

# Meu Mapa

*Lisbon, Portugal, 1502*

**H**ow do you map the wind?  
Well, it is less a matter of the wind, and more a matter of the sails and the ships and the men at the mercy of the wind. Knowing this, you draw. From port to port, kingdom to kingdom, Veneza to Jerusalém, around the Cape and on to Calicut. Little black lines spiderwebbing the world, held fast by so many roses. Until at last – if you can read the legend, and if the chart is well-wrought – you may see all the secret alleyways of air and sea and spice...

So in order to map the wind, you must first map the waves.

You can hear it through the shutters, where the Tejo spills into the Atlântico like an open wound. The sound is a comfort: all cartographers are sailors at heart. A lone candle drowns in wax, barely enough to draw by, but even that light bears a risk. One stray spark would set my world ablaze.

A flag pokes from Portugal, feuding with the emblems of Espanha, but you are busy in the north, feeling your way over Escócia, edging westwards

until you reach Greenlândia which, in a moment of rare desperation, you paint green.

You leave the landmass to dry. Pull forward another parchment.

A new shore rises from the mist, its coast flocked by fiery birds roosting in emerald trees that, according to the reports – and you know too much of sailors to believe all their stories – have wood the colour of Cristo's fresh blood. Your hand shakes, just a little, with no one there to see, as you write the name Captain Cabral proclaimed upon that coast two years ago: the Island of the True Cross.

*Vera Cruz.*

Somewhere in the casa, a child awakes in tears. A woman's voice moves to soothe. You listen a moment... Then, with an air of exhausted acceptance, you assemble the parchments.

Finished? Are you sure?

Then why do I feel so small? Is this all: three continents, two-and-a-half oceans and a hazy coastline that may, or may not, be an island? It's a disarmingly swift process, bringing me together, and when it's done at last – and you wipe your brow and risk a smile – you reach for your quill. The smile fades faster than it was born.

No signature. Not this time.

You open the shutters and peer out, then return to our desk, and then back to the window, as if the King's soldiers were waiting patiently without. With a steadying sigh, you roll me into blindness and cradle me under one arm.

Your feet on the stairs.

Your hand on the door.

Your wife's voice and your wordless reply.

Then the sound of your shoes upon the cobbles of the street...

It is late. The flurry of Lisboa has dulled to a murmur. A sultry autumn evening of twilight brawls and drunken dancing, and quiet muggings and murders. You quicken your pace. I can smell the sea, which – considering the sea is all anyone can ever smell in the western port of this western city clinging to the west coast of Ibérica – doesn't help narrow things down. Then I hear your hurried breath as you turn a corner, and the air muffles.

A voice that isn't yours says, 'Pedro, I presume?'

'Senhor Cantino.'

'A pleasure,' he replies, his accent betraying a foreign flair. 'You have the map?'

You spread me on a table, showing me the faded patterns of the place – an abandoned mosque? – and the eager wrinkles around Cantino's eyes. He studies me with strained intensity. Finally he says, with the deepest exasperation, 'I already know where Jerusalém lies.' He waves a hand. 'The city covers the whole of Pérsia, while Europa drowns in the waters of Veneza! And what of this lopsided tower, lying in ruins?'

'It is Babel.'

'The Tower of Babel? In *África*?' He emits a short laugh. 'Meanwhile, the new continent—'

'The reports claim it to be an island,' you interject.

'—is little more than a coastline. No rivers, no ports. Only parrots. Parrots the size of Itália!' He shakes his head. 'Is this why Manuel let you go?'

You breathe a weary breath. Even though your hand no longer touches my skin, our thoughts align. How in maps of yore, when accuracy was a thing of little import, the world revolved around Jerusalém, when reality was a circle with Éden at its heart, a journey to Judgement Day and back. A map can never be a measure of truth: a map is made of empty spaces, and in those spaces you may glimpse the edges of your understanding, and in those edges is humility, a grace which may or may not be the grace of God.

‘You asked me to show you how Portugal sees the world.’ You gesture to my parchment. ‘This is what we see.’

‘An impressive coastline,’ he admits, at length. ‘And the fact you completed it so soon... Certainly a Herculean feat.’ Your gaze follows Cantino as he removes a purse, weighs the contents, dips his hand. Three golden coins tumble into your palm. Yet as you study them, hunger turns to horror.

‘You said *six*!’

Cantino raises his hands. ‘Complications arose. You will receive the rest once I return to Ferrara.’

‘By God, if you think—’

‘Venezian gold is hard to come by this side of Ibérica. But the Duke is a rich man, and generous to those who show patience. Shall we say, four more ducats, upon my safe arrival?’

You say nothing. You make no mention of your wife and son. Or of King Manuel, your old patron, who is also a rich man, and may well be interested in this Ferrarese spy at work in Lisboa. Cantino knows all this already; he expels a sigh. ‘Six more, then! Twelve in total, twice what I initially proposed.’

When the deal is done, and hands have shaken, you roll me back into blackness. And as I pass into Cantino’s grasp – six months of your life in six pieces of parchment, all the knowledge of the Empire of Portugal laid bare – you know deep down, with a silent and solemn contentment, that you will not be remembered.

I see naught of the Gulf of Gênova, or the Itálian peninsula, or the long road to Ferrara. After a trip spent in darkness – without even a peephole to view the rhumb lines on the waves – they unroll me in the ducal palace, in the ducal hall, where Duke Ercole sits upon his ducal chair and appraises me

with an upraised ducal brow. His face is like South África: proud, sun weary, and wracked with storms.

Ercole makes a statement.

Cantino offers a reply.

Neither has the good grace to speak Portuguese. The Duke's mouth is a firm line; he frowns at the Portuguese flags peppering my shores, from África to Índia to Terra Nova, while another hangs precariously from the tip of Greenlândia. He considers the cold blue line which carves the world in two: the East belongs to Portugal, the West to Espanha; the rest of Christendom can fight for the scraps. Ercole sits back, unblinking. He isn't looking at me, not truly. He is peering into the mind of King Manuel, into his treaties and plans and deepest desires, musing upon his latest discoveries – upon the virgin coast of Vera Cruz...

Manuel de Aviz and Ercole d'Este. The only princes in Europa who know this new land exists.

They take me to a wide room and spread me on a table, where navigators nod and gesticulate. Over the coming months, they copy me. They purge the flags, shrink the cites, move Babel back to Mesopotâmia, tracing every coastline, every crevice, every secret cove – until at last there are two of me. No sooner is this done, than I'm removed. Set aside in the ducal library, for safekeeping.

Never to see myself again.

Whispers wander along the shelves. Books, ever muttering, straining to see through blackened binding, and more voices. Maps. Old maps, lumpish or upside-down, distinguished types who cannot count past three. 'Europa, Ásia and África,' they proclaim. 'Behold! The world entire, encircled by ocean!' Worldly maps – queer globes, broad atlases, medieval monsters – and humble charts in love with lone countries, single cities, from ever-changing Itália to the walls of fair Ferrara.

Weeks turn to months; months pile like layers of strata. Three years after I first arrived, word trickles through the palace: the Duke is dead.

Dead?

I wonder and wait. But his heir has no interest in the new world. Itália is enough: a fickle peninsula for ever on the brink of collapse.

Young maps gossip upon the walls. Some murmur of the Far East, others of the newfound West. I ask, 'What news of the Island of Vera Cruz?'

'Island?' they scoff. 'It is merely the eastern coast of a greater continent, connected to the northern landmass that Colombo first sighted, thinking himself in Ásia!' Soon it is no longer Vera Cruz but Brasil, for its brazen trees, and in a few years I am antiquated, outdated. Nothing but the glimpse of a globe that no longer exists.

A century falls faster than empires. In 1598, the doors fly open. The library fills with thundering feet, a sweaty hand yanks me from the shelf, and my brethren and I are cloistered together, boxed in, all in the space of a *pater noster*.

'We are under siege,' says a Muslim map. 'We will surely be tossed to the flames—'

'The men speak Ferrarese,' insists an Itáliaian chart, 'or else I am a Spaniard! We are in no danger—' They prattle on while I strain to hear our muffled captors.

Something about the Duke.

Something about a pope.

Then the indignant snort of a steed.

How can so small a country have such ceaseless roads? The hours tramp by with each bump of the cart, each grumble of the horse, until Itália heaves to a halt and we are dragged into the day.

'Modena,' mutters a map. 'Second stronghold of the House of Este. The Duke must be moving his seat...' I catch a glimpse as we're carried to our cell. Ancient streets and dawn-coloured clouds, awash with watercolour light. Then another library, not unlike the last, and I am encased in glass and mounted on the wall – staring, unblinking, down the lacquered candlelit hall.

For another hundred years.

In 1755, an earthquake startles me awake. The tremors travel across Ibérica and into Marrocos – and I feel it, even here, echoing from Lisboa. I hear the houses sliding into the Tejo. I see the old casa overlooking the port as its foundations crumble, the study where I was made tumbling down, vanishing into the sea...

Books crowd in, full of news forever out of date: a Portuguese prince declares himself Emperor of Brasil; North América revolts against her island overlord; França rebels against herself. The fire of revolution lights a hundred sparks – and in a matter of decades, all of Europa is ablaze. Napoleone tears through like a travado. He ousts the House of Este, conquers half the peninsula, and for a few years the Frenchman from Córsega is all anyone speaks of. Then, as with all storms, he disperses, leaving naught but dust.

It is the spring of 1858 – a strange, wet spring, the servants scurrying to keep the damp out the walls, the library director abed with a cold and wailing like the plague – when she arrives. One more bed in the servants' wing, one more pair of hands scrubbing the floor, gliding over the shelves, freeing sheafs of dust with a worn linen cloth, seldom speaking, never smiling, eyes blacker than the Black Sea. As those eyes fall upon me, they pause. Lingering over a compass rose, tracing the west coast of África up past the Mountains of the Moon, past the lone watchful lion, before settling on the weary flag of Portugal. A person wears their past like ink on vellum: the lines around her youth betraying long journeys and silent loss. From Portugal

to Brasil and back, fleeing north, ever north, pushed by wind and war, lips parting in wordless wonder. She looks into me, and I look back.

Two lost souls from Lisboa, finding each other at last.

A year of stolen moments. Her fingerprints upon the glass. Her breath hanging in the hall. I overhear her hesitant, husky Modenese. ‘Signor Boni, this map... where is it from?’

‘The Este family brought it when they fled Ferrara. Perhaps that’s why you’ve taken a shine to it, ah?’ Her surname is Ferreira, which he mistakes for Ferrara, believing it her place of birth.

‘But who made it?’

He offers a shrug. ‘All we know is Ercole the First had it smuggled from Lisbona. Supposedly a copy of the Royal Register. Although *I* believe it was made for King Manuel himself...’

As the days go by, talk turns ever more to war. Revolutionaries plotting in the mountains, Sardinian soldiers on the march.

‘They have guns from Francia—’

‘They will overthrow the Duke—’

‘They plan to behead the Pope!’

The library is all anxious chatter and nervous delight. She utters not a word. Yet I see the tremble of her hand as she dusts my frame, her gaze leaving Portugal and straying to a closer shore. The revolutionaries promise a resurrected country. No longer a labyrinth of duchies and republics and petty puppet-states. The old maps taken down, torn up, tossed to the wind like so much confetti.

Itália. For ever on the brink of collapse.

I sense them in the streets. I hear them break open the doors in unified fervour. The snap and thud of rifles, the servants' stifled cries; books torn shrieking from the shelves, globes razed to broken continents, the glint of a golden bullet – and I am falling, the library splintering into shards—

Then her footsteps, like raindrops upon the floor. She parts the veil of glass, freeing me from my frame, the softness of her hand touching my skin...

A dozen fractured reflections: you, kneeling in the library hall; you, running along the bank of the Tejo; a grown woman, a laughing child; racing home to find your house in flames; stumbling across the border at night, wandering ever on while your feet bleed and your birthplace burns, praying for your father, for your sisters, for all the souls you cannot save. In that instant, our thoughts align. Your mouth falls open.

*'Meu mapa...'*

Pigs.

Whole pigs; hinds of pigs; lonesome legs like strange peninsulas carved into islands. Skin stiffening, silent, patient, while I wait on the wall, hidden amongst hanging swine. I was once a handsome calf, three hundred years ago. Killed and cured much like my new neighbours – my skin stretched, smoothed, inked and painted, smuggled overseas and hoarded by princes. Cartography is but a form of butchery, when all is said and done.

Giusti the butcher bustles in and out. Consumed, day and night, by the delicate arts of salami. So much of Modena passes through his doors: the banker and the tailor and the blacksmith and his sons, the blind madonna and her brother, the wheezing old sailor who claims to have once, in his youth, glimpsed the coast of California. He does not want for business – not now, with soldiers swarming the city, smoking, singing, demanding more

meat, boasting of their impending victory against the Austrians. Plenty of coin to be had. Or there would be if they bothered to pay.

Giusti heaves a swine onto the slab. Before he begins the ponderous business of carving, his gaze settles upon my shores, amazed that something so sophisticated should have found its way into his world. He utters a sigh. 'If only the globe was so grand! Ah, but what do I know? Perhaps it is. Yet,' he says, with a slight shake of his head, 'I am sure the Boot should be bigger.' Then he takes a swig, wipes his chin, and waxes lyrical while he works. 'I remember when Modenese nights were warm, wine-sodden affairs. But the city, she is old, and fearful, and sick of her own sobriety...' While I wonder if he's addressing me, himself, or the swine, there's a knock on the front door. 'Rosa?' he calls, leaving the room. 'It's about time you—'

But it is not Rosa.

'Scusi, kind butcher. I know it's late, but... could I trouble you for some salami?'

'Alas. High demand and short supply. The two are fearful bedfellows.' At this news, the man must look so utterly crushed, so horrifically heartbroken, that Giusti adds, 'Well, perhaps this batch has finished curing. One moment.' He returns to the storeroom and uncovers a string of sausages. With a satisfied sniff, he stumps back. 'A midnight feast?' I hear him ask.

'A cursed man's cravings. Salami is all I can think of when the world's bearing down.'

'Ah, the revolutionaries?'

'Those bastards broke into the biblioteca, of all places! And two months later, here I am, still picking up the pages...'

I sense Giusti's surprise. 'You mean to say you're Signor Boni, director of the Biblioteca Estense?'

'For the moment. Some of our treasures are still unaccounted for. I swear I've searched the whole city, from the duomo to the Secchia, but they blame

me, can you believe! They say I hired thieves and Romani. They say I should have built defences, barricades. What do I look like, a Knight Templar?’

‘I see. Well, in that case you were correct to come! Nothing cheers the soul like fresh salami. I tell you what. I will throw in a side of prosciutto, free of charge.’ And Giusti strides into the back room with a look of divine purpose. A moment later – to offer aid or pointlessly protest – Boni follows.

Upon seeing me, he freezes.

‘Signore? You look like you’ve seen the Holy Ghost.’

Boni stares with eyes like inland seas. ‘By God!’ he bursts. ‘By Jupiter and Minerva and merciless Mars!’

‘Are you well?’

‘I cannot believe my eyes, and yet... Here it is, of all places. The Map of Cantino!’

Cantino. Honestly. As if that spy had discerned the secrets of astronavigation himself.

‘Who?’

‘Alberto Cantino! Agent of the Duke of Ferrara, who stole the planisphere from under King Manuel’s nose!’

Giusti reels. Dukes, kings, planispheres? ‘But—’

‘Gesù Cristo!’ cries Boni. ‘How on earth did you come by this?’

The butcher stands with gaping mouth. ‘It-it was rolled up by the back door – I thought, well, someone threw it out, some artist or—’

‘The Map of Cantino? Abandoned on the street?’

‘Si, signore.’

‘And you did not return it to the Estense?’

‘How was I to know? I’d no idea of the theft! And, well, I admit to growing fond of the parrots. My boy, you see, he moved to Brasile...’

Boni's brow has become one great ridge, rugged as the Apennines, separating his face into North and South, deserted forehead and forested chin. It's a strange joy to see his landscape again.

The back door opens. 'We are closed!' shouts Giusti, but his vehemence vanishes. 'Rosa? Come in, girl. You had me worried half to death!'

It shuts softly behind you. Your gaze moves from me, to Boni, and back. Boni frowns. 'Signora Giusti, I presume?'

'My assistant,' says the butcher. 'She helps keep the place in order. Rosa, this is the esteemed Giuseppe Boni, director of the Biblioteca Estense.'

You move your hair to hide your face. 'Salût, signore,' you say, avoiding his eyes.

Boni opens his mouth, face furrowed, but Giusti interrupts. 'You remember my map, Rosa? I can still barely believe it, but it is none other than the renowned Cantino Planisphere itself! To think it has been hanging on my wall all this time!'

'Incredible,' you answer, and say no more.

Boni's gaze lingers on you a moment, before returning to the matter at hand. 'Regardless, it is high time we restored the map to its rightful place in the Estense. You will, of course,' he adds, 'be compensated for its recovery.' While the two of them talk, you – Rosa Ferreira de Lisboa – step closer, stroking my old calfskin, breathing a sigh.

You are leaving. I can see it in your eyes. Soldiers in the streets, a young kingdom carved into shape. It's the same old story, and you do not plan to see its end. Where now? Pérsia, Índia, or away to compass-hearted África? While I return to my library cell...

Come now. We both knew this day would come, ever since you saved me, lest the besiegers despoil me. You planned to return me, of course you did, but by then it was too late. Even if you handed me back, they'd lock you away. Woman. Gypsy. Thief. So you left me by the butcher's door one dry

night, then took a job with him the next day. And here I've hung, no harm to you, but close enough to see, to touch, to remind.

A map is no more than a memory, once the world changes shape. And I will remember this, listening to the gossip on the street, the history in the air, this sly affair we shared. Walk with the wind, my love. Go to all the places I'll never see. But it's not farewell.

After all, you know where to find me.