

The Columbus Conspiracy

A historic mystery thriller

I. Lisbon, July 2006

"God does not forgive the sins He makes us commit."

— José Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

The Delta Airlines nonstop flight from JFK to Lisbon touched down at 8.39am, 51 minutes ahead of schedule. This was remarkable, although not at all uncommon on the eastwards flights, thanks to the North Atlantic jet stream. According to the captain's information, they had moved within a 180 km/hour jet stream which helped the aircraft to reach a speed of more than 1.000 km/hour at cruising altitude, thus allowing them to make the 6h40m flight in less than 6 hours. Her body was aching from the sleepless night in the small seats, and she craved for a shower and a bed. Hopefully, her sister would be waiting in the airport to pick them up in Lisbon.

It had all started two years ago in a downtown Boston coffee shop, near the Common's, at the corner of Beacon and Charles Street. At least, that's what Savannah told her friends, although she herself was not totally sure. The little coffee shop had later been bought by a national coffee chain, but at the time it was a lovely local spot with the best espresso in town. It was owned by Paolo, a third generation Italian who proudly maintained the coffee shop opened by his grandfather, with aged photos in fogged and dusty frames of Tuscan countryside or Roman landmarks. Paolo himself decided it was good for business to maintain the flair and talkative attitude of the Italians – and with that, a penchant to talk up the young ladies that came to the shop. That said, he was a democratic *charmant*, seducing all women indiscriminately.

Savannah had arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts a couple of weeks before, at the end of August 2004, to look up for a flat and settle down as a 1st year Harvard Business School MBA

student. She had been to Paolo's a few times, enjoyed the slow and positive atmosphere of the place as well as the deep historical symbolism of the Boston Common's, the cradle of the United States. Paolo's flirts were a bonus, which she took at face value – good natured and inconsequential. That morning Savannah was in a good mood. She had finally settled for a small studio close to the Charles River, ten minutes cycling to HBS. It had the advantage of allowing her to be simultaneously close to Boston city center and the school. It was a bit pricey, but the money she had made as an investment banking analyst in Wall Street for the past three years allowed her to afford it. The MBA fees, though, were a different matter, but a great job at the end of the program would certainly pay off the student loans. Savannah had just turned 25, one of the youngest students of the MBA intake and a bright future ahead. Although not what men would call a "stunner", she had an elegant and athletic figure – not that she had had the time to go often to the overpriced gym in NY she insisted on maintaining during the past three years, but still remnants of the volleyball she played all the way from high school to the end of university.

She asked for a "doppio espresso macchiato, just a splash of skinny milk, take away". "Of course, bella signora, the dark roast blend as usual, sì?"

She could almost pinpoint the exact moment it happened. The day was hot and she was wearing a light summer dress, her bare arms showing her white, almost pink skin covered by a light translucent blond fluff. As she was leaving the coffee shop, a strong and tanned male hand held the door for her. As she exited, her bare arm fortuitously touched the tanned hand holding the door. It was just a light, unconscious touch. A scrape really, not a touch, because she kept on walking. But enough to make the tiny blond hairs on her arm stand. Perhaps what had caused the sensation was that the touch had been... unhurried. Not as hasty brush of two strangers in the bustle of the quotidian. As if time had imperceptibly come to a halt, a bubble of time encompassing only the white arm and the tanned hand touching in slow motion, leaving everything else – other people, smells, sounds – outside the selfishness of individuality.

On her wedding, she had retold that story, saying she had felt goose bumps on that moment – the funny thing was that she had not even seen the stranger's face. It was just a reaction of her skin to the chance touch of a hand, her nervous system suddenly awakened by the unexpected touch. But that was an exaggeration.

Maybe it had just been the reaction of her skin at passing from the cool shadow of the coffee shop into the hot day outside, a burst of sunlight suddenly hitting her body. As her eyes adjusted to the sudden explosion of light, she turned her head, a strand of blond hair falling in front of her eyes, to thank the stranger. An absent minded, casual, thank you, because her mind had not yet processed the tingle in the skin of her arm, the tint bristle hairs upended. That sensation was still an instant behind, trapped in that bubble of time. The vaguely familiar guy held the door for her, looking shamelessly into her eyes while saying "Without coffee I'm gonna feel like something's missing in the day". Savannah smiled and held his gaze, continuing the Al

Pacino line, almost as an automatic response, in the spur of the moment: “Most of my scripts have coffee stains on them... that’s how you know it’s a Pacino script.” The guy was obviously impressed. Like in all other things in life, Savannah believed that if you want to beat them, you must know more than them.

It turned out Hugh was a classmate and they had briefly met during induction day back in July. Hugh insisted walking her down the Commons as she headed towards the Park Street metro station. That warm September morning she found him a bit cocky, the type of overconfident sporty type that expected a girl to fall out for him and be grateful of the scrapes of attention he was dispensing on her. Tough luck. But then again, from her experience, at that age guys were mostly divided into two categories: dickheads who believed they would be masters of the universe, or sex-deprived losers who looked like puppies and couldn’t hold a decent conversation with a woman without wetting themselves. Yeah, there were also the intellectual types and the sadistic, but those were the tail ends of the probability function... To be honest, she preferred the overconfident masters of the universe.

To her surprise, she found herself engaged at the end of the first year and married at the end of the second. They married on Sunday, 23 July 2006, in Savannah’s hometown of Newport, Rhode Island. In September, a vastly well-paid job at Goldman awaited her in New York, while Hugh had landed his dream job as a hedge fund manager. Both knew what expected them over the next 10 years, but the reward at the end of the line was massive. It was said that when you enter Wall Street, a shot was fired on your back and you just had to keep out-running the bullet and never look back. Hugh was thrilled about the all thing. Savannah was a bit more cynical, although she liked finance and loved the buzz of being in the middle of the action, making things happen and the world go round. During her time at JPMorgan before the MBA, she had the habit of taking a solitary walk up and down the street eating her lunchtime sandwich, away from the rush and noise of the open-space office, while mentally planning the slides for the pitch books 1st years were condemned to produce, chained to the production line 15 hours a day. In one of those lunchtime walks, it suddenly hit her – she smiled inward as she realized Wall Street was literally a street that started with a kindergarten and ended with the graveyard of Trinity Church... so fitting for the masters of the universe.

Anyway, Goldman was still a month away. Now Savannah and Hugh had three weeks to enjoy their honeymoon. They had finally agreed on a two-weeks tour of European cities and one week in Greece, island-hopping in a luxury sailing private tour.

As they waited for their luggage on the airport terminal and Savannah turned on her iPhone, a text message from her sister blipped on the screen. It had probably been sent while they were flying. Raven’s text was short and a bit cryptic: “Sorry, can’t pick you up. Urgent thing in Tomar, back tonight. Take a cab to the apartment and get a coffee at Antonio’s next door. XX”

That was odd. But Raven was odd anyway, so nothing to be surprised. She was obsessed with Christopher Columbus, or Christopher Colon as she insisted. Savannah remembered fondly

the lazy summer afternoons sailing with her twin sister in their godfather's boat around the Caribbean. He used to tell them stories about Colon's life and mysteries. Every summer since she could remember, they had sailed together, diving on Cuba's beaches, cruising the shores of Haiti and Dominican Republic, visiting the Cathedral of Santa Maria Menor in Santo Domingo where Christopher Columbus had been buried before being moved to Habana Cathedral and then to Seville Cathedral. Before that, the remains of the Admiral had initially been buried in Valladolid where he died and Las Cuevas Monastery in Seville. That was surely a record: 5 burial places. The famous explorer bones were as restless in death as in life.

Savanah and Raven both cherished those warm and breezy Caribbean holidays, hearing their godfather talk about the massive iron bell of Santa Maria, the ship from Columbus's fleet that supposedly crashed in the low tide reef off the island of Hispaniola, now Dominican Republic, and sunk – never to be found again!!

Still, Savanah found it a bit pointless to keep turning old and dusty pages in moldy libraries or spending hours looking at engravings in monasteries and churches no one really cared about nowadays. Yes, Columbus was a weird guy, with some crazy stories and mysteries, but the history books had settled that long ago. It was all in Wikipedia: "Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was an Italian explorer, navigator, and colonist who completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean under the auspices of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain. He led the first European expeditions to the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, initiating the permanent European colonization of the Americas. Columbus discovered a viable sailing route to the Americas, a continent that was then unknown to the Old World. While what he thought he had discovered was a route to the Far East, he is credited with the opening of the Americas for conquest and settlement by Europeans." That's it, right? He convinced the Spanish Catholic Kings to finance his expedition to the Indies via a westwards route, based on Ptolomeu's view of a round Earth, thus contradicting the medieval myth of a flat Earth, and by doing so not only became the First Governor of the West Indies, but also contributed to taking humankind from the medieval Dark Ages into the Renaissance. His last days were sad, imprisoned by the Spanish in Santo Domingo and taken in shackles to Spain. In a very well received and widely circulated diary of voyage, the explorer and naturalist Amerigo Vespucci described in splendid and ravishing detail the geography, landscapes and costumes of the new lands and – as legend has it – used for the first time the expression New World, thus recognizing it as a new continent and not just scattered islands. A famous mapmaker, whose name she had now forgotten, had published a map where the new continent was named after the Latinized name Amerigo, which ultimately led to the new continent name of America. Perhaps if it had not been for that historical mistake, Colombia would now be a continent instead of a country.

Raven had finished her undergrad degree at UPenn in History and then moved to Lisbon to do her PhD research on Christopher Colon. Savanah felt a bit stiff about the fact Raven had been traveling between Rio de Janeiro, the Caribbean, Genoa, Lisbon, Seville and god knows

where, sponsored by dad's money, while she was slaving away to make her way up the investment banking grinding machine.

Savanah pushed those thoughts away as unworthy, but they stubbornly reappeared once in a while, like a faint ghost making fun of her. But, heiii... Savanah and Hugh had only 3 days in Lisbon before flying out to Paris, and Raven couldn't spare the time to meet her husband and be with her twin sister? Gosh, not coming to the wedding had been bad, but this was a bit too much. Anyway, Raven had always been a head in the moon, fantasizing about her mysteries and conspiracy theories, and Savanah had got used to take her eccentricities at face value. She had even made the effort to pretend to appreciate the loud, horrible satanic music Raven had played at a heavy metal band at high school.

Anyway, no matter. If Raven couldn't meet them, it meant more time for her and Hugh to be alone and enjoy the honeymoon. There was just a problem, as Hugh pointed out as they entered a taxi outside the airport terminal. "How are we going to get into the apartment to leave the luggage, without the keys?"

Savanah waived the issue aside a bit too hastily, transpiring some nervousness she attempted to hide, saying Raven had surely left them some clue to find the keys. The tiredness that had weighted on her bones just minutes ago was gone, and she was excited about exploring the city. Heading towards Raven's apartment in Alfama, she asked the taxi driver to take a tourist route through the river and the old town.

Savanah could feel the heavy late July heat rising from the ground, tempered by a light breeze from the Atlantic. The tourist route taken by the taxi driver bought them close to the Tagus, with a glimpse of the Vasco da Gama bridge. The sun reflected between the clear blue sky and the still waters of Mar da Palha, the wide estuary formed by the Tagus river, creating a reflective mirror that invaded the city in a hazy golden light, like sparkling liquid honey. As the taxi driver explained in a quite decent English, Vasco da Gama bridge, with 12km, is the longest in western Europe and is the unique setting for the Lisbon half marathon that every year closes off the bridge for close to 40.000 runners.

As they turned westwards towards the heart of the old town, they marveled at the stacking of houses in a multitude of colors, piggybacking on top of each other in the gentle uphill slope to St. Jorge Castle, as if competing to catch a glimpse of the river. The taxi driver continued his pleasant description of the old "bairros", the Moorish quarter, the Jewish quarter, until they reached their destination.

As they climbed out of the taxi, Savanah smiled... Raven's apartment was in a side-looped old building, freshly painted in pale blue, lying shoulder to shoulder against other old buildings as if supporting each other, in a steep street of Alfama. The sidewalk had an intricate geometrical design, the typical Portuguese cobblestone, worn by the erosion of centuries. It looked beautiful but deadly – specially for women in high heels on a rainy day.

In the ground floor of Raven's building, a rusted sign announced Café Antonio, a picturesque coffee shop and tavern, with two cast iron tables outside, and a front window where you could see small groceries, bread, fruit and vegetables.

Savanah and Hugh set down for a coffee, as instructed by Raven's text message. As they did so, a mustachioed man with a friendly round face, sweating abundantly (clearly the shop didn't have air conditioned...) came out of the store greeting her enthusiastically. "Menina Raven, já voltou!! An envelope was left under the door, found it as I opened the store this morning, it is addressed to you". The man, probably Antonio, gesticulated a lot as he talked, in a clear effort to make himself understood by the American girl. She hadn't said a word, but he was making an effort to address her in English. When he deposited an envelope on the table, addressed to Raven, Savanah laughed as she understood: the man had mistaken her for her twin sister. She was about to explain the confusion when she felt the touch of keys inside the envelope. Ah, Raven, naughty girl!

She probably left Lisbon in a rush very early that morning, so left the envelope with the keys addressed to herself under Antonio's shop door, anticipating he would confuse the twin sisters and give the envelope to Savanah as soon as she arrived.

So be it. She winked to Hugh and thanked Sr. Antonio, ordering some breakfast with a flush of gestures and a lot of pointing. Sr. Antonio was clearly used to talking to her sister in a mix of English and Portuguese. He still seemed to have no clue this was a different person.

In the apartment upstairs, as Savanah was taking a shower, Hugh called her up. "Hey, Savanah, who is Sarah?"

"What? Can't hear you, I'm in the shower."

Hugh came into the bathroom holding a piece of paper. Savanah came out of the shower and was drying herself with a towel as Hugh read the message. "Hi Sophia. I need to rush out to Convento de Cristo in Tomar... discovered something huge, will tell you everything tonight. Glad you found the keys with Sr. Antonio :-). See you soon, Sarah!"

"Long story, love. I am Sophia. For some reason, we grew up calling each other by those names. Raven calls me Sophia. I call her Sarah. It was also the names our godfather used for us, so it became a bit of an insider secret."

They left the Alfama apartment mid-morning, around 10 o'clock, for a leisurely sightseeing walk. Savanah had expected her sister to show them around town, so she had not really planned a route. They were heading towards Terreiro do Paço when Savanah's mobile rang. It was Raven. It sounded like she was driving, her mobile in loud-speak. Yes, they had found the keys all right. Yes, they were having a good time. No, there was no problem she had not picked them up. Raven sounded excited, maybe a bit nervous, and said something about an

extraordinary discovery, a lost Book from Colon's library that might have been hidden in the Love Chapel in Tomar. Whatever that was. "I'm now arriving in Tomar and will be back to Lisbon tonight. It might be late, so don't wait up. Sophia, this changes everything, you will see! Love you, sis". And she hung up.

That evening, Savanah and Hugh lounged lazily in the balcony of 2nd floor apartment, with some cold beer and a lot of kissing, enjoying that unique feeling of the city as it cools down from the daily heat. Down the steep street they could barely see a portion of the river. Uphill they couldn't see much, but could feel the imposing force of St. Jorge Castle dominating the city at its feet. The monotonous sound of the cicadas, the blue hue of the moonlight reflecting off the river and the respite from the daily heat lulled the city into a sleepy haze, in a long sensual groan, inviting mysteries and secrets behind closed doors. Savanah and Hugh moved to the bedroom, made somewhat noisy sex that could surely be heard on the street from the open window, and fell deeply asleep.

In the middle of the night, they were woken up by hysterical cries in the street. Someone was shouting. It seemed something distant, as the sounds of reality mixed with the stuff of their dreams, in a limbo between two worlds. As consciousness was fighting its way out of the sleepy mists, they were violently awakened by the sound of crashing glass. Hugh ran to the living room and cursed. Someone had thrown a cobblestone through the window. The stone caused a dent on the wooden dining table and laid on the floor, splinted in two. Fuck.

They heard steps running down the street. Morons. Assholes.

In the morning, as they were having breakfast after cleaning up the mess, Savanah looked fixedly to a spot in the ceiling, her mind still processing what the eyes were seeing. She was still a bit numb from the jet lag, in need of caffeine.

"Sons of a bitch, assholes, fuckers!" Hugh looked towards the spot where her eyes were fixed. A fist-sized hole in the ceiling, a nasty smudge on the otherwise white-painted ceiling. The cobblestone thrown from the street, following its inexorable elliptical gravitational path, hit the ceiling before crashing down into the wooden table and then the floor.

They only got the news when they walked out of the apartment, met in shock by Sr. Antonio, who ran towards her, pale and hysterical, as if seeing a ghost. He started calling out, looking confused. It took Savanah some seconds to notice the buzz around them from a crowd further down the road.

Raven had never made it to the apartment. She had been found dead early in the morning, in the driving seat of her red Fiat Punto, in the steep street 300 meters away from her apartment, the door ajar and no signs of violence or fight. A pool of blood soaked the seat and the floor. On her left wrist, a deep cut in the shape of a pentagram.

The police investigation was a dead-end. The time of death was placed somewhere around 3.00-3.30 in the morning. The street had apparently been deserted and the neighbors asleep, as no-one recalled anything. The cobblestone thrown at their apartment window could have been around the time of Raven's death, but Savannah and Hugh weren't sure.

There were no fingerprints. The autopsy found traces of a strong sedative, Fentanyl, but no traces of injection or ingestion, suggesting the drug had been absorbed by nasal spray – willingly or administered. Fentanyl is the most commonly used synthetic opioid in medicine, but also widely used as a recreational drug and the most common cause of overdose deaths in the United States. It has a very rapid onset, although its effects last less than two hours. Fentanyl is 100 times stronger than morphine, and if Raven's assailant had pushed an impregnated cloth on Raven's mouth and nose, she would have been knocked out almost instantly and unable to cry out for help. In any case, she had not overdosed. Raven died of the bleeding caused by the pentagram-shaped wound on her wrist.

The honeymoon was, of course, cancelled.

On the third day after the event, as Savannah and Hugh returned to the apartment after hours of bureaucracy in the American embassy to handle the repatriation of the body, she noticed a car parked on the street in front of the apartment. The man inside looked firmly at her, as if trying to ascertain if he had just seen a ghost, then drove away. He had shaven head, a goatee beard and a black Iron Maiden t-shirt.

Police investigation never found any relevant leads. No fingerprints, no visible marks of physical struggle or rape, no witnesses. The time of death, the presence of drugs and the satanic pentagram cut led the police investigators to consider the most likely scenario was a drugs-related crime or some satanic ritual suicide pact gone wrong. This was reinforced when a 112 call¹ was linked to the death. As the police investigator explained to Savannah and Hugh, the call had been placed at 3.14am from Raven's mobile number. She didn't speak directly to the emergency phone line operator nor answered the questions, but the call recorded Raven saying something quite weird:

"High Goat, is Satan with you?"

After this recording and the results of the autopsy, the investigation wound down, although never officially concluded. Resources were pulled by other crimes with more likelihood of being solved... Savannah never mentioned this recording to her parents, to avoid increasing even further their distress. Just the suggestion Raven might have been using drugs or a victim of a satanic gang crime was enough for them to recriminate themselves for whatever parenting failures they invented. Parenthood is all about anxiety – parents never quite let go of the image

¹ The pan-European emergency number, equivalent to the 911 in the U.S.

of a tiny baby in their arms, totally dependent on them for even the basic survival needs, and carry that self-imposed burden of protection forever. Any failure of a daughter or son when adult is felt by parents as their own failure. Good thing that successes and happiness too.

II. Sagres, June 1460 (Columbus)

"In te Domine speravi: non confundar in aeternum"

- Epitaph of Columbus tomb

I was only nine when my father, a colossal man with reddish blond hair and blue eyes uncommon in those parts of the world, first took me to cross the 175 leagues from Madeira to Lisbon. At the time, I was not yet Christopher Colon.

It had been a last minute call to the mainland. Father had received ill-news that Infante Dom Henrique was sick and could die soon, so they had to make the voyage to meet the Old Man. Why he was taking me with him, no-one knew.

"I was born a king and a warrior" – father said in face of mother's protests – "At his age I already held a longsword and jested in tournaments to prove my skill. We now live in a land of sailors, so he must learn to live at sea. His sword will be the Compass, his armor the Caravela. He must learn to be one with the sea and the wind. The Old Man wants to speak to the boy."

As our ship entered the large mouth of the Tagus and approached the dock in Belém, what impressed me the most was the light of the city. The wide river reflected the clear blue skies filling everything with a warm, penetrating light. Lisbon was at the forefront of maritime exploration, a magnet that attracted cosmographers, mathematicians, adventurers and charlatans. The river was a forest of sails, the riverbanks lined with ships under construction exhibiting their ribs like skeletons of massive sea monsters. As we walked the shore towards the royal Paço, I marveled at the diversity of faces, variety of clothes and smells. The smells were the most memorable. Father had always told me that big cities stink. Indeed, a faint smell of rot and excrements hang over all things, but overpowered by the scents of freshly baked bread, exotic spices and fruit I had never seen, despite living in the fertile lands of Madeira island. My eyes turned everywhere, following the steps of strange men I had never seen – man black as charcoal with a deep blue hue and glistening white teeth, Arabs dressed in plain white cloths, Jews, Turks, Italians, Spanish. I could hear many languages with strange-sounding words, but somehow these people managed to communicate. Everywhere I looked, a wide assortment of priests and monks. Rough sailors, waiting for their next assignment, drinking the day away, playing cards or darts. Everyone seemed busy, talking loudly and gesticulating. Everywhere I

looked, there were ships being built, the ships of the Infante being prepared to sail down the coast of Africa to Guinea and further south. Always further south. How could a small country of less than 1 million people command such large expeditions into lands though inaccessible just a few decades ago?

Father was at court, paying his respects to King Afonso, so I had been left outside to roam the city. João da Câmara, my older cousin, son of the governor of Madeira João Gonçalves Zarco, showed off his knowledge of ship-craft by explaining those ships under construction were a new form of vessel. The Old Man was always challenging his ship masters with new designs that could make the ships faster, with higher sterns than the old Mediterranean galleys, to be able to stand the rough waves of the open sea away from visible shore. This posed an immense problem – higher sterns and side decks meant they could not use oars to push the ship forward when coursing contrary to the winds. So they had adapted an Arabic type of sail, a triangular sail able to tack upwind: the lateen. The boats were also smaller, able to explore rivers inland, which required a broader hold able to take the provisions of water, salted meat and hard biscuit. The Infante had announced a large reward for the carpenters and tin-makers who could solve the problem of rotting water – the traditional container lined with black pitch to become water-tight turned the water insoluble a few weeks after storage, so they needed a new solution.

Our final destination was still several days on horseback, and father was in a hurry. The Old Man was dying and had summoned us in haste.

The Infante, grand master of the Order of Christ, lived in a self-imposed captivity of austerity in Sagres, where he had assembled the most prominent minds of that time in the School of Sagres. I had fantasized about a magnificent palace with extraordinary machines and great debates around opulent gardens... but when we arrived at that barren promontory at the southwestern tip of Europe, I was stuck by anti-climax. It was a barren wasteland atop a cliff battered by waves, with grey and somber men and barely any other sound besides the cries of the seagulls and the clash of the waves into the promontory. We entered the eastern gate of the ascetic fortress, passing the chapel of Nossa Senhora da Graça, dedicated to Virgin Mary, where mariners spent their nights in pray before challenging the Sea of Darkness. The only sign that this was the most active scientific and exploration center of Europe in that year of 1460 was the continuous movement of ships you could see heading towards Lagos, large galleys from the commerce in North Africa through Ceuta and ocean-going Caravels.

We were at the outer edges of civilization, away from the bursting trade ports of Venice and Genoa who monopolized the trade with Asia – spices, silk and precious stones –, away from the religious power of Rome – the only supranational institution in the world –, away from the cultural and artistic renovation of the Renaissance that was starting to take shape in central Europe. For centuries, the country had looked west, to the Sea of Darkness as the Arabs called it, to the vast sea where the sun sets on a curving line at night, to the pounding waves and the sheet of white foam... longing to conquer it.

As we were approaching the fortress, I noticed a wide circumference marked on the floor, with intricate signs similar to those I had seen on father's books. A steel rod (which I would later learn was known as "Vara de Medição" – the measuring stick or simply "the Stick") prompted from the dusty land in a straight vertical line to the skies, about 2 meters tall. From the center steel rod departed several radius-lines, dividing the circumference in sixteen zones, each marked with a geographic direction and a name, some of which I recognized as wind names. It was the Wind Rose, both a mystical and practical symbol of the Order. It would play a key role in my life's quest.

That night I barely slept in anticipation for the meeting with the Old Man in the morning. The cells inside the Fortaleza were simple, monastic, with a hard bed and bare furnishings. But the library..., heavens, the library occupied the entire center of the Fort, with sturdy wood tables filled with maps and strange nautical instruments I barely knew at the time.

It happened at dusk. It was still dark when father took me out into the promontory, the rocky cliff of Cape Saint Vincent. This is the prow of Europe. The first rays of sunlight appeared on the East, enveloping the world with a soft glow. The water was still as a lake, with a metallic quality that looked like liquid silver. A seagull floated on the water, slowly moving to the rhythm of the sea, indifferent to the destinies of men. It looked straight onwards, fixed on a distant point on the horizon I could not discern. What was the seagull waiting for? Uncomplaining, undemanding, just focused on its own selfish existence...

The Infante sat alone on the rocks, looking West, with the faint light at his back creating a halo of semi-divinity. He was clad in black, with a light black head-cloth fashioned like the moors, with a hanging strip you could use to cover your face against the burning sun or the whipping wind.

"Come closer. Only the boy."

I approached the Navigator and sat next to him, unable to look at his face. This was the Infante himself, what could he possibly want to talk about with a boy like me. We just stood there in silence. Then he spoke.

"What do you see?"

How was I supposed to answer such question? Was it a trick question, to test my knowledge, or an honest question to test my beliefs? As I tend to do when confronted with the unknown, I looked for an answer that would be unexpected, that could impress the Old Man and make him remember me.

"Beauty."

"It is, boy, it is. True enough. It is the beauty of the world God bestowed upon us, therefore invoking the marvel of His gift of intellect with which can perceive this sense of

beauty. Keep your mind open to the beauty of the world. Do not trust what those ancient books tell you, unless you can understand with your brain or see with your eyes”.

Then silence again, cut only by the languished sound of calm surf caressing the edges of the promontory below.

“And home.”

“You mean, Madeira?”

“No. The far distant lands I will discover for you, my Lord, which by your grace and the King of Portugal I will have the pleasure of calling home.”

“You are a strange boy. Too grown up for your age. Better that way. The weight of the quest me and your father will put on your shoulders is such that you need to grow fast. The sun rises to our backs and will describe an arch, burn from the South at noon and set on the West. Every day, the cosmic bodies are the only thing that is real, immutable, indifferent to the struggles of the lives of men. Do you know what the old books say? That the sun enters the sea and heats the water to the point of boiling and if a ship ventures close enough to the edges of the world, it will burn.”

Silence.

“That cannot be.”

“Why?”

“If the water boils, it evaporates and leaves an empty space. The water next to it enters the void and it also evaporates and so forth, until all water in the sea is gone and we should see the innards of the world exposed, with all water gone. That does not happen.”

“Indeed, it cannot be. We shall sail further South and show them all. I know what they say on my back. A stubborn old man toying with dangerous dreams, chasing fantasies while sending men to their deaths by sea monsters or boiling waters. Boy, never doubt. Always further. Always further. There are no dangers grave enough that cannot be overcome by the promise of rewards. The little minds will always say you are wrong until you prove them wrong. Never listen to them. Never listen to the old theories that you cannot understand with your mind or test with your eyes. If you don’t understand, look further. Never listen to the intrigues of the court mice, scheming behind your back while you push forward. God made the world and our enquiring mind to understand His creation. Exploring brings us closer to God. I have spent all my fortune and fallen in debt to set up this magnificent enterprise. So far, it has not yet paid off. But I do not worry too much. Others will come after me, keep pushing forward, and the rewards will come. They say to my nephew King Afonso that these maritime explorations are a waste of time and money - how wrong they are. We know today more about the world and the oceans than any European court. In this fortress, men of knowledge map the unknown world.

Knowledge is power, and for a small country like ours, the only true power we can hope to achieve. What you know, you owe no one."

His feeble hands sat quietly on the Old Man's knees, as we sat on the rocks looking west. The only ornament he used was a ring on his left hand, a gold ring with a round sigil displaying an embossed hooked X, the north-eastern arm tilting up slightly.



I looked at the lone seagull on the silver still water, floating on the foam. Gulls never fly far from land or water. That one had the plumage of three or four years, an adult gull. It can manage about two leagues from land, at most. As if prompted by my attention, the lone seagull moved its head and opened the wings, gliding masterfully over the water and taking flight. It rose high up in the sky, wings stretched in solemn and majestic defiance of the earthbound limits of the two men seating on the rocks. The seagull hovered for a few seconds, static as it scanned the still waters down the reef, as if contemplating its chances of finding food. Then it dived straight into the sea, ready to continue with the gruesome business of daily life.

"So, boy", continued the Infante, "Have you seen the forbidden Book?"

"Yes, Dom Henrique.", I answered, knowing perfectly well he could only be referring to one book.

"Good, good...And has you father told you about the grotto in the Pyrenees?"

"Yes. A tremendous secret we must protect."

"Show me the figure engraved on the cover of the Book."

Solemnly, I picked up a stick and draw in the gravel and the sand. A rose and a cross joined in an embrace, the arms of the cross spreading wide as if trying to hug the rose. The Rosacrux engraved on the cover of the Book and on the Ark the Templars had for centuries been protecting.

"The Rosacrux, Dom Henrique. The arched cross is drawn on the sails of Portuguese Caravelas, the Crux still separated from the Rose. The Rose is kept hidden in the far lands beyond the boiling seas, until our Caravelas can reunite the Book and the Ark with the Rose."

"Very well", noted the Infante. "So you understand the importance of the mission"

The Infante motioned for my father to approach. There, in the cliffs above crashing waves and away from curious hears, the two of them talked briefly. They seemed to know and trust each other, just confirming the final details of a plan that had been agreed in advance.

Tough, austere men in manners as well as words. The plan had been set, there wasn't much to say besides trusting fortune and the strength of those they chose to face it.

"Ladislau, will the heirs of Henry Sinclair recognize the boy?"

"Yes, Henry. The boy has the mark, like me he has six toes on each foot"

The new day was dawning, the shadows of the night retreating hastily as the warm sunlight rushed in to fill everything. Nature was still yawning lazily, unaware of the plan set in motion by the Infante and my father. The full meaning of such mission would remain unclear to me for many years.

The Infante placed his hands on my shoulders as his eyes penetrated my soul. "Your father is from a noble Family. You are the son of a King. The quest me and your father are laying upon your shoulders is the most daring and challenging of all. Your fate is hard and most uncertain. Prepare well. And never listen to what the others say about you on your back. Never listen to them, for they have not been Initiated."

My father left early afternoon, heading back to Madeira. I stayed in Sagres for the following twelve years. Learning, studying and preparing.

The day after father left started at sunrise, as it would invariably do for the rest of my life. It became ingrained in such a way that even in my old years I would not be able to sleep beyond dusk. It never felt as a sacrifice, but rather as a blessing – I was being given the opportunity to participate in the most exciting, innovative and challenging enterprise of our times. I have always felt special, with a destiny to fulfill that required of me absolute dedication. Open myself to this destiny, embrace the sacrifice that God, my father and the Infante had bestowed upon me.

Indeed, I was special, son of a noble lineage with a grand mission. But I would soon learn that in Sagres, we were all special, each on his own way. Not all were noble, but each would prove to possess some unique quality. I learned to appreciate each of these friends. As I would find out many years later, the Old Man had a unique way of judging the men he carefully selected, of finding leaders who could strain further in the pursuit of great deeds. Bartolomeu Dias was stubborn, strong minded, well learned in the secrets of the sea. Pacheco Pereira was a brilliant cosmographer and mathematician, although I could not fathom how the skinny and sickly boy would ever survive on a boat. Diogo Cão was very much like me, proud and adventurous, rough and unrestful, maybe edging on the irresponsible sometimes and irascible when he failed to impose his will – but fearless and one of the most loyal men I ever knew. Gil Eanes was a charming philosopher chasing after girls in Lagos and looking for fortune. Gama was a cocky young boy, arrogant and auto-promoting, but a detailed and thorough planner, of soft noble manners he would learn to roughen up as he grew up. Pero da Covilhã came from a family

of Jewish *conversos*, son of a merchant from the inner highlands of Portugal, who had learned to speak Arabic while accompanying his father in the trades with the Spanish Moorish cities. We all shared a sense of fate and pride... after all, we were being prepared to become members of the Order of Christ, command the Portuguese Caravelas, charter unknown lands and discover riches beyond our wildest dreams.

All these boys I met at the morning breakfast in the common room of Fortaleza de Sagres on my first day in June 1460, after the tedious morning prayers at the chapel. Dry bread and a bowl of warm red wine (spiced in festive days) in which to dip the dry bread. I was nine, a bit terrified by the novelty of it all, but also proud. Most of the boys in my table were a little older than me and had started at Sagres in January – I was 6 months behind. Probably the plan had been to start me when I was 10, but the Old Man illness rushed things. I was never the shy type. If anyone could bully others into submission, it was me.

Before we could break bread, the Old Man rose from the table he shared with the seasoned mariners and cosmographers who had the honor to seat with the Infante. Next to him, seated Jehuda Cresques, known as the Jew of the Needle, because he had invented the compass. On the Infante's other side, sat Master Abraão Zacuto, his trusted cosmographer and mathematician. He limped a bit and the back was noticeable curved. I would know later the Old Man often used a penitence belt with sharp thorns under his black habit. He addressed the boys, but I felt he was talking directly to me. The Infante had this unique capability of talking to a multitude but each of us felt he was addressing him in particular, with his long direct stares punctuating each sentence.

"The islands of Azores were on the Florentine and Arabic maps several years before we claimed them for Portugal. Indeed, any commercial fleet rounding the Atlantic coast from the Mediterranean to England or Flanders is likely to spot the islands in the horizon. But seeing land and plotting it on a map is not the same as discovering land. Discovery requires a more profound commitment, setting foot on it, understanding the locals and engaging in trade, understand their language and cultures, Christianize and educate them. Or if the land is uninhabited, colonize it."

"For decades the islands were seen from a distance at the west, fuming a grey smoke like if it was the end of the world. Frequently the passing fleets could witness massive volcanic explosions that cover the skies of ashes for miles. This is, most likely, how the western boundaries of the known ocean became to be known as the "Dark See" or "Tenebrous Sea". That was the realm of monsters. Indeed, when Diogo de Silves first set foot on São Miguel island, he discovered a strong sulfuric smell, the land dotted with holes from which smoke escaped continuously. The sailors started believing the islands were the domain of the Devil, the doors of Hell at the end of the world. The only way to face fears and prejudices is to break them. So I ordered a few dozen rams and sheep to be settled on the island. Beasts for the horny devil – it would befit the situation. A few years later, our men returned to the island to check if the

rams survived. They had indeed, and reproduced happily. This convinced the people the islands were habitable and there was no devil. Settlement started and they now cook on those sulfuric hot holes...”

“Keep this story at your hearts. The domains of our Lord are infinite. But the domains of beasts, monsters and impassable obstacles are nothing but a reflection of our fears. There is no danger great enough that the expectation of gain and glory won’t make men overcome it. You are the elite of Portugal, a new breed of men. Knights of the oceans who fight on caravels instead of on horses. God gave us a small nation as our cradle, but the entire world as our coffin.”

III. Newport, December 2018

The corner office had taken to the red pen again. Another cull in the investment banking division of Bank of America. For thirteen years, Savannah had slaved away in the New York office, moving up to Managing Director. She had survived the sub-prime and Lehman’s collapse at Goldman, so when the rebound came she was well positioned to make her move. In 2012, as investments banks struggled to rebuild the teams they had decimated just three years before, she landed a MD position at Bank of America, the new plain mortgages-to-synthetic CDOs colossus of American banking. It had been worth it: it was an adrenalin-filled fast paced job where she could do what she was best at – make things happen. And she got paid handsomely for it as well, to afford the Maldives annual holidays and the upper east side apartment. But she was growing tired of the treadmill, the grinding machine that never stopped.

Wall Street nowadays was different from when she started, back in 2001 as an analyst at JPMorgan. The great investment banks of old, the respectable houses whose names alone were sufficient to make corporate executives tremble, had closed after the Lehman Brothers collapse or forced to merge into the big commercial banks. Then they moved the Wall Street office into the midtown towers. Yes, it saved money and provided handsome real estate profits from selling the downtown offices, but... well, the glamour, thechutzpah was gone. Now, Wall Street was nothing more than a shadowy street with the fumes of the underground puffing out, more the scenery for Gotham City gangsters than for Kings of the World financiers. The former headquarters of the investment houses were being turned into luxury shopping malls, tendering for the Chinese tourists.

So, when another cull in the division was announced, she had volunteered to take the severance package and go. That’s why this year she had arrived earlier for the Christmas holidays at her parent’s house in Newport, Rhode Island. Instead of the usual endless

succession of dinner parties and the glitz of the office silly season, she decided to take a few weeks off with her parents.

Hugh would join them later, for Christmas dinner. He had been quite supportive of her decision, although Savannah suspected he had second intentions. He had been gently pressing her, for some time now, to have a baby. Sure, she wanted kids... at some point... Hugh probably expected she would take the layoff as the right time to have a baby. Maybe. She was 39 now, the clock was ticking. The prospect of turning 40 in ten months' time, in October, was a bit... well, not daunting really, she was quite relaxed about the all age thing. But a bit, definitive, making her officially into the grown-ups' team. She kind of still thought of herself as the young brilliant hotshot who had received several job offers from investment banks, strategy consultants and VC firms at the end of the MBA. She had gone through the grind, always first on the promotion line, up to MD. It felt like her real life had just began, now that she had the time for dinner parties, daily gym or running sessions, reading... She was now enjoying herself the way some of her teenage friends had, many years before. So it wasn't fair to start already talking about babies, right?

Anyway, in January she would think about that. Now was her time off, relaxing at the family home at Newport. She was in fact looking forward to the family's holiday routine: she went jogging in the cold mornings, alone with her thoughts, filling the lungs with the crisp December air. Then she would go sailing and fishing with her father, up to Boston bay. And in the late afternoons she would cosy up in the library, next to the fireplace, with the smell of uncle Santiago cigar in the air, a slice of cake mum liked to bake, and a good book.

To her own surprise, she found herself with Raven's old notebook, which had been stored away since her death. Between the pages of the notebook was still that strange piece of cut paper with a threatening message.

No one had dared touch Raven's belongings for a while, so the boxes had just sat in her old bedroom for a few months, until uncle Santiago cajoled mum and dad to organize her books and stuff, to get some closure. As mum was unpacking Raven's papers, she found that notebook where Raven was taking notes of her thoughts and investigations – a notebook full of weird symbols and strange incoherent phrases. As she put it in the bookshelf unread, a loose piece of paper fell out. It was a nondescript white paper with a computer-printed message. It read:

"LEAVE GERMAN BITCH"

An uncomfortable thought had probably been floating around the back of Savannah's mind all those years. More like a nuisance. She had been too busy to think about it, and everyone just wanted to forget what had happened in Lisbon. But as much as she wanted to wish it away, the memory clang and nagged her: that email that was on her inbox upon their return from Lisbon, sent by Raven mid-afternoon the day before her death. She had probably sent it from her mobile in a hurry, on a motorway service station on the way back from Tomar to Lisbon.

Raven's notebook started in a very organized way, as she took notes for her thesis. At some point, though, the notes became all messed up, with lines back and forth, esoteric symbols and maps and random words just hanging like threats on the page. Most disturbingly, from a certain point onwards, the pages were covered in pentagrams and stars. A page showed a huge pentagram with a bearded and horned goat's head in the middle, and a weird sentence next to it: "The Goat is in my way".



The written pages ended abruptly at about 2/3 of the notebook, followed by two pages ripped off, the irregular remains of the cut off pages still attached to the notebook's spine.

"What were you after, sis? Have you gone mad or did get yourself caught in some weird satanic cult?"

Raven's autopsy had determined no other cause of death besides the bleeding from the pentagram-shaped gash on her left wrist. No fingerprints, no signs of fight, just that horrible pentagram cut deep into her left wrist and traces of a powerful drug in her lungs. Had she done the cut to herself? Was it a suicide pact gone wrong? A drug-related assassination? Savannah could not believe any of that.

And then there was that note. "Leave German Bitch". Gosh. Raven was not even German! Sure, she and her twin sister were probably the stereotypical German, tall, broad shouldered, blond hair and pale skin. Could Raven's death have anything to do with a race agenda? That was just...

Savanah could not share these thoughts with her parents. Raven's death had been devastating enough. So she kept reading through the notes and waited for her uncle Santiago to arrive just before Christmas. Their uncle was not a common man, not just because of his position in the US Capitol but also due to his imposing figure, penetrating eyes and immense knowledge. During the summer school holidays, he used to take them sailing to the Caribbean and prod them about Columbus and the Templars and the role of women in the bible. The two girls loved his charades.

On the afternoon of Christmas eve, before Hugh's arrival and as her parents were busy preparing Christmas dinner, Savanah sat on the library with a book, cosy and warm next to the fireplace. The oak logs released a mildly inebriating smoke, filling the library with a bluish tone and a musty odour. Her thoughts were far away, lost on the kindling flames, as Rachmaninov played on the stereo. Uncle Santiago's choice, obviously. She had an easier music playlist,

usually pop beats or beast mode power music when she went for the morning run. Or easy listening jazz during dinner parties. At most, she tolerated some Chopin or Liszt to help her concentrate. But uncle Santiago would always go for the “heavy metal” of the classics, Wagner, Beethoven, Rachmaninov. Rach 3, she could tell, was pounding from the Audio Analogue sound columns, an obsessive, compulsive music that always left her a bit agitated. Anxious. Like the soundtrack of a movie when something terrible is about to happen. Beethoven’s 5th in Clockwork Orange.

Uncle Santiago used to say that Rach 3 is the K2 of pianists. The K2 is the second highest peak of the Himalayas, also called “Savage Mountain” and is the peak with the highest death rate of alpinists who try to reach its summit. Rach 3 is the summit of death for pianists who attempt to perform it.

Most people listen to classical music or go to the ballet or read intellectual books or attend art exhibitions because that is what their projected image of the self likes to do, the idea of who they are or how they like others to perceive them. Our true preferences are revealed by the choices we make when alone, the result of the intimate conflict between the true self and the imagined self. That was not the case with uncle Santiago, though. He really didn’t care about how others perceived him. He was already at that point of his life when he didn’t care about the imagined self or what others thought.

The family old cream-coloured Golden Retriever Leo, short for Galileo, was lying lazily in the wooden floor next to the fireplace. He raised his aristocratic head from time to time, surveying his surroundings, before getting back to his rest. A hazy atmosphere filled the room, mixing the aromas of the musky oak logs crackling in the fireplace with uncle Santiago Cuban cigar. He was reading the paper, playing absentmindedly with the gold ring on the finger of his left hand, where you would expect a wedding band to be. A beautiful piece of distinguished aged gold with an embossed wind rose star that always reminded Savannah of Miró’s drawings. Uncle Santiago had a friendly but imposing figure, a short man with muscled legs and arms like tree trunks, white-grey hair that had once been blond framing a round face and honeyed almond eyes, heavy beard trimmed to perfection. He sat on the couch with his cigar and a crystal cut glass of whiskey, probably Lagavulin or Talisker Dark Storm, strong peated whiskeys that taste like stormy seas and smoky seaweed.

Savannah finally managed to take herself up from her hazy numbness and decided to discuss Raven’s notebook with uncle Santiago.

“My dear, those are intriguing notes indeed. Raven had a complex mind... there are complex crazy, and complex brilliant. The dividing line is tenuous. Complex minds are never easy, neither for themselves nor those around them. I have spent hours going through those pages...”

“So you have read it?”

“Of course. My job is to know, and to know you must invest time. You can make money running around like a busy bee in Wall Street, but that will just make you do better the things you already know, it won’t teach you new things.”

“Let’s not have that conversation again, uncle. I hope we can have a decent conversation like we used to, when Raven and I were kids... Look, I guess part of the reason the police gave up on the investigation was because of those satanic pentagrams with the goat-headed demon Baphomet, weird symbols and nonsensical sentences found in her notebook. There were no marks of aggression or fighting, except for the pentagram-shaped cut on her wrist. Although they never openly stated it, I guess the police thought she had lost her mind or was into drugs or some satanic cult.”

“That’s nonsense”, answered Santiago quickly. “Many mistakes and wrong assumptions could be avoided if people had a minimum knowledge of history. The pentagram you are so worried about never had a satanic connotation until... well, until the church invented that, to cover up and justify the extermination of the Cathars and the Templars in the 13th and 14th centuries. You know the square and compass symbol engraved on the entrance stone of this house, right!”

“Sure”, answered Savannah, picturing the image in her mind. “The freemasons symbol”.



“Exactly. The tools of the Great Architect are the same tools we mortals have: the free will and the flame of consciousness. As above, so below – the human and the divine united. The square and compass represents this geometry: the universe is not chaos subject to the arbitrary whims of an exterior God, but a geometry we humans can understand through reason. Like Einstein said, “God doesn’t play dice.”

“Yeah, I know the symbolism. You told me and Raven all about that when we were kids... But you know what I think about all the mysticism. The world is complex enough as it is, no need to add extra layers of complexity. Anyway, what does the freemasons’ symbol have to do with the pentagr...”

“It *is* the pentagram! Look here.”

Santiago took a pair of pens from the inner pocket of his jacket. On an empty space in his newspaper he drew a pentagram, highlighting the top and bottom open triangles to reveal the freemasons’ square and compass.



“The 5 vertices of the pentagram also represent the Hebrew character “hei”, which is the 5th letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and means God as an abbreviation for Hashem (meaning The Name). The pentagram shows in many churches, especially those associated with the Templars. The Vatican claims this is a simple reference to the five Holy Wounds of Christ, suffered during crucifixion. Two wounds in the wrists where nails fixed Christ to the cross. Two wounds on the feet where the nail passed through both feet to the vertical beam of the cross. And the final wound on the right side of Jesus, where his abdomen was pierced by the lance of Longinus to check if He was death. So the five pointed star is associated with the five Holy Wounds”.

“But”, continued Santiago, “do not be deceived. The pentagram symbolism is much older than this catholic justification. It is reminiscent of the ancient cult of the Venus goddess, a symbol of the feminine and fertility, and in this way it is intimately associated with the Templars’ cult of Virgin Mary. The pentagram shows recurrently in Templar churches, namely Santa Maria do Olival church in Tomar, the headquarters of the Portuguese Templars, and Rosslyn church, the base of the Scottish Templars. Two very meaningful branches of the Templars... the northern path and the southern path. The freemason’s square and compass appear in the emblem of Queen Leonor, wife of King João II, as well as in the decoration of the Convent of Christ in Tomar.”

“Oh, come on, uncle. Portugal is such a nice, tranquil country...”, commented Savanah, remembering her short honeymoon. “It’s hard to imagine the country could be the stage for such intricate web conspiracy. Templars, Discoveries, Freemasons...”

“Surprising things come from where you least expect. I would not like you to think I’m just coming up with wild conspiracy theories. But the world is not black and white. History is written by the victors and the powerful, and for the past twenty centuries the roman church has kept a strong hold on how history is told. Secret orders were the only way to pass on messages that were otherwise censored by the church.”

Savanah sat in silence for a while, contemplating the playful flames in the fireplace and the crackling sounds of the firewood. Then she asked, not wanting to let go so easily. “But then how did the pentagram come to be associated with Satan, the devil?”.

“When the Templars were extinguished by Pope Clemente V in 1312 and persecuted by the French king Filipe IV, they were accused, amongst other things, of spitting on the cross in secret rituals and worshipping Baphomet, the devil... and that’s how the Templar pentagram became associated with satanic practices. Indeed, a lie fed by the French King and the Pope of Rome. The true reasons behind the Pope’s obsession to exterminate the Templars are... less obvious.”

Savanah was not entirely convinced, but thought it better to let go. Uncle had always been a bit secretive. She decided to prod him further regarding Raven's notebook. He clearly knew more than what he was saying.

"Ok, the Templars, sure. Uncle, just tell me what you think. What could Raven have discovered? What's all the mystery around Columbus?"

"A lot, actually, my dear. Starting by the man's name: he was never called Columbus on his time, but Colon, and continues to be called Colon in Spanish speaking countries. Colon means "member" in Latin. Columbus means "pigeon". So, a substantial adulteration..."

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Historians were never quite convinced about the conventional view of Columbus as a poor, uneducated man from a family of Genoese wool weavers who inexplicably appears in Portugal – the old tale says he wrecked off the shore of Lisbon and swam 6 miles to reach land. Less than two years after washing ashore, penniless and illiterate, to Lisbon, this man becomes fluent in Portuguese, Spanish and Latin, masters cosmography, geography and mathematics, is admitted to the highly secretive senior counsel of king D. João II and his elite Board of Mathematicians and marries Dona Filipa Moniz Perestrelo, a "fidalga" of royal lineage, cousin of the elite Portuguese diplomats and discoverers, Vasco da Gama and Pedro Álvares Cabral. Dona Filipa was one of the twelve "donas comendadoras" of the All Saints Convent, where she lived, an elite place affiliated with the Order of Santiago. As a "dona" of All Saints, her marriage would have to be approved by the Grand Master of Santiago, who at the time was the King himself! A poor Italian wool-weaver or even ascending merchant would never have access to the Convent, reserved for the high nobility in a highly stratified society. How odd, or how convenient, that the log books of the Convent where the marriage of Dona Filipa must have been recorded, with the name of her husband, were never found.

This meteoric ascension in social and cultural status would be difficult today. It would be impossible in the 15th century. The traditional account, retold over and over again in schoolbooks, is ridden with contradictions, a well-orchestrated conspiracy that lasted for five hundred years and only recently is being revealed for what it is: a fairy tale.

All evidence suggests that Colon was a high ranked noble long before the expedition that made him famous. When Colon run away to Spain, fleeing from Dom João II rage after the 1484 conspiracy to kill the king, Colon was hosted as a 'hidalgo' (literally, son-of-someone, meaning, 'with high lineage') by the Duque of Medinaceli, a powerful Castilian noble. He is treated with the nobility title 'Don' in the 1492 Capitulações de Santa Fé, before he had even set foot on the Niña! So much reverence to a poor weaver, years before he supposedly gained fame and fortune by reaching the Indies!

Columbus cabalistic signature remains an unsolved mystery that eludes historians. When Bobadilla was sent to arrest Colon and remove him from commander of Hispaniola, he accused Colon of using a secret, cryptic alphabet to write coded letters, supposedly part of a conspiracy

to rebel against Spain and establish a new kingdom in Hispaniola. Unfortunately, those cyphered letters were lost in the shipwreck of 1502. Nevertheless, Colon's books and letters are dotted with unknown characters, potentially from a secret cryptic alphabet. Was he communicating a secret message to the recipients of the letters, on the side of the main "official" texts?

"Huummm. Interesting.", interrupted Savannah. "But what have the Templars to do with Columbus, or Colon if you prefer? All these pentagrams in Raven's notebook and references to a Templars' treasure, the Grail".

"The Templars were right in the centre of the birth of Portugal, as crusaders to expel the Arabs from Iberia. Later, in 1307, when Pope Clemente V extinguished the Order and the French King launched the ambush to kill or arrest them, the monk-knights fled from all over Europe and took refuge under King Dom Dinis in Portugal. This king not only protected them, but also promoted the rebirth of the Order, refashioned as the Order of Christ. Dom Dinis protected the Templars and transferred all the Templar properties in the country to the new Order, directly disobeying the Pope."

Columbus was most certainly a member of the Order of Christ. So Columbus was a Templar, maybe the Last Templar. The Templar's official mission was to protect the pilgrims to Jerusalem, but their ideology was charged with the dream of a "fifth empire", a new Promised Land ruled by the founding Christian principles, free from the self-serving and hypocrite bishops of Rome. In that, they share the spirit of the Portuguese Discoveries. When we talk about the religious motivations of the Age of Discoveries, we must distinguish the catholic "missionary" spirit to conquer, submit and appropriate, from the "spirit of discovery" that permeates the early Portuguese expeditions. The first intends to bring back, the second intends to go away.

"I dare say," continued Santiago, "that Portugal, in the outskirts of Europe, was the first attempt by the Templars to create a new, independent kingdom free from the shackles of Rome. The Portuguese Discoveries may well have been the second attempt to find that new Promised Land, the Avalon of Arthurian legends – the new Jerusalem that Colon is obsessed about in his Book of Prophecies."

"Ok. Then this note Raven wrote about Port-du-graal...", said Savannah

"Portugal as the port, the harbor of the Graal.", agreed Santiago.

Supposedly, the original nine Templars found, or were offered, a great secret in Jerusalem. The Templar Order was established there, in 1119, and had their headquarters on the ruins of the Salomon Temple, in Mount Sion, next to the church of Haggia Sion. When the city was retaken by Saladino, the Templars had to flee the city and took this treasure, the Holy Grail, by boat. First to Malta and then to south of France, where a dynasty of Merovingian kings in the region is said to have protected the secret.

Santiago puffed away some smoke from his cigar. Galileo lazily got up and stretched out, jutting forward his well outlined snout and chest while pushing back his hind legs, tail pointed back in a straight line. His unashamed yawn, with closed eyes and wide open mouth baring his teeth and dark red gums, seemed to Savanah to be teasing her, as if showing off the absence of stifling social conventions of decorum in the world of dogs. He then walked out of the room, languidly, tail wagging contently, probably bored with uncle Santiago's long historic dissertation. Or he smelled the beef being taken out of the fridge in the kitchen and went to try his luck. You have to admire nature's attitude of 'don't give a damn' about good manners, taking the world as it is and living the present, sniffing, peeing and mating freely whenever they please, instead of always making a fuss about the past or the future. There are of course some hardwired genetic behaviors, but at least they are not consciously thinking about them, always anxious about the consequences. Human consciousness of the self and the world is the source of all sadness. And happiness. Tough choice...

Then again, dogs aren't totally free, are they? Leo can pee and sniff and mate and run, but only when allowed by his masters. Once he accepts a leash on his neck, his freedom becomes dependent on her father's whims. At least it guarantees shelter and a plate of food every day, and some occasional treats, fondling and hugs from all of us. But it wasn't Leo's choice, really... many many centuries ago, a great great ancestor wolf made the choice for him, opting to be tamed, trading part of its freedom for a higher probability of food and protection. Under that fluffy, cute forehead, his brain may well thank or resent that ancient Wolf-God who made the choice for him.

God is made up of the bits of free-will we give away, willingly or forcibly. Is that why Dog is spelled God the other way round? One's tameness and domestication opposed to the other's whimsical power? God is the Dog's harness. At least until the dog realizes he can walk away and piss and sniff and mate as he pleases, because God, as a nice loving parent, will always forgive the Dog's sins.

People have all types of different relations with God. It is a rather private affair. Some are true believers. Others have a sense of respect, going to the priest when there is a problem, like going to the doctor when something hurts. Some just keep the Sunday routine out of habit and not to look bad or cause gossip from neighbors. Others don't really believe, but kneel and cross themselves when they go to church on the occasional wedding or christening, just to be safe, because you never know. Some, like Savanah, are real, fierce atheists. Most, nowadays, simply don't care.

Savanah's brain was divagating, listening her uncle's voice continuing in the background, like ambient music. The sound is there but her brain is not registering. She was getting a bit bored like Leo, with all the historical references and controversies. Maybe she should go to the kitchen and seat patiently on her hind legs until mum throws her a succulent morsel of raw

meat. What was the Wolf God that made the decisions for her, many centuries ago? There was a Norse wolf god whose name she once knew.

Uncle's long historical dissertation was sounding like a bunch of interesting tidbits about a long gone past (as in 'dinner party interesting'), but hardly relevant for the present or the future. "Sorry uncle, what do you mean?", she asked, hoping he hadn't noticed her brain's temporary absence from the room.

"I mean no-one honestly believed the farce of the poor Genoese wool-weaver turned vice-Roy, but it kept being parroted away for the lack of a definitive alternative. However, there have been some academic breakthroughs around Colon since the turn of the century. Colon's life suggests a tangle of deeply conflicting loyalties, which may have driven him mad at the end of his life: to the Spanish monarchs, to the Portuguese king and to his Templar mission. So, speculation jumped out of Academia into the social media... conspiracy theories are running wild on the internet, especially after the DNA studies conducted in 2003 from the remains of Colon, his brother Diego and his son Fernando. These tests disproved any link between Colon and the many Columbus families previously identified as candidates for the Genoese thesis."

The traditional story became widespread because it is endearing: rags to riches just by sheer brilliance and perseverance. Colon has a mystical aura of social mobility, just like a Walt Disney story. All that is required to create a good lie is to create a plausible lie and repeat it exhaustively. As time goes by, facts are forgotten and the nicely fitting lie becomes an acceptable truth. Alternative plausible theories, for the lack of irrefutable proof, are simply ignored: better the devil you know than the devil you don't...

And once the white-beards in Academia sign off under a theory – out of boredom or tiredness or laziness, or just because the human mind has a horror of empty spaces and runs off to fill them in with whatever half-baked comfortable hypothesis is provided – then the bar of scrutiny is raised immensely for any alternative theories to replace the commonly accepted one and disprove the white-beards.

"Don't forget history is written by the victors.", said uncle Santiago, getting up and pacing to the window overlooking a frosty landscaped garden. Two red maple trees stood as sentinels on each side of the front gate, now naked of their colourful autumn red foliage.

After a few seconds hesitation, he voiced his thoughts. "The powers that control the pen can write, forge and manipulate documents to fit their chosen version of the events! In fact, many valuable documents about the Portuguese Templar past and the conspiracy of Columbus against Spain were likely destroyed or tampered with by the Inquisition or by the Filipes, the three Spanish kings who ruled Portugal for 80 years from 1580 to 1640. Without alternative documental evidence, historians resorted to whatever they could grab... The fable of the Italian Columbus is based in nothing more than circumstantial allegations, and in some cases tampered or forged documents."

Santiago doubts were a wide open field, full of question marks but no reliable answers. Savannah was about to point that out, but Santiago interjected ahead of her, maybe guessing her thoughts.

“I guess what I’m saying here is... well, look, just because we don’t know what creates the mysterious crop circles in cereal fields, it doesn’t prove they are made by UFOs. True, a poor Italian Columbus probably existed and was born in Genoa around 1450, he may even have made his way up to a peddler of copied maps and trader of sailor’s gossip in Lisbon. But this Columbus and the Admiral Colon could never be the same person! The poor, commoner Cristoforo Colombo has nothing to do with the high-born *hidalgo*, vice-Roy and knight of the golden spurs Don Cristobal Colon, besides a similar name.”

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