

Armada Chapter One

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Diego Cortez faces not only the English on the high-seas, but the Spanish Inquisition Courts, for his relationship with a heretic.



ARMADA

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PART ONE: SAFEGUARD THE TREASURE FLEET

CHAPTER ONE

The sea flashed green, a bright opal beneath the sun, and gliding across it, like two trees of towering sail, a galleon, the San Felipe, sailed for Spain. The waters south of the Florida Keys, tepid and undulating, might have assured safety from coast hugging pirates, but the threat of gales, posed even greater dangers.

The San Felipe, an escorting warship, served the perilous duties of protecting a treasure fleet across thousands of miles of ocean, and with its bristling armament of forty-two cannon, appeared ready to destroy any foe in its path.

Onboard the galleon, Diego Cortez, a carpenter, stood below the main mast. Behind him, a triangular sheet of cloth, the lateen sail, billowed in the breeze above a lofty stern castle of slanting decks, while at the bow loomed another wooden forecastle, not as towering, supporting a mast for two square sails.

Diego sported the liveliest of bronze faces amongst his crew. His slick black hair gave him a spirited look of such youthful gaiety--he won over mortality with a grin. As the sun rose, bleeding through the main sail, he picked up his carpenter's saw, felt its teeth, pricked a finger, and content over its sharpness, set the tool on a table. His thoughts raced over completed jobs: repairs on floorboards below decks, another table built for the officers' mess, and a cask of foul smelling meats thrown overboard to feed the fishes. Contemplation of the last task upset his stomach.

A day for a carpenter consisted of rigorous repairs, plugging up holes busted out from long months at sea, or the more demanding jobs below, requiring the ability to work in darkly lit confines and amongst unbearable stench. The greatest dangers were the unpredictable and sudden catastrophes which could beset a vessel: the ravages of a storm and running aground, yet Diego felt content these troubles would not harass him.

"So carpenter, are you ready for another chair?" The request came early. A brown bearded captain in a close-fitting jacket, a black doublet, bent over Diego's workman's bench.

"Yes, captain, you desire another chair?" Diego replied. "Right away."

"May God bless it with as sturdy a make as your last accomplishments, yet one of your chairs has chipped, a curse upon it, and I am in need of another."

"I will have it to you by sunset," Diego replied, and after crossing himself, he went to work on another project. He had worked harder on previous tasks, his craftsmanship resulting in wonderful creations. He finished the chair by midday and while weighing his achievement, a lookout in a crow's-nest hollered out a sighting.

"Warship flying English colors!"

A boatswain in white shirt and trousers gazed up at the lookout. "How many guns?"

"Cannot say," replied the lookout. "But they're English and they have the weather gauge."

"With God's grace," said the captain, standing on the quarter deck, a breast plate affixed over his doublet. "We will rise out of the fight victorious. We must defend the Madre De Dios."

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The captain referred to a Carrack trailing the San Felipe, a merchant vessel of towering stern and bow castles. Its deep holds carried a priceless cargo of gold bullion, silver, and other treasures from the Americas.

"I pray their Queen has only sent one," the captain said, turning to his officer on watch. "They have the wind in their sails. Ready the cannon."

"Yes, captain," answered an armor-plated officer. Diego lugged his chair up to the quarter deck. He ran downstairs, sprinted between tiers of cannon for the prow, and leaned over a castle-like construction to shiver over the sight of a closing danger.

The English warship, bearing down with three towering foresails and decks crowded with white garbed gunners, passed nearby, firing shot. Iron balls smashed against hulls. Smoke swept the decks of both vessels. The San Felipe groaned under the onslaught. Musket fire wracked the prow to kill a sailor, who with a fateful clutch at his belly, went overboard.

Diego ran downstairs for the main deck. To his horror, he noticed a chewed up lateen sail.

The high-backed stern of the retreating enemy, replete with carved decorations and overhanging balcony, bobbed upon a wave, to fire parting shots from rear ports. Impacting rounds shook the quarterdeck.

"It's sailing for the Madre De Dios," warned a lookout, pointing at the English warship, its open sails like white clouds leading a dark storm. It drifted for the doomed Carrack, firing its guns.

A cannonade shot through the calm. Flashes and smoke erupted from broadside ports. The attacker kept distance, using its heavy artillery. Great shot smashed out sides of the Madre De Dios and sent sections of its forecastle in a plummet for the sea. It amazed Diego to see such ruin.

The English warship sliced a larboard turn, its sails tacking the wind, and came out for another approach. The San Felipe swung around to intercept.

A breeze carried the galleon over choppy waters for the enemy, its bowsprit rising upon a wave. Diego's anticipation for an ambush materialized when looking over at his right, he found the gun ports of the Madre De Dios open, and then with a glance forward, the three foresails of the doomed assailant, barreling into the trap.

"We have the wind gauge," an officer said, referring to the galleon's favorable position in the breeze. "The English do not stand a chance!"

A fish caught in its momentum is fated to swallow the bait, and like the fish, the English warship, driven by wind, fell victim to its own propulsion. As its bowsprit drifted for the invisible hook, bombarding cannon from both sides pummeled its hull. The English fired their broadsides. Gun smoke arose, masking the fire fight. Iron shot smacked into the weakened decks of the San Felipe. A swivel gun atop the gunwale of the English warship fired grapeshot. Pellets scattered Spanish defenders with its deadly spray, shattering limbs and mutilating bodies.

Diego, noticing the guns kill accuracy, ducked below the prow railing, and from his position, looked below him at gun crews struggling to fire their cannon. A sudden calm in the action caused him to stand and spy upon the warship, yet as he rose, the nearby bulwark bucked him into an accompanying wall. Breathless from his flight, he got up, heard iron shot slamming against the forecastle and the hull groaning beneath him. He suspected the worse.

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Diego looked behind him, shaken by a sudden queasiness, as he watched a lateen sail teetering upon a smashed masthead break off and fall overboard under the weight of cloth. His gaze went to the English warship, sailing away from battle, a shattered hull sinking low in the water. The ship drifted further into the Carrack's blasting culverins, and above their roaring muzzles, Spanish soldiers boarded, clashing it out with remaining English belligerents. Knights raced about decks, a flood of steel, slashing through sailors with battle axes. They overwhelmed the quarter deck, took the crew captive, and brought the battle to a quick finish.

"It appears our riggers have been eased of their labors, carpenter," an armor-clad soldier said to Diego, pointing at the severed mizzenmast stump, then out to sea. "They have sent long boats."

Two long boats, their beams weighed down by a mast, rowed for the San Felipe.

Diego, searching for topside damages, went for the stern, constructed a makeshift platform of wooden planks, anchored it to the forecastle railing with pulleys, and reeled himself down to inspect holes. Wounds torn into topside chambers stared at him like a pockmarked face. He hammered in wooden plugs to cover them. Splashes below distracted his work, and during brief interludes, he looked down to watch divers, stripped to their loins and secured by ropes, sink beneath the waves to plug damages. He knew accompanying sailors, working below decks, would assist their efforts.

Memories of home invaded Diego's efforts. As his mallet pounded a wooden plug into a hole, the tavern of Seville returned to him. His mouth watered at the remembrance of his sea-dried lips touching a beer-filled cup, and his tongue, a dying barnacle, trying to writhe out for its watery deliverance. The desire quickened his swing against a plug. He felt the release.

"Diego, I hear we are sailing on," hollered down his carpenter's mate, a sun-baked fellow in floppy shirt. His fingers tapped against a black chest pocket, then went through his tawny hair, arising out of the motion to return for the dark blot stitched into gray cloth. "We will drop anchor in the Azores. Do you think the saints will bring us through?"

"What maddened words you speak, Rodriguez?" Diego looked up at his friend in astonishment. "Our ship will never make the Azores. Does our captain not worry of gales? Only the blessed Mary could get us through with a leaking keel. It would be our undoing."

"But these ports are infested with English pirates! They will sink us to the bottom if we drop anchor."

"And chance a battered ship against a gale? I would rather spar with the English." Again, Seville invaded Diego's thoughts, with its beer smelling casks assuring him of safe-passage across the Atlantic. "I pray we do not hit the Florida gales. Do you not recall our last voyage?"

"The reefs! The saints be with us. If it was not for our expert pilot, we would have been split upon the rocks, all hands lost! We would have grown wings to fly for the Virgin Mother."

"Yes, a tragedy, but we sailed quick for Spain with our feet on steady planks."

"You should sway the captain to turn back, but I know him, when his mind is set, one must have the golden key to unlock his chest."

No, I trust his decision," Diego said.

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"So will you come for dinner or sit here to swallow the plug?"

Diego laughed at his mate's words and dropped his mallet to feel a tense bicep. His labors had toughened his arms. He felt an onrush of fatigue and laid down on the platform, stretching out his sinewy body on planks. Underneath a beating sun, his eyes stared above him, and in contemplation, he tried guessing upon the meal being served out. Hardtack? No, such a bitter bread had been swallowed for breakfast, then he remembered the salted fish. He climbed onboard and ran below to satisfy a ravenous hunger made more intense by an afternoon clash.

On the gun deck: rot, smoke, and powder smells made for an unpleasant rubbing against sweaty shoulders. Diego ran by sailors to steal a plate, slapped down three servings of fish from an open cask, and went for a table between cannon.

"So it's still sturdy after a three month's voyage." Diego felt the table's edge, ending his test with a fist slam.

"Si," Rodriguez said, tapping his black pocket, before returning his hand to the plate, to fork out a fish. "And in battle or storm, it has not shattered against bulkheads. Amazing!"

Diego stared out of gun portals at pink sky then looked back amongst an aisle of planks. "How is the flooding?" He remembered divers swimming below to make repairs. "Has all the water been pumped out?"

"Yes, all out. I have seen worse in the gale off Santo Domingo." Rodriguez forked out another fish.

"And we will see more of the gale with our sailing for Spain." Diego swallowed down a fish. "So what of your game of cards? Have you beat Montoya?"

"Montoya, heh. He owes me many ducats! You know my heart when it comes to money." Rodriguez tapped against the black pocket on his breast again. "My heart beats black blood for ducats! It can keep a secret for any price, but Montoya, I must tell you is in a shameful way. He has nothing."

"And how will he repay?"

"Bind his hands and throw him overboard. I was thinking with a fight against you! If you win, he owes me double earnings, if he wins, forfeit all, unless you would like to wager against him."

"To fight Montoya?" Diego laughed at his challenge. The Castilian stood as a competent fighter. He had beaten black-bearded Hernandez, who had killed many of Barbary pirates in hand to hand combat during Tunisian campaigns. "It would be a tough fight. If I faltered, would you save me?"

"I could never survive the likes of a beast."

A cask fell, releasing a putrid slime onto the decks. Its watery frights splashed against Diego's shoes. He looked up to find Montoya, the robust sailor, struggling to reseal it. His sweaty head of hair, a gunpowder black, shone curly in sunlight. Fountains of discolored wash spilt from cut staves and as he poked into openings, a desperate plight to plug the flood, spouts gushed out to soak nearby sailors.

"Look at the loser fight!" Rodriguez spun around to watch Montoya stumble with his dripping load. "He loses not only his game of cards but his dinner."

Sailors gathered around to throw fermenting piles of fish out of gun ports. The smelly chore caused unrest amongst the crew. A sailor broke out in aggression against Montoya. He tossed a fish outside a gun portal,

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spun around, and swung a fist at him. He missed. Montoya ducked behind a barrel, shot out, and slammed the thrower into cannon. The stunned victim got up, his ascent met by knuckles, and its perfect hit between the eyes, knocked him out.

"An easy win," Diego said, confident in a successful approach. He snuck out of his chair, hunching low in hopes of catching Montoya by surprise, and then lunged for his opponent to launch an uppercut. The fist slammed into the sailor's lower jaw. He spat out blood and threw a hand against Diego's face, but the carpenter ducked in time, and threw a jab at his chest, a crippling blow. The muscle-bound Montoya became a wreck before the eyes of the crew, staggering in his attempts to keep his feet steady. He lost balance and fell unconscious against a gun carriage.

A thrown card, flung by Rodriguez, landed on the fallen sailor's chest, and read the verdict, "You owe me double, loser of everything."

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The windy night screamed a gale. Breezes attacked the San Felipe, blowing wisps of whitewater off cresting swells onto its top decks. The disturbance caused unrest amongst the crew, whom, swallowing its salty sprays, tasted a tempest. Sailors, frantic in their duties, ran to and fro, adjusting sails, as others lowered storm canvas on a top mast.

Below, on the gun deck, hammocks strung between cannon, swung with the galleon's seesawing motions, awaking Diego from his sleep. He looked outside a nearby gun portal to find a gray sky blotting out the early light of dawn. Diego, fearing a squall, launched himself from his hammock, and ran into three approaching soldiers armed with swords. He darted past them, but they grabbed his arm, and with frantic jerks against their restraining hands, he tried escaping, only to be wrestled to the floor. Why had they detained him? Diego remembered his fight with Montoya. He gave up, feeling pressure against his wrists, as a soldier bound rope around them. The soldiers directed him aft.

Diego recognized one of the flanking men, Alfonso, his pointy black beard and square jawed face, tucked underneath the projecting brim of a steel helmet. The carpenter tried thinking up an alibi for yesterday's fight, but could think of no excuse. Alfonso looked at him with a disconcerting look.

"Diego, I say you knocked out the wrong man," he said. "We need Montoya more than anything in this bad weather. You know the punishment for such a crime."

"But he threw at me first," Diego replied, trying to get himself out. "I was only defending myself."

"I still think you knocked out the wrong man. The captain agrees with me and is in a rage over the incident. His best hand, demobilized in these unpredictable seas. You should have reconciled with him."

"Reconcile with a brute? Are you serious, Alfonso? He threw at me first. I gave him a just return."

Alfonso, grimacing above his chest plate of armor, escorted Diego past racing sailors. He stopped the carpenter amidships at a wooden hatch between cannon. Soldiers pried open a lid with swords, tossed a rope down into a chute, and took off Diego's bindings. The well, a square cornered descent, held a small compartment in one of its walls, the brig. It could be seen, even under dank candlelight, and the small door on it, open, awaited a fresh prisoner into its hellish confines.

"Two hours in the brig, my friend," Alfonso said, frowning at Diego's predicament. He gave him a key. Although pitch darkness had always been the frightful aspect of such a descent into an abyss, other terrors,

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like suffocation under nauseous stench arising from rotten casks, or the bugs, mostly roaches, crawling down the walls, made such a climb, an excruciating ordeal.

"I will climb down there," Diego said, holding the key in his mouth, accepting his doom. He wrapped his body around the rope, eased himself down into the well, and felt a knot in its length with his feet. He steadied his heels against it. The pitching deck threw him against the walls of the enclosure, but his hold kept, and he looked up to see a lantern lighting a soldier bent over the hatchway.

"I'm down," Diego said. He inserted the key into the door, turned it into a lock position, then with a look up, he took the key out, and threw it at the soldier above him.

"Do not worry, Diego," Alfonso hollered. Diego could only see him in shadow. "Your troubles will be over, soon. And again you will live like us, one amongst civilized men."

A horrible remark, the carpenter thought, and he felt his way into the swollen chamber. The brig, a claustrophobic nightmare, measured the size of a crate, allowing space for a prisoner to kneel or lie down below a low-lying beam of rotten oak. A hole, drilled into the door, acted as the only source for breathable air. It allowed toxic fumes rising from the hold to vent into the chamber, causing a prisoner to choke on a miasma. He smelt the rot now, coughing against its miserable stench. He remembered the soldiers above him, awaiting confirmation of a shut door, and he closed it, hoping they had started their count.

The wait began. To avoid overexertion and undue suffering, Diego curled into a ball on the damp floor, beating time with rest. Sweat poured down his brow and chest in floods. He took off his shirt. Even in the pitch darkness, he could not fall asleep--too many harassing elements. He hoped to be knocked out by a gruesome fume, but as he lay, breathing in short mouthfuls of the awfulness, each intake brought usable, rather than toxic clouds into his lungs. It would take an hour maybe, just another brief, before one of his breathes blackened his senses.

He tried thinking up revenge against Rodriguez for causing his strife. The card shark, with his black pocket, and dark heart, had only brought trouble with their kinship. He envisioned Rodriguez forgiven of his sins. If only the seas had been blessed by a priest, Diego thought, transforming them into holy water, its watery deliverance, would tear open Rodriguez's black heart and cleanse it. It would take death to forgive, but to witness Rodriguez struggling amongst the swells, his body pummeled by crashing waves, and the light of God shining down on his sins, the Holy Mother would surely float down and give him pardon. Yes, even the saints, in their merciful accord, would spirit his soul away, and cast his black heart into the depths.

Diego prayed not only for his mate, but for the saints and Virgin Mother to ensure his own protection, for as the minutes went by, and the heat and air got to him, turning his body into a sweaty pulp, he felt he, not Rodriguez, would be first to drown.

Thoughts of his brother, Antonio, a lawyer of the high courts in Seville, also plagued the carpenter's reflections. Not even the lawyer could save him. Those thousands of miles of ocean separating Diego from his brother's deliverance were like the nonsense of those countless reams of paper he worked through everyday, edicts saving people from imprisonment. All of those law books bound in stitched cloth, crowding a bookshelf of a tiny office, a sepulcher of knowledge, would drown under the clammy realities of a brig, and his brother's desk, a fountainhead of oak, would burst open with its gushing spouts of moisture, a torn floodgate.

Diego shifted his body, but only got as far as to sit in a bent position, his head tucked into his chest, for the surrounding walls, hugging him like a catacomb, prevented movement. He felt buried alive. The wood behind him, bulging into his back, groaned in distress, and the chamber, leaning for the other side, threw him against the other wall. He fell, spat out wooden bits, when, but again, the galleon heeled into a swell, and threw him

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back.

Stormy seas, he thought, fearing entrapment. His cell, a mayhem of clamorous timbers, shoved him back and forth. Minutes sped by and his launchings increased in intensity. Shivers wracked his body. His mind kept telling him, "the sands of the hour glasses on the gun deck had spent out long ago and the soldiers had forgotten him".

Yet there came a sudden knocking at his door.

The cell door, flung open, threw in gusts of air. The sudden outburst smacked Diego unconscious. He awoke moments later, gasping in the new relief. He felt a tug against his arm. Someone dragged him outside the cell into the chute, forcing his hands around a braided coil. The carpenter glanced up, found Alfonso clinging at the higher end of a rope, his bearded face lit dimly by overhead lanterns, and then discovered himself, dangling on the same thread. With the last of his aching strength, Diego pulled himself up the rope, following his deliverer's lead, and got onto the gun deck. He collapsed on the floor, splaying his sweaty body on planks, and the onboard lanterns, splashing soft light on his knotted sinews, showed the ravages it had suffered in bondage.

Alfonso helped him to his feet.

"The squall has us," Alfonso shouted, pointing at shut gun ports. He had traded his armor and helmet for soaked woolen garments. "We're fighting it strong, but it's blowing wild. The men are keeping us afloat, but it's a struggle. I saw a tidal carry a sailor overboard. He vanished in a ripple of foam! Mother of God, bless his soul. He clung to the wave and it swallowed him." With a quick gesturing nod, he took up a canvas jacket, pressed it against the freed prisoner, who navigated burly arms into its sleeves. The task seemed futile, for the jacket, slippery wet, slipped off the carpenter's tanned skin, but with further thrusts of his hands into openings, he got the wet mess on, and buttoned it.

A roll from the galleon threw Diego against a cannon. He held onto the carriage, but his grip slipped away, and he fell, smacking his back against a bucket.

Anger swelled within the carpenter. He blamed Rodriguez for his plight. He got to his feet, shook off the hurt, and looked around him for the card shark. Only wet faces of sailors flashed by him. He guessed the culprit had gone into hiding.

"Rodriguez?" Diego asked, hiding his fury with a curt nod. "Have you seen him? Where is he?"
Alfonso returned a blank stare.

"Topside!" screamed Diego. He ran down the aisle, clambered up a ladder, and got onto the top deck.

Chaos reigned above. Windy blasts, howling in the masts, halted Diego's strides. He clung onto a belaying pin, a prisoner to the powerful gusts. Sailors, crowding around him, their bodies cowering under ferocious winds and hands wrapped around ropes, appeared like many lumps of exhaustion. Others, who had found refuge amidships, their canvas jackets drenched with spray, kept a close watch on the rigging. The galleon rode the tumult with bare poles. The hungry sea, a jagged dance of foam and white caps, devoured the surrounding waters with colossal swells.

"It hit us like cannon!" A sailor hollered at Diego, cupping his hand for amplification, but his voice came out strained over the sea's thunderous crash and shrieking winds. "The clouds piled high, there came lightning, and now, look," the sailor, pointing at a wall of water, became wide-eyed, when it shot to even higher climbs. "The devil take us. The English brought this bad sea!"

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