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Final Project Part 2

Spain, 1493

Juan could not believe this was finally happening. He had certainly earned his position here, no one could doubt that given his military accomplishments, but still there was a part of him that felt so small when staring up at the large fleet in the harbor before him. Seventeen ships and 1,500 people bound for the New World, and Juan Ponce de Leon was one of the lucky ones selected to be a part of this historic endeavor, despite how little experience he had in exploration.

Yet perhaps the most daunting part of the experience was the conquistador heading up this expedition – Christopher Columbus himself. Juan was in awe of Columbus, and who could blame him? This was the man who had discovered the New World, a man who would be forever remembered for his work under the Spanish crown. Juan could only dream of such recognition, yet he knew that he would be a part of something much larger than just himself as he set to embark on this mission. This expedition could change everything, not just for Juan, but for Spain, and Europe, and maybe the entire world. Who knew what awaited them on the other side of the ocean? There would be land to claim, resources to gather, people to convert, and potentially even enemies to fight. But, Juan decided, he was ready for whatever may come next. Juan stole one final glance at the fleet of ships before him, and with excitement and anticipation building up inside, he took a confident step onto the gangplank.

Spain, 1496

As the ships sailed into the harbor after what felt like a lifetime away, Juan couldn't help but feel a strange sadness growing inside him. He had missed his family and his home over the last three years, so he should be relieved to be reunited with them. But as he turned to face the sea, he realized that he was forever changed by this voyage. The places he had gone, the things he had seen, the people he had met... As much as he loved Spain, he couldn't stay here. He longed for adventure, for gold, and for the unknown – he would forever be a conquistador.

Hispaniola, 1508

Juan had spent the better part of the last decade forging a new path in his life. He found himself living in the West Indies for a time, ultimately making a name for himself by quelling a mutiny. As a reward for his support, he was appointed as the governor of Hispaniola. This is where he found his beautiful wife, Leonora, and together they started a family. Juan loved his new life, and he thrived as governor. Yet still, he longed for a new adventure.

Juan could barely contain his excitement when he received orders from Spain to lead an expedition of his own. He had worked hard to establish himself, and now it would finally be his turn to discover new lands and, hopefully, bring riches back to Spain. He gathered his crew and set sail in pursuit of gold and glory.

San Juan, 1513

Gold and glory are what Juan sought, and they certainly are what he found. This new land was packed with gold deposits and other valuable resources that Juan claimed for the king.

The king was overjoyed at the discovery, and ordered him to establish a colony there for Spain, with Juan as its governor. Leonora and the children joined Juan on the island, and there they built a new life for themselves.

When Leonora passed, Juan turned once again to the sea. Life was short, and he was going to make the most of the time he had left. He loved his wife and his children, but his heart yearned for another adventure. One bright morning, he boarded a ship, with two more in tow, and set his sights on the north.

After sailing for a time, Juan finally heard the shouts from his crew. Land. They had reached a foreign coastline, blanketed with greenery. The vision was mesmerizing, so lush and serene. Juan was enraptured by its beauty. "La Florida," he gasped. The men rushed to disembark, anxious to set foot on the new land and discover the secrets it had to offer. They stumbled ashore and began their journey into the forest. Not far from the coast, the men discovered a spring, its water cold and clear. They rested there, making camp for the night, and prepared to venture on in the morning.

Days turned into weeks as Juan and his men worked their way south, searching fruitlessly for gold and other resources as they moved down the coastline. Until finally, they realized they were not alone. It began with an indistinct shout, then another, and then many more as people suddenly emerged from the foliage. They were not dressed like any Juan had ever seen, and he could not make sense of their language. Whatever they were saying, it was clear they did not want the conquistadors to remain. Barely dodging a fight, Juan led his men away from the people, and they continued to explore.

There was not just one group of these people, however, and the expedition found themselves in a number of conflicts in the following days. With no gold to be found and met with hostility from the locals, Juan knew it was time to return home. This new land was full of promise, but they had not yet reaped any reward. Perhaps someday he could return, but for now, Juan had seen enough. Pockets empty and hearts heavy, the men boarded their ships and began the return voyage to San Juan.

San Juan, 1516

Juan returned to his home, and eventually found his second wife, Juana de Pineda, but his heart remained in the north. La Florida had been so exciting, and Juan couldn't shake the feeling that his work there was not yet finished. At night, he dreamed of returning. In the morning, he cast his eyes to the northern sea. He wasn't sure how, but he knew that his destiny lied across those restless blue waters. When he finally couldn't take it anymore, he sat down at his desk and began to write a letter.

San Juan, 1521

The day was finally here. Juan once again felt like that young man standing before seventeen ships in the harbor, except this time there were only two ships and 200 people. But the ships were *his* and he was getting his wish. He had finally received a letter back from the king granting permission to return to La Florida, and this time they would set up a colony there. This time, there would be no turning back empty handed. This time, they would claim their territory and become an important part of Spain's westward expansion.

Juan stood on the dock, looking up towards the ships just like he had done so many years ago. He had come so far and done so much, yet it was never enough for him. But this time felt different. While he had always chased the thrill of a new discovery, this time felt more final. This is what he had been working towards for years, and he couldn't wait to see it through. He boarded the ship and turned back towards the shore, sending one final wave to his family on the docks below. As he looked into the eyes of his wife and children, he couldn't help but smile. He would go down in history, and he would make them proud.

At long last, Juan was on his way back to the land he had fallen in love with. The journey was long and tiring, of course, but he was so excited to once again set foot upon the white sandy beaches of La Florida.

La Florida, 1521

Finally, Juan heard the cries. Land. He turned his eyes towards the shore, and it was like he was seeing it for the first time again -- vibrant, beautiful, and teeming with life. But unlike the first time, this time Spain would be here to stay. They moored the ships and began to unload both settlers and cargo. Building up a new settlement was always a long, tedious process, but there was a buzz of excitement in the air that day. They were ready for the weeks, months, even years of hard work that they would have to devote to the colony if it was going to survive and thrive. And so, the building began.

As the men slaved away, cutting down trees for lumber and planting their farms, Juan remembered the people they had encountered on his last expedition. He knew they must still be here somewhere, but so far his men had managed to work uninterrupted. But still, he knew

the day would come that they might need to defend themselves against the natives. What he didn't know, however, was when.

The attack came on a quiet morning a few months after their arrival. The Spanish men were just beginning to start their work for the day when Juan heard a familiar shout break through the bushes. He and the other men rushed to grab their weapons as the native people burst forth from the tree line. A skirmish ensued, with lives lost on both sides. The Spaniards fought to protect their budding colony, but there was only so much they could do.

When the dust settled and the natives had retreated back into the woods, the men assessed the damage. In horror, they realized that their leader had fallen among the rest of the dead. They hurried to his side and were relieved to discover that Juan was still breathing, albeit severely injured by an arrow in his leg. Fearing another attack, and with supplies running low, the men knew they had no choice but to leave. They loaded their ships and carried aboard the wounded, and prepared to set sail for San Juan.

On the deck, Juan gazed across the land as his crew dropped the sails. He had worked so hard to claim La Florida for Spain, tirelessly tried to do good for his country. And now, as he felt the pain in his leg, saw the blood soaking through his bandages, and caught a glimpse of his failed colony in the distance as the ship began to move, he couldn't help but believe that it was all worth it. Surely there must be a reason for him to have worked so hard for so long and for him to have endured these struggles. He would choose to believe that he accomplished his goal, that no matter how it might seem right now, he would be remembered and make his family proud. With that, Juan took one final look at his beloved La Florida, and then he went to sleep.