After some time they came upon a piece of land almost surrounded by water— *which would later be known as the Peninsula of Paria*. Living their peaceful and quiet lives on this water surrounded land were the native Paria tribe, a part of the Cumanagoto tribe. The Spaniards docked their boats and came to land where they told the natives that they were stranded and looking for food and fresh water. The natives being a very generous people were more than eager and willing to share their resources with them. They served them some fruits and fresh water and after they'd eaten to their satiation, they informed them of their brothers who were stuck on Cubagua without any food and water. On the behest of their leader, the natives packaged fresh fruits and vegetables in baskets and filled some clay jars covered with tightly woven palm fronds to prevent excessive spillage with fresh water. They also gave them some wood, stones and palm fronds with which to construct their huts. Fernando and his men thanked them, loaded everything into their boats and returned to Cubagua.

Back in Cubagua, the native men were put to work offloading the items that had been brought back from the mainland and using the construction materials to erect makeshift huts while some of the older teenage boys were made to go search for sea creatures that the women would prepare as food and the rest stayed behind to help the men.

Captain Pedro Alonso put Pedro in charge of the teenage boys. He was to supervise them and make sure they caught enough fishes to feed him and his men.

Pedro was over the moon in excitement because he had been asking the Captain for more responsibility. He knew he had to execute this task perfectly so that the Captain could subsequently entrust him with more important ones. The Captain gave him permission in front of the native boys to use brute force on anyone who stepped out of line. Pedro knew abuse first hand so violence was second nature to him. He had been born in Valencia and his father had died in the war. His mother, heartbroken, followed shortly afterwards so he was shipped off to go live with his uncle. His cousins were anything but happy about his addition to their already large family so they beat him habitually and threatened to make his life a living hell if he ever told on them. So everyday he took the harsh treatment he received from them without uttering a word to anyone.

Now he was the one with the power and he intended to use it as brutally as he could. He marched Charaima and the other boys to the sea and just as the former had initially shown him when they had first arrived, they struck their spears in the water and put whatever the spearhead caught into a basket made of leaves.

They had been at it for hours when Charaima suggested that they rest a little before continuing

“There will be no rest until you’ve caught enough fishes for our dinner” Pedro said unsympathetically.

“But we...” Charaima started to object but his objection was abruptly brought to an end by the lash of Pedro’s whip across his back. Charaima’s eyes turned red with fury and he attempted to attack Pedro but the shackles on his feet restrained him. Pedro walked closer to him and held his head “I said no rest till you’ve caught my dinner” he then pushed him into the water.

Shortly before the boys returned with the sea creatures for dinner, the younger children had been sent off to gather the oyster shells that littered the oceans shores. They were given Calabashes and instructed not to return until they had filled them with oyster shells.

“Were there any problems?” The Captain asked Pedro when they returned with baskets full of fishes

“Just a slight one which I quickly corrected with my whip sire”

A sadistic smile spread over the Captain’s thin lips and he patted Pedro on the back “Very good my boy”.

The women immediately started fires and began grilling the fishes Charaima and his friends had brought back and some chickens and rabbits that were captured from the mainland. The men who were still hard at work with pangs of hunger gnawing at their insides couldn’t help but be distracted by the delicious aroma of the grilling delicacies. Their distraction was short lived however as Mateo and his men descended on them with their whips. By nightfall, the starving and overworked natives were worn out yet they were made to wait till Pedro Alonso and his men had eaten to their satisfaction before having their leftovers. The Spaniards even made a game out of it, forcing the natives to eat from the ground like dogs while they hollered in laughter.

That night, Charaima saw his father in a dream, he ran to him and embraced him like a lost puppy long in search of his master. Guama told him that he was the new Cacique of his people now that he Guama was gone so he had to stay strong and courageous in order to help his people survive this horror that had befallen them.

Charaima woke up in a sweat to see that it was daybreak, the sand on the ground that he had slept on tore into his unclothed back. Surrounding him were his mum who had cried herself to sleep like she had been the previous night. He had tried his best to console her but being only thirteen years old, he didn’t know how to help her, not really. His siblings and the other natives were all lying on the ground too. They were made to sleep outside by the side of the huts, shackled so none of them would attempt an escape.

Arturo approached them with two fierce looking soldiers and they quickly hastened to their feet. For a brief moment, Arturo’s eyes met with Vitis and he hurriedly averted his gaze as if not wanting her to catch the hint of guilt in his eyes. He beckoned on the men and older male children to follow him. Together they marched towards the boats that were waiting near the shores to take them pearl diving.

Before they left, Captain Pedro had instructed Mateo much to his chagrin, to take younger Pedro with them and to make sure he paid rapt attention to everything.

Each boat had six native divers and a Spaniard to commandeer it, all, except for Mateos boat which had him and young Pedro on board. Each Conquistadore had a whip and a musket to use as they deemed fit.

The natives were forced to dive in pairs attached to each other by ropes which were tied to their waists. Each pair would dive in the water about six times and gather Oysters which they would pour on the floor of the boat. After the sixth dive, the pair would climb onto the boat and the next pair of divers would go in. This continued till the six divers had gone in the water and then the rotation would restart.

Everything was going on uneventfully till one of the divers came to the surface and raised an alarm that his partner had cut the rope on his end and was swimming away.

"I bet you he's trying to make a break for it" Juan offered

"Oh, we can't have that now can we?" Mateo quipped "He's bound to come up for air at some point and when he does, ready your weapons to shoot."

All the Spaniards raised their weapons as the natives looked on in helpless anticipation for their friend. Just as Mateo had predicted, the native came up for air and without thinking twice, Arturo shot at him hitting him in the shoulder but that only seemed to motivate him to swim faster so Mateo ordered the natives to row their boat in pursuit of him. Weakened by his wounded shoulder and loss of blood he was soon surrounded and cut off by the boats. He threw his hands up in the air to indicate surrender but Mateo took this as a teachable moment for the others. He handed over his Musket gun to Pedro and without flinching, he thundered "Kill him" For all Pedros bruteness, he had never killed a man before so the color on his face briefly disappeared, leaving him as white as a sheet.

"I said shoot him or I'll report back to the Captain that you're good for nothing" Mateo threatened.

Charaima looked on in shock as Pedro collected the gun from Mateo. His hands were shaky but despite his fear, his aim was perfect as he shot the native in the chest.

"He's a natural at this" Mateo said beaming with smiles, "I think I might like you after all lad" As the dead native sank he whipped his partner who had been tied to him several times and not caring whether they understood him or not, he turned to the others "From now going forward, If any of you returns without your partner, you've given me a very good reason to use this" he said brandishing his musket.

At sunset when Mateo and his men returned with all the oysters they had gathered at sea, they were delivered straight to Captain Pedros hut. The women were tasked with harvesting both the Oysters his men had brought back and those the children had picked up around the seashores.

After some days, the food, freshwater and building materials they had gotten from the mainland of Paria were exhausted and they needed more. Pedro Alonso ordered Ferdinand to ready his men for another trip to the mainland to gather supplies. This process of going to the Mainland every couple of days continued until Ferdinand suggested that they appoint some of their

people to live on the mainland of Paria and gather supplies which they would bring back to them in Cubagua. This seemed like a great suggestion so he gave Fernando the go ahead. Fernando presented this request to the Paria tribe's tribal chief with the help of Arasibo the translator and the Cacique was happy to comply. Fernando left six men behind whose job was to gather supplies and bring them to Cubagua Island every couple of days.

In the wake of the native diver who had tried to escape, things got a lot worse for the natives, particularly the pearl divers.

They started diving with ropes tied around their waists, attached to one another. Whenever a pair of divers went into the water, the others on the boat would wait for some minutes and the lash of their masters' whips on their backs would let them know it was time to pull them both out of the water. The ropes were fastened firmly and securely and they made certain no diver stayed in the water long enough to untie it. They were forced to dive for pearls every day from dawn to dusk frequently without any food or water. The times they were allowed to eat which were far and in between and they gave them such meager portions that the men were mostly forced to sacrifice their share for their wives and children.

Apart from making the women cook and make utensils such as pots, plates and spoons from shells, the Spaniards arrogantly believed that the native women and girls were their readily available yet unwilling tools for sexual satisfaction.

Night after night, they would randomly pick their selection of native women and bed them forcefully.

That night as was their norm, Mateo and his comrades came to choose their involuntary female companions for the night accompanied by Arasibo who was often present to translate- although their whips did most of the translating these days.

The mostly inebriated men ordered the women to get up, then they proceeded to inspect their bodies as though they were goods after which they picked the ones they fancied.

“Pedro! Where is that young lad?” Mateo called and Pedro came out of one of the huts and approached him

“My boy,” he said, grabbing the back of his neck “how would you like to become a man tonight.” Pedro looked at him with a confused stare and Mateo added “Which of these savage women would you like to show a good time?”

“What?”

“Go on, pick anyone!” Mateo urged him. Pedro scanned his eyes over the women and his search abruptly ended as soon as he laid eyes on Cora. With a sinister smile on his sun tanned face he pointed to Cora who instinctively clutched tighter to her mother’s arm.

“Good choice” Mateo encouraged him then he signaled to one of his men to bring her to Pedro. By then Charaima who had deduced what was going on began to shout in protest but his protests didn’t hold any water as the Spaniard dragged a crying and screaming Cora to Pedro. Charaima, not knowing what else to do, knelt down, grabbed Pedros foot and begged him in his native language not to take Cora.

“What is he saying?” Pedro asked Arasibo

“He says that if your friendship meant anything to you, you shouldn’t take her away”

Pedro chuckled, a chuckle that sent chills down Charaimas spine assuring him that the response that was coming would be a devastating one.

“Tell him that I could never be friends with a godless barbarian like him. As for Cora, she’s mine now”

The agony on Charaimas face as Arasibo told him what Pedro had said was so much so that afterwards the latter shed bitter tears of remorse for Charaima and his people.

After he had “become a man” as per Mateo’s definition, Cora who had jealously guarded her innocence just sat there, on the ground, beside him soaked in her blood and his semen crying her eyes out while he slept like a newborn baby.

The Cora that exited Pedro's hut the next morning was an unfamiliar one, Charaima knew that the cheery and vivacious girl that existed before the Spaniards came was gone forever. She approached him and the others crying and limping in pain. She slumped into his arms and Charaima held her bruised body, whispering “I’m sorry my Cora, I’m so sorry” repeatedly in her ears, clinging onto her like his words could somehow erase the events of the previous night.

"How did it feel becoming a man, Eh lad?" One of the Spaniards, Fernando, asked Pedro who was getting ready for the day's activities. There was a group of men standing with him including Mateo so in a bid to impress them Pedro responded with "She wasn't even that good a fuck" Their hoarse laughter at his response reverberated around the environment.

"Told you lot he was a natural, didn't !!" Mateo said after the laughter had died down, proudly patting him on the back.

Such was the diurnal plight of the Guaiqueris for the next one hundred and eighty days that Pedro Alonso Nino and his men initially spent with them.

Loaded with about seventy two kilos of pearls and ten barrels of crude oil, enough to die a rich man without working another day in his life, Pedro Alonso Nino departed Cubagua Island for Hispaniola, taking with him twenty three of his men whilst ten were left behind to help Mateo and his men “keep the peace” and continue gathering pearls for the crown.

Their journey home was significantly smoother and seemed quicker which was probably because Pedro Alonso and his men could hardly wait to trade in the pearls they had gathered for money or any other thing they coveted. Before their voyage, the Captain ensured that he got a lion's share of the bigger pearls for himself and then the rest would go to the king and Queen. A larger part of the smaller pearls went to the rest of his men who were aware he had ripped them off by choosing the larger pearls, however none of them dared mention or confront him about it, mainly because they wanted to arrive in Spain with their heads on their shoulders. Docking their ship at the port of Hispaniola, Pedro and his men stormed the local taverns eager to flaunt their newly amassed treasures.

Upon entering the first tavern, they ordered some rum which they quickly chased down with some sweet beer and hard cider. It didn't take too long before their mouths started running faster than a broken dam as they bragged and showed off their personal bags of pearls.

“Oh you need to see it, such a beautiful Island with an ocean full of pearls just sitting there, waiting to be taken.” One of the sailors said, raising his bag of pearls “I was there for just six months and look how many pearls I returned with. Do you know how much money I'll make from selling these? I'm a rich man my friend.” He smiled from ear to ear and raising his *tazza*-wooden cup he screamed “Drinks for everyone on me!” Shouts of “Woo hoo!” saturated the tavern as the drunks and prostitutes jubilated at the chance for free drinks to satiate their unsophisticated palates.

Soon enough, the story of the sailors who returned with priceless treasures from the Paradise of Pearls spread in Cadiz. Local drunks and many others flocked to the taverns to see and hear these stories for themselves.

The sailors who believed they were going back to Cubagua to gather more of these precious gems mindlessly paid for their drinks and whores in pearls, often gifting them for nought to some people in their drunken state. The people, who had never seen such strange but beautiful gems were enamored and desperate to find out the location of this Island so the sailors described it to them in such great detail that anyone who had a boat or could pay to be on one could find their way to the Island of Cubagua. Of course they conveniently forgot to mention that they upended the lives of a peaceful people and forced them to endure horrific conditions just to be in possession of those pearls.

“Didn't you hear I just returned from the paradise of Pearls?” A sailor bragged arrogantly to a seductress who didn't seem to accept his advances. Her eyes quickly widened in pleasure as soon as she heard he was one of the sailors who had journeyed to Cubagua and for the rest of the night, he couldn't get her to leave his side.

Pedro Alonso Nino wasted no time in visiting the black market in Cadiz. He knew a particular jeweler who was experienced enough to tell him the true monetary value of the pearls but corrupt enough not to reveal his deception to the crown, for a little token of course.

“Ah Captain Pedro my friend, I heard you came upon an island filled with pearls. Lucky you eh?” the jeweler said sarcastically.

Pedro wanting to match his sarcasm responded with “I guess good news travels fast”

“Yes, either that or you and your drunk little friends with loud mouths telling everyone in town your business” the sixty seven year old fat, grey haired jeweler joked as Pedro handed him some pearls.

He raised one of the pearls above his eyeline and examined it closely while Pedro eagerly studied his face for answers.

“Well, my friend, they seem to be the real deal”

“Oh really?” Pedro asked, with a rare smile spread across his crooked lips “And their value?”

“Well from what I can see here” he began, examining the other pearls in his palm one after the other, “They have smooth surfaces and a very fine thickness. I can clearly see my reflection on most of them, their external surfaces are very clean and they are huge.”

“So? What does that mean?” Pedro scratched his head

“It means that very few pearls will be more valuable than the ones you have here”

“Oh that’s such great news!” Pedro lifted his hands to the skies “Thank you God”

After some haggling, they finally settled on a seventy-thirty percent share of the profits made after they’d sold the pearls.

After his rendezvous with the jeweler, Pedro left for the Royal palace taking along only forty five kilos of pearls.

The exterior of the palace was generally grey and devoid of sculptures. Save for a few royal guards standing at strategic points around the compound, the palace seemed otherwise ordinary. As the Captain entered the palace grounds, two palace guards opened a door, on which the names of all the former Spanish Monarchs were inscribed and ushered him in. The door opened to a huge corridor with ceilings so high he could barely make out their colors. The corridor was almost twice as long as it was wide and the walls were bare of paintings except for the Portraits of past monarchs and the reigning monarchs. The corridor itself had an emptiness about it and the only decorative pieces it possessed were its high windows, fitted with panels of clear glass through which sun rays streamed in.

The last time Pedro Alonso had visited the palace was as a boy, in the company of his father who had served the reigning Monarchs predecessors. He recalled the palace being much more regal than what lay before him.

Approaching the Throne room, he was met by two guards who inquired about his business with the crown. He stated that he had come to present the great treasures he had returned with from

his voyage to the paradise of Pearls. They informed the Royal herald who in turn informed the King and Queen of his visit and its purpose.

“Bring him in at once” King Ferdinand ordered

“Captain Pedro Alonso Nino to see the King and Queen” the herald announced before bowing and taking his leave.

King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I were seated on their thrones when the Captain walked in.

“Your Majesty King Ferdinand, Your Majesty Queen Isabella” he bowed “It's an honor to be in your Majesties presence this fine evening”

“Thank God for a safe return from your Voyage. We were informed by Admiral Columbus that due to his deteriorating health, you were to continue his voyage.”

“That's right your Majesty”

“So what did you bring to us?” Queen Isabella impatiently chipped in.

When the King and Queen had come to power in 1417, the kingdom was in a state of despair due to her brother Henry's reign. It was widely known that Henry IV was a big spender and left the crown with little to no reserves after his reign. In order to raise the resources needed to effectively run their kingdom, Queen Isabella was forced to pawn most of her jewelry and prized possessions so she was often seen wearing plain clothes, her neck bare of any jewelry.

When she had almost pawned off all her possessions she convinced her husband King Ferdinand to send Admiral Columbus to search for treasures in faraway lands. After Columbus's first two voyages failed and there was scarcely anything of hers left to pawn, she convinced her husband to pawn off some of his own possessions so they could send Columbus on a third and final Voyage. After much persuasion he agreed and Columbus was sent on his third voyage during which he discovered Cubagua Island.

Pedro Alonso handed the King a bag containing pearls. The king opened it and the joy that washed over his face was apparent. He took some pearls from the bag and handed it to the Queen. She couldn't hide her excitement at what she was seeing, in her hands were the most beautiful and shiny pearls she had ever seen! Their joy knew no bounds when they learnt that there were a lot more pearls where these came from.

Looking up at Pedro she asked “What is the value of this?”

“I'm afraid only the Royal jeweler can provide the answers you seek”

The Queen sent for the Royal jeweler who arrived quickly. He picked up one of the pearls and carefully examined it with his loupe.

The king and Queen were on the edges of their seats in unconcealed anticipation as he took his time scrutinizing the gem in his hand.

After what felt like an eternity, he announced that **the pearls were in almost perfect condition and were highly valuable.**

The King and Queen could barely contain their excitement, the broad smiles on their faces perfectly mirrored their inward ecstasy.

“Thank the Lord for his mercies” the King declared

“Indeed He has granted our supplications” Queen Isabella responded.

When Pedro informed them of the barrels of crude oil he had also brought back with him, Queen Isabella lost her decorum for a second as a shout of **“our kingdom is secure now!”** escaped her thin lips. She was ecstatic because if this voyage had been unsuccessful, they had no funds left to sponsor another one and the nation would have certainly sunk into despondency.

The King thanked Captain Pedro Alonso for his service and the part he played in returning the glory of his kingdom. He told him that arrangements had been made for another to return to Cubagua straight away and keep gathering Pearls and Crude oil for the Crown. They also assured him that plans for permanent settlement in Cubagua would commence immediately.

Fourteen days after Pedro Alonso’s visit to the Crown, Captain Jose Maria, the new man the Crown had chosen to carry on Pedro Alonso’s work on the Island of Pearls left for Cadiz from where he would set sail for Cubagua. On getting to Cadiz, the buzz of Captain Pedro and his crew’s arrival with the pearls and crude oil had attracted hundreds of people who were ready to cross the ocean to get their hands on these treasures.

Jose Maria had assembled a crew of about ten sailors and in their company was Fray Diego Suarez, a priest whom the Crown had appointed to follow Jose to Cubagua in an attempt to strengthen the efforts being made to convert the natives into Christians. Fray Diego chose two of his colleagues Fray Manuel and Fray Sebastian to assist him in Cubagua and with reinforcements of weapons, clothing items, food, plentiful barrels of rum, hard cider and other essentials, they set sail for Cubagua Island.

Shortly after Captain Jose Maria departed for Cubagua, some disgruntled members of Pedro Alonso’s crew decided to inform the crown of Captain Alonso’s deception and how he had kept a large portion of the pearls they had acquired from Cubagua for himself.. They told the Crown how Pedro had kept almost half of the pearls he was supposed to present to the King and Queen to enrich himself. Enraged, the King sent some soldiers to search the Captain’s residence and reacquire any pearls they found. The soldiers stormed Pedro Alonso’s house without warning and took all the pearls they could find back to the Crown. The Captain was arrested and brought back to the King in chains and because the Crown had declared a monopoly on pearl production, Pedro Alonso was found guilty of robbing the Crown and thrown in prison. (He would later be exonerated of all charges and set free, and he gained fame for participating in one of the most lucrative voyages to the New World.)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was the year 1504, five years had passed since the conquistadores invaded the Guaiquery natives home and subsequently enslaved them.

The once serene and uninhabited Island of Cubagua with its sparsely and neatly spaced cactus plants, which looked as if the spaces between each stout plant and the next were carefully measured by the creator, was bustling with life and activity that morning. The once unpopulated Island now housed over eight hundred people.

By the side of the huts where the slaves were typically chained up for the night, some men could be seen digging up cacti roots in order to create space for new structures being hurriedly erected everyday. As more black slaves were brought from Africa, more foreigners from Spain and other surrounding countries who had heard of the Pearl coast also poured into Cubagua. The seashores which were formally littered with Oyster shells now lay bare, about five huge Spaniard ships could be seen on the dock as slaves loaded sacks and sacks of Pearls onto them.

“Hurry up, I haven’t got all day” a young, brutish looking Spaniard yelled at the black slaves offloading supplies that had been sent from Spain and reloading sacks of Pearls onto the ships. A lanky younger lad approached this young man and tapped his shoulder “Sir Pedro, your savage has returned.”

The now twenty year old Pedro looked as ugly as ever, he had been promoted by the King and Queen to a Master of Ship and one of the dock supervisors who reported directly to Captain Jose Maria.

As he walked around inspecting the slaves as they loaded the ships, he often incentivized them to move faster with lashes from his whip.

The slaves’ feet were shackled leaving most of them with untreated, festering sores caused by the shackles. They mostly looked starved and exhausted and ugly scars from the daily whippings covered their bare backs. On all their chests and faces lay an identical ‘C’ scar which their slavers had burned into their skin using the royal branding iron popularly known as *ransom iron* which the King had personally sent to Cubagua to be used to mark the slaves for identification in the event that any of them were to escape. The ‘C’ mark was believed to have stood for Cubagua.

Most of the slaves’ hairs had turned grey undoubtedly from overexposure to the sun as they were made to dive for pearls from sunrise to sunset under the scorching sun.

On the vast ocean, humongous ships bringing in more Lucayan slaves from the Bahamas and black slaves from Africa could be seen entering the horizon.

Three years earlier, two years after the arrival of Captain Jose Maria, the three priests and his crew, a great revolt arose among the natives.

At this point, the inhumane treatment of the natives had gotten to its apex. Much like his predecessor Pedro Alonso Nino, Jose Maria was a stern man both in looks and character, who oversaw the Island’s affairs with an iron fist but unlike Pedro he was more interested in amassing riches for the Crown and converting the natives into Christians than lining his pockets with riches. He was one of the tallest men on the Island, slaves and Spaniards alike and had

joined the navy as soon as he turned eighteen, just like his father, grandfather and great grandfather before him. He had quickly risen through the ranks and gained the crown's favor and respect after he had fought valiantly in their fight against Islam.

Due to the harsh conditions the natives had to face, they were dying in their numbers for numerous reasons. Charaima had lost his mum and five of his siblings thus far and even though he was saddened by their deaths, he was grateful that they were far away from this hell he had to endure.

Most of the men died of sheer exhaustion and some as a result of infections from untreated wounds. Since the Spaniards raped the women without any thought of protection, many of them contracted and died from undiagnosed and untreated Sexually Transmitted diseases including Aids, others lost their lives during childbirth and the rest died of starvation. As a result of the poor quality and quantity of food they were given, if at all, the malnourished women couldn't produce any milk and most of the babies born around that time died of malnutrition. The death of those babies made the Spaniards extremely happy since many of them abhorred the thought of having half-barbaric children with the savage women and it meant less mouths to feed.

While the natives endured the inhumane treatments that were being meted out to them, the priests: Frays Diego, Manuel and Sebastian had set up missions where they taught the natives about their God and about the church. With each shipment of Pearls from the Island, the Crown gave an order that pearls be brought back to the Bishop in Castile for clerical use. On one of such shipments, the Bishop had personally come to receive the pearls. He wore his white long sleeved tunic lined with pearls, the cincture around the waist made from fine silk and sitting on his head was a white mitre with gold embroidered bands.

He examined the pearls carefully and gave a nod of satisfaction to the clerics who were with him. He noticed that the pearls that had the largest quantity were smaller and more yellowish in appearance than the others, so he ordered those pearls be used in the making of rosaries.

Those yellowish pearls would later be known as Ave Maria pearls.

The rosaries made from the pearls sent to the Bishop were sold to catholic faithfuls and the rest were shipped back to the new world to be given to the native slaves.

The Frays taught them to recite the rosary and say the Lord's prayer in Arawak. During these sessions many natives, following the Shaman's lead would refuse to speak and those who did would disrupt by reciting prayers to Atabeira, Yucahu and their ancestral spirits instead of the foreigners god. Whenever the children were not being put to work, they were gathered in a hut which had been built specially to serve as a Church; a wooden cross hanging by the doorway and there they were taught the doctrines of the church. In the first year alone, about thirty native children were baptized and given Catholic names. Despite all the work and efforts the priests were putting in, several reports reached them from the guards positioned at the slaves huts that the natives refused to adopt their beliefs and they overheard them offering prayers to their Zemís every night. Many times the Spaniards would find the rosaries that had been given to the natives thrown away or burnt.

One day, a report reached Diego that after a diving trip, the Shaman had fallen into a trance near the shore and started chanting incoherent words and the natives around had joined in and began chanting some barbaric songs. The boat masters had descended on the Shaman with

their whips but no matter how hard they flogged him, they couldn't pull him out of his hypnotic state or stop the natives from chanting.

In the beginning, Fray Diego Suarez had advised Captain Jose that the natives would come around with time and turn to God and the church, but after a year of trial that didn't seem to yield the predicted positive outcome, he suggested a more forceful approach.

The Shaman was brought before the natives, accused of blasphemy and publicly beheaded alongside natives who refused to profess their belief in 'the one true God'.

A decree was given that anyone caught offering prayers or sacrifices to any other god would meet the same fate as the Shaman. Afterwards, Fray Diego wrote a letter to the Crown requesting for more priests and clerics to be sent down to Cubagua to assist them.

After that incident, Fray Bartolome de las casas wrote a letter to the king on his observation as to why the natives were not being successfully converted to Christians.

Part of his letter read:

"The Guaiquery tribe natives, even the children, are so deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs and values that it's become almost impossible to convince them that our God is the only true God. Despite our efforts to convert them, they have continued to serve and revere their gods above everything and everyone else"

Before long, the news of the atrocities the Guaiquery natives were facing at the hands of the Spaniards and how they were being killed for not accepting the foreigners' god spread like wildfire to neighboring Islands like Coche, Margarita and even the Paria tribe. The Caciques of these lands held a secret meeting where they decided that they had to intervene and save their brothers from these evil foreigners. They also knew that if they didn't do something and soon, when the Spaniards had exhausted the Guaiquery natives, their homes and their people would inevitably be next.

The Cacique of the Paria tribe informed the other Caciques that some of these foreigners were living in his village. They had settled there indefinitely under the guise of needing food and fresh water to sustain their people working on Cubagua but he and his people hadn't been aware of the natives they had enslaved.

After several secret meetings with the warriors of their various villages, they eventually brought their plans before the people. After they had apprised their people on the severity of the situation in Cubagua, the strongest warriors were selected to recruit and train anyone willing to join the fight to banish the foreigners from their lands.

Over five hundred men were recruited but after a few weeks of grueling training, two hundred fierce native warriors were selected for battle.

Before their plans could take full effect however, the men of the Paria tribe were tasked with killing the twenty Spaniards that were living among them so that word wouldn't get back to Cubagua that the neighboring tribes were planning an uprising.

That night, Dumeji the Cacique of the Paria tribe with the help of some of his men slit the Spaniards throats in their sleep and dumped their bodies in the ocean weighing them down with heavy stones.

The following day they rendezvoused in Paria where they performed the fire cleansing and strengthening ritual. Huge fires were set in the center of the common area and the warriors

formed circles around them. The fire ritual involved each warrior receiving markings of fortification from a Shaman and with a quick cut to their palm from a sharp edged cowry, they let some drops of their blood fall into the fire. They believed that those drops of their blood that fell into the fire would prevent their blood from getting spilled in battle. After the fire ritual had been concluded, the warriors waited on their boats till they had the advantage of the cover of night to attack the Island of Cubagua.

Captain Jose Maria was sound asleep in his hut when he began hearing strange noises. At first he thought it was the natives rebelling again by doing their spiritual chants but then he heard a Spaniard screaming "Ready your weapons, attack!"

He quickly bolted to his feet like a scalded cat, grabbed his musket and shot out the door. He couldn't really see anything in the darkness so he followed the loud noises.

Charaima and the other native slaves had heard the commotion outside and couldn't do anything but wait due to their shackled hands and feet.

The native warriors were armed with bows and arrows, spears, daggers and axes. They were swift and precise, hacking at anyone who wasn't one of them. The Spaniards weren't idle either, they fought valiantly with their swords and released fatal shots of their muskets. One of the warriors pounced on Jose Maria and knocked his musket out of his hand. He dealt the Captain a deafening blow but the latter used his prowess as a skilled fighter to disarm the native and slaughter him with his own spear. He looked around and saw that they were outnumbered almost ten to one so he yelled out to his people to retreat. All the men who were still alive retreated and formed a line from where they fired their muskets recklessly taking anyone that remotely came near them down. When the natives saw that their weapons were not a match for the muskets whose shots were fatal, they retreated to their boats and sailed away to regroup and hit the Spaniards harder than ever.

The next morning, when the brightness of the sun had illuminated the arid island, Captain Jose and the Spaniards who had survived the ambush of the previous night walked around inspecting the dead bodies of their attackers. With the help of Arasibo, they were able to discern the identity of their attackers. Arasibo recognized the markings on their bodies as the war markings of neighboring tribes, including his own people from Coche. They burned the bodies of their attackers, dug graves where they buried the Spaniards who had lost their lives and Fray Manuel performed their funeral rites. They also burned the bodies of some native slaves who had been killed in the frenzy and confusion of the blackness of night.

However, the attack did not stop Charaima and other male slaves from being put to work diving for pearls that same day while the women culled and put them away in baskets. During the day, Jose Maria placed soldiers armed with fully loaded muskets and cannon at strategic locations around the Island in case their attackers decided to return.

Three days had passed since the attack and things on the Island of Cubagua seemed to be gradually returning to normal. The soldiers had begun to let their guards down believing that perhaps it was a one time attack but Jose Maria didn't want to take any chances, so he ordered them to remain at their assigned posts. On the third day, when they hadn't gotten any supplies of food or fresh water from the Spaniards living in Paria, they knew they had been killed.

On the night of the fourth day, the ferocious warriors attacked again but this time the Spaniards were ready. Pedro stood at a strategic location taking down whoever looked like a native with shots from his musket. One of the natives threw his spear at him and it tore into the flesh of his

upper arm but didn't cause any major damage so Pedro reloaded his musket and shot the native.

The door of the room where Charaima and the other slaves were chained suddenly burst open. A native warrior came in with a maul and broke the shackles of one of the men and handed him the maul to set the others free. As soon as Charaima's shackle was broken, he made his way through the darkness to search for Cora and make sure she was okay. He found her in Pedro's hut hiding behind their fireplace and immediately she recognized his voice, she ran into his embrace. He told her that no matter what she heard, she shouldn't come out of the hut. He looked around the house and found a rope with which he armed himself. Outside, he put the rope around the neck of the first Spaniard he saw and strangled him to death. Some native slaves invaded the hut of the priests and killed Frays Manuel and Sebastian. Fray Diego only survived because he hadn't slept in their hut that night. As the fight progressed, there were multiple casualties on both sides and finally once again the native warriors were overwhelmed by the Spaniards powerful weapons and they retreated. After they had retreated, some of the natives who the warriors had set free attacked their oppressors with a vengeance and killed many of them. Eventually Jose and his men subdued the slaves and put them back in shackles. The next morning, Jose chose five female slaves and dismembered them; he ordered that their dismembered bodies be paraded around the Island to discourage any further rebellions among the other slaves.

Captain Jose Maria sent a letter to the crown, requesting for more soldiers, weapons, priests and supplies to be sent to Cubagua.

The attacks from the natives became more frequent which meant all diving and harvesting of pearls was indefinitely suspended. Due to lack of access to food and fresh water, many Spaniards and slaves died of starvation and thirst.

Finally, almost six weeks after Jose Maria had sent word to the King and Queen that they needed help, four ships fully loaded with food, fresh water, medicine, weapons of all kinds and hundreds of soldiers arrived in Cubagua. The native warriors had attempted to attack them before they could arrive at their destination but they were grossly outnumbered and easily defeated them. The new soldiers met a lot of death and destruction in Cubagua, the only Spaniards who had survived were Jose Maria, Pedro, Arasibo and Mateo and even then, they were barely alive. Charaima and a few other natives had also survived. The soldiers gave them water to drink and food to eat and after a few days, they were back on their feet. Together with Jose Maria, the soldiers raided the islands of Margarita, Coche and Paria. They killed everyone who resisted including women and children, burnt every structure they could find to the ground and took the remaining natives back to Cubagua where they were enslaved.

After the natives had been vanquished and enslaved, pearl diving and harvesting recommenced in earnest with the few slaves they had left. They were overworked and beaten often because they couldn't keep up with the atrocious volume of work required of them. Being that they had decimated the neighboring Islands, there were no neighboring tribes left to enslave so Pearl production became significantly slow. Captain Jose Maria sent word to the Crown that they were in dire need of slaves to continue the work in Cubagua and the crown gave an order for ships to be sent from Hispaniola in search of more slaves.

Four ships led by Captain Gonzalo Mendez left from Hispaniola up North to the hundreds of islands that are nowadays known as the Bahamas to capture as many natives as they could. Many of the natives in this area were from the Lucayan tribes and were excellent divers. The first Island these slave raiders came upon on their expedition was the Island of Guanahani. They docked their ships on the shores of the ocean that surrounded this lushly forested Island then they grabbed and shackled some women washing themselves in the water. The others, seeing what had happened, raised an alarm and some of the men tried to defend their home. Unfortunately for the unsuspecting natives, their local weapons were no match for the guns and cannons Captain Gonzalo and his men brought with them and they were soon overpowered. The soldiers shackled them, and drove them into their Ships. Some of them in the commotion tried to run away but only three natives were fast enough to jump on a boat and escape. The rest were shot at and killed by the Spanish soldiers, discouraging the others from making a break for it.

As the newly captured slaves sat in the darkness of the ship's brig, one could clearly recognise the look of fear, confusion and desperation on their faces. They didn't understand why they had been forcefully taken from their homes and families.

The slaves remained in the brig for four days without food and water till the ship stopped. From the sounds and cries they heard outside the ships, they understood that another group of people were being captured and forced onto the ship.

Soon their suspicions were confirmed as more shackled native men and women were brought in to join them in the already crowded brigs.

Due to the overcrowding and lack of proper ventilation in the brigs, some captured slaves died on the voyage and those who were still alive were made to stay with the stench of the corpses till the Spaniards came to check on them. The Spaniards only came to check in on them when the stench of the corpses had gotten so bad that they had begun to perceive it from their cabins. They would remove the dead bodies and throw them overboard, leaving their bodies at the mercy of the sea.

They captured natives from other Bahama Islands till the four ships they had left Hispaniola with were filled to the brim with Lucayan slaves. They returned to Cubagua, their ships harboring the newly captured slaves.

Pedros first son with Cora was the one who had sighted the ships returning to shore. He ran to inform his father and Pedro and some men went to shore to await them.

As soon as the ships docked, Captain Gonzalo and his men led the slaves out. The ones who had survived the forty day trip came out of the ships, the clanking sounds of the shackles on their hands and feet filling the air.

Pedro and his men took the slaves off the hands of the Captain and his men, then counted and inspected them thoroughly.

After that, they were sent to Arasibo to be branded with the letter 'C'. The looks the natives gave Arasibo as he branded them were that of confusion, they couldn't understand why someone who looked like them, shared the same skin color as them and spoke a similar language as them could be working with these strange looking foreigners.

Smells of burning flesh permeated the air alongside screams from the slaves being branded.

Captain Gonzalo and his men were given some refreshments, a change of fresh clothes and allocated some huts to live in till they departed Cubagua. Jose Maria came to inspect the new slaves himself. He roughly moved their faces from side to side, then up and down. After which he spun them around to make sure they weren't handicapped or anything of the sort.

"They are all very fresh and healthy sire" Pedro observed

"Yes yes" the Captain replied "Put them to work right away. We don't have any time to waste."

As for the natives who were fortunate enough to have escaped, they sailed all night having no clue where they were going but hoping to arrive at a place far away from the danger back home. Eventually they sighted a group of trees and shrubs huddled together and they rowed their boats towards them and disembarked. On disembarking, they came upon a ceremonious circle, hundreds of strange holes beneath a layer of limestone which formed a perfect circle. Unbeknownst to them, they had arrived at what is famously known nowadays as the Miami Circle in Florida USA.

The Bahama Islands held little interest to the Spanish except as a source of slave labor. Nearly the entire population of Lucayan (almost 40,000 people) were transported to other islands besides Cubagua as laborers over the next thirty years. This displacement culminated in complete eradication of Lucayan people from the Bahamas by 1520.

The islands remained abandoned and depopulated for hundreds of years afterwards. Because it was vastly uninhabited, the Islands became a famous hideaway zone for Pirates.

Now three years after the great revolt and decimation of the native slaves, pearl production was at an all time high and the Spanish economy was flourishing.

On the clear waters of Cubagua Island, there were about twelve boats with lucayan, black divers and their boat masters on them. The boat masters took six divers each on their boats everyday and didn't return till they had filled up their boats with Oyster shells. Each diver was given a pouch which they hung around their waist and once they were in the water, they weren't allowed to come out till they'd filled up that pouch. If any of them dared come up for air without their pouch filled to the brim, he was whipped mercilessly and then later his boat master would punish him for breaking the rule.

An emaciated Charaima was one of the divers on Mateo's boat. Charaima, now eighteen, looked far older than his age due to the untold suffering his young body had to endure everyday. His once reddish lips were covered in white scales and a jagged scar rested on the brow of his right eye. The nasty scars on his back revealed that he had had numerous encounters with the Spaniards' whips.

While Charaima waited for the divers who were in the water to come out so he and his partner could take their turn, he saw something he thought was a shark in the water. He squinted his eyes to make sure he was seeing clearly and undoubtedly there was a shark rapidly advancing towards their boat. Pointing at the shark, he began shouting "Shark shark" in his native tongue and soon enough, everyone was aware of the impending danger. The divers in the water had also seen the shark and were desperately swimming, eager to climb into the safety of the boats. Charaima urged the divers from his boat to swim faster as the shark was closing in on them and by some miracle they actually made it on time to the boat. As they struggled to come into the boat however Mateo ordered them to remain in the water. They tried coming on board and Mateo hit their hands off the boat with a hard stick from a birch tree. The other boat masters followed his lead and refused the divers getting into their boats in spite of the danger. The shark viciously attacked one diver and in a second tore him to shreds. The other divers seeing this quickly started swimming to shore in a bid to escape this vicious animal but the Spaniards shot at them to stop them and soon enough all the blood in the water attracted other sharks. It was a feeding frenzy as the sharks ripped the divers apart much to the amusement of Mateo and his men who were laughing and finding the gruesome sight entertaining.

"Oh look at them go! Gotta love nature eh?"

"I think they'll thank us later for the sumptuous meal" another Spaniard quipped.

Mateo laughed but suggested they get the hell out of there before the sharks ran out of flesh and set their sights on them.

Per his suggestion, they turned their boats around and returned to shore. The divers were still severely shaken up by what they had just witnessed, especially Charaima. In his eighteen years of existence, he had never witnessed such cruelty being meted out to an animal let alone a human being. Tears flowed from his face as they went back to shore, he couldn't comprehend why and how these people could treat their fellow human beings in such a despicable manner. He was so lost in thought, that he didn't realize they had reached the shore. It was when he felt the sting of Mateo's whip that he returned to the present

“I said moor the ship and take the pearls to the womenfolk or are you stone deaf?”

A weary Charaima got out of the ship but as soon as he stepped on the ground, his legs gave way and he collapsed to the ground. Cora, who had come to give Pedro and the other supervisors some refreshments, saw Charaima collapse and impulsively ran to help him. She cradled his head in her arms and touched his face tenderly, Charaima opened his eyes and with his last strength, he raised his palm to her face and forced a half formed smile. Pedro approached them angrily, his whip in his hands, ready to strike. Cora was the first recipient of the four foot long leather whip as it tore across her bare breasts, she quickly dropped Charaima and raised her hand in an effort to block the whip from landing on her pregnant belly but Pedro could care less about her condition as his whip descended on her carelessly and mercilessly. Charaima staggered to his feet and shot Pedro a deadly stare filled with absolute hatred and venom. He tried to intervene but his overworked body failed him as he fell to the ground again. Pedro walked to where he had fallen and pulled his face up by his hair. “Don’t ever touch my woman again or you’ll be very sorry.”

He threw his head back in the sand and walked away, dragging a wailing Cora with him. Despite Charaima's weakened state, Mateo whipped him to get up and join the other natives carrying the oysters to the women for harvesting.

He took a deep breath, braced himself and stood up. He grabbed a basket filled with oysters and carried it to the female slaves for harvesting.

The women could be seen sitting on the ground, their hands moving swiftly as they culled the pearls. The women, much like the men, looked miserably malnourished and exhausted. Their hands were mostly swollen and had deep cuts due to culling pearls from morning till night. Despite the condition of their hands, they always worked swiftly, afraid of the sharp crack of their master's whips against their bare backs, living in constant fear of what the Spaniard masters would do to them if they were tardy in the slightest.

While the women culled the pearls, the children carried the shells away to a growing mountain of shells along the end of the shoreline.

The pathway through which the native children walked to throw away the broken oyster shells were surrounded by a grove of cacti plants with their jagged and scary looking thorns ever ready to tear into their tender flesh. Before the Spaniards had arrived, parents used to sternly warn their kids not to play near the cactus plants and the ones who didn't heed these warnings had deep cuts on their flesh to remind them never to disobey again. But now these children who had been robbed of their childhood walked through the cacti barely flinching. They were aware that any cactus originated pain was child's play compared to what their masters would do to them if they didn't finish clearing the oyster shell heaps before the sun went down. So they walked through the Cacti plants as if they were invisible, only having their deep cuts and gashes to remind them of their endless suffering while they lay shackled at night.

The clouds had completely covered the sun in the skies when Charaima and the other slaves were led to their huts to be shackled for the night. Following the several escape attempts that

had been made by the slaves, Jose Maria had ordered that they be locked up in their huts for the night immediately after they returned from their various tasks.

Two of the guards ushered them into the hut and just before they closed the doors, a drunk Spaniard distracted them.

“Aye did you hear that Pablo was weeping last night eh?”

“Why what happened?” One of the guards asked

“Apparently while he’s been here gathering pearls for the crown, his brother’s been sleeping with his wife and now she’s pregnant with his brothers child”

“So why is he weeping eh? Hasn’t he been sleeping with every savage woman on this godforsaken Island?”

“My man wants to enjoy hisself while his wife waits around, greedy motherfucker” The first guard added and they all roared with laughter. While the guards were distracted by their ongoing chit chat, Charaima spotted an unsupervised clay jar near the door. He darted his eyes around to make sure no one was watching him and moving quickly, he grabbed the clay jar without anyone noticing. He took a honey colored piece of cloth, unwrapped it and poured the pearls he had been hiding in it into the jar then he quickly dug the ground beside the corner he lay every night, buried the jar inside and covered it with dirt all the while making sure no one was watching him.

The next morning when the guards came to awaken them for the day's work, he checked to see if his clay jar was still properly hidden before leaving the hut with the rest of the slaves.

The only thing that remained familiar to Charaima from before the Spaniards arrived at their home till now was how busy the Island often was every morning. His people had been very early risers and so were the Spaniards. The hoots of ships' horns reverberated around the Island as they came into the port and docked near the wooden pier. Some slaves can be seen unloading rocks and wood planks which had been brought in from the mainland from these ships while some other boats arrived with fresh drinking water in barrels.

Due to the high demand of slave divers on the Island, many foreigners came to Cubagua to sell slaves who they had captured from the Bahamas or from Africa. As a result of the heightened pearl fishing and production, slaves who could dive were in high demand.

That morning the pier was congested with many ships and boats that had brought with them their latest shipment of slaves. The atmosphere was charged with sounds of activity as the slaves were unloaded from their various vessels. The majority of the newly arrived slaves were male, with only a few females among them. Dock masters could be seen arguing over prices with the slave merchants.

Charaima was nearby, getting into his own small fishing vessel, when he spotted a figure that immediately caught his eye.

One of the slaves had a very distinct look which made him stand out among the throngs of other slaves. He was overtly tall with very dark and shiny skin, his ebony black hair looked rough and unkempt and his muscular back was covered with a large tattoo of a lion's head and his white teeth gave a sharp contrast to his dark skin. His whole body rippled with so much muscle that Charaima concluded that he must have been a warrior wherever he came from. The first time Charaima had seen black people he was very fascinated by them, especially by the color of

their skin. He couldn't believe that people who had darker skin than his people existed and now he was seeing a black man who had the darkest skin tone of any black person he had ever seen.

The dock master approached the Captain of the ship that the man with the striking looks had come with to inspect the slaves and discuss prices with him.

"I see you brought only male slaves this time, that's good because these women do nothing but slow us down and get pregnant" the dock master joked and he and the Captain shared a laugh. "I'll give you five pearls for each of them"

"Oh no, they're worth nothing less than twenty pearls each" the Captain responded.

"Are you trying to swindle me or what? I just bought some slaves from you last month for five pearls each" the dock master seemed annoyed

"I understand but these ones have been carefully selected from coastal towns in the Bahamas and Africa for their excellent diving skills. Take this one for example" he pulled the tall man away from the rest, showing off his muscles, "He and many others are from Senegal in Africa and they are one of the best deep divers in the world, they can dive as deep as the bottom of the ocean"

The dock master takes a closer look at him "He does look very healthy and agile. I'll give you ten pearls for each of them"

"It's twenty white pearls for each of them or I take my business elsewhere" the Captain disagreed

At this point, the dock master conceded and they proceeded to the customs house where the Captain was paid the equivalent of a hundred pesos for each of his slaves in pearls. After he had received his payment, the dock master told him that they needed many more slaves as the ones they had were dying rampantly and he promised to return as soon as he could with more slaves.

"Welcome to your new home" the dock master sneered at the slaves as he led them to get branded. After the branding they were each assigned to various fishing boats, and the tall black man was assigned Charaima's fishing boat.

"I'm Charaima," he said, introducing himself in his native tongue.

At first the man looked at him confused but when Charaima said his name again and pointed at himself, the black man understood that he was telling him his name and "Dembe" rolled out of his mouth. They both exchanged a friendly nod of understanding before their boat sailed off.

DEMBE'S POV

Dembe Njie was from the Serer ethno religious people of Senegal in West Africa who originated in the Senegalese river valley. They were known for their farming expertise and their transhumant stock raising. The Serer people were huge land owners so Dembe had inherited many plots of land from his father on which he grew multiple crops and raised his livestock. Just like Charaima, Dembe descended from a long line of Serer kings and he was next in line to rule his people after his father had passed. Every Serer family had a *taana*— *totem* that represented them. This totem was either a plant or an animal and each family revered their totem. The Njie family totem was a Lion (hence the lion head tattoo on Dembe's back) and they were not allowed to harm or let anyone bring any harm to these sacred creatures. They were a socially stratified people which meant that they were divided into free nobles and peasants, artisan castes and slaves and none of them were allowed to intermarry outside of their caste groups. Just like the Guaiqueries, they had a strong bond with their ancestry and the soil where their ancestors lay in rest was very important to them and was guarded jealously. They also believed in the importance of communicating with their ancestors, known as *pangool*, both priests and priestesses were used to communicate with these ancestral spirits. According to the Serer religion, the *pangool* serves as the intermediary between the living and the dead and they could consult them to help solve the problems of the living.

They also believed in a supernatural supreme deity called *Roog* and they had other deities like Takhar, who was the god of justice and vengeance and Tiurakh who was the god of wealth or property. They worshiped them at the foot of baobab trees in the forest which were adjudged to be sacred. One of their most important religious practices was the *Xooy* which was when their saltigues—spiritual leaders converged to foretell the future in the presence of the community. They predicted everything from the future, weather, politics, economy and so on. During this ceremony, Serers would don an item belonging to their ancestor, such as the hair of an ancestor or an ancestor's cherished belonging, which they would turn into *juju* (*magical properties that bring good luck*) on their person or visibly on their necks.

Even though Dembe and Charaima were from completely different continents, they shared a deep concern for the well being of their people. Dembe had played a huge part in battling and defeating intruders that had tried to disrupt the peace in his home in the past. He became a champion in *Njom* wrestling, a brutal and violent form of wrestling practiced by his people so that he could protect his people and his family from impending dangers. Each skill in the *Njom* took years to master so most people started learning them from childhood. Dembe at twenty eight years of age had successfully mastered five of these difficult skills. He was one of the few wrestlers gifted in the *mbapatte* technique and because of that, he hardly lost any wrestling matches and his people had great respect for him. Similar to the Guaiquery tribe, the Serer practiced arranged marriages so Dembe was married to Mossane, a very beautiful woman who was also from a noble family. They didn't have any children of their own but it didn't matter because they regarded the children of their brothers as their own.

Being a people whose core traditions were centered around the idea of family, most of them lived in a shared compound with their relatives. Dembe lived in a large compound with his parents, brothers, uncles, their wives and their children. Their thatched huts were round shaped with oval-shaped roofs and a doorway held open by bamboo sticks. A large portion of the compound was mapped out and used for growing different crops while another area was dedicated to rearing their cows.

The day foreigners invaded their land for the first time started like a very typical day. That morning, just like every morning, Dembe joined his family to eat a breakfast of *Saay*— *pounded couscous* served with fermented milk and sugar prepared by one of his brother's wives. It was typical of the Serer people to eat together so once food was ready, everyone would sit around the plates and eat with their hands. After the meal, Dembe, his brothers and their sons grabbed their hoes and other farming tools and headed into the fields. They tilled the ground until it was almost noon, so they decided to return home and eat what the women had prepared for lunch.

While they prepared to eat lunch, a loud uproar was heard outside their compound accompanied by some loud sounds Dembe had never heard before. He quickly dashed outside and saw some men who were carrying strange looking weapons attacking his people. He instructed his wife and other women to take their children, go into their huts and remain silent while he grabbed his spear and charged out of his hut towards the strange attackers. Many of the other men who had also heard the commotion had armed themselves and come out ready for battle. With the speed of lightning, Dembe pounced on one of the attackers and drove his spear into his bosom. Then he threw the spear into the back of another attacker and the fellow fell to the ground. As he bent down to remove his spear from the fellows back, a hard blow to the head from the base of a musket one of the attackers was holding had him sprawling to the ground. As he tried to get up, blood flowed down his face and about three men held him down while the other shackled his hands and feet. He watched helplessly as the rest of his people were subdued and shackled. Among those who had been killed in the fight was his childhood friend ngor. To his dismay, the strange looking invaders began searching the huts one after the other and in no time, they dragged Moussane and the other women out and shackled them.

After they had shackled as many people as they needed with the exception of the Children, they lined them up in a single file and led them to a place in the outskirts of their village popularly known as *the House of slaves or the door of no return nowadays*. This house of slaves was the final exit point of the slaves from Africa. This was where their buying and selling originated and then their buyers would ship them off to their desired destination and resell them to gain a profit. The conditions in this house of slaves was very deplorable, the slaves were imprisoned in dark airless cells, they spent days shackled to the floor, their backs on the wall unable to move. Most of the families captured together were often kept separately and never saw one another again. The young women were paraded specially whenever traders came to the compound so that they could be chosen for sex and the entertainment of the traders. The girls that got pregnant from their encounters with the traders were often allowed to remain in the compound till they gave birth before getting sold without ever knowing what happened to their babies, except in the rare event that the trader wants them and their baby. Many of these men, women and sometimes children perished before being sold off into slavery. Yet their terrible conditions in

the House of slaves was nothing compared to what they endured when they were eventually being shipped off by their buyers. After Dembe and his group was sold off, he saw them dividing the women into two groups, one group was sent to the same ship as him and the other men, and the other group, including his wife Moussane, were put on a separate ship.

During their long journey to Cubagua, their slave masters only fed them bitter cola nuts because these nuts were believed to help conserve energy and keep them on their feet. Exhausted and ill slaves were killed whenever it became apparent they couldn't continue on their journey. After months of travel, their ship finally stopped and Dembe was happy that he would see his wife again but after he had come out of the ship, he looked around endlessly but she was nowhere in sight. He concluded that maybe her ship hadn't arrived and he muttered a prayer to the spirit of his ancestors to keep her safe.

As he sat on the boat with Charaima and the other black slaves, he noticed how skinny and grey their skin looked. The face of the one who had introduced himself as Charaima was disfigured, his left eye was almost drooping shut and his back was covered in scars. Dembe couldn't bear to imagine what they would have gone through to look like that and he wondered if he would end up looking like them.

A young Spaniard came on board and their boat sailed off into the waters. The young Spaniard was Pedro and he was their boat master for the day. As they reached the deepest part of the ocean, Pedro signaled him to dive in and start gathering Oysters.

Being a skilled swimmer, the depths of the ocean were no challenge for Dembe, he quickly dove in, filled the pouch tied around his waist with Oysters and resurfaced in no time.

"Amazing! This is why I like it when I get to be in charge of the new arrivals, fast and efficient!" he smiled.

Soon Dembe resurfaced with another bag full of oysters, he dumped them on the boat floor and just as he was about to go back in, he saw something approaching him from the water surface. At first he couldn't make out what it was because the sun was directly in his eyes but then his eyes widened in dread as he recognized what was approaching him. It was a huge shark. Dembe was temporarily stunned but he quickly collected himself and prepared for the attack. He knew that the boat wouldn't row away fast enough if he climbed in it and he didn't want to jeopardize the lives of the other divers. Since there was no place to hide, he quickly swam to the ocean floor to look for any weapon to defend himself with. As the huge shark attacked him, he struggled ferociously with it, fighting for his life.

One of the divers noticed this and shouted pointing into the water. Charaima and the rest of the divers on the boat were stunned as they watched the intense battle between Dembe and the shark. With a powerful strike, Dembe stuck the jagged rock into the Shark's eye, momentarily destabilizing it, then with a strike to its gills, he finally killed the shark and watched its lifeless body sink to the ocean floor.

As he turned around to return to the boat, the sound of the divers' cheers and laughter greeted him and he beamed with smiles, proud of his accomplishment. Dembe took Charaima's hand which he had extended to help him climb into the boat but Pedros whip across his back stopped him.

"Where the hell do you think you're going? So because you killed a shark you think you're special now? Get back into the water and gather more oysters! Maybe this time around another shark will get you!" Pedro snarled at him.

Dembe and the others dove till the sun had completely retreated into the skies and by the time their ship docked, he was completely fagged out. He was shackled and put in the same hut as Charaima and as he closed his eyes to get some rest, he could hear Charaima scurrying around obviously trying to hide something but he was too tired to care. His eyes were heavy with sleep and his stomach rumbled in hunger as he fell into the comfort of a dream.

By the following morning, the story of the new slave from Africa who had killed a shark armed only with a rock had spread across the Island, earning him the respect of the other slaves. Wherever he went, he could feel the others looking at him in admiration but unfortunately his strength only meant one thing for his masters; they could put him to work for longer periods of time.

Six months had passed since Dembe was forced out of his home and sold into slavery. Despite his strength, the lack of proper nutrition and rest had started taking their toll on him yet the only thing he worried about was his beautiful wife Moussane. He thought of her often and each time he sighted a ship coming to the dock, he prayed to the Creator god — Roog that Lucia would be one of the slaves the ship had brought with them, but she never was. Other times he thanked Roog that she wasn't there with him because he believed she was better off wherever she was. He didn't want her to suffer a fate as horrific as his, his sweet Moussane wouldn't last here, she couldn't possibly survive under such horrendous conditions.

Dembe would later find out that Moussane's ship had taken her to become a slave in Hispaniola and he would never see her again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As time went by, more and more ships sank their anchors on the shores of Cubagua. The news of the pearl coast was rapidly spreading and soon greedy adventurers from other countries like Portugal, Britain and France started pouring into the Island to trade for pearls.

Temporary Rancherias were being erected everyday to accommodate the growing population which meant that the workload on the natives was steadily on the increase.

As pressure from the Crown became worse to produce more pearls, Captain Jose Maria applied more pressure on his men. He was publicly seen yelling at them on several occasions for making him look incompetent in the eyes of the Crown and of course they took out their anger and frustration on the natives. They flogged and punished them at any slightest provocation and often made them stay without food and water for several days at a time.

At the tail end of the ocean, a group of vultures could be seen hovering over the Island, flying around in circles, searching for their next meal.

There was a display of massive mountains of discarded Oyster shells that littered the beach. These shells were encrusted with millions of flies, buzzing around in a frenzied state. A closer look at the mountains of shells revealed that the flies are feasting on the washed up remains of dead pearl divers who had most likely perished while diving for pearls in the dangerous waters that surrounded the island.

A group of vultures were gingerly perched on top of the stenchy hills of shells, also feasting on the human remains, ripping into their flesh as if they were vagabonds.

As Charaima disembarked from one of the fishing boats after a very draining day of pearl fishing, he noticed the unseemly sight near the heaps of Oyster shells but he was abruptly distracted when he saw Cora run out of Pedros hut screaming and rubbing her entire body vigorously. Pedro ran out after her like a man possessed, swinging his whip menacingly. He

lashed her across the back severally and she rolled on the ground begging him to show her mercy. Their three children ran to her but Pedro didn't stop flogging her, less concerned that he was hitting them in the process.

"You're going to do what I tell you, do you hear me you whore?"

Charaima wanted to intervene but he quickly remembered that the last time he did, Cora suffered severely for it. He had tried to help her stand up after Pedro had viciously beaten her one day but Pedro had seen them and later that night Cora's screams and pleas of mercy as Pedro whipped her echoed through the quiet of the night and almost drove Charaima mad. With each scream, Charaima felt as though someone was taking a dagger to his heart and he lay there totally helpless, unable to help the woman that he loved. After whipping her, Pedro had shackled Cora and the kids outside their hut, forcing them to sleep outside and not caring that they were exposed to the elements.

The next morning while Charaima had been on his way to his fishing boat, he sighted Cora and her children still sitting down shackled outside their hut. Just then Pedro came out and unshackled them just to release Cora to go make breakfast for him. Charaima didn't know he was staring till Pedro snarled "Whatchu looking at?" at him before dragging Cora back into his hut.

After that horrific experience, Charaima had to restrain himself with everything he had not to intervene whenever Pedro was at it. That didn't mean his heart wasn't breaking into a million pieces for his beloved Cora.

The main reason Pedro was so cruel towards Cora was because he was livid that after all this while, Cora and Charaimas bond was still alive. He therefore looked for the most trivial excuses to torture the both of them. He knew that Cora would never love him and he hated her and Charaima for it.

As at this point in time, the pearls harvested at Cubagua and the barrels of Crude Oil being shipped out on a regular basis were fueling the crown's financial and political prowess among the other kingdoms. Given the increasing demand for pearls and the potential tax benefits to the Crown, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decided to send his governor at Hispaniola, Nicolás de Ovando, to build a fortress in the Pearls' Coast in order to provide protection and a site for pearl commerce.

They therefore summoned Nicolas de Ovando, the Governor of Hispaniola to the Royal palace. The Governor had visited the Royal palace many times in the past so nothing prepared him for the pristine and resplendent ambience that welcomed him.

From the gold plaited palace gates with their richly designed golden finials to the beautiful array of Orchids surrounding the fences, the Royal Palace screamed elegance. Once inside the palace grounds, there was a gigantic golden statue of the son of God surrounded by golden Cherubs. The elaborate carvings of the crown and other cardinal artifacts on the walls were magnificent. Inside, the formerly drab walls were a sparkling yellow color and the previously empty walls of the huge corridor that led to the throne room was covered in splendid paintings of Masters of that time.

As the king's herald went in to announce the Governor's arrival, the King and the Queen can be seen dressed in luxurious robes. They had traded in their old crowns for new golden ones,

heavily decorated with pearls. Laying majestically on the Queen's neck was a glittering sapphire necklace, on her wrists were golden bracelets with pearl embellishments, and on her finger sat a ruby ring. The king wasn't left out of all this grandeur as his royal scepter was made of gold and bejeweled with precious stones and he had on an identical but grander ruby ring as the Queen. The throne room itself was ornately decorated with royal velvet curtains beautifully parted to allow rays of sunshine stream into the room.

The fat, ugly looking Governor bowed as he greeted the King and Queen.

"Surely you've heard about the Pearl Coast by now, haven't you, Governor?"

"Certainly your Majesties"

"Well," the King continued "We are pleased to announce that you are to be the first official Governor of the new world"

They went ahead to enunciate his responsibilities to him as the Governor which included ensuring control of pearl production, minimizing theft and enforcing the Royal taxes "El Quinto" which was a levy of twenty percent on all pearl production. He was also to ensure that the biggest and finest pearls were put in separate pewter boxes and shipped directly to the Palace for making of the Royal and Chapel jewelry. But most importantly, he was to find out what was needed to erect permanent structures on the Island so that could establish a base of operations. The Governor gave King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella his word that he wouldn't disappoint them, bowed and took his leave.

In early 1505, the Governor of Hispaniola Nicolas de Ovando set sail from the Port of Cadiz for Cubagua.

Captain Juan, a loyal friend of the Crown commandeered this ship. Onboard the ship were about twenty soldiers, some priests and some of the Crown's trusted officials among whom were two jewelers and a pearl expert.

When the Governor's ship arrived at the dock of Cubagua, Pedro ushered him and his men to see the Captain.

"I am Nicolas de Ovando, Governor of Hispaniola and I am here on a special assignment for the Crown"

He handed a letter with the Royal seal to Jose Maria. The moment he saw the Royal seal, the Captain ordered his men to find a very nice rancheria for the Governor to settle in and to ensure they gave him whatever he needed. The priests, soldiers and officials were also shown to their huts and native women were sent to cater to their needs.

After the Governor was well rested, he took a walk through the Island. He watched as slaves that had gone pearl fishing returned and carried bags of oysters to the women to harvest them. He was fascinated to see shiny pearls inside these little sea creatures as the women opened them up, some harboring as many as six small to medium sized pearls while others had none.

He also later watched as able bodied slaves dug the ground and scooped out a tarry looking liquid into some wooden barrels.

The Governor had heard the rumors of an Island covered in pearls and teeming with crude oil but he felt the stories were being exaggerated but now that he had personally confirmed that it was true, his sole mission became to gather as much as he could to enrich himself before the Crown could completely monopolize pearl and Crude oil production so he hatched a plan to delay the Crown till he had amassed enough pearls and crude oil to satisfy his greed.

The corrupt Governor wrote back to the King that due to the lack of freshwater, building any permanent structures on Cubagua would not be worth it. Unfortunately for him however, the Crown refused his advice and decided that they would go ahead with erecting the structures.

Knowing that he was running out of time, the Governor began mounting extreme pressure on Captain Jose to intensify Pearl Production, fabricating stories about how there were talks going around that the King and Queen were considering sending a more competent replacement for Jose Maria. Afraid that he was disappointing the Crown and by extension God and uneasy about losing such a revered position and the favor of the crown, Jose Maria pushed his men to hasten Pearl fishing and harvesting and as always the brunt of this decision fell heavily on the slaves.

They were forced to dive all day and all night giving them no chance to sleep or rest.

The oyster beds were gradually depleting so the divers had to go deeper and deeper, heavy rocks firmly tied around their waist so that they could stay in the water long enough to gather oysters. Due to this prolonged stay in the water, many of the slaves died underwater of Oxygen deprivation and hemorrhages produced by water pressure. When they were finally pulled out of the water and it was discovered that they had died, the boat masters would sever the rope attaching them to the rest of the divers and their bodies would float away into the ocean probably to be devoured by sharks and other cannibalistic sea creatures.

As cruel as Jose Maria was, he was nothing compared to Nicolas de Ovando, the Governor who ruled Cubagua with an unbridled ruthlessness.

The slaves were made to erect certain Gibbets- an instrument for public execution used for displaying corpses after death. These gibbets were used to hang the bodies of any slaves who tried to escape or were caught keeping any pearl for themselves. The Governor took the cruelty to an unmatched degree by hanging the slaves on the gibbets while they were still alive.

These gibbets were large, but low made so that the feet of the slaves hanging almost reached the ground, underneath it was a Fire made to burn them to Ashes whilst they hung, their screams of agony hanging over the Island.

For all the cruelty the slaves had suffered, many people felt that the Governor's methods were a step too far and there were whispers of disagreement with his brutality.

A brave foreigner finally openly spoke out against the Governor and when this criticism was brought to him, the woman was paraded naked through the streets and then her tongue was cut out.

All the cruelty Nicolas de Ovando meted out against the slaves didn't do much to prevent them from trying to escape, if anything it seemed that more slaves tried to escape Cubagua under his rule than any other time.

Whenever a slave or groups of slaves had decided to escape, they would swallow pearls on that day's fishing trip and if they succeeded in escaping without getting killed by the boat masters muskets or by sharks, they would then excrete the pearls, clean them up and use them to buy back their freedom or sustain themselves on the run.

In the wake of the decision of the King and Queen to erect structures on the Island, many Spanish ships arrived at the docks of Cubagua carrying with them materials to build the future city. Tools, heavy machinery, wood planks, stone artifacts, clothes and other items are brought in from Spain. Two to three guarded officials from the crown were always present at these rendezvous to receive the Crown's Pearls and also collect the "El Quinto". The actual pearls were delivered to the officials who would use sieves of different diameters to separate them by size. The pearl expert would then examine each pearl by color and luster and they would be stored in different metal boxes, the biggest and finest ones always going into separate boxes for the Crown. Alberto the king's book keeper was always present, recording and writing down everything meticulously in an official records book with the King's emblem. Once enough pewter boxes were sealed with the red Royal seal, the boxes were loaded into Captain Juan's ship alongside some barrels of Crude oil. The official would then give Captain Juan a copy of the written inventory which they would each sign off on before the ship would leave for Spain.

As soon as the Pearl shipments arrived in the kingdom of Spain, the king would inspect the pearls and then they would be shipped off to the Black Forest in Germany. The Black Forest was famed for having the finest jewelers in all of Europe so they constantly got orders to make royal jewels for the Kings and Queens of Europe. There was a jewelry factory which was not open to the general public that specialized in handling royal orders. There were wooden benches and tables where the jewelers worked and three bearded German jewelers were currently working on some crowns, scepters, and royal clothing. They had orders from the Queen of England, the emperor of Germany, the Royals of Spain and the Habsburgs from Austria. On a bench there were boxes with pearls, emeralds, diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones. On another large table, there were drawings and sketches of diverse Crowns and scepters and other artifacts, showcasing their designs and the locations where the stones would be set. The main jeweler opened a newly arrived box filled with pearls which were mostly drop shaped, round and large. The head jeweler called his assistant jeweler to get his opinion on the newly arrived pearls and their orders. The assistant took some of the pearls and put them on top of the drawing to see where it could be used. They both agreed on which of the orders have to be filled first.

The construction of permanent structures in Cubagua was immensely under way. More and more ships brought construction materials to Cubagua as huge structures were being rapidly erected and the future city took shape. More architects and builders who would help oversee the construction were also brought in with the Cargo ships.

The slaves who were not chosen to dive for pearls were put to work clearing the construction sites, digging the ground for foundation placement, cutting of wood and metals, carrying the stones, fetching water and carrying out other menial tasks while the Spanish architects and builders handled the main construction.

Charaima didn't believe that a day would come when he would loathe being a fantastic swimmer. He hated it because it meant that he was often selected for pearl diving much to his chagrin. He wished that just once he could have the advantage of working on the grounds, helping with construction which he believed would be easier than his constant battle with the ocean.

The then twenty one year old boy looked like a shadow of his former self. The hardship he endured day in and day out had aged him beyond his years, his lack of nutrition evident from the bones which were visible on his flesh.

Presently, he was under water putting oysters into the pouch around his waist. Suddenly he saw some seahorses swimming by and it reminded him of the day one of them had wrapped his little tail around his finger. He remembered how his friends and Cora used to plead with him to play with them and how he would later enjoy himself thoroughly despite his earlier reluctance. All these memories brought a smile to his face. It seemed strange because he didn't remember the last time he had smiled. His smile soon faded however when something hit him and he looked around and discovered it was the severed leg of a native diver who had probably succumbed to the elements and been dismembered by the sharks. He quickly swam up for air and was greeted with a proper whipping across the back.

"What took you so long you whiffle whaffle, do you think I have all day to mess around?" The boat master threw an oyster shell in Charaima's face "Go get us more pearls now" Charaima gave him a stern look before diving back into the water to gather more oysters.

Situated near the already completed Port where ships loaded and unloaded their cargo was the official customs house, a one story stone building constantly guarded by several armed soldiers. Inside the customs house, the pearls which had been culled by the native women were being classified and stored away. Roberto, the young officer that the Crown had sent to Cubagua was writing a detailed account of everything happening in the room into the bound book with the king's emblem. From time to time he would ask for a clarification of the size, luster or total count of the pearls that he had missed or misheard. **By Nicolas de Ovandos rule, no natives or unauthorized persons were allowed in the customs house so only the crown's trusted officials oversaw the process while the pearl expert determined what pearl went in what box. At the end of each classification, the pearls would be counted and the total number of pearls acquired determined the "El Quinto" the Crown would be receiving.**

Just about a stone's throw from the customs house, a building which served as a bar, restaurant and a brothel was teeming with people. Drunks could be seen going in and out of the bar and

most transactions were being done by pearls although a few gold and silver coins could be seen exchanging hands.

Every night, inside the newly built bar which wasn't too far from the hut where Charaima and Dembe were usually kept shackled for the night, they could hear the screaming, yelling, singing and Partying that came from the drunks and whores. The drunk men often sang so loudly in their hoarse voices as though they were songsters, this could only be attributed to the false self confidence that free flowing alcohol gave.

That night, as Charaima and Dembe lay wearily on the ground of their hut, fagged out by a tedious day of diving and looking to get a much needed rest, they heard an ongoing altercation outside their hut. Two drunks who had just left the bar were walking down the dark streets when they saw a Native woman.

"Hey where do you think you're going whore?" One of them yelled blocking her path
 "I think she's looking for a man to stick it to her good" the other responded. The woman, noticing their drunk state, insisted they let her be and tried to walk away in the opposite direction but they grabbed her and started fondling her breasts.

"Don't you want us to show you a good time eh?" The older drunk asked brushing his hard member up against her. She tried desperately to break free but the duo was too strong so they easily overpowered her, ripped her clothes off her body and held her down as they took turns raping her as she screamed.

After they had defiled her, they realized that they would be in big trouble if Governor Ovando found out that they raped one of his whores for free.

"What if she's able to identify us as the ones who did this to her? I shudder to imagine what Ovando will do to us"

"He'll probably castrate us"

"O sweet Jesus!" the younger drunk exclaimed, grabbing onto his genitals protectively "I can't lose them, they're my best features"

"We have to permanently silence her. Quick make sure no one is coming"

"Won't killing her make things worse for us?"

"O come on my friend, she's a savage, nobody will miss her or care that she's dead"

The younger drunk kept watch as his friend strangled the native woman and left her body on the street, her shrill shrieks breaking the silence of the night. Charaima and Dembe who had listened all through her brutal ordeal had different reactions. Charaima broke down and cried bitterly while Dembe turned his back to Charaima, shut his eyes tightly and drifted off to sleep. It wasn't that Dembe wasn't touched by the woman's pathetic ordeal, he had been trained from childhood that men didn't cry. Once any boy of his tribe turned five years of age, they would be taken from their mothers to be trained to become men. They would be flogged or punished and told not to let any tears drop from their eyes no matter how badly what was being done to them hurt. It typically took the young boys six weeks or longer to finally learn to suppress their urge to cry despite the circumstances but Dembe had been an exception. The young lad learnt to

suppress his tears in four weeks and the trainers admitted they hadn't had such a record in a very long time. After the training, they would be released back to their mothers and expected not to cry for as long as they lived.

The next morning, some soldiers discovered the native woman's bloodied and badly battered body lying close to Jose Maria's house. They were instructing two native slaves to dump her body in the ocean just as Charaima and some other slaves exited their hut to go pearl diving for the day. As they carried the body towards the ocean, Charaima watched as a native man who later turned out to be her husband abandoned the wood he was cutting and ran to them. He fell on his wife's body crying and calling her name but the hardhearted soldiers didn't show a hint of sympathy as they whipped him and forced him to go back to work. The Spaniards that had killed her had been grossly wrong about no one missing her or caring that she was dead.

The sight tore at Charaima's heart but he knew he had to keep moving or else he would be next in line to feel the sting of the slavers whip. As they moved towards their fishing boats in a single file queue, Knavee, Charaima's friend who was one of the boys he used to swim and play with every morning, trudged along in front of him. Apart from Cora, Charaima and Knavee were the only living slaves from the Guaiquery tribe. Without warning, Knavee plummeted to the ground in exhaustion. Although being very weak himself, Charaima managed to put his arms under Knavee's skinny arms and drag him to his feet before the soldiers could descend on him with their whips. Judging by Knavee's pale, almost white skin Charaima knew he wouldn't survive much longer. With his arms supporting Knavee, they succeeded in getting on the boat and diving commenced for the day.

The Oyster beds had begun to drastically deplete due to over harvesting of the oysters without allowing them any breaks to reproduce. On average, only one in one thousand oysters can produce pearls and even then it takes them somewhere between six months to a year to produce these pearls, especially depending on the sizes of pearls but of course the Spaniards didn't know this. This meant that as time progressed, the divers had to go even deeper to gather oyster shells so it took them longer to resurface and many divers who weren't skilled swimmers drowned.

The native slaves had been diving all day, coming out of the water with less and less oysters so Charaima's boat master, a soldier who had arrived on Juan's ship suggested that they move further down the ocean. Other pearl fishing boats with their divers onboard followed their lead as they sailed deeper into the ocean. That part of the ocean was really deep and dangerous for the divers due to the shark attacks but the Spaniards didn't care about the divers, they only cared for their precious pearls.

The day had been far spent and the divers didn't have a great number of pearls to show for it. As Knavee and Charaima resurfaced from the water for the umpteenth time, Knavee told him in a voice that sounded almost like a whisper that he wasn't sure how much longer he could hang on. Charaima, afraid that his own eyes mirrored the fear and desperation he could see in Knavee's bloodshot eyes, calmly reassured him to hold on a little while longer as they were almost done for the day and would have a nice long sleep later that night and by morning he would be good as new.

One of the boat masters caught them talking and screamed at them

“Hey! White wolves ,who gave you permission to chat?”

White wolves was the nickname the Spaniards had given natives whose skin and hair had turned grey.

He swung his whip at them but missed their backs completely hitting Charaima in the face “Get back to work and hurry it up our shift is almost over and very much like to go get drunk”

Charaima couldn't hide the frustration and anger coursing through him as he gave the Spaniard a resentful glare.

“What's that look for?” The Spaniard asked him, accompanied by a whipping across the back.

“You better learn some manners! Slaves don't look at their superiors in that manner. Now go get us more pearls or you two can consider yourselves fish food”

Charaima and Knavee not having a choice dove back into the water to gather as many oysters as they could. Charaima resurfaced from the water after some minutes, both of his hands and pouch filled with oysters which he dumped on the floor of the boat. One of the Spaniards picked up about three oysters, opened them up and saw that they were empty.

“Uh empty again” he informed his friend, “I don't think luck is on our side today”

Charaima was about to dive back into the water when he suddenly realized that Knavee had not come up for air since they both went under water. He quickly dove back into the water and frantically searched for him. His eyes soon fell on Knavee's seemingly lifeless body floating away so he swam towards him. Dembe, who was also in the water, had noticed what was going on and swam towards Charaima. Together they grabbed Knavee and hurriedly brought him to the surface. They tried putting him on the boat but the boat master who had whipped Charaima earlier had refused saying he was as good as dead and no longer valuable to them.

“The sharks are assured of a sumptuous meal tonight” he joked to his partner.

“These sharks ought to pay us for this constant supply of food at this point” they laughed, not caring that a human being was literally in his last moments on earth.

As Knavee's ravaged body lay immobile in Charaima's arms, Knavee who had been unconscious coughed up water and took in a weak deep breath. His breath had a whistling sound as he struggled to speak so Charaima brought his disheveled face closer to his.

“Help me” he whispered

“Don't worry Knavee I will save you”

“F f f father is that y y y you? He stuttered

Knowing that these were probably his last moments, Charaima played along “Yes it's me, your father”

Knavee smiled weakly “Have you come to take me home father?”

“Yes my son we are going home” he responded, barely holding back tears, “Your mother, Macuya and Majagua can't wait to see you.”

Knavee smiled and took his last breath as Charaima repeatedly told him that everything would be okay.

Hugging his friends lifeless body, he whispered in his ears “I'll see you soon my friend, death is only the beginning”

He let go of Knavee's body and watched it float away before some sharks attacked and devoured his body.

The Spaniards seeing the Shark attack quickly rowed their boats away dragging Charaima and Dembe who hadn't yet gotten in along with them by their ropes.

"I guess one of them did end up becoming fish food" a Spaniard joked and the rest of them bellowed in laughter.

As they dragged Charaima behind the boat, he put the pearls he had been holding in his palms into his mouth, he looked at Dembe and placed his index finger over his lips in a manner that said "help me keep my secret".

Still visibly shaken from having witnessed his friend die in his arms, Charaima looked like he had seen a ghost. His eyes were hollow, his hair looked like a wild animal had run through it and he was sweating profusely. His legs were shaky as he stepped out of the water and gingerly approached the slave huts. As soon as he entered inside, he checked to make sure no one was watching and he got on his knees and dug with his fingers until he unearthed the clay jar he had hidden. He uncovered it and heaved a sigh of relief to find out his pearls were still as he had left them. He took out the pearls he had hidden in his mouth and put them in the clay jar. "Someday this will buy some of our people their freedom Knavee, I promise."

He then closed the jar, put it back in its place and covered it properly. After he had secured the pearls, he lay down in his corner and wept bitterly for his departed friend.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The formerly crystal clear waters of Cubagua Island had been polluted with the atrocities of the Spaniards. There were body parts of black and lucayan divers who had been dismembered by sharks carelessly floating around, their permanent resting places typically the belly of vicious sharks. Charaima once believed that if the dead didn't get a proper funeral and appropriate rites, their souls would be trapped in the land of the living forever. These days however, he was much too occupied with the cruel realities of the living to care about the dead. Moreover what spirit would want to hang around after suffering the horrors on the Island. Death had become an attractive escape route for many slaves and they often prayed for it to come. Charaima used to tear up whenever he came across the slaves' dead bodies but these days he looked past them like they were the carcasses of animals and not human beings who once had identities, lives and families.

It was 1512, thirteen years since the arrival of the Spaniards to the new world. The kingdom

of Spain was experiencing the peak of her economy as more resources poured in from pearl and Crude Oil trade. Apart from using the profits made from the pearls and crude oil to beautify and rule their kingdom, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand were committed to the church's course. They sent more and more soldiers and priests to capture colonies which they considered primitive and convert them into Christians.

The construction of the city in Cubagua had finally come to an end, and by a royal decree from the Crown, the city that became the first Spanish town in the New world was named Nueva Cádiz. The newly erected buildings and structures towered over the city, casting shadows over the bustling streets and marketplaces below. The marketplace was saturated with the hustle and bustle of the merchants and sailors haggling over the prices of food, clothing items and other valuables. Many of these people were only passing through Cubagua determined to partake of the treasures of the Island before moving on but some of them had taken up permanent residence on the Island. The city was a hub of activity, with people of all shapes and sizes going about their daily lives. In the center of the city was the biggest and nicest house which belonged to the Governor. It was a two story building with Stone gargoyles at the corners and marble statues at the entrance. Enclosing it was a metal fence surrounded with colorful flowers. The interior was elegantly furnished with smooth plush carpets and furniture made out of the finest English Oak and the walls were lined with flamboyant paintings.

Visible along the shores of the ocean were three completed docks and two more that were still under construction.

The city now had two main avenues and about seven smaller streets. Just a stone's throw from each other were the newly erected church and convent buildings. Carriages with buoyantly dressed Spanish women and men could be seen riding along the streets. The market place was a hub of activity as usual as fresh vegetables and fruits from the mainland were being sold. There were also some live animals like chickens and pigs for sale and you could see other vendors selling eggs, wine, beer, fresh water in barrels and dry wood for making fires.

The city's population had tripled by now, housing over one thousand men, women and children most of whom were slaves. The ports were buzzing with life as expected, several ships were unloading the merchandise they had brought from the mainland while others were being loaded with cargo to be taken to Spain. Among the ships being loaded with pearls for the crown were Captain Juan's ship, he had been returning to the Island to take back pearls to the Crown since his first voyage to Cubagua and he was now very good friends with Captain Jose Maria. The latter always hosted him on each voyage, they would eat and drink as Juan filled him in on life at sea and how things were faring back home.

"Our kingdom is so beautiful now, you won't believe how many tourists pour in everyday to see the amazing places and structures the crown has erected especially at the Royal palace"

"And the taverns? Are the women still beguilingly seductive?"

Juan laughed, "Spaniards and beautiful women, it's in our blood eyy" he paused to take a swig of his drink "And to answer your question, yes they still are."

Captain Juan also told him about the rise in pirate attacks at sea and Jose told him to be careful on his trips.

The newly erected buildings weren't the only new developments in Nueva Cádiz, Governor Nicolas de Ovando had been reinstated as the Governor of Hispaniola by the Crown and a new Governor had been assigned to govern the new city. Just like his predecessor the new governor was a fat, lazy, corrupt and greedy man. He didn't care much about the horrific conditions the slaves were being made to endure, he only cared about enriching his pockets and making the crown happy by sending them the largest and finest pearls and collecting the El Quinto as at when due. The Governor usually embarked on bi-weekly inspections of the customs house to make sure everything was going on smoothly. As he stepped down from his luxurious carriage and entered the customs house, the soldiers stood in formation as he walked past them. He ordered the accountant to bring the books and he cross checked them to make sure everything was accounted for. Unbeknownst to the officials, he was secretly collaborating with the accountant to cook the books so that the Crown would be oblivious of their treachery. Coincidentally it was payday so while the soldiers stood in line waiting for the accountant to call their names in the order they would get paid, the Governor entered the inner room where the pearls were stored before being shipped off to Spain. He took a few handfuls from each of the boxes of pearls and put them in a bag which he passed through the back door to his personal slaves that went everywhere with him.

Just in front of the customs house, some black female slaves could be seen shucking oysters. A Spaniard with a mean looking grimace on his face is standing nearby supervising them, his whip ready in hand. As they disposed of the empty oyster shells, some children packed them into some *firkins* which they put on their heads and carried towards the mountain sized heap of shells along the shores. The cactus plants which stood nearby had been cut down during the city's construction and in their place stood some maize plants which were used to make maize beer. From the scrunched up look on the children's faces as they got closer to the shells, one could tell that a putrid smell was emanating from them. They covered their nose once they reached the mountains of shells with rotten mollusk flesh and unloaded their buckets. Vultures could be seen circling the skies waiting for their turn to descend on the rotten human flesh below them while the others were leisurely feeding on the many dismembered body parts of dead pearl divers that were abandoned on top of the shell mountains. Some of them were attacking each other just to get the greater chunk of their priced meal.

Captain Juan's ship had been fully loaded with the latest Pearl and crude oil shipments for the crown. He and the accountant cross checked to see that everything was in order before he set sail.

Shortly after Juan's ship had departed, Charaima returned from diving for the day with Dembe and the other slaves. The sound of the Sanctus bell coming from the church overshadowed all the other sounds on the Island. Ever since Fray Bartholome de las casas had been sent to Cubagua by the king to explore the place and give a detailed account as to why the slaves were refusing to convert to Christianity, many more priests had been sent to Nueva Cadiz.

Evening masses had become compulsory for both the Spaniards and slaves alike. Everyone was expected to drop whatever they were doing and head to the Cathedral for worship as soon as those bells rang and anyone caught doing otherwise was publicly flogged by the soldiers. “En el nombre del padre, del hijo y del espíritu santo, amén” the priest began, then proceeded to give the exhortation with Arasibo translating his teachings in their native tongue. The slaves were made to sit on the ground on one side of the church while their masters sat on the other side with benches made of fine Oak. As the priest babbled on, Charaima struggled unsuccessfully to keep his eyes open. He was so weak that at one point he feared he would die before the mass ended but he made it through and with the help of Dembe, he returned to the slave's chambers. Later that night while everyone slept, Charaima used the little strength left in him to unearth his clay jar and add some pearls he had hidden under his sleeping mat in it, after which he buried it and returned to sleep.

On the open seas, Captain Juan and his crew are on deck watching the waters.

“Captain, I think a storm is coming” one of the sailors said, handing Juan the Telescope. The Captain peered into it and nodded “I think you're right, the winds are blowing leeward. Tell Paschal to reduce sail at once and make sure the uppermost masts and rigging are sent down and stowed away to reduce weight aloft”

“Yes sire” the sailor said, leaving to go carry out the order he had been given.

“Petty officer Frances, take two men with you and make sure the boxes of pearls and barrels of the crude oil are properly secured”

As the storm brewed, Captain Juan watched it closely, being a man who hated anything taking him by surprise, he kept his eyes on the changing winds.

The Captain and his crew were so distracted by the threatening storm that they didn't notice a pirate ship advancing at full speed towards them. Suddenly something rammed into their ship and rocked it so heavily that one of the sailors taking down the ship's mast lost his bearing and slammed his head into the pole of the mast. The other sailor who was also up there with him sighted a ship with a black flag that had the vivid drawing of a skull mounted on its mast approaching theirs and let out a scream of “Pirates” at the top of his lungs. He quickly got down from the mast still shouting “Pirates! Pirates”.

Captain Juan, who had been knocked off balance by the cannon that hit his ship, quickly gathered himself and swung into action, giving orders to his sailors as they scrambled to get ready for the brutal attack they knew was coming.

“Battle Stations!”

“Aye aye Captain”

Frances ran down to the gunport to ready the cannon and fire at the enemy ship

“Ready the cannon! Fire!”

The cannon released an almost deafening sound as it slammed into the Pirate ship which kept coming at them.

Captain Juan, seeing that the first cannonball barely had any effect on the Pirate ship, ordered for a second shot to be fired but alas they were too late as the pirates jumped on board their ship in a flash and attacked ferociously. They had tiny pieces of black clothing tied around their heads, black markings covered their bodies and they carried muskets and cutlasses which shone off the reflection of the sunlight. They wasted no time in cutting down and firing at any sailor who stood in their way. The Captain of the Pirate ship didn't enter Captain Juan's ship until his men had done most of the damage. He approached Juan with a gleam in his eyes and their swords clashed. The Pirate Captain viciously attacked Juan, slashing his sword out of his hand with his cutlass.

“Surrender or I cut you down where you stand” the Pirate Captain threatened, his cutlass to Juan's neck.

“I will never give up my ship, not to you thief!” He spat

Captain Juan and his crew fought valiantly to defend their ship, but ultimately they were outnumbered and outmatched and soon many of them fell at the hands of the pirates but not without taking some pirates down with them too.

When Captain Juan saw that his men were being defeated, he ordered them to stand down and when they did, the Pirate ships Captain ordered his men to tie the survivors including Captain Juan up at one corner of the deck.

“They call me Blackhead” the Pirate Captain told Captain Juan “Cooperate with us and you might just leave here with your life and that of your surviving men. What booties do you have on this ship?”

“Everything is in the cargo hold, take whatever you like but please spare my men and I” Captain Juan tried to reason with Blackhead.

Blackhead ordered his men to go check the cargo hold and shortly after they left one of them shouted out to him from the cargo hold to come see what they had discovered. On getting down to the cargo hold, Blackhead found his men holding open some boxes that were filled with shiny pearls.

His eyes almost popped out of their sockets as he scooped up some of the pearls

“Are these what I think they are?” He directed the question to no one in particular

“Would you look at these beauties” he held up the pearls to his men as though they hadn’t already seen the ones in the boxes

“We are rich boys, we are rich!”

The pirates raised their cutlasses to the sky “Aye aye Captain”

“There must be more where these came from” Blackhead suggested and his crew agreed “Let’s go find out from the Captain shall we? Meanwhile carry all these boxes to our ship at once”

With that he left the cargo hold and returned to the deck where Captain Juan and his tied up crew members were being watched by three heavily armed pirates. He asked Captain Juan where they got the pearls in the boxes from.

“I don’t know, we just unloaded them from another ship, no questions asked”

Blackhead moved his face closer to his until their faces were almost touching “I don’t believe you. Well I gave you a chance!”

He turned to Captain Juan’s crew and told them that anyone that could give up the location of the pearls and crude oil would walk away with their lives. The others were very brave, but one of the jewelers caved and told Blackhead everything he wanted to know about an Island called the Pearl coast and its location. As promised he ordered his crew to untie the jeweler and take him to their ship, promising to drop him off along the way. As soon as the pirates had loaded all the boxes of pearl and crude oil onto their ship, Black head poured some crude oil on Captain Juan’s ship, lit a match and with a sinister smile on his face lit the whole ship on fire.

The laughter of he and his men could be heard as the fire devoured Captain Juan’s ship along with everyone on board.

The news of the attack on Juan's ship was brought to the new Governor’s notice by one of the Cargo ships who had unexpectedly happened upon the remnants of the burnt ship on their way

to the Island. As soon as they saw the ship's double headed Eagle figurehead, which had been one of the only things that hadn't been destroyed in the fire, everyone knew that it was a Spanish ship and the only Spanish ship that had left for Spain from Cubagua in the past week was Captain Juan's ship.

"I'm sure it was a pirate attack" Jose Maria offered "He was just telling me about the increase in pirate attacks in the past month"

"I have to write to the Crown at once and inform them of this unfortunate incident. Captain Juan was a good man"

"That he certainly was. May God save his soul and that of his crew" Jose Maria added.
The people present said "Amen" before the Governor exited to send a letter to the Crown.

After twelve years, one would think that Pedro would have gotten over the unbreakable bond Charaima and Cora shared, but it seemed to infuriate him as time went by. Despite all the untold hardship they were going through, Cora and Charaima still had an unspoken bond between them. Pedro knew that Cora was the only thing keeping Charaima alive and he despised that notion. Years ago, he had hatched a sinister plan that would sever their bond permanently which was going to Pedro Alonso to request her as his personal caretaker. Their arrangement had entailed Cora culling pearls and cooking meals with the other women during the day but coming back to take care of him at night.

Almost every night Cora would come back to a drunk and angry Pedro who would rape her and afterwards shackle her for the night. Things got even worse for her when she became pregnant with their first child. Pedro knocked her around constantly, often making it known to her that he would never be the father of that “filthy heather” she was carrying. Despite many nights she went to sleep starving and beaten down, she miraculously survived the pregnancy and gave birth to their son whom Pedro never touched or showed any affection as a baby. He never attempted to conceal the patent hatred in his eyes whenever he looked at them. A year later, Cora took in again and gave birth to another boy who bore an uncanny resemblance to Pedro. As a young girl, she used to dream of having children someday, nurturing them and loving them just like her mother had loved her and her younger siblings but whenever she looked at the two boys she had with Pedro she didn’t feel any love for them and she hated herself even more for feeling that way towards her own children. She knew it wasn’t their fault that the man who had fathered them was a monster.

Cora’s first son with Pedro was now seven years old and bore a remarkable resemblance to his father which meant little or nothing to Pedro as he still severely mistreated them. Since it was almost time for Pedro to return home, Cora was preparing his dinner. She stirred the soup that contained little chunks of meat in a clay pot over an open flame, her hands were badly swollen and fidgety from culling pearls all day long. The anxiety on her battered face as she anticipated Pedro’s dreaded return was apparent. Pedro was like a ticking time bomb these days, nothing Cora and the children ever did was good enough for him and he wasn’t shy about showing his displeasure. As she prepared dinner, her boys cowered in the corner, watching her cook with fear in their eyes as they awaited the inevitable. She looked at them and her eyes immediately swelled with tears. She had come close to ending her life several times but the thought of the horrors her boys would suffer at the hands of their father if she went through with it stopped her every time. She was constantly overwhelmed with guilt for bringing them into this nasty world to suffer for something they knew nothing about.

The sound of Pedro slamming the door behind him as he entered the hut, sent a chill down Cora’s spine. They greeted him and he grunted in response, scowling at the sight of Cora and the children. Cora dished some soup into a plate and set it in front of him, he grabbed the spoon, tasted it, then spit it out like he had eaten poison.

“What the hell is this?” he fumed in anger

Cora jumped at the exasperation in his voice, she tried to mask the fear that had

gripped her but the tremor in her voice instantly gave her away

“F..fo.. food...I...made..you..food.” she stammered.

Pedro stood up with the plate in his hands and crossed the room to where she was standing. He raised the plate up to her nose and asked her to smell it

“Does that smell like food to you? Huh?” He yelled, throwing the plate and the hot contents in Cora’s face “You prepare this shit and call it food?”

Cora shrunk back, afraid of what he was going to do next and the children clung to each other, whimpering.

“Please forgive me” she pleaded “I’ll make you whatever you want for dinner”

Pedro’s face was contorted with rage as he grabbed Cora’s neck and shoved her up against the wall “You’re always sorry you worthless piece of trash! What the hell is wrong with you? Can’t you do anything right?”

As his hands deliberately tightened around her neck, Cora hit him furiously with her bony hands, struggling to free herself as he had cut off her air supply. The boys came behind him and dragged his legs, begging him to leave their mother alone. He only freed her to grab his whip and descend on the boys. Cora fell on the ground pleading with him to have mercy on them so he turned on her, dumped the belt and used his fists. He hit her until he had knocked out some of her teeth then he grabbed the pot sitting on the fireplace and hurled it against the wall, sending food and shards of pottery everywhere.

“There better be real food before I return from the tavern”

With that declaration, he stormed out of the hut, leaving the children to comfort their motionless mother.

Cora eventually gathered herself and took a wooden container to go in search of fresh water that she would use to prepare Pedro another meal. As she stepped out of the hut, the first person she saw was Charaima. As their eyes met, they both gave each other a knowing defeated look. They were the last survivors of the Guaiquery tribe.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dembe and Charaima's sleep were interrupted by screams coming from a nearby slave hut. One of the slaves had woken up to a very gruesome sight that left her visibly shaken. Twelve of the slaves she had been shackled with had taken their own lives using a rusty piece of metal with jagged edges which lay in the bloodied palm of one of the dead slaves. Some soldiers had been alerted by her screams and rushed to the scene to see the bodies lying in the hut, in a pool of their collective blood.

The Governor was immediately informed and he came to see the sight for himself

"How much did we pay for these ones?" He asked a dock master

"They were bought for twenty white pearls each sir"

The Governor shook his head "Where are the guards who were supposed to be watching them eh?"

One of the guards stepped forward "So you didn't see or hear anything as a dozen slaves under your watch slit their throats"

"N...nn.. no sir" he stammered

"What a waste of resources" the Governor lamented

"What should we do to their bodies sir?" Mateo asked him

"Burn down the hut with their bodies in it and put these three in the guard room, leave them there till I say otherwise" he pointed at the guards who had been assigned to their hut.

That evening at Mass, the Priest as instructed by the Governor strongly condemned the act of suicide among the slaves, telling them that anyone who took their own lives would end up in the lake of fire for all eternity. He admonished them to save their brothers and sisters souls from condemnation by reporting any of them heard talking about taking their own lives. He then made them pray for their 'brothers and sisters' who had sinned against God to be forgiven and allowed into Paradise.

The exhaustion of the Oyster beds was no longer a secret. Before the Spaniards arrived, you could see the oysters lying on top of one another through the clear surface of the ocean but now, with each trip, the divers had to go deeper and deeper into the ocean, many times as deep as the bottom of the ocean which was almost twenty feet in depth. The shark attacks on the divers were becoming so frequent that almost one or two lives were lost to these creatures everyday. During one of the attacks, a shark toppled over a boat and he and his feral friends decimated everyone on board including the boat masters. Seeing them scream and beg for help almost brought a smile to Charaima's lips if he hadn't been too weak to muster one .

He was getting really desperate because with each fishing trip, he struggled to dive deeper which meant he came up with less oysters and attracted more whipping from his boat masters. As he struggled to dive deeper on one of the trips, Dembe who was tied to him that day decided to help him. He took most of the shells in his pouch and put them into Charaima's pouch so the boat supervisor would not see that Charaima was at his last straw and then dove deeper to gather more for himself. Charaima was really grateful for the gesture and he was certain that his time to die was near. At that point he had little to no human features left and looking at him was like staring death in the face. He had even started having vivid dreams of his dead parents and siblings beckoning to him to join them and find peace.

Luckily for Charaima, Dembe helped him in and out of the deep waters all day, putting oysters into his pouch without the boat master's knowledge. Despite all his help, Charaima was exhausted by the end of the day's fishing trip. As soon as he stepped out of the fishing boat, his knees gave way and he collapsed into the sand. Cora, who was shucking oysters nearby with some black slaves, saw Charaima collapse and immediately ran to him. She sat on the ground, put Charaima's head on her lap and sang a song they used to sing for each other when they were younger to him. In his weakened state Charaima echoed the song along with her and told her in their native tongue that he was dying.

"I will be with mother and father and Knavee soon, Cora"

"Death is only the beginning my love, we will still be together even in the afterlife" she responded with tears pouring from her eyes.

One of the soldiers had alerted Pedro who had been in the bar drinking and jabbering to his fellow drunks about the situation with Cora and Charaima. In his drunken stupor he rushed out and ran towards them furiously shouting Cora's name. When he got to them, he descended on them with his whip trying to separate them but Cora held on tightly to Charaima who was begging her to leave him and go with Pedro so that he would stop hitting her. She refused and clung onto him, knowing that this could be the last time they would ever be in each other's arms. Finally when Pedro had succeeded in separating them, he dragged Cora with him towards their house and Charaima's emaciated body wracked with sobs, afraid of what would happen to her. Dembe, who had witnessed the pathetic scene, picked up Charaima and carried him back to their hut.

When they got to the hut, Charaima dug up the buried clay jar and handed it over to Dembe and without saying anything, Dembe knew exactly what Charaima wanted him to do with it.

Blackhead and his crew had been searching for Cubagua Island since their encounter with captain Juan a few weeks ago and their greed kept them going. They could only imagine how many pearls and crude oil they would loot from the source if they found the large quantity they did on just one ship from the Island.

As they sailed on the clear waters that day, one of the pirates called Captain Blackhead's attention to a trail of corpses floating on the water. As they inched closer, they noticed that many of the bodies were dismembered and had some sort of bag tied around their waists. Blackhead ordered them to pull one of the bodies into the ship and when they did they found some oyster shells and some loose pearls in the bag. They threw the first body back in the ocean and pulled another one in, they searched the bag around his waist and found some oyster and loose pearls too.

Captain Blackhead held up the pearls "Do you what this means boys?" The men around him shook their heads no "It means we're close to our riches. Quick search all their bags and collect every last pearl you find"

After they had rid the bodies of all their treasures they continued sailing till they spotted some ships over the horizon.

"That must be the Pearl coast" Captain Blackhead said as he glanced into his telescope. He relayed to his men that there was too much activity going on at that time so they would have to wait and attack them under the cover of darkness.

Unbeknownst to the people in Nueva Cádiz, while they were going about their usual businesses of buying and selling, Pearl fishing and partying, there was danger looming. After the days activities, the bar was parked as usual with drunks and whores going in and coming out of the unholy establishment. Pedro as always was at the center of all the partying, telling stories of how he had beaten a slave or describing how the sharks had torn into the flesh of some divers. The others drunk on free flowing liquor laughed recklessly as though these slaves were not human beings whose lives had been ended by vicious sea creatures and their dismembered carcasses left floating carelessly in the ocean.

While the inhabitants of Nueva Cádiz partied, the pirates got ready to attack. They marked their faces with black paintings, armed themselves with their sharp cutlasses and other deadly weapons and descended upon the brightly lit town. The soldiers guarding the customs house were the first to sight them, they raised an alarm and began firing their muskets at the invaders. Blackhead had divided his men into three groups. He sent the first group to the bar, the second group to the fanciest house on the Island which was the governor's house and then he took charge of the group assigned to the customs house. The pirates hit their various targets in their typical ruthless manner, butchering anyone they found in the streets, men and women, armed or unarmed, Spaniard or slave whether they were a threat or not. The soldiers at the bar who had heard the gunshots ran out with their weapons, shooting at anyone they could find. As men, women and children ran helter skelter looking for ways to escape, a stampede was created and many people were trampled to death.

The pirates that were sent to the governor's house kicked the door in and butchered all his personal slaves who had hidden in one of the rooms of the house once the shootings began. The Governor himself had fled from the house through a secret door only he knew about and one of the soldiers hid him in the church, along with some terrified children. The pirates ransacked his residence and made away with all the valuables they could carry then they set the governor's house on fire. Blackhead and the member of his crew who had taken on the customs house were gradually subduing the guards. Most of the guards had run out of bullets and without their muskets they were all but defenseless against the ferocious pirates who cut them down like chickens.

The remaining guards soon ran for their lives, leaving the customs house at the mercy of the pirates who took over all the boxes of pearls that had been classified for shipping and burnt the house down. The pirates went into the bar and church killing as many people as they could find including the frays. Dembe, who had woken up as soon as the shootings began, stayed alert, ready to attack anyone who came into their hut. Charaima was awake too, although he was too weak to be of any help. On the open waters, Spaniards could be seen fleeing in boats. After the pirates had completely subdued their opposition, they celebrated their victory by drinking, partying and violating the women who were left. They also captured many of the slaves with plans to sell them off to the highest bidders once they left the Island. When it was almost daybreak, they loaded up all they had looted including the slaves into their ships and departed the Island leaving destruction and death in their wake.

After they left, survivors gradually came out from their hiding places horrified at the number of corpses that littered the streets of the town. Charaima begged Dembe to help him search for Cora among the survivors and he let out a huge sigh of relief when Dembe gave him a nod that she was still alive.

Pedro, Jose Maria and the Governor were among the few Spaniards who had survived the attack and hadn't fled the town.

They made the slaves clean up the streets as much as they could and a few days later things relatively went back to normal and Pearl fishing recommenced.

The ports were all but deserted as many of the ships and boats who hadn't left on the night of the pirate attack were set on fire by the pirates. The few boats they had spared were used to continue the pearl fishing but after each fishing trip, the number of pearls recovered continued to reduce drastically. The Governor arranged a meeting with Captain José and the boat masters to find out why they weren't harvesting enough pearls. They informed him that the oyster beds had been exhausted and the few surviving slaves who had to dive almost to the bottom of the ocean were dying from shark attacks and fatigue. He was also informed that a new pearl coast had been found and many adventurers and kingdoms had shifted their attention and resources there. The corrupt governor immediately started making plans to leave Nirvana Cádiz as soon as possible. He paid a sailor and in the middle of the night, they commandeered a boat and left the Island.

The day Charaima finally reunited with his ancestors started like every other day on the Island. Charaima, Dembe and a few other slaves entered their fishing boats and sailed into the waters.

Pedro was the boat master in charge of the boat among whose occupants were Charaima and Dembe. Diving soon commenced with Pedro whipping them at intervals to hurry it up. Charaima was deep in the water when he saw a shark rapidly approaching him. He tried to swim away but he was too weak and the shark was too fast. He closed his eyes and let the sweet memories of Cora, his parents, brothers and sisters and the happy days they shared before the conquistadores arrived envelope him as the shark tore into him. Dembe who was also in the deep waters at that time saw what was happening and swam furiously towards Charaima but it was already too late. He pulled what was left of Charaimas body from the water and loaded it into their boat. Amid protests and whippings from Pedro he rowed the boat to shore, determined to not let Charaimas final resting place be the polluted waters.

As soon as Cora saw him carrying Charaimas lifeless body out of the boat, she threw the oyster she was shucking away and fell on the ground weeping for her beloved Charaima. Dembe took his body and lay it at her feet as she wept. She took his body and cradled it against her chest and Pedro who was watching the pathetic scene had a grin of satisfaction on his face. He turned to Dembe "Get ready, you're next"

Dembe shot him a deadly stare that momentarily chilled the blood flowing through his veins before he walked away laughing.

Dembe dug up the earth near their slave hut and buried Charaima there. Afterwards he put more pearls into the clay jar Charaima had given to him and buried it. He glanced over at Charaima's empty sleeping mat and for the first time since he turned five years old, he faced the wall and shed bitter tears for Charaima, his wife Moussane, his family and his people.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The news of the depletion of the oyster beds and the desertion of the pearl coast of Cubagua had reached King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. They had also heard about the frequent pirate attacks and the discovery of another Island of great riches of gold, emeralds and pearls so they began withdrawing and shifting their resources to this new Island. They also ordered José Maria not to leave Cubagua until he had taken every last pearl he could lay his hands on so despite the depleted oyster beds and scarce labour, they still forced the few slaves left to continue diving for the last of the pearls.

As the slaves left their hut on this particular morning to go pearl fishing, Dembe noticed that the skies were slightly cloudy like a storm was coming. He was getting more and more frustrated because no matter how deep he dove, he mostly came up empty and Pedro was always there to greet him with a lash of his whip. The young Spaniard sat on the boat, holding his whip in one hand and his booze in the other. He knocked back his drink as he barked orders at the divers to get him pearls or face his wrath.

The clouds in the skies were getting darker but the boat masters paid no mind to it, they were more interested in whipping the slaves and laughing as sharks attacked and tore some of the divers in the deep ocean.

As the clouds darkened, the winds began to pick up and the waves intensified. Dembe who was almost on the ocean bed scrambling to grab any oysters around while fighting against the water pressure remained oblivious of what was going on on the surface of the ocean. Suddenly he saw a shark approaching him and he swam quickly to the surface eager to get away from the shark. As soon as his head rose above water, Pedro screamed at him to go back inside and raised his whip to strike him but Dembe held the whip and with all his strength, he pulled Pedro into the water and quickly used him as a shield between himself and the shark. As the shark tore Pedro to pieces his chilling screams could be heard throughout the Island. Dembe, seeing the fury of the wind and the waves crashing all around him, quickly jumped into his fishing boat and began paddling towards the mainland desperate to escape as fast as possible.

The other boat masters were so occupied with trying to get to the safety of the shore or mainland that they didn't bother chasing after Dembe as he rowed away.

The hurricane hit with full force, blowing roofs off of the buildings and huts standing in the city. Carriages, fishing boats and equipment were pulled into the ocean as huge waves crashed onto the Island. The pier was destroyed and the few anchored ships sank right then and there drowning those who had boarded them to escape. Cora held tightly onto her children praying to the creator to protect them but the roof of their hut caved in on them, killing them instantly. The stone buildings of the church, convent, the governor's house and the remains of the charred customs house collapsed, taking down with them every occupant and property within. José Maria, a few Spaniards and slaves who couldn't escape from the Island are buried with the collapsed buildings. Over the next three days everything was destroyed and decimated and the former thriving city of Nueva Cádiz lay in ruins. It was as though the wrath of Guabancex— *the zemi of all violent storms* was making sure that nothing was left over from this hell on earth.

It's a bright and sunny day and the rays of the sun are streaming over the vibrant deep blue ocean.

Four hundred and fifty years have passed since the city of Nueva Cadíz was wiped away by a hurricane, the ruins of the city—as *they are known nowadays* the only evidence that the Island once bustled with life and activity.

A group of foreign tourists are inspecting the ruins when one of them spots something peeking out of the soil. He gets on his knees and begins digging with his fingers till he unearths a clay jar covered with a termite infested tattered piece of clothing. He takes away the shreds of the clothing and inside the jar are pearls both big and small. He pours the contents of the jar on the floor and the other tourists gather around him fascinated by his discovery. They soon begin haggling over who got to keep the pearls, not fully understanding that those pearls they were haggling over had been paid for with blood.