

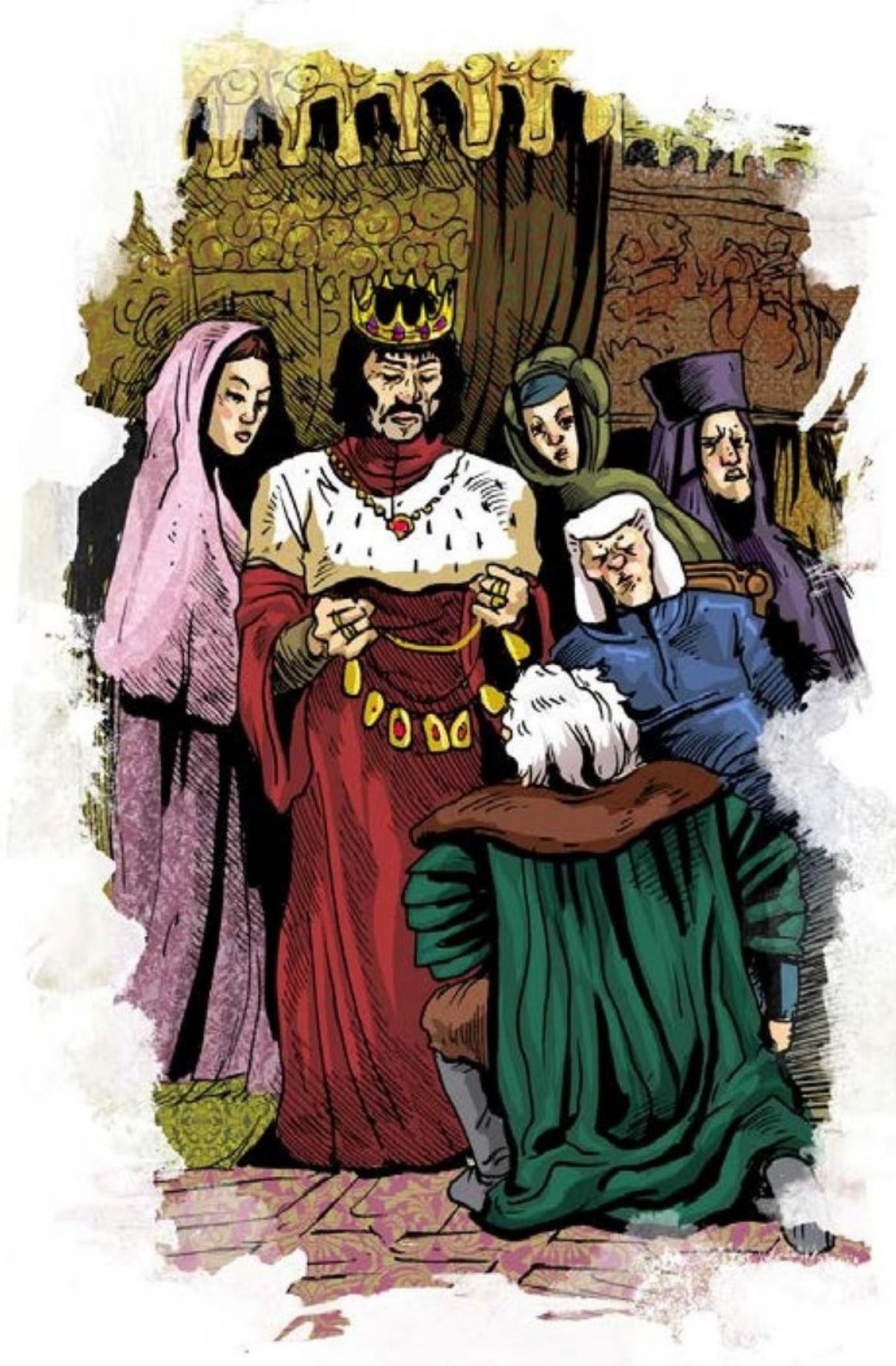
LEVELED Book • Z

# Christopher Columbus



Written by David Dreier • Illustrated by Mike Lariccia

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## I. Karen Gets an Assignment

Karen Palmer looked like a human thundercloud as she sat down at the dinner table with a gesture that said, "I am majorly not happy."

Her mother could see that all was not right in Karen's world. "What's the problem?" she asked. "Something at school, I assume."

"Yeah," Karen sighed. "Mrs. Kendrick wants us to write a class report next week on some famous person in history. We drew names from a box, and some of the kids got really neat people to report on, like Queen Elizabeth—the first one—and Leonardo da Vinci. I got Christopher Columbus."

Karen's mother looked at her with a confused expression. "So?"

"So? He's boring. Everybody knows how Columbus discovered America and proved that the world is round."

"You might find that there's a lot you don't know," her dad replied. "You might also learn that some of the things you think you do know aren't so."

Karen wasn't convinced. "Like what?"

"Well, this is *your* report. You should find out for yourself. After supper, why don't you get started on your research?"

"But where do I start?" Karen asked.

Her mom replied, "The best place to begin with anything is at the beginning. Start with Columbus's youth, and then go from there."

Her younger brother, Billy, chimed in: "That's what I was gonna say!"

Karen rolled her eyes. "Oh, sure you were. As if a fourth grader knows anything about doing research."

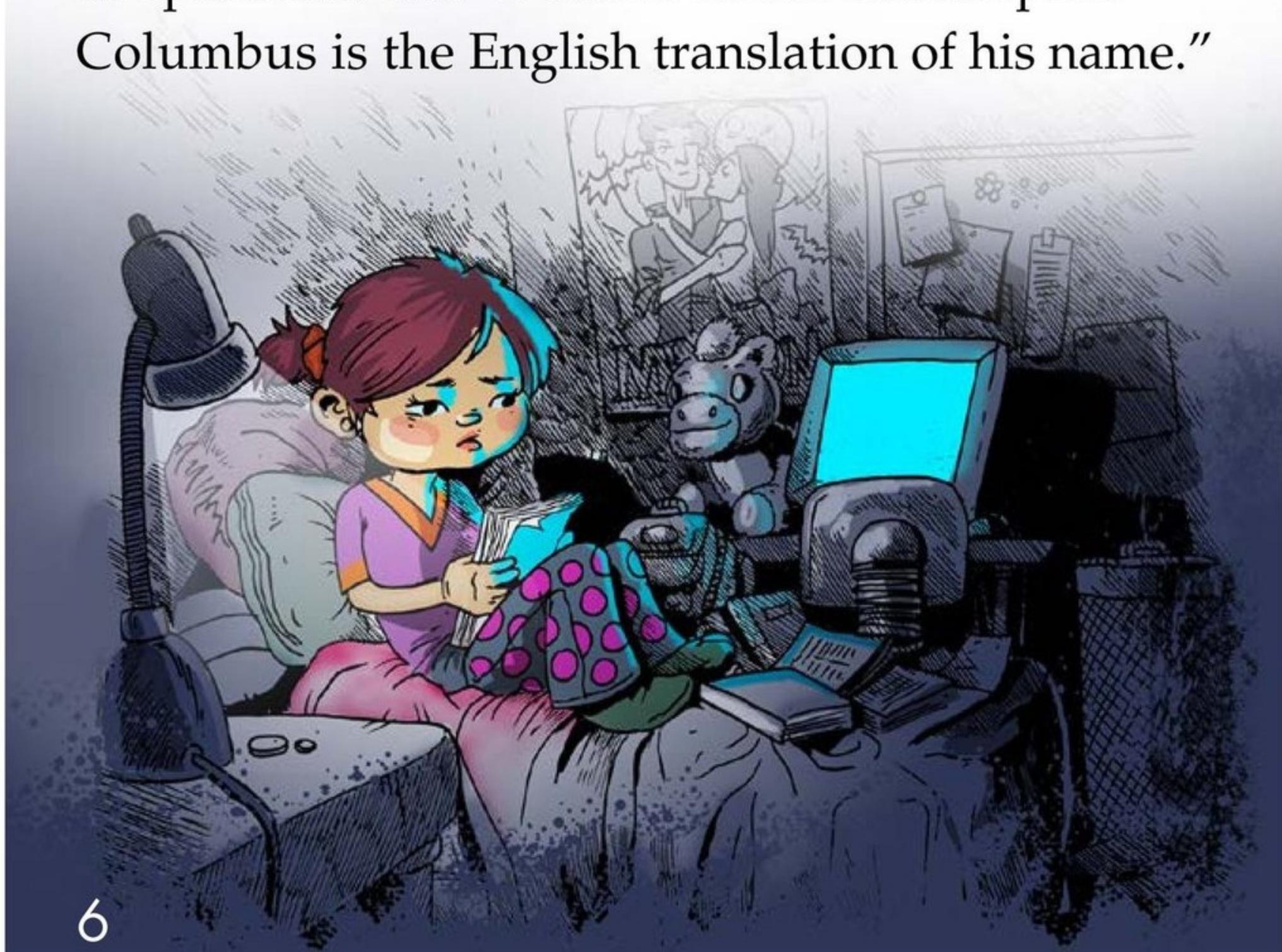
"Now, you two," said Mrs. Palmer, "let's have a pleasant dinner."

## II. Learning About Columbus's Early Life

"Start at the beginning," Karen said to herself later as she sat at her computer. "I guess that's good advice. I'll just type in 'Christopher Columbus biography' and see what comes up."

Immediately, a long list of websites appeared in her browser. She clicked on one, and a lengthy article came up. "Wow, terrific!" Karen exclaimed. "I'll print this and then see what else is available."

An hour later, Karen was propped up in bed reading and underlining important information. She read aloud to herself as she looked over one of the articles: "Born in 1451 in Genoa, Italy, as the oldest of five children, Christopher Columbus's name in Italian was *Cristoforo Colombo*, and in Spanish it was *Cristóbal Colón*. Christopher Columbus is the English translation of his name."



Karen scanned the article. “Let’s see, his father was a wool weaver, and young Chris worked in the family business for a while, though he really wanted to go to sea. He began his oceangoing career at the age of fourteen. Wowie, fourteen and he was already going off to sea.”

She continued reading. “In 1474, when he was twenty-three, Columbus was hired as a sailor on a ship that sailed to an island in the Aegean Sea, which is the part of the Mediterranean Sea east of Greece.”

Karen ran her finger down the page. “In 1476, Columbus made his first **venture** into the Atlantic Ocean in a five-ship trading expedition from Italy to England. French vessels attacked the ships when they were just a few miles out to sea. Columbus’s ship was destroyed, and he had to swim back to land.”

“Columbus married in 1479 and had a son, Diego. About a year after that, his wife died. In 1482, he sailed along the western coast of Africa, where he learned all about the winds and currents in the Atlantic Ocean. He started thinking about where a fast westward-moving current, called the Canary Current, might carry a sailing ship.”

Karen looked up from the page. “Well, now I think we’re getting someplace.”

### III. Unlearning a Couple of Things

After three days of research and notetaking, Karen felt she was ready for her class report. As she sat at the desk in her room late one afternoon going over her note cards, Billy **ventured** in.

"So how's it going, Miss Research Expert?" he asked.



#### What Did Columbus Look Like?

There are more than seventy known portraits of Columbus, but all were painted after the explorer's death. None of them match the written descriptions, which say he had white hair, light skin, and freckles.

Karen ignored her brother's sarcastic tone. "Just fine, thanks. I've learned a lot of stuff. Sit down and I'll tell you all about Columbus."

Billy gave his mouth a twist that said, "Not interested," but he sat down on the side of Karen's bed. "Okay, let's hear it. But don't take forever."

“Columbus wasn’t the first European to arrive in America,” Karen began. “Although the rest of Europe didn’t know about it, some others—the Vikings—beat him to it by hundreds of years.”

Billy’s eyes brightened. “The Vikings? No way!”

Karen smiled. She knew that bit of history would hook her brother. “They settled on the eastern coast of Canada for a while in about AD 1000,” she turned to a globe on her desk and pointed to an area, “right here, in what’s now called Newfoundland. They called it *Vinland*. In the Viking sagas—those are long stories they told about their history—they talk about fighting with *Skraelings*, which is their name for Native Americans.”

“Tell me more about that!” Billy exclaimed.

“Sorry,” Karen replied with a sly smile, “this report is about Columbus. So, moving on. . . Columbus didn’t prove the world is round. Every educated person since the ancient Greeks has known that Earth is a sphere. What they didn’t know back then was how big it is.”

“Columbus thought it was bigger than it really is?” Billy asked.

“No, he thought it was smaller—a lot smaller.”

#### IV. A New Route to the Indies

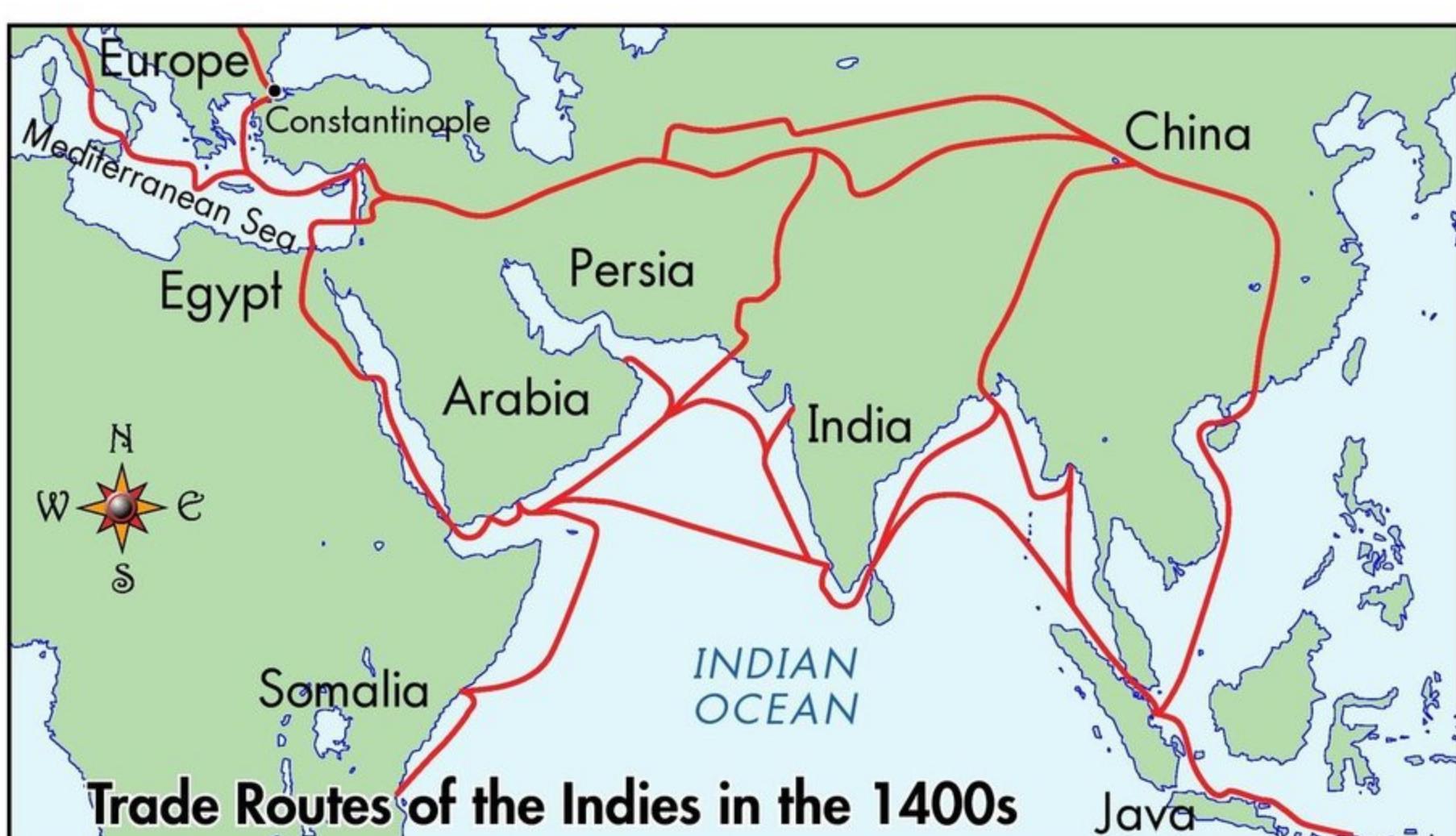
"Okay," Karen said, "now we're getting to the interesting part."

"I thought the Vikings were interesting," Billy replied.

"Later with the Vikings, huh? Listen up—I want to tell you about trade with the East. You know all those spices Mom has in the kitchen cabinet?"

Billy nodded.

"Well, we can buy all those spices at the store, and they don't cost much. At one time, though, spices were very rare and expensive. You could only get them by trading with India and other places farther to the east. Europeans called that whole area the Indies. For a long time, Europeans had a pretty direct trade **route** to that part of the world."



"Look here where it says Istanbul." Karen turned the globe to Turkey and pointed.

"For more than a thousand years, that was a Christian city called Constantinople. It was an important center for the trade between Europe and the Indies until 1453, when the Muslim Turks conquered the city and renamed it Istanbul."

"Was there a really awesome battle?" Billy asked excitedly.

"Yeah, there was," Karen said, a touch of annoyance in her voice, "but the point is, the loss of Constantinople took away European traders' link to the Far East. This meant they had to find a new route. In 1488, a Portuguese ship sailed around the bottom of Africa, but it turned back because the crew got scared. The Portuguese were determined to follow that route all the way to the Far East, and eventually they did. Because that's a seriously long distance, though, the Europeans needed to find a shorter route. That's where Columbus came in."

"In 1492, Columbus got the chance he'd been waiting for," Karen continued. "Early that year, Spain defeated some Muslims called the Moors, who had been ruling parts of Spain for more than 700 years. With the Moors finally gone, Spain was ready for new adventures."



"This is getting interesting," Billy said.

"I thought you might think so. Anyway, Columbus begged the king and queen of Spain—Ferdinand and Isabella—to provide him with ships for a **voyage** west across the Atlantic. From his own studies, Columbus estimated that Earth was less than 16,000 miles around. The actual distance is about 25,000 miles. He also thought Asia was wider than it is. Based on those two big mistakes, Columbus figured that Japan was about 2,500 miles from Europe."

"And how far is it, really?"

"About 12,000 miles. If there'd been nothing between Europe and Asia except open water, he never would have made it."

## V. The First Voyage to America

"Nobody knew who was right about the distances," Karen said, "so King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decided to give Columbus a shot. They supplied him with three ships."

"I know what they were," Billy piped up, "the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*."

"Very good. You get a gold star. Well, anyway, Columbus set sail on the *Santa María* from a Spanish port on August 3, 1492. He had about ninety crew members altogether on the three ships, including experienced sailors and a few government officials."

Karen pointed again to the globe, indicating a group of islands off the upper west coast of Africa, and said, "Columbus stopped here first, at the Canary Islands. Then on September 6, he launched his ships into the westward-flowing Canary Current that—along with the winds—he hoped would take him to the Indies."

Billy interrupted by asking, "How did Columbus keep his ships going the right way?"



"Good question. Sailors back then had a few tools for navigation, such as magnetic compasses, and they could tell a lot from the stars. Columbus was a little different. He relied mostly on a method called dead reckoning, which involves estimating a ship's speed and direction from various kinds of observations. It's not very precise, but Columbus was really good at it."



"Yeah, he must have been," Billy said.

Karen amped up the drama. "Day after day, Columbus's ships sailed westward across the empty ocean, and by early October, the crew was getting scared. They thought they might die out there in the middle of the sea, and they wanted to turn back. Columbus insisted that they keep going and finally, on October 12, a sailor aboard the *Pinta* cried out, 'Land! Land!' After thirty-six days at sea, they were saved!"

"I knew that!" Billy said proudly.

Karen shook her head before she continued. “Columbus went ashore at an island in the Caribbean Sea and claimed it for Spain. Nobody is sure now which island it was, though many think he landed on Watling Island in the Bahamas. Columbus was convinced he had landed in part of the Indies. There were lots of natives there, so guess what the Spaniards called them.”

Billy shrugged. “I dunno.”

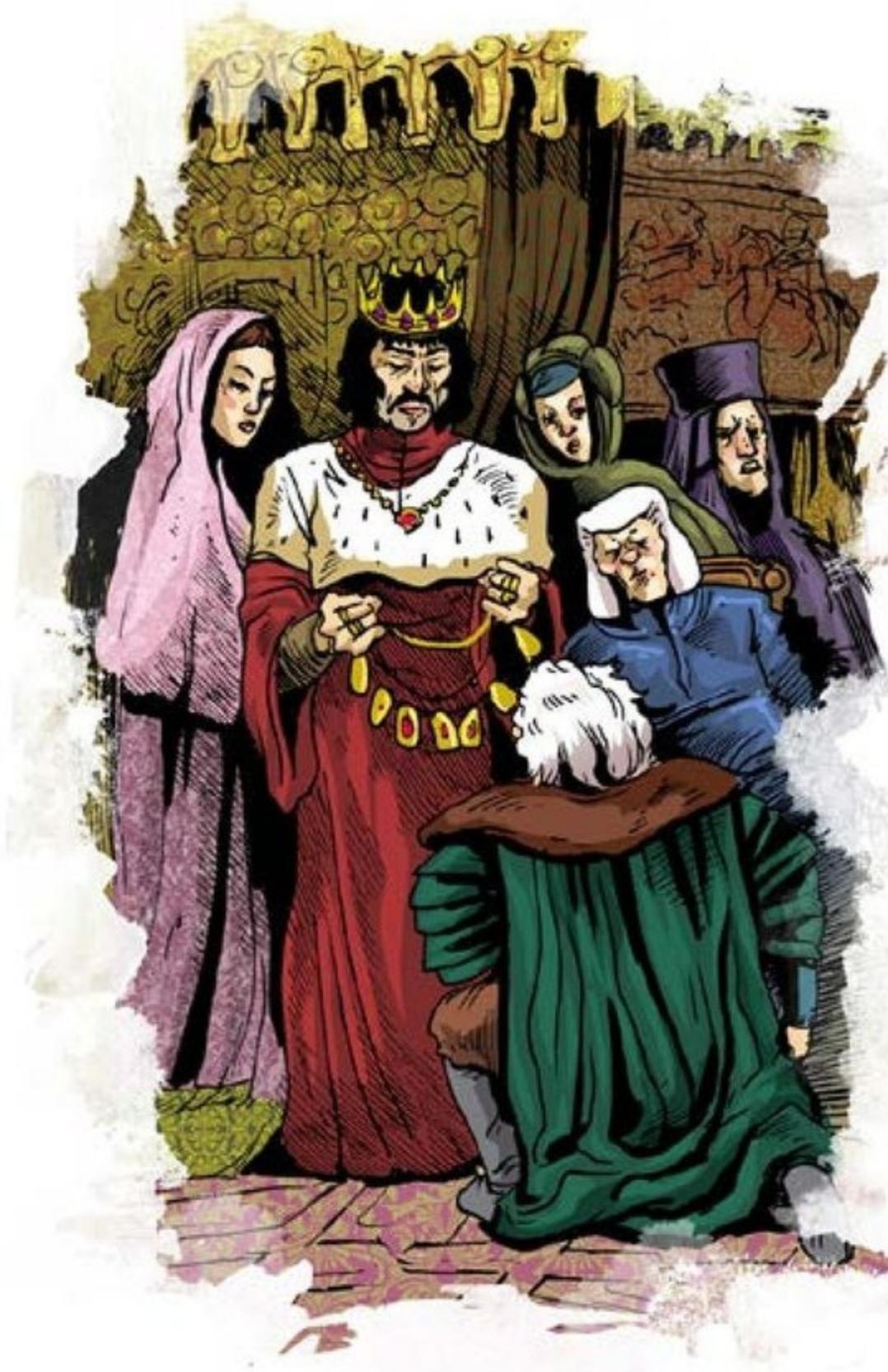
“*Indians*, what else? That’s where the word comes from. Anyway, the natives were really friendly, and everyone got along great. In time, the two groups even learned to communicate with each other.”

“So what happened next?”

“Columbus sailed around and found other islands, including Cuba. Native guides told Columbus it was a big island, but he insisted that it had to be part of China. At another island, Hispaniola, the *Santa Maria* got wrecked, and the men used wood from the ship to build a fort called *La Navidad*. Before he returned to Spain, Columbus left thirty-nine members of his crew there to establish the first European **settlement** in the Americas since—”

“—the Vikings!” Billy interrupted.

"Bingo—another gold star," Karen said. "Columbus finally set sail for home in his remaining two ships in January, and by mid-March, he was in Spain again. As part of his hero's welcome, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella gave him a generous reward, made him governor of the new lands, and named him **Admiral** of the Ocean Sea. Pretty impressive title, huh?"



"Yeah, I'll say. He was a really big deal."

"He sure was. He had no trouble convincing the king and queen to finance an even larger expedition to 'the Indies.'" Karen made quote marks in the air with her fingers. "He promised to bring back loads of gold, spices, and other stuff."

"Columbus probably thought his fortune was made. He couldn't have known that after this **triumphant** return to Spain, everything would be downhill."

## VI. The Second and Third Voyages

"In September 1493," Karen continued, "Columbus sailed from Spain with a **fleet** of seventeen ships. The people on the ships included 1,200 **colonists** sent to give Spain a firm hold on the new lands that Columbus had found."

"Columbus was full of **optimism** as they sailed west, but his mood changed pretty quickly when they arrived at Hispaniola in late November. He was shocked to find that the natives had killed the inhabitants of *La Navidad* settlement and burned the fort to the ground."

"Wow! How come?" Billy asked.

"The settlers had been **abusing** the natives, so they **revolted**. You'd think that Columbus would have learned something from that **tragedy**, but he didn't. He established a new settlement on Hispaniola and allowed the colonists to make **slaves** of the natives. He thought it was the best way to get things done."

"King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ordered Columbus back to Spain in 1496 to answer questions about his rule of Hispaniola. Settlers who had gone back home earlier had badmouthed Columbus, so the king and queen wanted to hear his side of things."

“Columbus managed to smooth things over and to even get funding for six more ships for a third voyage in May 1498.”

“So everything was okay?” Billy asked.

“Not for long. Conditions between the settlers and the natives continued to get worse, and Columbus was held responsible. In late 1500, he was stripped of his titles and hauled back to Spain in chains.”

“Oh, gee!”

“This time, Columbus couldn’t talk his way out of the mess he was in. He spent the next two years in **disgrace**, thinking he’d never again see the lands he thought were the Indies.”



## VII. The Fourth and Final Voyage

“Believe it or not,” Karen said, “he got King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to back him for another voyage.”

“He must have been a fast talker,” Billy said.

Karen smiled. “He must have been, because by now, everyone except Columbus realized that the lands to the west included continents that nobody in Europe had known existed. Even so, the Spanish monarchs considered the possibility that these lands were not too far from Asia. Columbus wanted to search for a water **channel** to China that Marco Polo had described in the 1200s, even though he had no idea that this waterway was, like, a zillion miles away.”

“In May 1502, Columbus was given four ships and told to search both for the water channel and riches. He was ordered to avoid Hispaniola, where he was no longer welcome.”

“So how did things go on this trip?” Billy asked.

“Not well. Nothing was working out for poor old Columbus anymore. He found some gold in what is now Panama, but in June 1503, he got shipwrecked on the island of Jamaica. He and his men were stranded there for a year until a Spanish ship finally rescued them.”



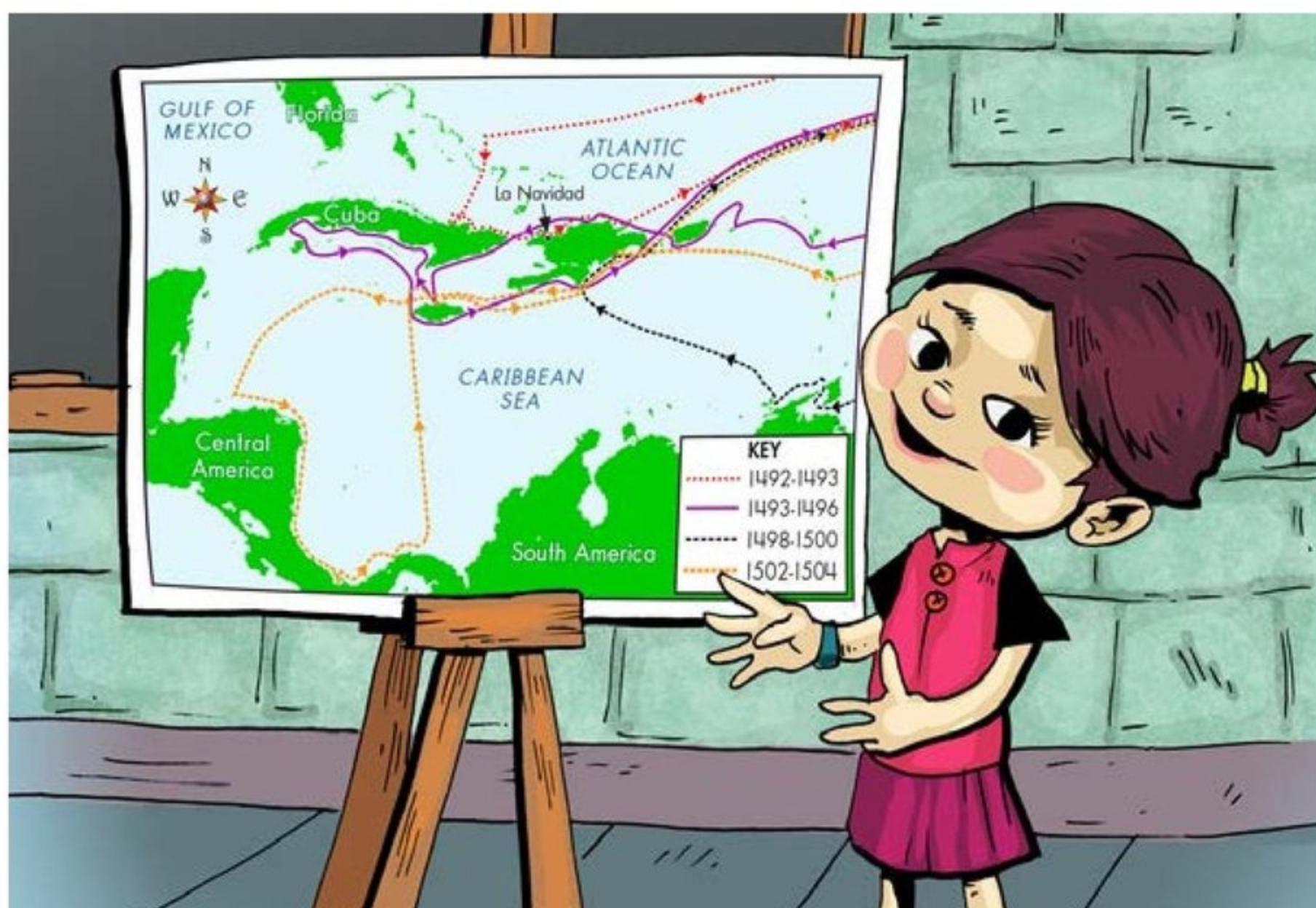
## **Saved by an Eclipse**

While Columbus and his men were marooned on Jamaica, they ran out of food. The natives of the island refused to help. By looking through his books, Columbus learned that a total eclipse of the Moon was due on February 29, 1504. He warned the natives that if they did not provide him with food, he would cause the Moon to darken. When the eclipse turned the Moon a deep red, the people of the island were so terrified that they brought food to the stranded men.

“Columbus was worn out from all his voyaging, so he returned to Spain in November 1504. He died less than two years later, at the age of 54. To the end of his days, Columbus believed that he had sailed to Asia.”

## VIII. A Successful Report

A few days later, Karen gave her report to the class. At the end, Karen pointed to a large poster she had made and placed on an easel. “This shows the routes of Columbus’s four voyages,” she said. “As you can see, he covered a lot of territory.”



“It seems kind of unfair that the **New World** didn’t get named for Columbus. Instead, it was named for another Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci. At least there are a lot of places in the United States named for him, like Columbus, Ohio.”

She looked over at her teacher, Mrs. Kendrick, who was standing at the side of the room.

“Excellent report, Karen,” Mrs. Kendrick said.

Mrs. Kendrick motioned for Karen to sit down.

"Now, class, how many of you were surprised by some of the information in Karen's report?" Mrs. Kendrick asked. Almost everyone in the class raised his or her hand—including Karen. "That doesn't surprise me."

"Every year on the second Monday in October, we observe Columbus Day, but what are we really celebrating? As you heard, Columbus was a great **navigator**, and he pushed the boundaries of the European world. However, pushing these boundaries also led to hundreds of years of disease, hardship, and slavery for the Native Americans. Do we honor him for what he achieved, or do we reflect on the suffering that followed his voyages? As we get ready for Columbus Day, we should all think about these questions and what we want the holiday to mean to each of us."

As Karen listened, she thought about all the things she had learned—and unlearned—about Christopher Columbus. Then she thought about the things she knew and didn't know about other famous people in history. She knew she had plenty more research ahead of her.

## Glossary

<b>abusing</b> (v.)	mistreating, especially in a cruel or violent way (p. 17)
<b>admiral</b> (n.)	a very high-ranking officer in a navy (p. 16)
<b>channel</b> (n.)	a wide passage of water that connects two larger bodies of water (p. 19)
<b>colonists</b> (n.)	people who live in a colony or are founders of a new colony (p. 17)
<b>disgrace</b> (n.)	a loss of respect as a result of having done something dishonorable (p. 18)
<b>fleet</b> (n.)	a group of ships or other vehicles operating under one commander or owner (p. 17)
<b>navigator</b> (n.)	a person who plots a course to arrive at an intended destination (p. 22)
<b>New World</b> (n.)	North and South America, especially in relation to early exploration (p. 21)

<b>optimism</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the belief that everything is going to turn out well (p. 17)
<b>revolted</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	fought against the government or authority (p. 17)
<b>route</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a path or road from one place to another (p. 10)
<b>settlement</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a new place where people live (p. 15)
<b>slaves</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who are legally owned and completely controlled by another person (p. 17)
<b>tragedy</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an event that causes great destruction, suffering, or loss of life (p. 17)
<b>triumphant</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	joyous because of recent success (p. 16)
<b>venture</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a risky project or undertaking (p. 7)
<b>ventured</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	dared to go to a dangerous place (p. 8)
<b>voyage</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a long trip or journey, especially on a ship (p. 12)

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