

WHIPPOORWILL O

KOFFEE OLAY

By Timothy L Shaul

The Third of a Five Volume Tale

With Observations on

GETTING ALONG WITH DEMONS

Our Story Continues in 1816 A.D.

On a Slave Ship in

THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

Where our Hero Jed has given himself up to be a Slave

So that he might Accompany his Enslaved Wife Zoh

TO THE LAND OF FREEDOM...AMERICA

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This work is in memory of Joan Ellen Viener, who made it possible

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JOURNEY TO SUGAR ISLAND

The dream that takes us out of hell, becomes truth.

Jed and Zoh walk down the gangplank from the slave ship to a broad pier of stone, at Sugar Island. The sun is hot but there's a good breeze. In the distance, a cluster of small houses around the curve of a huge bay. A number of ships ride at anchor in the bay.

Zoh says, "Thank Goodness we don't have to land in canoes here! At Lagos, it scared me so! The sharks...and the turbulence, getting through the waves..."

Jed peers down into the harbor water. "I don't see a single shark. Lordy, Zoh, maybe we could go swimming here! I never did get lessons..."

"I'll teach you, Husband." Zoh squeezes Jed's hand. "You'll love it. It'll be like our honeymoon all over again."

"Yeah." Jed laughs. "Without that burly fellow."

"He was a pain in the butt, wasn't he?" Zoh laughs too.

On the pier, folks of all colors are milling about. A White man comes up to Jed and Zoh. "Come with me. I'll be your Master here. My, are you pregnant, my dear?"

Zoh says, "Yessir, I am."

"Wonderful. I have a midwife on my plantation who's great with birthing. You won't have to worry about a thing."

Zoh puts her hand on the White man's arm. "Oh, thank you, Sir. I must admit, I was so worried!" She wipes her eyes.

"Why don't you get into my carriage and sit down. I don't want you walking too much, my dear, in your condition." The White man leads them to a carriage, pulled by a grey dappled horse.

Jed notices the hand railing of the carriage is damaged. "I could fix that railing for you, Sir. I'm a Blacksmith."

"You don't say! What a valuable skill! My, I'm so glad to have found you folks!" The White man gives Zoh a hand up into the carriage. "I'll be just a moment. I want to get a few more workers from that other ship." The White man walks off to a group of folks disembarking from another ship.

Zoh leans back in the carriage seat. "I never rode in anything so fine! Remember, Jed how I always wanted a carriage, and a tiara? What nonsense! I was so vain...that's over with. I'll do my best to be your wife, Husband."

Jed is overcome. "Love, you already made me happy, just by getting your health back."

There's a familiar voice. "Jed! Miss Zoh! Gods, imagine finding you both here!"

Jed feels his gut churn. He can't believe it. "Ayotunde!"

It's her, all right. She clambers up into the carriage. "Dat nice White man just bought me! Ah came on da other ship!"

Zoh and Ayotunde hug. Zoh says, "How you feel, girl? How's your baby?"

"Oh, we's fine! Look how big my tummy is! How's you and yours, Miss Zoh? Lordy, Ah's so glad to see you both!"

Jed kisses Ayotunde on the cheek. "I figured I done lost you for good, girl..." Happiness fills Jed's chest. Tears are running down his cheek. Or no, it's rain. A drop of rain falls into Jed's eye.

Zoh says, "Oh, it's raining. So warm! So...so..."

Ayotunde says, "Oh, shit. Rain..."

Now the rain's pouring down into Jed's face. He twists and writhes to escape it, but it's hopeless. "Curse it!"

Zoh says, "Ahhh...ahhh..."

Ayotunde says, "Husband...help...the rain..."

Jed tries to wipe the water out of his face. He recognizes the stink of it. It's urine, not rain. He sits up, awake now, gasping with revulsion, and smacks his head hard on the planks just

above his head. "Dammit!" The urine is coming from the shelf above him, although it's almost totally dark, so he can't really see. He pounds futilely on the shelf over him but the liquid drip continues. Jed lurches off the shelf into the center aisle, but it's too late, his shirt is wet with piss, his hair and face. He shudders in revulsion, takes his shirt off and wrings it out. Now what. Dammit all!

A woman shoves past him in the cramped isle, on her way to the honeypots in the middle of the ship. The isle is so narrow, two people can hardly pass. Jed looks to complain to whoever pissed right where they lay, on the huge shelves that fill the guts of the ship. But on the shelf above where he and Zoh lay packed tight with strangers, all Jed sees are feet sticking out. Everyone has their heads in, toward the hull of the ship. How can a man complain to a row of feet? Jed shakes his head in frustration. Now he's wet with piss, cold, his shelf is wet. He does his best to use his shirt to dry the shelf in the stinking darkness. Then he sags against the shelving, standing up, existing.

More people shove past, in both directions. The ship ponderously rolls constantly, first one way, then the other, causing anyone on their feet to lurch from one side to the other. There's the ceaseless sounds of wind, water, sailors thump above, often someone vomits from sea-sickness, always someone crying or moaning. The women have to let it out, have to cry about the darkness, the crowding, the filth, the stink, the *unknowing*. How many days has it been? Jed believes it's been three days, from the waning and waxing of the dim light from the open gun port, close to where he and Zoh lie, since he gave himself up to the slavers. It's probably night, now, outside. Jed slips into sleep, standing up in the isle with one arm around a stanchion...

Jed and Zoh walk down a long plank, onto the broad pier at Sugar Island. Zoh says, "It looks like rain." Jed says, "It don't matter if it rains, just so we's off that ship!" Zoh says, "Yes...thank Goodness that's over...now we can start anew...start anew..."

The ship heaves more than usual, and Jed falls sideways painfully. This'll never do, he has to get back on the shelf, even if it's wet with piss. He wipes the boards again, then, groaning with disgust, crawls in beside Zoh. Moving to a dry shelf is out of the question, every inch of space is taken, bodies crammed in, Jed hardly has room to lie down beside Zoh.

Jed lays his hand on Zoh's shoulder. As usual, she does not respond, but Jed can feel her breathing, very slightly, and when his fingers rest on her neck, the heartbeat is still there. Still alive! He checks constantly, to reassure himself. Zoh has eaten nothing, drunk nothing in two days, even though Jed tries to rouse her. She's dying, clearly. She's decided to let go. Other than the scrape down her face, Jed can find no wound on her, she has no fever. She's simply willing herself to die. Zoh is floating away, toward the Mother Land.

On Jed's other side is a Black man from up-river somewhere, his dialect is strange to Jed, they have a hard time understanding each other, so they don't talk much. The man mutters to Jed, "Some bastard pissed on us."

Jed says, "Yeah. Ain't nothing you can say to 'em. All you see out there is the feet."

"Yeah. Hard to understand, though, man. Hard to understand. All they gotta do, is get their ass up, and go piss in the pots. Takes a real lazy person to piss where they lies. Know what I mean? Real lazy."

"Yeah. I knows what you mean, man. I knows. Maybe they's sick, or something." Jed can't think of anything else to say. The

man rolls away, grumbling under his breath. On his other side, his woman is crying quietly. She's been crying on and off for a long time now, in the dark. Not loud. Very softly. Hardly audible. After awhile, Jed don't hear it. At first they had a child with 'em but now it's gone. *Real lazy...real lazy...*

...Jed helps Zoh down into the rowboat. The ship is anchored a short ways from the dock, rowboats are being used to ferry the Blacks to shore. Jed says, "Careful, Love. Watch your step."

Zoh sits in the boat. "At least the water is calm. Not like at Lagos. No huge waves."

"No. And no sharks. We'll be fine. We'll make out." Jed smiles at Zoh.

The two sailors manning the oars say, "First time to Sugar Island?" They pull off from the ship, their oars thumping rhythmically in the oarlocks. "Don't miss the hot springs, while you're here...ask anybody..."

Jed comes to. Good Lord, asleep again. Jed shakes his head. The fuzziness. The yielding. The darkness in the mind. Zoh. What to do about Zoh. Something drastic is needed, something virtually impossible. Zoh must get sun, air, exercise, food, clean water, or she will die. And here they lie, Bodua Jed and his wife, side by side on a piss-soaked board in the black bowels of a slave ship. Everything they need is just above their heads, as inaccessible as if it were in Heaven.

Jed has to do something or he'll go crazy. Angrily he rouses himself and digs out the small pack that he brought from Lagos, with his fishing equipment. He crawls closer to the square door hole in the side of the ship, where cannons used to poke out. He takes out his beloved fishing tackle, and the cloth he wraps bait in, small fish selected from those caught before. Hook baited, Jed lowers the line down into the sea and waits.

Jed has not eaten the food cooked for the slaves, knowing that it contains a drug. He eats fish that he catches himself. Raw. It's an acquired taste. When he first got on board the slave ship, he had some food in his pack, bread and cheese and some palm nuts, packed for him by Monifa and his mother. Jed offered that to Zoh, and she ate, and Jed got her to swallow some of the tepid water provided by the Whites. Since then, she has eaten nothing.

When Jed put the first live fish into his mouth, still twitching, chewed it and swallowed it down, he recalled when he and Oleon were slowly starving, as they labored on foot down the Ogun River to Lagos. Jed had caught a frog, but could not bring himself to eat it, and Oleon had said that if he got hungry enough, Jed would become the kind of person that could pop a live creature in his mouth and eat it without a qualm...and now, Jed has become that person. He wishes he could tell Oleon somehow...Lordy, but that was a hike...the two of them, foraging their way down the Ogun River...thank the gods they found that village, or Oleon would have died...*and Jed had to give up his wedding band, so the villagers would care for Oleon...but of course, that was necessary. A man can't desert friends...what's a wedding band compared to friends...and Oleon will take care of Monifa, help her make it...help out with Jed's son...He came to love Oleon, as much as he loves his father...good men, both of them...men to look up to, to emulate...*

Lost again. Jed curses and shakes his head to get the cobwebs out.

This door where Jed fishes, is one of many in the ship's side. When he first came on board, after finding Zoh, he intuitively got them a place near an open door, before the ship filled with people. Spray comes in the opening sometimes, occasionally even a solid splash of water if the ship hits a wave sideways, but the water that comes in the little door is not a problem, because the

ship is built to deal with it, by a clever gutter that drains down into the ship somewhere. And through the little door also comes fresh air and view. Peering through the door, Jed sees a vast plain of grey heaving water, running to the edge of the Earth. Above, a vast blueness, running to the gates of Heaven.

Prisoner, how sweet is space.

The only trouble with being close to the open gun port is that it's on the bottom layer, so there's a shelf above them, filled with more slaves. At first it seemed better to be on the lower shelf for ease of getting in and out, but now that piss is dripping on Jed and Zoh, he realizes there's other issues involved. If they were on the upper shelf, no piss would drip.

The nausea that often clouds Jed's brain from the motion of the ship, fades when he sticks his head out the little door, but he must not block the air. Zoh needs sweet, fresh air.

And beyond, lie several hundred other Blacks, packed as far as one can see in the dim light, down the length of the ship, two layers on each side of the narrow central isle. They all need air. They all need a lot of things.

As his head clears in the cool air, Jed's fingers automatically sense the line, the vibration of motion, alert for a nibble, but his mind once more studies their plight, searching for a scheme. *If we stay below here, she's gonna die. She done decided, like an animal in a trap. I gotta get her up in the sun and air. Up on top. That means, the Whites has got to want me and her up there. The only way they is gonna want us up there, is if we is useful to them. Then I gets to the point that sticks...how can we be of use to a White man? What have we got, they might want?*

Jed ponders on what he knows of the Whites. Not much. There's almost no contact with them.

Twice a day, Whites open the big door in the ceiling of the slave dungeon, and a small number of Blacks can scramble up on top, where they cook a huge pot of food for those still below, and enjoy a short time of sun, before returning below. Honey pots are emptied, bodies cast overboard.

One morning, Jed got a real scare. There's a woman on the other side of Zoh, and then a man. Jed woke to find the man reaching across the woman to shake Zoh, and getting no response from her, he began to shout at Jed.

"This one here is dead! What you doing, man, keeping a damned corpse? We needs the *room*, man! Git this cold thing out in the isle to be chucked overboard!"

Jed lost control. Lunging overtop of both Zoh and the other woman, he grabbed the man by the throat, shouting, "You better believe there gonna be a corpse, but ain't gonna be my Zoh! Gonna be you! Here me? Gonna be you! Keep your dirty hands off my wife!"

Jed still shakes, recalling that incident. Later he offered both the man and the woman a fish he caught. The man took it silently. Jed forces himself to eat many of the fish he catches, to keep up his strength. He offers fish to others, but mostly people are too sick to eat, or they cannot bring themselves to eat a raw fish. Whenever he gets a particularly tasty fish, he tries to get Zoh to eat some, so far without success.

At first, Jed pleaded with Zoh, begging her to eat, but after the incident where she was taken for dead, he tries to conceal her lack of response. He feels her heartbeat. He puts his hand before her mouth and feels the breath flowing in and out. The life candle, still guttering on.

A strike on his line, almost jerking it out of Jed's hand! *Now we got something!* Exultantly, he pulls in, doing his best not to fray the

line on the door frame. *Look at that fish! Man, it's as long as my arm! What a beauty! Here's something them Whites could use!* And just like that, Jed has a plan to save Zoh.

When the ceiling door is unlocked for emptying the honeypots and cooking the morning meal, Jed is first up the ladder. He wears his pack with the big fish, and he carries one of the honeypots. He empties the honeypot overboard, and then studies the situation. A light rain falls with a chilly wind behind it, and the prospect on deck is dismal. A maze of ropes, railings, huge timbers rise into the sky, with odd wooden shapes all about. Above, like captive clouds, sails strain and snap. Ropes hum, wood creaks. Everything is foreign, confusing. Whites are busy doing their jobs, and other slaves prepare to cook the huge meal needed to feed the Blacks, watched over by barefoot White men with clubs. Beyond the railing, a gray wind-ruffled ocean stretches in all directions. The view is staggering for a landlubber, but Jed pays no attention. He searches for the Oba, the Chief, the man in charge.

The Chief is obvious, when Jed finally picks him out. At the back end of the ship is a raised smaller deck, with its own railing, and several covered huts. Leaning on the railing of this raised deck is a large man, bearded, dressed in a faded blue coat and black boots. He has both elbows on the railing, and he smokes a pipe. A wide hat and slicker keeps the rain off him. He watches motionless, except for an occasional puff of smoke. It's the same man that Jed saw watching on the day he and his father first came to this ship, the White man that the translator called "Captain".

More Blacks clamber on deck, guarded by the White men with clubs. The Blacks can walk about, within limits, while they start a fire in a brick hearth and cook the gruel that passes for food.

Jed takes his big fish from his pack. Holding the fish, he approaches the Chief. As he expected, two White men bar his way.

Jed falls to his knees and holds up the fish, offering it toward the Chief.

One of the sailors hits him, and Jed gasps, but the Chief speaks. The other sailor hauls Jed roughly to the Chief.

The Chief regards Jed and puffs on his pipe. Jed holds the fish out.

The Chief calls to another man, and the two of them talk. This man gestures over the side of the ship, and Jed realizes that his fishing through the little door has been observed.

The Chief puffs some more, then murmurs something to a White boy who is on his knees, scrubbing the raised deck. The boy runs to Jed, grabs the fish, and carries it off through a tunnel in the deck.

The Chief murmurs some more, and a man goes to a locker, roots in it, and produces a contraption that looks like a small wheel, with thin rope wrapped around it. The White man holds this out to Jed without looking at him.

Jed reaches to take the device and smiles at the man, who instantly hits Jed a stunning blow in the side of his face.

Taken by surprise, Jed staggers and falls. The man simply waits, looking at the sea, tossing the device in his hand. Jed gets up. *I was too familiar.* He takes a deep breath, grits his teeth, ducks his head, and again holds his hand out for the device, which he now sees is some sort of fishing tackle. This time, Jed does not smile, and keeps his eyes down.

Still absorbed in the distant sea, the White man opens the handle of the tool, to reveal the finest fishing hooks Jed has ever seen. The man closes the handle, tosses the contraption to Jed,

points languidly to the shelf where it was stored, and walks away. Not once has this man actually looked at Jed eye to eye.

Jed's nose bleeds from the blow, but he turns toward the Chief and bows. The Chief just looks at him and puffs on his pipe.

Jed takes the fishing tool to the railing and studies how to use it. He trembles with exultation. The first part of his scheme worked! He's accepted on deck! Now, if only he can get Zoh up out of the ship's hold, into the fresh air and sun, perhaps she'll decide to live!

While the other Blacks cook the ship food, Jed fishes and studies the situation. He locates the bucket and scrub brush that was used by the White boy for cleaning the upper deck. The bucket has a rope which is apparently used to lower it over the side and scoop up clean sea water.

After breakfast is over, Jed is herded below decks with everyone else. That afternoon, the rain intensifies. Through the gun ports, the Sea steams and seethes with rain and mist, so that Jed can only see a short ways over the ocean swells. It's not a good time to pursue his scheme, so he gives up until the next morning.

It's a near-sleepless Jed that greets the dawn. When the door in the ceiling is dragged back, Jed shakes Zoh hard and forces her to wake up. Still he must carry her off the shelf and over to the ladder that leads up to the open door. Were it not for Jed holding her erect, Zoh would slump to the floor. She'll never climb the ladder by herself. A blinding light shines down into the slave's cavern. The weather has cleared off, it's sunny up there. Jed throws Zoh over his shoulder like she was a bag of beans. Thank the gods he's kept his strength up, with all those fish! Even so, it's almost impossible for him to lurch up the ladder using one free

hand while trying to clasp Zoh's legs. Jed's legs tremble with the exertion. He must do this! Her life depends on it! When he emerges from the hatch, onto the blindingly bright deck, Jed cannot get to his feet, he crawls away from the door, Zoh still draped over his shoulder and back, but at least he's there! Gently he lays Zoh down in a protected spot. Other Blacks, the strong ones, swarm up the ladder behind him, onto the deck, glad to get into open air.

Jed leaves Zoh where she is and goes quickly to get the cleaning bucket and brush with its rope. Jed takes the bucket, ignoring the other Blacks, who prepare to cook the day's breakfast. He lowers the bucket over the railing down to the water, and brings it up full. He takes the bucket to where Zoh lies. Jed gets Zoh up on her hands and knees. She does not collapse! There's a spark alive within her! But she does not raise her head, she simply stares down at the deck. Jed places the bucket of clean sea water in front of Zoh's face. He lifts her hand and puts the scrub brush in it. He says loudly and firmly right in her ear, "Time to get to work, Zoh! Enough laziness! The floor needs cleaning! You hear me? Time to get to work!"

Zoh's life hangs poised. If she falls into a stupor, all is lost. But lo! Her hand closes on the scrub brush! Her arm moves, to scrub the deck! Just as Jed hoped, Zoh's habit of cleaning floors takes over.

Jed scampers to the locker and takes out the fishing tackle, settles into position at the rail, and fishes. Only then does he glance to find the Chief. There he is, lounging as always over the upper deck railing, a cup of something in his hand, watching, always watching.

Jed takes a shuddering breath. So far so good. Zoh, ignoring the bustle about her, slowly scrubs her way across the deck. The

sun, a ball of fire, rises in the East. The ship plows on across the Ocean under a pleasant breeze. Whites and Blacks alike go about their morning business.

Jed settles in to keep watch over Zoh. So far, things are working out. But now, the next problem becomes crucial. Zoh has not eaten or drunk water in days, since he gave her the food he brought from Lagos in his pack. How is she to work on an empty stomach? And if Jed gives her the food for the slaves, cooked in the big iron cauldron, it may have the drug in it that will make her even more lethargic than she is.

While Jed ponders this problem, sailors pull Black men out of the group around the cook fire and herd them off to one side. The Chief whistles sharply to these sailors, and points at Jed. The sailors grab Jed also, hardly giving him time to secure his fish line, and pull him into the selected group of Blacks, making eight men total. Looking at his companions, Jed realizes that all of these men appear strong and healthy, despite the days spent in confinement below deck.

A short Black woman dressed in colorful clothes comes over to the selected Black men. She's well-dressed, she must not be a slave. Her complexion is not really Black, it's more of a soft brown, and she wears ornaments in her ears and on two of her fingers, and a fancy comb stuck in her hair. Her dress looks to take a lot of fabric, wrapped about her, and she wears sandals rather than go barefoot. Her manner is energetic and loud. She reminds Jed of a brightly-plumed and somewhat aggressive bird. To Jed's amazement, she speaks to the group of men in Yoruba! Or at least, a version of Yoruba, close enough that Jed can understand her.

This gaudy woman says, "Hi! My name's Koffee Olay. It appears that I's the only person on board who speaks both

English and our language, other than the Cook, and he's busy, so I've been made translator. My Ma spoke Yoruba, so I picked up some, even though it's not my normal language. I'll do my best. You all Yoruba?"

The men look at each other, and all nod, more or less. They all look as puzzled as Jed feels.

The woman Koffee Olay says, "Good! Here's why you all been picked. The Captain's in a bind. A lot of his sailors caught some disease. Two men died already, and there ain't enough healthy sailors to work the ship on all the shifts. So you all been drafted into service. The Captain wants you to help set the sails, during the day. You'll go below decks at night, as usual, unless there's special need. Each of you gonna have a White sailor to show you what to do, until you figure it out. All you gotta do is tag along after him and copy what he does, when the Captain blows his whistle for a sail change."

One of the Black men says, in a slow drawl Jed can hardly follow, "You means, we gotta go...up...*there*?" He points up and raises his eyebrows.

Jed's eyes follow the man's finger...up...up....Good Lord! When he leans far enough back to see the top of the tracery of ropes and wood above him, Jed cannot tell if it's the clouds moving, or the ship, and he loses his balance for a moment. Man, that's *high*! A man falling from that height...well...which would be worse, to miss the ship and drown, or land on the ship and splatter? Probably to splatter would be the easier death.

Koffee Olay says, "I reckon. I don't really know what's involved. Y'all musta done some tree climbing, now, ain't you? Here, there's ladders! It should be easy!"

Indeed there is a rope ladder, swaying through space like a rope cobweb. Jed swallows. Right. Easy for her to talk about it, with her feet firmly on solid wood.

Koffee continues, "Captain say, if you work out good, you get fed the same food as the sailors, not the swill that goes below decks for the crowd."

The same Black man gives a slow smile, and says, "Man, if I get some decent chow, at least when I fall off them ropes, I'll die happy!"

Koffee says, "I's gonna try and teach you all some simple English words, so the sailors can tell you what to do."

What good luck! Someone who speaks Yoruba, someone sympathetic, perhaps! He has to speak. He clears his throat. "Ma'am, could I ask a favor? It's my wife, over there." He points to Zoh lethargically scrubbing the deck. "She's pregnant and sick. She ain't et nothing in two or three days. She can't work on an empty stomach."

Koffee and the men all study Zoh. The garrulous Black man says, "Man, that's one good-looking woman. Or she could be." He looks at Jed. "Ain't many men manage to stay with their woman, in this god-forsaken place."

Koffee says, "She don't look pregnant to me."

Jed says, "She was pregnant when her village was wiped out and she was taken, some ten or twelve days ago, or maybe more. I lost track."

"You both from the same village?"

"No, Ma'am. It's a long story. I don't wanna go into that."

Koffee studies Jed. "I suppose not. I suppose we all have long stories. Listen, as soon as I get you all squared away, I'll see to your wife. But first, we gotta do the Captain's desire. Don't worry, Mister...uh..." Her eyes roam over Jed in a disconcerting

way, he's not used to having a woman look at him as if he were on display.

"It's Jed, Ma'am. And thank you!"

So for a while, Koffee teaches White man's words to the selected Black men. What a rope is, words for pull, words for let go, words for come here. How to tie a simple knot. How to never look a White man in the eye, how to duck the head and murmur Yassuh and Nosuh, and how to jump fast when a White man whistles or snaps his fingers. How to never react when beaten. How to say "Thank you, Suh!" for every blow, and make no show of defense or resentment.

A whistle blows. White sailors come and pair up with the Blacks, one on one. None of the White sailors looks happy about this. Jed's sailor jerks his head, and climbs up one of the rope ladders like a monkey.

This ladder is not straight up, it bellies from the ship's side railing, up to a small platform attached high on the center pole. The sailor climbs up the underneath side of the curved ladder, for some reason. Jed decides it would be safer to climb the upper side of the curve, so he starts up. He quickly realizes he's made a mistake. The ladder begins to twist on him, and when he's halfway up, it flips around completely, so he's underneath the curve, but now the ladder is all twisted. Jed's feet come off the rungs, and he's dangling by his hands only, high in the air. He hears the sailor laughing raucously, high above him. Jed strains for the ladder with his foot, but can't reach it. Only moments into this work, and about to die already? No sir! Jed quickly pulls himself up the ladder hand over hand, without using his feet at all, and in a trice he's standing beside the sailor, on the tiny platform. The sailor laughs no more. Jed wonders if the man will

try and simply push him off the platform. Well, two can play that game.

A horizontal wooden branch intersects the main vertical pole here. The sailor scampers out along a foot line dangling below this branch, to the very end. Jed carefully follows, this time imitating every move the sailor makes. The two men reach the end of the wooden branch, and wait until other pairs of Whites and Blacks come up, during which time Jed realizes that the entire assembly of ropes and wood is swaying slowly from side to side as the boat rocks below them. The motion begins to mess with his head. Jed looks up to calm his brain, and there drift the huge white clouds, so that the swaying timbers above seem to be moving in several directions at once. Vertigo sweeps over Jed, and he closes his eyes and simply holds on.

When he can open his eyes again, Jed focuses on the wooden branch right in front of him, the grain of the wood, the knots in it. This does the trick, the vertigo goes away. Now all eight pairs of men are in place along the wooden branch, and copying the Whites, the Blacks begin to help gather in the huge sail dangling below them, which has already been untied along its lower edge by other workers. The men bundle up the sail and tie it in place with short ropes spaced all along the branch. The sail flaps in the wind, and it's heavy. The foot line Jed stands on provides only poor support, and it's not even close to being steady, wobbling about like a live thing. Soon Jed forgets fear in the job to be done.

But Jed doesn't forget Zoh. Sure enough, far below, he sees the fancy Black woman Koffee Olay go talk to the Captain, who talks to a White boy, who gets some small round biscuits with something inside, and a drink in a cup, and gives it to Koffee, who takes the food to Zoh. Koffee kneels and taps Zoh on the back as she scrubs, and hands Zoh the food and water. Zoh

straightens up slowly, lifts her face from the deck, and looks Koffee right in the face. The two women peer at each other in female greeting. Zoh takes the biscuits and water from Koffee, and they study each other some more. Koffee lays an arm over Zoh's shoulders and hugs her, then departs. Zoh slowly eats one biscuit, puts the rest inside her clothes somewhere, and takes a long drink from the cup before setting it down and going back to scrubbing. Jed shudders with relief. Zoh eats. And Koffee Olay is a good person, a friend, in a place where friends are few.

So the day goes by. Generally there's a long wait between sail changes, followed by a burst of fast, arduous work in the rigging. Jed fishes in the slack time, and checks on Zoh. When the whistle blows for a sail change, Jed wishes that Zoh would look up and see him climbing up into the Heavens, just as he did in her village, when Zoh took him up the big Tree. But when Jed looks down on Zoh's small figure below him, from his perch up in the rigging, all he sees is her back, as she scrubs on hands and knees. She has no interest in anything else, it would seem.

As midday approaches, Zoh reaches the bow, where the ship narrows to a point. Trapped in this dead end, Zoh halts her scrubbing. Jed sees her still on her knees, but peering over the ship's railing at the vast Ocean ahead. She remains this way for a long time, in a reverie. Then, she slowly puts the brush aside, and begins awkwardly to climb up on the railing. Fear shoots through Jed, and he recalls their honeymoon trip, where in the middle of the night, Zoh went to the misty waterfall, climbed up on the guard railing and was about to leap, but for him catching her. Luckily Jed is not up in the rigging. He drops his tackle, runs to Zoh and takes her arm. She turns and looks at him, and her eyes show no recognition at all. Her look chills Jed through. On blind

instinct, Jed lays his hand on her stomach. Zoh lays her hand on top of his and glances at him, and there's...something there. A glimmer between them. Zoh clambers down off the railing, and takes up her scrub brush. Jed watches her for a moment, before returning to his fishing. He cannot forget her look at him...like two strangers.

At midday, the sailors eat, and the White boy brings a pot of good food for the selected Black men. The Captain says something to this boy, who gives Zoh a dish of food too, and a mug of water to go with it. Jed watches Zoh, breath suspended. She puts her scrub brush down, sits back against the railing and eats. His eyes get teary. She's gonna make it! She works and eats out in the sun and fresh air! She's coming alive again! A stone rolls away from Jed's heart.

Now all I needs is to get Ayotunde up here too, and...

It's like he's been stabbed.

The stone rolls back.

SAILOR JED

That afternoon, Jed catches an unusual fish along with the normal ones. The White boy comes to take Jed's fish to be cooked, and even this boy gives Jed a kick. Then the boy pounces on the strange fish Jed caught with a shout. He holds this fish up for the Captain, who watches as usual. The boy pretends to bite the fish. He drops the fish, his face contorts and he claws at his throat. He grabs at his stomach, runs to the rail and pretends to throw up. He falls on the deck and goes into convulsions. Finally, with one last shudder, he dies. Then he leaps up and bends forward at the waste with a grin. There's scattered laughter from the crew, the Captain smiles and the boy gives a flourish. He throws the bizarre fish overboard, grabs the rest and capers off.

So, some of the fish are poisonous! How interesting! It's a good thing Jed didn't eat any of them. It's also interesting that this White boy, a lighthearted and good-natured chap, should kick Jed as if it were a game. Obviously, Jed's persecution by the Whites is a ritual, a mindless habit.

While Jed fishes that afternoon, he hears the sound of women's voice. The air is warm and caressing. Koffee and two other Black women come out of small huts under the upper deck. They lie about in hammocks in the sunshine and talk, then pull out cards and play a game. A mangy animal that prowls the ship comes to Koffee, and she takes it on her lap, removes a comb from her hair and works over the animal's fur, old friends. This animal, similar to Ayotunde's Mist, must be a cat. All three of these women are attractively built, although none dress as well as Koffee, nor fix up their appearance like her. The sailors become interested, and there's discussion among them, apparently concerning the three

women. Jed wonders where these women fit into the crew, or if they are passengers. They don't seem to work at all.

Later Koffee makes these two women exercise with her for a long time. All the crew men are interested in this, as is Jed. Only Zoh ignores them. It would seem that Koffee is in charge of the two women, somehow.

However, Koffee also continues to check on Zoh as she scrubs. Koffee has taken to Zoh. Koffee takes water and biscuits to Zoh in mid-afternoon, then Koffee goes into a cabin and returns with a bonnet for Zoh, to keep the sun off. When Koffee gives Zoh the bonnet, Zoh smooths it with her fingers, then puts it on, and smiles at Koffee. Koffee smiles back and squats down beside Zoh for a talk. Zoh doesn't reply, of course, but she nods or shakes her head as needed, and sometimes she signs to Koffee. Encouraged, Koffee goes on for quite a while, gesturing and blabbing away. Zoh smiles and appears to listen. They're friends now, it would seem. This pleases Jed immensely.

That night, the working Black men and Zoh are sent below deck along with all the other Blacks, and the hatch is locked down on them. The eight men stick together, afraid of a vengeance attack from the other Blacks below decks, but this doesn't happen. The slaves who eat the drugged food are in a constantly drowsy state, just as the Captain planned.

The days fall into a routine. Every morning the hatch is opened at sunrise, and what Blacks are able, come up on deck. Zoh and Jed and the seven Black apprentice sailors are all given the same breakfast as the Whites. After breakfast, most of the Blacks are sent down below deck again. Jed and the other apprentices work all day setting sail as needed, or any other jobs the Whites can

come up with. When Jed isn't working for the Whites, he fishes. Often the ship's cat comes to him for small fish. In the evening, the hatch is opened again so that Blacks below deck can come up and cook their own food. Once again, Zoh and Jed and the other Black apprentices are given the same food as Whites, lacking the drug.

...a sodden mist dampens everything and steals hue, blurs time of day, confuses direction and speech. Sailors whisper and spit and make signs with their fingers and tap nervously on the woodwork. Misty shapes that mimic form and life, lashed by a sighing wind, leap and gallop and squirm and slither across the ship and vanish, a parade of ghosts, hardly glimpsed before hurtling silently over the railing and gone. Jed's skin crawls. A sailor, his face shiny with sweat, sits with eyes closed, muttering to himself and fingering a string of beads...

Every day Zoh scrubs after breakfast, but often the White sailors bring her other work to do...sewing, food preparation. Jed suspects that the White sailors are enamored of Zoh, or perhaps impressed by her perseverance in scrubbing. One sailor brings her clothes to be sewed, then instead of going back to work, he stands gaping at Zoh, as if lost in confusion. Koffee Olay visits Zoh also and brings her snacks and water, as does the Black Cook. Zoh eats everything that anyone brings her, making up for her long starvation. Her belly becomes noticeable, the baby is growing.

However, Jed's concern for Zoh is not abating, even if she's found her niche, because he's noticed a new unsettling development with her. She never looks into his eyes. Whenever Jed's near Zoh, or talking to her, or doing anything with her, she looks at his chest, not his face, if she must look at him at all. She

never smiles at him either. Her only smiles are granted to Koffee, and more of a thank you than any expression of joy.

Of course, how can Jed expect a pregnant woman on a slave ship to be joyful?

But if Zoh is accepted by the sailors, the working Black men are still abused. Especially Jed continues to be yelled at and struck by any White man any time, without cause or reason. Whenever a sailor walks by, Jed tenses all over for the blow...and he's seldom disappointed.

As Jed fishes, his mind dulled to stupor by the slow rocking of the ship, apprehension hits him without warning...he cannot recall how he got on this ship, or why. He sucks in a breath, and then of course it all comes back. How odd! *This here Sea does something to a man. Maybe it's the hugeness, or the lack of any shore, nor any bottom to it, and only air and clouds above, and all of it changing moment to moment. I feel like I'm a wave myself...breathe in, breathe out, sleep when it's dark, get up when the Sun does...keep doing that from now on. Lagos...I gotta work to bring Lagos back! It's like I been on this ship all my life.*

Maybe Zoh feels the same. Maybe she don't look me in the eye, on account of she can't recall who I am...I'm just this man who dragged her back from the edge. Maybe she kinda resents that. Maybe she had her own solution worked out, and I barged in and messed with her.

As he learns the names of ropes and sails and posts and beams, Jed also learns the stratas of White men on the ship. At the top of the heap is the Captain, alone. Below the Captain in rank, is a small group of Whites that Jed calls "Boots", because these men all wear boots, and typically stand with their hands clasped behind their backs, doing nothing, it would seem, except talk and

look important. There are only as many Boots as the fingers on one hand, more or less, and they're seldom all on deck at once, usually only two, sometimes three. Boots don't work with their hands. Their role is to take orders from the Captain, then tell the sailors what to do, and see it gets done right. The Boots mostly stay up on the raised deck with the Captain, unless they come down to the lower deck to supervise sailors, never yelling from the upper deck. There seems to be a rule that Boots cannot yell. Boots are the only men to carry guns when the Blacks are on deck. When the guns are not needed, they're kept in a locked closet on the raised deck. The Captain carries the key to this small room on a chain about his neck.

Occasionally the Boots and the Captain will get out intricate metal tools and spend a lot of time squinting into them and making marks on big pieces of white cloth and arguing and tapping the cloth emphatically with their forefingers as if to prove something. At these times only, the Boots might argue with the Captain...but politely. At other times, a Boot touches his cap and gives a little head nod if he wants to speak with the Captain.

The largest group of Whites by far are the sailors, who all go barefoot and do the sail changes and other manual work. Sailors are a noisy and colorful lot, often wearing bright patched clothes. Some sailors are missing parts, often teeth or fingers, sometimes an eye or an ear. They all have tattoos, jewelry of one sort or another, strange clothes, bizarre hair-do's, anything to be different. Some sailors are so dark, whether from the Sun or from natural color, they appear Black to Jed.

Unlike the polite Boots, sailors yell and curse at each other constantly, and often get into fights, which the Captain never stops. Typically a fight only lasts moments, then the two

combatants abruptly jump back, laugh, slap each other on the shoulder like good buddies and walk off!

In the evenings if the weather is good, between sail changes, the sailors sit about with their drink...they're dolled out one mug of some kind of booze every evening...play cards, sing, argue, whittle, mend their clothes, endlessly sharpen their pocket knives, or simply talk. Were it not for their cruelty to him, Jed could easily like the sailors. They're his kind of people...but for their racism. Some of the sailors are fond of the cat, and will pick it up and pet it, or squat to feed it some tidbit they have saved from a meal. Also they have adopted Zoh, it would seem. So there is tenderness in their hearts...except for him. Why is this?

There are also two men who do specialized work, a Cook, and a Carpenter, a jack of all trades man who repairs the woodwork, sews up the sails, and bandages injuries. These two men never go up in the rigging, but neither do they stand about talking all day like Boots. They rank midway between sailors and Boots. The Carpenter is a White man, but the Cook is a Black man, a curiosity to Jed, he does not appear to be a slave! He talks freely with every person on the ship, if the need arises, and is respected by all. With the Blacks, he speaks a version of Yoruba but with many unfamiliar phrases and words. Never once does Jed see a sailor strike the Cook. Also Jed notices that the Cook looks White men in the eye when he speaks with them, although he also smiles, but then he smiles at everybody. So it's possible to be Black and respected in the White Man's world! Jed wonders how the Cook attained this prominence...and if he could do the same. For truth be told, Jed wishes the sailors liked him.

In a class by himself is the White boy who mostly helps the Black Cook, but is also sent on errands. He's a cheerful and ragtag boy, often pulling pranks, missing one tooth already, sporting an

earring. He talks to everybody with little respect for anybody, and is often in trouble and getting yelled at, although he ignores abuse, even grinning at curses, and adroit at dodging kicks and blows. One sailor slaps the boy for some small offense, but when the sailor turns away, the boy insolently struts up behind, making faces and obscene gestures at the unsuspecting sailor, to the amusement of others.

Jed still has no notion where Koffee and her two girl friends fit in. Of everyone on board, these three women are the laziest, doing little besides laying about in their hammocks, doing each other's hair, exercising or playing cards.

...brassy streaks of gray sky turn chilly bright, bringing no warmth for the fingers, and a cold lid lays over the day, making work a burden...the Sea becomes an old hag, dull, listless and rinsed of hue...then at the end of the day, a spear of purple and rose strikes across the bottoms of the clouds...another flame spear to the other side, and green dye tints the horizon, dueling colors...

Jed rapidly gets the hang of setting sails. Within a week, he's lost his fear of the height and the sway, and he looks forward to the whistle that summons him up the ropes. He eats as much fish as he can, in addition to the White man's food given him, and his strength builds. Every sail, the timbers and main ropes have names, and he begins to learn them, plus the words for what has to be done, so he no longer need imitate a sailor, he knows what to do himself when the Boots shout out orders. But his growing skill in the rigging doesn't impress the sailors. They actually seem to abuse him more, the harder he tries to play their game.

One day Jed hears the whistle and the shouted command, and races up the rope ladder, only to find he has mistakenly climbed

the wrong pole, and everyone else is up another pole. The White sailors over on the correct pole look at Jed across the void and make what must be contemptuous remarks. There's a rope between the two poles for some purpose other than climbing, but Jed grabs it and hand over hand swings through space across to the pole he's supposed to be on. Once there, he grins at the sailors...who only stare at him and turn away. Jed is puzzled, and as always, an outsider. There seems to be nothing he can do to win the sailors over.

One of the Black apprentices falls from the rigging. After two weeks training, he's still scared stiff on the ropes, his movements jerky and clumsy. Then one day while the men struggle to change sail in a stiff wind, a corner of the heavy canvas gets away from them, flapping about and snapping like a whip, and whacks the apprentice, probably knocking him dizzy for a moment. He loses his grip and tumbles through the air. He does not scream. Due to his height in the ropes and the sway of the poles, he misses the boat entirely, landing in the water. His head bobs up. Jed looks to the White sailors, they all saw the man fall, he expects a rescue to be mounted, but no-one does anything. Jed would throw something to the man in the Sea except for being blocked way out on a branch by other men. On the deck below, the Captain puffs on his pipe and watches, imperturbable. Koffee Olay saw the man fall too, and she runs about yanking at things, apparently trying to find something loose to toss to him, but she cannot find anything except one of the scrub buckets, which she throws over the railing, but far too late, and probably wouldn't help the man anyway. Koffee Olay yells something at the Captain who stares at her without moving. The small dot of the man's head soon vanishes in the seas behind the ship.

Fishing in the hot sun, Jed feels grimy and he smells. He gets a bucket, pulls up clean sea water, takes off his clothes and washes himself. He still wears the amulet about his neck, the small carved statue of the Goddess of Beginnings, given to him by his mother. The water is salty and cold but clean. He washes out his clothes and hangs them on the rail to dry.

Someone whistles. Jed jumps, first thinking it's the signal to set sails and here he is naked, but the whistle is too soft. It's Koffee Olay, the short loudly-dressed Black woman, lying in her hammock, petting the cat and watching Jed bathe. Koffee's two women friends watch Jed also, and two sailors, working on some ropes nearby, stare at him. Jed sits down and turns his back on the ship, but his clothes are soaking wet, it'd be foolish to put them on, so he sits in bare-assed embarrassment, trying to fish and waiting for his clothes to dry.

For some odd reason as he sits, Jed recalls Ayotunde, and a sudden lump of grief in his stomach rises up into his throat and near chokes him.

...shadows cruise beneath the waves and pass under the ship, not shades of light, but the bulk of gigantic creatures, grayed and green and dimly seen, often more than one...

As Jed fishes one day, the short Black woman comes behind him and says in Yoruba, "Hi! Remember me? Koffee Olay."

Jed almost tumbles off the railing in surprise. His voice harsh with disuse, he mumbles, "Hi, Koffee Olay."

Koffee grins. "Call me Koffee. It's Jed, right?"

"Yeah. Jed." Unease floods over him, first to be talking to a woman who saw him naked, second to be talking to *any* woman

on this ship, other than his wife. Jed has no notion of Koffee's status...or reason for talking to him. And the surmises that pop up in his mind are very unsettling.

She says, "I've been watching you, even dressed. You's learning so fast, up in the ropes! It's entertaining, although it's nerve-wracking too, wondering if anyone is gonna slip and fall, like that poor man did the other day. That was horrible. All I could find to throw was the bucket, and our dear Captain refused to stop the ship. But still, I wish I could climb up in the ropes! Not to work, I wish my hammock could be strung up there. What a view you must have!"

She looks at Jed expectantly, but he just gawks, completely tongue-tied, to have this pretty woman talking to him and bouncing from the death of a fellow to swinging in hammocks. All Jed can come up with, is a picture of Koffee Olay in a hammock strung from the tops of the big poles...and him in there with her, naked.

With no warning, Jed tries to recall the last time he made love to a woman. This is even more unsettling. He works hard to breathe slow, and he wishes Koffee would go away.

Koffee looks at him with an odd smile. "Not big on conversation, are you? Anyway, the Captain says for you and your wife and the other Black workers to take lessons from me in the White language. We're gonna do that when work is slow, from now on."

Jed stutters, "Now?"

"Well, yeah. If you ain't busy. Captain's orders."

Jed glances at the Captain. Sure enough, he stares right at them. "Lemme put this fishing stuff away." But Jed recalls something that must be said, Captain or no. "Ma'am, thanks for looking out for my wife."

Koffee shrugs. "She interests me. She's the most beautiful woman I ever seen, and I seen some. No, actually, it's more than beauty she has, and I wouldn't say it's happiness, like some expecting mothers get. No, she's not happy, Jed. But I's sure you know that. You know what she feels like, to me? She feels like a clear blue Sky. Just blue, with no clouds."

Jed puts down his fishing. Koffee rounds up the other apprentices, and the Black men have a language lesson with Koffee. This happens often in the following days, and Jed soon gets over his unease and comes to look forward to the lessons. Mostly, he enjoys looking at Koffee, hearing her voice, and being near her in a situation devoid of any unsettling implications. Jed is attracted to Koffee, and he suspects that she feels the same, but he has no notion what to do with those feelings. It will help him to know the White Man's language, however.

ZOH STANDS UP

Below deck, conditions deteriorate day by day. Many Blacks down there are ill, some with infections from lying on the filthy platforms without air or sun. The moans and crying heard the first week have subsided into a worse silence. As folks weaken, they cannot make it to a honeypot to relieve themselves. Clothes have rotted into rags. Due to the drug the Whites put in their food, the Blacks have no desire to move. It takes a certain amount of strength to climb up the ladder to the upper deck when the hatch is opened, and more and more of the Blacks lack that strength. They are dying. One morning, a half dozen corpses are thrown overboard. It's Jed and the apprentice Blacks who must haul the dead bodies up, because the sailors refuse to go below decks.

One morning during the language lesson, one of the Black apprentices pokes Jed and nods off to one side.

Jed says, "What? Can't it wait?"

The Black man points across the deck. "Your woman done stood up, man."

Jed follows the man's gaze. It's Zoh. Near the bow, she stands up to her full height, with her head back proudly and her feet spread against the sway of the ship.

Now all the Black apprentices turn to look. Koffee stops lecturing. One of the men whispers, "Man, why can't all women in the world be like that one there?"

Koffee says testily, "Variety is nice, you know."

The sailors notice Zoh, and all over the ship, they pause in their work and watch. Zoh has always been on hands and knees before. Now that she's standing, it speaks. It says something is gonna happen.

There's a line stretched between Zoh's eyes and the Captain's eyes, and Zoh reels it in. She paces down the ship, to just short of the upper deck where the Captain lolls over the railing, as usual, smoking his pipe. There Zoh stops, her eyes locked with the Captain.

Nobody looks at the Captain like that...until now. He takes the pipe from his mouth and straightens up.

Still looking right at the Captain, Zoh brushes her hair to one side with an angry toss. Like a flower bending in the rain, she goes down to the deck, all the way down, and lays her ear on the hard boards. There she pauses for a long moment, her eyes closed, listening. Then, she raises herself halfway back up, looks right at the Captain again, and slowly shakes her head from side to side three times.

Like a carving, Zoh waits. The Captain looks down on her. The moment stretches long.

Abruptly the Captain gives a huff, points across the deck at Koffee, and crooks his finger for her to come. Koffee goes over and the Captain mutters to her, then Koffee comes back to the Black apprentices. "The Captain wants you men to go down below deck and tell about a third of the Blacks down there to come on up here. The Captain wants them to exercise before the meal. Then tomorrow we'll do another third, and so on, every day from now on until we get to Sugar Island next week. He wants them in good shape for the sale."

Jed and the Black men look at each other and laugh. One man says, "Miss Koffee, them folks down there ain't gonna be doin' no *exercisin'!*"

Koffee says, "And why not? It's the Captain's orders, they don't have a choice."

Jed says, "They is dying, Miss Koffee. There ain't hardly a soul down there with strength even to climb the ladder up here, much less exercise. Don't this Captain know that?"

Another man says, "Miss Koffee, you ask that Captain man where he figured them bodies was a'comin' from, that we dump over the side every mornin'."

The men laugh, but cautiously.

Koffee says nothing, but her eyes fill with tears.

There's a loud whistle. It's the Captain, his patience exhausted. Koffee goes back to him and explains, then she returns. "The Captain says, you men gotta carry 'em up here."

The Black apprentices groan as one.

The sailors open the hatch. Jed and the other apprentices go down.

Then begins a horror that strikes the hearts of even the sailors. One by one, Jed and his companions manage to lug below-deck Blacks up the ladder, by draping a body over one shoulder and climbing with the free arm. When laid on the deck, these Blacks slump down to the boards like gobs of once-human flesh. Dressed only in tatters of rotted rags, smeared with feces and dried vomit, emaciated corpses still breathing, they lie there on the boards with eyes closed against the light most of them have not seen in many days.

One of the sailors bends over the railing and pukes. A silence and a stench hangs over the ship. The Captain, his pipe gone out, stares down on what he hath wrought.

Jed and his companions run out of strength. Jed has carried up three, but on the fourth, he falls to the deck under the load, his limbs trembling like an old man. His companions are no better. Jed shakes his head when a Boot kicks him and points down the hatch.

The sailors bring a device they've rigged, a sling of sailcloth to go around a person's chest, with a rope attached to pull the person up. Using this, the apprentice Black men bring a sick person to the foot of the ladder, then use the sling and rope to lift them up to the deck. This works much better.

But the work has only begun. Gradually the deck is covered with crumpled, stinking and filthy bodies of Blacks hardly strong enough to move. Zoh, burning with indignation now, comes to Koffee Olay with her scrub bucket, gestures at the bodies on the deck, then grabs Koffee's hand and plunges it into the water in her pail. To Jed's amazement, Koffee immediately understands. Koffee also is furious now, perhaps mostly at her own failure to perceive the situation.

Koffee strides to the Captain and says in a loud voice, "Captain, we need buckets. We need warm water. We need bandages. We need a whole lot of good food, without that god-damned drug in it!"

To Jed's further amazement, the Captain apparently does what Koffee says. He issues orders, and things begin to happen. The sailors fill the iron cooking pot with sea water to heat up for washing. Buckets are found. Zoh already works on the people on the decks, stripping away their hopeless clothing and throwing it overboard. Zoh, Koffee and Koffee's two friends set in to wash the Blacks of the filth crusted on them.

Jed and three apprentices are sent below decks to clean the empty shelves where Blacks must lie. It takes quite awhile to do this. When the job is done and Jed comes up, the women have only cleaned perhaps half of the sick Blacks on deck. Zoh's exhaustion is obvious. Jed grits his teeth and does what he must. He wades through the bodies to Zoh, kneels down beside her and puts his hand on hers. Zoh looks directly at him for once, and Jed

gently takes her bucket from her, and her wash rag, and points over to where the apprentices are cooking and feeding people, a much easier job. Zoh brushes the sweat off her face, then nods very slightly. She gives Jed a fleeting smile, and he helps her to her feet.

Jed begins the terrible job of washing sick people, but inside, he's content. Zoh smiled at him.

It takes the entire rest of the day to finish with caring for the sick Blacks on deck, and then the Captain insists they must be lowered back down below decks, and helped to the shelf where they have to lie. This work falls entirely on the Black apprentices. By the time they're finished, it's dark. Jed is so tired he's hardly aware of what he's doing, when he finally collapses beside Zoh on the shelves below deck. At least the shelf is clean now.

On that first day, about half the sick Blacks were brought up on deck, washed and fed. The next day, the other half is brought up, and the whole procedure repeated. The sailors do the cooking, in between sail changes, but they refuse to help with washing the sick, cleaning up the shelving below decks, or hauling sick people up and down. This work is done solely by the seven Black apprentices, and the four Black women, Zoh, Koffee and her two friends.

Sometime during that endless day, Jed finds himself floating high up in the rigging, looking down on his body that toils on and on. It's pleasant up there. He feels none of the utter exhaustion that is the only reality for his body, far below. Jed wonders what would happen if he were to let the wind take him, and float him away, across the Sea...

But below on the deck, his woman still toils with Koffee and her two friends. So Jed goes back down, and once again gives Zoh

a break with the washing, so she can have a few moments of respite. Zoh enjoys feeding sick people. This awareness of her rises up from the darkness that is Jed's center, just as his bodily feelings rise up. Exhaustion has eroded the separation between Jed and Zoh. He and Zoh are left and right hands of one creature whose entire purpose is to help their people, that lie so close to death.

After those two terrible days, the feeble Blacks below decks are still brought up every day, half every day, to be fed, and eventually to stand and walk about and stretch themselves, but never again is it necessary to wash them, and they can feed themselves. Some of the stronger among them help with food preparation, and some can even climb the ladder unassisted.

Jed wonders if all the below-deck Blacks might have died, had Zoh not stood up to the Captain that day. There's a new intimacy between him and Zoh now, a bond as strong as their first romance, but of a different metal, not shiny but well tempered. When they sit to eat side by side, or lay on the planks at night, brushing against each other ever so lightly, this is fully satisfying to Jed, to feel that slight warm touch from Zoh that says she accepts him.

The Black Cook produces a keg of small red and orange berry-like fruits, hard and bitter. These are passed out to everyone, White and Black alike. Jed chews one. It's sour and foreign, but as the juice of it soaks into his tongue, a craving floods him, and Jed eagerly munches all of his share.

KOFFEE'S TALE

For the remainder of the voyage to Sugar Island, the daily feeding and exercising of below-deck Blacks takes up the first half of the day. During the rest of the day, Jed and the apprentices sometimes must help set sails, and every day there's the language lesson with Koffee. Jed fishes during his free time and keeps track of Zoh.

Zoh helps care for the below-deck Blacks all morning, then in afternoons she stands by the railing and stretches for a long time, looking out over the Sea. Stretches done, she'll often sit watching the waves, her spine straight as a pole, swaying gently to the motion of the ship. The sailors have rigged a place for her to sit there, with a small sail suspended above it for shade. It's then that sailors often bring her sewing to do, which occupies a good bit of her afternoons. Sometimes she'll put the sewing aside and take up her scrub bucket to scrub decks. She seems to get something she needs from this mindless task. By day's end she hangs the finished sewing up on one particular small rope, from whence it will be retrieved by its owner.

The sailors ignore Jed and Zoh for the most part, doing their own occupations. They sew, splice ropes, mend sails, curse each other, tell endless stories, play card games, throw tiny arrows at a target, and infrequently, when a Boot blows a whistle, they scamper up the ropes to set sail. The evening meal is the good time for the sailors, because they each get their mug of a powerful booze then. They all get tipsy, and usually have a rowdy game of chance that involves a lot of shouting and good-natured arguing.

Koffee and her two friends help with the care of the below-deck Blacks all morning, but they do nothing in the afternoons except lie about fanning themselves if it's hot. Sometimes they

play cards or do each other's hair or sleep in their hammocks. They sleep a lot.

Every day when the Sun is straight up, the Captain and one or two Boots haul out some strange metal tools that they peer at and sight through. Then they become involved with arguing and making marks on a big white cloth that's usually rolled up inside a tube and stored in the Captain's hut. At the end of this discussion, they talk to the sailor who apparently steers the ship using a big wheel with spokes that he turns while looking at a device attached to a short pole. Jed figures this business has to do with getting the ship across the Sea to wherever it is they are headed, for the Sea is devoid of path or sign. This is a mystery to Jed, and likely to stay that way. After this process, the Captain often orders a sail change.

Koffee interests Jed. He'd like to talk to her, but this doesn't seem smart. One day he gets his chance. While the sailors are doing a sail adjustment, one of them spies another ship, very far away but apparently overtaking them from behind, only a white patch of sail on the horizon in their wake. All the sailors, and Black men too, then have to take their turn in climbing a rope ladder to peer back at this stranger.

The Captain, on learning about the other ship, shows unusual signs of agitation. He puts his pipe away and fetches a shiny metal tube that he holds to his eye and points over the stern at the other ship for a long time. Then the Captain gives this device to the Boots on deck, and they look at the strange ship also. When they all have had a look, the Captain and the Boots argue, all of them perturbed.

Koffee ambles nonchalantly over where she can hear what's being said. After awhile, she comes back and says to her friends...with Jed listening..."The Captain can't make out this

ship coming up behind us, but it don't look good. The best that could happen is that it's simply headed the same direction we are, and will pass us and keep going. But it could be a British warship. The Captain has good reasons to fear the Brits. For one thing, we haul slaves, which irritates the Brits. For another thing, the Captain and his men mutinied and stole this ship from the British navy. They could get imprisoned or hung if that other ship is Her Majesty's navy. Or, it could be a pirate ship, which would probably be the worse for all of us. Especially since our ship has no cannons to defend ourselves with."

Pirates! Jed, listening, feels chills up his spine. Even in Lagos that word was known and feared. Since he was young, Jed heard tales of pirates, scarred and bitter men lacking any human feeling. Ships taken, the crew slaughtered or enslaved, the women raped then murdered or kept for amusement until they perished, the gutted and burned hulk abandoned to drift until it wrecked on the shore...

The Captain and the Boots order the sailors to make tiny adjustments to the sails and the course, trying to get as much speed as possible out of the ship. But when Jed goes to help at the whistle, the Captain shouts and waves him off for some reason, and likewise for the other Blacks.

So Jed is left to his own devices, while all the Whites are in a tizzy trying to get the ship to go faster. The normal routine is dismissed. This is Jed's big chance to talk to Koffee. The ship following them is very far away, and Jed sees slight indication it's gaining on them. Jed figures this chase will go on for the rest of the day and into the night. Probably the Captain is hoping to elude the other ship after dark, when he could alter course dramatically without being seen and vanish over the horizon.

Jed takes his fishing down the railing so he's close to where Koffee and her two friends sit playing cards. Once set up there, Jed says in Yoruba, just loud enough so Koffee can hear, and without looking at her at all, "So, how'd you get this way?"

Koffee looks around at him, but Jed doesn't look at her. He knows it would be a mistake to be seen talking to Koffee, or any of the women, other than Zoh.

Koffee also seems to realize the danger in their conversation. Pretending to talk to the two women, she says, "How 'bout I tell you where I been?"

One of her friends says, in passable Yoruba, "I know where you been. It's where you're gonna end up you should worry about." She grins at the other woman.

Koffee says, "I's talking to him, not you."

The other woman says, "Come on, you gonna raise or fold?"

Koffee pretends to talk to the two women but she speaks loud enough that Jed can hear. "I was born in Dakar. My Ma was Yoruba, from your part of the world. She followed some sailor to Dakar before he dumped her pregnant. She had to take up whoring for us to survive. All I remember of my childhood, is the House, the House of Solace, and the girls in it. There were other girl children there. The Mother would take on girl orphans if they looked promising. An investment in the future. I'd play with them, we had fun, in between the work. And there were always cats. And a parrot, Uncle Alphonse, that I loved. And I loved my Ma. She and me used to talk in Yoruba so nobody else could understand. That's how come I learned it, Yoruba's not common in Dakar. I got to be good at cooking, too. That's why I believe I could make a bakery work, when I get to Baltimore."

Jed bends over and scratches his foot and says to the deck, "Wasn't there no men in this House?"

Koffee laughs. "Men! Of course! There was men every night. Our House was full of men! Customers! Chiefs, we called them. So many men that after a while, it was like there was no men at all!" She laughs again. "That's funny! When I recall the House, I don't recall a single man! Only us girls! Well, there was the Hulk, our guard, but I never was sure if he was really a man. And the parrot. He's the only man that sticks in my mind. Maybe that parrot took the place of the father I never had!" Koffee laughs again. "I even follow that parrot's advice! The Mother taught the parrot to say, 'Smile! Smile!'" Koffee laughs again, and says directly to her two women friends, "You two needs to listen to that parrot, too!"

Jed likes to hear Koffee laugh, but it makes him nervous. He looks about. The sailors stand gazing back over the rail at the distant alien ship, talking in low voices or simply watching the other ship in silence. Fear hangs in the air. Nobody pays attention to Koffee, or to him.

One of the other two women has a blue bandana about her hair. She stares deadpan at Koffee. "Figures you got your smarts from some dumb bird!"

Koffee ignores this. "One night that man over there with the pipe, our Captain, comes in and asks the Mother of my House if any of the girls was interested in working on board a ship, in return for fare to Baltimore, in America. I speak up and say I might be, although Mother's not happy when I say that. I was one of Mother's best, if I do say it. Ma wasn't happy either, until I explained my scheme to her, to make money in Baltimore, then send for her to come live with me, and have that bakery she and me always dreamed of, and go straight, 'cause there ain't much future for an old whore, and my Ma deserved better'n that, and

we wasn't getting no bakery in Dakar, for all our plans and hard work and saving."

"So I done it. I took up with this here Captain, so as to get to Baltimore."

Jed says, "So you get carried to Baltimore. What does the Captain get outta taking you there?"

Blue bandana laughs. "He ain't seen the light yet. Fuckin' farmer. Ask him 'bout beans or yams."

Koffee says, a bit sheepishly, "Well, do I have to do all the work, here? I have to service the Captain, of course! We're not dense, now, are we?"

Blue bandana woman says, "The Captain, *and...*"

The other woman says, "Are we playing cards here, or what?"

Koffee says, "And the officers, of course! The ones that dress up and wash! No stinking barefoot sailors!"

Blue bandana says, "No, you don't want them stinking barefoot sailors, lemme tell you."

The other woman says, "There ain't a one of 'em that's whole. They all got parts missing. Too bad we can't re-arrange 'em like a quilt. I used to do quilts, you know. Folks bought 'em, too. Good quilts. Down stuffing. Make you sweat, they would. Pretty, too. Give 'em to your chilluns when you die."

Blue bandana woman says, "Do we really need quilts in Africa?"

Koffee says, "And I get to check 'em for sores. I's particular. I don't want no Pox! And I get two nights off each week. And my own cabin. So it ain't bad. I get to see the world this way. Not many girls can escape their fate, like I's gonna do."

Jed feels a bit dizzy and his gut is getting tight, for some reason.. "I hope your scheme works for you and your Ma. It's a high price you gotta pay."

Koffee says, "Everything worthwhile costs. The more it's worth, the more it costs. Just being alive costs. Keeping those you love alive, costs even more."

Jed says, "Yeah." He looks about cautiously, then he says, still without looking directly at any of the women, "So you other two going to Baltimore, too?"

Blue bandana woman says, "I takes it one day at a time."

The other woman says, "Then how 'bout today you play this here game."

Koffee says, "The Captain has rules as to who gets to lay these two fine women here. Each night, one sailor who has worked the hardest, in the Captain's opinion, gets one of 'em. And another sailor is chosen by that noisy game of chance they usually play every evening, with all that shouting, to get the other one. The Captain figures the women and the booze will keep the sailors happy and working hard. The sailors sure get excited 'bout it, usually, when we ain't chased by pirates."

Jed says, "What you reckon is gonna happen to me and Zoh?"

"All us above-deck Blacks is going to Baltimore. You and the other six apprentice men, and these two girls here and your woman, will be sold on the black market, if you pardon the pun, on account of it's illegal now in Baltimore to sell slaves, although that don't worry the Captain none. Me, he'll just set me on shore and bye-bye. That's what the Captain told me."

"The Cook too?"

"No, he's crew."

Zoh scrubs the deck nearby on her hands and knees. When she gets close, Zoh reaches out and touches the foot of the blue bandana woman, who says, "Hey. Why she messing with my feets?"

Zoh stands up to her full height, tosses the dirty water in her pail over the rail, and hands the empty bucket to Jed, who as usual gets the rope to lower the bucket for clean water. While he's doing this, Zoh puts her hands together and bows to the three women.

Blue bandana woman puts down her cards and elbows her friend. "Git up! Git up!" All three women get up and bow back to Zoh. It must be some kind of female ritual Jed has never seen.

Zoh gestures for the women to sit, then she gets down on her knees again, dips her rag in the bucket of clean water and takes one foot of the blue bandana woman, who sucks in her breath and jerks back. "What she doing with mah feets now?"

Jed says, "I reckon she wants to wash your feet. Don't fight it, you can't win."

"Wash mah feets?" Blue bandana woman sits, amazed.

Koffee leaps up. "Oh, what fun!" Koffee dashes to her hut and soon comes back with a hunk of yellow soap that she gives to Zoh, a large rag and a corked bottle. Using the soap, Zoh washes the woman's feet then dries with the rag.

Koffee says, "This is fragrant oil I use for my special customers. Just use a little bit, it's rare."

Zoh takes the oil, smells it and smiles, then she puts a few drops on her hands and gently rubs the woman's feet.

Blue bandana woman murmurs, "Oh my god that feels good."

Then Zoh does the other woman's feet. Blue bandana woman says, "Nobody done that since Ah was a chile."

The other woman says, "I could tell."

Zoh washes and oils Koffee's feet too, while the women watch solemnly. Then she goes back to scrubbing the deck.

Blue bandana woman murmurs, "Ah been blest. Gods have mercy on this poor nigger chile, Ah been blest."

The other woman mutters, "Probably for the last time."

The Captain toots on his whistle for Koffee to come. When Koffee gets back, she says to Jed, "Captain wants you and the apprentice Blacks to go below decks and move all the people down there to the high side of the ship. The Captain believes that'll help our speed."

Jed and the other apprentices do this, and it takes awhile. When he comes back up on deck, Jed climbs up a rope ladder a bit until he can see the pursuing ship over the raised stern deck. It's overtaking them for sure, but still a long ways back. The speeds of the two ships must be almost the same.

When Jed comes down to the deck, Koffee comes over to him without regard for caution. "Jed, the Captain can see with his telescope that the crew of that ship ain't wearing any standard outfit, nor is the ship flying any nation's colors. He feels that means it's a pirate ship. Jed, if they take us, I'll kill myself. I got oleander leaves. I got enough for my friends and Zoh too. Your woman's the most desirable woman on this ship. You know what that means, don't you, in regard to pirates? I'll tell your wife what I just told you, and if she asks for it, I'll give her the leaves. The poison takes time, so planning will be needed. Of course, there's faster ways to go."

Jed is incredulous. "You wanna give my wife *poison*?"

"Only to save her from worse, Jed! And only if she asks for it! Use your head!"

Jed stares at Koffee, so filled with tumult he can't speak. She goes off to talk with Zoh.

THE POKER GAME

The day draws to a close. Jed and the apprentices cook a meal for the Blacks below decks. The pursuing ship won't catch them this day, it only gains slowly, but persistently. The sailors haul the ship's small dinghy onto the main deck and fit it with a mast and two odd looking sails, and lash a lantern to the mast. The Captain assembles all the sailors on the lower deck, and all five of the Boots on the upper deck, and he makes a speech. Jed knows enough of the language now, from Koffee's lessons and from listening to the sailors, to piece together what the Captain says.

"Men, I'm sure we're chased by pirates. They fly no colors, and no navy would allow their crew to be dressed so sloppily. I can't imagine a merchant ship would chase us like that. They won't catch us before dark. If the wind calms when the sun goes down, we're lost. If you got any credit up there, pray that the wind holds through the night!"

The Captain gestures at the rigged dinghy. "You all know both ships been runnin' Northwest, on a tack with an East wind followin'. This here is a decoy. Tonight we'll burn one lantern on our ship until it's pitch dark. Then we'll light the lantern on the mast of the dinghy and set it adrift, and turn out the lantern on the ship. The way we got the dinghy rigged, it should run by itself straight before the wind, to the West, as a decoy. Seeing that lantern on the decoy, the pirates will believe it's our ship, turning to West to run before the wind, and they'll follow the decoy. But actually we'll turn Southwest and go on the opposite tack, sharp. We might even go faster on a tack then running before the wind. Hopefully, by the time the Sun comes up, we're over the horizon and gone."

“Once we release the decoy, our survival will depend on being unseen and unheard. Don’t make a single flame! Don’t make a single sound! Check the ship now for anything loose that might roll when we come about on the tack to the Southwest!”

The sailors all mutter and nod their heads. It seems like a plan. But Zoh, standing beside Jed, turns to him, signs fast and tugs on his arm. Jed can’t understand her, and Zoh turns away, pushes through the sailors, stands below the Captain and signs to him.

The Captain stares down at Zoh and says to a Boot, “What the hell does she want now?”

The Boot shrugs. “Got me, Sir.”

Zoh holds up both her hands. Then, she points at the dinghy with one hand, and with the other hand, she makes a wavy motion like a fish swimming over the waves. Next she points down at the deck and stamps her foot on it, and makes a long, slow, even motion through the air. The Captain stares.

A Boot says, “I got it! Sir, she’s saying the dinghy will bob up and down in the waves, so the lantern on it will bob up and down too. Whereas if the lantern was really on our ship, it wouldn’t bob up and down at all. The pirates will see the light bobbing up and down headed West, and realize right off it’s only a decoy, and that we actually have turned Southwest, most likely, to confuse ‘em and get the most headway on ‘em! They’ll be right behind us!”

At this, a murmur goes over the whole crowd. The sailors look admiringly at Zoh, their idol. One smart dame!

The Captain mutters, “Alright. So it won’t work. What do we do then, just flip a coin to decide what to do?”

Koffee comes alive, pushes forward, stands beside Zoh and says in a loud voice, “Fine! Listen, Sir! Send the decoy out! Sure it bobs up and down! The pirates see the bobbing light headed West

and figure out that it's only a decoy, and therefore, they figure the real ship will be headed Southwest, like the man said, and they'll chase us to the Southwest. But, we don't head Southwest at all! We don't turn at all! We hold the present course and run to Northwest!"

At this, there's complete silence...except a sailor laughs out one bark. Even the Captain and Boots are silent. Every man looks at his neighbor as all realize the gamble...and the stakes.

The Captain shakes his head and says to Koffee, "Poker, right?"

"Sure, poker, Sir. Life is a card game, sometimes."

The Captain looks about, at crew and Boots. "Whadda you all say? Shall we play this game? Not even try to escape at all, and rely on them pirates assumin' that we *would* try to escape? If we lose the hand...we die. All of us."

A sailor standing near Jed mutters, "Suppose them pirates is dumb as me, and can't figure none of this poker shit. We's sailin' a ship, not playin' cards! Suppose they just keeps on doin' what they's doin', holdin' to the Northwest, in which case they catch us toot sweet!"

But the Captain doesn't hear. There's a growl of nervous assent. So be it. The course is decided.

There's little sleep to be had that night for anyone. Darkness falls, and the wind does not die. But even though it's a Moonless midnight, the other ship is still clearly visible behind them. In the Heavens, the night Sky is ablaze with countless Stars, a river of glory...were it not such a problem! There's no use sending out the decoy, or changing course to escape, because both ships are clearly visible in the starlight, once eyes adjust to the dark.

Not only that, but the ship leaves a faint trail of blue fire through the Sea! Jed never noticed before, or perhaps his eyes were blinded by lanterns. Looking at the fire in the wake of the ship, Jed recalls the night he lay on the Beach at Lagos, a free man, watched the blue fire flicker in the waves and planned how to save his wife, enslaved in this very ship, offshore.

I done my best to keep Zoh safe, so far. By my ancestors, I will not let Koffee Olay give my wife poison! If worse happens, Zoh and me will jump into the Sea, and go down into that blue fire, holding each other tight...but not until it's the only way left to us!

The night drags by. Like moths to a candle, every soul is drawn to look back time and again at the pursuing ship, either by climbing a rope ladder, or by leaning way over the railing, to see around the high stern deck. Only Zoh seems uninterested, because she's asleep in her hammock.

At one point when all the Blacks are close together, a Black apprentice says, "I done heard they have big hooks on ropes that they throw across to join the two ships together. Then they come swarmin' over the rails. They'll be fighters. They'll know how to do it. They has survived a dozen fights afore this. Even if we had weapons..."

Koffee says sharply, "We don't need that talk!"

The Cook is out on deck too, since no-one needs food in the middle of the night. He says to the gathered Blacks, "This'd be a good time to pray to Allah for the forgiveness of your sins."

Jed is curious about this, besides, it passes the time. He says, "Who's Allah?"

"The one true God."

"I heard the main man up there was Olorun."

"That's the Yoruba belief, the same as I was brought up on. But I's converted to Islam, which teaches there's only One God, and

His name is Allah. You got a chance to be saved from Hell if you hear this teaching and accept Allah tonight."

Jed says, "I'm kinda tired."

The Cook nods. "I know. I spend a good bit of time talking to the sailors, and I'd intended to talk to you all, but things got out of hand here. But like I say, it ain't too late for any of you. In one moment, you can accept Allah and be saved."

An apprentice Black man mutters, "If I really been such a bad person as to deserve Hell, I can't see how that could all be forgot in one moment if I simply asked. If I owes a man for a card game I lost, there ain't no way he'd forget it if I simply asked. It don't make no sense. A man has to pay his debts."

The Cook says, "Allah's not a man. He's beyond that, and He'll forgive you."

But one by one, the Blacks wander off. It's all too much. First pirates, now Hell, all in one night.

The Cook mutters, "Not a good time."

Koffee says, "You got that right."

Blue bandana woman says, "But it was cute of you to try, honey."

Jed says, "If we survives this, I'd like to talk to you some more, Mister Cook. About Demons."

Cook says, "I'd be happy to talk to you, Mister Jed, whenever I can find the time."

Halfway through the night, everyone collapses, simply lying down flat on the deck, or sleeping sitting up against the railing. It seems a weakness to seek out a bed, even if one is only paces away. The deck looks as if the pirate slaughter had already occurred.

The other ship overtakes them as the faint gray of dawn lights up the Eastern sky and hides the Stars.

Sailors and Blacks alike are awake as doom approaches. They have slept but little. The alien ship, which has been right behind them, now changes course to pass, and finally becomes clearly visible around the high stern deck. The pirates will be abreast in moments.

Jed says to the women, "They've been taking advantage of that current behind our ship, to gain on us. Now they's gonna pass us up-wind. When they get abreast of us, their sails'll take all the wind from our sails, and we'll be becalmed and helpless. Oh, they're clever! They've done this many times afore, you can tell!"

Now the Captain unlocks the tiny room where the guns are kept, and passes out guns to the Boots. There's only enough guns for them. The Captain himself already wears a belt that hold a smaller gun in a pouch. The sailors, having neither guns nor swords, find what clubs they may. Some of them brandish their pitiful pocket knives. A tense silence prevails, broken only by the slight hum of the breeze through the rigging and the slap-slap of waves against the hulls of the two ships as they draw even with each other in a race to the finish.

Jed has himself a piece of timber that might serve as a crude club. The Sky ignites, over to the East, with streaks of fire and spears of light along the waves.

Koffee says, "At least we're gonna go out in a blaze of color!" She takes out a small canister and opens it. "It's time, girls. Way I heard it, one leaf of this oleander will kill you, and I got enough so we can all have two leaves. Don't swallow it, chew it up. We should probably do it now, 'cause it's gonna take awhile to work, and I really don't wanna see the slaughter. Who wants two leaves?"

Her hand shaking, blue bandana woman takes two leaves. The other woman shrugs and sticks out her hand. Koffee says, "It's been a pleasure knowing you all. You too, Mister Jed. Too bad we don't have a hit of whiskey to wash this down. How 'bout you, Miss Zoh?"

Zoh, wide awake now, calmly holds out her hand for the oleander leaves. Her face shines with a light beyond the dawn, and the notion flashes through Jed's head that Zoh has never been so beautiful as now...which is part of the reason why he grabs her wrist and yanks her back from Koffee's outstretched hand.

Jed gasps, "Git away from her, Koffee! This moment, you is the Demon, by the gods!"

Zoh struggles to get free of Jed's grasp, but he holds on tight. Koffee says, "Control yourself, Jed! She wants this! It's salvation I's offering her!"

Jed snarls, "I don't give a shit if you're offering her heaven! As long as I'm alive, she ain't taking no poison! You imagine I come all this way, give up my family and everything for her sake, *just to see you give her poison?*"

Zoh struggles harder, and Koffee hits at Jed. "Stop it! Stop it! You're acting like a fool! Time's wasting!"

Jed bellows, "So I's a fool, then! Get the hell away with them damn leaves!"

Zoh kicks Jed in the shin and yanks with all her might, and Jed falls down, dragging Zoh with him. He rolls on Zoh like they were wrestling. She lies under him, glaring up at him and straining with effort, but he has her arms pinned to the deck.

Koffee whacks on Jed's back, and tries to pull him off Zoh, but he ignores her. Koffee yells to her girl friends, "Help me pull him off her!"

Blue bandana woman says "I never get 'tween lovers. You can pick up bruises front and back both."

Now there's a commotion, men shouting. The pirates must be coming over the railing. The other woman abruptly screams out, "Stop fighting, you idiots! Look! Just look, for god's sake!"

Jed glances sideways, expecting to see a torrent of Demons pouring over the railing, but all he sees is their own sailors, excited over something.

Because of the tack, the pirate ship is slightly tilted toward them, and Jed can plainly see the entire deck of the alien ship...and it is deserted. There's nobody on the other ship. Not a single soul can be seen...oh, but one man, a statue, stands at the wheel, adjusting it slightly once in awhile. He's not looking at them.

A Black apprentice says, "Them pirates must be all crouched down behind the railing so we don't see 'em!"

But no. Nobody hides behind the railing with a dagger in their teeth. There's not even any sailors lolling about to set sail. They must leave their sails at one position unless the wind shifts.

They might as well all be asleep over there.

Jed lets Zoh go, and pulls her to her feet. Koffee says to her friends, "Hold on! Hold on! Don't nobody eat them leaves yet!"

Now on the other ship, a door opens on the upper deck, and a fat man ambles out, pulling up his pants as he comes. He stretches, glances up at the sails, scratches his groin and looks across the short distance at Jed's ship. He says something to the steersman, who says something back. The two men glance at the Sky, glance at the sails, exchange a few words. Then the fat man goes to the railing, leans over it, spits in the water and stares at Jed's ship, where all the sailors and Boots and Blacks are lined up

and down the railing, watching this fat man's every move like lovers.

A man near Jed mutters, "He sure don't look like no pirate captain. He ain't even missing no parts. You know, an arm or leg or eye."

Another man says, "And not a parrot anywhere."

The fat man on the other ship straightens up, touches his cap, goes back in his cabin and shuts the door.

Another Black man near Jed says, "They ain't even got no cannons!"

It's true. There are no gun ports at all down the length of the other ship.

The other ship pulls ahead, and just as Jed predicted, their own ship slows drastically as the wind is taken from their sails. In moments, they are looking at the stern of the alien ship as it pulls away from them.

One of the Black men tosses his bit of timber aside and says, "They never did fool me. I knowed it all along." He slaps hands with another man, and they laugh.

The other man says, "How come you's all wet with sweat, then?"

Koffee says, "Gimme them leaves back! Good gods, I hope nobody ate none!"

Blue bandana woman gags, clutches at her throat, staggers...then she laughs. "Just joking." She hands Koffee back the leaves. The Blacks laugh giddily at her silly gag. All the leaves safely back in the canister, Koffee puts it away.

Jed sweats himself in the cool morning air. He looks up at the Sky. Never has he seen such gorgeous colors. Jed breathes deep. The air tastes like wine. He looks at his beautiful wife to share the joy.

Tears run down Zoh's face. She's disappointed. Once more, Jed has dragged her back from the void...against her will.

SUGAR ISLAND INTERLUDE

That tired day, the “pirate” ship is not the only one they see. While the below-deck Blacks are being fed and exercised, two other ships are spotted far away, on distant courses. Birds are seen in the Sky. Clearly they are nearing a port. At mid-day, land is sighted by a man high in the rigging. Sugar Island, their destination.

The Captain examines the coast ahead with his metal tube held to his eye, then he orders course corrections. He also orders that the other half of the below-deck Blacks be brought up and exercised, and extra food be given to all. By mid-afternoon, the ship approaches what must be the port, a wide bay with buildings lining the curve of the shore and piers reaching out into the water. Two ships are tied up at the piers. Distant figures of men work to either load or unload the docked ships. Several small rowboats busy themselves in the bay. A slight pall of smoke hangs in the air, and many seabirds wheel above it all.

Their own ship, with much tedious maueuvering, anchors out in the bay. The dinghy is lowered, and two Boots, with sailors to row, paddle off towards the town. A long wait ensues. Jed examines what he can see of this place. A squalid village crouches close about the arms of the bay, as if on the verge of fleeing the shore entirely. The land beyond the village is mostly covered by a tall cane-like plant, except for areas that are being planted. The few trees Jed sees are all damaged in some way, twisted and broken off, maybe by storm winds. There are isolated constructions in the land beyond the village, buildings of unknown purpose, with a few encircling tall log walls. Very far off, hazy and blue, low hills rise towards a central peak. Forest clings to the very tops of the highest hills. The air is smoky, hot

and humid, and stinks of garbage. At various places flocks of seagulls quarrel and dart for food. A hazy Sun stares down through the smoke, broiling the land. Occasionally there's the faint and distant sound of many dogs snarling all at once over some unseen prey.

Even though many people labor on the piers, there's hardly a sound from them, but for an occasional shout. Most of these people are Blacks, with a few White men who stand about watching. The White men carry whips and many have large dogs on chains. Some carry guns.

Jed feels a chill, even though the air is hot.

The dinghy returns and the Boots confer with the Captain, but nothing happens for the rest of the day. The evening meal is fixed as usual. Jed expects to sleep deeply, exhausted from the previous night, but he's disappointed. Dreams trouble him. In one dream, he's pursued by hyenas across a barren wasteland devoid of refuge but for one tree, and when Jed climbs the tree to escape the hyenas, the tree is snapped off clean at head height. He perches on the splintered trunk, pulling his feet up from the slaver's jaws below.

The next day during the breakfast ritual, one of the ships at a pier is pulled away by rowboats. Their own ship is jockeyed into its place. It's mid-day before this is accomplished, and the hull bumps against solid wood. They have arrived.

A cleated ramp is run up from the pier to a little gate that opens in the ship railing. When this ramp is secure, the sailors and apprentice Blacks take their mid-day meal. Fat White men from the town come on board and talk to the Captain. Hands are shaken, many words spoken, the Whites smile excessively and stick out their stomachs. A Black man dressed in fancy clothes

comes along with the town Whites, but he does not smile at all, and he's not fat. He carries papers, some of which he gives to the Captain. All the townspeople leave the ship, and the unloading commences.

The sailors open the hatch. Jed and the other six apprentice Blacks help below-deck Blacks climb up the ladder, then descend the ramp to the pier. Many Blacks are terrified of the sloping ramp, and need an apprentice Black to go down with them holding their hand, so it's slow going. Cook shows up, stands by the ramp and lays his hand briefly on the shoulder of every Black as they go down the ramp, then he takes over the job of helping Blacks down the sloping ramp. Once on the pier, Blacks straggle off to the town, with the supervision and inspection of a few town White men. The fancy-dressed town Black man stands at the foot of the ramp and makes a mark on a paper for every Black unloaded from the ship.

The flow of Blacks out of the hold ceases, as usual. That was the end of the below-deck Blacks strong enough to climb the ladder. So as usual, Jed and the apprentice Blacks begin hauling up below-deck Blacks, using the sling device the sailors made for the purpose, a ritual everyone is well used to by now, but it's no less tiring. Helping Blacks down the ramp also turns out to be grueling for the man who must do it.

But the town White men are very surprised at this. They come on board and watch the unloading process, and now there are no smiles to be seen. The town Whites complain loudly to the Captain, who also has lost his smile. Angry words are exchanged. Postures are exaggerated. Gestures are dramatized. The town Whites depart in a huff, talking loudly amongst themselves.

It takes a long time to get all the below-deck Blacks out of the hold and down the ramp to the pier. Most can at least walk under

their own power once on the pier, but some must be loaded in carts and carried off bodily. During the entire unloading, the below-deck Blacks are eerily silent, a ghost parade.

Zoh, Koffee and her two friends have been watching, Zoh's face wet with tears at first, but when Cook takes over helping Blacks down the ramp, then Zoh stands at the top of the ramp and gives a quick hug to every soul who goes down .

All the Black men switch off with all the jobs, because some work is more arduous.

Jed arranges to be the man helping...actually, carrying...the last below-deck Blacks down the ramp to the pier. After he carries the last person to a waiting cart, Jed, shaking with fatigue, turns to the fancy-dressed town Black man who has been keeping tally. Jed says, using his new language words, "Say, man. What's gonna happen to them poor folks we just unloaded?"

The town man looks at Jed for a long moment, then says, "This Captain should of forced everyone to exercise more. Usually there's a few sick on every boat, but nothing like this. The Whites will allow a sick Black a week to get on their feet and out in the fields. If they don't recover in a week, they'll be thrown out."

"Th...thrown out?"

"Yes. Hauled around to the end of the peninsula and tossed into the strong current there. Or given to the dogs. Dogs need to eat, and bones are needed for the cane to grow." The town man continues marking his paper.

Jed is so appalled he cannot speak.

The man glances at Jed. "How did you escape the general malaise? I've never seen a stronger looking man than you, of any race."

"I eat a lot of fish."

"Hm. I'll remember that. Never developed the taste, myself."

"You look to be doing alright for yourself, for a Black man, without fish."

"Actually I'm Spanish. Blue eyes."

Jed stands wiping the sweat from his brow. "Spanish. Never been there. Is it pretty?"

"It's gorgeous. I dream of it."

"You gonna go back?"

The Spanish man laughs. "Go back! Who among us gets to go back? Will *you* go back?"

"I plan to. With my wife, up there."

Jed gestures up at Zoh, who is leaning on the railing looking off at the cane fields.

The Spanish man glances up at Zoh, glances again. "Dios mio! You need not go anywhere to find a dream, my friend. There she stands!"

"So what's your story?"

"My father was a diplomat. Our family was on the way to his next assignment, a consulate in South America, when a storm shipwrecked us here. I was a boy. My younger brother was lost, and my father died within the month, of disease. I was sent to the fields to chop cane, but my mother caught the eye of a White boss...Mother was very beautiful, a Spanish lady...the White man took her and my baby sister away. That's how I got this scar on my forehead. When next I saw my mother, four years later, chopping cane, she was an old woman. She had lost her beauty, her mind and my sister. When I asked my mother what happened to my sister, Mother rambled about our old life in Spain...opera, vacations in Madrid and Barcelona...so on." The Spanish man looks far off, lost in memory.

"Did you ever find your sister?"

The man sighs. "No. I'm not free here. When I get the chance I ask after a girl, perhaps ten or eleven, with vaguely African looks except for blue eyes. I've never had a clue, but I have this strong hunch that Maria is still alive on the Island somewhere. If only I could find my sister, I'd take her and my Mother back to Spain, and perhaps Mother would recover."

"How'd you get out of the fields?"

"I'm conversant in every language that shows up in port. I translate. They need me. That helped me move up and get Mother a town job. I'll stay here while Mother lives, then I'll escape back to Spain, I suppose, and marry, with or without Maria." The man laughs bitterly. "Mother believes she now lives in her own hacienda on the Mediterranean. In the house where she lives here in town, she orders the people about in Spanish, like servants. They ignore her. She's happy! Happy, I tell you! Every time I visit, she asks if the alterations on her ball gown are finished yet, because the season will open soon. I always tell her the seamstress asked for another month. Then she shakes her head, and she always says how things are not the way they used to be when she was a young lady, and she doesn't know what the world is coming to, and so on. Then she asks how the shipping business is doing, and I'm supposed to make some joke about it, like, *oh, we're still afloat!*, so that Mother can throw back her head and laugh her lovely...her lovely..." The Spanish man stops and looks away.

He continues, "Next in my visit, after the joke, then Mother says that her husband's ship...my father, that is...should arrive any day. I invariably agree. Then she asks if I want tea. There is no tea for the hot water she offers me, but she always asks, and I always decline."

Fat White men, talking loudly, come stamping down the pier. One White man snatches the paper from the Spanish man, glares at it and waves it in the air, blustering to his friends. All of the Whites thump up the ramp to the ship. Jed hopes the ramp will collapse, but it holds. Jed nods to the Spanish man, wishes him good luck, and follows the Whites back on board.

The White men from town are arguing with the Captain and the Boots on the upper deck. Cook serves a light meal for the sailors, the tired apprentice Black men, and the four Black women. The fat White men leave. The Captain and Boots do not eat. They stand about on the upper deck talking in subdued voices. Finally they seem to reach some decision, because the Boots all take their meal. The Captain calls Koffee over and talks to her. When Koffee returns her face is shocked. All the Blacks huddle around to hear the news.

Koffee says, "Those men from town hardly gave the Captain but a small piece of the money he expected, not enough to buy a cargo for Baltimore and provisions also." She licks her lips, and blurts out, "The Captain is gonna sell all you Black men but Jed to the Whites here. And he's gonna sell you girls too. He'll keep me on account of I'm not a slave, and he'll keep Zoh 'cause she's a prize and will bring a lot in Baltimore, as will Jed. The Captain intends to sell both Jed and Zoh as slaves, in Baltimore...but not necessarily together. Jed...Zoh...you might be sold separately. You gotta get ready for that."

There's a stunned silence. Blue bandana woman lets out a low moan. One of the Black men yells out in anger.

Koffee whispers, "There ain't nothing we can do. Nothing. Here, the Whites is the gods...and there ain't none higher."

Nothing more can be done that day. Jed has a sleep troubled by dreams of people crying out in a land of ash and eternal night. The next morning after breakfast, which goes quickly since there are no slaves to feed, the work of loading begins. The Captain and two Boots go off to town, probably to negotiate a cargo. The sailors begin rigging a contraption to lift heavy weights from the pier, up in the air then down in the ship's hold. Jed and the other Black apprentice men are sent below deck to dismantle the huge shelves where the slaves lived for the voyage from Africa. This is hot, hard work, but the men open all the gun ports to get fresh air and light, which helps. The men are distraught over their impending sale to the Sugar Island Whites, and there is little cheer.

The Captain and the Boots return from town, and soon hogsheads begin to arrive on the pier beside the ship, in preparation for loading. Jed watches when he can, through the gun ports. Judging by the number of men needed on the piers to move them around, these hogsheads are heavy. Jed has to wonder how they'll be lifted on board the ship. Also he's struck by how quietly the Blacks on the pier work. There's not a song, not a word, only an occasional yell from Whites overseeing the operation.

A skinny fellow working on the pier falls to his knees, then down to hands and knees, apparently overcome by heat, fatigue or perhaps sickness. A White supervisor comes over, yells and lashes this man with a short whip. The skinny fellow tries to stand, holding on to a post, but apparently faints dead away, because he topples right off the pier into the water...and goes under. The White man looks over the edge, spits then walks away.

Jed dashes up the ladder to deck, intending to drag the skinny man out of the water somehow, but a Boot blocks his way down the ramp. The Boot says, "Where the hell you think you're going, Mister?"

Jed babbles, "A man down there fell in. I's gonna help him out."

The Boot glances down at the pier. "I'll handle it. You get your ass back to work."

Relieved, Jed goes back down in the hold, but when he looks out the gun port to see if the skinny man is saved, the pier is deserted.

By the time the shelving is dismantled and stacked, it's time for mid-day meal. After the meal, loading of the hogsheads begins. The sailors will handle lifting the heavy barrels from the pier and lowering them down into the hold, where the waiting Black apprentices will roll them into place and secure them. Jed and two of his friends sit on the edge of the hatch to see how the sailors are going to accomplish this difficult feat.

The sailors have rigged up a web of ropes and the largest branch from the main sail pole. This branch can now swing out like an arm, past the side of the ship and over the pier. A pulley suspended from the very tip of this branch carries a thick hawser, one end of which thus dangles down to the pier. The other end of this hawser passes through a second low pulley, then is coiled about a large iron spool with six removeable handles, a tool Jed hears called a capstan. He has seen this capstan used just the other day to lift up the heavy ship's anchor, by six men, one on each handle, walking in a circle around the capstan while pushing on the handles. A clever ratchet device locks the capstan at any

particular position, so as to restrain a heavy load until released. Jed is impressed.

The first hogshead is attached to the hawser. Six sailors walk around the capstan and wind in the hawser. The hogshead rises grandly into the air, high above the pier, much higher than is really necessary to clear the ship railing, Jed guesses. A bit of over-enthusiasm is evident. The ratchet device on the capstan locks the hogshead at this height, and the six sailors relax and let go of the handles.

Now the purpose of a second rope attached to the hogshead becomes clear. By pulling on it in a sideways direction, two sailors make the entire rig pivot about, so that the hogshead follows an arc through the air, an arc that will pass over the hatch. How awesome it's elegant motion! Everyone cheers. The sailors pulling the hogshead sideways grin and redouble their efforts. The hogshead picks up speed.

Too much speed! Too fast! Jed's breath catches. A problem becomes evident. There's a rope to set the thing in motion, but no rope to slow it down.

Like the finger of fate, the swinging hogshead passes unrestrained right on over the open hatch, right on around and whacks into one of the big poles that holds up the sails. The entire ship trembles in its bones. The big pole, as thick as Jed's chest, is undamaged, but not so the hogshead. A stave breaks open from the blow, and a dark liquid pours out in a torrent.

The branch holding the hogshead up, following its own fate, now rebounds in the opposite direction, and pulls the hogshead with it. The hogshead goes swinging randomly back and forth above the deck, in a complex waltz with the branch that holds it, showering dark liquid down like rain as it goes. In a trice, the dark fluid has drenched much of the ship's deck and any sailor in

the way. The Captain bellows. Boots come running and shouting. Some sailors grab various ropes, trying to stop the careening barrel, other sailors scramble to get out from under it. The deck is instantly slippery with black slime, and now sailors slip and fall into the goo. A running Boot loses his footing and goes skittering on his back across the deck, knocking two sailors off their feet, all of them tumbling in a slimy heap.

Jed and his friends, sitting on the hatch edge and watching in disbelief, are abruptly and rudely showered with falling goo. Spluttering and cursing, the Black men jump down to the gun deck, where they study each other, and then as one man, they burst into laughter.

One Black man licks his slimy hand. "It's sweet, man!" So this is molasses!

Another Black remarks, "At least on us it looks natural."

A third Black grabs Jed's arm and licks it. "You sweet thang, you! What you doing after work?"

The men double up with laughter.

Jed climbs up and looks out of the hatch to see what happens now. The ruined and depleted barrel comes to a halt, still dribbling, high in the air. A silence falls, but for the smothered laughter of Koffee and the two harlots, standing well out of the chaos. The Captain begins to yell at the Boots. The Boots in turn yell at the sailors, who yell at each other. Now the Captain yells at Koffee, who stifles her laughter, lifts her dress fastidiously above the flood and comes tiptoeing her way to the hatch.

Koffee calls down the hatch, "Come on up here, Jed, all you men. Stop lollygagging down there."

Jed and the Black men come up on deck, trying to step carefully. It's slippery. Koffee says, "Mister Jed, you gotta do something 'bout your hair. We really cannot condone such

disarrainment." She laughs. "You men is to get some buckets and rags and clean up this mess."

Jed points up at the mangled barrel hanging above them all. "You might mention to the Captain that we ain't seen the last of the damage, if pieces of that there barrel falls on somebody."

Koffee shades her eyes and looks up at the barrel. "Yeah, that's dangerous..."

But looking up was a mistake. Koffee's foot slips, she screams and tries to get a footing. Jed lunges for her, but his own foot goes out from under him. Jed and Koffee go kicking and windmilling together like some demented dance...then they both go down in the goo, *splat...thump!* Koffee on her back, Jed sprawled on top of her.

Koffee, lying in a pool of molasses, stares up at Jed. "Mister Jed...you gotta clean out your nose, if we's to mess around. I got my standards." Then she's lost in laughter. Jed cautiously stands up and pulls Koffee halfway up, but their slimy hands slip and she sits back down in it. Koffee's no help, she sits there in the goo trying to shake it off her hands and laughing.

"Mister Jed...it only gets worse! No, no, please don't help me no more..."

Koffee glances up at Jed, her face shining with the fun of it...and Jed loves her.

The Black men cast about for buckets and rags. Koffee, still laughing, crawls on her hands and knees through the molasses to a part of the deck still clean, where she can get to her feet. Jed watches Koffee go and tries to make sense of what he's feeling. His beautiful wife Zoh has her own bucket and she's already dabbing at the edges of the flood.

The sailors turn out to be good at dealing with molasses. They throw buckets of water on the deck and use their bare feet to skate about and mix the molasses into a dark soup that runs into the Sea through holes all along the base of the railing. In a surprisingly short time, the molasses is gone, and the chagrined sailors, eager to prove their competence, resume lifting hogsheads off the pier, but very carefully this time, and lowering them one by one down through the hatch to the gun deck. There, the Black men roll the barrels into rows and turn them up on end for stability. The work goes well, and by the end of the day, there are three rows of barrels stashed away down in the hold.

That night, as Jed lies on his pallet, slipping into sleep, he realizes that the first three rows of barrels are packed wrong. The men began every row at the right hand side of the gun deck, which left a space about a half barrel wide at the left hand side of every row. It would be far better to begin rows alternately at the right side and left side of the space, for stability. Jed resolves to fix this problem first thing in the morning, by shifting the entire second row tight to the left side of the ship, before the men start work. He's pretty sure he can do this from on top of the barrels, by walking each barrel over a bit, without too much difficulty.

As soon as men wake up in the gray light of dawn, Jed gets some of the Black men to help him open the hatch, explaining he needs to fix something. Cook serves breakfast. Jed gets his bowl of porridge, and his water jug, but rather than sit to eat with the others, he climbs awkwardly down the ladder, intending to gulp food in between juggling the barrels on the second row into their proper position. He really wants to get the job done before more hogsheads come down to be stacked.

It's darker than he figured on the gun deck, because the Sun is not strong yet, and halfway down the ladder, Jed wonders if he'll need a lantern to work the barrels...and it's then he sees something move where nothing should move. In the gloom back where the hogsheads are lined up, a darting shape goes silently and quickly into the space between the hogsheads and the left side of the ship, and vanishes.

Prickles go up and down Jed's spine. Good gods, do they have panthers on this Island? It never occurred to him to ask. A panther could leap from the pier in through the open gun ports with no trouble at all!

Jed grits his teeth. Well then, if it's a panther, it can leap right back out again! He sets his breakfast down on a barrel and calls out, "Hey! Anybody there?"

Silence.

His heart hammering away, Jed walks as quietly as he can towards the gap in the barrels. Then he hears a sound. It's a frightened creature breathing...panting actually...and trying to keep quiet, and nearly choking as a result. Something's clearly alive back in that hole.

Jed peers around the end barrel. There it is! A heap of what looks to be rags, that wasn't there yesterday! Way at the back! And...good gods amighty...two dirty little feet, sticking out of the rags, but trying in vain to pull themselves in and hide!

Girl's feet. Jed's sure of it, even in the dim light. There's a girl hiding behind the barrels!

Jed calls low, "Hey, girl. Don't be scared! I ain't gonna hurt you! Who the heck are you, anyhow?"

For an answer, the girl throws back the rags and leaps to her feet in a low crouch, ready to pounce, bite, kick and scratch. By the gods, she might as well be a panther! She snarls at Jed, and

claws at him. Jed steps back in spite of himself, and puts up his hands. "Hey! Hey! You ain't gotta..."

Jed gets an inspiration. He backs up, keeping an eye on the girl, and gets his breakfast bowl and water jug. Then he goes back to the girl, sets the bowl and jug on the deck and cautiously pushes it to her, ready to leap backward should she attack.

The girl glances at the bowl, glances again...and her whole face changes. She must realize that Jed's gonna help her! She sags down, the tension goes out of her. She puts both her hands together and gives a quick little bow to Jed, then she stretches out a shaky hand, grabs the bowl and devours the food. She was starving.

Jed says, "Hey now! Slow down or you'll get sick!"

The girl ignores him. When the bowl's empty, she snatches up the water jug and upends it, water running down her chin. Then she sits back, wipes her mouth and stares at Jed.

What now? Jed contemplates the situation. If he shifts the second row of barrels to the left as he planned, the girl's hiding space will nearly vanish. She probably wouldn't be able to lie down. Turn her over to the Whites? Unthinkable. Hide her in some other part of the ship? But the gun deck is the only place the sailors won't go, because they believe it's haunted by the ghosts of dead Blacks. However, as soon as the light comes up, the other Black men will spy the girl in her hiding space as it is, and Jed doesn't want this to happen, for some reason.

The only solution is to shift the *third* row of hogsheads to the left, then the fourth row to the right, and so on. This'll stabilize most of the barrels and still leave space for the girl to lie down, yet keep anyone from seeing her, so long as she doesn't stand up. She could still get out by climbing over the top of the barrels,

should she wish. And there'll be an open gun port in her hiding space for light, view and air.

Using signs, Jed explains to the girl what he intends, and he's surprised how quickly she grasps it. Clearly she's not only spunky but smart. Jed gets to work, and in no time the third row is shifted to the left, and the girl is hidden from sight.

The other Black men come down to the gun deck, and soon the sailors lower more hogsheads and the loading continues, but all morning Jed worries about the girl. When work stops for mid-day meal, he has a plan to feed her, at least. Up on deck, Jed gets his trusty pack that he brought from home. Usually the Black men sit in a group by themselves, as do the sailors, and Jed sits with the four women in this order...Jed, Zoh, Koffee, and Koffee's two friends. Sometimes the Cook will join them, but usually he must work. This arrangement makes it possible to talk to Koffee in some privacy.

While eating, without looking at any of the women, Jed says, "I's gonna say something odd, but don't make any sudden move or pull a face. There's a young girl hiding down on the gun deck."

Koffee is amazingly cool. She says quietly, "What does she need?"

Jed says softly, never once glancing at Koffee, "Take my pack here to Cook, tell him what's up and ask him to fill the pack with food and water, but keep it quiet. You could put in a blanket if you can spare one."

Koffee immediately takes the pack and her bowl and goes to see the Cook, as if getting seconds for herself. Zoh glances at Jed and makes her sign for sleep, joined hands against her cheek, then she goes into Koffee's cabin and returns casually carrying a folded blanket.

Koffee is soon back with the pack. Zoh turns away from the sailors and slips the blanket in. Just in time, because the Captain blows his whistle for everyone to go back to work. Jed makes a show of standing up, stretching, yawning, then throwing the pack over his shoulder, as if it were something he needs for work. The pack is heavy! Good for Cook! Jed goes down in the gun deck with the other Blacks.

But now, how to get the pack to the girl, who Jed hopes still hides behind the barrels? The solution to this comes in an unexpected way. Only a few hogsheads have come down from above when there's a commotion out on the pier, a lot of shouting, and no more hogsheads come down. The other Black men go to the gun ports and lean out to see what's going on. Jed sees his chance. He grabs his pack, clambers overtop the rows of hogsheads and peers down into the girl's hiding place. She's there, curled up on the deck, but she looks up at him in alarm. Jed drops the pack at her feet, then makes signs as if emptying something, then he pats the top of the hogshead, hoping she understands to give back the pack.

Jed quickly crawls back to the open area and looks out a gun port himself. On the pier, several White men cluster about a sailor lying flat, and a White man from town kneels over him. The sailor must be hurt. He's lifted up and put in a cart, which trundles off to town.

Soon the barrels are coming in again. That afternoon, the men find their rhythm. Jed feels like the girl's situation is workable, and he forgets everything in the work, the play of his muscles, the coordinated shoves and pulls that roll the heavy barrels into place with a rumble and thunk. The men begin to sing, cautiously at first, then louder. In between barrels, they sing on and clap their hands. They're baptised in sweat and song.

The barrels stop coming. Jed yells up to the deck, "Hey, up there, what's the problem? We going too fast for you?" Jed can't believe he's yelling at sailors. His blood is hot and he don't care. The other Blacks grin and slap hands. You tell 'em, man! Lazy Whites!

A sailor leans over, spits down on them and says, "Shut your fuckin' mouth, nigger. They's all loaded. Now y'all can go to hell."

The seven Blacks climb up on deck, and Jed arranges to be last up the ladder, so he can run over and retrieve his empty pack, which the girl has set up on the barrels just like he signed her to do. Smart girl!

Up on deck, something odd is going on. The sailors don't seem at all pleased to have the ship loaded. They're talking amongst themselves with angry glances at the Black men, much spitting over the railing, hitching up of trousers and gesturing.

Koffee comes over to the Black men and says in Yoruba, "We got a nasty situation. The sailor that got hurt has died, and believe it or not, the sailors blame you Blacks! That's a sailor for you. They claim you all put the evil eye on the wounded man, or voodooed him or something, who knows how a sailor's mind works, assuming it works at all. They claim that you all sang to celebrate your spell working."

The Blacks glance at one another, incredulous.

Koffee goes on, "The Captain wants all of you men but for Jed to get ready to head out for town. The party's over."

So as the Sun dips, all the working Black men that were kept behind to load the ship are put ashore to be sold to Sugar Island Whites, except Jed. Jed and his friends shake hands, and he wishes the men luck, although it's clear that luck is on short

supply on this island. Jed is sorry to see the men depart. He's become fond of them all, and it's certain he'll never see them again. He hurts in his chest, as the last of the men goes down the ramp.

Jed's very much aware that he's now the only Black man on board a ship with a crew that hates Blacks...except for the Black Cook, and Cook is part of the crew. It's a lonely and nervous feeling Jed has in him as dusk falls.

At the evening meal, the Captain gives an extra portion of booze to the sailors, along with an admonition to enjoy it while they may because he didn't have enough money to buy booze for the voyage to Baltimore. Koffee, helping to serve the meal, murmurs to Jed, "The sailors are probably gonna get drunk. They're in a terrible mood. They know they'll lose their harlots, and now their booze after tonight, and one of them was killed in the loading. It'd be a good idea for you to be somewhere else this evening, Jed."

Jed says, "I should ask for some boards and nails to steady the final row of hogsheads so they don't tip, and I could take food down for the girl."

Koffee says, "Fine. I'll explain to the Captain and then ask Cook to fill your pack again for the girl."

Soon the Carpenter comes to Jed with a hammer and a sack of nails. He asks Jed if he needs help, but Jed says no. Jed sure don't want the Carpenter to see the girl.

Jed says, "What about some boards?"

The Carpenter says, "You mighta noticed there's a ladder from the gun deck that goes on down inside the ship. That goes down to the bilge, at the ship's bottom. That's where I store my wood. There's a trap door you gotta latch back, and you'll need a lantern, it's pitch dark. I believe there's some planks in there you

can use. Or if rope would work better, I got rope up top here. Come find me in my palace back next to the galley, if you need anything."

Jed says, "Thanks, Sir. I'll be alright."

The Carpenter says, "Yeah, I figured. Listen, Boy, lemme give you a word. Watch out for them sailors! See, when God got done creating, he had little pieces of the Devil and little pieces of the Angels left over, not enough of either to make a decent critter, so he crammed the scraps into a wart hog's hide, sewed it up, called it a Sailor and let it loose on the world. There's times a sailor is kind as Jesus, they can make you plumb cry with hope for mankind. Other times, they can delight in pure savagery, and make you despair of claiming to be part of the animal kingdom, even. Just keep your wits about you and your eyes down and your mouth closed, that's all I'm saying. We'll be at Baltimore soon...or, the way this ship is run, in Davy Jones Locker!" He laughs.

Jed says, "Davy Jones Locker?"

The Carpenter winks. "The bottom of the Sea."

Jed takes the pack of food from Koffee, a lantern, the hammer and nails, and climbs down to the gun deck. He gives the food to the girl and warns her with signs that he has to make noise hammering. She gives him the same little bow of thanks for the food and eats. Taking the lantern, Jed climbs down the ladder to the bilge. He had no notion the ship went down so far. At the bottom he opens and latches the trapdoor. Just beneath appears to be a dirt floor, but when Jed steps on it, to his great surprise he goes right through a layer of scum and up to his thighs in water! He has to laugh. So this bilge thing is kept full of water! How very odd! Jed has to wonder what use all that water serves.

Jed's lantern picks out a good bit of floating wood, including some planks, which he wades over to and retrieves. It's easy to float these planks over to the ladder. Perhaps that's why they're stored in water! Oh, these Whites are so clever! Jed carries what he needs back up to the gun deck, and there he braces the final row of hogsheads so they cannot tip, which takes longer than he figured it would. While doing this, it occurs to Jed to try the few phrases of the Igbo language he knows on the girl, which he does when the bracing is finished. She does not respond, so he sits with her for awhile in silence, for company. Then he says goodnight to her with signs.

When Jed gets back up on deck, it's late at night, and the stars are out. Zoh's asleep in her hammock. Even though there's obviously no need for a sail change, many of the sailors are asleep on the open deck, because there's only room for about half of them to sleep in their own deck below the gun deck, and besides, it's probably hot down there since that deck has no open gun ports. For some reason there's lantern light inside the cabin belonging to Koffee's two women friends. There's no Boot on watch nor steersman since they are in port. However, with all the sleeping sailors lying about, there's little real privacy on deck.

Koffee Olay however is leaning over the railing, staring over the land. She saved a small mug of the same booze the sailors got, for Jed. She has a mug herself. A Moon floats over Sugar Island, looking down in imagined dismay. The air is as smokey and warm as a strumpet's kiss. In the soft dark, dreams...or nightmares...could take form and walk about.

Koffee murmurs to Jed, "We can risk talking for a bit if you stay far away from me."

Jed glances at the sleeping bodies all about, like the aftermath of a battle. He sighs. "Gotcha."

"What a day. How's the girl?"

"She's okay for now."

"Has you talked with her much?"

"I ain't spoke one word to her that she understands."

"Is she Black?"

"In the poor light, I ain't sure."

"How old, you reckon?"

"She might reach my shoulder, but she's only a chile."

"Old enough to wanna get off this island."

"Who wouldn't?"

The booze, the soft moonlight, the warm air, Jed's aching need and Koffee's presence...he can smell her...all sets Jed on fire. Koffee's cabin...and her bed...is only a few paces away in the secret and seductive night.

To take his mind off what cannot be, Jed says, "Your friends is up late."

Koffee laughs low. "They'll be busy all night. Two sailors is in there with 'em. The sailors was told the girls'll be sold tomorrow, so they's making up for the prospect of a long dry trip to Baltimore. That's why we gotta be careful. When those two get done, they's to come out and wake up the next batch."

Jed's horrified...and other feelings too difficult to sort out.

Then, so distant he can barely make it out, Jed hears a tune being played. It's a sad and plaintive melody someone is sharing with the night, an invocation meant to reach across a Sea to a far-off home. The tears start in Jed's eyes. But almost immediately, from the same location as the music, there are angry shouts, the snarl of a dog and the tune is silenced. So these Whites don't even allow music!

Little waves slap at the hull of the ship. A sailor on the deck grunts and mumbles in his sleep. In the women's cabin, a man calls out sharp, for his *mother* for god's sake...

Koffee says, "This is dangerous, I want you to go away in a moment, but Jed, I gotta tell you what I saw. While you was down there bracing up, Zoh scrubbed the deck for awhile. She needs that to sleep good, I believe. Them sailors was all cursing and drinking their booze and being sailors, but for two of 'em. Two sailors came over to Zoh as she scrubbed, Jed, and got down on their knees before her. She musta understood what they wanted, 'cause she stood up. Both sailors took something on a thin chain from about their necks, held it between their palms, closed their eyes and mumbled words. Zoh, she laid one hand on each man's head for the longest time...and then, Jed, she bent down and kissed 'em each on the forehead. Then she pulled 'em up to their feet. They all just stood there looking at each other...then the sailors went away."

Jed, impelled by a clenching in his stomach he cannot deny, turns away, he don't wanna hear no more, he don't wanna know no more. But Koffee won't stop pestering him, she grabs his wrist. "She's holy, Jed. Your wife is holy. Any fool can see it, feel it. Can you?"

Out of his frustration and many other feelings, Jed snaps, "How the fuck is that your business?" He shakes off Koffee's hand and goes to get his lonely pallet and catch some sleep.

FAREWELL TO SUGAR ISLAND

The next morning, as soon as breakfast is out of the way, the Captain orders that Koffee's two women friends, both reeling with fatigue and one with an eye near swollen closed, be sent off to town, to complete his trade with the Sugar Island Whites. Koffee, Zoh, Cook and Jed all hug the women and wish them well, although obviously this wish has little hope of coming true. As soon as the two women are gone, the ramp is pulled away, the town Whites order the ship cast off from the pier, and two rowbots manned with Blacks come to tug the ship out into the open bay where they can set sail and depart for Baltimore.

Jed, under pretense of forgetting a tool below decks, manages to get food to the girl still hiding behind the hogsheads, before the sailors slam the hatch closed and snug it down tight, as it usually must be, on the ocean, in case of a sudden storm. It takes awhile to get the ship clear and catch a breeze to tack away from that place. Meanwhile, Koffee arranges for Zoh to move into the cabin vacated by her two friends. Koffee and Zoh set in to clean the place up from its previous occupation and find Zoh decent bedding.

There are two beds in this cabin. Jed peers in the door where Zoh and Koffee are cleaning. Koffee stands up and sighs. "Mister Jed, I know what you want. You see that extra bed and it's calling to you. I know you ain't real fond of me at present, but I gotta say this. It won't do you no good a'tall to move in here with your wife, even if the Captain says you can. You in here would irritate them sailors even more. Try and be patient. The trip to Baltimore is only supposed to take 'bout two weeks, if the weather holds."

Jed stares at Koffee. She has dirt smeared on her cheek. Her bones are really fine. Hell, she's fine all over. He could cuss and

stomp off, but it's worn out. He says, "You's right, Miss Koffee. That's wise. By the way, I apologize for my nasty words to you last night."

Koffee and Zoh both glance at Jed in surprise. Jed nods to them both and goes fishing, since the sailors don't seem to want him to help set sail.

The ship clears the tepid bay, and the smoky foul air of Sugar Island blows away in a fresh salty breeze off the Sea. Jed takes his favorite seat at the railing, breathes deep, baits a hook, drops his line and settles into position with a sigh. He looks ahead. No sign of Baltimore yet! How far is it anyhow? Much too far to be fighting with Koffee, his best ally on this boat. Jed feels good that he made peace with her. He gazes without seeing and lets his mind shut down while his fingers sense the line on their own. Relax...

The girl. Almost under his feet, a lost child huddles alone in a strange ship, with no notion where she's being taken. No company, no-one to talk to, nothing to do but wait...for two weeks?

Enough to drive a girl crazy, a girl too young to be hardened yet to isolation. Nearly as bad as the voyage from Africa.

The ship gives its first long, slow roll from an ocean swell. Like cold water, up from Jed's deeper mind comes the realization of the mistake he made. When he stabilized the hogsheads on the gun deck, it never occurred to him to stabilize the two hogsheads right next to where the girl lies in hiding. If the ship rolls, those monstrous barrels could slide and crush her...just as the sailor was crushed on the pier, while loading.

This realization is so stunning that Jed grabs the railing with dizziness, and he goes cold from head to toe. The girl might die in the very next moment!

Jed quickly snubs off his line and lurches to the door of the cabin where Koffee and Zoh work. Stumbling over his words, he explains that the girl is in danger. All three of them ponder. Koffee says, "I was just now recalling her. Down there all alone...and I forgot the hatch would be battened, now that we're afloat. How you gonna feed her, Jed?"

"She won't need no food if she's dead!"

"Calm down, now. Let's put our heads to this."

Zoh holds up one finger, her sign for having a suggestion. She makes the talk-talk sign, then points up at the ceiling, where the Captain and Boots must be, above. She shrugs and spreads her hands wide.

Jed says, "You's saying to *tell the Captain?*"

Zoh nods and shrugs again.

Koffee snaps her fingers. "Of course! She's right, Jed! Tell the Captain! He's not dumb. He'll be glad to have one more slave to sell in Baltimore! He'll want to keep her healthy! Why, maybe the three of you could be sold as one family!"

Jed shakes his head...but it does sound good, the way Koffee tells it. One family! They could play cards after work...

And that's what they do. The three of them go out on deck and look up at the Captain, who as usual has taken his pose, leaning on the upper railing, smoking his pipe and watching. Jed, with Koffee's help, explains in his fumbling English that he found a girl on board while loading barrels.

The Captain stares at Jed, then his eyes go crossed as he stares at his pipe, which is not smoking. The Captain taps his pipe on the railing. Ashes fall down on the three Blacks below. Holding his pipe, the Captain says, "Coal." The cabin boy, who had been feeding the cat, runs off. The Captain meticulously fills his pipe from a pouch. The cabin boy returns carrying a metal ladle. The

Captain delicately takes a coal off the ladle with his bare fingers, balances it on his pipe, and puffs. Soon he's wreathed in clouds of smoke. He flicks the coal onto the deck and squashes it with his foot. The Captain says, "Get her up here and let's have a look." He turns his head slightly, glances at a Boot and says, "Open the hatch."

The Boot speaks to sailors, who lift the heavy hatch off. Jed goes down below, and crawls over the tops of barrels to where the girl lies in her cubby. She glances up at him, expecting food, but he smiles, holds out his hand and gestures for her to come. Surprised, she jumps up, agile even after lying so long, and trustingly follows him over the barrels and up the ladder.

When Jed brings the girl up on deck, every eye is on her. The girl freezes in alarm. Jed looks at her too...and his breath catches. It's the very first time Jed has seen the girl in daylight. She comes about to his shoulder as he guessed, and she's as skinny as a stick...but her face is all her own. She has a lean and brilliant look, the look of a taut and very new soul, and her eyes are as blue and vibrant as the Sky when the wind wipes away all clouds...and right now, her eyes are scared.

The girl fears Jed tricked her. He squeezes her hand harder, nods and smiles, and she smiles back shakily, glancing at the sailors, ready to bolt and run...where? Over the railing? Up the rigging?

Seeing her blue eyes and her winsome brown face, Jed now knows who this girl is, where she came from, what language she speaks and even her name. But he says nothing. Fix her fear first, introductions later.

Jed leads the girl toward the Captain, but he needs to get Koffee and Zoh out here fast, so he looks at them desperately. They get the hint, and come quickly...but Koffee is too loud and

gushes words the poor girl cannot understand. It's Zoh who turns the trick. Zoh says nothing, just looks at the girl with a smile and takes her hand. The girl looks at Zoh...shudders...and falls into Zoh's arms! Zoh, eyes closed, holds her tight, and they sway back and forth.

The sailors sigh like wind in the rigging. Koffee was right.

The Captain, not used to waiting, blows his whistle sharply. Zoh leads the girl by the hand over for the Captain's inspection. The girl glances up at the Captain once, then she looks at the deck. The Captain studies her, puffing away, then he says, "Put 'em both in that empty cabin. Git her something to eat. She looks like a damn belaying pin." He gazes off, dismissing.

The sailors resume whatever it was they were doing but muttering over the new gossip. The Boots link their hands behind their backs and study the clouds. The cat comes to sniff the newcomer. Koffee and Zoh take charge of the girl like mother hens with a one-chick brood. They install her in the cabin with Zoh, where she gets an actual bed to sleep on, which has to be demonstrated to her. Jed prowls about offering suggestions that are ignored, then he goes to ask the Cook for a snack for the girl.

When Jed returns, Koffee is trying various languages, but the girl responds not at all. She's clearly smart, because Zoh has no trouble talking to her about simple matters using signs. Koffee and Zoh close the door so they can try some of their clothes on the girl, but when they open up again, the girl looks like she's wearing a body bag with holes cut. Koffee and Zoh indicate they will remedy the situation.

Cook shows up with a bowl and mug, and stares at the girl, struck like everyone. The girl gives Cook her little bow of thanks. Cook's eyes go even wider.

Koffee says, "Cook, try some languages on her."

Cook says to the girl, "Parle-tu francais?" She only stares. But when Cook tries another language, he gets a bite. The girl opens up. They jabber back and forth, and finally Cooks says, "She's Spanish, and her name is Maria, although...I told her she was pretty, and she said she didn't wanna be pretty, her mother warned her to never be pretty, 'cause then men would hurt her. So I suggested we call her Ugly Maria. And, uh...she calls me Sir Cook." Cook looks sheepish and shrugs. "Her notion, not mine."

The girl nods with a grin. She taps herself. "Maria la Fea!" She taps Cook on the arm. "Senor Cocinero!" The girl throws back her head and laughs, and all over the ship, men lift their heads and pause.

The girl says something else, and Cook translates. "She's very happy to be here. It's...uh...like a dream come true. Her words, not mine."

Well, she's happy, but Senor Cocinero looks dazed. Jed knows that look! Cook's beginning to suspect that the life he had planned, ain't gonna happen. But odds are, it wasn't for shit anyhow, so Cook'll soon discover that things ain't near as bad as he fears.

In the next few days, Maria la Fea moves in to the galley during the days, where Senor Cocinero gains a helper to make his work go faster, even if she does talk a lot. And Jed? It's all too complicated for him, to decide whether he should reveal that he talked to Maria la Fea's brother, back on Sugar Island. So, he holds his tongue, figuring that if the gods want this girl to know about her family, then the gods is gonna have to enlighten her they own selves. So he goes back to fishing.

Jed expects the sailors will call on him to help set sails, at least on occasion, but they do not. They seem determined to do

without his help. This leaves him little occupation but for fishing. The second day away from Sugar Island, Koffee resumes lessons in the White man's language, teaching Jed, Zoh and Maria la Fea. Jed enjoys these lessons greatly, since it gives him the chance to be near Koffee, listen to her talk, watch her gestures and her lips making words he can almost taste. And he does learn the language better. A man who wanders in the rain gets damp.

During these lessons, Zoh listens intently to Koffee, often nodding slightly, her lips shaping words she cannot apparently speak. This puzzles Jed no end. It's clear that Zoh's mind is soaking up this new language. Her mouth makes the words. Why doesn't she breathe those words out as sound?

During the lesson on the third day, Zoh listens raptly to Koffee as usual, Zoh's eyes bright, her attention rivited on Koffee. Jed happens to be looking at Zoh, puzzling once more on the nature of her muteness, when Zoh's gaze goes past Koffee and she notices Jed's gaze on her. Zoh seems to be astonished, she freezes, looking right at Jed...then she turns away and looks over the Sea. In a few moments, Zoh walks away, gets her scrub bucket and energetically sets in to scrub away some stain on the already-immaculate deck! And never again does Zoh come to Koffee's language lessons. Another mystery.

However, Zoh attacks the language barrier in her own way. Sometimes Maria la Fea comes out of the galley and sits on the deck with Koffee, and Zoh makes it a point to stop her work and visit with the girl then. Maria la Fea cannot yet talk to anybody except Senor Cochinero, but Zoh and the girl set in to make their own sign language, just as Zoh and Ayotunde did. Jed can tell that both Zoh and Maria la Fea enjoy this, but he's careful this time not to let Zoh see his interest, fearing to shy her off again.

Jed decides that Zoh is like an animal in the wild, that is tranced or made nervous by the fixed stare of another creature...especially if that creature is her husband.

In their spare time, Zoh and Koffee both work on creating decent clothes for Maria la Fea. This turns out to be a challenge, since they have hardly any supplies. The Carpenter gives them thread and needles, although the thread is more like twine and the needles could spear rats. Cook contributes empty sacks in which grain was stored. The two women mutter and despair over these materials all of one morning, until Senor Cochinero bashfully also offers a nice shirt. It's of fine material. Koffee and Zoh set in to make it into a blouse for Maria la Fea, to go on under a sack cloth skirt so the coarse sacks won't touch her pretty skin.

Cook mutters to Jed, "I was saving that shirt to be buried in, but now I reckon Maria la Fea ain't gonna let me duck out anytime soon." He grins.

Jed blurts the conjecture that's been fermenting in his brain. "Won't you need something to be married in soon?"

Cook looks hard at Jed. "Friend, you got the wrong notion. I's old enough to be that girl's father...and that's exactly what I intend to be. No, I got it figured. I's gonna collect my pay in Baltimore and give up the Sea. I'll find some way to care for this girl that fate has plopped in my lap. Get a place to live, a job, settle down. When she gets her bloom, I got a hunch she'll have no trouble finding a young man her own age, a decent young man with good teeth and clear eyes and a warm heart. Not some decrepit old salt like me!"

Jed says, "Why wouldn't you take her back to Trinidad, then?"

Cook looks off, tapping the railing. "Yeah. We'll see. Trinidad's my home, but it had problems, oh yeah. I was damn glad to get out, lemme tell you. I got no family there, since Ma

died. I'll just stop in at Baltimore and have a look see, then decide. This girl got no strings anywhere that I can tell. Main thing now is finding a decent home for her, with decent folks."

Cook looks hard at Jed. "Or maybe you's the one with big plans! You was the one found her. Am I stepping on your toes?"

Jed says, "No, no, you got more to offer the girl than me. Zoh's as much as..."

But Koffee interrupts, shooting sparks. "Did I just overhear you two fine men discussing *this girl's future*?"

Jed almost trips over himself backing up. "Hey, Miss Koffee, I got no..."

Koffee glares back and forth between them. "There's nothing to be decided! She'll come live with me, and work in my bakery! Until she finds a husband that I approve of, of course!"

Jed says, "Oh, well now, a girl does need a mother..."

Cook says mildly, "You don't even speak her language, Koffee."

Koffee spits, "Bah! You really believe they speak this Spanish in Baltimore? They speak the White man's language! So the girl will have to learn it! And I can teach her just fine!"

Cook mutters, "Yeah, but if you ain't got the Spanish to begin with, how you gonna jump right in cold with the English? Now me..."

Zoh comes up behind Koffee. She has Maria la Fea's hand, and she's grinning. She holds up her finger, then makes a fast set of signs to the girl. Maria la Fea frowns, and then signs back to Zoh, but not as fast. Zoh takes Jed's hand and Maria la Fea's hand and smiles confidently. One big happy family!

Jed tries to pull away. "Hey now, leave me outta this..."

Cook says, "How about we ask *her* who she wants to live with." He murmurs away to Maria la Fea, who glances about

with a deepening frown at the circle of faces about her...Senor Cochinerro, Koffee, Zoh, and yes even reluctant Jed. The girl shrinks down in their midst.

Just then a voice booms from above, as if God had deigned to interfere. It's the Captain! On the upper deck, leaning over the railing as usual, and apparently listening to their argument!

The Captain says, "All of youse wastin' your breath. That female came on board my ship without permission, wantin' free passage. She owes me and I got plans for how she can pay me back. How 'bout you all git back to work and stop jabberin'."

Maria la Fea looks a question at Cook, who apparently translates the Captain's words, because Maria la Fea shrieks. She darts away from all of them, over to the rope ladder leading up into the rigging...and she scampers up so fast and so light the ladder doesn't even have time to flip her...or perhaps she balances on it! Good gods, the girl climbs faster than Jed can! She's like a little bird! When she gets to the first platform, she pauses only a moment to look up and brush the hair from her eyes in the wind, then she goes on up, using the iron pegs driven in the big post.

Craning up at the girl, Jed didn't notice that Zoh has followed her! Not up the same post, but up the next one over! Nor as fast as the girl, but Zoh's *pregnant*, after all! She reaches the first platform, which is tricky, with her belly in the way, and her right foot slips! A nearby sailor yells out sharp, and Jed glances.

The whole crew is frozen, peering up at the two climbing women. One man is biting all his fingers at once.

Maria la Fea has made it to the second platform, and she pauses there to watch Zoh come up on the adjacent pole. When they get even, Maria la Fea climbs up again, and Zoh matches her

now, step for step. Up to where the ship sails in Sky alone, the last platform.

Near the top of both posts is a tiny platform, big enough for one person. It's for setting the flags that sometimes fly, or for searching the Sea, or for servicing one tiny sail. No-one can go higher unless they shinny right up the naked pole. Maria la Fea and Zoh both reach these little platforms at once. There's two extra pegs provided above each of these platforms, not for climbing but for holding on.

Jed suspects what Zoh's gonna do, 'cause he seen her do it before, in the huge tree outside her African village...but that time, she was in the circle of his arms. And she was barely pregnant! Not so now! Zoh holds on to an iron peg with one hand, leans out into space, throws her head back and stretches her other hand to the Sky, to her Mother Land, and from out of her muteness she cries out the paeon of joy that Jed recalls so well.

On the other platform, Maria la Fea matches Zoh. The girl's voice high, the woman's voice low, in harmony, like Angels perched in the rigging for a respite, calling to each other before flying on.

The next day, the wind picks up. The ship is on a tack and heeled over. Jed loves it when the wind is brisk, the feeling of controlled power pushing them along. He likes to hear the taut ropes hum. Sometimes a gust will make the sails snap like a shot of a gun. Also there's moaning sounds in a wind that Jed cannot locate. No wonder the sailors believe the ship to be haunted! And always, the slap of the waves as the ship plows along.

Today there's another sound Jed can't place, as he sits fishing over the railing, a sound like a lot of water poured out suddenly from a very big bucket. It only happens occasionally.

When the ship heels over like this, Jed always fishes off the low side, so his line doesn't hit the hull. At the speed they're going now, all he can do is let his tackle skitter and bounce along the surface. Seldom does he catch anything this way, but it gives him something to do other than sit there and wait for Baltimore to appear.

Jed's daydreams go back to the previous day, when Zoh and Maria la Fea climbed together up to the top of the masts and sang, just as Zoh once sang from her precious African tree. When the two women came down, the sailors stood about looking at them as if they were strangers. Jed laughs. Them sailors never seen any woman do a stunt like that! Now they'll really worship Zoh! He laughs again. That's how they make women in Africa!

The strange sound comes again, of water pouring. During a gust of wind, Jed notices.

And Zoh pregnant! It occurs to Jed to wonder when her baby is due. She clearly has a stomach, but climbing rigging like a youngster? Jed begins to figure on his fingers. Zoh was barely pregnant when she and he went on the honeymoon trip to her African village. How long has it been since then? Jed tries to recall, and soon is astonished to realize that it's only been about four months, since that disastrous honeymoon. So Zoh is probably about five months pregnant. Or perhaps six months, given the basic uncertainty. She won't be expecting for another three or four months! Jed is shocked. So much happened in that short time!

There's that odd sound again! Yes, it definitely happens when a gust hits the ship, and it heels farther than usual.

Jed wonders whether their child is a boy or a girl. May the gods get them off this ship before Zoh's time comes! This notion chills Jed. He wonders if Koffee has any skill as a midwife. But surely

they'll be in Baltimore by then. Surely! If it took four months to get this far, they'll certainly get to Baltimore within the next four!

Jed peers across the Sea in the direction they're going. Nothing. He wonders how far away he could see land. Cook said there would be birds when the ship got close. Jed scans the Sky. Not a single bird. It never occurred to him to look for Sugar Island before they arrived, so he's not sure how far he could see land. It must depend on how clear the air is, or something. How strange! The air appears to be perfectly clear today, there's neither mist nor low clouds. Why then can't he see Baltimore up ahead? Jed shakes his head. One more mystery, like the moans he hears from the wind, or that strange pouring sound.

If he and Zoh are slaves in Baltimore, and they have a chile, is the chile then a slave, or free? Hm. He'll ask Cook. Also, is Baltimore on an island, like Lagos...and will they have to ride canoes through a wild surf, to get there? But...the huge hogsheads filling the deck below are going to Baltimore. They could never be carried in a canoe. So many unknowns!

There's that sound again! Talk about your unknowns! It don't seem like there should be a waterfall on a ship, somehow. It seems like water should keep it's place.

Jed reels his line in. His bait has vanished, probably beat to pieces by the motion. He stands up and stretches. He wonders what he would name their chile. If it was a boy, maybe he could name him after his Pa, Korede. Jed leans over the railing and idly peers down at the foam rushing past.

The wind lifts the shirt from his back. The ropes hum. The ship ponderously leans with the gust. And low down, over the side of the ship, comes the sound of water pouring, pouring, pouring.

What the heck? Jed glances down...and there, just below him, a wave floods right into the open gunports, with a sound like a whole lot of water, running down inside the ship...whooshhh...

The ship is going down.

Jed's breath and heart lurch. He leaps up so fast he falls and trips, his legs in a palsy, as if in a nightmare, he scuttles across the deck on hands and knees toward the Captain, screams out, words lost.

The Captain, on the upper deck as usual, stands up startled. Boots run, a sailor blocks Jed's way, Jed grasps for the words, Yoruba words, White words, any words...

The Captain bellows. Koffee pops out of Maria la Fea's cabin. The Captain points at Jed. Koffee says, "Jed, what the hell..."

Jed manages to stand, grabs Koffee's arm, drags her to the railing and points down. "Little doors open...water coming in...we's gonna sink!"

Koffee whispers, "Oh my." She runs to tell the Captain, who yells at the steersman, who spins the big wheel. The ship turns sluggishly off the wind, and levels out. Up above, sails snap and complain. The Captain shouts. Boots scamper. Sailors jump to the rigging and take in all the sail. The ship wallows and pitches, devoid of purpose. Boots peer over the railing. Sailors peer too, as they come down to the deck. The whole crew, all of them too late. The ship gets quiet. Even Cook comes out and looks over the side.

Jed doesn't look. He knows already. He knows there's no bottom to the depths below. He knows there's only one small rowboat on this ship. A child of Lagos, he knows the Sea gives when the waves wash in, and the Sea takes when the waves wash out. He falls to his knees, covers his worthless head with his clasped hands, softly bangs his forehead against the deceitful planks and weeps.

The Captain orders Jed to close the gun ports, because the sailors refuse to go down to the gun deck, convinced that the ghosts of dead slaves crowd the rafters there, seeking revenge.

It only takes Jed a short time to do this. Each port has a little sliding door. Some ports are behind a hogshead, but Jed can always either reach behind, or use a short stick, to slide the door home. It's dark, down there, when Jed is finished, but not pitch dark. Sunlight leaks around many of the little doors.

When Jed comes back on deck, it's not quiet any more. Sailors argue in loud, angry voices, gathered in bunches like bees. On the upper deck, the Captain and all his Boots huddle and glance nervously at the sailors. Koffee calls council of all the Blacks...Jed, Zoh, Cook and even Maria la Fea.

Koffee says, "Mister Jed, the shit deepens. There's a few hothead sailors that blame you for near drowning us all, on account of you and your friends opened the ports back on Sugar Island. They want you thrown overboard. They claim you're a jinx."

Jed blurts out, "They was gun ports open way back in Lagos! And the bilge thing was half full of water back in Sugar Island, 'cause I seen it!"

"You gonna let me finish? The Captain's on your side. He argues you'll be gone when we get to Baltimore, probably in a week or so, and he needs money from selling you to pay the sailors. Then there's a lot of sailors undecided, who know it was their fault as much as anybody, 'cause they was supposed to pump bilge water all the time, using pumps on the gun deck, but apparently when the slaves was loaded on that deck, none of the sailors would go down there, so they gave up pumping."

Jed says, "Right. So what we got is a bunch of ninnies trying to duck out of the blame. An old story!"

"Mister Jed, you still ain't caught on. Right and wrong don't mean diddly, compared to fear, and fear's what we got here."

Cook mutters, "She's right. Listen, Mister Jed. If they comes for you, I'll stand with you. Maybe if them fools see they's 'bout to lose their *cook*, then their stomachs might talk to 'em!"

Jed says to Cook, "You'd go down with me?"

Cook shrugs. "Stand as one, or fall alone! Another old story."

Jed looks at Cook hard. "I hear you, man. I hear you. And I won't forget." But Jed resolves that he'll jump first, if the sailors come for him.

Koffee says, "All I's saying is, keep your head down and lay low 'til we get to Baltimore. When tempers cool, maybe these ninnies'll see the light."

Possibly agreeing that Jed would be best out of sight, the Captain orders Jed and Cook to go down to the gun deck and work these pump things to get the water out of the bilge. Apparently four men can work them at once. The Captain asks for volunteers to hazard the ghosts so the ship won't sink. First things first, after all. The same two sailors who came to Zoh to be blessed, both volunteer to pump the first shift.

The four men go down to the gun deck. There the sailors show Jed and Cook the pumps, at the far end of the deck from the stored hogsheads, so Jed never took notice of them. Each pump has two handles so two men can work each one. There's a pump on either side of the ship. No skill is needed, one simply grabs the handle and pumps away. The water goes through a tube, and Jed can hear it gurgling and splashing outside the ship, back in the Sea where it belongs. The only problem is, the work is grueling.

Jed's used to hard work, but not so the other three, and their enthusiasm rapidly wanes. After awhile, the two sailors mutter something about sharing the load and go back up. Cook takes a break, walking about and stretching, so Jed keeps on pumping by himself.

Cook says, "You's having fun, ain't you."

Jed admits it.

Cook mutters, "This ain't kneading biscuit dough, man."

Without a pause in the rhythm, Jed says, "I don't mind, man. Come back at it when you get your wind."

Cook says, "The worst part is, you didn't slow down any, when I turned it loose."

Two different sailors come down and take the other pump. One sailor says to his buddy, "It stinks down here."

Jed can't help it, he says, "And it's haunted. Ghosts probably ain't worried 'bout us sinking."

Both sailors glower at him. "Soon we gonna have another ghost, that's for damn sure."

Cook says, "Use your head, man. How would that help anything?"

The mouthy sailor looks at his buddy. "Who cares if it helps?" They both laugh.

The pumping goes on without a break all night long, eventually most of the sailors taking their turn, after their friends survive the haunts below deck. Jed only pumps for part of that time, then he comes up to get some sleep. By morning, the Captain declares it safe to set sail and cautiously get under way. Boots confirm that now the gun ports ride high above the waves, even when the ship is on a tack.

Jed is told to pump for awhile every day by himself, to continue lowering the water in the bilge. Jed doesn't mind. It gives him something to do, and he feels like he's making amends for opening all the ports back on Sugar Island. On the second day, the pumps begin to suck air and water both. Out of curiosity, Jed gets a lantern and goes down in the bilge. No water is visible there now. The wooden walkway in the bilge is not the bottom of the ship. Beneath the walkway is a layer of stones mostly, and a few heavy iron balls, some of them hollow, whose function Jed cannot imagine. The lumber stored in the bilge has floated into a chaotic mess, which Jed resolves to fix when he has the time. He brings two of the iron balls up on deck to show Cook.

Up on deck, Zoh, Koffee and Maria la Fea sew on a dress for the girl. It's a hot and sultry day, with only a slight breeze to push the ship along, so the sailors have set every sail. Jed fishes over the rail near the three women. When Cook comes out of the galley to take a break from his work, Jed shows him the iron balls.

Cook says, "Those was the balls the cannons shot. The hollow inside could be filled with gunpowder that'd blow up when the ball hit the other ship."

Jed is horrified. "Good gods! What kinda gun could shoot something this heavy?"

Cook shrugs. "Them cannons was huge, man. I was in a battle, up in Europe. We was hit many times by them cannonballs. A lot of our men was injured or killed." Cook shakes his head. "You can't imagine how terrible them battles was, Mister Jed. Many a ship went to the bottom, taking everybody on board down with it. Some ships burned, and we could see folks jumping in the water, some of 'em in flames. There was nothing anybody could do to save 'em, we was fighting to save our own selves. I reckon they all drowned."

“What was you doing there?”

Cook laughs bitterly. “After I became a Muslim, I left Trinidad to go on my pilgrimage to Mecca, but on the way back, I run outta money in England, so I got me a job in a tavern. I was working in the tavern one day, and had just took my mid-day meal during a break, and sat down at a table to eat, when in come a whole bunch of soldiers. They grabbed every man and boy in that tavern, hauled us all off without so much as a by-your-leave, and stuck us on ships to go fight Napoleon. Most of them grabbed was White.”

“Did you fight in this battle?”

“No. I told the officers I’d help with the wounded but I wouldn’t shoot folks I got no quarrel with. So that’s what I done. Not that you can do much for a man with an arm or leg shot off or a bullet in his gut. I’d tie cords to stop the bleeding, but they all died in a day or two. It mighta been merciful to let ‘em go faster, but I’d try and tell ‘em ‘bout Allah and salvation afore they died, so that was good.”

Jed says, “How many ships was in the battle?”

Cook shrugs. “The Sea was covered with ‘em.”

“Was they Black folks sailing the other ships?”

“No, no. It was all White folks. Way I heard it, they was frogs, on the other ships. But Whites.”

“Frogs? What you talking, man?”

“That was an insult our men used.”

Jed says, “Ha! I got it! So Whites call us niggers and make us slaves, and they call other Whites on other ships frogs and shoot ‘em with huge iron balls. Yeah, it all hangs together.”

So Whites are cruel not only to Blacks, but to their own kind! Of course, back in Africa, Blacks often fought other Blacks.

Perhaps it's merely that men like to fight. Jed himself liked to wrestle, and his hot temper has always been a problem.

Koffee asks for the two iron balls to put in the window of her future bakery with flowers growing in the holes.

Cook laughs and says to Koffee, "How you gonna carry them cannon balls with you, in Baltimore? You try and lift 'em yet?"

Koffee says, "Maybe you could gimme a hand."

"Me?"

"Well, it seems like we's both needed to raise Maria la Fea right. You said you wanted to give up the Sea and settle down, maybe in Baltimore, in order to support her. You'd need a job, you's a cook, and I wanna open a bakery. So..."

Cook says, "I gotta admit the same notion crossed my mind. Well, first let's get to Baltimore, then we'll see."

Koffee says to Jed in a low voice, "Mister Jed, maybe you and Zoh could get free of this here Captain and settle down in Baltimore, too. Maybe we could all stay friends."

"Yeah, that'd be fine." Jed gestures at the upper deck, where the Captain lounges as usual, watching everything and smoking his pipe. "But the Captain said he has plans for Maria la Fea. Has you forgot that?"

Koffee glances up at the Captain, and her face is worried.

Since Maria la Fea arrived, Zoh has come alive. She seldom scrubs the deck these days. She sits close to Maria la Fea, both of them sewing on a dress for the girl. Bits of cloth appear by unknown dispensation, draped over railing or rope, none of any size, various colors and patterns. These gifts the two women patch together into a harlequin outfit that works wonderfully with the girl's soft complexion and exotic eyes.

Koffee contributes small gold earrings for Maria la Fea's ears.

Zoh and Maria la Fea consult entirely by signs. They get better at it every day, their hands flying. The sailors watch in fascination, hands twitching in incoherent imitation like the muttering of the mind made visible.

As a final unravelling, Maria la Fea sometimes sings. Jed finds her singing hard to endure.

Zoh smiles, even laughs. Jed had figured her joy was over, but not so. For the foolish heart stubbornly sprouts hope, like the tiny weeds that shyly bloom on barren soil.

The sailors rig up a shade for the two women from old sailcloth.

For Jed, it's exactly the opposite story. Previously he was abused in a haphazard way. Now, the sailors seek him out for punishment with a vengeance. The fact that Jed saved all their lives from drowning seems to only make his treatment worse! He is hit, kicked, spit upon, cursed, at first for the slightest infraction...allowing his eyes to raise from the deck, or holding himself too erect in the presence of a White...but finally, for no reason at all. It seems that whatever viciousness the sailors used to dissipate on many Black men, now falls on him alone.

Jed's mother Olusayo charged him to seek out the White Demon and learn its habits, so as to defeat it some day. Jed yearns to discuss this Demon with Koffee. He has a hunch that she too is well acquainted with the beast. Only three days after the flooding of the bilge, his chance comes.

FISHING FOR MEN

Over three days, the winds that caused the ship to heel so sharply gradually die away. To take advantage of every breeze, all sails are set. The weather becomes clammy and hot, and the Sky sits heavy on Jed's shoulders. About noon on the third day, after mid-day meal, the crew subsides into a lassitude, brought on by the still, hot weather, the lack of any real work to do and full stomachs. Jed too drowns by the railing. Maria la Fea helps Cook finish up the meal, and Koffee lies in her hammock. Only Zoh continues working under her sun shade, sewing on Maria La Fea's dress.

Jed comes awake to a yell. It's Cook, standing in the galley door and pointing to the East, the first time Jed ever heard the man yell. Jed looks, and catches his breath. The Eastern horizon has turned a greenish-gray bruised color, where silent lights flash, and a gray curtain is swallowing the Sky.

The crew comes alive as one man. Boots shout from the upper deck, and sailors scramble up the rigging. Without worrying about permission, Jed does the same. He's been aching to climb again, and here's his chance. Knowing he's the fastest, he heads right on up to the top of the main pole, and there he quickly unties the bottom edge of the highest sail. The sail loose, Jed glances East...and is suddenly afraid. The greenish-gray cloud bank moves inexorably up the Sky even as he watches, and now the lightening jabs down visibly all along the front, but still in silence. A shadow dims the Sun, and Jed chills.

Not a sailor has come up to help Jed furl the sail. Lower down, the sailors are not furling any of the sails, simply loosening the bottom edges as fast as they can, some desperation evident. Jed

decides to do the same, and he moves down to the next lower sail, considerably larger.

The work is hard and fast, and Jed is careful not to loose his grip or footing in haste. It's a long way down. But he's good, his muscles are honed and his body is attuned to the job, and the fire of it comes up in him. For only a moment he worries about the women, but he instantly realizes there's nothing he can do for them except survive, and that takes his entire concentration. He quickly loosens two more sails, each larger than the last, as he works down. He looks again to the East and freezes.

A monstrous broom sweeps across the Sea, racing toward the ship at astounding speed, lashing the waves into a froth of gray-white water. In the Sky above, green-black clouds writhe and twist as if fighting with themselves, and spears of blue-white lightening stab constantly and randomly. The thunder is the beating of a riotous drum, *boom, boom, boom*. Just before the tumult hits, Jed wraps his arms and one leg tight about the pole, buries his face in the crook of his arm and hangs on with all his might. Then the wind is on him, like an animal it's on him, ripping at his clothes, his hair, his fingers even, prying, pulling, and hurling a torrent of rain turned stinging as gravel.

The mighty invulnerable pole strums in Jed's arms like a musical instrument...and it tilts. The wind, stronger by the moment, is toppling the pole...or perhaps the very ship below! Farther and farther the pole leans. The wind, as if sensing triumph, redoubles its force, and howls. Like a man wounded in a fight, the ship struggles to survive...and this pole is Jed, and in the tempest, he is this wooden gamble, made by a hand not his, the hand of his brothers, given into his care and imbued with the strength of a sacred folly, to dare fate...the tilting pauses...and gets no worse.

The wind falls off! And the ship still floats! The deluge of warm rain continues, but the ship slowly rights itself. Above Jed's head, the three sails he loosened stand out from their branches like insulted laundry. Far below, a tangled pile of ropes, sailcloth and a branch off one of the poles clogs one side of the deck. Something must have torn loose. Jed prays the women are alright, but there's nothing he can do for them at the moment.

Abruptly, with a roar, the rain turns to hail! Down it comes, pelting everything...and it hurts! Jed partly shields his head with one arm from the falling ice, that rattles on the ship below as loud as the wind was before. The hail soon stops, then the rain returns, but much abated.

It's a petulant storm, quick to arise, quick to dissipate, and soon the whole bank of clouds has blown off to the West. The Sun comes out and weaves a rainbow into the retreating storm caverns.

The sailors in the rigging furl up loose sails. Jed goes back to the top and furls the smallest sail, but it's very hard work alone. Jed goes lower down, intending to help the sailors, but they wave him off and curse him, so he climbs down to the deck. He wants to check on the women.

On the deck, the three women and Cook pull and peer at the wreckage. Everyone seems to be unhurt. Cook says, "Might be somebody under this mess." That's what Jed fears also, so he helps search, but no bodies are found. While they work, the Captain and the Boots come out on the upper deck, but they make no move to search also. They stand up there and talk in subdued voices.

Once assured that no sailor is under the wreckage, there's little for the Blacks to do, since they have no notion how to repair the damage. Zoh and Maria la Fea pick up hail from the frozen

mounds of it in the scuppers and play with it. Koffee asks Jed if he's alright.

Jed rubs his head. "That hail was hard."

Koffee says, "You coulda been killed, Jed. I seen where you was."

Jed says, "We all woulda been in trouble if the ship went over. Cook, if this thing flipped, you reckon it'd still float? Wood floats, after all."

Cook shakes his head. "All that ballast in the bilge would take it right on down, I's heard. 'Course, I don't know anybody that's actually checked that out!" He laughs. "You should see my galley. Everything loose is all down one end. Thank Allah the pot of stew was empty."

Koffee says. "Them two cannon balls was rolling 'bout the floor of my cabin and near took out the cat 'till Zoh grabbed her up. We all had to get on the bed to save our feet. It woulda been funny in any other situation."

The sailors finish furling sails and come down to the deck. The whole crew surveys the damaged pile of rigging, mutter amongst themselves and tentatively pull at the pile. Jed goes over and grabs a fallen rope to show his willingness to help, but once again, the sailors drive him away with curses. Finally some decision is made by the Captain and Boots. Orders are given out and the sailors set about with more purpose to set things to rights.

The four Blacks and Maria la Fea stand or sit off to one side and watch. Jed rants in Yoruba, "I offer to help, and they drive me away! I wanted to help 'em furl sails but they drove me away! I do everything I can to help out, and still they drive me away! I don't get it! For all their abuse, I don't talk back, and I surely never raised a hand against 'em, even when they kick and spit on

me! Now that my friends is all sold off at Sugar Island, I's the only Black man they got to torment, so it's worse than ever!"

Nobody replies. What's there to say? Zoh puts her hand on Jed's arm. Koffee scratches her elbow.

Jed says, "Cook, they respect you! How come?"

Cook shrugs. "I dunno, Mister Jed. It does seem like they got a special disliking for you."

Koffee runs her fingers through her hair and pulls at a snarl. Maria la Fea fetches her half-finished dress and the sewing basket, brushes the water off the closed hatch then sits on it. Zoh sits beside her and the two women sew.

Jed has to work the pressure out of his gut. He should go down and pump like a crazy person, but instead, he says, "I gotta ask you something, Miss Koffee. Back in Lagos, Ma come to believe that all folks everywhere was under the sway of a Demon, that caused war and slavery and all manner of evil. She charged me with finding a way to defeat this Demon when I got to the White man's world."

Jed stops talking. Even to his own ears, his words sound ridiculous. Zoh and Maria la Fea ignore him, Koffee cleans her nails. Only Cook appears to listen.

Jed grimly forges on. "So, here's how come I mention this, Miss Koffee. These sailors act like Demons, toward me. You got a lot of experience with men. What's going on with them? Why do they hate me?"

Koffee shoots Jed a glance, pulls up her dress and examines her legs. "Look how disgusting my skin is. I can scrape some off with my nails. This salt water is a horror. My hair feels like vines are growing out of my head. Why did your mother say that?"

"She saw in a dream that Market was full of Demons, not people."

"No, I mean why did she give you this silly job? Did she figure you'd be bored?"

"Ma said a man who carries his village on his back, can swim the flood that would drown a man who swims alone. 'Course, I can't swim at all, let alone with somebody on my back."

Koffee cleans her toes with one foot up on the railing and her dress hiked to her thigh, but Jed obstinately looks the other way. She says, "Interesting, these folk sayings. One never knows whether it's profound wisdom, or something children made up."

Cook says, "Maybe it's both. You gotta look at the hidden meanings to these things. That's how our People has passed on their wisdom for thousands of years. It ain't something that hits you in the face, it's something you live with and let it sink in and then one day, you say, oh. Right."

Jed leans forward, irritated. "You's ignoring my question, Koffee. I was hoping you might have a notion as to why the sailors hate me, but maybe I's expecting too much of you."

"You undermine their self-respect, Mister Jed, and their self-respect is 'bout the only thing these here sailors got. So they don't like you! They don't like your gorgeous body, taller than any man on board this ship, with muscles they didn't know a man could have. They don't like your loins, that makes them squirm with shame. They don't like that you learned in one month to scamper up the rigging better than men who's been doing it for years. They don't like it that your lady looks like a goddess compared to the cheap harbor harlots they gotta pay for even a smile. They don't like how Zoh wakes up them tender feelings inside their shriveled little hearts, and so they beat you extra, to prove they ain't *nigger lovers*. They don't like the guilt they feel, deep down in whatever soul they got left, to be trading in human beings for a living." She looks at Cook and Zoh. "Did I miss anything?"

Cook says, "They don't like it that you don't fight back and give 'em some excuse to hate you."

Zoh waves her hand from where she sits with Maria la Fea, then she pretends to pull in a fish on a line, then eat it...then spit it out.

Cook says, "Yeah, they *is* tired of fish. And they's terrified of voodun, and dark critters that hunt at night."

Jed ponders this. "Yeah. Thanks, but...now I see that what you all said ain't gonna help with my mother's charge. All them things you mentioned only apply to me, and don't tell me why Whites take Blacks as slaves, which is why we's even here in the first place, on this ship."

Koffee says, "So really you wanna fix the whole world, not just get the sailors to love you."

Jed sighs. "I reckon that's what Ma intended."

Koffee says, "I wish I could talk to your mother. What's her name?"

"Olusayo."

"Hm. A good name. A strong name." Koffee closes her eyes and abruptly grabs Jed's hand in both of hers and squeezes tight, then whispers, "A small woman, but strong. I bet she saw the wholeness, the Family. I bet it broke her heart, when you left. Yeah. And out of that...out of that anguish...she seen a Demon at work. Of course! What mother wouldn't?"

Boots and sailors shout. They've untangled the debris, and are trying to put the big fallen branch back up where it came from, with ropes and pulleys. There seems to be a lot of argument over how to do this. The Captain fumes, his pipe going so hard he appears to have smoke coming out his ears.

Koffee says, "Mister Jed, I's gonna tell you something and I don't wanna catch no grief for it, I wouldn't even mention it but for you pestering me and for me believing it answers your question. When I lived in the House of Solace, at Dakar with my Mama and the girls, if a Chief came in...a customer...everything we done was aimed to *hook* him. That was our word. Mother said there was five goodies needed to hook a Chief...good food, a good high, a good laugh, a good fuck, and good pity. Lacking one of 'em, a Chief might go away hungry and not come back to us. Good food and a good high was easy. One of our girls could talk the shit to a Chief and get a laugh outta him, and that was her job, she never had to go up to a room. She got to wear the best rags. My job...and the other room girls, six of us...was providing the last two goodies...the fuck and the pity. And that's where the hook really came in." Koffee laughs. "I reckon I's a fisherwoman, Mister Jed! See, lemme explain..."

Jed says, "Wait...didn't you say you was born in that House, and grew up there?"

"That's right."

"I guess I figured you did the chores or something...wash dishes..."

"Of course I washed dishes. We all did. Mister Jed, how you gonna deal with the White man's Demon, if you can't even face the fact that I's a harlot?"

Jed mutters, "I don't see they's the same thing."

"How can you say they ain't, when you's asking *me* what this Demon is? Seems to me you's hunting a beast you never met in unknown territory, and it'd behoove you to be ready for anything."

"Alright, alright, I gotcha, let's get on with it. I never heard a woman talk so much and tell me so little."

Koffee gives Jed a level look. "You's a hard man to deal with, Mister Jed. I should walk off on you, 'cause you ain't even a paying customer, but for some reason, your Demon problem has grabbed me. And I got nothing better to do."

Cook says, "And no place to walk off to, either."

Jed says to Koffee, "Well, I ain't the only problem here! How you 'spect to be a decent mother for Maria la Fea, when you's a harlot? Don't you reckon she's gonna pick that up, too, just like she's learning everything else 'bout us?"

There's a hard silence. Jed and Koffee stare at each other like they might come to blows. Zoh stops sewing, gets up and lays a hand on Jed's arm, but she makes no sign. Cook looks tense. Only Maria la Fea, the object of the discord, goes on blithely sewing.

Koffee says low, "I done told all of you that I's going straight, in Baltimore, so I'll be a decent person to care for her."

Jed hisses, "Promises!"

Cook says, "Listen. Nobody has made any decision yet 'bout what happens to Maria. And you all forgets that she makes the choice, not us."

Jed slices down with his hand. "Bullshit, Cook! She's a chile! What does she know 'bout right and wrong?"

Cook looks pissed. "Any woman runs from Sugar Island ain't no chile, Mister Jed. She's earned the right to respect, seems to me, no matter her age. Besides, it ain't for us to decide whether other folks is right or wrong. That's Allah's job."

Jed says, "Allah! Don't you figure Allah wants us to care for them that needs care?"

Koffee says, "You ain't laid all your cards on the table, Mister Jed."

Jed blusters, "Like what?"

“Like why it upsets you so bad that I fuck other men...other men than you! That’s your real bone to pick with me, ain’t it? ”

There’s another hard silence.

Zoh shakes Jed. He reluctantly looks away from Koffee.

“What?”

Zoh lays the palm of her hand on Jed’s cheek and smiles at him.

Jed says, “Yeah, yeah.” He looks off, then he looks at Zoh direct. “So you married a fool! Is that my fault?”

Cook starts to laugh but catches himself.

Zoh smiles and holds up one finger, her sign for having something to say. Then she taps Koffee...makes the quack-quack talk sign...and then Zoh makes a new sign, holding one finger down with a sharp upward crook.

Jed puzzles Zoh’s sign. “That there finger thing is a hook, right?”

Zoh nods. Then she repeats the same sequence of three signs.

Jed says, “Uh...Koffee...talk...’bout the hook.”

Zoh nods vigorously. Then she cups her hand around Jed’s ear.

Jed says, “And I listen.”

Zoh nods and smiles radiantly.

Koffee says, “I’d be happy to talk! I got no secrets! Like I said, we *harlots* back in Dakar aimed at hooking the customer. The point I was ‘bout to make, when Mister Jed took us on a little excursion, is that the pity goody was as important as the sex goody to hook a customer. Remember I said we gave the Chiefs the five goodies? See, Chiefs could get laid anywhere in town, but pity was our specialty! Pity’s actually not a good word, *sympathy* is more like it.”

“Mister Jed, what you gotta understand here is, my main point...*there was not a man walk in the door to our House of Solace*

who wasn't already hooked on something that held up the center of who he was, what he dreamed of, what he wanted outta life. The bits of pleasure we gave him while he was in the House was weak tea in comparison to that main obsession of his, that keel to his boat. My job was to worm that secret obsession outta him...and then, sympathize with his madness! Encourage him to talk 'bout it, listen wide-eyed, and finally, convince him he wasn't crazy, he wasn't some fool, he was a good man with a worthy dream! Men walked outta my room with stars in they eyes and the world on they plate. I do believe that most men got just as much pleasure outta bragging to me on their secret dreams, as they got in squirting they juices in me. Or maybe it amounted to the same."

"So do you see the connection, Mister Jed? Let's say your mother Olusayo is right, that there's a Demon in every man. Well, my experience tells me that all men is hooked. Surely Olusayo and me says the same thing! Surely the Demon is being hooked! Two words for the same thing!"

Cook says, "Well, that ain't what I mean if I say a man is hooked. I mean a man who's got some kinda habit, whether it comes in a bottle or in a sack."

"Sure, Cook, they's hooked too, but see, we didn't get them kind, 'cause they didn't have the money for no whore! No, the kinda man we got, the kind I's familiar with, was your well-to-do man of the world, on top of life, dressed fine and smilin' at everybody, the man everybody figures is better by far than the drunk in the gutter. But I seen clear, that the drunk in the gutter, and the rich man in the coach, is all the same. All hooked!"

Cook says, "So a customer might tell you he just wanted to hoard up a lot of gold?"

Koffee shrugs. "I'd tell him gold is needed to raise a family, so with gathering up gold, he's only looking out for his family...or

his future family, if he ain't got one yet. Nothing more noble than looking out for your family."

Jed says, "Bah! So you get paid to peddle lies!"

"Jed, Jed. I do love you, but you sure are a pain in the ass sometimes. I's telling you these things to show you how this Demon might work. The point is that men got this dream inside 'em, that they love and cherish. They love to talk 'bout their dream, 'specially to a pretty woman, which I believe I is. They love to be told their dream's a good dream, and worthy. They love all this attention so much, that I can lead 'em 'bout like they was dogs on a rope, and be sure they'll come back to me another night, to get pumped up all over again. The fact that their dream is imaginary ain't the point. Nor is it the point if their dream is truly good or bad. The point is how bad men want to *believe* in their dream, which is the same as being hooked on the dream. Get what I's saying, Jed?"

Jed gazes out over the Sea and doesn't answer.

Cook says, "Why you figure men needs this dream so bad?"

Koffee shrugs. "How should I know? I ain't interested in *why*. Why does the wind blow that makes this ship move?"

Cook laughs self-consciously. "I suppose you might call me hooked on Islam, if I was one of your customers, Miss Koffee."

"Then ask your own self how come you needs that."

Cook says low, "It gives me something I can't get no other way. Without the promise I get from the Koran, I's only a Black galley cook on a stolen slave ship."

"Yeah, well. You might scorn me as a fucking whore, Cook, but I know that feeling. I went to mosque in Dakar when I could, if the holy men didn't see me and kick me out. Without that feeling I got of being sacred, I woulda been only one more harlot in a grimy African seaport."

“I don’t scorn you one bit, Miss Koffee. There ain’t nothing pretty ‘bout me cooking for slavers. We’s kinda the same, you and me. Both of us at the bottom of the ladder but looking up at the heavens.”

Koffee, Zoh and Cook stand in silence, watching the sailors, who have rigged up a complicated assembly of ropes and pulleys from high up on two big poles, so as to lift the fallen timber back into place. The timber is almost secured, and ready for the sail to be attached. The sailors seem to know what they’re doing, probably because of lifting the heavy hogsheads of molasses back at Sugar Island. The Carpenter is there with them, shouting advice. Maria la Fea stands up and holds the half-finished dress against herself. Jed, who has been pacing about muttering to himself and gazing over the Sea, stops and watches her. Maria la Fea sits down again and goes back to work.

Jed comes over and stands pounding softly on the railing. “Miss Koffee, I realize you’s trying to help me, and I ‘preciate that, and I get your point, that men is hooked. It’s valuable, what you told me. But...I keep coming back to the notion that being hooked don’t apply only to your customers. And I can’t ignore whether this is right or wrong. Listen, Miss Koffee. Suppose your customer tells you that he owns a ship, and his dream is, to go to Africa and grab Black folks to sell and get rich. Would you tell that man that he’s noble to look out for his family by getting rich?”

Now it’s Koffee’s turn to gaze out over the Sea. “That never happened to me. But if it did...if it did...”

Jed presses on. “And ain’t you on that ship this very moment, Miss Koffee?”

Zoh grabs Jed's arm and shakes him, and makes an odd moaning sound. Jed glances at her, pulls his arm away and says, "I don't give a damn!"

Koffee's face changes...and tears come into her eyes. She picks at her fingers in silence, and Jed's gut twists, but something in him whispers this is the only way. Zoh watches Koffee and her grip is tight on Jed's arm. Koffee turns away and walks slowly over to Maria la Fea, who still sews on her patchwork dress. Koffee gently runs her fingers through the girl's hair. Maria la Fea looks up and smiles.

Koffee walks back and stands in front of Jed. "Alright, Mister Jed. You win." She waves her hand and glances at Cook and Zoh. "When we gets to Baltimore, you all work it out what happens to Maria, but leave me out. I don't wanna hear no more 'bout it. Now I might take a nap. A good whore has to take her beauty rest, to keep them wrinkles away!" Koffee turns and rubs her face too quickly with the hem of her dress. "All this aggravation don't help none either!"

Koffee goes to leave but Zoh stops her. Zoh makes a flurry of signs to Jed, which to his surprise, he understands perfectly.

Jed says, "Miss Koffee, Zoh wants me to tell you that she used to be a whore too, in her own way."

Koffee's eyes go wide. "You, Miss Zoh?"

Zoh nods hard.

Koffee says, "Thanks for telling me that, Miss Zoh! Is that how come you scrub decks? As a penance?"

Zoh nods even harder.

Koffee says, "I see! How very interesting! A penance! Hm!"

Cook says, "You could wash pots for me."

Koffee says, "Thanks, Cook, but I hardly reckon that would do it. No, that wouldn't do it a'tall. This needs some study. Yes indeed."

But it's Zoh who studies Koffee, and Zoh looks worried.

Cook says, "Mister Jed, if you like, sometime I could tell you what Islam has to say 'bout Demons. That's my religion, Islam. Not today. We done..."

Cook is interrupted by screams from the sailors, who were in the process of attaching the fallen sail back where it belonged. It looks to Jed like a gust of wind got ahold of the loose sail and knocked a sailor off the walk rope, but he didn't fall to the deck. The man dangles in mid-air, holding onto the walk rope by his hands only, his feet scrabbling in space. Jed's gut clenches. The crew shouts advice but nobody can get to the man to help him, he's below the walk rope. The dangling sailor tries to kick his legs up and over the walk rope, but he's not agile enough. Then, he begins torturously working his way hand over hand, back to the main pole. But every time he makes a move, he has to let go with one hand. Finally, strength exhausted, he simply hangs. Jed feels pains shooting up his legs, he can feel the man's panic as if he was the one about to fall.

Zoh's fingernails dig into Jed's arm. The Captain bellows orders. The Carpenter quickly brings out a large piece of sail canvas, and the sailors spread it under the man dangling high above. Then, all the sailors in a circle lift the edge of the canvas and pull it tight as a drum between them. Even the Boots run to help! The sailors yell up at their comrade. The man has no choice, he lets go and falls through the air, limbs flailing. *Whump!* He lands in the taut canvas, hits the deck a bit, but his fall is broken almost entirely. He leaps up, laughing like a maniac, spared. All

the sailors shout, and slap the man on the back. Even the Captain smiles.

Koffee and Cook walk over toward where Maria la Fea sits, discussing something urgently between themselves, but Zoh tugs gently on Jed's arm, and when he looks at her, she points over to the sailors and embarks on a long series of signs, which Jed cannot follow. His face must show his confusion because Zoh tries the same signs again, slower, but still Jed cannot follow her. Many of these signs Jed has never seen before. Finally Zoh gives him a weak smile and a gesture to forget it.

SEÑOR COCINERO

After the storm, the Heavens are exhausted. That night, the Stars shine in all their wonder, and the next day, there's not even a breeze. The ship is becalmed. The sails hang limp and useless. The Sun beats down relentlessly from a blue, cloudless Sky, and a clammy heat lies on the Sea.

The sailors are not happy. There's nothing for them to do except complain of having neither women nor drink nor hope of reaching Baltimore, lacking any wind. Further, the Boots report that one sailor is missing, and Koffee overhears the sailors saying that the missing man was last seen just before the storm hit, climbing up to help Jed at the top of the mast, and that Jed must have caused the man to fall. This is the second death the sailors ascribe to Jed, the other being the sailor that was killed while loading the ship at Sugar Island.

Jed dismisses it all with a Yoruba curse, saying the sailors are fools.

After the storm and the argument between Koffee and Jed, the Black men and women stay apart by some mutual agreement. Zoh, Koffee and Maria la Fea sit together in the shade of the sailcloth awning the sailors made for them, talk and sew, unless they help with the meals, or Zoh scrubs the decks for awhile, or Koffee and Maria la Fea do exercises together.

Every morning Jed pumps water from the bilge, but this does not take long. Then he fishes. Cook sits with Jed on breaks and they talk of small things. Everyone, sailors, Boots, Captain and Blacks, all watch the Eastern horizon, fearing another storm. But the Sky remains a peaceful blue.

Cook plots out how much meat he has left to feed the crew, and worries that there may not be enough to make it to Baltimore, given the becalming. Cook tells Jed about scurvy, the disease that causes sailors to lose their teeth, which is why rose hips are part of the diet. Cook had hoped to get lemons on Sugar Island, but could not, so he must rely on rather old rose hips from Dakar. Both men tell stores of their previous lives, which helps to pass the time.

“Mister Jed, lemme ask you something I been curious ‘bout. The other day you said your mother gave you this job to conquer the Demon of slavery, when you got to be a slave. It sounded like she *knew* you was gonna be taken.”

“Ma *did* know. We figured out that Zoh was a slave on board this ship. Pa and me came out to the ship to buy Zoh back, but that didn’t work out, so I climbed in through them doors in the side of the ship. I told Ma I was gonna do that, afore Pa and me left Lagos. I couldn’t let Zoh go alone.”

Cook stares at Jed. “No, I reckon you couldn’t.”

“You said Islam mentions defeating Demons. Talk to me ‘bout that.”

Cook scratches his head. “Yeah. But I don’t reckon it’d be what your mother hoped for. As I understand it, Muhammed expected each person to work on their own self to defeat evil. The only way one person could change another person would be to give the necessary information to the other person and hope they accept Allah and Muhammed and follow the practices. There ain’t no way you could change even one White man if that man didn’t wanna change hisself. Much less the whole of White civilization! I hate to say this, Mister Jed, but I fear your mother done gave you a hopeless task. Besides, to be honest, Muhammed had slaves.”

“Muhammed had slaves! So this Islam ain’t gonna help me a’tall!”

Cook looks uncomfortable. “I gather Jesus didn’t have slaves, but neither did he speak out against slavery. Mister Jed...I’s sorry, but your mother gave you a lonely burden.”

Jed sighs. “So what are these practices?”

“Well, first of all, I tell the sailors ‘bout Islam when I get the chance. I go without food when I’s supposed to, although it’s hard since I still gotta work. It’s no fun to cook for other folks on an empty stomach! When I get paid in Baltimore, I’ll give some to the poor. I pray and do prostrations every day, back in the galley. Maybe I should do my prostrations out here on deck so everybody can see me, as an example.” Cook laughs. “Your Zoh scrubs the decks, I could do prostrations. Your Zoh reminds me of the Angels that Muhammed talks ‘bout.”

Jed says, “Tell me ‘bout Angels.”

“Well, Angels seem like Allah’s helpers, who go ‘round trying to get folks to do His will. Angels are pure good, but that might not be what *we* figure good means. To us, in our limited understanding, the actions of an Angel might appear cruel or insane or evil. Somewhere I got the notion that Angels has wings, and I used to imagine them as women flying through the skies dressed in bright robes, but now I understand Angels can be either men or women. Sailors imagine that there’s fishes that look like women, but with fish tails ‘stead of legs. Funny what loneliness’ll do.”

Jed says, “What are prostrations?”

“I’ll show you.” Cook demonstrates the Islamic prostrations and prayers.

Jed says, “Well, that’s interesting, but I need something more powerful. What else does Islam have you doing?”

“There’s the pilgrimage. Once in their lifetime, every believer is supposed to travel to the place where Muhammed gave the teachings. I was coming back from my own pilgrimage when I got snared by the British soldiers to cook on this ship. Lordy, but that seems like years ago! Oh. I just recalled something you might find interesting.”

“Let’s have it.”

“I was with Muslim friends. We’d all gone to Mecca and we was on our way home. We had to wait in a port town for a boat, probably the next day they said. We decided to find a mosque, do our prayers then get something to eat. We wandered ‘bout the city, trying to ask folks who didn’t speak our language where the mosque was. By the time we found a mosque, I had to pee, so I told my friends to go on in and I’d join ‘em as soon as I relieved myself, which I done, but when I went in to find my friends, they was nowhere to be seen. So I wandered ‘bout this mosque looking for the prayer hall or somebody to ask and got myself lost.”

“I went past an archway that opened into a courtyard, an open place, very pretty, with some plants in pots around the edges and a little pool of water fed in a trickle from a pipe. The courtyard was surrounded on all sides by fancy tiled arched openings, and had a nice tile floor with designs in it. There was no roof a’tall, and the place was bright with a golden light from the setting sun.”

“In the middle of the courtyard was a tree growing out of a raised well in the floor, and under that tree sat an Elder, dressed all in white, with a white beard, sitting crosslegged on a rug and red cushion on the tile floor. Several young men, who musta been his helpers, sat ‘round him, all crosslegged on rugs and cushions, praying or looking at books. One young man played on a flute real low, and another waved a big fan over all of ‘em. There was

incense burning in a little pot, I could smell it even where I stood a distance away."

"One young man sat directly in front of the Elder, their knees near touching...and the two men looked straight at each other. First I figured they was talking, but as I tarried, all was silent. There was no talk. The Elder and this young man just looked at each other. Not smiling, not talking, just looking. Their backs was as straight as the tree, and their faces was...shining. Like the sunlight was inside of 'em. Their faces...you don't see folks looking that way. Most of us...so...worried..."

"I can't tell you how this affected me, how...what made my heart beat so. Their faces, their silence...to this day, I don't understand what them men was up to, nor why it all hit me so hard. It felt real important, maybe the most important thing ever come my way, but nothing I'd heard before or since explained what I seen in that courtyard. I don't even know if it was Islam. Maybe I'd got outside the mosque, I don't know. But here's the odd thing, Mister Jed."

Cook turns to Jed and looks him in the eye. "What I seen that day...those few, few moments...it's part of me now. I know there's a freedom so...more." Cook waves his hand.

"Anyhow, a guard came up behind me and grabbed me by the arm and put his finger to his lips for silence. He was not happy I was there. He led me away, through several corridors to the big prayer hall where my friends and other folks was. On the way I tried to ask him questions, but he wouldn't answer to Spanish nor English nor Yoruba."

Jed says, "These men you seen, was they doing the prostrations you showed...?"

There's loud shouts from sailors, and Cook lays his hand on Jed's arm. Two sailors jump to their feet, spilling a card game on

the deck, and swing at each other. Other sailors pull them apart, but one of the fighters turns on the man trying to restrain him! The shouts get louder, and more sailors join in the fight. From the upper deck, the Captain bellows, but the sailors ignore him. A shot from a gun! One of the Boots has fired into the air. The sailors stop fighting, the Captain shouts and waves his arms. Sailors walk off, but their faces are angry, men spit and wave their fists and mutter and hitch up their pants.

Cook says to Jed, "We got some bad shit here. It's the heat and boredom and...the rest of it."

The Captain yells for Cook to serve up dinner, probably hoping this'll pacify the sailors. Cook goes off to the galley, and the three women go to help him. Jed's left alone to ponder events.

It's not until evening as the Sun sets that Jed gets to talk to Cook again, when he comes out of the galley, drying his hands on the rag he always carries. Cook says, "I hope that food calmed them sailors. I made some cookies for 'em. I don't often make cookies. I don't know what you knows 'bout cookies, Mister Jed, but it ain't easy. 'Specially on such short notice."

Jed says, "I been studying on what you told me, Cook. Lemme ask you something. Was this Muhammed fellow with you on your pilgrimmage, when you seen the Elder and his helpers in the courtyard?"

Cook laughs. "Mister Jed, Muhammed died hundreds of years ago."

"Hundreds of years ago! But you told me..."

"I got a copy of the Koran, Mister Jed. I carry that with me wherever I travel."

Jed shakes his head. "You lost me."

"Oh, that's right. Lagos. You probably don't read."

“Probably not!”

Cook says, “I’ll be right back. I can’t show you my Koran, ‘cause you ain’t a Believer, but I’ll get you my Robinson Crusoe. I got five books, and I read ‘em in order and over and over, to keep from going crazy on this ship.” Cook goes back to his quarters and returns immediately with an odd object that he hands to Jed. Jed takes the thing. It opens up into many layers of white cloth, all covered with odd marks. On the first layer of cloth is a picture of a man with odd clothes, a long beard, and what looks like two guns over his shoulders.

Cook says, “All them marks you see actually tell a story. Lemme figure how to show you. I’ll teach you just one word, and you’ll see how it works. This mark here...” Cook points. “...that’s called ‘c’. That ‘c’ mark has a sound that goes with it, like this.” Cook makes the sound for ‘c’. “Now this mark here is ‘a’, and it has this sound.” Cook makes the ‘a’ sound. “Finally, this here mark is ‘t’, and it sounds like this. Now if you was reading and you seen them three marks grouped together in the same order as I told you, that group of marks then gets the three sounds combined into a whole word. Can you tell me what ‘c’, ‘a’, and ‘t’ put together might sound like?”

Jed says, “Alright. Alright. Lemme take this slow. Gimme the sounds of each mark again.”

Cook repeats the separate sounds for ‘c’, ‘a’ and ‘t’.

Jed says, “Cuh...ah...tuh. Cuh...ah...tuh.”

“That’s close. Say ‘em faster and slur the sounds together.”

Jed says, “Cuhaht. Cuhaht. Cat! Cat! It’s cat! I got it!” Jed grabs Cook’s arm in excitement. “I can read!”

Cook grins. “Well, let’s say you made a start. That first one hits you, don’t it?”

Jed whispers, “Cat! Cat!”

Cook says, "Now on the page...this here is called a page...if you was reading, the first word you read would be on the top left of the page, and you would proceed the way my finger is moving, down the page to the bottom, then you would turn to the second page, and so on."

Jed says, "Man! You sure is lucky that fella made this book for you!"

"Yeah, well, the fella who wrote Robinson Crusoe lived a long time ago too, like Muhammed. And he didn't actually make *this here* book. He wrote down the story, and then folks printed this book from his story. See, a printer has a whole lot of little pieces of metal with all these marks shaped on 'em backwards. In order to print this page, I reckon the printer arranges them little pieces of metal into the holes in a metal plate, in the reverse order of what you see here on the page. Then, they smears ink over the little metal pieces and press it against a blank page, and the ink marks up the page. In that way, a printer can make hundreds of pages all exactly the same as this here one, in no time a'tall. When they has printed all the pages that make up this book, they fasten 'em all together and you got hundreds of books."

Jed whispers, "Cook, can *you* print a book?"

Cook laughs. "Me? Mister Jed, I's a cook, not a printer! Hey, I wonder if Maria la Fea can read. I might show her my Crusoe, Mister Jed."

Cook walks off, and Jed sits in a fog. *Hundreds of books, telling stories! I's a blacksmith, I can work metal! So is Pa! If I was to take this book notion back to Lagos with me and Zoh, when we escape the Whites...Pa and me could print out books telling the stores of the Yoruba People!*

We could sell them books to traders, and the whole world could learn

'bout us! How then could they enslave us, if they was to learn that we is just like everybody else!"

"This is the way to defeat the White Demon! Not with guns and swords, but with stories! This is the way to do what Ma wants me to do!"

Hardly knowing what he's doing, Jed walks over to the women who sit sewing. He's got to tell Zoh 'bout this! But a Boot comes rudely shoving past and says to Koffee Olay, "The Captain wants to talk to you. Now."

Koffee lays her sewing aside, stands slowly, straightens her dress and goes off to talk to the Captain. Cook and Maria la Fea bend over the Robinson Crusoe book, the girl looking in wonder at the picture in the book. Jed falls on his knees before Zoh, takes her hand, and begins excitedly to tell her what he's learned about reading, and his scheme to defeat the Demon and save the Yoruba People.

But Zoh hardly listens to Jed. She keeps glancing over at Koffee, who stands listening to the Captain, and the worry on Zoh's face deepens. Irritated at her, Jed says, "Is you hearing me? This is what I been looking for, Zoh! This is the answer!"

But Zoh shakes her head and points at Koffee...who shouts at the Captain!

Koffee yells loud, for all to hear, *"No! I will not do it! I will not do it, I tell you! She's not growed, she's a girl! A girl! She could be your daughter!"*

The Captain bellows at Koffee, "How the hell could a nigger bitch be my daughter? Shut your mouth, slut! You forget yerself! She's female, and that's what I need! Now you listen to me! You do what I tell you, or by God, that *girl* will do what I tell her, without your help! I'll give you tonight to teach her what she needs to know! By tomorrow morning, she starts paying for her

passage and the food she eats...or she goes overboard! She can swim back to where she came from! Now git! Git! If I hears another word outta you, it's the whip!"

Koffee shrieks, runs back, falls on her knees before Maria la Fea, and embraces Maria like a lost child. Her head buried in Maria's lap, Koffee wails, *"He wants to use her to make the sailors happy so they don't mutiny! I said to him, I'll do it, I'll do 'em all, and he refused! He refused! He wants me clean for his own use! And he wants this child to service the crew! Beginning tomorrow morning!"*

Maria la Fea, not understanding the words, is still upset by Koffee's tears, bends over, rests her head on Koffee's curls, and gently pats Koffee's back, by way of comfort. Appalled, Zoh, Jed and Cook are shocked into silence.

Jed glances at the sailors. Every one of them has heard, every one of them understands...and most of them look starved. There'll be no help from them. Once the first sailor tears through the thin taboos of civilization tomorrow morning...the pack will follow.

Koffee suddenly leaps to her feet, and like a woman possessed, she runs to her cabin, ducks inside, and immediately comes back out tugging her bed pallot behind her. She throws the pallot down on the deck, turns and glares up at the Captain. "Here I sleep from this night on, where all can see, 'til I leave this damned ship in Baltimore! If anybody wants me...they know where to find me!"

THE LONG NIGHT OF DISCONTENT

That night, Jed dozes off for awhile out of weariness, but in the middle of the night, he wakes and lies sleepless. Tormented notions battle in his head. Like a thirsty man spying the glitter of water through a jungle, he clings to the dream he conceived the previous day, after talking with Cook...the dream of books, printed by his family back in Lagos and telling the story of the Yoruba People for the world to read and cherish.

But overwhelming this pleasant prospect is the horror of the Captain's decision to toss young, innocent Maria la Fea to the sailors like a piece of meat tossed to hyenas. Nothing can still the anguish Jed feels from this threat. He tosses and turns, sweats and moans, schemes quarreling in his brain to save Maria, all of them hopeless. Koffee offered her own body for the sailors to use, and the Captain refused! What more could anyone do, short of murdering the sailors...or the Captain...in their sleep?

Finally Jed gets up, intending to walk about to tire out the voices in his head. He paces briskly down the length of the shadowy deck several times when, to his surprise, Zoh appears out of the night and grabs his arm. She too is distraught.

Jed whispers, "I reckon you couldn't sleep neither?" He fears to awaken the sailors sleeping on the deck for the coolness.

Zoh nods sharply, glances back over her shoulder as if someone is following her, then she urges Jed towards the bow of the ship, gesturing at the Stars that fill the Sky in a river. Zoh seems to be trying to divert Jed's attention.

"What's up, Zoh? You as confused as me?"

There's a muffled thumping sound, back towards the stern, and in the faint starlight, Jed sees Koffee Olay dragging a large sack out of her old cabin and towards the railing, where she tries

to throw it overboard. The sack must be heavy because Koffee cannot lift it over the railing, no matter how she wrestles with it.

Jed murmurs, "Reckon I'll help Koffee."

Zoh clings to Jed and shakes her head violently, but Jed pulls free of her. "What's the matter with you, Zoh? I do believe events has made you balmy."

Jed strides off down the deck, followed by Zoh. He says to Koffee, who's puffing away, with one end of the sack up on the railing, "Need a hand, Koffee?"

Koffee must not of heard him come up, because she jumps like a spooked critter.

Jed bends down to lift the sack and discovers it to be far more unwieldy than he expected. It feels like it has stones in it. Zoh comes darting to help, but the cursed thing slips from their hands like a fish, offering no purchase.

Jed whispers to Koffee, "You got the Captain in here, Koffee?" She does not laugh.

A Boot stomps down from the upper deck. There's one Boot and one sailor on watch at the helm all night long, in case a breeze arises. The Boot says, "What the fuck you niggers up to? Some kinda mischief, I'd bet!"

Koffee babbles, "I...I was just cleaning out my old cabin. I got some trash to toss overboard, but we can't lift it. Please, Sir...you men are so strong ..."

Jed fumbles with the middle of the sack. It's as cumbersome as a dead body. He says, "Koffee, why's it gotta be in a sack, anyway? Just open it up and toss the stuff over a bit at a time!"

Zoh surreptitiously kicks Jed in the shin. Koffee looks so mad that Jed fears she might toss *him* over the rail, single handed. She

snarls at Jed, "It's women's unmentionables, Mister Jed! You wanna go pawing through that?"

Jed and the Boot glance at each other, suddenly united by ignorance. Jed grabs the sack in the middle and heaves. The Boot huffs with annoyance and picks up one end of the sack himself. Koffee and Zoh both grab the other end, and the four of them get the slippery sack over the railing. It splashes into the Sea below and vanishes.

The Boot says, "Now git your asses back where you belong, and don't lemme hear no more outta you tonight!"

Koffee mumbles, "Yessir. Thanks for your help, Sir!" She brushes the sweaty hair back from her forehead, and her hand trembles violently. She gives Jed a murderous glance. The Boot goes back to the upper deck, the two women go off to their pallots and Jed does the same, but he only dozes fitfully. At long last the Sky turns gray to the East, and the Stars retreat.

Let the end of all things begin now.

Jed gets up and does his business. The eastern horizon turns to flaming salmon-pink with impossible smears of translucent blue so pure it brings tears to a man's eye. The disc of the Sun peeks over the edge of the Earth and spears its lambent promise...or is it a threat?...across the Sea all the way from Africa. All over the ship, bodies walk, bodies talk. Cook clatters in the galley, fixing breakfast. Sailors hunch over the railing. The Captain, pulling on his frayed coat of office, comes on deck, his cold pipe clamped in his teeth. The Boot on watch makes his report. No wind at all, Sir! No course set, Sir! The sailor at the helm shrugs, spits and idly spins the wheel, to keep in practice. Koffee and Zoh serve the men coffee and breakfast. Cook has really gone all out on breakfast. Instead of the usual huge pot of gruel, this morning there's flapjacks smothered in molasses. Jed can't imagine how

hot it must be in the galley for Cook, frying all those flapjacks. Oddly, there's no sign of Maria la Fea. Jed wonders about this.

The reason is soon explained.

As the sailors sit drinking their second hit of coffee, Cook, Zoh and Koffee Olay come out on deck, walking purposefully, as if a team. Koffee goes to the raised hatch cover and climbs up on it. Her body shakes like a leaf in a storm, Jed can see, and she has trouble standing, but for Cook's steadying hand. What the heck?

Koffee takes a visibly deep breath, chokes, takes another deep breath, clenches both her fists and yells out with a voice that reaches every corner, "Listen up! Listen up, all of you! I have a confession to make!"

Jed's stomach turns to stone...he knew something was coming! He knew it!

Koffee points up to where the Captain stands listening and watching, as usual. She says loud, "Yesterday, that man up there, our leader, told me that he intended to give Maria la Fea, a child, a young girl innocent of men and men's ways, as a plaything for you sailors, this morning. Last night, I vowed that none of you would ever lay a hand upon that pure soul."

Koffee nearly falls, and Cook reaches up to steady her. Koffee grasps at her throat, gags, then forges on, her voice raspy.

"Last night, after our dear Captain fell asleep in his usual oblivion, I snuck into his cabin and stole one of his precious jugs of Sugar Island rum. Yes, he has rum! Even though you sailors got none!"

The sailors growl angrily and the Captain bellows in rage, but Koffee simply raises a hand for quiet. The silence that falls is the silence of a blade pressed to the throat.

Koffee says, "I took the rum back to my old cabin and prepared a drink. I have dried leaves of the poisonous oleander bush. A

single leaf can kill a grown man. I crumbled six leaves into a mug of the rum, and left it to brew. Then, I woke up Maria la Fea, and enticed her into my web. We shared a mug of untainted rum. I don't speak her language, but we taught each other songs whose words we could not follow. We giggled like naughty children in the night. When she was wobbly, I gave her the other mug. The one laced with oleander."

Everything goes dark on him. Jed realizes he's collapsed onto the deck. From a long way off, he hears Koffee's voice intone the curse.

"Maria said she was sleepy, and she lay back on the bed. She passed out quickly, and soon after, I determined that her breath and heartbeat was gone. Her face was calm and relaxed. She never once felt pain. I lay beside her for a long time, to make sure of it. There was no mistake. No mistake! Because...if I'd made a mistake..."

Koffee loses her control for a moment, but then she gathers her strength.

"When her body was cold, I got up. I managed to get her into my bedding sack. I added two cannonballs that Mister Jed had been kind enough to provide. Then I dragged the sack out the door, intending to throw it overboard. But I couldn't lift it over the railing, even with the help of Zoh and Jed, who was out on the deck unable to sleep. At last we had to get the help of that man there..." Koffee points to one of the Boots, who cringes. "...to throw the sack overboard. Maria la Fea's body now rests at the bottom of the Sea, but I believe her soul rests in Heaven. As for my soul...well..."

Heaven? All hell breaks loose. Every sailor shouts, some of them shake their fists at Koffee. A sailor tries to climb up on the hatch cover to get at Koffee, other sailors drag him down. The

Captain shouts, even Boots shout. Only one Boot does not shout. He looks like he wishes he was on any ship but this one.

Then once again, Zoh stands up. Soliciting Cook's help, she clambers awkwardly up on the hatch cover with Koffee, who holds out a hand. Zoh ignores Koffee's hand and stands up, balancing, tensing. Zoh quivers, she's a flame, a sword of retribution. Koffee blanches...and shuts her eyes! With all the strength of her scrub-toughened arms, Zoh strikes Koffee down, strikes Koffee across the face so hard that Koffee stumbles right off the hatch cover, down to the deck, possibly to break some bones...except that Cook breaks her fall, as smoothly as if he was ready.

The sailors cheer and stamp their feet.

But quick as a hummingbird's flight, Zoh jumps down to embrace Koffee. The two women lie on the deck sobbing in each other's arms.

The Captain shouts, "Boy...the whip! Get my whip!"

The cabin boy appears from nowhere, "Yessir. The lash...or the cat, Sir?"

The Captain pauses for only one breath. "I'll not use the cat on any woman, no matter what she done. I ain't no savage, like some, by God! Get the lash!"

"Yessir!" The boy dashes off and returns in a blink with a wood-handled leather whip.

The Captain turns on the poor quivering Boot. "You! You went and threw the girl overboard, so you can do the whipping!"

The Boot quavers, "Wasn't *me* pizened her! It was *her* done it!"

The Captain says, "Do what I say! Twelve, laid on solid!"

The boy runs over and gives the lash to the Boot, who takes it like it was red hot. Without being told, sailors yank Koffee from Zoh's arms, rip Koffee's dress to the waist, and tie her arms about

a mast, so that Koffee's naked back is exposed. The whipping Boot comes shakily forward, with all the sailors clustered about and egging him on, blood lust in their faces. The Boot raises the whip, and...

And Jed hurtles forward and grabs ahold of Koffee from behind, so as to cover her with his own body. "Go on!", he shouts at the mob. "Go on! Do your worst, and may the gods damn you all! Who *really* killed the girl? Tell me, if you got the guts to speak the truth! Tell me who *really* killed the girl!"

Koffee turns her swollen face and hisses over her shoulder, "Get the hell off me, Mister Jed! God damn it, you can't spit without screwing something up!"

This takes the wind out of Jed's sails. Completely disrupted, he falls back.

The sailors drool at this developement. Perhaps Jed is gonna fuck up and get hisself whipped too! But the Captain is more subtle. He looks down at Jed and proclaims, "So, nigger, you wanna play, too! Alright, here's the rules of the deal. If my mate whips this slut, she gets twelve lashes. But nigger, if *you* whip her, and each stroke draws blood...then she only gets six!"

The sailors love it. A growl of assent goes up. Nice move, Cap! The Captain leers, pleased with his own ingenuity.

Jed nods feebly, a pawn un-knighted on a tilting field. Once more all his efforts at doing good have only burned his own hands. The Boot, relieved, hands Jed the lash. The wooden handle is warm and slick with sweat. Koffee's back...the target, the dream...is brown and smooth as honey. Here Jed longed to touch...now his touch will leave scars.

Koffee turns her bruised face to Jed and grins! "Here's your chance, big man! You wanted me punished, didn't you? For being a whore? Yes, you did! And I warned you that I'm good at giving

men what they want, Mister Jed! I warned you!" Koffee Olay, harlot supreme, lashed to the mast of a slave ship and nearly naked for punishment, she puts her head back and laughs, loud and long.

Jed raises his puppet arm in a time slowed to molasses crawl and a voice whispers, *Her mind done snapped from what she done. She won't even feel it...but I will!*

A flash...the memory of another time Jed whipped someone he loved...Ayotunde, in the African village where she foolishly kissed Oleon in front of the Oba who believe her married to Jed alone. That time, he came away from it partly paralysed...but then, Ayotunde did nothing wrong, really! Not so in this case! Koffee confessed to *the murder of a girl...a girl innocent of any crime!*

Yes, that's how to get through this! This here insolent and lovely flesh is not a beloved woman, this here sarcastic bitch is no sacred mystery, the work of the gods...this here is a murdering whore, the destroyer of dreams!

Jed's avenging arm comes down, the lash swishes through the air.

THE DEMON, BIG AS LIFE AND TWICE AS NATURAL

But Koffee *does* feel the lash! How could she not? She cannot bite off the screams, and at Jed's fourth blow, she sags in the ropes, unknowing. But having once begun, he must go on. After the sixth slash, Jed hurls the lash over the side of the ship. Then he takes both hands, digs his fingernails into the skin of his own face, and rips downward. Blood and tears mingle on his hands. His righteous resolve has failed him. It was not truth, but only weakness, the Demon's work in disguise. He could not flay his love away.

The Captain, leaning on the rail, is amused. He says, "Nigger, that weren't wise, to toss the lash. I got a hunch you'll regret that deeply, afore we makes port." He knocks the cold ash from his pipe and pulls out his tobacco pouch. "Coal, Boy!"

Jed ignores the man, as he helps Cook and Zoh untie Koffee and lay her on her pallot, on her stomach. The sailors wander off, the show's over.

Cook says to Zoh, "I's heard the sailors swear by washing a wound twice a day with plain sea water. The salt helps, apparently."

Zoh shrugs and nods. Neither of them look to Jed. Cook quickly pulls up a bucket of sea water and takes it in the galley to warm on the cook stove, then he returns. Zoh wipes Koffee's forehead with a damp rag. Koffee's eyelids flutter. Zoh signs to Cook as if drinking something, then she makes her head wobble, crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue. Cook nods in understanding, goes into Koffee's old cabin and returns, hiding the stolen jug of the Captain's rum under his shirt, and carrying a mug. Cook starts to pour rum in the mug, but Jed says, "That there mug ain't the one that had oleander in it, is it?"

Cook looks at Zoh oddly, then he throws the mug in the Sea, and goes to the galley to get a clean one. Zoh tries to help Koffee to sit, awkwardly, but when Jed moves to help, Zoh actually bats his hand away. So!

Jed angrily says, "What else could I of done, Zoh? What else?"

Zoh ignores him. Koffee whispers to Zoh, "A man is only a man, love. One more loose cannon." She actually laughs!

Cook comes back with a mug. He and Zoh give Koffee a sip of rum. Koffee gasps and says, "Whoa. Burns like hell. Something cut open inside my mouth."

Cook says, "You ain't lost any teeth, has you?"

Koffee explores her mouth. "Nope. All there."

"I reckon you don't want rum."

"Who said that? I'll tilt my head over to one side." By virtue of doing this, Koffee sips her rum. "Whoo! Wicked stuff!"

Cook brings a pot of warm sea water and a rag. He and Zoh gently wash Koffee's back. Cook says, "Is we hurting you, Koffee?"

"It ain't the most fun I had today."

Cook returns the joke. "What was the most fun you had today?"

"Seeing the look on Mister Jed's face when the mate gave him the whip."

Nobody responds. Nobody looks at Jed. He might as well not be there.

Cook says to Koffee, "You reckon you can sleep on your side or your belly?"

Koffee says, "Cook, you telling a harlot she can't lie on her back? Gimme a break! Do I tell you to find a recipe for sea water?"

Jed says to Koffee, "I hoped you done gave that up, now that you sleep out on the deck!"

Koffee jeers, "Same old Mister Jed! He never stops, does he, Zoh? And I hoped *you* gave up on the holy chorus, Mister Jed! So we all remain the same! Becalmed!" Koffee glances at Jed. "What the fuck happened to your face?"

Jed realizes he must look like a Demon his own self, with the bloody scratches he inflicted. He turns away.

Koffee waves her mug of rum like a drunk in a tavern. "You trying for the tribal scar look? Whadda you reckon, Zoh? It's him all over, ain't it?"

Zoh ignores Koffee and Jed both.

Koffee won't let up. For a woman just whipped, she sure is irritating. "Besides, what would I be if I wasn't a whore? We is all little sausages stuffed full of our various expertise!"

Cook says, "How about a wife?"

Koffee stares at Cook, then at Zoh. "What? Who?"

Cook takes Koffee's free hand. "How 'bout we both drop anchor in Baltimore and get hitched?"

Zoh gives a little gasp, grins, nods enthusiastically then hugs Koffee...gently.

Koffee's face goes pale, then flushed. She holds out the rum to Zoh. "Here. Take this. I must be drunk, I's hearing things." She gives Cook a long look. "Sorry, you caught me by surprise, Cook. You...right now I feel like I'll never tell you no. That shows I better..." She looks all about. "Oh, the Sea is so pretty! I love you all! I am free, free at last! I wonder...what happens now? What happens now, Zoh?" She takes a deep breath and stretches her arms to the Sun. "Ouch. I swear, Cook, I'd kiss you if my mouth didn't hurt. Gimme some time here, okay? With, um, your question."

Cook says, "I's a patient man."

Jed's feeling an overload of second hand rapture here and he can't take any more, so he gets up and goes down to the gun deck to do his daily stint on the bilge pump. He wanted to say to his friends that it wasn't him who smacked Koffee in the face so hard her mouth got cut. He wanted to say that if he hadn't taken the damn whip, the Boot woulda given Koffee twice as many hits. He wanted to say he feels like everybody dislikes him. But instead, he goes below decks.

Jed wishes he could pump out his feelings as easily as he pumps out the bilge. His heart is so sore he can scarcely breathe. First the death of Maria la Fea. Then, the pain he caused Koffee with the lash. And now, he's shunned by his friends and his wife...unjustly!

Right behind these feelings comes a wash of jealousy. Koffee and Cook are in love, even if Koffee won't admit it yet, probably 'cause the terrible events have burnt out her mind. It's clear she ain't playing with a full deck. Why else would she be in some kind of exultation, smiling and joking, so soon after confessing to the murder of Maria la Fea? Poor woman!

It's clear why Cook offered to marry Koffee! She'll need someone to care for her...maybe for a long time. Maybe for the rest of her life. A rose doubly tattered...first by being a whore, second by turning murderess and going batty.

Not that pity is a good reason to marry. The union is probably doomed from the get-go.

And what about Koffee's crime? Was it justified? Here Jed's own mind reels, skips away. If Maria had been used by the sailors...Jed shudders. A young girl? Talk about your permanent damage! Or maybe even death! Maybe even *better off* dead!

It's all too much. Of course, if Jed is really honest here, really comes clean with himself, in the privacy of this hidden

gloom...he understands perfectly why his friends shun him. They shun him because he's supposed to be the Man, he's Bodua the Protector, his mother said so, the village of Lagos confirmed his appointment at his marriage ceremony, he's supposed to fix the world, and now he ain't even protecting shit. Folks fall left and right, and he gets diddly, some homemade scratches down his face that only warrant Koffee's ridicule. He gingerly feels the self-inflicted scratches down his face, and his finger is still bloody. He must look like a savage. Idly, he hopes he'll be scarred.

Jed pulls the amulet from about his neck, given him by his mother before he left Lagos, the small carved statue of a pregnant woman with a void in her abdomen, the so-called Goddess of Beginnings. Suddenly that hole in her stomach makes sense to him, on some deep intuitive level he could never explain.

Another thing. Here Cook done handed Jed the weapon to defeat the Demon, like his mother wants...books, telling the truth about the Yoruba People for the world to read...but it's useless. What nonsense, to imagine he could escape from this White man's world, return to Lagos and help his father make books! He'd sooner fly!

The pump sucks air. Fully aggravated, Jed climbs the ladder back up to the deck. When he pokes his head out of the cool cavern below, the Sun whacks him with a blast. Soon the ship will be a floating kettle of stewing, angry, frustrated men. The brazing Sky is so still and thick that Jed feels like he has to move about or end up breathing in the same air he just exhaled, and smelling his own sweat. Koffee lies on her pallot under the sailcloth awning where the women sit to sew, and Zoh perches soliciously by her, wiping Koffee's brow occasionally with a damp rag. Koffee's eyes are closed, Jed cannot tell if she is asleep or awake. Probably

drunk. Jed wishes he was drunk. He wishes he was a shark, and all the sailors done fell into the Sea in front of him.

The day settles into dull endurance. There's not a cloud to mercifully dim the Sun, not a breeze to bestir the sails or cool the sweat-drenched skin. Every surface of the ship is hot to the touch. The sailors pull up buckets of sea water, dip their shirts in the water and wrap their heads like so many mushroom men. The Captain takes off his faded blue coat and drapes it like a tent over his head for shade. Boots unabashedly shed clothing, but bare untanned skin is worse than clothed, first turning red then risking blisters in the relentless rays. Zoh often dips a rag in a bucket of sea water and mops the sweat off herself and Koffee, who lies in a groggy doze.

Cook bestirs himself and does his prostrations up in the bow of the ship, but the heat soon defeats him. Koffee wakes up and asks Zoh for more rum, which Zoh hides from the Captain's gaze. Zoh has finished sewing on the dress that was intended for Maria la Fea. Now she's sewing a big floppy hood thing onto one of Cook's coats.

Jed, sitting lethargically on the hatch cover with Zoh, says to Cook, "How come you need that hood on your coat?"

Cook shrugs. "In case it rains. It could rain any time now."

Zoh nods sagely in agreement, glances up at the cloudless Sky then she frowns and sews even faster. Jed is amazed to realize that Zoh has just acted out one of her subtle wordless jokes! Apparently her mood has turned about completely...at least, where Cook is concerned! Who's to understand women? Maria la Fea lies cold in the Sea, the ship is becalmed, running out of food and water, the sailors are going to slaughter everybody...but Koffee and Zoh are having fun!

Maybe Zoh's been hitting the rum, too.

The sailors huddle in the shade of a mainsail, sitting on whatever they can find and playing their endless card games. As the Sun nears noon, the dangling sails only give a sliver of shade, and the occasional quarrels over the cards become more frequent. Jed mutters to Cook, "The Captain should give them sailors some kinda work, to pass the time."

Cook says, "Yeah, but what?"

Jed shrugs. "Furl the sails, then set 'em again. Or launch the little boat and take turns rowing 'round the ship in circles."

"I wonder if they could pull the ship toward Baltimore with the rowboat."

"Slow going. Very slow going."

"Way I hear it, there's rivers in the Sea that we can't see, that carries things along, but very slow."

"Hey. Maybe them rivers in the Sea will carry us to Baltimore!"

Cook ponders. "Could be. Could be. Only trouble is, we'll starve first. Or more likely, run outta water."

"Here we sit surrounded by water and we might die of thirst."

"I done heard that where you got mountains, big rivers of frozen water...like that hail...slowly creep down the mountain side, and eventually reach the Sea and fall in and float away, and in some parts of the oceans up North, you can spot these hunks of froze water floating 'bout, and the froze water in 'em is clean and pure to drink. And sometimes there's animals up there that ride on the hunks of froze water, like they was on a boat."

"I don't reckon they's in a hurry to get somewhere."

Zoh puts her sewing down and makes another of her fast flurries of signs, too fast for Jed to follow. But Zoh's looking at Cook, not him, and to Jed's amazement and irritation, Cook nods his head and says to Zoh, "That's true."

Irked, Jed says, "*What's true?*"

"Zoh pointed out that what appears slow to us might be fast to other creatures, like those huge fish we see way down in the water."

This is too fucking much. So Zoh has only known Cook a month or two, but he can follow Zoh's signing, where Jed can't? Fuming without reason, Jed goes to stand by the railing alone. He didn't mind that Ayotunde had to interpret Zoh for him, back home, but damned if he's gonna have *Cook* tell him what his wife says.

As noon approaches, shade evaporates. Cook goes in the galley to plan out the meal. There's a dispute at the card game, and sailors growl back and forth. One sailor throws down his cards and paces about the deck. He first grumbles to himself, but then bitches louder and louder in an angry voice and waves his arms as if to punish the air that refuses to move the ship. The other sailors watch this man warily. Still muttering, he goes to the water jug and fills a mug.

From up on the raised deck, the Captain speaks around his pipe. "Go easy on the water. Soon we gonna have to ration."

The agitated sailor gapes up at the Captain, then he insolently drinks his mug of water, wipes his mouth, walks off and begins his tirade anew, using a belaying pin to punctuate his remarks. He rails at the sailing life, this terrible voyage, this cursed ship, the hellish weather, as he strides about. Up and down the deck he goes, whacking hard with the belaying pin at any object he passes.

Another sailor yells at the first sailor, "Shut up, man! You ain't helping none with that shit!" A third sailor sounds off in agreement. A growl goes up from the other seated men. The cards are forgotten.

The first sailor yells back, "Fuck you, man! I'll say what I want, and I'll drink all the water I want!" He glares up at the Captain on the upper deck. The Captain straightens up slowly to his full height, and takes the pipe from his mouth. The Boots, who were lounging in sleepily lethargy, come awake and move toward the railing.

A fourth sailor chimes in, loud and indignant. "Yeah, so you'd screw the rest of us?"

The first sailor whacks the ship railing viciously. "What the hell difference does it make? We's all gonna die here! We's all gonna stew like rats in an oven! Better to slice all our throats and git it over quick!"

This angry sailor happens to be passing Koffee where she lies on her pallot, and the damned man spits on her! He shouts, "And now, the Captain's whore done pizened our sweetheart!" Then he grins wolfishly and snarls, "Maybe if there wasn't so many fucking people drinking it, we'd have enough water! Maybe we needs to thin out the crowd!"

The blood surges up in Jed's head, his vision darkens with a contagious rage. All he sees is this insolent White bastard. Jed gets to his feet, bounces, hunches. The ancient beast comes to life, ready, charged.

Another sailor leaps up and yells at the first sailor, "Stop it! Stop it, man! You's making me crazy!"

Suddenly all the sailors are on their feet and yelling, waving their fists.

The Captain shouts, but no one listens. To Jed's dismay, he sees the Captain take the key to the gun room from about his neck and give it to a nearby Boot. The Boots as one man hurry to open the little closet and take out the guns.

Flames are engulfing the ship. Could not Zoh understand this? Or perhaps it was because she *did* understand, that she does what she does. Anyhow, Zoh stands up now, for the third time, as the Sun reaches high noon.

Zoh stands up right in front of the striding, cursing sailor who first started the chaos. The man stops in his tracks, a curse dying on his lips.

Like a bonfire quenched with a bucket of water, silence falls instantly, and the crew freezes, every eye on Zoh, the idol of every sailor. But it's no peaceful lull! It's the eye of the storm!

Zoh lays her palm on the cheek of the raving sailor before her. He jumps as if burned, and his eyes go wide with shock.

Zoh takes this man's hand and pulls him toward the raised hatch, where she sits down. As if tranced, the man lets her lead him. Zoh looks up into his eyes, and smiles.

For a long moment, the sailor stares down at Zoh, seated before him. Probably in complete confusion, he glances at his comrades, but finds no guidance there. He licks his lips, stretches out his other trembling hand, and touches Zoh's cheek. Zoh smiles yet, and now she presses the sailor's palm against her own cheek. *Yes. It's okay, what you want, what you need. I understand. It's okay.*

Let me help you.

Zoh always could speak, when the need arose.

All over the ship, there's a gasp, carved statues that tremble. Jed looks desperately for Cook, but Cook's in the galley. Jed even looks to Koffee, but she sleeps, drunk. There's only him and Zoh. Jed goes to Zoh where she sits and he says, *"Zoh, has you lost your mind?"*

Zoh never once breaks her gaze with the sailor standing before her, nor does she loose the man's hand from her cheek, but she

holds out her other arm rigid toward Jed, her palm turned against him like a wall, and once more, her meaning is clear.

Stop, Husband! Let me handle this!

The sailor snorts and says to Jed, "Git lost, nigger! You had your chance!"

Zoh turns to the job at hand. One by one, she unbuttons the sailor's trousers, where the trouble lurks, the messy lust that Zoh will soon wash away to purify the ship once more. The man moans and shakes from head to foot. Behind, one of the watching sailors screams out, sharp.

Then the Beast in Jed roars and pounces, strikes the Zoh-whore down where she sits, so she reels and tumbles in a heap on the deck. Jed-Beast grabs the stunned sailor, Zoh's lover boy, grabs the man by throat and belt the Jed-Beast does, lifts this sailor high in the air and *throws* the man at the pack of pressing sailors. Four sailors go down beneath the tossed one and then they are on him, a stinking sweating wave of bodies, bearing Jed-Beast down in a crush to the deck. Buried there, Jed-Beast roars aloud, gathers up his rage and explodes upward and sailors are tossed off like so many misbehaving children. Jed-Beast rolls and crouches and a sailor kicks at him but he grabs an ankle jerks and fells the man stunned on the hard boards. Two more men both leap on Jed-Beast's back at once like leeches and he laughs, old wrestling habit somersaults him forward and both men fly over his head down on planks. Jed-Beast springs to the rack of belaying pins by the mast, exultation flooding him now like the most potent drink, and taking a heavy pin in each hand and slashing left and right, he charges bellowing at the sailor mob that flees before him like birds before a stooping hawk. Jed-Beast catches a sailor in the gut with a belaying pin and the man screams and goes down. He catches another man in the arm and something cracks. The very

ship itself trembles under the fleeing feet of White men. Jed-Beast spreads his own Black feet firm on this *his* ship now, his conquered ground, lifts his crude weapons to the Sky, howls in triumph, and not a sailor dares to stand up in his face nor even the crowd of them, no, they tremble and hide, one and all.

So much for the White boss.

From behind...*wham!*

Jed musta been out for only moments 'cause the sailors are tying his hands and feet when he comes 'round, and sailors are fast with ropes. He shakes his aching head, the whole world is a blur, a mist. The treacherous rowboat oar lies broken beside him.

A sailor proudly holds up a hangman's noose, in good Manila he tied it, yellow and new. The other sailors grunt eagerly, and in a trice, the noose is about Jed's neck, the other end of the rope tossed over a yard-arm, and a dozen eager hands yank the rope tight, jerking hard on Jed's neck...

Boom! A gun goes off. The sailors freeze and hunch like chilluns caught stealing candy. The Captain's voice... "*If you blighters wanna git paid, I need that nigger to sell in Baltimore, and I can't sell no corpse!*"

The rope about Jed's neck doesn't slacken. He's choking. None of the sailors yield. They want revenge, and at the moment, they don't seem concerned about getting paid.

The Captain bellows again. "*Whip him now, and I can sell him later. Use the cat on him.*"

The sailors look at each other, nod and grin. The cat! Now we's talking business! The rope about Jed's neck slacks. Jed dares hope. Koffee got whipped, and it wasn't that bad. Just drink some rum later.

The sailor who first ranted, Zoh's lover boy, the one Jed tossed through the air, he runs to get this cat from the Captain, and soon returns. In his hands, a wooden handle, fitted with many leather thongs at one end like the tail of a horse, and every leather thong ends in a small steel weight, sharp and glinting in the sunlight.

This sailor slashes at the mast with the cat, and from the seasoned wood, splinters fly like sparks.

In a blink the other sailors lash Jed to a mast, just as Koffee was lashed before him, his back exposed. The sailor with the cat laughs, gloating. Jed only has time to whisper a prayer for strength to Ogun, the strength of iron and the feeling of iron, that feels nothing at all...a hush...a swish...

AHHHHH....

when the ropes are cut he falls into a pool of his own shit and piss and blood and vomit

pain like flames of hell

soft hands drag him fumble with the ropes

woman sobbing my whipping was like mosquito bites compared to compared to

get water we gotta wash him Allah help him Allah help us all

get the pants off they is ruint

hands tugging

What we gonna do what we gonna do

ain't nothing we can do 'cept wash him with sea water

is he gonna die is he

that sounds pretty good right now

yeah...die and go home...go home...oh...yeah...remember the surf on the sunny beach that day that blessed day...at lagos...yeah, back home...how the grasses in the dunes whispered and danced...i was the sun and the wind that day it was never better...

*them little birds that scurry so fast amongst the waves you cant see
no legs yeah always made me laugh
ah yeah we was happy then life was ourn joy was ourn yeah
i was just a boy in the market remember standing in market watching
princess zoh tend her stall under them palm trees so cool
next time around i'll talk to her
next time around i'll go to her easy and cool and i'll just say hi
princess how's it going by the gods but you sure is a looker princess
reckon i cant help but fall for you yeah cant help but fall for you girl cant
help it a'tall
would you care for a pepper fry prince?*

HEALING

The voyage wears on. Like a vast apology, the Earth turns and turns, the Sun goes down and down, and the Winds return once more to carry the ship on to Baltimore. After the whipping, the sailors let up on Jed, more or less. There is work to do now, to set sails, and the Wind dispells the fumes of anger and makes the Sun's heat bearable.

Koffee heals, and every night she sleeps chastely on the open deck with Napoleon the ship cat. Zoh heals, no teeth are lost from Jed's blow, although her eye on that side looks terrible for days. Jed's body begins to heal, although it's gonna take some time, and he'll never be as strong, never move as smoothly, never have a day completely free of pain.

Three times a day Zoh and Koffee wash Jed's wounds with warm sea water, and often he lies with the Sun on his back until it gets too hot. His wounds scab over without the infection that might have killed him. Jed spends his time fishing and pacing up and down the ship. He talks to no-one. On the third day, to the exasperation of the two women, he goes down and gingerly pumps at the bilge water, which starts his back to bleeding again. But he must work, for a man who gives up on his work, gives up on his life.

Jed's father Korede would want Jed to pump the bilge even blind, with only one arm left and hobbling on a wooden leg like a pirate.

What fish Jed catches he takes to Cook, but the two men no longer talk of serious matters. Not that Jed is hostile to Cook, who is a good man, a friend. It's simply that Jed now knows that talk is useless. All these grand notions of books to save the African people! What nonsense! The Demon done heard all 'bout books

long ago, Jed's sure, and the Demon was probably amused. Actually, the Demon probably wrote up books, giving a demonic view of the world, and teaching folks how to be Demons they own selves!

Zoh and Koffee still sew. They embellish the dress for Maria la Fea that'll never be worn, being too skinny for either Zoh or Koffee. Perhaps the two women hate to leave a good job unfinished. And they alter Cook's coat to add a large hood, for some reason. Zoh scrubs occasionally to keep her hand in. Jed dreads that Zoh will revert back to the suicidal and despondent mood that she languished in, before Maria la Fea came along, but this does not happen. Actually, Zoh, Koffee and Cook seem to be in a continual excitement over some secret bekknownst only to the three of them. They huddle and whisper often, thus acerbating Jed's alienation.

But when Jed gets a fleeting urge to join his friends and his wife, to casually sit down with them and nonchalantly say something like, *Hey, folks, what's up? What's so interesting?*...then he recalls that Koffee has confessed to poisoning the innocent Maria la Fea. He remembers how Zoh blamed him for Koffee's whipping. He relives the sight of his wife Zoh, busily unbuttoning the pants of a drooling White sailor, right before his eyes. He blames Zoh for being the spark that caused his own whipping. And a door slams shut in his brain, before he even takes the first step toward socializing.

Jed hurts bad and he's pissed off and in no mood for small talk.

At least being alienated gives Jed has a lot of time to ponder, as he sits alone at the rail with baited line running through his fingers, gazing off across the Sea. Like creatures from the deep, images surface in his mind. The first monster to appear is fear for his damaged body. He tentatively moves his shoulders and arms,

twists gently, bends sideways, always hindered by stabs of pain. Will he heal? Will his raw flesh rot before he's healed? And if he does heal, what of his strength? A cripple has short fare as a blacksmith. Is he to arrive in Baltimore shorn of a profession and helpless to even work as a laborer? He breaks out in a sweat of apprehension, even in the cooling breeze.

But then, as if to compensate for the fear, he recalls with pride how he routed the whole damn crew, with only two belaying pins! Man, did them sailors scatter! Jed laughs to himself, and a warmth floods his chest. That'll learn 'em to have respect! Weaklings! All bluster and no guts! Their only strength lies in their numbers...and even that didn't help the pathetic souls when he got good and riled!

But then his cup tilts again, and he recalls the humiliation...how he fouled himself, how he screamed out in pain. And worse of all, how he struck Zoh in his rage. Even though she did deserve it! But still, no matter what the crime, a man has no call to hit a woman. It's a weak and cowardly thing to do. His mother would spit on him for it.

Jed straightens his sore back as best he can, and makes some vows to himself. He might be beaten again, but never again will he foul himself! Never again will he scream from the lash, no matter how bad the pain! Never again will he strike any woman, especially a woman he loves! And never again will he kiss the ass of a White man! Jed sees now plain, that in spite of the curses and blows he got from sailors, still he had yearned for their affection...like any dog! Never again! From this day forth, he'll stand proud and tall in spite of their abuse...even to death! But if death be the cost, then at least he'll die proud, and a man!

Somewhat mollified by these musings, Jed falls into a reverie. He didn't sleep well the night before, because of the pain. The Sea

is beautiful right now, the wind kicks up little curling waves that stand out brilliant white on the blue-gray waters. Cook has explained to Jed that it's the Wind blowing that causes the larger waves also, but it takes a steady wind over several days from the same quarter to do so. Cook claimed that in a big storm, a hurricane, waves can be enormous, able to wash right over the ship. Jed ponders this image. It's pretty scary. He's glad they'll be in Baltimore soon. He can do without the hurricane experience and waves washing over the ship.

Something about big waves prompts a notion. If the sailors abuse Jed because of *their* Demon, is it then *Jed's* Demon at work, to hate them, and to attack them as he did only days ago? Jed doesn't picture *himself* acting like a Demon. Of course, he did kick some ass, the other day, but that was in self-defense.

Well, actually he started the fight, so it wasn't really self-defense. Jed rubs his head. This is too complicated, and now he can't relax. He feels guilty. His pleasant reverie evaporates.

Jed takes a deep breath and gives up. He's too tired and sore to fight any more. A nasty little voice whispers that perhaps he fucked up, when he attacked the sailors. Perhaps it was he who caused the whole damn mess the other day. Perhaps...perhaps he really did act like a Demon, his own self. Perhaps the whipping he got was his own fault.

Jed's Pa once told Jed, long ago in Lagos, that it takes a big man to defend those one loves, but it takes an even bigger man, to admit to a mistake.

But what Jed's wife Zoh did, with the sailor...unbuttoning the sailor's trousers, for all to see...how could Jed have ignored that, and still remain a man?

Something Cook told Jed, about Angels, divine Beings who go around helping Allah. Cook said that Angels might appear crazy, or even evil, to human eyes.

So how then would an Angel differ from a Demon? And why is that important?

Jed groans and rubs his head some more. Nothing makes sense.

There's a tap on Jed's shoulder, and he gingerly turns around. It's Zoh. She gestures at his back to see if he's ready for another douse of warm sea water on his lacerations. She has the pot of warm water that Cook heats on the stove. Jed says, "Sure. Lemme wind in my line." Jed quickly takes in the fish line...devoid of both fish and bait...takes off his shirt and swings around so Zoh can reach his back.

Zoh very gently applies the warm water to Jed's back. It helps the pain. He glances over his shoulder. Her face is still swollen on one side. "How's your face, Zoh?"

She shrugs.

By the gods but Jed loves her! He hates it that the two of them have not gotten along well lately. Maybe talk might help. Honest talk. He lays it on the line. "Zoh...the other day...was you in love with that sailor you favored?"

Zoh stops washing Jed's back, hawks up a gob and spits on the deck.

"I see. Then why did you...you know. Take his hand, and...mess with his pants and all?"

Zoh makes a sweeping gesture to include the whole ship. Then she presses her two fists together with all her might, scrunches her eyes shut...then she throws her arms out wide, a release of pent-up force.

"You figured things was gonna blow up."

Zoh nods. And of course, things *did* blow up...because of Jed. Jed squirms. "Zoh...what would you of done...with that sailor...if I hadn't of...?"

Jed looks full at Zoh for an answer, over his shoulder, and she looks right back at him, her big eyes saying something, but not anything Jed understands. After awhile, he realizes that this is all the answer he's gonna get. Zoh continues washing his back.

Just when Jed gets close to knowing Zoh...he doesn't. He never will. But he can at least be civil.

"Zoh...I's real sorry I hit you. I acted like an asshole."

Zoh throws Jed that same look, open to him, listening. He can tell her anything.

"Zoh...did I do wrong to fight the sailors?"

Now Zoh frowns at him...and Jed instantly understands her! Zoh doesn't want him to doubt himself! She just now told him so!

Jed takes a deep breath. "Yeah, I got you, but Zoh, when I had to whip Koffee, you was mighty pissed at me."

Zoh starts, then she nods ever so slightly, and her eyes are sad. She admits it, but she's sorry! She too made a mistake! Jed can't believe this! She doesn't even have to make a sign and he understands her perfectly!

"Zoh, I need you. I need your love."

Zoh gives Jed that same intent, dark look. She straightens, pushes her hair back and wipes the sweat from her cheek. Then she runs her damp hand lightly along Jed's arm. Lingerin' there.

Jed tumbles into her eyes...and that's fine with him. Her lips are oh, so close, slightly open...he leans into her...

When he swims up, her eyes are closed, her face dazed. She blinks, searches his face, smiles slightly...and takes the water pot back to the galley.

Jed stares after this woman he married, this mystery, this Angel. One moment he understands her even better than speaking, smooth as palm oil pouring, the next moment, she's some other kind of human critter, the next step up the beaches to the gates. And yet, for all the strangeness of her, she bestows direction on Jed's soul. Alone, away from her, he cannot tell right from wrong nor find his way. But within her smile, the most subtle expression on her face gives him more guidance than any religion.

Jed sighs, puts his shirt back on, baits his line and lets it run, makes himself comfortable and drifts off in a reverie once more. Soon, the next concern knocks on his door. Cook has given Jed a weapon to defeat the Demon, it would seem. Books, telling about the Yoruba for the world to read, showing that Jed's people are not savages to be enslaved, but smart, hard-working folks with their own tradition and civilization going back many centuries. What is Jed to do with this nugget of information, this printing technique? He has no details of the process, only the vague general notion from Cook. There's probably enormous difficulties, like the problems his Father and he encountered with the casting of bronze. It didn't seem like Cook had much knowledge of how to actually *print* a book. Cook simply knew it was possible, for somebody somewhere to accomplish.

Almost instantly the solution bursts on Jed. Soon the ship will reach Baltimore. Jed's first goal will be to escape with Zoh so as to join Koffee and Cook, who apparently want to live together in Baltimore. Once free, Jed will find a place for Zoh and him to live, hopefully close to where Koffee sets up her bakery with Cook. Jed will get a job, probably as blacksmith, so as to earn money for food and other bills. Perhaps Zoh could do some easy work too,

until their baby is born. Once the baby is part of the family and things settle down, then Jed will search out a printer! A man...or woman...who knows how to make books! Jed will convince the printer person to hire him on. Jed suspects that printing has to do with metal, and he's good with metal. If Jed works for the printer for a few years, why, he'll learn how to make books!

Once Jed knows how to print books, and has some money saved, and the baby has some growth to it, then he'll buy passage for his family back to Lagos, where he'll teach his Father how to make books, just like he taught his Father the bronze casting technique learned in Igboland.

This vision is so powerful that Jed sits stunned by the promise of it.

His Mother will love it. Why, Jed can easily imagine her writing up stories to be printed, the stories of the old women in the Lagos Market!

Hardly knowing what he's doing, Jed winds in his line, then he stands and contemplates the Sea. Books for Lagos! Books for the Yoruba! Books for the future! He turns away from the rail. The ship is a mist, unreal, a means to an end. The sailors are ghosts, phantoms. Who cares if they beat him? He has a higher concern now. He wanders across the deck like a drunk. Zoh, Koffee and Cook, huddled under the sailcloth and whispering as usual, look up at him, their faces friendly but uncertain.

Cook says, "Hey there, Mister Jed. How's it going?"

Jed smiles at them. "Great, Cook, great. Thanks for asking. And you?"

Cook mumbles, "Oh, I got no complaints. Now that we's moving along and might not starve."

"How's the battle scars healing, Koffee?"

Koffee stares at Jed like a stranger. "I'm fine, Mister Jed. Thank you. Good to see you...getting about."

Jed nods and wanders off, but he hears Koffee whisper behind him, "What the hell was *that* all about?"

Like palm wine, Jed lets his vision mellow for a day, then he tells Zoh about it, while she applies the warm salt water bath to his back. After he gets done, he looks over his shoulder at her. "Zoh, whadda you figure 'bout what I said? Is printing books the way to defeat the White Man's Demon?"

Zoh goes on washing, but finally she faces Jed directly. She makes the duck-quack-quack sign, smiles and nods vigorously.

"It's good for folks to talk."

Zoh nods, then she makes the quack-quack sign with one hand and a fist with the other hand, then she shrugs and looks a question.

"Ah. You ain't sure that stories can be a weapon."

Zoh nods. Then she mimes reading a book, the way she saw Cook reading. Then Zoh closes the imaginary book and looks at Jed, her eyes deep and dark, her face puzzled. She shakes her head and lays both her palms against both of her own cheeks.

"You don't know. It's all unknown territory."

Zoh nods, and looks an apology at Jed. Then, her gaze drifts to where Koffee and Cook sit under the sailcloth awning. Zoh points at them, then she waves her hand to them as if in farewell.

Jed starts. A part of his plan that he missed. "We would have to leave Koffee and Cook behind, if we went back to Lagos."

Zoh nods sadly, and pensively takes Jed's hand.

"But we would see our folks, back home."

Zoh nods, but she's still sad. Gods! She and Jed have love-threads strewn about the world.

“Maybe Koffee and Cook could come to Lagos to set up their bakery. It’d be easy for Koffee to get her Ma, then.”

Zoh shakes her head and flutters her hands and looks up at the Sky. It’s too much uncertainty, too far away.

“Well, let’s take it one step at a time. I gotta follow up this book notion, Zoh. It’s important. But one step at a time. First we needs get to Baltimore, get free, and have our baby.”

Zoh nods and massages her swelling stomach. *Yes. Books are important...and babies are important. One step at a time.*

Jed has no opportunity to try out his new approach to dealing with the sailors...eyes up, stand tall and proud...because not a single sailor abuses him in any way on the remainder of the voyage. Perhaps the sailors recall how he tossed one of their fellows through the air, and have no desire for the same experience.

BALTIMORE

At last, the Sea journey ends. Land, the land of the White Man, is sighted. Flotsam from shore dots the Sea. Gulls land on the railing. There's the smell of trees and rotting things. The ship enters a broad passage between marshes on both banks, a wide and shallow Bay. Ocean swells die away. All day they sail up this vast Bay, as it becomes narrow, with higher ground on the western bank. The Bay reminds Jed of the Lagos Lagoon, but there are no palm trees on the banks, only endless reeds and swamps. Fishing boats appear but no canoes. Another sailing ship passes, headed out very pretty. Flocks of strange birds cry in the Sky. Ducks paddle out of the way. There's the odors of the Earth, a welcome change. Tacking is needed to beat up the Bay against prevailing westerly breezes, so the sailors have their hands full and ignore the Black folks, who sit at the bow and look about.

Soon after entering this wide Bay, a small sailboat approaches right up to the ship, and a shouted conversation takes place between the Captain and a man down on the sailboat. The sailboat fellow offers to send a pilot on board the ship, as pilot up the Bay...for a fee. The Captain hems and haws. He consults with his Boots. Is it a trick of some sort, pirates maybe? Or is there really a chance of running aground or getting lost, as the man claims? Finally the Captain refuses the pilot, and the little sailboat cuts away.

Jed says to Cook, "That there little sailboat is a fine piece of work. Even I can tell that and I don't know nothing. Look how she moves! She dances on the water! Maybe I'll be a fisherman instead of a blacksmith! I always did like boats."

Cook says, "It could be mighty chilly out on the water in winter."

Koffee says, "After this I never want to see water again unless it's hot and either has tea in it, or me!" She laughs.

By this time it's getting dark, and soon the Captain orders the anchor dropped. The wind has died anyhow, so they ride at anchor and pass the night, then get an early start the next morning up this huge bay. All day long they sail North. In the middle of the day, the Captain gets out his navigation tools and sights on the Sun, then he and the Boots unroll the charts and argue. Apparently they decide Baltimore is farther North, because the Captain gives orders to continue up the Bay.

Small sailboats become more numerous. On some, Jed can see men working nets or cages. He never heard of fishing with a cage! Once again the ship passes the night riding at anchor, then proceeds the next morning.

Around mid-day, a fork is reached. The wider Bay goes on up North, and a side branch goes to the West. It's nearly noon, so the Captain lets the ship drift until exact noon when he sights the Sun again. From watching their arm gestures, Jed figures that the Captain and the Boots are pretty sure Baltimore lies down the western branch.

One Boot however argues that it would be wise to ask, since there's a fishing boat right on their intended course. Jed can tell the Captain is irritated. Jed laughs and says to Cook, "The Captain hates to ask anybody anything. He wants to *tell* folks, not ask."

Cook says, "No, he wants to *bellow* at folks, not ask."

The Captain reluctantly goes along with the Boot's sensible suggestion. The helmsman steers the ship close to the fishing boat. To Jed's surprise, two Black fishermen are on this boat, working hard to pull in a large net. Jed says to Cook, "The only

thing the Captain'll hate more than asking folks for directions, is asking *Black* folks for directions!" Cook laughs.

As the ship approaches, the two fishermen shout, for some reason, and pull frantically on the net. The ship comes alongside, and the Captain yells down at the two men, "Hey, boy, call your Captain out on deck."

The Black fisherman yells up at the Captain, "Man, you damn near hit my net! Can't you see them floats? Is you ignorant?"

Well, this is the wrong thing to say to the Captain. His face gets red. "Boy, don't gimme no lip. Call your Captain!"

The two Blacks keep on hauling in the net, which looks to be hard work.

The Captain bellows, "*You hear me, nigger?*"

The fishermen get the net in, then one man looks up angrily at the Captain. "I's the Captain *and* the owner of this boat, and I ain't no boy nor no nigger! I don't know where you come from, Mister, but you got a lot to learn if you plan to live long in this town!"

The Captain says, his voice tight, "Well I'll be damned. A big-mouth nigger that claims to own his pitiful boat! Maybe you need a touch of the cat to teach you some manners...boy!"

The Black fisherman looks up at the Captain. "Fuck you, fat prick. Fuck you."

The Captain is so angry he can't speak. There's nothing he can do to the fisherman, although it's clear he'd like to kill the man. He stomps away and gestures to the Boots to take the ship on up the western channel in search of Baltimore. The two fishermen stand rigid in their boat, watching the ship depart.

Cook says, "This is a bad end to a bad voyage. Them two men memorized every detail of this ship...and we ain't your ordinary ship, neither, so we're easy to spot. I'd bet all my wages that their tale will be all over Baltimore harbor by nightfall. It's shit like this

can get a ship sabotaged.” He glances at Zoh, Koffee, and Jed. “We best make our move as fast as we can, when we get to Baltimore. I wanna get free of this asshole Captain so bad it makes my teeth ache.”

This must be the way to Baltimore, because buildings appear along the banks, with piers sticking out. On the port side, a huge stone fortress sits on a spit of land, with the largest flag Jed has ever seen waving insolently in the breeze. Workmen fix a damaged section of the fort walls, and cannon peek over and through the breastwork. This land has seen war recently...and they’re getting ready to fight again.

Koffee murmurs, “That flag got holes in it.”

Cook says, “Probably from huge moths, big as a dog.”

Zoh mimes darning up the flag.

Jed says, “Maybe they’ll hire you on, Zoh. Looks to be a steady job, patching that there flag.”

A large village heaves into sight. The water comes to an end here at a hodgepodge of piers and warehouses. The ship can go no farther.

Jed gazes in astonishment at this village. Many ships like their own sit moored in a huge harbor, while small rowboats ply among them. All about, piers stick out into the water, thronged with workers. A multitude of buildings of every size and construction huddle behind the piers. Behind and between the harbor buildings, streets climb low hills. On these streets, an endless variety of people can be seen, going about the affairs of a harbor town. Horses pull clattering wagons. Children dart, scream. Dogs bark. Pigeons wheel overhead. Gulls huddle on rooftops. The smell of smoke, cooking, sewage, stagnant water. A distant bell clamors. The pulse quickens, the eye roves, dazzled.

So this is a White man's port! What a decrepit and superfluous conglomeration, compared to lovely Lagos with its neat shores, tidy piers and harmonious homes and shops!

But what a swelling and bursting forth of life, compared to Sugar Island!

Jed and Zoh and Cook and Koffee sit by the railing, fascinated by the sights. Occasionally one or the other of them will point to some feature, but mostly, they simply watch. For Jed, it's all too new, too alien. His brain is befuddled and unable to grasp anything. When he stands up to stretch for a moment, he's actually dizzy, and has to sit quickly, his head spinning.

The ship laboriously makes its way, helped by rowboats and hawsers from shore, to a large dock, where the molasses casks are unloaded by a crew of Black stevedores. There's no need for the sailors to re-construct the derrick they used at Sugar Island, because here there's a derrick already made, attached to the dock. The stevedores even swarm on board and jump down in the gun deck to attach the hogsheads, shouting back and forth, their bodies glistening with sweat. The whole ship bumps and rocks as the Black men slam the hogsheads about. The sailors get out of the way and watch. Jed notices with some jealousy that Zoh and Koffee get their share of appraising glances from the Black workers, and more than one smile comes their way.

The difference between these Black workers and those on Sugar Island is amazing. These men are competent, energetic, boisterous. A White man supervises the work on the pier, but the Blacks are openly insolent to him! Jed is flabbergasted. These Baltimore men crack jokes, laugh, shout back and forth, and finally, they break into song! It is a lively, thumping tune, background for their work as they yank the hogsheads up out of the ship's hold to the dock, then trundle the big barrels off to a

warehouse. Jed thrills to the song from the very bottom of his soul. His spirit awakens. He straightens his hunched shoulders, stiff with scab. He aches to be working with these men, but he knows his back is not ready yet. A forgotten feeling fills his chest. There's pride in this place, pride in having glossy Black skin over strong and supple muscles. There's song here, on scornful and irreverent lips. Jed breathes deep, even the air is different in his lungs, filled with the stink and lust of life. In this odd, foreign port, Jed might find a home. He might be able to shout, here. He might look any man square in the eye. He might work the pain out, and feel it blow away.

Jed says to Zoh, "I do believe I could like this place."

Zoh throws him a glance, but as usual, she's hard to impress. She shrugs. *Time will tell.*

Koffee says, "I never seen men work as hard as these! At the end of their day, they'll need bread. I can do that."

Cook says, "They might need a good hearty stew to go with that bread. I can do that."

Jed says, "They'll surely need tools of good iron. I can do that."

Zoh glances at Jed, taps her teeth with one finger, looks up in the Sky pensively, then shrugs. Jed has to laugh, at her and himself. What else can a man do with a woman like Zoh?

Koffee says, "You could wash their feet, Zoh."

Zoh's face lights up, she puts her hand on Jed's arm and nods hard.

When the cargo is unloaded, the ship is moved to another pier, closer to the center of the harbor. A sloping gangplank is placed from the ship down to the pier so men can go back and forth. Well-dressed White men come on board and talk to the Captain. The sailors become excited. Finally the sailors form a line to the Captain, who hands out a small bag to each. The sailors eagerly

compare the contents of their bags. Never has Jed seen them so animated. Cook stands in line and gets a bag too.

Jed says to Koffee, "How come you didn't get a bag?"

Koffee says, "I get satisfaction from a job well done." Cook throws her a look. Koffee says, "A joke, Cook, a joke!"

Jed says, "I believe I'll get in line and see what the Captain gives me."

Cook laughs. "I can tell you right now what he'll give you, Jed."

Koffee says, "Mister Jed, I truly am confused 'bout my whole damn life. I loved Mama! She got me where I am! Maybe if I live long enough, I'll sort it out. Listen to me, all of you. You know what I been. Am I evil? Honestly now! I want honesty!"

Zoh brings Koffee's hand to her lips and kisses it. Cook looks Koffee in the eyes, and says, "As Allah be my witness, you is a good person, Miss Koffee."

Jed feels wrenched, then angry. "You all is putting something on me!"

Koffee looks at him hard. "That's alright, Mister Jed. Don't hurt yourself. You got your own mind. I respect you for that. I know how you feel 'bout me, you ain't gotta say it. But...I hope some day you might come to a better opinion of me...when all the cards is on the table."

Jed says, "Koffee, you figure you know me but apparently you don't. Sure I got opinions. All the opinionation in the world ain't for shit when a man loves a woman! And I love you! I told you so before! Didn't you hear me then? Do you reckon I's like the breeze, from the East one day and from the West the next? So don't talk to me 'bout no good nor evil. That's as ridiculous as that fool Captain disparaging them fishermen who owned their

boat. Why, I only got angry at you for whoring on account of I love you!"

Everybody stares at Jed. There not much to say after that outburst.

Zoh goes in the cabin to take a nap.

Many of the sailors leave the ship, and Jed can see them going into various shops that line the harbor. Sailors come back with cheeses, fruits, gaudy gewgaws, brightly colored candies, loud hats, jewelry, souvenirs, tatoos and especially jugs, which are opened and passed about. One sailor brings back a large and mangy cat, that's fussed over before it claws its way free, is attacked by the ship's cat Napoleon, darts down the gangplank and vanishes, probably to its original owner to be sold all over again. Another sailor buys a parrot. Within moments the parrot screams out a curse, bites the sailor, flies off, joins a flock of small birds and vanishes over the roof tops. The foiled owner sucks his hand and grins. Easy come, easy go! Everybody's happy. Life is good. The Captain even laughs and slaps one of the Boots on the back in a friendly way.

Although most of the folks Jed sees down in the streets are White, many Blacks walk about, doing their business, often without any White person with them! These Blacks appear to be free to do what they wish! Jed is astounded. This place contradicts all that he expected from the White man's village.

Loud bells somewhere play out a short but sweet melody, the sound echoing over the town. Jed says, "Ain't that pretty?"

Cook says, "That's probably the noon bells. Every big town I been in has a church or temple or mosque that rings out a little ditty like that at high noon. Folks use the bells to tell time, you know, so they can meet up at the right time."

Zoh wakes up from her nap and comes to see Jed. She's worried that his wounds have not been washed with warm sea water as usual, but the water in the harbor is filthy. Cook suggests she use a bit of warm drinking water with salt in it instead of the harbor water. Zoh and Cook go in the galley to get warm salty water. When they come back with the warm water, Cook says, "I might go shopping in town my own self. My pay is burning a hole in my pocket. Anybody want anything? Parrots? Candy?"

Koffee jumps up. "I'll go with you, Cook. Just for fun. I don't need anything. Just let me comb my hair a bit."

Cook mutters, "Koffee, who knows you here?" But his words are wasted. Koffee combs her hair.

Zoh begins to wash Jed's back wounds. Cook and Koffee head for the gangplank down to the street. How Jed wishes he was going shopping too! But when his friends start to go down to the street, a Boot standing at the top of the gangplank blocks their way and points to the Captain.

Cook talks to the Captain, but Koffee comes back. She's almost crying. "Cook can't leave the ship. I knew it! I knew it! Every since...I let myself hope that I might have a normal life, you know, settle down with Cook here in Baltimore, go straight, get my bakery, send for Mama...have flowers on my window sill...but it's all coming apart...I'm a fool..."

Zoh takes Koffee's hand. Jed says, "Hold on, girl. You's going way too fast. Nothing happened yet to your dream."

When Cook returns, his face is troubled. "Something real strange just happened. The Captain won't let me off the ship! I told him I was gonna buy a few things to throw a dinner for the crew, and he said I should make a list and a mate would get the stuff for me. But I don't know what they got for sale here. I was

gonna look around...you all realize what this means? I'm a prisoner! Even if I still cook! But Captain paid me wages! What did he figure I was gonna use gold for, if not to go shopping?"

Jed says, "Cook, if you's a prisoner, so's your gold. But keep you voice down. Don't look over there, but our lord and master is staring right at us. Let's all calm down afore he gets suspicious."

Everybody looks at the scenary, but Cook is still pissed. "I told the Captain somebody's gotta do some shopping soon or we won't have nothing to eat. You know what he said? He said he's near broke after paying off the crew! Maybe he's lying, but if he ain't, how's he to buy the next cargo, if he can't afford provisions for the crew? Not having grog is one thing, but if he figures the crew's gonna skip eating, he's gonna be surprised."

"Are you still going ahead with the dinner?"

"I dunno. I was feeling real generous and all, but now it's gone. I believe I'll go clean out the drains or something, or read my Koran. You know, a man like that kills the spirit. Just kills the spirit." Cook morosely wanders off to the galley.

A Boot comes and tells Koffee the Captain wants to talk to her, so she leaves.

While Zoh works on his back wounds, Jed sits staring over the harbor, where a large sailing vessel is being maneuvered about, with the help of several rowboats full of men. It's a pretty picture, but he's not really interested. Jed contemplates the situation. He and his friends need to get off the ship, free of the Whites, and do it quickly. Koffee is still free, as Jed understands it, but now Cook is a prisoner! The Captain could be making plans even now to sell any or all of them as slaves. Opportunites to escape might be few, and might come up with almost no warning. It's going to be important to be alert and act fast, when a chance arises.

But this makes problems. If they escape separately, when a chance arises, they might never get together again. Jed couldn't save himself, or even himself and Zoh, and leave any of his friends behind on the ship, possibly to be enslaved. It seems that they must all escape together, not separately. If one is left behind, then none of them are truly free, the way Jed sees it. This makes things complicated, but it must be that way.

Jed says over his shoulder, "Zoh, we should all be on the lookout for a chance to run, but I feel like we have to all get free together. Nobody left behind. Do you agree?"

Zoh nods without interrupting her work, so it must be obvious to her also.

"I don't see why we can't do it tonight, when all the sailors are asleep."

Zoh stops washing Jed's back and considers. Then she nods agreement.

"Right. Let's get it settled with the other two. Do you know where Koffee went?" Koffee went to talk to the Captain on the upper deck, but now there's no sign of her.

Zoh shrugs. Jed wonders if Koffee went in her old cabin, but oddly, the door to that cabin is now closed and locked with a heavy wooden bar that was never used before. Jed recalls Koffee saying this cabin used to be the ship brig. Now the Captain must have locked some rowdy sailor in there to cool off.

"You done with washing my back? Listen. Koffee must be in the galley with Cook. We can't all go in the galley and talk, it'll look suspicious. How 'bout you go in there and ask Cook and Koffee to come out here so we can make plans. While you do that, I'll get my backpack so I'm ready to run, and I'll pretend to fish. We all gotta look easy and natural so the Captain don't get wary."

Zoh goes off to the galley to fetch Cook and Koffee. Jed yawns, stretches, and nonchalantly wanders over to the storage cubby where his pack and fishing gear is stowed. He straps on the pack, then casually gets out the fishing tackle. But when he gets back to the railing, intending to fish, his eyes roam nervously about the ship.

Jed's eyes betray him. He locks eyes with the Captain, who as usual leans over the railing of the upper deck, smoking a pipe and watching everything. Jed looks away, but it's too late. The Captain has deciphered Jed through and through. Jed curses himself for a fool. The backpack! How obvious!

Still watching Jed, the Captain says something to two of the Boots passing a jug. These two men nod and come purposefully down to the lower deck, toward Jed. Jed glances about desperately, the sudden fear in him telling his feet to run, run! Dammit! But his friends aren't there, and he must take them along! He's stymied.

Without a word, the Boots grab Jed by both arms and hustle him to Koffee's old cabin, with the door barred shut. The Boots raise the heavy bar, open the door, and shove Jed inside. The door slams behind him, and the bar drops in place outside with a solid clunk! Jed's a prisoner, even more than Cook, escape plans no sooner created than thwarted!

There's a dim light from a small grated window, but Jed's eyes are not accustomed. Koffee's voice comes out of the dark. "Hey there, Mister Jed. Now we's both fucked. Where's Zoh?"

"Koffee! How'd you get in here?"

Koffee sighs. "Where's Zoh? Is she alright?"

The door opens and Zoh walks sedately in, carrying Napoleon the cat. The two Boots behind her slam the door closed and the

bar drops down once more. And now there are three. Actually four, counting Napoleon.

Zoh sits down on Koffee's pallet beside Koffee, picks up Koffee's comb from a small table and begins to curry Napoleon. The cat purrs loudly.

Koffee mutters, "One big happy family. Now all we need is Cook and..."

"Koffee, what 'bout your plans to get free and start a bakery?"

"Jed, Jed! Please don't irritate me no farther by talking like some ninny! Can't you see with your own eyes what's happening? The damn Captain is gonna sell us all to get gold so he can sail 'bout the world getting rich and prosperous!"

"I's just surprised he took you without a fight, knowing you."

"You know what that bastard did? He told me that them fancy men brought him a packet of letters for the crew, and there was a letter for me from my mother in Dakar, lying on my pallet in here! So of course like a mouse after cheese I ran in here and wham! The door locked behind me. And no letter."

"I got a plan to get us out of here, Koffee."

"How nice. Let's hear it."

"The main thing is we all gotta escape together, or else we's liable to get separated forever. Cook is still on the loose. Seems to me he could let us out tonight after the sailors go to sleep, and we walk down the gangplank and go away. Together."

"It's too easy. There's gotta be something wrong with it."

"How is too easy a problem?"

"What did Cook say about it?"

"I ain't talked to him. Zoh figures we oughta do it. Right, Zoh?"

Zoh looks up from brushing the cat's hair and nods.

Jed says, "I'm ready to go. I got everything I own in my backpack here. What about you, Zoh?"

Zoh holds up Napoleon, but then she gets up and takes down a dress hanging on a peg, the dress that the women made for Maria la Fea. Zoh folds the dress carefully, hands it to Jed and taps his back pack. He grumbles but he puts the dress in his pack.

Koffee says, "The main thing I own is the gold I brought from Dakar, for my bakery. It's heavy. And a few clothes and some jewelry. The gold is the thing."

"Maybe you should wear it around your waist, in case you lose your bag."

"I had a dream where I was wearing it and fell into the Sea and drowned."

Jed says, "Thanks, Koffee. Now *I'll* probably have a nightmare that you fell in the Sea with gold strapped to you."

Koffee laughs. "Why?"

"Why do you figure? 'Cause it would kill me if you did! You can't stand the fact that a man's happiness might depend on you, can you, Miss Koffee? No, it's all just take care of your own shit and Allah help the last! I suppose that's 'cause of your life so far. But it don't bode well for your married life with Cook."

Koffee studies on this. "There's a bit of truth there, Mister Jed...and a whole lot of unfairness. It still puzzles me that you're so upset. I still feel like you ain't coming clean."

Zoh makes a flurry of signs. Koffee says, "Yeah, that's probably true."

Jed huffs, "*What's* probably true?"

"That the disaster you get ready for, ain't the one that happens."

Jed paces around. Everything annoys him. Everything. Koffee wants him to come clean! But if he did, she wouldn't like that neither, by the gods! No she wouldn't!

The afternoon passes. Zoh and Koffee manage to play cards in the dim light, peering at the cards to read them. Jed paces, bites his nails and tries to imagine what could go wrong with his plan to escape. It's only a pace or two from one wall to the other, not a good room to worry in. Koffee watches Jed then whispers in Zoh's ear. The two women giggle and nod, their eyes shining in the dark room like wild creatures peering from a cave.

Jed says, "What, dammit! I reckon you two is bored with cards so you figure to amuse yourselves by tormenting me!"

Koffee and Zoh giggle more. Jed curses to himself. Women can do that, make him feel silly, and so easily, just using the expressions on their lovely faces, and the mystery in their eyes, that never fails to burst the bubble of his self-concern without them saying a word.

As the Sun sets, Cook unbars the door long enough to shove in water and a pot of food from the evening meal. Then he bars the door and stands near the grated window, talking through the grating. "You all keep your heads down and quiet. There's gonna be a sailor's party, what normal folks would call an orgy. I seen this happen before, in other ports. Things can get nasty. It's best you's locked up for now. Outta sight, outta mind. Mister Jed, if you can, figure some way to lock the door on the inside, in case the sailors take a notion."

Jed murmurs, "Cook, come open this door after the sailors fall asleep, and we'll all run for it."

Cook says, "Hm. Generally, Captain has a mate stay on watch all night. And this night, I wouldn't be surprised if the sailors didn't party 'till daybreak."

Koffee says, "See, Mister Jed? You said it's simple, but it ain't. Hey, Cook, can you get us a lighted lantern so we can play cards?"

Cook says, "Uh...alright. But listen. For your own good, turn the lantern off when the party gets going. A dark window looks a lot less appealing than a lighted one, and a sailor could look in and see you two luscious babes if the room is lit up. Don't take risks, Koffee. None of you has seen a mob of drunken sailors. I have."

Jed dismantles the frame of the pallot and comes up with two sizeable boards. One he puts aside for a weapon. The other board he has Zoh hold horizontally across the door opening, then he lashes his belt around both the board and the door handle. When this contraption is in place, it looks quite able to lock the door, especially since the door must swing out to open. These preparations set Jed's mind at ease considerable. He feels ready for anything...until he recalls Zoh's comment. The disaster you prepare for, ain't the one that happens.

With darkness, the partying on the deck of the ship swells little by little. Koffee turns down the lantern to a low blue flame, and she and Zoh lie down and doze, with the cat Napoleon between them. Jed watches through the window grating. The sailors play cards on upturned barrels, apparently betting the same money they just earned this day. Someone produces a harmonica, and ribald songs are sung. Drunken jokes are shouted. Always, endless jugs go the rounds until empty, and are then tossed in the harbor...or on the street.

The evening wears on. Jed paces the tiny room, softly pounding his fist into his palm in exasperation and boredom. Is the entire night to pass like this? Outside, arguments and sometimes fights erupt over card games, fights which the Captain makes no effort to quell. Koffee mutters, "Our Captain and the mates are making bets on the fights. I can hear them. What assholes!"

Sailors stagger to the railing and vomit overboard. Others don't get that far. One sailor takes off his clothes, climbs up in the rigging and commences to sing a serenade to Baltimore where, his song says, every woman in London was, is, or will be in love with him, or if not actually in love with him, at least in his bed at one time or another. He must be partial to English lasses. One of the Boots yells up at the man they'll shoot him down if he doesn't shut up, nobody needs that shit, but the sailor continues to sing. BOOM! An explosion from the upper deck. Great laughter from the other sailors, and momentary silence falls...but soon a little pitter-patter rains down on the upper deck, the ceiling for the cabin. The sailor up in the rigging seems to have survived the gunshot long enough to piss down on the Boot that shot at him. The Boot yells curses up at the man in the rigging, but the Captain guffaws. The naked sailor in the rigging launches into his song again.

The sailors begin to dance a haphazard hornpipe, winding about the deck to the song of the man in the rigging and a harmonica. One of the dancers trips on his own feet and falls over the railing. More laughter. A sailor grabs a coiled rope to save the man who fell, but he throws the entire coil overboard, then stares stupidly at his empty hands. The helpful sailor then leans over the railing, apparently in the belief that he can reach the man in the water some ten or more feet below. He bends over the railing,

reaching down...bends farther...slips and somersaults right over and vanishes! Not a soul on deck notices, they're too busy dancing drunkenly. Jed's horrified, but he cannot risk Koffee and Zoh by yelling an alarm.

The dance grinds to a halt. Cook must have fed them beans for dinner, because one sailor gets a lighted lantern, drops his pants, lays flat on his back, cocks up his legs and ignites his own fart with a bang. This inspires such guffaws that sailors fall down laughing. Then they all have to try it, limited only by the number of lanterns they can come up with. Soon there are pops and bangs going off all over the deck. Jed says, "Zoh, Koffee...come look at this."

The two women get up, take one look out the window and collapse in giggles. The fart explosions give off a small blue flash that apparently doesn't burn the creator's behind, or more likely, they don't feel it.

Now a sailor takes a mouthful of booze, holds up a lighted lantern in front of his face, and spits out a plume of flame as long as his arm. This is impressive, but it earns an immediate gunshot from the upper deck, BOOM!

There must be a protest from somebody in the town about the noise, because all the sailors run to the railing and peer down at the street, shouting profanity and jeers at whoever dared to complain. A sailor throws an empty jug at the town, and four more jugs quickly follow the first one. Jed can hear the jugs smash, hopefully on the street, not through some shop window. No more protests are heard after that.

On through the night, the pranks and drinking goes on. It's a good thing Jed's women are locked up in the cabin, because out on the deck, their safety would have been doubtful. Finally, the night half gone, the sailors begin to succumb to unconsciousness.

The party dies down. But four sailors persist, playing cards and drinking. Zoh and Koffee cuddle on the pallot, arms entangled. How Jed wishes he was there too! He's exhausted and yearning for sleep. But there's no room, and besides, he must stay awake to watch for the sailors to quit, so he can unbar the door and take his friends away from this ship. He sits morosely on the stool with arms folded, waiting, waiting. He can't even comfortably lean back against the wall, because it hurts his back wounds. Jed sighs from deep down.

Koffee says in a low voice, "Not fun, is it, Jed."

"No. Keep your voice down. Why don't you sleep? I'll wake you when it's time to run."

"Why should we sleep when you can't? What are they doing out there?"

"Four of 'em won't quit the cards."

Koffee raises up on one arm and murmurs quietly, "Jed, I wanna say something now, on account of how uncertain things is. I said you wasn't coming clean with me. Truth is, I ain't laying my cards out neither, and the reason is, I's real confused 'bout how I feel with you."

Jed looks down on the two women he loves, in the dim light from the window, and beyond all sense, ready to drop in his tracks, still he's hot for this woman. He kneels down and gropes for Koffee. He can smell her, he can smell them both. "Miss Koffee...I's too damn tired to be confused no more. I want you, and that's *my* truth!"

Koffee puts her hand on Jed's chest and gently pushes him away. "It ain't gonna happen, Mister Jed, so we both gotta accept that. Both of us! Listen. When I first met you, all I knew for quite awhile was wondering how to get you in my arms and in my pussy. 'Specially after the day you stripped naked to wash

yourself. Remember that day? But since then, you and me has gone through some stuff, and now...it's all changed. I love you, but...Jed, I suspect I love you the way a sister loves her brother! Although I never had no brother to compare. Sometimes, Jed, you make me so mad I really wanna kill you. Other times I wanna hold you in my arms forever, and tell you everything, and listen to you talk. Is that...? See, being a whore taught me all 'bout loving *sisters*, but left me high and dry when it comes to *brothers*."

"And besides, Jed, now I's gonna be Cook's woman...if we all live to get off this ship. My days of wine and roses is over. When Cook and me makes a home in Baltimore, I wanna be able to tell him straight that I been clean, waiting for him, ever since the night that Maria...that Maria...well, you know."

Jed sighs. "I hear you. You's a real good woman, Koffee. Cook's a lucky man. But you can't make me stop loving you, 'less you *do* kill me! And I don't love you like no sister. I had two sisters, back home in Lagos. I done that bit. No, it ain't no sister I need."

"Jed, I gotcha, but listen. The woman you need is right here beside me, pretending to sleep...and I tell you now, you don't know how lucky *you* is." Koffee laughs. "I reckon men can't tolerate the tiny bit of frustration involved in waiting for their woman to birth a baby. Don't matter that their woman is gonna go through a bit of hell, their man got that *need*. It's kinda funny to watch, kinda...silly, Jed. But I reckon why that's why many African men got several. They can't take the strain." She laughs. "Or so they pretend."

A HOT TIME ON THE OLD TOWN

The four sailors never seem to get enough card playing. Jed intends to outwait them and break out of the cabin somehow as soon as they sleep, but sometime in the long night, Jed succumbs to fatigue and doses off, sitting on the stool with his forehead resting on the window sill. He wakes with a curse when he falls off the stool. Stiff and head spinning with grogginess, he looks out the window. All the sailors are asleep, but a grey light faintly outlines the masts of ships against the eastern Sky, and above, the Stars are giving up on the night. A mist floats over the harbor and up to the ship deck, or perhaps it's smoke. The day of reckoning dawns.

Jed curses again and mutters to himself, "Dammit! I fell asleep! It's getting light already!" He uses the honeypot, his head full of memories of the night, apprehension of the morning and uncertainty about the day to come. Outside, the ship is silent but for snoring. Sleeping bodies litter the deck like corpses after a battle. Jed coughs. The air is smoky. Somebody must be cooking an early breakfast in town, or maybe they heat their houses with stoves.

Jed shakes Zoh and Koffee awake. "Get ready to run, girls. I's gonna open the door." He turns up the lantern for light and begins pawing through his pack.

Zoh gets up instantly. Koffee yawns and stretches. "Jed, Cook said he'd be here."

"Well, where is he? How do we know he ain't locked up his own self? How do we know he's even still alive? No, I's gotta get a start on it...by opening that door. Once I get the door open, we'll go wake Cook up. I bet he fell asleep...like I did, to be honest."

“And how is you to open the door?”

“You’ll see.” Jed has his fishing line out, and he uses the lantern to burn off a short piece of string.

The two women use the honeypot. Napoleon meows. Koffee says, “Napoleon wants out.”

“He’ll have to wait.”

“Cats don’t wait long.”

Jed huffs, “I can’t be worried ‘bout no cat! Plop his behind on that pot!”

But Napoleon needs no help. He leaps up on the window sill, oozes through the grating and vanishes.

Jed says, “Too bad we can’t do that!” He fashions a loop of string hanging down from one end of a bed slat.

Jed says, “I’s gonna stick this slat out through the grating of that window, and see if I can get this loop of string over the end of the bar that locks the door, and lift it up, so we can open the door.”

The holes in the iron window grating are too small for a person, or even Jed’s head, but he can get his arm through. Jed carefully guages about where the door bar must be, then he sticks the slat out through the window grating and tries to feel for the string loop going over the end of the bar. It’s harder than he imagined, since he can’t see the bar, only guess where it must be and try repeatedly to snare it.

Koffee says, “This was the ship’s brig, before it became my place. That’s why the bar’s on the door. If it was light, I could show you where prisoners carved things on the walls, to pass the time, I reckon. There’s this one amazing carving of a fish leaping. The fish has a woman’s face, and breasts and arms, but it’s fish where the legs should be! Can you imagine? How frustrating for a sailor! Vital parts missing! It’s not a good decoration for a

whore's room. Too prudish. Imagine, a woman with no basic equipment! Why, you'd figure a sex-starved sailor would want to have everything, the breasts as well as the..."

"You sure talk a lot! Would you mind putting a lid on it? I wish my head would fit out through this cursed grating, then I could see what I was doing."

Zoh mimes stretching her arm out to its limit. Jed pulls the slat in and sticks his arm as far as it will go, up to his shoulder, down the wall outside. "I can just barely touch the end of the bar with my fingertips, but I can't grab it."

Napoleon comes back in through the grating and leaps down onto Zoh's lap. Zoh strokes the cat, then she hugs him, then she gestures in some puzzlement and signs.

Koffee says, "Zoh believes that Napoleon is all upset over something."

"Don't bother me with nonsense!"

"Cats know things we don't, Jed. Hurry up and open that door. I need some coffee. Whew! I wonder if mornings in Baltimore are always so smoky."

"You need some good sense, not coffee."

Zoh puts Napoleon aside, goes to the door and tries to stick Koffee's comb through the crack between door and frame, so as to lift up the locking bar, but a piece of wood trim blocks it.

Napoleon is not happy. He stalks about the tiny room, sneezing, wiping his face with his paw and meowing piteously, in great agitation.

Koffee coughs and says, "What ails that cat. I never seen him like this."

The light is coming up outside, soon sailors might waken. Pressure builds in Jed's head, he can't concentrate on his task. Besides, the smoke really bothers his eyes. He feels like smashing

at the door with his fists and feet. He shakes the grating in frustration, but it's securely let into the window frame and made of iron. No hope there.

Zoh claws at the door trim, to no avail, but she gets down on her knees and pries with her fingers at the bottom end of the trim, near the floor, sneezing as she works.

Koffee says, "Mister Jed, lemme stick my vanity mirror out the window grating. I believe I'll be able to see the loop of string and the bar." Koffee stands on the dismantled bed, sticks her arm out the grated window, holding the small device, and twists it about. She whispers, "Yes! I can see the bar! You're too low and not far enough to your right, Jed. Yes, like that...no, come back a little bit..."

Zoh has got the end of the door trim loosened, and by pulling on it, she gradually loosens the rest of it and pulls it off the door frame with rather loud squeals. She has to stop work for a bit due to coughing.

Koffee sneezes, trying to silence it in one fist, then there's a horribly loud clatter outside the window. Jed curses under his breath. Koffee whispers, "Oh, shit, shit shit! I dropped the vanity outside!"

Jed groans. "Was I close to the bar, with the string? Just before you went and dropped the one thing we need here, and maybe woke somebody up?"

"You was right on it, Jed, but the string loop was sideways to the bar...oh, what the fuck are we to do? I'm sorry, Jed."

Zoh takes Koffee's comb and sticks it through the large crack now visible between door and frame. Running the comb up, it strikes something. She gestures excitedly to Jed, and gives him the comb.

Koffee says, "Why, she's got it! Use the comb to lift the bar, Mister Jed!"

Jed glances thanks at Zoh, takes the comb, sticks it through the crack, and starts to lift the bar outside, but then he stops. "This is good but not good enough. I can lift the bar, but it's gotta go over the top of the door to clear, and it'll slip off the comb afore it gets that high. Get the wood piece off the other side of the door!"

Zoh and Koffee begin clawing at the other side. "But Jed, it'll be a lot harder to lift this side, 'cause you'll be lifting close to the pivot."

"That's how come I's making a handle for this thing." Jed takes off his shirt and wraps half of the comb to make a handle of sorts. The women pry off the trim, and through the crack, Jed can see the bar with lantern light. Jed coughs in the smoke and rubs the tears from his eyes. "This looks real promising!" He sticks the comb through the crack, strains with all his might...the bar begins to lift...*snap!* the comb breaks, half falls outside with a clatter, and the bar falls back in place, *thunk!*

All three of them stare at the half of the comb in Jed's hand.

Jed curses and throws the broken comb aside. He peers out the window grating, searching for inspiration.

Outside on the deck, the smoke is worse than before. It drifts like mist across the deck. Jed coughs again, trying to figure how to get the damn door open. Where the hell is Cook? Could the Captain have locked Cook away somewhere? Knowing the Captain, it's pretty likely! Zoh tugs hard on his arm and points at the floor, her face a bit wild. Jed says, "Zoh, I ain't..."

In the light of the lantern, smoke curls lazily up from every crack in the floor boards. Thick greenish smoke. Determined smoke.

Koffee says, "No wonder my eyes sting!"

Jed struggles to make sense of what he's seeing. Is he dreaming? He was so tired last night...but there's smoke everywhere, all morning...the cat...Jed glances out on the deck...thin ghostlike flames shoot up the sides of the ship, past the railing. The ship is burning, down inside somewhere, flames are leaking out open gun ports and smoke rises strong from all around the hatch cover. The sailors sleep unknowing in a drunken stupor while the deck burns out from under them.

It's surprising how calm Jed feels. A fire is something he can face head-on. It's no lurking Demon, always hiding in shadow. It's no White man's hatred, coming at his back. This is a man's kind of challenge, and he can handle it, with some well-placed blows.

Jed hitches up his pants and turns to the women. "The ship is on fire. No wonder Napoleon was upset! I reckon I'll have to bust the door down. It really don't matter if I make noise now. If them sailors wake up, they'll be worried about the fire, not us." He laughs. "I can't believe this. This is the last..."

Zoh stares at him, her eyes huge but very calm. Koffee bites her nails. "Yes, yes, break the door down, but oh hurry please, Jed! I really don't like this, I don't like it at all..."

Jed gives Koffee a reassuring smile, she's rather excitable. Not like Zoh. Zoh is a rock. Jed gets back at the far wall and charges at the door. WHAM! He hits it with his shoulder and simply bounces away, stunned. Koffee gives a little scream. *That door is solid, man. Ouch. Whoo.*

It never occurred to Jed that he can't break down the door.

Jed gets back again and breathes deep, screwing up his resolve. Enough fooling around! Once more he charges, and once more he bounces off. *Man. That hurt. Me, not the door.*

Panic claws at Jed's mind. *Must not...scare the women...* he gets back once more, crouches, clenches his fists, breathes deep over and over, stares at the door as if it was his worst enemy...Zoh looking outside holds up her hand imperatively...but he charges...

Just before Jed hits it, the door swings open.

Expecting impact, Jed stumbles and skids across the deck on hands and knees. He leaps up. Cook, blessed Cook stands there! Cook has a duffel across his shoulder, and he's leading a small stranger, a person wrapped entirely in Cook's old coat, the one with the added hood, which now hides the stranger's face.

Jed could kiss the man.

Cook hisses, "Stop playing games, man! We gotta get off this ship! The cursed thing is on fire! Down in the hold somewhere, the ship's on fire!" Cook puts down his duffel on the deck, spreads his feet, takes a deep breath, cups his hands around his mouth and roars in a stentorian voice, "*WAKE UP! WAKE UP! YOUR SHIP IS ON FIRE!*"

All over the deck, sailors that were asleep, leap to their feet. Bedlam ensues. Sailors run to the railing and peer over, coughing and choking in the smoke, then they all begin to shout. If words could quell flame, the fire would quench post haste. Some of the gun ports were somehow opened again, and flames pour out of every one that's open. The entire gun deck must be on fire. Out in the town, a loud bell begins to ring frantically. It must be an alarm for fires.

Jed says, "There ain't nothing we can do."

Cook says, "No. Let's get going."

Zoh has Jed's backpack on her back and Napoleon in her arms. Koffee has her bag over one shoulder, and she takes the hand of

the cloaked stranger, Cook's friend. They head for the gangplank down to the street...but the gangplank is gone.

One more insurmountable problem. Jed peers over the railing. There's no way down to the street, except to leap a narrow chasm over harbor water. In Jed's mind flashes Koffee's dream, where she fell into water wearing all her gold around her waist. Down in the street, men come running from all directions. Another alarm bell sounds in the distance, clanging in a frenzy. Fire! Fire! The terror of any town.

Where's the gangplank? Could somebody have stolen it? Jed searches in vain up and down the street. His eyes don't seem to see right, black spots dance before him and there's not enough air and he's so fucking tired and desperate and he aches to close his eyes...

The railing beside him moves! Jed leaps back...and there's the gangplank! He was standing right beside it, but instead of angling down to the street, somebody tilted it up with a block and tackle...Jed traces the rope down to the deck railing, and there Zoh stands grinning like crazy as she lets the rope run through a cleat to lower the gangplank with one hand, while she cradles the cat in her arms.

Relief floods Jed so his knees feel weak, and it flashes on him, that when he first got on this ship back in Lagos, it was he who carried Zoh, but now, there's times when she carries him. How can she be so strong? Where does her power come from?

Thunk! The gangplank hits down out in the street. Zoh comes over. Jed touches her arm.

Cook says, "Nice, Zoh! Let's get moving, folks!"

Jed says, "You first, Cook. I'll watch out."

Cook says to the three women, "Let's hold hands, and take it real slow! There's no hurry now!"

Cook starts slowly down the plank, reaching back to take Koffee's's hand, who takes the hand of the small strange person, who holds on to Zoh, who also has the cat.

Jed glances back. The sailors and Boots are all engrossed in trying to put out the flames. Some of them have pulled up buckets of water to throw in the open gun ports, but the angle is hopeless, the water has no effect. None of them pay any attention to the Blacks escaping...but something catches Jed's eye. The Captain. On the upper deck, the Captain stands alone, his blue coat in disarray. He's loading a gun as fast as he can. In moments, he'll be able to shoot right down the gangplank.

The Captain will be able to choose which of Jed's friends to kill...and from the look on his face, he can't wait. Zoh's back is an easy target at that range...and when one falls, they'll all go in the water.

Jed dashes up the stairs to the upper deck. In the Captain's trembling fury, he spills the priming powder. Jed yanks the gun from his hands and throws it overboard.

To Jed's distant amazement, he sees that the Captain is much shorter than him. He says, "Can't talk, gotta run!" He turns to leave this man forever.

All the way from Africa, Jed hears his Father's voice...*Watch your back, Son!* Jed whirls...just in time to grab the Captain's arm, as it comes down on him with a dagger. Jed shakes the Captain's arm hard, but the man snarls in rage and won't let go of the knife.

Jed hits the Captain in the chest with his fist, intending to stun the man into letting go of the dagger...but a fury boils up from Jed's gut and explodes through his arm...bones in the Captain's chest crunch like dry twigs.

The Captain falls to the deck, still clenching the knife. Fascinated, Jed stares down at the man. The Captain's eyes stare back, livid with hate, and he opens his mouth to shout for help or curse Jed...but instead, a flood of dark blood fills the man's mouth and nose and runs down his cheeks. Horrified, Jed cannot tear away. The Captain's body writhes, twists, convulses with a terrible shiver...and goes rigid. The hating eyes go blank, staring fixedly up at eternity.

The horror! The horror! Jed dashes down the stairs and down the gangplank. Out on the street, his friends stand waiting for him nervously, while all about, a shouting crowd of townsmen jostle and argue. A wheeled pumping machine pulled by a horse has arrived, and hoses are being unrolled, apparently hoping to flood the ship's hold through the open gun ports. But other men shout that there could be black powder on board, to blow up at any moment, and the ship must be towed away fast or Baltimore could catch fire or even worse, people killed in an explosion. Nobody takes the least notice of the five Black folks. They wend their way through the crowd, across the street to a sheltered alley. There, drawn by fascination, they halt close together and look back.

Flames climb the sides of the doomed ship, from any crack or crevice, but mostly from a half dozen gun ports that the stevedores must have left open. The crew abandons ship and comes down the gangplank to the streets. On the street, townsmen cut the hawsers that moor the ship, and remove the gangplank by twisting it free of the railing. Out in the harbor, two large rowboats have come up. Townsmen throw the mooring ropes down to the rowboats, where they are secured, and then the oarsmen bend to their work. The lines snap taut. A funeral barge for a failed enterprise, the flaming ship pulls off the dock. The

strategy is clear. The men in the rowboats intend to tow the burning ship to clear water, away from anything else...and let it burn or explode as it will.

The crew of the ship, sailors and Boots alike, even the cabin boy, stand on the dock and watch as their ship burns. Only their Captain is missing. But no-one seems concerned. No-one glances about, taking tally, remarking his absence.

Out in the harbor, the flames become too intense, so the rowers drop the lines and pull off, then lean on their oars. Among the crowd thronging the docks to watch, a silence falls, as if a funeral wake. When any boat dies, it's a loss and a sadness, to folks who make their living on the water. For a ship is loved by her maker, just as we all are. A ship does her best while she floats, just as the worst of us do. And any boat is worthy of a tear when she sinks at last beneath the waves, just as you and I.

The old lady goes out in style. The entire deck is engulfed now, and from there, flames leap up the furled sails, as if climbing a ladder to redemption and glory at last, higher and higher up the masts the flames go, clean to the tiny topsail, until the entire ship is a towering inferno, sending a column of sparks and smoke whirling into the Sky. Even this far away, Jed can feel the heat and hear the roar of the mighty flames. The burning vortex rips shreds of canvas and rope away, and hurls them skyward, only to tumble slowly down in a fountain, flaming, into the water. The harbor water reflects the inferno in wavery bands of scarlet and ochre, and behind the burning ship, although the Sun hasn't appeared yet, it throws its calling cards up across the Eastern Sky, in streaks of flaming pink and crimson splashed over the clouds, so it's as if both Water and Sky have kindled in sympathy.

There's a brighter flash of light from within the flames, and moments later the gut-thumping report comes, then echoes and

rattles all about the harbor. Burning debris is thrown high by the explosion, and one mast slowly topples, sending up a torrent for sparks. The onlookers give a collective moan...or is it a sigh of admiration for a fine finale?

The flames gradually subside.

In the alley where the five refugees watch the show, Jed says to Cook, "How you reckon it started?"

Cook gives Jed a look. "Maybe she had enough."

Koffee murmurs, "It's sad, in a way. Isn't that odd! I felt that ship was my home! I mean...she was more than just this wooden thing...I wonder what will happen to her now?"

Cook hitches up his pants, "I was just now studying on that. It's a pretty problem for 'em, to be sure. They'll be real interested in getting her out of the channel afore she sinks. That'd be a real mess for everybody, if she blocked the channel. Once she was down there, I don't reckon nobody could do nothing 'bout it. I was wondering if the wood below the waterline might be soaked through, and burn slow, so that's a consideration. You know, give 'em some time. But still, once the main beams go, the hull'll fold in on itself, I reckon, and then it's bye-bye."

"Now on account of the gun ports, they probably believe she got cannons on board that could be salvaged. So they'll really wanna get her beached somewhere. Now the problem is, the heat. They could set a grappling hook on a chain in the burning hull, if they could get close without being cooked. The heat's the problem. When I was in London, I seen a fire boat in action. It had a nice pump on it, run by a bunch of men. But who knows if they got such a thing here in Baltimore? And also, see, they can't pump too much water on her, or the water itself might sink her right where she's at! So it's a pretty problem. But judging by the

expeditious way they hauled her outta here, them folks has done this afore, so maybe they got cards under the table.”

The others stare, but Zoh nods wisely. Koffee almost giggles, but she throws a glance at Cook and shuts up.

The townspeople on the docks disperse to their dull ordinary lives.

Another day. Dawn pinks the Sky behind the smoke haze that lays over the water. Men roll up the useless hoses and stow them away on the fire wagon. Shopkeepers open their doors for business. A woman wearing an apron comes out on her stoop and throws out a bucket of slop into the street gutter. Pigeons come fluttering down, and a stray dog prowls to see if anybody dropped something good to eat in the chaos.

The crew of the lost ship stands about in a huddle down by the water’s edge. Nobody bellows at them so they don’t know what to do. Jed has this twinge of pity! It wasn’t their fault, really, the bad things that happened. They was born assholes stuck between a rock and a hard place, they done what they knowed. Even as Jed watches, two sailors amble away from the group, talking to each other, looking about. The party’s over for good. At least they all got paid, even if it only lasted one glorious orgy. Maybe that was all any of ‘em hoped for...on any trip!

Cook mutters, “Best we make ourselves scarce, just in case them sailors or mates notice us. Who knows what deviltry they might come up with. They could put the blame on us!”

Jed nods vaguely. Blame indeed! His brain’s obsessed with the sight of the Captain spewing up his life blood. Along with Zoh carrying Napoleon, Koffee and the small cloaked stranger who still holds Koffee’s hand, Jed numbly follows Cook’s lead, away from the harbor. An old woman pushing a cart down the bumpy

street intones as they pass, “Hot brew, my pretty duckies?
Somethin’ to take the chill offa youse?”

RIPE FOR THE PICKING

Jed, Zoh with Napoleon the Cat, Koffee, Cook and the cloaked stranger quickly make their way onto the main street of Baltimore that skirts along all the piers, and away from the harbor. They stumble down the street, looking like nothing so much as escaped slaves, gawking about, meandering aimlessly, soaking up the city sights and wondering what happened to the world they once knew. The morning is getting under way. Folks come out, opening shutters, greeting neighbors. A wagon goes by, clattering on the rough street, pulled by two huge horses. Far off, a bell tolls. Dogs prowl for a handout, cats sit and watch, pigeons coo. The smell of wood smoke and sewage and horse manure and harbor water. The streets gradually fill with people, all dressed so differently! Jed hears passers-by speaking words he cannot understand, or maybe he could, if they would slow down.

Cook mutters, "For the love of Allah, try and pretend you know what you're doing! I hope they ain't got no laws against dumb here, 'cause if they do, we's in trouble."

They come to a vacant lot where a building going up. A hole is dug in the ground and piles of red squarish stone sit among weeds and trash, sheltered from the street bustle. No workers are there, it must be too early. Cook says, "How 'bout we sit and eat? I got breakfast for all. We ain't gonna be worth much on an empty stomach."

They sit on the piles of red stones and Cook opens his duffel. To Jed's amazement the man pulls out a huge cheese, two loaves of bread, a jug of ale and some cookies wrapped in a cloth.

Koffee says, "How'd you manage this, Cook?"

"I's cook, it's my job to feed folks! Actually I only cooked the cookies. I figured to impress you, Miss Koffee, so I bribed the

cabin boy to buy me this stuff in the town. He did a decent job of it. Too bad things got a bit squashed in my bag."

"What's the lumpy things in your bag?"

"My books! And my savings and a few clothes, but you women used most of my clothes for your sewing, to take care of our friend, here." Cook gestures at the small cloaked stranger. "I ain't complaining, though. The duds look better on her than me."

On *her*? Jed glances at Cook's cloaked friend...and glances again. All Jed can see of the stranger's face hidden beneath the coat hood is chin and mouth, but it's a girl alright! Is this girl a whore, that Cook hired last night? Never would Jed have dreamed that such a thing was possible for Cook. But that's what she looks to be! And such a young whore, too! How sad! What's to become of the girl now? Why has Cook brought her along this far? And if Cook was so hard up as to need a whore, why didn't he ask Koffee, his future wife, for some relief? But it's neither Jed's business nor his worry, he has other concerns. Like, how to survive in this town, with Zoh, and their baby on the way.

Cook pulls out a pocket knife and cuts off hunks of cheese and bread that he hands around. He uncorks the jug of ale and sets it on a pile of rocks. Zoh breaks small pieces of cheese for Napoleon the Cat, who has to study the cheese for a long time before condescending to eat. Then, out of nowhere, a pigeon lands at Zoh's feet, and struts about hopefully. Napoleon freezes and crouches, staring at the pigeon. His tail twitches. Zoh grabs the cat and shakes her finger in its face. Napoleon ignores her and stares at the pigeon.

Jed sees all this without really seeing anything, because the memory of the dying Captain fills his brain. He never meant to hurt the man, much less kill him. All he wanted was to get away unscathed. But the man would *not* let go of his damn dagger!

When Jed drew back his fist to strike the Captain and make him drop the knife, it was like a flood of raging hot fire swept out of his belly and into his arm, so fast there was no time for restraint. It was this rage that killed the Captain, not really Jed himself. Jed certainly didn't *like* the man, but gods...! Murder? Never!

The cat under control, Zoh tosses cheese to the pigeon. Three more pigeons appear as if by magic, in a flurry of wings. Koffee, Cook and the small strange person whisper together. Cook and Koffee sure are familiar with this child whore. Koffee seems fond of her!

Suddenly Jed wonders if he might have dreamed the entire incident with the murder of the Captain! Dreams can be so vivid. Perhaps he only *dreamed* that the Captain was gonna shoot Zoh, he only *dreamed* that he fought with the man and finally killed him! And in a flash, now Jed's almost sure that he *did* in fact dream the whole thing! He had a terrible night's sleep, he was groggy, not really in his right mind, all the confusion, the anxiety, the fire...of course! It was all a dream! How could anything like that really happen? He's no murderer!

Why, wasn't the Captain standing on the dock with the crew, watching the ship burn? Yes, surely he was...

Zoh tosses cheese to all three pigeons, and all of a sudden it's raining pigeons. They fall from the sky in a feathered torrent. Napoleon screeches and leaps for Zoh's embrace. Zoh scrambles to her feet and climbs up on the rock pile...but immediately, four pigeons fly up on top of the rocks also, and go cooing and strutting about Zoh's ankles...and a pigeon lands on her shoulder! Napoleon scrawls with indignation. Zoh bats and kicks at pigeons and nearly falls. Jed grabs her...and somebody laughs. A laugh like music. A laugh like the Sun coming out after a hard rain. A laugh like forgiveness.

Jed knows that laugh! It cuts right through his confusion. He scoops Zoh off the rocks, Napoleon and all, then he turns to the stranger, the little person wrapped so tightly in Cook's old coat, a hunk of cheese in her hand...and he gently lifts the hood from her face.

It's Maria la Fea. Or her ghost. Jed's brain flutters like the pigeons. Is he *still* dreaming? He croaks..."Maria?"

The girl throws back the hood from her face and laughs that wonderful laugh. She says, "Maria *la Fea*, por favor!"

And now Zoh, Koffee and even Cook laugh along with Maria at the stupefaction on Jed's face. None of them surprised! They all knew!

It all falls into place. All the events of the last week or so, on the ship...the whispers, the giggles, the inexplicable excitement...Koffee's good spirits right after she confessed to murder. "You all planned this from way back when!"

They all laugh like children. Cook and Koffee slap hands. Maria throws off the ugly coat...and lo, she wears the beautiful harlequin dress that the women spent so much time on! She whirls out into the street like a gypsy queen and laughs. She leaps in front of a big horse pulling a wagon full of barrels. The horse jerks to a stop and lifts its tired old head. Maria kisses his nose. The driver tips his hat to her. Maria dances down the street in the Baltimore dawn, stepping daintily over horse droppings. Passers-by shake their heads and reluctantly grin.

Jed gasps, "Koffee, you didn't poison her! It was all pretend!"

"You got it, Mister Jed. What kinda person you take me for? A murderer? No...don't answer that."

"So where has she been all this time?"

Cook laughs like a little boy. "She's been locked in the pantry! I's the only person with a key to the pantry, 'cause we used to store the booze in there."

Maria comes spinning back and kisses Cook.

Jed shakes his head in disbelief, and says right to Maria, forgetting she's Spanish, "Wasn't you lonely, locked in the pantry?"

Maria answers in English! "Not to alone be! Look at picture books!"

Koffee says, "One of us three would visit with Maria on alternate nights. We'd tell stories, or read, or draw, or play games, or sing real quietly, or exercise, or sew..."

Maria says, "Big fun. Much learn!" She kisses Koffee, Zoh and Napoleon, who tries to scratch her.

Jed says, "But why didn't you let me in on it? I was the one found her!" Maria kisses him.

"We figured the fewer knew, the better."

Koffee says, "Well it wasn't quite like that, Cook. I was pissed at you, Jed, on account of you said I was a bad person for being a whore. Zoh and Cook wanted to tell you the plan, but I said no, let him hurt like I hurt from his words!"

"Koffee, I never meant you was a bad person. I meant that what you was doing was wrong. Why, if you'd told me your plan, I woulda been glad to take the blame for the fake poisoning, and take the whipping too! I never ever wanted you hurt, Koffee."

"Words can hurt as bad as a whip, Mister Jed. But see, I wanted to get whipped. That was part of my plan. I wanted to do penance for my life afore then, like Miss Zoh done, so I could make a break and start clean. That's why I slept on the deck, to stay clean of them White men."

Maria pulls Zoh into the street, without Napoleon, and the two women both apparently have some kind of fit...and in unison, to Jed's amazement. He says, "Zoh, Maria...what are you doing? Koffee, what's she doing with my wife?"

Maria laughs. "Sevillana! Come to dance, Senor! Come you por favor!"

Jed says, "I...ain't got the clothes for that...or something. Zoh, is that smart? Gods, folks is looking at us..."

Cook mutters, "Yeah, maybe we should save this dancing business. Maria...Zoh...it's fun and you's pretty as fresh bread but this ain't the time nor the place for it."

Maria pouts. Zoh picks up Napoleon, then Zoh and Maria quietly ignore Cook and do the foot moves for this dance, together side by side, with no arm waving.

Jed says, still disgruntled, "How come Zoh was in on your scheme, but not me?"

Cook says, "We wanted the crew to be convinced that Maria was gone, gone, gone. Koffee got the notion for Zoh to slap her over the poisoning, to convince everybody of Koffee's guilt, since they all worshipped Zoh. But we knew Zoh wouldn't slap nobody without reason, so we let Zoh in on it."

Koffee says, "No, it was more than that." Koffee takes Jed's arm and murmurs, "Look at your woman, Mister Jed, out there in the street like a young girl. I done got to know Zoh, on that trip. She seems real strong, but inside she's soft and easy hurt, and she's been hurt bad already by some tragedy I knows nothing about. When I first met her, Zoh was scraping the bottom of her bucket. Zoh bloomed when Maria come along. Had Zoh believed Maria was really poisoned, I do believe it woulda killed her, Mister Jed. So we let her in on the plan."

Jed shakes his head. "What did you throw overboard, that night, when I wanted to open the sack with the Boot?"

"Some old bedding and the two cannonballs. I woulda been lost without them cannonballs."

Jed sits on a pile of rocks and tries to sort things out. He watches the two girls dancing in the street, so beautiful it makes him ache inside...yes, two girls. How old is Zoh, anyhow? She appears to be a timeless saint...but when Jed reckons it up, she must be barely clear of twenty, just like him.

But Jed feels like an old man.

Cook says, "Well, whadda we do now, chilluns?"

Koffee says, "I reckon our first concern is renting a room, or two rooms."

Cook nods. "Right. I'd bet folks with rooms to let will have a shingle out. So let's wander around and see what we find."

So they pack up and begin strolling the streets. Sure enough, they come to a place that advertises rooms to let, but when Cook knocks on the door, a fat, smelly White man chewing on a toothpick opens the door, in the middle of yelling at an unseen person. The man belches, "Yeah?" Behind him is a pile of trash, and the smell of old dirt, smoke, booze and garbage wafts out. Somebody screeches from a back room. They nod thanks anyway. The man curses them. They walk on.

There's a bundle in the street. Jed at first assumes it's trash, but as they draw near, he's amazed to see it's a man, lying on his side in the street gutter. His clothes are filthy and disarrayed, his face is covered with a grizzled beard. There's vomit in the street near his face. A White man! Jed, appalled, bends down to look at the man, puts his hand on the man's shoulder and shakes him. The

man groans and shifts a bit, he's not dead. Jed can hear...and smell...the man's rasping breath.

Koffee says, "Jed, best leave him be. We don't know..."

Jed says, "Suppose he's sick? Gods!"

Cook says, "She's right, Mister Jed. He's probably drunk. Leave it be. If folks see a Black man bending over a White man on the ground, we could have all kinds of shit come down on us, even if our intentions is good. They'll believe we's robbing him."

Zoh tugs at Jed's arm. *Come away, Husband!*

Two White men walk briskly past, both carrying pails, talking to each other. Jed opens his mouth to speak to them, and lifts his hand tentatively, but the two men pass by, without the slightest pause or sideways glance. The quick tattoo of their boots fades.

Jed says, "Well, that's a White man for you."

There's a Black woman across the street, sweeping off her door stoop. Jed crosses over, intending to ask about the man in the gutter.

Jed says, "Ma'am..."

The woman looks at him wearily, brushes damp hair back from her forehead and interrupts. "I got nothin' for you. I just work here. Go see Ella." She indicates down the street with her head, goes inside and closes the door. A lock clicks.

Jed shakes his head and says to his friends, "Don't reckon we gotta worry 'bout being noticed!"

Koffee says, "Ella?"

Cook says, "Best we keep our heads down, 'til we learn the ropes."

Koffee says, "Come on, Jed. There's nothing you can do."

They walk on down the street. Jed says, "I never seen such a thing. Why, back home, there woulda been folks helping that man, or going for help if they couldn't do nothing for him."

Koffee says, "We're a long way from Lagos. Actually, there was lots of drunks in Dakar, too."

Cook mutters, "Every big town I ever seen had drunks lying in the street. It's Lagos that's strange!"

Jed looks back. Two White men both dressed identically in fancy clothes and carrying identical short clubs, amble up to the man lying in the street, twirling their clubs on a thong. However, these men make no attempt to help the man lying there. Instead, one of the fancy-dressed men casually kicks the man, and yells at him. Shivers run up Jed's spine.

Jed says, "The Demon walks here."

Koffee says, "There was parts of Dakar where nice women never went."

The Cook nods. "You wouldn't want to be out here after dark. You might keep that in mind, Mister Jed. You and your wife. Also you both need to stop looking right at folks we pass. There's people would take that as provocation of one sort or another."

They continue the search for rooms. This involves a lot of walking and a lot of no's. One place won't take young folks, another won't take Blacks, another only has one small room available, barely large enough for one person. A fourth place won't take cats! They begin to get discouraged and hungry. Koffee carries the cat to give Zoh a break, and Maria takes him sometimes also. Napoleon is strictly a woman's cat, however.

Jed stumbles along, following the others. He can't forget the sight of the Captain dying. Now he has to admit it was no dream, it actually happened. Cook and Koffee walk with Maria between them, holding hands. Zoh and Jed walk behind, and Jed whispers, "Zoh, I gotta tell you something." In a low voice, he relates how the Captain was going to shoot at them as they fled

the ship, or most likely shoot Zoh, since she was last in line. How Jed wrested the gun away, but then the Captain tried to stab Jed and Jed punched the man, inadvertently killing him.

Zoh looks at Jed with her big deep eyes. There's no condemnation in her gaze. She stops right in the street and hugs Jed tight, tight. And like that, it's all fixed. A burden lifts from Jed's shoulders. Zoh smiles at him, and hand in hand they hurry to catch up with the others. Now at last Jed is truly free!

Cook stops in the street so that other folks can go by. They pass around the last of the ale jug. Koffee mutters, "My feet hurt." Zoh's face is weary and drained. Even Maria has lost her ebullience. Cook says, "Maybe we need to eat, then I believe we should find a safe place where the women can sit and wait, Mister Jed, while you and me do the walking to find a room."

Jed mutters, "Man, we shouldn't split up."

Her face worried, Koffee studies Zoh. "We needs to start trusting folks and ask for help afore we gets desperate." Abruptly she marches across the street to two Black men delivering firewood to a house. Koffee says to them, "Can you tell us where we can sit down and rest and get a bite to eat? Not charity, we can pay for it."

The two men straighten and study Koffee and her friends standing behind her in the street. One man glances around nervously, then sighs. "Look at 'em out there like sittin' ducks. Lemme talk wid 'em, Bud."

Bud says, "Sure. But git back in that there alley, Joe."

Joe brushes his hands on his pants and says to the five friends, "Follow me." Joe ducks back into a narrow space between two buildings. "Come on, come on! I ain't gonna bite, and I ain't got all day!"

The five of them meekly follow this Joe.

Joe says, "Alright, listen. I dunno what cloud yuh blowed in on but here yuh can't go lollygaggin' down the street like crab bait. Walk fast even if yuh's lost. Next, don't *never* tell nobody yuh can pay for *anything*, woman! Then, yuh mens should walk in front and yuh needs a stick or somethin' a bit vicious tuh carry. And finally, go see Ella. 'Bout four streets down, past Market, on the East side of this here street. Can't miss it. Big swingin' doors. Jes walk in and ask for Ella. She's White but yuh can trust her when even the Good Lawd done wrote yuh off. Got yuh papers handy?"

The five all stand there taking up room.

Joe sighs. "Yuh ain't got papers. What, yuh just git off a ship? I know y'all five didn't run from some hillbilly scratch out in duh boonies."

Maria says brightly, "Our ship burn down! Big flame. Whooooosh! We fly, fly, fly!"

Joe's eyes go big. "Y'all was on that brig? Listen. Yuh don't know it, but dat is yuh ace in duh hole. When yuh meets Ella, jes work it in casual-like dat yuh was on dat ship. She'll near adopt yuh, I'd wager, on account of dere's three things Ella loves...shellfish, helpin' folks, and gossip. Now I gotta git. Good luck, Brothers...Sisters." Joe leaves.

Koffee says, "Thanks Joe! You're a prince!" Then she turns to the others. "See? We gotta open up to folks! We gotta relax and stick our necks out a bit!"

Jed mutters, "Looks to me like all we's doing is sticking our necks out."

Years later, alone in a cold shack at the end of a long work day, wore out and lonely, Jed sometimes looks back to see what went wrong that day, and sometimes then, if he's managed to steal

some ale to take the edge off, or he's too tired to think straight, he's tempted to blame things on Ella, the mystery woman he never once meets. 'Cause it's the hope of Ella fixing everything, that launches Jed into a high that day in Baltimore...and there ain't no call for high when you're a Black stranger in a White man's town.

The five friends walk down the street, in a business-like way and with the men up front, on the way to find Ella's place. They come to a large open space, filled with stalls. All about, wagons are unloading produce. Men bustle, stocking the counters with strange fruits and vegetables and other foods. At one stall, early shoppers have lined up to get a cup full of soup and crackers, dispensed by a matronly woman and a girl. The murmur of voices. The smell of a hundred foods seasons the air. A mangy dog wanders about looking for handouts.

Jed says, "Why, it's a Market! Just like back home! Some things are the same, no matter where you go!"

Koffee says, "Sure enough."

The five stand and watch the bustle of activity. Jed's stomach growls.

Jed says, "Let's get something to eat!"

Cook says, "Take it easy, now. Let's not rush into things."

Koffee says, "Let's wait 'till we get to Ella's place, Jed. That's what the man advised us."

Jed says, "Take it easy! I got money, I'll buy for us all!"

Jed walks over to the nearest stall, where a boy is busy piling up a round red unfamiliar fruit out of big baskets, and a man is helping a woman buy some. Jed sees the man is busy with the customer, so he says to the boy, "Can I buy some?"

The boy says, "My Pa be here soon. He sets the price."

Jed takes a fruit. "I'll just try one." He bites it, then turns to the others. "Man, this is good!"

The boy says, "You gotta pay best grade for that now, Mister."

"I know, I know. I'll pay your father. Here, folks! Help yourself!" Jed hands out fruit to everybody, but only Zoh and Maria take one.

The boy says, "Now you gotta pay best grade for all t'em. If you wasn't in such a hurry, they might be second grade."

Jed says, "That's alright, I'll pay best grade for all. Here, young man. I's gonna fill my pack and you can count'em up." Jed takes off his pack and digs out his money bag from Lagos, put in there so long ago by his mother Olusayo. Jed puts fruit in his pack while the boy counts...1...2...3...

Zoh grabs Jed's arm, her face alarmed.

Koffee hisses, "*Jed! Has you lost your mind?*"

Cook says, "Man, what the heck are you doing?"

Maria la Fea spins about so her dress twirls out.

Jed says, "Don't worry, I'll pay!"

The stall owner man comes striding over. The boy says, "Pa, he took three for them to eat and he put eight in that pack and I done tol' him he'd have to pay best grade but he said okay."

The stall man says, "That's eleven, Mister. You buy one more and you get the dozen discount." The man glances at Maria.

"Nice outfit, Miss."

Maria says, "*Gracias, Senor.*" Zoh, Koffee and Cook stand nervously watching.

Jed puts one more fruit in his pack. "What do I owe you then, Sir?"

The stall man holds out his hand and names a figure, but it's words Jed does not understand, so he opens the money sack from his mother and dumps some of the cowrie shells in the man's

outstretched hand. "There you are, my good man. Keep the change!"

The stall man gapes at the cowrie shells in his hand. "What's this?"

Jed says, "Ain't that enough? Here." Jed dumps more shells in the man's hand.

The stall man's face gets red. "I don't want no damn *shells*! I want good coin!" He throws the shells on the ground.

Jed says, "Hey, man! My mother gave them to me!"

The stall man says, "Gimme gold, nigger!"

Cook drops his duffel on the ground and begins frantically pawing through it. "Wait, wait..."

Jed shouts at the stall man, "You done threw my money on the ground! Come on folks, I paid, let's get outta here!" Jed puts his pack on his back and turns away.

The stall man bellows, "*Hey! Stop! Constable! Constable! Thief!*"

Two fancy-dressed White men amble over, one fat and one thin as a rail, both wearing the same outfit as the two that kicked the drunk man lying in the gutter, and both have the same short clubs on a thong. One fancy man says to the stall man, "What's the trouble, Bill?"

The stall man points at Jed. "He took apples and he ain't paid!"

Jed grabs two more fruit off the counter and hands one to each of the fancy men, by way of smoothing the waters. "Here. It's on me. He's lying. I paid plenty."

The stall man yells, "He paid nothin'! His pack's full of 'em!"

The boy chimes in, "And they et three already! Don't forgit that, Pa!"

The fat fancy man grabs Jed's arm. "How 'bout you pay up damn quick, nigger. And I wanna see papers for the whole lot of

youse.” He puts the fruit Jed gave him in his pocket and says to his buddy, “Hold on to that there apple, Harry. It’s evidence.”

Koffee stutters, “Papers? What kind of papers? We just got off the boat...tell us what to do...”

Jed tries to shake his arm free. “I already paid that asshole, but...”

Cook searches frantically in his duffel. “If you all just calm down...”

The fat fancy man says to his friend, “We best take ‘em in. Come along peaceful, now, nigger, we don’t wanna hurt nobody, now does we. You get the other one, Harry. You too, girlie. All you little women. Come along now.”

Koffee says, “What did *we* do?”

“No papers, that’s what. Don’t gimme no lip now, or it’ll go worse for you.”

Jed jerks his arm free. “Get your hands off me!”

Both fancy men grab for Jed, but he shoves them off, Zoh kicks one of them in the shin, and Maria shoves the other one. The thin fancy man yells, “Shit!” The fat fancy man takes a silver thing from about his neck and blows a shrill whistle. Immediately a dog begins barking frantically.

Cook’s in a quandary, he can’t find his gold coins without taking his precious books out of the duffel. Koffee turns and runs a short distance, but then she stops, turns back, and freezes, locked by indecision, wringing her hands.

A half dozen more fancy White men come running, all dressed like the first two, and join in the struggle to capture Jed, Zoh and Maria. The fat one yells, “Don’t beat ‘em, we get more if they ain’t bruised!”

Zoh kicks with gusto and throws in a few punches as well, not easy when she’s carrying Napoleon. But Napoleon leaps out of

her arms and goes for the dog. Still, two fancy men quickly have Zoh's arms pinioned. Jed, in a rage, shakes free of the fancy men and draws back his fist to punch the men holding Zoh, but the memory of the dead Captain drains his resolve, and he's nabbed.

Two other fancy men have Maria. She begins singing a song in Spanish at the top of her lungs.

Koffee appears to be taking off her clothes.

Suddenly Cook leaps to his feet, goes over to the stall man and gives him a coin. "Is that enough?"

The stall man bites the coin. "Yeah."

Cook yells, "The fruit's paid for! Let 'em go!"

The fat fancy man yells, "Grab that one too!"

Two fancy men grab Cook. Koffee shakes her head and buttons up her dress.

The fancy men hustle Jed, Zoh, Cook and Maria down the street. All the friends look back to find Koffee. There she stands, alone but for Napoleon. For a moment, Jed wonders if Koffee will escape and get free. But no. Koffee picks up Napoleon, and slowly follows the procession, down the street to justice.

JAILBAIT

Now our four companions are shoved into a big room made of stone, within a building made of stone. The floor is brick and the ceiling is mostly gray plaster except where it has fallen to show the beams. There's a tiny window barred with iron, and a door of iron bars that clangs shut behind them, locked by a White Jailer wearing boots and a dirty stripped shirt over his huge paunch. This Jailer is talking to the fat fancy man behind him. The Jailer's Deputy, a grimy young White man with one lazy eye and a twitch in his unshaven face, stands nearby, chewing something. A large and nasty looking dog prowls about near the Jailer. The place reeks, it could stand being hosed out, and it's cold, damp and dim. There's a bucket in one corner, probably for a toilet, and a haphazard collection of rickety chairs and benches against the walls. Zoh eases down onto one of two wooden benches with a sigh and rubs her stomach. Cook's face looks as cold and hard as the stone walls. Maria sits down beside Zoh and studies the other occupants of the room. Two adolescent girls in skimpy clothes huddle to keep warm. A child sitting on her mother's lap looks at the newcomers with big eyes. Covered by a blanket and with an ancient pillow behind his head, a White man snores slumped in a large arm chair. A drunk has passed out on the floor, his face slimy with spit.

Jed goes to the little barred window and looks out, but all he sees is a filthy alley behind the building. He can't see the street, nor Koffee Olay, of course.

The Jailer produces a grimy piece of paper, a slate and a pencil. He looks at Jed. "Let's see. We got us one young able-bodied nigger...what's yer age, boy?"

Jed shrugs. Intuitively he guesses he shouldn't tell this man anything.

"Twenty some." The Jailor writes and looks at Cook. "And one *old* able-bodied nigger. You?" Cook doesn't respond or even look at the man. "Thirty some." The Jailor looks Zoh up and down. "A pretty pregnant woman. Age?"

Zoh shrugs and flutters her hands vaguely.

"Twenty some more. Any of youse got any skills? Law-abidin' skills, I mean?"

A familiar voice! "Hello. Can I come in there?" It's Koffee Olay!

The Jailor ponderously turns. "Whadda you want, woman? Deputy, can't you handle her? I's busy."

Koffee comes into view, carrying Napoleon. "I'm with them."

The Jailor says to Koffee, "Oh, you come to get them out? Fine, fine. I's just now figurin' up how much it'll cost you...assumin', of course, you got money. Gimme a moment." He studies the paper, mumbling under his breath.

Maria goes to Cook and says something in Spanish. Cook shakes his head.

Koffee says to the Jailor, "No, I want in. Inside there. With them."

The Jailor looks up from his figuring and swivels his gaze to Koffee. "What? You wanna...be in jail?"

"Yes, yes. What's to understand? Do I have to pay you or something?"

The Jailor's eyes go wide. "Oh no. It ain't often that I gets volunteers, in my line, so you surprised me."

The deputy comes behind. "I tol' her she was crazy, Boss, but she won't go away."

The Jailor pulls his chin in and straightens up pompously.
“Sorry, woman. Only genuine lawbreakers allowed in my jail. I ain’t runnin’ no boardin’ house here.”

The Deputy says, “Well, actually we got yer Pa...”

The Jailor says, “Stuff it.”

Koffee says, “Is it against the law to not have papers?”

“Among other things.”

“Well, I ain’t got papers. So now you can put me in there.”

The Jailor studies Koffee.

“You can’t figure her, Boss. Just lock her up.”

“I reckon for once you’s right, Deputy.” The Jailor opens the jail door with a key, ushers Koffee in and locks the door behind her. “Let’s see. Able-bodied but crazy woman, age ‘bout thirty.” He turns away.

Maria yells, “Senor! Senor!”

“Oh yeah. Noisy pretty girl.”

Maria yells, “Able to body!”

“Right.” The Jailor walks off muttering.

Koffee sits on the bench with Zoh and Maria. Napoleon jumps down and explores. Cook says, “I’s real glad you throwed in with us, Koffee.”

Koffee says, distracted, her mind elsewhere, “I done had some kinda vision, out there. I ain’t the person I always figured I was. No, I always figured I was smart. Turns out I’s a fool.” She absently reaches for Zoh’s hand and Maria’s hand.

“You don’t look like no fool to me, Koffee. You look like what I been searching for...although I didn’t know it. I reckon that makes *me* a fool. But I’s gonna fix things. You’ll see. When things look dark, dawn has to come.”

Koffee smiles at Cook, and they study each other.

“Cook, I got some fixing to do, too, but I ain’t in the mood to wait. I’s wondering if we could manage to hang a man. Since we’s already in jail, we might as well do something to deserve it.”

Cook glances at Jed. “He’s pretty hefty. We’d need a good strong rope, which we ain’t got.”

“We could tear up our rags and fashion a rope, and get it over them exposed beams in the ceiling. Then if he was standing on a chair, we could kick the chair away. I been cherishing that picture while I was walking down the street behind you all.”

Cook ponders. “That sounds workable. We could tell the fat man out there that he was despondent over recently losing all his life savings.”

Zoh sits up straight and looks worried, but not as worried as Jed. Maria looks confused.

Koffee uncoils herself and comes at Jed. He was sitting on the floor, but he jumps up and backs off. There’s no place to run. Koffee croons, “Jed, Jed, Jed. Whatever am I to do with you, my Jed? My lovely...stupid...Jed.” Jed flinches when she lightly lays her palm against his cheek. “Right there oughta do it.”

Koffee pulls back, Jed figures she’s given upon him, his head swarms with apologies and excuses, but Koffee hasn’t given up. She’s winding up. Her slap is so hard and so unexpected that he staggers sideways and goes down to his knees, lights flashing before his eyes.

Koffee paces the room like a tiger circling crippled prey. “*Damn you, damn you, damn you*, Jed, I could... rip your eyes out! It ain’t just that you’s stubborn enough for any three men, I mean we’s way past naïve here, we’s into *bullheaded*, but it’s that *you won’t fucking listen!*” Suddenly she attacks, kicking, scratching Jed’s face, her fingers like claws. “*Asshole! Fucker! Bastard!*” When Jed shields his face, she kicks him in the groin, and when he protects

his privates, she punches his face. Jed grabs her, hoping to restrain her, but Koffee bites his arm. Jed hollers in pain and tries to hold her at arm's length. Koffee kicks him in the groin again, and when he doubles over, she knees his face. Blood gushes from his nose.

Jed blubbers, "Stop! Mercy! Help, somebody!"

Zoh sighs. Maria stares. Cook smiles.

The other prisoners come awake. The young girls titter behind their hands. The child starts to cry and clings to its mother, who says "Do you mind, for God's sake!" The drunk rolls over with a groan and covers his head with his shirt. The sleeping White man mutters in his dreams and hugs himself.

The Jailor comes striding and bangs on the iron bars with a club. "*Stop that shit or I'll beat the crap outta the lot of youse!*" His dog is right on his heels, growling low.

The Jailor and his dog go away. Koffee collapses beside Zoh on the bench and bursts into tears. Zoh puts one arm about Koffee's shoulders, and gently strokes Koffee's hair. Napoleon licks Koffee's arm. Maria takes Koffee's hand. Jed tears his shirt off and tries to stem his bleeding nose. Cook goes to the barred window, stares out and picks at the wall mortar with his fingernails.

Koffee's tears subside. Maria hums a song while making odd gestures that must have something to do with the song. She and the two girls are staring at each other. One girl says shyly to Maria, "Your dress is very pretty."

"Gracias, Senorita."

The two girls look at each other and giggle.

Maria pats her own hair, then points to the girl's hair and says, "Pretty pretty." The girls have beads in their hair.

One girl says, "Did somebody drop you on your head?" They both giggle.

Cook says, "She's Spanish. She's from another country."

"Ooooooh!"

Koffee wipes her eyes and blows her nose on her dress. "Jed, you believe you hurt now, but the shit ain't even begun yet."

"Koffee...everything you say is deserved. I's sorry! I's a fool too, Koffee."

Cook turns away from the window. "It's an ill wind that blows no good."

Koffee says, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Cook shrugs. "It's what sailors say rather than admit they's lost in the fog."

There's a long silence. Cook paces about, muttering, then he grabs the bars in the little window, shakes them hard, and bellows out some sailor's curses. He's picked up quite a few in his career.

The mother with the child says, "Have some respect! There's children here!"

Zoh gets up, takes Jed's pack and offers apples to everybody in the jail. The mother with the child takes two, the girls each take one, Maria takes one and Zoh takes one for herself.

Cook says, "Them things would make a decent pie. I'll have to learn all kinds of new recipes here...as soon as I break this wall down."

Koffee takes an apple. "I worked up an appetite. I feel so much better now. Mama always said it ain't healthy to bottle things up inside."

The morning goes slowly. Zoh sleeps. Jed sits dejectedly on the floor holding his shirt to his nose. Koffee grooms Napoleon with the half of her broken comb.

Cook works on scratching away the mortar that holds the window bars in place, using a pocket knife. Koffee mutters to him in Yoruba, "What happens when the Jailor sees what you doing?"

Cook says over his shoulder, "When they come, I'll stay here leaning against the wall so as to hide the damage. You all might give me some notice if you hear 'em coming."

The mother with the young child says in English, "You gonna make trouble! We done had this jail for years afore you come along, and now you gonna make trouble!"

Cook stares at her and replies in English, "I's only trying to get us free."

The mother says angrily, "You don't know nothin'! Free! There ain't no such thing! You take what life hands you and carry it! Now here you gonna make even more trouble than what we already got!"

Cook and Koffee stare at each other. Cook says, "I's sorry, Ma'am, but I gotta play the hand I been dealt. It wasn't me put us in this place, but I intend to get us out. Listen. When I get these bars loose and the five of us run, you can stay here. I ain't trying to make nobody run with us."

The mother says, "Damn straight you ain't!"

Cook goes back to scratching on the mortar.

Maria goes over to sit near the two girls. She's teaching them a catchy Spanish song that involves patting one's body in different places at different spots in the song. All three girls are slowly getting giddy. But their fun comes to an abrupt halt when the Jailor opens the iron door to admit a matronly woman, her face furious, who stalks into the room and promptly slaps both girls in the face, then grabs their hands and practically yanks them out the door.

One girl looks back at Maria. "Awww..."

Maria waves. "Adios, amigas!"

The Jailor says, "Don't lemme see you girls in here again!"

In the hall outside the room, a man immediately harangues the girls. The voices fade away.

Soon after, a grey-haired Black man is let in. He goes to the woman holding the young child and whispers, "Come on, Wife." The man has a drooping arm.

The woman says, "Did you get it?"

The man nods.

The mother shakes the child awake. "Let's go, hon."

The family leaves. On the way out, the mother mumbles to the Jailor, "God bless you."

The elderly White man who has been asleep in the big chair rouses, yawns, goes to the cell door and calls out in a low voice. The Jailor comes and unlocks the door and lets the man out. "See you tonight, Pa." The man gives the Jailor the blanket and pillow, then vanishes.

The Deputy accompanied by the dog comes in with a bucket half full of water. Napoleon scrambles up on Zoh's lap at the sight of the dog, and no wonder, but the dog ignores him. The Deputy throws the bucket of water on the comatose drunk's face, and kicks him for good measure. The drunk man groans and doubles over. The Deputy yells at him to get up. The drunk man staggers to his feet and wobbles out the door that the Jailor holds open.

At midday, the Deputy brings in a meal of sorts for the five companions, although it's not fancy fare by any means. Hard biscuits, water and a few small pieces of cheese. The Jailor wanders in also and stands at the iron barred door, watching them eat through the bars. He's chewing on a big plate of roasted

chicken, and seems to be in a good mood. Grease is running down his chin.

The Jailor mutters, "Fifty each. Two hundred fifty for the lot. Not bad. Not bad. Looks like you folks might be here for awhile, so let's run down the house rules. First, don't touch me or my Deputy, even to give us a kiss. That dog is trained to take down any stranger what touches us, and believe me, he's trained good. We ain't got no money to feed him so he aches to chow down on darkies. Now if y'all is still here tonight, either me or the Deputy'll be sleepin' in the next room with a loaded gun by our side and the dog prowlin', and that dog can hear lice crawlin'. And there's constables outside most all the time, on account of they gets their share of the take, God bless 'em."

The Jailor fumbles in his shirt. "See here? I got one of them whistles too. And I got other toys you really don't wanna play games with."

The Deputy says, "The other night, me sleepin' the sleep of the righteous, a fool mouse snuck in. The dog growled and roused me so fast I never even studied on it, just blew that mouse to its ree-ward."

The Jailor says, "So that's where the hole come from."

"Shoo! Ain't easy to hit a runnin' mouse in the dark."

"If you blew it to kingdom come, how you know you even hit it?"

"Little bits of fur on the baseboard."

Koffee says to the Jailor, "Sir, why are we being held here? If you don't mind."

The Jailor jabs between the iron bars with a drumstick to emphasize his points. "As I recall, constables claim you's guilty of stealin', attemptin' to pass fake money, no papers, resistin' arrest, fleein' the scene of a crime, bribin' an officer of the law,

disorderly conduct and strikin' an officer of the law. Oh, and usin' foul language in public. It boggles the mind how four niggers can break so many laws in such a short amount of time. It'd take White folks at least a day or two to run up a record like that. 'Course all I got on you, woman, is no papers."

"What are these papers everybody is so interested in?"

"Blacks is supposed to either be under the supervision of a White, or have a written paper from their owner givin' 'em permission to be on the street, or a written paper sayin' they's free, not slaves, and can do what they please."

The Deputy says, "Two things niggers can do good, and one is, break the law."

The Jailor says, "I's lookin' to make some jingle off of youse. Is there somebody who can bail you out?"

"What's that mean?"

"Pay to get you out of jail."

"Pay how much?"

"Fifty dollars for each of you. Plus restitution for your grub."

"What's a dollar?"

"What's a dollar! Oh my." The Jailor roots in his pocket and pulls out a shiny coin. "This here is a gold Eagle, worth ten American dollars. Five of these Eagles for each of you. Or I'll take gold from some other country, I don't give a shit, I weigh it on my scale and give you ten dollars on the ounce, so it'd be five ounces of foreign gold for each of you. Tell you what. Seein' as how there's so many of youse, I'll let y'all go at once for two hundred American dollars, or twenty ounces of foreign gold. A bargain. But it's fifty each if you go separate."

Koffee says, "May I see your Eagle, please?"

"Sure." The Jailor hands the coin through the bars to Koffee. She hefts it and studies it, then hands it back.

"It's a pretty coin. But suppose we can't pay your bail?"

"If you can't pay, then I'll sell you as slaves. See, a good Black slave, a younger man with a useful skill and no attitude, or a prime woman who can breed, might go for a thousand dollars here in Baltimore. That's a lot of jingle. Even so, there's demand for slaves, now, in Baltimore, since shippin' 'em in is agin the law, and the South is buyin' up slaves to beat the band, to pick cotton, so there's a shortage up North here. It's a seller's market."

"Now my hook is to undercut the market. My overhead is low. The City *gives* me my place of business, this jail, and maintains the place, and *pays* me a salary, to sell slaves! And best of all, the dear Constables provide my inventory, without me layin' out a coin! What a racket! Nobody in Baltimore can beat my bottom line. So I aim for four, five hundred, for a young Black man who's been trained in a good profession, or a nice young fertile woman, or just fifty for a untrained Black who can at least walk out my door. That's why folks come to me, to buy slaves cheap. That reminds me. Any of you got any marketable skills?"

Nobody professes marketable skills.

The Deputy mutters, "That there knocked-up woman is a prize, Boss. Maybe you done overlooked the possibilities there."

The Jailor says, "Come on over here, sweetie, let's take a look at you."

Zoh walks over close to the iron door, and offers the Jailor and Deputy both an apple, but neither of them are interested.

The Jailor says, "You's a pretty one, for sure. Too bad I's married already. Didn't they feed you in Africa? You don't have any hips. Turn around and lemme see the backside."

Zoh spins around gravely. The Jailor gets a funny look on his face. He says to Zoh, "Hmmm. This is your first, ain't it, girl?"

Zoh nods.

The Jailor sighs and mutters, "I swear, there's times a man's hard put to find sense in this world. Do you know what a doctor is, sweetie?"

Zoh nods. She knows alright. A doctor waves dead chickens about and shakes a rattle.

"Is one of these no-goods your man?"

Zoh frowns at the Jailor, but takes Jed's hand.

"You sure is a quiet one."

"She don't speak at all. She was hurt some time ago."

"Hm. I'll have to try and hide that fact if I sell her."

The Deputy spits on the floor and points at Maria. "What 'bout her, Boss? She's nice too. Kinda young yet."

The Jailor blinks at Maria. "Is you somebody's daughter, girl?"

Koffee says, "She don't speak much American yet. We found her on Sugar Island. But she's gonna be our daughter. Cook and me. He's the one over there by the window."

The Jailor shakes his head. "You *found* her? Alright. Listen up. Here's what I'll do. If y'all can't come up with bail money, I'll try and sell you three as the parents of the girl for two hundred, and maybe settle for one fifty if the man gets leery. Then I'll try and sell the knocked-up woman along with muscle man there, for one fifty hopefully but settle for a hundred. That'd give me a sure deal of two fifty and a shot at three fifty. Oughta keep the Missus happy for a day or two."

Koffee says, "You're married?"

"That's right."

"I's guessing you got family."

There's a shout from another room, and a fancy dressed man clumps in, the fat Constable, twirling his club. He says, to the Jailor, "Just checkin'. How's it goin'?" He looks about suspiciously.

The Jailor says, "It's goin' alright. How's business?"

"That ship burnin' was the high point of the day, but for these folks. Somebody hit a pub last night down by the docks and roughed up the proprietor. Got away scot free. Never even told us 'till today! So what the hell do they 'spect? We ain't god." The Constable comes to the iron door and peers in at the captives. "Five left. Don't you folks get no notions, now! We keep watch outside!" He turns to the Jailor. "Let's settle up."

"Settle up! What's to settle? I ain't made nothin' yet! Gimme a chance!"

"What 'bout those two girls? You musta got somethin' for 'em. I seen their old man, he looked to be well turned out. Don't go and claim you let 'em walk!"

"I came out ahead on that but lost ground on the mother, and y'all know the deal on that! There ain't no profit in children and bums and drunks! Come in my office, we can't talk here." The Jailor and Constable go in the other room.

The Deputy, still gnawing on his chicken, comes over to the barred door, and says to Koffee, "Y'all can't pay bail, can you."

Koffee walks over to the door and studies this person. "You're very perceptive, young man."

"I knows people. I keeps my mouth closed and my eyes open. We sees all kinds here. A man gets to recognize the signs."

"Wisdom grows from experience."

"Don't I know it. But lemme tell you. If you get sold for a slave, it's a crap shoot."

Koffee sighs dramatically. "So I feared. I too seen things, and right now, I's guessing you got a suggestion to make. A suggestion best made..." She glances toward the office. "...while your boss is occupied elsewhere."

The Deputy scratches his ear. "You got me all wrong, woman. I ain't quite sure what you's drivin' at, but me and the Boss is brothers. He been takin' care of me and mine for many a year, and I don't sneak behind his back. All I wanna say is, there's more'n one coin to pay with. 'Specially for lookers like you three." The Deputy nods at Koffee, Zoh...and Maria. "Catch my drift?"

Koffee must catch his drift, because she jerks imperceptably. But Jed notices.

"Is you family with the Jailor man?"

The Deputy shrugs. "Who knows. What difference does it make? I done tol' you, he and me is brothers!"

"Is it...part of your job here, to give me this little talk?"

The Deputy nods deviously. "We got our ways, woman. Don't fight what you don't know."

Koffee sighs. "Yeah. But you know, it's the same everywhere. You reckon he's chargin' us a lot for bail?"

The Deputy shrugs. "He's the boss. He charges whatever he wants. There was a fat White man hauled in the other day for bein' rude to the wrong lady and kickin' her dawg, the Boss set bail at a hundred flat. That man cursed and ranted, but he paid up afore mid-day. Rich bastard. So you're gettin' off easy. Not as easy as some, but still. And he offered you a group discount! We gotta pay off the constables and buy bread and water and cheese and dog food, you know. It ain't all uptown."

"Where do you buy these biscuit things?" Koffee holds up the remains of her biscuit and whacks it on the bench with a thump.

"The factory. They turn out these by the barrel for the ships. We get 'em fresh, which is why they taste decent."

Cook laughs. "Yeah, we all knows what they taste like after a month or two."

"You could break a tooth on this thing. Don't anybody eat good bread?"

"What's that?"

"I see. How come you gotta buy water?"

"You gotta buy everything here, 'cept air, and you can hardly breathe the air sometimes. You wanna drink what floats in the harbor?"

"You said some got off easy. What's that mean?"

"The Boss charges backward bail on some folks. Like that woman was here this mornin' with her little girl. The Boss gave her old man twenty in backward bail."

"*Gave* him twenty!"

"Yeah. The Boss says bail is to keep folks from comin' back. In that woman's case, the only way to keep her from stealin' chickens at market, for them to eat, is to give her the money to buy 'em with. So the Boss gave her old man twenty, this time."

"This time?"

"Yeah. She gets hauled in 'bout onct a month for stealin' chickens at market, and every time, Boss gives her backward bail. 'Course, it don't seem to be stoppin' her from stealin'. Boss says she's his burden."

"Is *she* family?"

"Hell, no! She's a nigger! But a neighbor. She lives right down the street, in a squat with her old man and the kid. They ain't got shit, her old man's crippled. He was workin' loadin' slate ballast in a ship, and a pallot tipped and crushed his arm. So he can't work, 'cept odd jobs."

"Why can't he work here? It only takes one arm to eat chicken."

"Ha ha. Funny funny. Just study on what I said." The Deputy wanders off.

BLACKSMITH

After the Deputy departs, the five friends are alone in the cell. Zoh and Maria play games. They seem to be able to create games given almost nothing to work with. Zoh has wiggled a nail loose from a chair, and they use this to scratch diagrams on the bench, and then to take turns making marks that apparently involve some sort of competition. Soon the bench is covered with scratches that only have meaning to the two of them.

Jed says to Zoh and Maria, "Now folks is gonna get splinters in they sits there."

Zoh and Maria look up as if just noticing Jed. Then, simultaneously, they turn back to their game.

Koffee talks to Cook and ignores Jed, whom she has not forgiven. "So, if we pay this man's bail, he'll turn about and dispense our hard-earned gold to the poor and needy of Baltimore. There must be quite a few of 'em. Why don't I feel all warm and mushy inside?"

Cook says, "Let's talk in Yoruba. They might be listening. I's getting nowhere with them bars, they go way down in the mortar, and there's stones in there too. If we's here for a week I could maybe do it, but they's gonna notice sooner or later."

Jed says in Yoruba, "There's only two of 'em, and I could take 'em both when they open the door for some reason. I could bump their heads together and then we skedaddle."

Cook says, "And the dog?"

Jed shrugs. "It ain't a Demon. It's flesh and blood. All creatures has they weakness."

Koffee snaps, "Yeah, and yours is in the head! Real smart, Jed! Didn't you see he's got a pistol under his shirt? And the constables is watching the place, apparently. But why am I

arguing? Go ahead and get yourself killed! It would simplify my life!"

Cook mutters, "That ain't helpful, Koffee."

"It helps me!"

Cook sighs. "Fact is, I's found out the hard way that no town is as big as it looks. What that means is, you can't hide. We can live like rats, here, on the run day and night. We could be sold as slaves in which case none of us might meet again, Allah only knows what would become of Maria but it almost surely wouldn't be good for her, and our gold might get stolen from us. Or we can learn to play their game."

Koffee says, "Of course. I found the same, living in the House, back in Dakar. If I's to have a bakery, I gotta play the game! Not start off bumping heads together! We got on the wrong foot so we gotta fix it."

Cook says, "Yeah. I's found it ain't that hard, to play, but you gotta ante up. We need two hundred and fifty to walk outta here right now. I got sixty dollars left from my wages from the trip. How much you got, Koffee?"

"I got plenty, of course! I got my life savings, plus a good bit from Mama. And it ain't just gold...it's years and years!" Koffee pounds on the stone walls with her fist. "But my gold...it's for my bakery! All our dreams, Mama and me, is bound up in that gold...if I loose it, I might never see Mama again! But even worse, *she'll die alone, an old whore in a fucking harbor town! You know what happens to old whores?*"

Jed feels like he's swallowed hot coals.

Koffee leaps to her feet, and her eyes are wild. "Cook...what I's about to do will probably ruin it between you and me. I hope you realize that'll tear me up something fierce. I hope you believe that

half my dreams was about you. I hope some day you come to see, that this is the only way I can play this hand."

Jed leaps up too. "Koffee..."

Koffee ignores Jed. She goes to the jail door and rattles the bars. "*Mister Jailor...*"

Jed grabs Koffee's arm. "NO, by the Gods! You will not do this thing, Koffee! I'll...I'll..."

Koffee yanks her arm free. "You'll do what! There ain't nothing you can do, Mister Jed, so keep your damn hands off me! Just 'cause I was nice to you once or twice, now you believe you own me! I ain't your woman! You take care of Zoh and leave me alone! I's just trying to straighten out the fucking mess you created here, with what tools I got to hand!"

Cook says, "Keep your voices down! And Jed, keep your goddam hands off her!"

Jed puts his hands behind his back and hisses, "You said you was gonna go straight, when you got to Baltimore! Has you forgotten that?"

"I did say that, but we got a desperate situation here! I'll do this one last job, and after that, I'll give it up!"

"You *hope* you'll give it up! But you won't, Miss Koffee! You told me onct that folks was hooked...and that's you! You's as hooked as any of your customers! You's hooked on your own power over men, and you'll never get free! There'll always be one more emergency that you gotta take care of, and then, you'll promise yourself, you'll finally go straight! But it'll never happen! And you too will die an old whore! Not only that, do you imagine that Maria is ignorant of what you're doing? She's from Sugar Island, Koffee! She knows! What will you teach her?"

Koffee curses under her breath. "By Allah, I rue the day I met this man! He ain't been nothing to me but trouble!"

Maria starts to cry. Cook goes over and holds her tight. "None of you is doing right by this child!"

Once again Zoh stands up. She grabs both of Jed's hands and gets in front of him so he can only see her.

"Zoh, please..."

Koffee says, "Allah save us, here comes the goddamn sign language!"

Zoh glares at Koffee and holds up her forefinger. *I got something to say*. Then she taps Jed emphatically on the chest and mimes hammering on something, hard.

Jed rubs his eyes. "I don't get it, Zoh, please lemme handle this..."

Zoh shakes Jed, then repeats the signs. Then again. The same signs. And yet again.

"Alright, so you say that I's a blacksmith. So...what..." Then Jed's eyes get big. "I's a blacksmith! A goddam *blacksmith*! Of course! *Of course!*" Jed near runs to the jail door and shouts, "Mister Jailor! Mister Jailor!"

Koffee says, "Oh yes! Here we go again! What the hell is he gonna fuck up this time?"

Zoh puts her hand on Koffee's arm and watches Jed intently.

The Jailor comes ambling in followed by the Deputy with the dog clicking close behind. "Lordy, but you folks make a racket! Even my worse drunks never carry on the likes of you!"

Jed says in American now, "Mister Jailor, you say a Black man with a skill be worth a lot more?"

"You got it, boy. A skill other than making noise, that is."

"I's a blacksmith, Mister Jailor."

"A blacksmith! Why didn't you say so, man?"

The Deputy says, "It's bullshit, Boss. It's some kinda trick they come up with."

The Jailor studies Jed. "Yeah. Caught me by surprise. How's I to believe you all of a sudden recalled that you's a blacksmith, boy?"

Jed looks at this White man, standing before him. How to prove himself? All he's got is his bare hands...

No. That ain't all. He's got his father's teaching over the years...and his mother's wits and her bottomless love...and Ogun's muscles...and the Ashe from Olorun, the life force given like rain freely to all creatures...and Zoh's love guidance...what more does a man need?

Jed says, "I got power over iron."

Jailor laughs. "African voodoo!"

"You could say that." The iron bars of this cage...*give up them shackles, Ma said...a man gets angry, in a cage...real angry...anger to bust free! Pa come to terms with anger...when he was young...breathe on your anger, Jed! Like it was hot coals... 'til sparks fly and run, 'till fire snakes up arms and hands...let that anger hum and sing and breathe...spread your feet, Jed! Take aholt of them bars, one bar in each fist, yes, and now, let it happen!...let the power sing, Jed! Let it sing free! Turn it loose on the world!*

Squeals of metallic complaint...rust and and scale showers down...dog barks once sharp...listen to the song, Jed! Hear only the song! The humming song of power! Deputy shouts...cracking, splintering...Jailor yells, "Sweet Jesus! Stop it, Boy! Stop it, I say!"

Jed steps back. Two bars of the jail door is twisted, bent sideways. There's a gap a man could step right through...if he was inclined.

Jailor whispers, "You done bent my door!"

Deputy says, "Flat out vandalism."

Jed stretches his arms wide. "I got power over iron. I's a blacksmith from Lagos. And I'll make you a deal, Mister Jailor."

Maria laughs through her tears. She jumps up, runs to the door, steps right through it. She looks up at the Jailor and smiles.

The damn dog! But...the dog looks at Maria, cocking its head, puzzled.

Jed says, "Maria, come back in, Sweets. Ain't time yet."

Maria slips back into the cell and dances about. She sings, "Whooo..."

Jed takes hold of the bars and bends them back the way they were, more or less.

Jailor pulls out a rag and mops his face. "What's your deal...Mister Blacksmith?"

"I'll convince one of your customers that I'm a blacksmith. That way, you can charge maybe four hundred for me, like you said."

"I hear you. Keep talking."

"In return, you let my friends go for nothing, and you write up papers for each of 'em saying they's free Blacks."

"I can't do that, man. You don't know what you's askin'. I can let 'em go for maybe ten dollars in bail, but if I was to write free papers for 'em and somebody seen my mark, I could lose my job. Or worse. That's bad news, in Baltimore, to forge free papers."

Jed takes a deep breath. He still hears the song and he won't be defeated on this. "Alright. Then write papers that say it's okay for 'em to be on the streets while they earn the money to pay their bail. It don't hafta claim that they's free."

Jailor looks at Jed, then he looks at Deputy, then he walks up and down. "Whadda you figure, Deputy? I ain't happy 'bout papers with my name on 'em."

"Yeah, but there's jingle in it. Lots of folks could use a blacksmith. Wheelwrights, the armory, boats, farriers, farmers. Iron's everywhere."

"True, true. I wouldn't hafta let on to the constables that he's a blacksmith, neither. Let on he went for fifty. But it irks me the other four gotta walk for nothin'."

"Four? Ain't it three? Ain't the knocked-up one goin' with muscle man?"

Jailor snaps his fingers. "Yeah! That's it!" Jailor turns back to Jed. "Here's the deal, Blacksmith. I'll let them three..." He points at Koffee, Cook and Maria. "...let them go loose so they can care for the kid, and I'll write 'em passes givin' 'em permission to be on the streets for a month while they earns ten dollars bail each."

"Alright."

"But I'll sell you as a blacksmith, and you gotta convince my customer of that, without tearin' my jail down any more than you already done. Also, I'll sell the expectin' woman as your mate. That should turn me five hundred, if I play my cards right. But you gotta hide the fact that she can't talk. You know, answer for her. And you gotta tolerate the customer feelin' both of you up. That's standard, so for Chris' sake don't lay nobody out. A man's gotta squeeze the fruit afore he pays for it."

Jed looks at Zoh, suddenly realizing that he and Zoh will be separated from the others. Zoh nods, but she's realized that fact too, because her eyes fill with tears. Jed swallows hard and says, "It's a deal. That'll give 'em a month to get settled. Shake on it?"

Jailor says, "We can't shake, the dog'd rip you up. I'll write up the papers now. Soon as I get five hundred in my hand, Deputy'll give your friends the papers and let 'em walk. They'll be gone afore you, so what's to shake on anyway? But y'all listen. If I let you go, hightail it outta here afore them constables spots you, or

they might nab you all over again. They's real good at findin' cause to lock up a Black."

Deputy says, "If they was out and about makin' all this cash, why would they come back here and pay you, Boss?"

Jed says, "So he stands to lose, what is it, thirty dollars, but make five hundred. Besides, he can't lose what he don't have."

"Yeah. I reckon."

Jailor says, "Five hundred! I might put a sign out. It pays to advertise."

After Jailor leaves, Koffee goes to the jail door, smiles at the Deputy and gives him a little wink. "I suspicions you might taste a bit of that five hundred."

The Deputy has a hard time controlling a grin. "I ain't denyin' it."

Koffee pouts, "Don't seem fair to me that we can't get no free papers. After all, all we did was come here on a boat. Not like we stole or killed."

Deputy glances around, then he confides in a low voice, "Don't let on where you heered this, but you needs to talk with Ella O'Leary. Ask anybody where she hangs."

"Ella O'Leary. I's heard that name afore."

The Deputy slaps the bars as he walks off. "You won't hear it from me agin. Come on, dog."

It's a matter of waiting, now. The five friends sit down and look at each other. Maria looks worried. "Miss Zoh to not see me?"

"Explain it to her, Cook."

Cook talks low to Maria, but the more he talks, the more her eyes fill with tears, and finally she reaches for Zoh. Zoh weeps too. The two women hug and rock back and forth. Jed can't take

it, he gets up and paces about like a caged beast...but this cage won't be broken. He blurts out, "It's all my fault! We was free..."

Cook says, "It ain't no use to look back. We gotta look ahead. Listen. Is there some way we can figure to stay in touch, if we ain't together?"

Zoh wipes the tears from her eyes, then she mimes eating and also feeding Maria.

Koffee says, "You and Maria could eat together? How?"

Zoh taps Koffee, shapes a roof and mimes kneading bread with quick gestures.

Cook says, "Your bakery, Koffee. She means we could meet at your bakery, assuming you get one some day. It don't seem like Baltimore has a lot of 'em, it should be easy to find."

Jed sits down beside Zoh, his mind taking fire from this possible solution. "Zoh, we could run off from this White man we's gonna be sold to. Or maybe wait 'till you have the baby and it can handle itself, then run off and find Koffee's bakery. Or if our future master ain't some fiend, maybe I could get a pass to visit Koffee's bakery, and we can make plans from there!"

Zoh smiles through her tears, and hugs Jed. Cook explains it all in Spanish to Maria.

Koffee says, "How many months you got yet, Zoh?"

Zoh shrugs and holds up two or three fingers.

"Well, that's not forever. And sure it'll take me two or three months to get my bakery."

Zoh grins, jumps up and does a little twirl about the cell. Maria joins her. Zoh scoops up Napoleon off the bench and the three of them waltz about as best they can in a jail. Watching the two girls dance, once again Jed's reminded how very young Zoh is. For all her experiences and wisdom, she's a girl at heart. And at least she's dancing, not crying.

Later.

Koffee says, "Listen, Jed. I been studying on what the Jailor said, 'bout men pawing Zoh. Where you're going, men might even mistreat Zoh. Maybe right in front of you. You gotta decide ahead of time, how to handle that. You got the fight instinct. If you fight the White man, they'll kill you, Jed! Just recall that Zoh needs a live husband, not a dead hero! If you meet the Demon in a White man, or Black man for that matter, don't throw yourself away! Wait, be patient, talk to the other Blacks you meet, plan your moves, and don't strike until the time is ripe!"

Jed says, "I hear you, Miss Koffee. This time I'll listen. Although there ain't always time, if Zoh's in danger. A man has to act."

Later yet.

Koffee says, "So, Cook, you reckon you might work in my future bakery, that I plan to start here?"

"Sure. I figured that was settled back on the ship."

"Just seeing how the wind blows."

"Well then here's something else. On the ship I asked you to get hitched, in Baltimore."

"I's studying on it."

Cook looks at Koffee for awhile. "You don't trust men as far as you can throw 'em, do you?"

Koffee's face gets red, which isn't easy for a Black person. She glances at Zoh for help, but Zoh ignores her. "Cook...of all the men I ever met, you's the one I's most likely to trust. Well, 'cept for Hulk, our guard in the House."

Cook ponders this. "Maybe that sounds good to you, but it sounds like the joker to me."

Koffee squirms. "Gimme time, Cook."

"Sure. Sure. While you's studying on it, I suggest that you, Maria and me stay together."

Koffee stares at him. "Why is that even a question? Why are you suggesting anything at all? Do you have other options in mind?"

Cook shrugs. "Calm down, now. If you don't want me, Koffee, I can always find work on a ship outta here. Maybe to my home in Trinidad. See the old boys again. I ain't decrepit yet. I'd survive."

Koffee slaps the stonework. "Dammit, Cook! That's what I mean! In your heart, you could walk off from us?"

Cook looks at Jed, who listens off to one side. Zoh and Maria listen too, and Maria looks about to burst into tears again. Cook scratches his head. "Koffee, the only reason I got options is you don't seem interested in my main plan, and I don't want or need your pity."

"What 'bout Maria?"

"Of course I won't forget Maria! But Koffee...you and me can't build something real, simply on each of us wanting what's best for Maria! That'd be...hollow. There's gotta be more."

"I suppose it'd be cheaper if we rent one room rather than two, when we get out. And I already asked you to work in my bakery. I ain't gonna shun you. We can play cards in the evenings and share a mug. What more do you want?"

"I don't want you as my boss nor only my friend. I was hoping for better."

"How about I make you joint owner of the bakery, then?"

Cook shakes his head and rubs his eyes. "Koffee, Koffee...you is throwing words at it."

"Well, what the hell do you want then?"

Cook looks at her. "Do you really not know?"

"Why would I ask if I knew?"

Cook stares at her some more. Then, he wiggles himself across the floor to where Koffee sits and kisses her gently on the lips. After awhile, he says, "I shoulda done that to start off, a month ago."

Koffee touches her lips and her eyes are big, but she says, "I knows all 'bout that! Yeah, now I see real clear what you want!"

Cook studies Koffee close. "You see nothing at all, Koffee...and neither do I. We's both blind." He touches her on the cheek.

"Look at me, Koffee. Look real close. "

Cook and Koffee gaze at each other for a long time, then Koffee flops back. She's all bewildered. She leans against the stone wall and looks off into space. Cook sits beside her and puts his arm about her. Slowly, Koffee rests her head on his shoulder. Cook closes his eyes and rests his own head against the woman.

Still later.

The three women sit together, fiddle with each other's hair, giggle and murmur, Maria apparently understanding it all. Napoleon sleeps on a bench. Cook and Jed have marked off worry routes in the cell. Cook goes to the window, peers out, paces towards the women's end, turns around and does it all over again. Jed goes to the door, peers out, paces toward the far end, turns around and does it all over again. They are in jail, they have always been in jail, they will always be in jail. Jed glances at the three murmuring women and chews over his latest anguish. He knows where Maria came from and where her family is. Should he speak, and perhaps ruin the happiness on the women's faces? Or should he refrain from telling Maria that her family exists yet, and that her brother still searches for her, hoping to return the

family to their homeland in Spain? Shouldn't Maria be told the truth?

Jed yawns. Fatigue washes over him like water. Was it only this morning they escaped from the burning ship? He only slept a few hours the night before. He shakes his head to dispell the fog. Something must be done now. Who knows when he'll see Maria again, if the Jailor comes up with a customer. Jed resolves to confide in Cook. Without attracting the attention of the women, Jed deviates from his normal route in order to whisper in Yoruba, "I gotta ask you something private, Cook."

Cook sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. "Anything to pass the time. I's 'bout going crazy here, Jed."

The two men amble down to the far end of the jail and pretend to look out the window. "Cook, while the ship unloaded at Sugar island, I seen a smart Black man working on the docks, a local man, dressed real nice, and I got to talking to him. He told me that he and his family was shipwrecked on Sugar Island some years back. His mother lived in the town there while he searched for his lost sister, to re-unite the family and return to Spain, their home. From his description, his sister is Maria."

Cook's eyes go wide as he ponders this. "By Allah. Her brother and mother!"

"Yeah. I don't believe she had any notion her brother and mother was right there in town, when she hid herself on the ship. Could be she believes 'em dead. Has you got any hint from her?"

Cook rubs his face. "She's never talked much 'bout her family, 'cept to say she recalls her mother, when she was real young, then her mother vanished for some reason, she didn't seem to know why. Mostly she talked 'bout other children she got to know, later on. And pets they had. Lizards, snails. Jed...don't talk to folks! All it does is cause problems!"

"Too late now."

Cook sighs again. "I reckon you's asking my advice now, to spread the blame if you tell them women."

"No, no. But if it was you, what would you do?"

"Koffee was mad at you before, but that won't hold a candle to what you'll catch if you let this out."

Jed mutters, "She's always mad at me, no matter what I do, so what difference does it make?"

"You know why that is, don't you?"

"I don't know and I don't care. Let's figure what's the right thing to do, here."

"Well, here's my opine. See, there ain't no place on the charts called Sugar Island. That's just some fake name somebody made up. Sugar cane is growed on several islands, each with its own true name. And actually, there could be more than one port on each island. 'Less you knowed which one we stopped at, it's hopeless, Jed. You could spend years searching, maybe drown or taken slave in the process, and besides, even if you found the place, this brother and mother might be long gone! It's a sin and a shame, but we didn't make Sugar Island. Of course, if we was to go back to the Baltimore harbor and track down the Captain, maybe he could be persuaded to tell us..."

"Uh...the Captain is dead."

"Dead! How do you know that?"

"I killed him. When you all was starting down the gangplank, the ship on fire and all, I seen the Captain fixing to shoot one of you from the upper deck. I ran up there and we had a little disagreement and he ended up dead."

"Shit, Jed! You know, I wondered why I didn't see him on the dock later...by Allah! You saved one of us...or maybe all of us! If

one was shot, the others coulda tumbled into the water...not a soul on the pier woulda noticed...or cared..."

Jed and Cook look at each other.

Jed says, "It's no use telling Maria if she can't do a damn thing about it, to find her family."

"No. No. No use a'tall. It'd only cause heartbreak, Jed. Look at her over there! She's found a family! Why tear open old wounds? It'd give her lifelong torment, to know that somewhere in the world, beyond her reach, she's got a brother and mother searching for her. Just forget it forever, Jed. Forget it forever. Let us both swear to each other, to never again mention this talk we just now had, to a soul."

Jed nods. "Yeah. I agree."

Cook gets a wicked grin. "Except I might let on to Koffee how the Captain met his fate, if you don't object. If she knowed you saved her life, maybe she might not kick you in the face next time."

"That would be nice."

Late afternoon.

Deputy brings more bread, cheese, water, and a cookie for each of them. He clears his throat, looks goofy and then barks out much louder than needed, "Is anybody chilly? 'Cause I got a blanket in the other room I ain't usin'."

Maria nods shyly. Deputy near runs in the other room and brings back a shabby blanket for her. Maria smiles gratefully and wraps up in it.

While they eat together, Cook and Maria are going on and on softly in Spanish. Jed reaches inside his shirt and pulls his mother's necklace, the goddess of sacred rebirth, from about his neck. He holds it out to Koffee and mumbles self-consciously,

“Got a gift for you, Koffee. Ma gave it to me. She got it from her Ma.”

Koffee takes the amulet and studies it. “Thanks, Jed. Just what I always wanted. A pregnant woman with a hole through her tummy.”

Jed has to duck down, he’s so embarrassed. He mutters, “Way I heard it, she’s the goddess of rebirth and beginning. She...uh...gives birth to a void. The hole there.” His face is hot. “Ma explained it a lot better...it made sense...anyhow, don’t seem like a man can hold on to rebirth, so I pass it to you now.”

Zoh leans forward and stretches her hand, and Koffee passes the amulet to her. Zoh studies it and runs her fingers over it lightly, then hands it back to Koffee, who actually puts it on and tucks it down inside her shirt. Jed feared she might throw it at him.

Koffee says to Zoh, “You never seen that afore?”

Zoh shakes her head.

“Dear heart...your man was wearing it. He just now took it from around his neck.”

Zoh lifts her eyes to Koffee, then to Jed.

Koffee starts, her eyes widen and she puts her hand to her mouth. “Oh! So! By Allah! I mean...I mean...” She jerks the amulet out of her shirt and stares at it. “Jed...my friend...you say this is a *goddess*?”

Jed is lost. “That’s what Ma said.”

Koffee whispers, “Whoo!” She carefully tucks the amulet back in her shirt.

Koffee and Zoh talk back and forth with their eyes and Jed is completely in the dark. *Now Zoh don’t even use signs. She just sits there, and other folks get some kinda direct spooky revelation.*

Even more embarrassed, Jed blurts out, "I got a hunch that starting your bakery is gonna be harder than you suspect, Koffee. Maybe some African voodoo might come in handy."

Koffee mutters, "Yes, yes, of course, thank you so much for your concern, Jed, my friend..."

Then Koffee actually takes Jed's hand! "Jed...I wanna give you something in return. It's...oh...how to...Jed...thanks! For everything. That's the best I can do."

Jed says, "Don't mention it."

Finally, as the light goes down outside...

Jailor comes in, wide awake and eager now, and says through the bars, "I got a man out in the office, a White farmer by the name of Masterson. He came to town to shop and pick up a house girl for his wife, but I believe I can talk him into a blacksmith too, soon as I lubricate the wheels of commerce. You still with me on this, right, Blacksmith? Don't deal me no wild cards, now!"

"I's still with you."

"You all get your shit together whilst me and the man git acquainted. Deputy here gonna do a little prettyin' up."

Jailor leaves, and Deputy comes in toting a sack, both of them moving faster than they have all day. Deputy stands in front of Jed and looks him up and down. "Take off that shirt, man. You look like you was at the Fort drivin' off the Brits."

Jed takes off his bloody shirt and Deputy hands him another one from the sack. Jed tries to put it on but it's too small. He can't possibly button it, the sleeves barely clear his elbows and it's so tight across the shoulders the seams look to pop.

Deputy clucks in annoyance. "At least it's not bloody. Actually it brings out the muscles, don't you agree, girls?"

Koffee says, "Oh yeah. It's him alright."

Jed puts his pack on his back over the new shirt. There's a bit of a ripping sound. Deputy goes to Zoh. "Stand up, beautiful, and lemme look at you."

Zoh stands up. Deputy squints at her. "Beautiful, beautiful. I'd buy you my own self 'cept I's poor as a church mouse. I reckon we could put a comb in your hair." He pulls a box from the sack. "This here's my box of tricks, for them what needs it. Not you." Deputy opens the box, takes out a fancy curved comb and gives it to Zoh. "You can put this in your hair if you want."

Zoh puts the comb in her hair, then smiles at everybody. Koffee says, "Nice, nice."

Zoh reaches in the box in Deputy's hands and takes out a little corked jug. She pulls out the cork, sticks her finger in and scoops out a dab of red stuff.

Deputy says, "That's for the lips but on you it'd be a waste."

Zoh carefully applies red stuff to her lips, then she smiles at the others.

Koffee says, "I don't know 'bout that one."

Zoh reaches in the box of tricks again and takes out a smaller round container. She opens it and holds up a ball of fuzz with red powder all over it.

Deputy says, "That's to hide wrinkles and whatnot. You ain't gotta worry 'bout that."

Zoh dabs the powder on her cheeks, then looks at Koffee with her eyebrows raised.

Deputy says, "Oh my."

Koffee says, "Looks like you caught some tropical disease."

Zoh takes out another little corked jug, opens it, and scoops out something black as tar.

Deputy says, "That's for them with no eyebrows. Careful with that. A little bit goes a long way."

Zoh smears the black stuff on her eyebrows way too thick. Deputy says, "Hey. Now you done gone too far."

Zoh looks at him, then she somberly paints a big black line down both cheeks. Deputy snorts in amusement.

Zoh turns to the others. She's a stranger. They gawk, then they all burst out laughing.

Deputy lays his tricks on the bench. "Here's what the harbor women do on Saturday night." He juts out one leg, one hip and one shoulder, plants his fist on the hip, squints his eyes, tosses his head back so his lanky hair falls over his eyes and waves his free hand disparagingly, as if, *you ain't good 'nough for me!*

Zoh copies him, one part at a time. The leg, hip and shoulder forward...put the fist on the hip...squint the eyes...toss the head back...wave the free hand bye-bye...

The others break up in laughter. Zoh does a little bow. Then she struts about the cell, occasionally stopping to stick out the leg hip and shoulder...plant fist on hip...squint...toss the head and wave. Of course her hair, being so curly, fails to fall over her eyes.

Deputy shakes his head. "How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they seen the lights." He stows his bag of tricks.

Zoh does her act in front of Jed, and ends by tickling him under the chin with her free hand. Maria falls over on the bench she's laughing so hard.

Jed says, "Get ahold of yourself, Zoh. You look foolish."

Zoh struts over to Cook and tickles *his* chin. Cook looks bewildered. Maria hides her face in her arms and sobs.

Jailor dashes in. "Deputy...look at this." He shoves a piece of paper at Deputy.

Koffee says, "We should get ready to leave . Zoh, should we keep Napoleon, or do you want him?"

Zoh nods and picks up Napoleon, but the cat takes one look at her face and tries to scramble away. Zoh gives him a big kiss.

Koffee says, "Zoh, now you got cat hairs stuck all over your face."

Maria shrieks and kicks her feet in the air.

Jailor jabs his finger at the little paper and says in a low voice to Deputy, "We agreed on four fifty, but he claims he only got eighty on him, so he gave me this piece of paper he wrote out, sayin' it's a check, worth three seventy! You ever heard of that?"

"Yeah, it's so people don't gotta lug gold 'round. I reckon you can take it."

"Alright. Let's hope." Jailor yells, "Bull, if you's done eatin', Deputy's got 'em ready for you!"

Wiping his face with a rag, a mountain of a White man comes lumbering down the hall. Jailor points at Jed. "There he is, Bull! Look at the muscles on that fine specimen of the human thing!"

Bull Masterson shoves right into the cell, and half the air and all of the mirth flies out the window. Once a man of substance, Bull Masterson drifts along now on old habit. His clothes, once fashionable, are frayed and threadbare. A pretentious watch chain dangles over his well-fed paunch. His hair and sideburns are shot with silver, but neatly trimmed. His boots are worn at the heel and lopsided, but lately polished. His stature and bearing let him look down on those who must toil to get ahead. Bull might be flotsom from better days, but he's comfortable flotsam. There's something out of kilter in Bull's gaze, his eyes don't seem to be both looking in the same direction, an unsettling effect that adds to his overbearing manner, as if he could keep an eye on two different people simultaneously.

Absurdly, Jed feels like the man has violated their home.

Bull booms out, "Lemme look at this piece of Black mischief I jes' spent all my money on!" He grabs Jed's arm, squeezes the muscle then leers in Jed's face. "Open the trap, boy!"

The White man is right in Jed's face. Stunned, he gags on the man's reeking breath, his fist on the way up when in a flash he recalls that to fight this man will ruin the deal made with Jailer. Jed struggles to get control.

"Open your mouth, I say!"

Writhing with shame, Jed opens his mouth so the man can peer in.

Bull guffaws, "At least the fucker didn't bite me! Haw haw! Is this here the woman?"

Jailer says, "That's our African queen!" Jailer proudly gestures at Zoh, sees her face, starts, then glares at Deputy, who shrugs.

Bull shouts, "What, is she some kinda voodoo princess? Just what my wife wants, a fuckin' African voodoo princess to wash dishes! Haw haw! Wait'll the damn Church ladies see her! Haw haw! At least she got another one comin' that might turn out normal! Let's wrap this up. It's gittin' late and I got me a ride to go yet." Bull fumbles in a pocket and pulls out a length of chain and two locks, which he hands to Deputy. "Here, sonny, make yerself useful. I only brought one chain, so let's do the man. He's worth a hell of a lot more than the voodoo princess."

Deputy gets down on his knees and chains Jed's ankles together with maybe a foot or two of slack, so he can walk with short steps but not run. Jed has his feelings under rigid control by now.

Bull stomps out of the cell. Jailer says to Jed, "G'wan, boy."

Jed says, "I ain't going nowhere 'till the deal is done. Passes for my friends, and their freedom."

Jailer says, "Relax, boy. All in good time."

Jed sits down on a bench. "That's what I intend to do. Relax right here."

Bull bellows from outside, "*What the fuck is the holdup!*"

Jed says, "Your customer is getting antsy, Mister Jailor."

Jailor dashes out. "*We're comin', Bull! A last bit of business!*"

Jailor is back in no time with three papers, that he gives to each of Cook, Koffee and Maria. "Now git your asses outta here!"

The three of them near run out the door.

Jed stands, settles his pack on his back and says to Zoh, "Shall we go, Wife?" Zoh nods, snuggles Napoleon in her arms and they walk out of jail.

In the street outside the jail is a two-wheeled conveyance hitched to two horses. Bull stands there impatiently slapping his leg with a short whip. Bull rumbles, "What the hell was *that* all about? No good, I'll wager! Put the voodoo princess up in the seat, boy. You'll hafta scrunch in where you can."

Cook, Koffee and Marie stand on the far side of the street, watching. Zoh has the cat in her arms, so Jed simply lifts both of them up and sets her on the seat. There's only one bench seat, big enough for two, with padding, a low back and side arm rests. In a cramped space behind this bench seat are some iron contraptions that Jed doesn't recognize, probably farm implements. Farther back is a folded device of leather attached to iron hoops which Jed figures could swivel overhead in case of rain. When Zoh and Napoleon are situated, Jed awkwardly clambers up behind and shoves the iron things about to make room for himself.

Bull asks Jailor for directions on what roads to take. Deputy comes out carrying the old blanket and a rag, and says to Zoh, "You might wanna wipe the paint off your face, sweetie, so you don't scare nobody."

Zoh takes the rag, which must be damp, and scrubs her face. Deputy gives her the blanket and whispers, "May God bless and keep you, child." He glances back at Jed. "Take care, Blacksmith. Of both of youse. Or three, with luck."

Jed says, "Thanks, Deputy. You're a good man, but I don't reckon we'll visit."

Bull Masterson clambers up on the other side, tipping the whole thing sideways, sits himself, picks up two leather straps connected to the horses and yells, "Giddyup!" The horses yank the wheeled thing down the street.

Jed and Zoh both crane back and wave to their friends, who stand there watching and waving until a curve in the road hides them from sight and they are gone.