

El canto del taíno

widow of a thousand fires
guardian of the zemi dream
mother to a sea of tears
suager of her people's fears
Anacaona, Taino queen

your husband by the Spanish slain
braver man was never seen
still his light in you burns on
crimson like the breaking dawn
Anacaona, Taino queen

— Fragment of a Taino *areito*, translated by
Fray Pau Gonçalves, Santo Domingo 1499

Prologue

THE DISTANT SOUND OF a horn seemed to go unnoticed amid the clamor in front of the alcazar, where the court had gathered that April morning in a rare gesture of public welcome. The hawkers continued to call out their wares but the milling crowd paid no more heed to their brash accents than it did to the snorts of the horses clearing their nostrils of the dust that rose in drifting clouds from the packed dirt of the plaza. All eyes were on the raised wooden platform, shaded by brocade hangings, where a troubadour was plucking the strings of a vihuela for the sovereigns. He was singing the final stanza of a Catalan song that had been popular since the turn of the century, his warm tenor drawing out the open vowels of a language still widely considered the richest and most melodious in Europe. When the vihuela fell silent, the horn blew again. This time it was impossible to mistake. Even the king, who had been paying little or no attention to the music, broke off his conversation with his courtiers and stared across the square in the direction of the city gates, which were separated from the huddled buildings of the town by a swath of stubbly pasture land. The sudden anticipation brought on by the horn turned his ruddy features even ruddier. Isabella, seated next to him on her twin throne, raised her hand in an elegant gesture that silenced those in the crowd who had not already been silenced by the sound of destiny ringing into the plaza. The hush continued for nearly a minute, until the horn sounded again, closer this time. Then the pent-up eagerness of the people spilled into the vacancy like water over a precipice.

Pau hadn't needed the second blast from the horn to know that the man whom Isabella and Ferdinand had named "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" had been sighted and would soon be ushered into the royal presence by the city officials who had been sent to the gates to await his arrival. He had resisted his urge to wait at the gates with them, his imagination sorely agitated by the scores of printed copies of the admiral's letter that had been circulating in the city for the past two weeks. He had kept a copy for himself and read it over and over again with his sister, soon to be the Countess of Tarragona. The two of them had wondered aloud if these Indians, as Columbus called them, really went around "as naked as their mother bore them." They wouldn't dare arrive in Barcelona like that, would they? In front of the king and queen? "Artless and free," the admiral had called them,

and his description of the new lands he had found and claimed for the Castilian Crown made it seem as if he had sailed to paradise and returned with proof that he had been there. Pau was proud of his homeland, proud that the Crown of Aragon ruled over the most democratic state in the known world, proud that Catalonia was the jewel in Aragon's crown and Barcelona, its capital, the most cosmopolitan of cities, rivaling even the Italian principalities in its embrace of knowledge and freedom. But it still seemed to him that the world was a trial to test men's souls, that the earthly paradise some men dreamed of could only be found after death—and God knows, death came soon enough for most, whether through sickness or hunger or the villainy that blew across the land like a steady wind despite all of Ferdinand's efforts to rein in the wanton lawlessness that was as commonplace in Christendom as the malodorous filth that lined its streets from Valladolid to Rome. Could such a place really exist as these islands that knew no winter, where men lived in innocence, like children, oblivious of evil and eager to share the bounty that nature had bestowed on them? It seemed like a story from a book of children's tales. And yet, here were Columbus and his Indians, about to materialize in front of his very eyes.

It did not take long for the cortège to reach the plaza. Pau's first glimpse of the man whose fame was spreading like wildfire throughout the Peninsula made him catch his breath. Flanked by the city marshal, the mayor, and representatives of the Cortes, Columbus sat astride his horse like an emperor returning from conquest, his white hair and regal bearing making him seem even more commanding than the sovereigns who were rising from their seats to receive him. He had done what no man had ever done before, what few men had even thought possible: he had sailed across the Ocean Sea and lived to tell the tale. But Pau's gaze did not remain on him for long. Walking behind the admiral were six men unlike any he had ever seen. They were not naked, as Columbus's letter had suggested, but the woven cloth that draped from their waists did little more than cover their pudenda. Their skin was the color of burnished copper, their long black hair was decorated with feathered plumes, and they looked as clean faced, as well built, and as handsome as men could be, despite their unusual flattened foreheads. All of them wore finely woven cotton belts adorned with colored seashells, polished fishbones, and beaten strips of gold, and the grace with which they walked made Pau wonder if they were considered highborn in their land. Perhaps they were emissaries sent by their king to the Spanish sovereigns bearing the gifts that accompanied any royal embassy—in this case, brightly colored birds and other strange creatures in wooden cages carried by Columbus's men, small silent dogs on leashes, and several chests of what Pau assumed to be treasure.

When Columbus dismounted from his horse and ascended the steps to the royal platform, Isabella and Ferdinand reached out their hands to greet him, a testament to the great esteem he enjoyed in their eyes as a result of his unprecedented exploits. He kneeled to kiss their hands but they asked him to rise and sit beside them, while the nobles and knights of the court gathered round, eager to hear the

conversation between their lords and this newly minted hero. Columbus did not disappoint. While Pau sought a place by the side of his uncle, the venerable Fray Bernat Boyl, secretary to the king, Columbus followed up his reverent display of gratitude for the beneficence of the royal couple with an impassioned description of the lands he had discovered: the beauty of the islands, as green in November as Castile in summer; the varieties of exotic wildlife; the endless abundance of tropical fruits and honey and aloe and cotton; the plethora of aromatic spices; and the vast veins of gold that lay untapped in their mountains and awash in their rivers. Then, as if in answer to the impatient murmurings of the crowd, he presented the six Indians he had brought with him, assuring Their Highnesses that their new subjects—who were as numerous as grains of sand—would bring them undying glory with their conversion to Christianity. The Indians even surprised everyone with a few words of thickly accented Castilian, though it was clear to Pau from their startled eyes that they understood little of what was going on around them. When the admiral coaxed them into speaking some words of their own language, the courtiers clapped and the queen smiled as if she were in the presence of precocious children. When Columbus averred that the Indian tongue was as sweet and as melodious a language as one could ever hear, she nodded her head in agreement.

After nearly an hour of this festive conversation, Isabella and Ferdinand rose and led Columbus into the alcazar chapel to chant the *te deum* in honor of the great discovery. Afterward they paid him homage by accompanying him to his lodgings. They were followed by the court and a great part of the populace, a grand procession that Pau could not take part in, for his uncle wished to return to the Benedictine lodgings where they both resided and Pau had little choice but to accompany him in the silent stroll that seemed unbearably somber after the exuberant festivities he had just taken part in. His uncle was a taciturn man, though he could be eloquent when he discoursed on church doctrine, as different from his sister, Pau's mother, as two people raised in the same house could seemingly be. Pau's mother had had a cheerful, garrulous disposition that she had passed on to her children, and a smile that never wavered, even during her final days, two years earlier, when the deadly Spanish influenza had carried her off along with hundreds of others behind the walled gates of the city. Pau had learned to curb his overactive tongue in these past two years, leading up to and following his ordination as a Benedictine monk, to the approbation of his uncle, who had taken a dim view of the frivolousness of his childhood years. It was only fitting. When his mother died, Fray Boyl had taken the burden of Pau's family on his broad shoulders, Pau's father having fallen twelve years earlier as a member of the abortive resistance during the ascension of Ferdinand to the Crown of Aragon. He had paved the way for Pau's entry into the clergy, arranged his sister's coming marriage to the Count of Tarragona, and helped him to develop the talents he would need to take his place in the Crown's confidence as the nephew of Ferdinand's trusted confessor. Pau recognized the value of this undeniable virtue—a man

who could not control his tongue was easy prey to the devil's lures, as his uncle had warned him on repeated occasions—but there were times when he felt an almost overwhelming need to unburden his mind of its disquieting passions. As they left the sea road and approached the gates of their lodgings, he cautiously asked his uncle if he agreed with the admiral that the conversion of the heathens he had discovered would bring Ferdinand and Isabella undying glory throughout Christendom for having played the central role in the fulfillment of God's divine plan to Christianize the earth.

"Ferdinand and Isabella are already renowned throughout Christendom," he replied. "They have no need of this so-called admiral for that. Pope Alexander himself owes his position to them. Still, wherever there are heathens, it is our duty to bring them to the true faith. We will do our duty, admiral or no admiral."

His uncle did not appear to have much interest in continuing the conversation and Pau knew better than to press him. After accompanying Fray Boyl to his room, Pau went to his cell and lay on his cot, staring at the ceiling and reliving the day's excitement. He pictured the islands as the admiral had described them: in his mind they seemed as much like paradise as any terrestrial land could. What he wouldn't give to be able to go there himself, to see sights that no European before Columbus had ever seen, to minister to the souls of men who had not been tainted by the corruption that filled men's hearts in these decadent days where everything pointed to what many learned men of the church believed: that the end of the world was near and the Last Judgment soon to follow. Pau hadn't always wanted to join the church. While growing up he had dreamed of knights and crusades to distant lands, a youthful passion that had reached its culmination the year before with the fall of Granada. Lately he had become fascinated with the learning that had come from those distant lands and faraway times. The royal court had arrived in Barcelona in November, two months before his ordination, and with it came an Italian scholar, Peter Martyr D'Anghiera, whom Isabella had put in charge of the Infante Juan's education and that of the young nobles who traveled with the court as it shifted to different parts of the Peninsula. Two weeks after his arrival, Martyr had given a talk on the satires of Juvenal, astounding Pau with his wit and his scholarship, making him appreciate the ancients as he had never been able to before. Since then his mind had traveled further, in less time, than in all his previous years. Now, with the arrival of the admiral, the monastery where he was destined to spend his life in devout repose seemed to him like a prison whose stone walls were designed to keep him in, rather than to keep the pestilence out. His heart raced and his mind chafed at the bit as he lay in the stark interior of his cell dreaming of all that he longed to see and experience, but there was no one to whom he could unburden himself—not until his next visit to his sister, the one person to whom he could open his heart without the fear of censure or incomprehension or indifference.

The admiral stayed in Barcelona for six weeks, fêted by the nobles and doted on by the sovereigns, whom he advised in the important diplomatic consequences of his discovery. On the advice of the saintly Cardinal Mendoza, archbishop of Toledo and the second most powerful figure in the church after the Spanish pope, they wrote to the Holy See within days of the admiral's arrival, and on May 6 a papal bull arrived conceding all the lands found by Columbus to the Castilian Crown. Ten days later Pau was stunned to hear the news that his uncle had been appointed by the pope as the papal nuncio to the new possessions, charged with the sacred duty of establishing the Holy Roman Church in the lands that God had gifted to the Spanish sovereigns. Not surprisingly, he had had no intimations of this from his uncle—Fray Boyl was as close-lipped a man as Pau knew—but this lack of intimacy did not stop Pau from giving full rein to the tempestuous feelings that had unsettled his mind and overheated his blood. He went to his uncle the moment he heard the news and begged him to take him along. His justification for wanting to join the expedition was the unparalleled opportunity it offered to share in the exaltation of leading countless souls to the holy faith, but what he truly longed for was a chance to escape the prison to which he was being led. This new world of Columbus was not only filled with the promise of adventure, it was as far removed as one could get from the misery that was the lot of every European in these dark times, no matter how rich or how holy one might be.

Fray Boyl seemed neither annoyed nor particularly surprised by Pau's impassioned request. They were seated across from each other in the refectory after vespers. The forbidding clergyman looked at him for a few moments without replying and then filled Pau's goblet with a generous quantity of wine. The faint hint of a smile appeared on his face, then vanished.

"If I remember correctly from the times I failed to convince you to accompany me to Majorca, you are not a great aficionado of sea travel. And that is a very short trip compared to crossing the Ocean Sea. What makes you think you could handle the voyage?"

"I am not a child any more, Uncle. I may get sick, it's true, but what is a little sickness compared to the chance to do the Lord's work in these new lands? The history of the church is filled with martyrs who gave their lives for Christ. I think I can handle a little seasickness."

"Good. That is exactly what I was hoping to hear. I want somebody with me whom I can wholly trust. Who better than my nephew and a fellow Catalan? The king does not have the same faith in this Columbus that his wife does. It was he who convinced Isabella to propose my name to Alexander. He wants a man he can trust to keep an eye on this "admiral" and see to it that what is going to be a considerable expense for the Crown is well-spent. In the meantime, I am to assemble a group of clerics to go with me. Preparations for the voyage are already underway, so you will need to make yourself ready. We leave for Seville at the beginning of June."

Pau's sister was stunned by the news. It took her a long time and many tears before she could begin to share his excitement. "You'll have to write and tell me everything that happens," she said, once she had resigned herself to his decision, "otherwise, I don't know what I'll do."

"Don't worry, Maria, I'll write every chance I get. It will be like you were right there with me."

Before long they were planning the voyage together, dreaming out loud of the adventures he would have and the fame that would be his when he returned home. Though Pau was just twenty and only ordained these few months, she was convinced that his name would one day be almost as well-known in the Peninsula as Cardinal Mendoza's. For not even the cardinal would be able to boast of having done what Pau was about to do.

He was about to cross the Ocean Sea.

Part One

La Española

1493 - 1508



The Letters of Fray Pau Gonçalves

Translated from the original Catalan by Professor Juan González Méndez,
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Fray Pau Gonçalves of the Order of Saint Benedict, to his sister, Senyoreta Maria Carme Gonçalves,

Greeting and Grace,

Dear Sister, our uncle informed me a short while ago that a messenger is being dispatched tomorrow to the court. Naturally my first thought was for pen and paper so that I could write you a letter. I hope it finds you in the best of health and the highest of spirits. He also informed me that the same messenger will be returning here with an answer from our royal sovereigns. I shall expect a letter from you as well; otherwise, I will have no choice but to assume that you have already forgotten your recently departed brother.

So that you might not accuse me of being remiss in my promises, I shall begin forthwith with an account of our journey to Seville. As you know, it was the admiral's intention to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe in fulfillment of the vow he made when caught in a terrible storm in the region of the Azores. With that as our goal we set out across the plain of Ebro to Saragossa, and then along the Sierra de Guadarrama and into the plateaus of New Castile. Here we passed numerous castles, many of them built by the Moors. As their shadows fell across us, I could feel the weight of past centuries bearing down on me, as if the eyes of countless generations were keeping watch on anyone who passed. We have often joked among ourselves, you and I, about how little the Castilians laugh. After passing through their kingdom I think I can better understand their character. It is an austere land, battered by strong winds and guarded by rocky precipices and ancient battlements. There is a gravity that hangs over the land like the mass of clouds that hung heavy above us as we rode. Indeed, it is no wonder that this land has given birth to such a serious people. We cannot match them in gravity—how could we, with our easeful climate, a sun that never seems to fail us, and the balm of the Mediterranean washing up against our shores—but they will never outdo us in laughter or in music or in dance. There is much to admire

about them and their land, but I remain grateful that I was born in Catalonia and not in these arid plateaus.

After spending one night in Madrid, we crossed the Tagus and began climbing into the foothills of Extremadura. From there it took us three days to reach the monastery. It was a sight I will never forget. It is not without reason that Santa Maria enjoys the renown it does, or the royal patronage of the kings of Castile. Nothing like it have I ever seen or may ever hope to see again. The cloister and conventual buildings are adorned with stately colonnades and elegant statuary that whisper to your heart as you pass, and these are separated from each other by verdant gardens and murmuring fountains. The church is grander than any in Catalonia and more beautiful. Its sacristies seem to have all the riches of Christendom crowded inside them. You have heard of the Virgin of Guadalupe, how she was hidden from the Moors by our peasants in the nearby hills until the Virgin herself appeared to one of our shepherds centuries later and showed him where to find the statue, which is said to have been carved by Luke the Evangelist. It was on that very spot that the church was built, in honor of the mother of our Savior. You can imagine my feeling as I stood under her hallowed dome for the first time. It was for me the scene of profound reflections.

After the admiral prayed there for some time, the monks took us to the shrine, where he offered his thanks to the Virgin and asked for her continued protection on the coming voyage. Afterward the monks, who belong to the Order of Saint Jerome, crowded round us, eager to see our Indians and hear of their conversion to the faith. They asked the admiral to name an island after their sacred city and this he promised. The following day, one of their order, Ramón Pané by name and a fellow Catalan by birth—until recently he had been in the monastery of Saint Jerome of the Murtra in Badalona—was so enthralled with the admiral's description of those exotic lands that he voiced his desire to come with us on our mission. Our esteemed uncle accepted him forthwith, adding one more soul to our small body of clerics—we now number five, including the two Mercedarians who came with us from Barcelona, Fray Juan Infante and Fray Juan Solórsano. I was especially happy to see Fray Ramón join us: he is the only one of our party of an age with myself (not including the Indians who travel with us).

From Santa Maria we descended the southern slope of the sierra and after some forty leagues we reached Cordova,* where the admiral's two sons are living. We rested there for several days, then proceeded on to Seville, which we reached some ten days back. But before I tell you about Seville and our preparations for the voyage, I must tell you about a scare we had halfway between Guadalupe and Cordova. It was nearly sunset. We were traveling on a lonely stretch of road after passing the village of Don Benito, in the territory of the Count of Medellin,

* A Spanish league was approximately three miles.

when we were set upon by the Santa Hermandad.' They came galloping out of the dusk with their arrows notched and lances at the ready. I could not make out their standard in the failing light but their green sleeves and leather jerkins were impossible to mistake. For a moment I thought one of us might take an arrow in the chest before we could explain who we were and what we were doing there. They say that brigands fear the road these days in Castile, for they know that the Hermandad is pitiless in its justice, and in truth, at no time in our long journey were we ever exposed to any kind of villainy, but it is also rumored that innocent travelers are sometimes mistaken for brigands by these grim men who are wont to use their swords in lieu of questions. The head of their council, the Bishop of Cartagena, is an inquisitor of the Holy Office. I have heard whispers that he has taught them that the dead are always guilty. Fortunately, we were traveling with members of the royal court who will embark with us as representatives of the king and queen. When the Hermandad examined their papers, their looks of distrust finally lifted. They accompanied us to the next village and warned us to be wary of brigands—though with a party as large as ours, I think our only real danger was from the Hermandad. Pray that King Ferdinand never sees fit to bring them to Aragon!

Since arriving in Seville, we have been lodging in the Carthusian monastery, Saint Mary of the Caves, at the invitation of the admiral and his friend and confessor, Fray Gaspar Gorricio. The admiral has been busy these past days with the archdeacon, Don Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, whom Queen Isabella has put in charge of outfitting the expedition. I have only met him once, when he came here to receive the admiral, but he seems to be a worthy man and is by all accounts an expert organizer. The monks here consider him to be the most powerful man in Seville, and from his manner and the deference people show him I do not doubt it. I have seen little of Uncle Bernat since we arrived: he is busy procuring more volunteers for our mission and assisting Don Fonseca in his duties. Sometime in the next few weeks we will leave for Cadiz, where the fleet is being assembled. In the meantime, I and Fray Ramón have been left in charge of the religious education of the Indians, though the other monks here do what they can to assist us. We have been instructing them in the gospel and the holy observances. It is hard to know how much they understand—the Castilian tongue is a trial for them and they seem to have no real concept of religion—but they are forever smiling and it is our hope that once they understand their great fortune in receiving the holy word they will serve as missionaries to their pagan brothers and help us to bring the glories of the true faith to those who know not the darkness in which they live. There is one especially for whom I hold out great hope. He is no older than I, very handsome and strong, though slight of build. You may remember him as

* The Santa Hermandad, or Holy Brotherhood, was established by Isabella and Ferdinand in 1479 as a general police force endowed with powers of summary jurisdiction. It was an extension of similar brotherhoods that had begun forming in the thirteenth century to police the roads between towns, which were notoriously dangerous in those days.

the one who was christened Diego Columbus and whom the admiral intends to make his translator. He is far ahead of the others in all respects. He is able at this point to carry on a simple conversation. Though his sentences are fragmented and his grammar rudimentary at best, he is a fast learner and clearly very intelligent. Ramón jokes that soon we will be teaching him Latin. I believe the Lord has chosen him to be his instrument, as he has chosen all of us, and that soon he will become fluent in Castilian. In return, he has begun teaching us some words from his own language—Ramón, especially, seems quite bent on learning the savage tongue, so that we can more easily convert them when we arrive, but I must admit that I have also developed an interest in these exotic syllables.

I hear the bell calling us to compline. I will end my letter here by wishing you once again continued grace, health, and happiness. Lord willing, I will write again before we embark.

Given in the city of Seville, on this fifteenth day of July, the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1493,

Your devoted brother,
Fray Pau Gonçalves

Translator's note: I have retained the Catalan spelling for Catalan names, except in the quoted dialogue of Spanish speakers, in keeping with Fray Pau's practice in his letters.

Fray Pau Gonçalves of the Order of Saint Benedict, to his sister, Senyoreta Maria Carme Gonçalves,

Greeting and Grace,

Dearest Sister, I write you now in the hour before sunset from a solitary perch on the sea wall that overlooks the Bay of Cadiz, a short walk from the city cathedral where I have spent the morning in prayer and the afternoon helping to conduct Mass and give communion. It is the last sunset I shall see from the Peninsula for some time—how long, only our Lord knows. The admiral plans to weigh anchor before dawn, and so today all have been busy readying their souls for the long voyage, seeking their Creator's protection before they commend their fortunes to the sea. A special Mass was held at noon and another at two for those who will be sailing with us. As large as the cathedral is, it required both services to accommodate everyone—our uncle tells me that including crew members the entire armada comes to almost fifteen hundred souls. The admiral was not present, but he may have been the only one who was not. He will attend a small private service in the early morning. Uncle and I will also attend. Then we will accompany him aboard the flagship, the *Santa Maria*, which the crew calls the *Mariagalante*,* where we will sing lauds to sanctify our departure.

As I look out upon the bay, with the sun beginning to flame above the horizon, my soul is steeped in its reflections, submerged in the humble recognition that even the greatest of man's achievements will one day be swallowed by the night, as will this sun whose flames will soon die upon the waves. Only his glory endures, immune to the vagaries of time, though all too often we forget this undying truth. Spread out across the bay, the ships that will carry us tomorrow across the Ocean Sea seem to proclaim the glory of man's achievements. Seventeen ships have been readied to sail, and every inch of their gayly painted sails have been unfurled this afternoon to the wonder of the onlookers who crowd the shore or look on from these same walls or from the cathedral or from the Castle of Santa Catalina. The royal standards of Castile and Aragon wave from the foredecks and from the stern. The caballeros who mill on board wear waist cloths emblazoned with

* *Mariagalante* literally means "brave Maria"; at the time, however, it was also used among sailors as a term for a buxom woman of questionable morals. It was in this playful sense that the crew of Columbus's flagship nicknamed their craft. Fray Gonçalves was almost certainly not aware of this slang meaning when he wrote this letter; otherwise, he would not have mentioned it to his sister. Interestingly, Columbus also seems not to have been aware of this meaning, for he gave the name *Mariagalante* to one of the islands he passed on his second voyage, and the name has come down to us in history without any of the ribald connotations it once had.

their coats of arms. They are accompanied by craftsmen of every trade, singing lustily as they stow their wares. Ringing the armada is a fleet of Venetian galleys that will escort us from the bay into the open sea. I am told that most of the city will be watching when we sail and that there will be cannons firing and trumpets blaring to commemorate our historic departure. But I have learned to beware of trumpets. The seventh, as we know, will herald the coming of our Savior and the beginning of his eternal reign on earth, but before then six must sound, and each will bring a judgment more terrible than the previous.* Apparently, the admiral has calculated that the Day of Judgment will come after a span of 152 years—he made a show of his evidence to Uncle Bernat, gleaned from his study of the Bible and Cardinal d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi* (you can imagine our uncle’s reaction). Whatever be the date, whether sooner or later, those trumpets are waiting for us in the shadows up ahead. What trials have we yet to pass, more terrible than the ones that already afflict us? The archdeacon, Don Fonseca, and the admiral have been flooded with requests by men who wish to sail to these new lands. They sail for glory and they sail for gold, but most of all they sail to escape the afflictions that scourge us in these troubled times, to seek out the paradise that is promised them on the other side of that burning horizon. I can understand their desire—have we all not felt it at one time or another? I cannot help, however, but remember the trumpets and the night that is waiting to draw its curtain over these great happenings in the Bay of Cadiz.

But I am allowing myself to grow too somber. You have often rebuked me for this and you have usually been right (though, as I remember, I seldom admitted it). I could use more of your natural grace and good spirits. You are growing more like our mother every day, and I, it seems, am growing more like our uncle. But then I remember your cheerful smile and my somber mood vanishes, as if it had never been. I have been looking westward since I arrived in Cadiz in early August (our preparations have suffered numerous and unexpected delays), looking out over the water toward the destiny that seems to hover like a low-lying cloud slipping off to sea, but from tomorrow I will begin looking eastward, to where my sister wears her smile and hands it out freely to the delight of all who know her. My one great regret about undertaking this voyage is that I will miss your wedding. In March you will turn eighteen and in April you will be married. It is still hard for me to fathom these simple facts. By the time I return you may have children of your own who will call me “Uncle” and ask me to tell them tales about the strange lands that lie on the far side of the Ocean Sea. In the meantime, I will look eastward, toward our beloved Catalonia, and use your smile as a compass while my thoughts sail back to the land of my birth. And of course, I shall keep my promise. On the first ship that sails for the Peninsula I shall send a letter with

* The idea of the coming end of the world was something taken quite seriously by educated and uneducated Europeans alike in the late fifteenth century; it was based on biblical prophecy and supported by the terrible conditions and imminent dangers of everyday life. The reference is to the Book of Revelation, chapters eight and nine.

a description of my travels and the lands we encounter—and yes, it will be as long as you have commanded. But you must also write, as you have promised. To the Holy Word I will add your holy words—I will keep your letters inside my Bible and look at them whenever my heart speaks to me of home.

Cadiz, on the twenty-fourth day of September, the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1493,

Your devoted brother,
Fray Pau Gonçalves

Fray Pau Gonçalves of the Order of Saint Benedict, to his sister, Senyoreta Maria Carme Gonçalves,

Greeting and Grace,

Dear Sister, earlier today I learned that the admiral has decided to despatch twelve of our seventeen ships for Castile with a request for provisions under the command of Don Antonio de Torres, brother to the governess of the crown prince. Such welcome news! At last I can send you the letter that I have long been wanting to write. Don Antonio proposes to leave in two days' time. He has promised me that he will personally hand this letter to a courier in Seville who will bring it to Barcelona. If fair winds favor his voyage, it will reach you in time for your birthday, just as you are making your final preparations before stepping to the altar for the blessed sacrament of holy matrimony. Though it pains me to be absent on that hallowed day, I give thanks to the Lord who in his infinite wisdom has granted me this opportunity to send you my love and best wishes for your future happiness. In Don Antoni Martí de Tarragona you will find a worthy husband, pious in both manner and thought, who is sure to give you the affection your heart deserves. I remember when our uncle first introduced me to him, how happy I was to discover that he was a virtuous soul who was sure to be the best of husbands. I am even happier now, knowing that the blessed day has nearly arrived when the two of you will be joined together in the sight of God. May the Lord shower his grace on you and on your future family.

As you have commanded me, and as it is my pleasure, I shall herein make an account of our voyage and the beginnings of the first Christian community on these pagan shores, an enterprise that has already seen its fair share of heartache and misfortune. When last I wrote you, I was sitting on the sea wall watching the sun set over the harbor at Cadiz. It was a sight that has not yet faded from my memory: the sails of Christendom unfurled in a crimson sky, preparing to carry the true faith to the other side of the horizon. I can still see those sails and remember the excitement I felt the next morning as I followed Uncle Bernat and the admiral to the harbor where a boat was waiting to carry us to the flagship. More than half the city had come to see us off. There was music and lombard shots and cannons firing, a great predawn festival in which everyone looked upon us as the most fortunate of men, as I can imagine they looked upon the crusaders in years past, or as we did those brave heroes who marched to Granada two short years ago. It seemed as if I were one of those heroes, charged by the divine hand to carry the holy word to untold multitudes of heathens deprived of the knowledge of religion. But there was the sea to contend with first, and however much I tried not to think of it, the prospect of being out of sight of land unsettled my stomach and weakened my step. No, there is no need to tell me, Maria, I know—I have grown up by the

sea and rubbed shoulders with brave mariners since childhood—but you know better than anyone that until Cadiz the closest I had gotten to an ocean voyage was in our imagination when we sailed as children to distant lands in the privacy of our family garden. Do you remember when Uncle Bernat offered to take me to Majorca with him for the Feast of Saint Catherine but I could not go because I fell sick? Well, I was not as sick as it appeared, or rather my sickness was more fright than the fish we had eaten the night before. The thought of an untimely squall and a watery grave among broken timbers was enough to take me to my bed. You might also remember my rapid recovery once our uncle was safely out of port. But this time I was not twelve, and the thought of the great service I would soon be rendering in the Lord's name was enough for me to master my unruly stomach—or if not master it, it was enough to get me on board, after which it was too late to do anything but pray. And believe me, prayer was practically my sole occupation those first few days on the open sea—undoubtedly, our esteemed uncle was greatly impressed by my unrelenting piety. I have since learned that the ocean between Cadiz and the Canaries is seldom calm (they call it the Sea of Mares, for the great number of horses that make the journey). Some days the ship pitched and rolled so much, I was amazed that anyone could stand upright without grabbing on to the nearest stanchion, yet these mariners walk the deck as if their feet were nailed to the planks. My stomach heaved at regular intervals, responding to the heaving waves as if it wished to show solidarity with the ways of nature, and many of the other passengers who were unused to the sea joined me in that unpleasant occupation. The mariners laughed and brought up buckets of saltwater so we could swab the deck. Still, it is strange what a man can get used to when he has no other choice. By the time we put in at Grand Canary, seven days from the day we sailed, my stomach had settled in its course and I could walk the ship with no more concern for my unsteady footing than a sparrow has for the winds that bear it this way and that as it crosses the sky.

We stayed only a few hours at Grand Canary before continuing on to La Gomera, a journey of three days, but before I continue my narrative, let me tell you something of the sailor's life. No doubt you consider sailors to be a rough lot; I know I certainly did. And they are—when they are in port. But at sea they are the most religious of men. There is not one among them that does not give thanks to his Maker for the smallest of fortunes, and even for his misfortunes, for they seemed convinced that any small misfortune is the Lord's way of saving them from a far greater mishap. "They that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great water; these men see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep." I was reminded of this passage in Psalms when I saw its truth portrayed in these rough men of crude speech and great piety. At each turning of the *ampolleta* they sing the Lord's praise,* as they often do while they work; and before the night watch is set, the crew gathers for evening prayers. Pater

* A type of vial, similar to an hourglass, containing enough sand for thirty minutes; it was turned every half hour by a ship's hand.

Nosters and Ave Marias ring out into the gathering night, sanctified by the salt spray and the approaching stars that all acknowledge to be his handiwork. The prayers end with a stirring *Salve Regina*, and those who are not on night watch spend some time contemplating the creation, its vastness never more apparent than at sea under a darkening sky, before they find a vacant plank where they can curl up and sleep. Even a small mishap at sea can mean death, and a great one a watery tomb for all on board—perhaps it is this closeness to one's mortality that makes the sailor so conscious of his God, so ready to see his hand in every happening, to sing his praises in every enterprise he undertakes. It is a hard life, as any traveler who has sailed out of sight of land for any length of days can tell you: the food is terrible and carefully rationed, as is the water and the wine; the quarters are cramped and crowded with men and animals; you see the same faces day after day, with no escape when they test your nerves, as they are wont to do; you sleep wherever you can find space, no matter the pitching of the ship or if it rains or if you had the night watch and must sleep when the sun is up; you must ease yourself in full view of everyone—admiral, priest, and peon alike—in chairs they call *jardins* that they hang over the rail with a tarred rope end to clean your private parts; and the daily work is unrelenting. But among it all, the sky and the sea speak to you incessantly of the hand that guides your destiny and of the wonders he has placed here for you to know. Yes, they may be rough men, but the sea turns them into monks and their ship into a cloister.

From Grand Canary we sailed to Gomera. Along the way we passed Tenerife, where a huge volcano was sending smoky plumes into the noon sky. Tenerife has yet to be pacified; it is still in the hands of the natives, who are called Guanches. They are said to be very fierce and very primitive. I saw some of them at Gomera, where they serve the *hidalgos* that govern the island, but these were tame natives; they bore some resemblance to the Indians who sailed with us. We stopped again at Ferro, due to paucity of wind, and finally began the long crossing on the thirteenth. Twenty-one days it took us to landfall, 820 leagues. Dr. Chanca, the fleet physician, said it would have been even faster but the flagship is a poor sailor and the other vessels often had to shorten sail so as not to leave us behind. Twenty-one days with an empty horizon on all sides and a fervent faith that the admiral would not misjudge his course and strand us in a watery desert with limited provisions. But by this time, I knew something of sailing, and those who knew best judged the admiral a mighty navigator with the light of Providence on his brow—many of the crew had sailed with him on his initial voyage and they trust him in nautical matters as one might his father confessor in spiritual ones. Since I had little to do, or perhaps because of my need to be reassured that these men were not running blind across an endless ocean, I attached myself to the ship's master, Don Antonio de Torres, owner of the vessel and a more than able seaman (the same who will carry this letter). He taught me much of the navigator's art: how to read a compass; how to chart your course by estimating the daily distance, which you do by estimating the ship's speed (not as difficult

as it sounds) and multiplying it by the hours you sail; how to line up a quadrant with the sun by day or the polestar by night.

The admiral noticed my interest in these matters and several times he engaged me in conversation. He is a man of great confidence, as you may remember, and this confidence is magnified when he is at sea, where he is in every way the master of his domain. He is tireless in his habits and sleeps but little, and he wears his sense of destiny like a crown. When I asked him if he used the quadrant to confirm his position, he scoffed at the notion and told me that he was guided by the prophecies of Isaiah. “Look at the signs,” he said. “Granada has fallen, the Jews have been expelled from Castile, and three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are loose upon the world—war on the red horse, famine on the black, and death on the pale one. Only our Savior on his white horse has yet to appear. Soon the heathens and infidels the world over will be either converted or destroyed, and then he will come. I will tell you a secret, lad: King Solomon’s mines lie somewhere in these lands that I have discovered; I have had clear intimations of it. From there will come the gold that will launch the Last Crusade and lead us to the end of the world. It is my destiny to bring these riches to Castile, because it is from Castile that the Messiah-Emperor that the prophecies speak of will come. Now, you tell me, what need do I have of a quadrant?” When I mentioned the Muslim successes in Turkey and the obstinacy of the Jews when faced with the choice of either converting or being expelled, he told me that these were also signs of the Second Coming. He considers them to be divine tests, the necessary dark before the dawn. At times there is a mystical look in his eye, as if he were a biblical prophet himself, able to see the truth of everything he says, and it is difficult not to be affected by his fervor. Certainly, Ramón and I both were, though I thought it best not to mention this to Uncle Bernat. He is rather predisposed against the admiral. He considers him boastful, and you know that our uncle cannot abide men whom he considers vain. But boastful or not, there is no denying the immense impact that Columbus has had upon us all.

But I am neglecting my narrative and there is still much to relate. Once we left Gomera, the seas were relatively calm, except for one thunderstorm that struck in the night some two weeks in. Its winds were so strong they split the mainsail and snapped some spars before the crew could fasten them down, and while the winds raged we could see St. Elmo’s fire dancing above the topsails. I prayed then as I had not prayed since the first days of our voyage, sure that the end had come, but Don Antonio and the pilot assured me that there was nothing to worry about: it was just a squall, they said; in fact, we were lucky we had not run into more along the way. Sure enough, the winds died down and the sun came up on a sea as quiet and as smooth as polished marble. One week later, in the breaking dawn, I was waked by a shout from the round-top: “We have land; the reward, the reward!” I ran to the port bow and there it was: a mountainous island rising into the rosy dawn of the Sabbath. The admiral gave his thanks to God and called all hands to prayer, after which he named the island Dominica,

in honor of the Sabbath. Soon several more islands became visible, to whom the admiral gave various names, all more verdant and lush than any lands I had ever seen. We sailed onward the following day for an even larger island that was visible from Dominica. The admiral named it Guadalupe, thus fulfilling the promise he had made to the monks at Santa Maria, much to the delight of Fray Ramón. It was a sight I will never forget. A high volcanic peak rose above the clouds and from those clouds there leaped a silver ribbon that shimmered in the morning light. Crew and passengers debated as to its origin, until we drew close enough to discern that it was a waterfall, as beautiful as any that poets dream of. We took shelter there in a pleasant cove on the southwest shore, protected from the winds that sped us across the sea, where we rested from our voyage while the admiral sent parties to explore the island and bring back what provisions they could find.

It was while we were getting reacquainted with the passengers from the other vessels that we received some unfortunate news. Of the four Indians who had not been with us on the flagship, two had died during the crossing and a third was gravely ill (the admiral believes that their constitution is poorly suited to these difficult ocean voyages). Diego and Fernando, who had been with us on the *Santa Maria*, were sorely affected by the loss of their compatriots. Fray Ramón and I did our best to console them, as did Antonio de Marchena and Rodrigo Pérez, the two Franciscan friars who accompanied us on the flagship, being friends of the admiral. In an effort to distract them from their sorrows, I asked them to tell us what they knew of the islands we had seen thus far. To this end, I asked Diego to draw us a map in the sand, oriented by sunrise and sunset—in Cadiz, I had shown them Ptolemy's maps, as well as the recent work of Mauro and Toscanelli, so they had some notion of what a map was. This seemed to animate them. They began conversing back and forth in their melodious tongue. In minutes they had collaborated on a map depicting no less than twenty islands of various sizes that stretched over a great distance. We could not get an exact notion of the scale of their map—they could only tell us how many days it took to cross from one island to another in the dugout boats they call *canoas* that the admiral praised before the king and queen—but we had a rough idea since we knew that it was seventeen leagues from Dominica to Guadalupe. The islands they drew described a great arc that stretched from Cuba and Española in the west to what they insisted was the mainland in the south, with Dominica and Guadalupe more or less at the midpoint of the arc. Diego was anxious to point out to me his homeland, Guanahaní, a small island to the north of Española, but I was far more interested in his insistence that the mainland lay due south of where we were anchored. Was this the Japans? Was it China perhaps or India? Had they told the admiral? There was no way we could make it clear to them what we meant by China or India, but yes, they had told Columbus everything that we were hearing for the first time. In fact, rather than sail directly from the Canaries to Española, the admiral had decided to chart a course further south based on what he had learned from Diego and the other Indians. But there was no mistaking Diego when I asked him to

describe what manner of men, if any, lived on the island of Guadalupe, for we had yet to see any sign of human habitation. “Caribs,” he said, and the animosity was plain on his face.

You should remember that name, Maria. I have not yet forgotten your shudders when you first heard the stories the admiral and his men told of these cruel warriors who feast on human flesh, the mortal enemies of all the pagan peoples who inhabit these islands. You can imagine our shock then when Diego told us that Guadalupe was home to the Caribs. I instinctively turned toward the forest, half expecting the naked hordes to come streaming out at any moment in search of their next meal. I have since learned that Diego and his friends do not entirely agree with these notions of the admiral—from their description, the Caribs are more like the Huns who ravaged the Roman Empire, fierce warriors who raid the more civilized islands to steal their women and their wealth; in fact, the word *carib* means “brave man” or “strong man” in their language—but at the time I was still under the sway of the admiral’s stories. Diego smiled at my reaction. He said they were more frightened of us than we were of them; and indeed, one glance at our armada was very likely enough to make even the bravest savage take flight: fifteen hundred men and the most sophisticated weaponry the world has ever seen—two hundred trained soldiers, twenty mounted calvary from the Santa Hermandad, and hundreds of armed hidalgos and commoners who know how to use their weapons.

Diego’s pronouncement proved true. We saw no one those first few days—clearly the Indians fled when they saw our ships approaching—but the parties that the admiral sent out on the third day returned two days later with some two dozen captives, most of them young women and all as naked as the day their mother bore them, just as the admiral described in his letter. Their nakedness was a great shock to me, but I have gotten used to it since then, at least as much as a man of the cloth can get used to the sight of naked men and women who have no concept of shame. Diego was pressed into service then for the first time as the fleet’s official translator. With his help we learned that most of the captured Indians were themselves captives of the Caribs; they had shown themselves in the hope of being rescued. But among them were four Carib warriors who had been bound with ropes after a fierce struggle to escape. The admiral liberated the captives and later allowed them to return to their native islands, but the four Caribs were taken to Española as slaves.

After setting off from Guadalupe, we continued on the course shown by the Indians. We passed numerous islands along the way but we did not stop, except once to take on water. The admiral was anxious to press on, for he was worried about the men he had left in Navidad nearly one year earlier. It was during these days of tranquil weather that I was able to appreciate more fully the beauty of my surroundings. Truly, if paradise were made of men’s imaginings, it would not be much different than these islands with their balmy clime, their lush verdure, and their crystalline waters. Their winter is as our summer, though

much pleasanter owing to the freshness of the ocean breezes, and they remain greener than Andalusia at the height of spring. Sapphire peaks, ringed round by lush forests, brimming over with all manner of wild fruits; transparent emerald waters teeming with fish of every color; afternoon showers followed by brilliant sunshine that leaves the landscape sparkling like a palace adorned with jewels and precious metals: nature could not be more beneficent or more bountiful. It is an empire of islands that lacks only the holy church and her teachings to open the eyes of its people to the glory of the Lord's creation. But alas, they are pagans still, and there were earthly trials in store for us.

The first of these befell us five days from Guadalupe when we put in at a smaller island that the admiral christened Santa Cruz. Its aspect was even more pleasing than those we had passed, for it had no large mountains and the entire island seemed to be under cultivation, as if it were one enormous garden. The fleet dropped anchor in a small estuary from where we could see some simple huts and a number of Indians, but they fled inland when the admiral sent an armed party ashore in the boat. Our men followed them to a village but its inhabitants also fled when they saw our men coming. While the shore party was returning to the ship, an Indian dugout appeared around the headland, paddling up the coast for the estuary. When they saw our ships they dropped their paddles and stared in open amazement. Taking advantage of their stupefaction, the pilot positioned the boat so as to cut off their avenue of retreat. When they realized this, they gave a fierce cry and attacked the boat. Though there were only six of them—two of them women—against two dozen of ours, they fought so fiercely, the women also, that they managed to wound two of our men before they could be overcome and brought aboard the flagship. One of the Indians was cut so badly his intestines were hanging out. Dr. Chanca declared him to be beyond hope and had him thrown overboard, but to our amazement he began swimming shoreward while holding his intestines in place with one hand. Even our Spanish soldiers were impressed with his courage. Lest he warn his fellows, he was recaptured and bound hand and foot and thrown back into the sea, but even then he managed to free himself from his bonds and begin swimming, so that our archers were forced to shoot him with arrows. By then a huge number of these Caribs had come running down to the shore. They had painted strange designs on their naked bodies with red, black, and yellow pigments, and they were brandishing wooden spears and bows and arrows. Though there was nothing they could do from that distance, it was a frightful sight and a stark reminder that we were in pagan lands and that our mission here would not be without its dangers.

We set sail then, passing more islands as we went, until four days later we came to a large and beautiful island that the Indians call Boriquén and which the admiral christened San Juan Bautista. We stopped here to swim and fish and gather quantities of wild fruits that would be prized as delicacies anywhere in Europe. Here also the natives fled when they saw us, but after our encounter in Santa Cruz I was thankful they did. Diego assured me, however, that we had nothing

to fear: the island was well-known to him and there were no Caribs there. The next morning the admiral sent out an exploratory party and this time I was able to go along. Upon entering the forest we discovered a well-maintained walkway. Shortly thereafter we came to a tall lookout tower large enough to accommodate ten or twelve men and so cleverly camouflaged that while it remained invisible from the beach it commanded an unobstructed view of the same for anyone who stood upon it. About a quarter league inland from the tower we came across an Indian town that had obviously been abandoned after our arrival, for the signs of human occupation were only hours old. The town was not laid out in streets as ours are, but like ours it was organized around a large, well-swept, rectangular plaza. We discovered several smaller plazas in other sections of the town along with fragrant orchards, vegetable gardens, and on the outskirts a sizable plantation. The houses were made of wood and thatch and were of well-designed construction, such as you might see in Valencia, though these were round and high and spacious enough to accommodate several families. I have since examined similar structures in Española. They begin by driving sturdy poles as large as my thigh into the ground in a circle and close together. These are crisscrossed with thinner poles that are tied with thick vines and covered with a latticework of stripped reed and cane that is formed into such clever designs that it appears as if the inner walls were painted by a skilled artist. Other poles are then angled up and tied at the center point to form the roof, which is covered by a thin, beautiful, and pleasant-smelling straw. The floor, as in our villages, is of tightly packed earth. Indeed, the entire appearance of the town was one of easeful comfort and natural beauty.

From San Juan Bautista we sailed westward some twenty leagues until we came to a low, flat land that the Indians assured us was Española, which they call Haiti or sometimes Quisqueya. At first the crew did not believe them, but some mountains soon came into view that they recognized, thus confirming what the Indians had told us. For the next few days we sailed along the north coast while the admiral examined the shoreline for suitable harbors and other advantages. One morning we stopped in a small bay where Uncle performed the funeral rites for a Basque sailor who had died the previous night from the wounds he'd received in Santa Cruz. Our next stop was the harbor that the admiral had named Monte Cristi on his previous voyage, which lay some half dozen leagues from Navidad. There our mood, already growing somber from the long confinement on board, suffered a grievous blow. A shore party found two decomposing bodies whose beards confirmed them to be Christians. We reached Caracol Bay at twilight, near the site where, as you may remember, the largest of the admiral's three ships from his first voyage broke upon the rocks, forcing him to leave behind thirty-nine men, nearly half his crew. We lit flares and fired cannons, hoping for the best, but there was no answer and our hearts began to sink, fearing that these men were lost. We prayed for their succor and sang the *Salve Regina* but our hearts were heavy as our eyes searched the shoreline for any sign of Christian life. After a couple

of hours, three Indians in a dugout approached the fleet shouting the admiral's name. They were directed to the flagship but they hesitated to come aboard until they recognized the admiral in the torchlight. They turned out to be emissaries of the local king, Guacanagarí (one of them was his cousin). At first they told the admiral that the settlement was well, other than a few deaths from sickness and fighting, but as Diego continued to question them a story gradually emerged that inflamed our men with anger and suspicion, even as we wept.

According to the Indians, no sooner had the admiral left for Castile than the men started fighting among themselves. Several died in these quarrels. Afterward they went their separate ways, with most of the men leaving Navidad to roam the island in search of women and gold. These wandered into the lands of a neighboring king, Caonabó, where they abducted the native women and used them as they pleased, terrorizing with their swords and arquebuses anyone who opposed them or who would not furnish them with the gold they desired. Supposedly those who stayed behind to man the garrison were not much better, also taking undo liberties with the local women. When this Caonabó, who is reputed to be a redoubtable warrior, heard of the depredations against his people, he gathered together a war party, captured the offenders, and put them to death. Then he descended on Navidad in the night. He burned the fort and chased the surviving Christians into the sea where they drowned. As the Indians told it, Guacanagarí's men tried to come to their rescue but they arrived too late and many were wounded in the attempt. In retaliation Caonabó burned their village.

This was their story, but the crew could not believe it; neither could the admiral. How could two-score armed Spaniards be slaughtered by these timid, defenseless Indians who fight with sticks and wear nothing to protect their bodies? But I believed it, if not the particulars then at least the general import. I had seen with my own eyes how fiercely the Indians fought in Santa Cruz; more importantly, I knew my own people. I had hoped that we'd left the Spains behind but I saw then that we had brought them with us—brought the violence, the greed, and the lasciviousness that plague our decadent age. I knew it the moment I looked into the vengeful faces of the passengers and crew after the Indians had told their story. We had just crossed the Ocean Sea and arrived in lands that appeared to our eyes like paradise, but inside us nothing had changed. The violence we carry within had come to meet us, and afterward I was sure that disease and hunger would not be far behind—have they not always afflicted our people as recompense for our evil deeds? The admiral, in his letter to the sovereigns, compared this island to Eden; he praised the innocence and gentle, generous nature of its inhabitants, who were only in want of some religious men like myself to usher them into the sight of God. But what would happen if we Spaniards wandered into Eden with our insolent ways, our greed, and our lust? In Barcelona we heard from the admiral's lips how docile and guileless these Indians are, and I have seen the truth of his words in Diego and his companions. But are we surprised to discover that they are also men? You may fault me for saying this, I know Uncle

certainly would, but we both know how cruel we Spaniards can be. How could we not with the example of the inquisition to instruct us? There is much to be admired in us but also much to condemn. Those of us who made the voyage may have left Europe and its troubles behind—indeed, for many of us this was our principal hope—but we cannot escape ourselves. Nor can we escape the eyes of the Creator who sees everything we have done and who will not forget. But let me continue with my account. There is still much to tell and soon I shall have to hand this letter to Don Antonio.

The next day the admiral and Dr. Chanca went ashore to explore. They found the remains of the fort and eleven bodies to whom we gave a Christian burial. On the following day the admiral led a battle array to the king's village with fife and drums and a show of arms that must have made any Indian who saw it tremble. I did not go but I heard afterward that the king claimed to be convalescing from the wounds he'd incurred while coming to the aid of our men, though Dr. Chanca, who examined him, did not find anything serious enough to suggest that he had been in a battle. That night the king came to the *Mariagalante* to dine with the admiral. He professed his sorrow over our comrades' death and pledged his continued support. Though a savage, he seemed a dignified and serious man who might have been a *hidalgo* had he been born in Spain. I was surprised to see that he washed his hands both before and after eating, in water spiced with herbs brought by his retainers. He also brought gifts for the admiral of great value and great artistry that I marveled to see when they were passed among us: finely crafted wooden carvings; gold statuettes and others of bone and polished stone; pendants of all sizes and shapes and composition; sturdy stone tools; and a wondrous belt made of tiny colored stones and pearls of white fishbone sewn together with cotton thread, so hard and strong that an arquebus shot could not pierce it. Instead of a purse, it bore a solid gold mask with two great ears and a gold tongue and nose.

After the king left, the admiral held a council and debated what to do. Uncle Bernat and some of the admiral's officers suspected Guacanagarí of treachery. They urged the admiral to arrest him and put him to death, so as to frighten his countrymen and impress upon them the wrath of the Spanish, but the admiral would not agree. He deemed it imprudent to irritate the natives, at least for the present. In this he showed his wisdom, I believe, for from what I have seen and heard this land is large and densely populated and we are a meager few by comparison. If this Guacanagarí truly be an ally, then we will need his help in the days and months to come.

We left that place and put to sea once more in search of a suitable harbor for our settlement. Rather than continue westward, the admiral decided to retrace our route in order to be closer to the region the Indians call Cibao, where the principal gold mines are said to be located. We were heading against the westerly winds now and it was difficult sailing. It took us more time and effort to travel thirty leagues up the coast than it had taken us to cross the eight hundred leagues

of the Ocean Sea. By this time the crew was worn out and sick, and the animals were dying from their long confinement. On the second of January, twenty-five days after leaving Navidad, the admiral brought us to anchor in the sheltered bay of a wooded peninsula where a rocky promontory seemed to offer a natural defense for our proposed town. After a short exploration, he was convinced that it offered all the advantages he was searching for. At any rate, neither the crew nor the passengers had the strength to go any farther. Thus, after many hardships and three long months of travel, we disembarked. Four days later we celebrated the first Mass in this new world on the Feast of the Epiphany, on the site that the admiral marked out for the church.

A day will surely come when we will celebrate Mass on this island in a cathedral, but this first Mass took place under the unadorned dome of God's creation. Nevertheless, it moved me as no Mass has ever done. The previous evening I helped my fellow friars set up an improvised altar that we covered with a tapestry on which Uncle placed the crucifix and the candles and the statue of Our Lady of Montserrat that he brought with him from his former monastery. We hung the banners of Castile and Escuadra on either side of the altar and above it we raised a spacious tent with the help of some spare sails. A couple of soldiers climbed into a nearby tree and hung from one of its branches the beautiful bronze bell that King Ferdinand sent for the church. The bell began sounding half an hour before dawn, calling the penitents to worship. It was echoed by the peals of the ships' bells in the harbor. As the horizon began to glow with the crimson light of the immanent sun, nearly fifteen hundred men gathered before the altar to celebrate this historic Mass. The admiral and his brother were seated in front. Alongside them sat Don Antonio, the various high officials, and Fernando, the king's Indian godson. Behind them sat the soldiers in full armor flanked by the Santa Hermandad on their magnificent steeds, and behind them the commoners and the crew. On all sides there gathered crowds of Indians drawn by the sacred sounds. When the sun crested the horizon, Uncle Bernat, wearing the gold-bordered crimson robe that the sovereigns had presented him for this very occasion, passed among the penitents with the hyssop branch, sprinkling them with holy water and chanting those memorable words: *aspergas me, Domine, hyssopo et mundabor: lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor*. We clerics formed a train behind him, each with a golden stole over the robes of his order: slate gray for the seven Franciscans, white for the two Mercedarians, dark brown for our lone Hieronymite, and my traditional black. I cannot express in words how pregnant with meaning each line of the Mass was for me that day! When Uncle began the Gradual and we responded in chorus—*surge, et illuminare, Jerusalem quia Gloria Domini super te est*—I could see the new Jerusalem rising up in front of my eyes, causing them to stream with tears that were still flowing when Uncle lifted the host and the beautiful gothic chalice sent by the queen. When all had taken the host and been renewed, Uncle raised the consecrated wafer and blessed the four regions of the world. He then declared, "In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and

of the holy pontiff, head of the church, I take possession of these islands, seas, and mainland.” By then I was not the only one weeping: I dare say there was not a dry eye among all the Christians gathered there.

Since then we have been busy raising our settlement on this rocky promontory that the townspeople have taken to calling *Isla Bella* and which the admiral has christened *Isabela*—may her name resound to the glory of our illustrious sovereigns and please him who watches over us. So far, the site seems favorably disposed to our success. The promontory overlooks a bay that provides ample harbor for any number of ships. There is a mountain of excellent quarrying stone nearby and another of fine limestone. Though there is no immediate fresh water, there is a powerful river only a lombard shot away that empties into the bay; that water can be brought into the town by canals, which will also make possible the construction of water mills and the ferrying of stones from the quarry. Beyond the river there is a fertile valley that extends for many leagues and also a goodly supply of clayey soil for bricks and pottery. Our first work has been to surround the town with a rampart of rammed earth and stone to protect us in case of attack, but in the meantime we have built temporary shelters, including a small chapel. As I write this letter, the principal buildings are being raised: the royal storehouse, the admiral’s house, a military depot, a shipyard, and of course the church—all of stone and brick; ground has also been marked out for a hospital. There is an Indian village nearby, and after overcoming their initial fear the savages have been coming every day to bring us food: a type of bread called *casábi* that they make from a stiff, white root; *ajes*, which are like turnips; wild fruits and vegetables; and varieties of fish. Most agree with the admiral that the sickness that runs rampant among us is due to the change in climate and the alien foods; thus we confine ourselves to the stores we brought with us, though many of these are spoiled and the food is strictly rationed. But Dr. Chanca recommends the fish as being healthful. He tastes each new variety and observes its effects on his own person before he will allow us to eat it.

Lest you worry overmuch, I can tell you that apart from a few days’ diarrhea I have had the good fortune of escaping the fevers and chills that have afflicted most everyone else. I have since been assisting Dr. Chanca, who is working tirelessly to nurse the men back to health. Despite the chronic diarrhea and general weakness that is everywhere apparent, the admiral insists that everyone, even the sick, must work to raise the town. I have heard him repeat many times that a single Indian with a torch could burn our makeshift colony to the ground, and there is some truth to what he says. Thus all are at work, even the *hidalgos*, who consider it an outrage that they are forced to do manual labor, they who have never passed a rough day in their lives. They have no choice, however: the admiral has threatened to withhold food rations from anyone who does not work. Even the clergy are subject to the same penalty. Uncle, as you can imagine, is sorely vexed over this, but there is one point, at least, on which he and the admiral agree: the church will be the first building completed. Lord willing, it will have

a roof by week's end. The bell tower, in fact, should be finished tomorrow, and thus the sovereigns' bell will soon be ringing with the glad tidings of the arrival of Christendom to these islands.

Despite their poor health, most of the men are in high spirits. After we celebrated the Epiphany, the admiral sent two parties to search for the mines. They returned ten days ago with gold samples and news of riches gushing from the mountains in gold-laden streams. While most of my fellow Christians are regular in their prayers and careful to give thanks to the Lord and the Virgin Mother for the blessings they have received and the hardships they have overcome, it seems these days that what sustains their spirits is more the thought of the riches and honors that await them than the thought of the Creator who has planted those riches in the earth. Thus there is much for me to do here, hundreds of souls to keep from the temptation that assaults their hearts and minds, and countless more to bring to the Christian fold, but that is why I came. Wish me well in my mission, Maria Carme. Though you remain on the far side of the Ocean Sea, I can feel your spirit beside me as I walk and it gladdens my heart.

I wish I had time to write more, but I am afraid that I shall have to end my letter here. Don Antonio's boatswain has arrived and he is bidding me sign my name to this letter and seal it. It is time to hand over what I have spent the better part of two days preparing so that you may know of your brother and his fortunes since last I wrote. May the Lord watch over you and give you much felicity on your wedding day.

Isabela, the first day of February, the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1494,

Your devoted brother,
Fray Pau Gonçalves

Fray Pau Gonçalves of the Order of Saint Benedict, to his sister, Senyora Maria Carme Gonçalves, Comtessa de Tarragona,

Greeting and Grace,

Today is the fourteenth of March, eighteen years to the day since our sainted mother brought you into this world. Though it may be many long months before a ship heads back to the Peninsula, I have decided to commemorate this day that is so dear to my heart by writing you a letter that I will keep safe between the pages of my Bible until the Lord grants me an opportunity to speed it on its way to Barcelona. Though we have little time for letters in these days of hard work and meager rations, the nights are ours, and this one I dedicate to my only sister, whose smile illumines my eyes far more than the tallow candle that lights my table in our newly completed church, the first in these pagan lands. Do you remember when you showed me your first letter, the one you wrote Uncle Bernat at mother's request? You were not yet ten, if I am not mistaken. I corrected your errors and mockingly proclaimed that Isabel de Villena had nothing to fear from your poor attempt to imitate her inimitable style. Now I look forward to a letter from you more than I once looked forward to the first printed copies of *Tirant Lo Blanc*. And then there were our poetry-writing contests—how seriously we took them! I was enamored of the octosyllabic verses of Auzias March, while you favored the *nova rimada* of Jaume Roig. Do you still write verses, now that you are about to enter into wedlock? Perhaps you will tell me that it is no occupation for a grown woman, but I would rather we were both young again and free to argue over whose verses showed more *éclat*. What did we know of care then, of the hardships that are attendant upon the reason when a man or woman grows into maturity? But there is no turning back the clock. We must confront the trials that the Lord has deemed necessary to purify our reason and lead our hearts into his eternal presence. Speaking of such trials, I would be remiss if I did not continue my narrative of life in these pagan lands. You have commanded me to do so and your command is my delight. It is also the only means I have these days of keeping alive the love of letters that our mother took such care to instill into our young hearts.

It is two days now since Columbus set out for the gold mines of Cibao at the head of a magnificent cavalcade of Spanish arms; he plans to begin mining operations and construct a fort in that region. Like everyone who remained behind, I could not help but feel a swell of pride as I heard the trumpets blare and watched the flag bearers raise their banners. More than five hundred men in military formation followed behind the admiral—cavalry, crossbowmen, hidalgos, foot soldiers, carpenters, masons, and metallurgists—an impressive display of Spanish might designed to put the fear of God and the fear of the Spanish into the Indians, to

use the admiral's own words. I saw no signs of fear, however, only curiosity and excitement. As many as a thousand Indians from the nearby villages followed the procession as it wound its way toward the Vega Real, a great plain that begins some ten leagues inland and which I am told has no equal in richness or beauty (I have yet to see it but our scouts report that it is nearly as large as Portugal). Adult savages were running alongside the columns together with their children, laughing and conversing among themselves as if they had brought their families to watch a festival-day parade. Our army must have appeared a great and marvelous wonder to them, and I had to ask myself if they in their innocence had any idea of how dangerous a wonder we Spaniards are. For hours after the cavalcade disappeared from sight, we could hear the trumpets and the occasional boom of an arquebus—it was mid-afternoon before the last echoes faded—and there is no doubt that great crowds of Indians from villages along the way thronged to watch the procession as it passed.

The innocence and natural goodwill of the natives is something I was able to experience firsthand this past Sunday when I accompanied Diego to the nearest village. I was a little apprehensive at first. Until now we have mostly kept ourselves confined within the walls of our nascent town, only venturing forth in armed parties, often led by the admiral, who has banned all unauthorized trade with the Indians. It seems only natural to maintain this careful regard for our safety after the massacre at Navidad, which still weighs heavily upon our minds (I have since learned that Caonabó, the perpetrator of the massacre, is himself a foreigner from the islands north of Española), but up until now we have seen nothing but goodness from the smiling people who are our neighbors. They continue to bring us food and to trade their gold for trinkets, despite the admiral's ban. This, coupled with Diego's assurances, led me to accept his invitation to spend some time among the people whom I have come here to convert. How glad I was that I agreed, for truly I have not passed as rewarding or as delightful a day since our arrival.

As we approached the village, a crowd of children rushed to greet us, chattering away in their pleasant-sounding tongue. They were followed by their elders who met me with gifts and a great show of hospitality. They led us to the cacique's house—*cacique* is the Indian word for king or chief. A great feast had been prepared in our honor: baked fish, a vegetable stew spiced with hot peppers, varieties of fruit, and freshly baked cassava bread, which Diego tells me does not spoil, even if kept for a full year. I was hesitant to try the food—most men in our colony are; they are afraid it will speed them to an early grave, despite Dr. Chanca's recommendations that we gradually accustom ourselves to the local dishes so as to supplement our meager rations—but I did not want to offend my hosts, whose generosity and eagerness to please was evident on their faces. Once I overcame my reluctance, however, I found the unfamiliar foods to be quite palatable. Indeed, I found them so much to my liking that I ended up enjoying what was my first substantial meal in weeks. Since then I have felt no ill effects—if anything, quite the opposite.

Afterward they took me on a tour of the village. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to show me his home, whose construction I described in my previous letter. As we walked from house to house nearly everyone in the village followed along, laughing gayly and listening as best they could to every word that passed between myself and the cacique—they seemed just as awed by Diego's ability to speak our language as they did by the exotic figure I presented. The cacique, whose name is Caballas, not only showed me their houses, which they call *bohíos*, but also how they prepared their food, and how they made their baskets and their pottery and the cloths they weave. In return he wanted to know all about our Spanish customs. They were especially curious about my clothes—the only ones among them who wear anything at all are the married women, and all they wear are thin cloths that cover their pudenda, the same that we saw Diego and his comrades wearing when they arrived in Barcelona. My fellow Spaniards think that this shows that they are little better than animals, but clearly this is not the case; rather they seem to have no concept of shame. I was not yet ready to impress upon them the importance of developing a sense of modesty, so I told them about the severity of our winters and how clothes also protect the skin from the summer sun; I thought it prudent to wait until we gained their confidence before we begin teaching them the importance of this and other Christian virtues. They were agape at many of the things I told them about the Peninsula and about our customs and beliefs. I think much of it was beyond their capacity to understand, though Diego did his best to describe his experiences in Castile and Catalonia, much to the delight of everyone who listened. The one area where they do not seem backward is in their methods of cultivation. There is an extensive plantation on the outskirts of the village, so fertile and productive that I doubt any European town could boast of its equal. Unlike our farmers, who plant in rows, they build up mounds of loosely packed earth and plant different roots and vegetables together so that they grow in symbiosis. According to Caballas, the combination of plants discourages insect attacks, so that the mounds require very little care. Interspersed throughout the plantation were varieties of fruit trees; thus from a distance you might think that you were looking at a pleasant wood instead of a carefully planned plantation.

None of what I learned that day, would have been possible, of course, had it not been for Diego. You would not recognize him, I should think, were you to see him now. His Castilian is perfectly understandable and his vocabulary grows day by day. He never fails to attend morning Mass or evening prayers, and he wears clothes as easily as we do, though he has discarded our course woollens in favor of garments made from the finely woven cotton cloth that the Indians produce. Watching him as he translated my speech and conversed with the villagers made me realize just how important it will be for me to learn their language if I wish to bring them to the faith by the straightest and quickest means possible. Realizing this, I wasted no time in beginning my education. By the end of the day, my vocabulary of Indian words had increased manyfold. Their plantations, for example, are called *conucos*. The people themselves are Taino, which means

“good people” in their language. It seems an apt description. Diego tells me that there is no stealing among them and few squabbles, and I believe it, for they lack nothing and what they have they share freely among themselves. They are, as the admiral said, a guileless and happy people, generous to a fault.

When we returned to Isabela that evening, it was as if I were seeing our town through different eyes. I had just spent most of the day among a laughing, child-like people brimming over with healthful vigor. Not one of them, it seemed, carried a heavy burden or knew how to do anything but smile and enjoy the company of their fellows under the bounteous shade of trees laden with fruit, as innocent of their nakedness as Adam was before Eve bade him eat of the apple. What a contrast our poor colony presented! Only half a league away in Isabela nearly everyone has fallen sick. We have been here but ten weeks and already we have had our fair share of untimely burials, and the prospect of further deaths hangs like a specter over the minds of one and all. Diarrhea runs rampant among us but worse is a fever that Dr. Chanca has not been able to counter for all his efforts. Like most everyone, I blame the forced labor and the stingy rations, but why then do we refuse to eat the native foods that exist in such abundance and instead endure our hunger with grim visages and much caviling as we wait impatiently for Don Antonio to return from Castile with the supplies the admiral requested? You cannot walk ten paces without seeing a sorry face or hearing a bitter, though not unjustifiable, complaint: the work is hard and unrelenting, the promised riches are nowhere to be seen, and beyond our walls lies a pagan horde that could overwhelm us at any moment. For these and other reasons many chose to go back with Don Antonio, mainly those who were not on salary from the Crown. Of the nine hundred who remained in Isabela many have had reason to regret their decision. Indeed, there has already been an abortive rebellion that has left our colony with bitter feelings. Last month, Bernal de Pisa, a court marshal designated by the sovereigns as royal comptroller, hatched a plot to take possession of several caravels and sail back to Castile, but some crew members found incriminating papers hidden in a buoy and Columbus had him clamped in irons. The admiral hanged two of his co-conspirators and only refrained from hanging Pisa because his appointment as comptroller required that he be tried in Castile. One of those hanged was Aragonese, Gaspar Feríz. Uncle Bernat has been in a rage ever since. Though he does not show it publicly, there is bad blood between him and the admiral, and he is not alone in his sentiments. Columbus is a foreigner; for that reason his iron rule is doubly hard to stomach. These proud Castilians and Aragonese chafe at the yoke when they see themselves tied to the rule of a man who is not only a foreigner but a commoner by birth. And yet just beyond our walls—walls that serve as much to keep us in as to keep the Indians out—the natives live in joyful abundance, guileless and content. “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Is there perhaps something we could learn from the childlike simplicity of these Indians, primitive though they be? Of what good is the progress that our

modern age has brought us if the price we pay is our innocence and our goodwill? But I doubt my Spanish brethren would ever stoop to live in such simplicity and innocence as these primitives who walk unclothed outside their walls. Alas, we know too much to become as little children.

But lest you think that all is hardship and hunger in Isabela, let me tell you that there is much I am thankful for. The first Christian settlement in these new lands will be a wonder to see when it is completed, with a spacious avenue and sturdy buildings looking out on an emerald sea that dazzles the eye with the glory of the Creator. The climate is so pleasant that I wonder how I should ever be able to adjust to the Barcelona winter when it comes time for my return. The days are growing warmer but the afternoons bring rain and a welcome coolness. Our crops grow so fast you would be amazed, even if we have yet to adopt the Indian methods. What takes twenty days in Barcelona takes eight here. We have already harvested our first melons and greens, and other vegetables will soon be ready. My only regret is that the men were so eager for bread, they ground most of the remaining wheat instead of using it for seed. Nor is there any shortage of good company. One of the older monks, Antonio de Marchena, a studious Franciscan, is exceedingly generous with his time. He often sits with me and instructs me in both the scriptures and the ancients from the small collection of texts he brought with him—after the admiral's it is the best in the colony. When I settle in at night I could ask for no better company than Fray Ramón, with whom I share a small hut near the church. While he has little interest in books or learned discussions, his devotion and good-heartedness are exemplary, and he is quick to laugh, a commodity in short supply in Isabela. I have also made several friends among the hidalgos and officials who live nearby. One of these is Mosén Pedro Margarite, captain general of our armed forces, whom you may remember from his visit to the court, a man of firm principles and true Christian piety who is highly respected by all in Isabela, as he was in Aragon. He and Uncle confer together often and at times they include me in their discussions. Another is Michele de Cuneo, Genoese by birth and childhood friend of the admiral. He is a high-spirited man, full of tales of adventure from his years at sea. Twice have I dined with him and Columbus, once aboard ship and once at the admiral's house, which is nearing completion. On both occasions the two men told tales that filled me with amazement. They share the same overflowing confidence, though Don Michele lacks the admiral's penchant for mysticism. I have also gotten to know the admiral's brother Don Diego. He is very different from his elder brother, more contemplative in nature. His real yearning is to enter the church, and for that reason he often seeks me out for spiritual conversation.

Best of all, I am confident that once Diego returns from Cibao with Columbus I will be able to begin teaching the Indians our religion and thus fulfill the confidence that Uncle Bernat has shown in me. This alone is enough to fill my chalice. Indeed, I consider Española an ideal place for one of my order, young though I be. I have learned company in my religious brothers and the camaraderie that

our common discipline occasions; a natural setting that inspires contemplation; nearly a thousand souls to minister to, men who are in sore need of the solace that only religion can offer; and untold multitudes outside our walls who have hitherto been barred from the true faith by the intractable ocean that the admiral has so recently conquered. For these and other reasons, Maria, my spirits remain high. I cannot help but miss our Catalonian vistas, the most beautiful in Christendom, and the brave people who walk there—no one more than you—but there is a reason why our Savior brought me here. I hope to fulfill that trust before he calls me back across the ocean, no matter what difficulties this entails. When I consider the cross he bore upon his back on the road to Calvary, how can I think myself anything but fortunate?

I shall end this letter here with a glad heart and fond thoughts of your eighteen years. Soon it will be spring, and in the spring you will celebrate your wedding. If God wills it, then spring will also bring the return of our ships from Castile and with them a letter from my only sister, who is and shall ever remain dearest to my heart.

Isabela, the fourteenth day of March, the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1494,

Your brother,
Fray Pau Gonçalves

Part Two

Borikén



(please refer to the back of the book for a glossary of Taino words)

FROM HIS SEAT ON the sand, Jagüey turned to greet Karaya, the moon, as she climbed from her underground cavern and began to fill the night sky with her languid radiance. He had been waiting for her to appear, waiting for her muted light to illumine the lapping waters of the western sea from where his destiny would come, knowing that it was only in her presence that his zemi would emerge from the ocean's depths to speak to him. For years he had tried to fathom the secrets of her unfailing serenity and unwavering gaze, seeking to learn how to watch the world as she did, so that one day he might be able to complete the vigil he now kept, the solitary quest to fulfill his long apprenticeship and be accepted among his people as a bohique, guardian of the secrets of the zemi world and emissary from the society of men to the society of other living creatures.

He kept his eyes on Karaya until she detached herself from the eastern hills and began her long ascent. Then he turned back to his vigil, fixing his eyes on the gentle waves that had begun to turn iridescent under the moon's beneficent gaze. As he scanned the surface of the waters for any sign of movement, he fingered the three-pointed limestone amulet that hung from his neck, a stylized depiction of the great leatherback sea turtle, almost identical in design to the one painted on his chest with the dark red paste of the *bija* seed, whose pungent odor offered protection from mosquitos and other small biting insects. The amulet had been a gift from his master after the sea turtle had first appeared to him on this same solitary beach nearly seven years earlier, the day she had revealed to him that she was his tutelary spirit. He had learned how to add to its power by fastening it around his neck each time he felt her presence, allowing her to infuse it with her spirit. Now he used it as a talisman to let her know that he was waiting for her, as he had waited for her on each of the previous six nights. He had no doubt that she would come, whether on this night or the next, just as he had had no doubt as a child that he would become a bohique when he grew to manhood, a healer of bodies and souls, keeper of his people's memories. His mother had often told him stories of her father and her uncle, both respected bohiques, as their father had been before them, and on those occasions she had never failed to remind him that the gift of communicating with the zemis ran in his blood. He had heard it so often he had assumed it to be his destiny, even before his master had entered his mother's bohío and formally asked her to allow her son to become his disciple. What he had not been prepared for, and what he had little understood at the time, was when his master told his mother that her son had been born a *soraco*, such as had not been seen in Borikén in two generations, a seer of visions who did not need *cohoba* to enter the zemi world where the past, present, and future melted into an eternal present and the answers to all questions could be found. Even now

he did not fully understand what it meant, or why he did not need the sacred powder as others did. But his master had told him many times that some things could not be understood but only felt, as he now felt the portents of a troubled future hanging like a heavy storm cloud against the western horizon, despite the clear night sky and the abundance of stars that accompanied the moon in her vigil like a necklace of finely worked beads of coral and gold.

Jagüey took a bitter sip of *digo* juice from a small gourd, his only nourishment during his seven days of fasting. But it was not for nourishment that he took it, nor as an aid to perceive the *zemis*, as was the case with some *bohiques*, but as a means to keep awake and alert through the long nights while he waited for his tutelary spirit to appear. He could feel his vigor increase as the viscous green liquid sent a warm glow through his body. With the heightened awareness that the *digo* juice promoted, he gradually willed himself into the state of internal silence that invariably preceded his visions, a natural ability that he had honed under the careful guidance of his master. The river of time began to slow, gradually yielding up its sovereignty to the timelessness of the *zemi* world in which everything that came within the ambit of his awareness partook of the same shared consciousness. The moon that was climbing into the mirrored sky above his head, her reflection on the crenelated waters, the warm sands beneath him, the nearby mangroves whose roots clove into the silted seabed: all shared with him the restful passage of the night.

Karaya had completed her ascent and was halfway to the western horizon when his eyes were drawn to an unusual ripple a stone's throw from the beach, a rapidly moving phalanx of parting waters that approached faster than a man could run. When it reached the shore, a looming shape heaved itself onto the sand, propelled by two huge flippers spread like the wings of an enormous bird. With a titanic effort the great sea turtle, daughter of the ocean mother, *Atabey*, longer than *Jagüey* was tall and ten times his weight, began dragging herself slowly up the gentle slope by the force of her powerful front flippers. Her small encrusted eyes and beaked snout pointed straight ahead, seemingly oblivious of her human observer, who was seated so close to her path that he could have reached her with two short bounds.

It was the moment *Jagüey* had been waiting for, the reason he had come to this lonely beach, a half day's walk from his village, to seek the vision that would complete his apprenticeship. Whatever tiredness still lingered from his long vigil was gone now, banished by the advent of this lumbering creature who had come to conduct him into the *zemi* world. As if freed from its tethers by the coruscated edge of a flint blade, his mind blossomed into an unbounded awareness in which he became conscious of every sound, every sensation, every image in his field of vision in a manner so intimate that it felt as if the world around him was now inside him: the thud of the turtle's massive flippers; the scrape of her body as she inched forward on the sand; the moonlight glinting against her leathery back, spreading around her like the waters of a placid lake; the sibilant breeze filtering through

the leaves of the mangroves; the hidden cooing of a *biajaní*; the calm, measured footsteps of his own heart—a thousand different forms dancing on the outgoing breath of Yocahu, the infinite, invisible spirit that had brought them into being.

His mind filled with unspeakable delight as he accompanied the turtle's painstaking journey to reach the high-tide line. Once there, she used her massive front flippers to excavate a pit large enough for her body to fit into; with her small rear flippers she dug a chamber in which to lay her eggs. When the first of the leathery eggs began to fall, Jagüey rose from his seat and went to sit beside her. The turtle's half-closed eyes were glazed over from the tears that coursed gently down her scaled cheeks. Jagüey knew that she was in a state of ecstasy now, the same state in which he found himself and through which she would escort him into the *zemi* world. He closed his eyes and soon heard her gentle, rasping voice: "Come, Little Brother. Swim with me. I have much to show you."

Colors began to swirl in front of his closed eyes, a maze of greens and reds and purples and golds that waded to and fro in a dense, liquid atmosphere. Light filtered down from above, breaking through the dancing fronds as he felt himself propelled forward with a thrilling surge of energy. From the corner of one eye he saw a shadow move beside him. He turned his head toward the shadow and saw the great sea turtle surging forward, her powerful flippers pulling her through the water at astonishing speed. The turtle eyed him affectionately, her beak curved into a smile. Suddenly he realized that his own front flippers were propelling him forward in the same sure manner, filling him with life, with power, with knowledge.

Jagüey followed his sister through the kelp forest and down into a great crevice where the water grew refreshingly colder as the ocean floor fell away. She motioned with her head at some pale bubbles floating up from the cooling depths. He recognized them immediately: his favorite food, the succulent jellyfish with their dangling tentacles and juicy flesh. Together they glided down and feasted on these delectable creatures who offered their own life so that he and his sister could sustain theirs. When they had eaten their fill, she beckoned to him to follow once again. Their journey took them through landscapes as varied as any he had seen on the island of Borikén: mountains gave way to valleys, and they in turn to vast undulating plains; forests of sea kelp waved in the underwater currents, as huge and as diverse as the forests above; endless varieties of living creatures roamed about in search of food and other pleasures, none of them posing any threat to himself or his sister. Far above, the daylight waned and the rhythms of life around them slowed as divergent creatures sought their familiar resting places. His sister kept swimming, however, as if nothing could tire her, coming up for air at long intervals and then diving again into a slowly darkening world. After a period of darkness, a faint luminescence began to irradiate the surface above them. It was the moon, his fragmented memories told him, her pale light casting familiar objects in an otherworldly radiance, much as it did in the world above. Soon the sea bottom began to slope upward and the water grew warmer. The moonlit dome drew nearer as the ocean floor rose, and then they breached.

He reached forward with his flippers to drag himself onto the sand as he saw his sister do but they were no longer there. In their place he saw two arms flailing on the beach. Realizing that he was a man again, he rose to his feet. Or at least he now wore the shape of a man, as he had previously worn the shape of the sea turtle, for inside him nothing had changed. Instinctively, he looked for his navel and saw that it was not there. He was still anchored within the zemi world, walking the sand as an invisible spirit, aware of both worlds at once, the world of the living and the world of the dead.

“Where is this place?” he asked his sister, who was dragging herself up the sloping sand as he had once seen her do in the distant past. “Do you not recognize it?” she asked. “It is where I was born and where my children will be born. And you and yours. I come here to renew the cycle of life, but you come because your spirit is bound to this place.” Jagüey looked around him; slowly he began to recognize the beach where he had first become a bohique. It was the same, yet not the same. But what had changed? As he groped for an answer, he noticed two women and a child walking toward him in the moonlight. Their appearance was so strange and so sudden that his first impulse was to dive back into the sea. But then he remembered that they could not see him. He wore a spirit body now and these were living human beings, unable to inhabit both worlds at once. Freed from his momentary panic, he saw that their bodies were covered with strange cloths so that only their legs and arms and heads were visible to the moon, a sight he had never seen before, for Tainos did not wear cloths, other than the *nagua* that married women draped from their waists. The three figures walked up to his sister, who was now beginning to dig her nest, and knelt beside her with what seemed to be a look of reverence in their eyes. Were they preparing to enter a state of trance, to enter the zemi world as he had once done in that same spot? But they were not Taino! Their skin was too pale, their foreheads were more round than flat—and they wore clothes! Suddenly the ominous clouds that had once gathered against the western horizon thundered and broke. They were Spanish! He had never seen any of those strange beings who had come out of the east in their huge, fantastical canoes, but he had heard many tales about them. Who else could they be?

Then he heard the voice of his sister speaking inside his head. “Do not be deceived, Little Brother. As your mother lives inside you, so do you live inside them. The zemis cannot die, even if the people who carve the idols cease to feed them. They will find others with whom they can communicate, though their way of worship be foreign to you. You will be an ancestor one day, part of the zemi world, and when you are, your spirit will pass into them, though your blood has washed into the sea and the dust of your bones has been carried off by the wind.”

He heard a deep, guttural sigh and then the voice fell silent. Looking down, he saw his sister lost in the ecstasy of procreation. The tears that trickled from her eyes were his own tears, a shared lament for all that had been lost. Then his

attention was caught by one of the women, who got up and stood behind the great turtle. She removed a shiny silver object from a compartment in her clothes and held it out in front of her. Moments later a blinding flash of light dazzled his eyes. He jumped back, knowing now that she possessed a talisman of great power. Was she a kind of bohique who had captured a piece of the sun in her unknown artifact, or was this some strange magic that the Spanish had brought with them from across the sea? At that moment, there came a whisper in his ears. “Go, Little Brother,” he heard his sister say. “Go and see what this world has become. Your time here is drawing to a close. Go and learn what you can of this world while you still have time.” Reluctantly, he backed away and turned in the direction from which he had seen the women come.

It was then that he saw the lights.

Jagüey awoke curled up in the sand, the mid-morning sun uncomfortably warm on his bare skin. For a few moments he felt disoriented, but then it all flooded back. He sat up and looked at where the great sea turtle had been. He could see the small mound of swept sand where she had covered her eggs in such a way that no marauding animal or bird would suspect that she had nested there. No, it had not been a dream. His zemi had spoken to him in the night! She had tested him and found him worthy, thus fulfilling his lifelong dream to become a bohique. His next thought was of his master, of the pride he would see in that ancient face when he described for him his experience on the beach, and his eyes began to tear over, for nothing in this world was more important to him than the old man’s approbation.

As a young child he had been in awe of his village bohique—who had long been famous throughout Borikén for his uncommon wisdom, his prowess in the healing arts, and his uncanny prophecies of the future—and perhaps even a little afraid. Like everyone else in Cotuy, young and old alike, Jagüey had been captivated by the masterful areitos that Guatúbana sang during their village ceremonies, the great song cycles that preserved the history of their people and taught them about the spirits that watched over them—rapt performances that often lasted all night, until well after he and the other children had been carried off to sleep, their minds dizzy with the colorful images of the Taino’s mythic heroes and their magical exploits: the unfortunate Mácocael, who stood watch by the cavern from where his people emerged at the beginning of the world, only to be carried off by the sun for his lack of vigilance; the impetuous Guahayona, who stranded their women on the island of Matininó, thus forcing them to make new women with the help of their friend the woodpecker; Yayael, whose remains gave rise to the ocean and all its creatures; Deminán Caracaracol, from whose back sprang the great sea turtle who would one day become his zemi. He was still in awe of Guatúbana, still lifted into transports of ecstasy by his incomparable areitos, but his childhood fear had given way to a love that not even his eventual journey into the next world could erase.

At that moment his attention was drawn by the gnawing emptiness in his stomach. There was no longer any need to fast, he realized, no more need for the digo juice that had helped him to stave off his hunger and his weakness while he waited for his zemi to appear. He had brought with him some cassava bread and some strips of dried papaya, but he had also had his eye on the clusters of sea grapes that were ripening near the beach. After bathing in the sea, he took the small basket in which he had carried his few belongings and soon filled it with the insubstantial but delicious fruit. He took a long draft of water from a freshwater stream that ran down to the sea and made his way to a small promontory to break his fast and take a last look at the scenery he considered the most beautiful in all his experience. Borikén was the jewel in Yocahu's eye, a lovingly crafted green gemstone floating in an azure sea of waters so transparent he could see every crevice on the ocean floor when he paddled his canoe, but this isolated beach held a special charm for him that no other spot on the island could match. The sky seemed grander here, whether one gazed out over the open sea or inland toward the receding silhouettes of the forested hills. A crescent moon of royal palms rose up like sentinels guarding the shores of paradise, casting their graceful shadows over sands so fine and so white they appeared to have been fashioned as a resting place for the zemis. It was here that his master had taught him to feel the presence of Yocahu, the lord of life and death who governs the destiny of all beings in his infinite creation, the place where he had first met his zemi and where she had confirmed to him that he was a soraco like his master, weighted with the responsibility of his people's future.

As Jagüey savored the tart, pungent flavor of the sea grape, his mind traveled back to the moment when the sea turtle had breached the moonlit waters. He retraced her difficult climb up the sandy slope to the place where she had been born and recalled her tears of ecstasy as they had both entered into trance. Then he remembered what he had not remembered when he had woken up: the sight of a Borikén unknown to any Taino.

Prodded by his zemi's words, he had walked up from the beach toward the glowing lights of what appeared to be a nearby village. But it was a village unlike any he had ever seen. The path that led into it was fashioned from a black, rock-like substance that he had never seen before, and the bohíos that loomed out of the darkness were square rather than round and seemed to be built from stone. They were dyed with different colors and the entire village was illuminated by lights that glowed without fire. As he walked along the smooth, black path, he heard a growing rumble behind him and turned to see a pair of blinding lights moving toward him faster than a man could run. He sprang off the path and watched dumbfounded as a strange shape roared past. At first he assumed that it was some kind of fantastic creature, like the Spanish horse that he had heard so much about, until it passed him on rounded legs and he saw the unmistakable image of a man inside it with his eyes fixed straight ahead. Astounded by what he saw, he noticed similar shapes standing motionless by the side of the path.

Then he saw a man climb into one through an opening in its side. He heard the same rumble and saw the two bright beacons leap out into the night as it started to glide forward, validating what he had already guessed, that this was a kind of covered canoe designed to travel on land.

As he walked up to have a closer look at the amazing vehicles, he noticed a crowd of young men and women clustered outside a large bohío, wearing clothes and speaking a tongue he had never heard before. Then his ears caught the harsh, pulsating rhythms of what he knew to be an alien music coming from inside the building, an areito so loud that the people outside had begun to shout to make themselves heard. He thought to enter, to see what manner of bohique was leading that strange recitation, but just then his eyes caught sight of something stranger still: blinking lights high in the sky illuminating the silhouette of what appeared to be a gigantic bird gliding on the wind currents and emitting a distant roar as it passed. But this was no bird, he realized. It had to be another of their strange vehicles, one that traveled through the air instead of on the ground. In his stupefaction he felt a sudden impulse to flee, as if by fleeing he could banish these strange apparitions to the nothingness from which they had emerged, but then he heard the voice of his zemi, calling him back to the beach and into his living body.

Jagüey turned from his memories and fixed his gaze on the familiar landscape of his native island. Could these troubling images have been a true portent of the future? Had it really been Borikén he had seen, a Borikén transformed beyond anything he could have ever imagined? The land had been the same, the one he had known all his life, but the people who lived there with their frightening creations did not belong to the world as he knew it. Was this what his zemi had come to show him, a nightmare more troubling than any he had ever witnessed? Then he remembered her words when he had felt himself being drawn out of the zemi world and back into his body: “Do not fear, Little Brother. Fear is the cavern that eats the sun and looses huracán to ravage the earth. We die so that we can live again, as dust motes dancing in Yocahu’s dream.”

No, he must not fear. But he had to understand. He jumped to his feet and began striding in the direction of his village, toward the one man who might be able to explain what he had seen.