



São Tomé

Journey to the Abyss— Portugal's Stolen Children

Paul D. Cohn

Foreword

The provenance of the Saulo Chronicle is nearly as intriguing as the life of its sometimes author, Marcel Saulo. The document was commissioned by Bishop Henrique Cão of São Tomé in 1497 and completed three years later. Shortly after its completion, Catholic reactionaries forced the bishop to flee Tomé Island. Cão returned to his native Congo where, in less than a year, he died of malaria.

Saulo's chronicle spans a period of five years, beginning in Lisbon with the kidnapping of Jewish children, and concluding with the arrival of a Portuguese military fleet to put down the Angolar rebellion on São Tomé. In 1485 the Portuguese Crown and Catholic Church began a program of kidnapping Jewish children, 'reeducating' the young conscripts as Catholics, and shipping them 4,000 miles to the equatorial West-African island to work the sugar plantations. At first the authorities stole youngsters mainly from refugee families fleeing persecution in Spain, but São Tomé had (and still does) one of the most virulent strains of

malaria on earth, and the disease killed two-thirds of the conscripts within their first year. Saulo's chronicle begins in 1491 when the Portuguese demanded more conscripts from Jewish communities and began abducting resident children.

The chronicle remained in the São Tomé church rectory (under Bishop Cão's seal and apparently unread) for a hundred years until a Dutch fleet invaded the Portuguese island colony (18 October 1599), sacked the town, and in their Protestant zeal, burned the church. The parchment chronicle, along with shiploads of other spoils, briefly became the property of the Dutch captain, Pietier Van Der Vossen.

After the attack, the Dutch sailed west from Tomé for Brazil, hoping to repeat their deadly mischief in the Portuguese coastal settlements. Blown completely off course by an Atlantic hurricane, a few of the Dutch ships, including Van Der Vossen's, sought refuge in the Gulf of Paria between the Isle of Trinidad and the mainland. There they ran afoul of a Spanish naval squadron that quickly defeated them and recovered what remained of the São Tomé booty.

The Spanish captain, Carlos Márquez, recording that he thought the Saulo Chronicle dealt with the defenses of São Tomé, broke Bishop Cão's seal and read the document. After his reading, Márquez penned a damning letter and inserted it under the chronicle's lambskin wrapper. In part it read: "I find the biography of this vile Marrano, Marcel Saulo, an appalling slur upon all Christendom and our mission for The True Christ. I believe this slanderous blasphemy must be destroyed."

Fortunately the Márquez letter—written in Spanish—was likely misread or ignored by the Portuguese archivists. Faithful to the Spanish treaty with Portugal, the captain returned the seized goods to Lisbon in the summer of 1600.

In Lisbon, the Saulo Chronicle resided in the Archivo de Colônias for the next hundred-and-fifty years until it and thousands of other colonial documents found their way to

the Archivo Nacional de Histórico Ultramarino after the earthquake that devastated the Portuguese capital in 1755. There it languished for another two-hundred years until the death of dictator Antonio Salazar in 1970 when many Portuguese national and colonial archives became available to research scholars.

The Saulo Chronicle came to my attention in 1998 via the Ph.D. thesis, *An Early History of the Portuguese Inquisition*, by Ervin Kolbertz of Brandeis University.

A few years later, while assisting me with the chronicle's English translation, Dr. Kolbertz wrote: "In your efforts to preserve the authentic voices of the early 1500s—in particular Saulo's youthful vernacular—I suggest you adopt the language common to the Portuguese/English translations of the time." With this in mind, and using a thorough etymology, I made certain each word of the English translation (with a few unavoidable exceptions) was in common use before c.a. 1550.

—Paul D. Cohn, October 2007

Saulo

Chapter 1

The street before me surged with activity, horse wagons, vendor carts, dogs, sheep, stray chickens and other animals, and throngs of people hurrying with their bundles. Everyone rushed to get ready for the Sabbath—not just any Sabbath, but the most important of all, our New Year 5252, first day of Tishri, and it would arrive at sundown. Because the sky was cloudy and the exact hour of sunset uncertain, we needed to be at synagogue with time to spare. The late afternoon breeze from the harbor carried the fragrant promise of rain; and everywhere women hastened to shake out and gather their laundry from balconies and overhangs. It had been a dry autumn in Lisbon (September 1491 by the Christian calendar) and though it had rained yesterday, more would be welcome.

Nearby a lamb bleated in pain as a cart ran into it. The woman of the house rushed out, cursed the driver, then dragged the struggling animal farther inside her doorway. I pulled the heavy gate of my father's brickyard shut behind me, closed the latch and tapped the wood stave into place. Across the street there he stood, the giant rabbi from Spanish Vigo talking with the group of Castilian refugees who petitioned our religious council last night. As if we did not feel enough foreboding these days, this hulking rabbi with his crazy manner and no pulpit seemed to sharpen our

fears just by his presence. But with hardly a closer look, one could see it on the street: a mother's extra touch on her daughter's cheek, a father's arm around his son's waist jostling the boy in fun, yet the man's smile nowhere present in his eyes. Our entire community asked the same question, "Do you think they will come here?"

My father's answer was the most common: "It is only a matter of time."

I worked my way through the crowd toward home, nearing the intersection where the many streets of our Jewish warren ran together. As usual I had to go around the small lake that always formed there after a rain. On the opposite side an overloaded handwagon had dropped a wheel into the sewer channel and spilled some of its contents. A man and boy struggled to right the wagon and reload their goods, mostly thatch and rough lumber. To me they looked like refugees, and no one stopped to help—but I would, for that is my father's tradition.

"From where do you hail?" I asked, walking over to retrieve a piece of lumber from the water.

"Recently from Castile. Allariz," said the man without a hint of accent. "But like you, we are Portuguese. From Aveiro." I walked around to examine the wagon as the man dragged a soaked bale of thatch onto the dry cobblestones.

"I think we'll have to unload your wagon before we can pull it out," I said, and extended my hand. "I am Marcel Saulo." The man had a disordered beard and a fringe of dirty black hair protruding around his cap. He and his son appeared exhausted.

"We are the Saparows," he replied, not offering his first name. "This is my son, Germao."

The boy was small, perhaps two years younger than I, with sad and brooding eyes. I shook his limp hand, then began to gather more of their goods from the water. "I take it you're not refugees?"

"Not exactly," said Sr. Saparow, "but we fled Church persecution in Castile like all the Jews from there." He looked at me curiously. "Was that your father who spoke up

for the Castilians at the council meeting?”

“Yes,” I answered, “for what little good it did.”

The man put an arm around his son and drew him close. “The Crown authorities stopped us several times on our way here for questioning.” He inclined his head toward his son. “The last time they did so I had to bribe the soldiers not to take him.” The boy looked afraid and clung to his father. “For now it appears they’re only taking refugee children. It’s the *khateefat*—stealing of our precious children. The worst crime I can imagine.”

Germo spoke for the first time, his voice hurried and fearful. “We saw wagonloads of little kids and lines of older ones on their way to Porto for shipment. The ones walking were strung together like slaves.”

“Any idea where they’re taking them?”

“Maybe Madeira,” said the father. “No one knows for sure.”

By now we had stacked the spilled goods to one side and made an effort to free the wagon. My legs were wet to my knees, but I didn’t care. The wagon would not budge. Sr. Saporow climbed in and began passing things down to Germo and me. “What are you building?” I asked.

“A lean-to shed behind a friend’s house. A place for us to stay when my wife gets here with our younger son.”

“Where from?”

“Aveiro. My other son was too sick to travel.” He nodded at a group of ragged-looking refugees who hurried by. “Every Jew wants to come to Lisbon. It’s supposed to be safe here.”

“For how long?” came a booming voice from behind us. We had been so occupied with the wagon that we’d failed to notice the rabbi from Vigo standing there. He strode over and considered the wagon, grabbing and shaking it at each point of his inspection, then looked at me and began to speak. As usual his manner was menacing and he stood too close. “Now consider this son of Saulo here. Only *his* father spoke out last night for the refugee delegation and pleaded that we intercede with the authorities. And the council

shouted him down! Don't you think our brethren from Castile should get their children back?" He wagged his massive head and took a step closer. "That rabbi of yours, Saulo, and the council elders, what a sorry lot. Now if the council would grant *me* status—" He turned abruptly. With a violent heave he lifted the wagon and freed the jammed wheel. Senhor Saparow toppled backwards in the wagonbed and sat down hard. The rabbi hauled the wagon up the slanted street to the dry cobblestones. "This is the most substantial Jewish community in all Portugal," he said furiously, "and they turn a deaf ear to God's Commandment."

Sr. Saparow got down from the wagon and offered his hand. "Thank you, sir. Who—?"

The Spanish rabbi put his immense hands in the air and backed away. "Tell them, Saulo, tell them. And tell your father he is the only man in this community I admire. The only one!" He stalked away into the crowd.

"What a strange fellow," said Sr. Saparow. "What's his story?"

We had started to load the spilled things back into the wagon when I realized how late it was. "I've got to leave," I said. "Will you be at synagogue tonight?"

"Of course."

"I will tell you about him after services. Then too, you can meet my family."

"Thanks for your help," they called after me. I hurried down the street.

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"You're late," my mother said. "And why are your pants filthy?" My father, mother, and sister Leah sat at the table; they had already started dinner. I went into the next room and changed my clothes, telling them in a hurried voice what had happened.

I peeked around the corner to see my mother's smile. "You're a fine son for helping those people," she said. "Your lateness is forgiven."

I sat at the table, offered my Hebrew grace, and began to

eat. It was our traditional Sabbath meal, beet soup with onions, bread, and the last cucumbers from our brickyard garden, salty and flavored with nutmeg. We would eat the soup cold after sundown tomorrow, the end of our Sabbath fast.

Ah the Sabbaths. In ten days we would celebrate our Day of Atonement; and at services I would have to repeat the endless chant, *I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have done perversely*, then plead for forgiveness. As a child I remember sitting with my mother and Leah in our synagogue balcony, wondering at the meaning of these words. Growing older I began to search for my sins, but could not come up with anything that seemed to qualify—maybe a small lie occasionally or forgetting my prayers. Now that I am old enough to sit with the men on the main floor, imagining sins has become a way to occupy my mind when the service drags on. Now I can think of some that would qualify; a few even make my cheeks redden. Hopefully what Leah and I do at our father's brickyard does not qualify, although certainly to a Christian eye it would be a—

“Look at him,” Leah said, “he’s blushing again.” I gave her an insolent smile.

“Finish up,” said Father, glancing out the window. “We mustn’t be late.”

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The interior of our synagogue was a place for peaceful joy—darkly burnished wood, soft candlelight, and the last colors of day fading through the amber window above the Holy Ark. When Sr. Zelador, our shammes—the only non-Jew allowed inside our house of worship, and retained to do Sabbath chores since Jews are forbidden any toil on the Sabbath—blew the shofar and announced that services would start, everyone took their seats on the polished benches, the women and children upstairs, we men below on the main floor. Next Sr. Zelador dropped the heavy timber in place across our entrance door. The purposeful thud of this timber seemed to give us all a feeling of safety,

that we could forget—at least for an hour or two—the concerns of the day.

Our rabbi ascended the pulpit and began the service. He welcomed us, then bade the congregation stand and join in the responsive chant thanking God for our New Year. As the cantor called out our devotion and we answered him, I noticed a light flicker through the window above the ark. Others noticed it too. There sounded a thump at the synagogue door, not a loud thump—perhaps someone late for services—but enough to disturb our congregation. Some of us glanced about. We looked at one another, prayer voices fading.

Then our beautiful amber window shattered, showering the rabbi with glass. At the same moment there came a fierce crash at the entrance, splintered wood caving inward, a mounted knight atop our ruined door, his lance menacing the congregation, the horse defiling our house of worship. The king's soldiers stormed inside, the red Christian cross emblazoned on their gray tunics. The rabbi from Vigo rose like Goliath, raised a bench over his head and smashed it down on the helmet of a soldier. He swung the bench again, knocking two more intruders to the ground. Men around him threw themselves at the soldiers. Though a crossbow bolt protruded from his back, the giant rabbi rushed forward, seized the knight from his horse and slammed him to the floor. But quickly the soldiers overpowered our fighters and killed them all. We stood there stunned and shaking as more troops lined our walls, threatening us with crossbows, lances, and axes. The women and children trapped in the balcony continued screaming until the soldiers threatened them into silence. I looked up to see my terrified mother and sister. Near them stood an ashen Germo staring down. His father was among the dead.

Our rabbi lay lifeless on the pulpit steps, and at least ten Jews were dead or dying on the blood-soaked floor. The soldiers removed the horse and their wounded men, then the knight's body and the three soldiers killed with him.

They forbade us to tend our wounded. Through the broken door I saw more soldiers with torches outside in the street. I felt my father's arm around my shoulders. His face streamed with tears. I could not help but wonder if God had brought this vengeance upon us—His demanded atonement for neglecting our Castile brethren. Our trial was at hand.

Here now was the price of our cowardice, the calamity come home. We heard drumbeats, and a ghastly procession began. A tall priest marched inside accompanied by several others, all wearing white robes and devil masks. The tall one mounted the pulpit and, with animal indifference, stepped over our rabbi. This was the most terrible thing I had ever seen, and the priest spoke the most terrible words I had ever heard. "By Righteous Decree of His Most Catholic Majesty, King João II, all Jews, male and female, seventeen and younger, shall be removed from their district of residence and transported to the Holy See of Africa. These Jews shall receive the Beneficence of Conversion and Redemption in The Catholic Faith of Our Lord Christ Jesus. This decree shall apply to the districts of Estremadura, Porto, Aveiro, and Setubal." The congregation seemed to sob in unison.

At the devil priest's direction, soldiers went through the main-floor crowd, shoving all the boys into a space by the pulpit. My father gave me a strong hug, his face still wet with tears. "Be true to your namesake," he whispered. "There you will find courage." He looked up to my mother and Leah in despair. The soldiers grabbed my father and drove him and the other men from the synagogue into the street where the night rain poured down. The men spilled outside, black coats and hats in disarray.

Outcries came from the children and women in the balcony above as the soldiers harried them down the narrow stairway. At the confined exit of the stairs they seized all the children, including the infants, and forced the women into the street. They gave the infants to the older girls, thrusting a boy not a year old into my sister's hands.

“He’s still on the breast,” his mother pleaded. A soldier clubbed her to the floor. With the girls and children crowded together and all the women now outside, the soldiers pushed my sister and the others into a space against one wall.

The priest spoke again, this time to the girls, and appeared to be shaking his evil fist at my sister. “These are your Jew children, your responsibility. If any of them die, so will you.”

I will never forget the look of terror on Leah’s face.

Outside, the soldiers had driven the adults into the alley across from the synagogue. Next they prodded us over our shattered entrance and into the rainy street where the torches sputtered in the downpour. I had to step over the body of poor Sr. Zelador, one of the first to die defending our house of worship. Once we were assembled, they paraded us through the twisted streets, our families crying after, held back by angry swords. When we entered the Christian section, enraged mobs crowded in on us. At first they shouted only curses, but then a boy my age threw a paving stone. Soon we were dodging stones from every direction. A woman stepped from a doorway—her features savage in the orange torchlight—and threw a bucket of slops in my face. More slops showered down from balconies. As the crush of people came together they barred our progress, began to chant, “Assassinios de Cristo,” and drag some of our children away. The soldiers feared for their lives and gained passage by offering up five of us. The mob took twice that many. Crushed of spirit, battered and stinking, we finally arrived at the harborfront.

My sister and all the girls with infants had been kept apart from us, but for a moment their group paused nearby. The little boy struggled screaming in Leah’s arms. Clenched in his small fist were my sister’s gold necklace and amber amulet, the sacred kamea passed down from our grandmother. “Marcel, my brother,” she called, her face dirty and streaked with rain. “Pledge to me, Marcel. Pledge to me!” She looked down, seeing the child had broken the

fragile chain and pulled it from her neck.

“Pledge what?” I shouted.

“No matter what happens, I will find you. You must promise to find me too!” Leah worked the little boy’s hand free and threw the necklace my way. As I reached for it, soldiers crowded between us, shouting, pushing my sister and the others away. One of the men stepped on the kamea and crushed the precious carving. Like tears of despair, the rain fell in sheets.

“I promise!” I shouted above the din. “Leah, I promise!” I fumbled in the sodden street until I found the broken chain, then shoved it into my pocket. Like the condemned led to the gallows, they marched us all into warehouses, the girls and children disappearing into one building, we boys into another. None of us could sleep that night, locked and alone in our filthy prisons of cold wood and stone.

Next morning our parents and other Jews brought clothing and provisions for our journey. Flaunting his disdain for our Holy Day, the priest had demanded this Sabbath violation from the pulpit last night. Soldiers kept everyone at a distance while they herded us into the harbor plaza. Our parents screamed our names and thrust their bundles at the authorities, pointing frantically. My father and mother stood in the very front of the anguished crowd, waving and shouting, peering between the lines of troops. Throughout all this I looked for my sister, but could not find her. Some of the girls and children were there, but many were missing.

The day had broken clear and hot; and to my left in the center of the plaza stood a large fountain. Vapors rose from its water spray and the pool beneath. I immediately recognized the ornamental masonry from my father’s brickyard around the fountain’s circumference. In spite of the terror within me, I had to smile, knowing what Leah and I had hidden there—the Hebrew letters yod-heh, heh, and sheen (symbols for our Jewish God, Yahweh) carved into the brick scrollwork. Even more amusing, we had carved the Hebrew mezuzah numerals from Deuteronomy into bricks destined

for churches, crosses, and other Catholic structures. Though fear pounded in my chest, I worked my way through the confused crowd and over to the fountain where I drank and splashed water on my face. There were our symbols, evident to anyone who knew where to look. How my sister and I had laughed at our devilry, yet knowing fully the penalty if the Christians found out. At dinner my father would say to my mother, “Elcia, I cannot imagine how two children could find brick-making so amusing,” and Leah and I would giggle like possessed idiots.

Despite the prohibitions against Jews working the guild crafts, including the Mason’s Guild, our brickworks had made a fine business for my family. Because our yard was the only one in Lisbon that produced ornamental bricks suitable for construction, we were partly exempt from guild restrictions and allowed to sell our special masonry to the Christian community. Since Leah and I were skilled at drawing, we often worked with our father—sometimes even with the Christian masons—to design brick decorations, carve the molds, and prepare construction drawings. Considering this now, my heart fell. Had our clever mischief turned against us? Why had God permitted this misery around me that now spread everywhere? Was Yahweh punishing Leah and me for misusing the venerated symbols?

The tall priest in the devil mask appeared and mounted a scaffold. The soldiers silenced the crowd, our noise reduced to flapping pigeons, gulls’ plaintive calls, Sundered families weeping. The priest paused, then read again his proclamation from the night before, appearing to savor the words, a new mask this time covering only the upper part of his face, his smile the purest evil. Then he began, his speech like sand grinding into our eyes, confirming our dread in the light of day. The priest’s words brought forth a collective mourn, the sorrow of two-hundred voices. “Order! Order!” he shouted. “Gather the provisions and restore order!”

I heard a familiar voice and turned to see my father

running, shouting, holding two bundles in his arms. Three guards chased after him while another aimed his crossbow. “Marcel, my son!” my father cried. I raced in his direction, feeling that if I were there, they would not kill him. We collided just as the soldiers seized and threw him to the ground. I covered his body with mine.

“Please,” I begged, “he’s my father. These provisions are for me.”

“Two bundles?” a brutish soldier asked. “You don’t need two.”

“One is for my sister,” I said, finding and showing him her name on the cloth.

“Where is Leah?” my father implored as they dragged him away. “Where is Leah?”

“I don’t know,” I shouted. “But I will find her.”

“You’ll find Hades,” growled the soldier, taking both bundles and thrusting me back toward the other boys.

The priests and soldiers searched our pitiful provisions. Letters, mezuzahs, prayer books, worship vestments, all things family or religious ended their existence in a burning pyre. I could not help crying. With the exchange finished, the soldiers pushed the crowd back, forcing them to turn away. I saw my mother shouting things I could not understand. And my father, what would happen to him?

It seemed everyone received a bundle except Germo. The soldiers had recovered him in the early hours of the morning, returning the boy from a place where the mob had imprisoned some children. His face was cut and bruised. “Stay with me,” I told him. “I will care for you.” My words seemed so hollow, for how could I care for myself, much less another? I wondered what would become of the children the soldiers had not recovered.

Back in the warehouse a priest spoke to us. “You are going by ship to São Tomé.” We boys looked at one another—none had ever heard of this place. “There will be prison convicts aboard. If you do not behave and love Christ, we will throw you to them. As of this day you are no longer Jews. By mercy of our Almighty Father you will embrace

The One True Faith and someday be baptized Catholic.”

This could not be. I will always be a Jew. Last year I recited Torah to our congregation, and I go to Talmud school. I am now considered a man.

Chapter 2

The next day they loaded us onto the ship, a two-masted caravel. The boys had the center, a narrow space on the main deck with a place below to sleep. No surface on this strange deck was level. It had a bowl shape from the rear highdeck along its entire length to the bow, a saucer with ropes sprouting everywhere—more ropes than I'd ever seen. Tall slatted fences were erected on either side of us, the convicts chained in the bow, the girls and little children crowded behind in an enclosure like ours. I looked through a narrow opening for my sister, but did not see her. I saw a girl I knew, and asked, "Have you seen Leah?" A nun pushed her away and beckoned a priest who seized me with an iron grip and hauled me by my hair to the convict fence. I had never been so roughly treated.

"Useful hair," he said. "We won't cut it off until we get to Tomé." I thought of Samson. "Who wants this spawn of Satan for dinner?" he asked the convicts. The wretched pile of men leered at me like hungry dogs. Some of the convicts were dark of complexion, a few black as slaves. Moors, I assumed, Moslems imprisoned for their beliefs as were many Jews. "One more outrage," the priest told me, releasing his grip, "and over you go." I went back and sat with Gerمو.

The sailors threw lines to slaves on the shore. They began to pull us along the bank of the Tejo backwater. Another group of slaves at the water's edge and bleeding from the sharp rocks, stumbled along the steep bank,

fending us from the rocks with long poles. I stood at the rail, wondering at their struggle. The ocean appeared in the far distance. A fitful wind from the hillside scattered yellow leaves of locust trees across the estuary, and they stirred like flecks of soiled gold in the ship's wake. With my family torn from me, I felt as helpless as these tiny leaves, caught in a wake of circumstance so desolate that only the depths without sunlight might provide solace. Never had my cup been so empty.

"Remember your father's words," I finally told myself. "Be true to your namesake—there you will find courage." Among us there is the legend of the Just Man, the Saddiq, who endures all sorrows and protects others. I am called Marcel after my great-grandfather. He came to Portugal many years ago from France. People say Marcel saved a hundred Jews during uprisings against us, that he was the Saddiq. I vowed to God, "I resolve to be such a man."

As we moved along the shore I hoped to glimpse my house, but we had turned the corner at Almada with only the smoke of Lisbon visible above the hills. Many citizens from town stood along the pullway, including a few Jews who called to us. I did not see my parents. Had the soldiers released my father, or had they arrested my mother too? It seemed impossible I might never know their fate. As for seeing them again, I had no hope.

When we approached the harbor mouth, small boats with oarsmen took the lines and towed us to sea. The wind freshened from the northeast. With Lisbon fading behind the smoke of its many cook fires, the sailors—as if breaking my last connection with home—cast their tow lines into the water. The captain ordered, "Raise sails." They swelled out and caught the wind. Thus began our voyage.

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The captain, Alvaro de Caminha, an angry looking man with a short-cropped beard and waxed mustache on his stony face, stood near the rudder pole shouting orders to the sailors. His voice sounded full of malice. "Captain de Caminha is the colonizer of São Tomé," a fat priest in a

brown robe told us. "He is the island's benefactor."

"Where is this place?" I asked.

"If you sorry Jews were true citizens of Portugal, you would know of our great conquests. São Tomé is our island colony on the African equator. There we grow sugarcane for the kingdom." He pointed to me. "You're going to be a farmer."

"How far is this island?"

"One-thousand-three-hundred leagues. Two months at sea."

Upon hearing this many of the boys began to rock back and forth and tear at their hair. I did not feel so afraid because I had a secret, one I could not be sure of, but something I hoped would sustain me through this journey. The secret was a letter I'd discovered while searching my bundle for a shirt to give Gerمو. My parents had hidden it in the yoke, and I felt it crinkle inside the cloth. I could not read this letter until I found a safe place away from the priests.

People crowded every inch of the ship, and left little space to move about. "How are we to survive," Gerمو asked, "with everyone packed together like this?"

"We'll make do," I said, but the truth was elsewhere. Earlier I heard two priests talking—when one asked a question much like Gerمو's. "After a month or so," his companion replied, "it will be less cramped. The captain told me half these convicts and Jews will perish."

On the second day at sea the nuns found a girl with a small prayer book. The priests tied her to the foremast, and her cries in the night kept us from sleep. Our sleeping area consisted of rough planks in the ship's hold just below the mast where she was tied. In the morning the fat priest baptized the girl and gave her a Christian name, wielding his cross like a club. "I commend your soul to the loving arms of our Merciful Savior," he shouted, and threw the little girl into the sea. This death made us gasp—one of many we would see in days to come.

"These are the cruelest of men," I said to Gerمو.

“My father told me it is because they take women, but do not take wives.” He began to cry for his dead father. I put my arm around his shoulders.

One side of our enclosure lay exposed to the sea, and most of the boys feared going near this open scupper—few had ever been close to water of this size. But that’s where the privy sat, and since many boys refused to use it, our area was soon contaminated with feces and piss. The priests called us filthy Jew pigs and forced us to clean the deck. They slapped and punched any boy found relieving himself outside the privy. After a while I began to sit along this open section and watch the ocean. Large fish the sailors called porpoises swam ahead of the ship, leaping gracefully in the bow wave. Occasionally they drifted beneath my feet and twisted in the green water to show their perpetual smiles. I did not know fish could smile. I envied their freedom and made a covenant with these playful porpoises, to let the priests’ words wash by me as a ship moves through the sea—I, a ship’s prow passing safely through murderous waters. Though I knew they would force me to learn this Catholic religion, possibly I could use it to my favor.

I wondered about the several boys who made up the ship’s complement. There were three about my age and one a little older. I kept trying to catch their attention, hoping I might make a friend or two; but they so obviously avoided us, I assumed they’d been warned off by de Caminha or the priests. The three nearest my age had quite responsible stations, one was the captain’s scribe, and the other two traded off as stargazer and compass squire.

One day a sailor speared a porpoise with a barbed lance from the ship’s bow while others stood—crossbows poised—over the convicts. They hauled the porpoise aboard with hooked poles, the fish smiling even in death. Roasted in the fire pit, the meat smelled delicious, but they did not give us any; we had to be satisfied with our daily biscuit, raisins, a lemon, sometimes a few dates or rotten olives. They never allowed us enough water. As for beer of any sort, there was

none.

I got sunburned as did many others. In Lisbon we spent little time in the sun or even outdoors except on our way to synagogue, school, or in commerce. Even then we worked in the shadow of buildings. Most Jewish parents kept their children safely inside to study. At least on this ship we could get away from the sun in the sleeping hold, but the convicts in rusted chains on the forward deck were completely at the whim of the elements. One afternoon a terrible storm blew in and we were ordered below. They closed the hatch and the hold became pitch black—no one had thought to light the lamps. The ship heaved and shuddered in the storm, seawater everywhere. Our sleeping place was next to the animal stable which reeked like a privy basin. Goats, cows, and a horse skidded together and kicked in the dark. We were very frightened. As animals and boys jumbled together, many got hurt. Everyone became seasick.

Mid-morning next day they opened the hatch. Although the storm had passed, the rough seas remained a sickening gray. Those of us who were able, clambered on deck, dying of thirst; we lined up for water. A gang of sailors went through the heap of convicts, chopping the dead from the chains with axes. As they rolled each body overboard, a priest recited a prayer. One convict threw a severed foot at the priest and hit him in the back. A sailor moved to strike the offender with his axe, but the priest whose name was Norte—the youngest of the four on this ship—stopped him.

Almost all the boys had cuts and bruises, one a fractured hand, another a broken leg. Through the fence, the girls and little children sat in miserable disarray, soaked, bloody and bruised, bemoaning their fate as the nuns worked among them. The sailors butchered the injured cow, winched the quarters up to be cooked, then put us to work bailing the stinking bilge. We handed bucket after bucket of filth up the ladder. They doctored the animals first, and tended later to us. The boy with the broken leg died the next day. The priests spent a long time with this boy and

two children from the girls' enclosure who had also died, wrapping their bodies and blessing them with Christian names. After a ceremony in Latin, they dropped our dead comrades over the side. I wore my shirt with the letter inside so as not to lose it, though I feared it might be too soaked to read. They roasted the cow in the fire pit, and for the next few days we ate beef. We were so hungry for meat—it tasted even better than our lamb at Passover.

What would my family's Passover be like this year with Leah and I taken away? It had always been a joyous time, but the next—if at all—would be a heartache.

How we looked forward to the Passover celebration, the special food, the prayers, the Exodus story at synagogue, then the traditional question-and-answer parables at our family dinner, each person taking turn with their favorite part. From my earliest memories Mother would let me set a place at the table for the Prophet Elijah. And then when I was old enough—since we lived on the second floor—to open the window to welcome him. “Just ajar,” my mother would say. “He mustn't think we're so presumptuous as to expect his visit.” It seems when I was very young (or so they told me), that I thought Elijah's place was intended for Great-Grandfather Marcel, and I would sit in his chair, pretending to be the old man waiting for his dinner.

“Look at him,” my sister Leah would say. “He thinks he's the Saddiq.”

My mother would smile, hold Leah from behind, rest her chin on my sister's head and say, “Perhaps he will be a Saddiq someday,” and then my father would add, “That is why we named him Marcel.”

How could I live up to my family's hopes and find the bravery of a Just Man, to endure this cruel exodus without another Passover?

...

We came upon land, a Spanish port in the Canary Islands named Las Palmas. Captain de Caminha shouted Castilian at the soldiers who arrived in boats to inspect us. They rowed twice around the ship, all the while our captain

declaring his peaceful intentions. After boarding and a short negotiation—de Caminha reminded them he'd provisioned here six month's before—several from the crew went ashore with the Castilians, then returned in large boats filled with supplies. The transfer of goods took two days during which the priests accelerated our conversion to the Catholic faith. We had to sit very straight on the splintery deck. Sailors stood around popping whips. We knew these whips. A few days earlier, the sailors tied one of the crew to the rail below the rudder pole, stripped him naked and lashed him until he fainted.

The priests began by banning Hebrew. "Jews speak an evil language. You will speak Portuguese and nothing else except the Latin of our prayers." I thought them stupid in the way they addressed us, and wondered if they knew we were literate, quite above Portugal's general population. Did they know our tradition of religious scholarship? That every boy here was conversant with Hebrew Scripture, scripture identical to the Old Testament of their Catholic Bible? I squeezed shut my eyes. I must survive this insanity.

Marcel came to me, my Saddiq, in his black coat and beard, hatless, with mirth of eye quite unexpected, looking as much like God as any man. He said, "Marcel, my beloved grandson, take heart."

"How?" I asked.

"Don't you see? The Castilians have their hideous inquisitions, but these Portuguese give you perilous adventure. We will endure this travail and make—"

Shrieking— A sailor struck a boy's ear with the butt of his whip. A priest came forward and grabbed the child. "Punishment for the non-attentive," he proclaimed, and threw the boy over the convict fence. He landed on the deck with a dreadful thud and lay there dazed. I touched the comforting letter within my shirt's fabric. The priest's glare sought me out. "Who else wishes to visit our vessel's particular hell?"

We stared stupefied as a convict like a spider stalking

crawled toward the boy. When he reached the end of his chains, he motioned to the others fastened with him. By his beckon they moved in ragged unison, enabling this terrible fellow to reach the child. The convict held him by a leg and began to talk. "You have nothing to fear from us. The priests are not men of God, they are craven animals who enslave children." Despite these words, the child wailed in terror. "We have better food," the man went on. "If you stay and help us, we will feed you. We'll give these tyrants a lesson in kindness."

Contact with this foul-smelling convict was a fearsome experience for the boy. Except for Jews engaged in commerce outside our community, most of us had never been near a gentile. The boy sat up and rubbed his backside, though the man still held his ankle. The child began to bolt in fear. With the fence at the ship's edge closed, he could not flee back to our space. "Get me the water skin," said the man, "my friends and I are thirsty." Every eye fixed upon him. At this moment the priests forbade us to watch, demanding we turn our attention to them. I forced myself to ignore the boy's struggle.

After the lesson I approached the priest named Norte, one I had observed to be better educated and not given the brutality of his brothers. His name pleased me; Norte being the direction from whence we came. "Father Norte, may we write letters home? Leave them for the next ship going—"

"Letters?" he asked. "You are able to write?"

"We Novos Christãos are quite literate."

"No doubt the language of Lucifer," he said.

"No, no," I replied, "Portuguese, a little Castilian."

"We shall see," said Norte, and went forward to where the priests slept. He returned quickly with quill and ink, and handed me a sheet of rough paper, saying, "Let us witness this letter writing."

As if scribing my Torah lessons, I wrote carefully and deliberately.

Honored Father and Mother,

Life on this vessel of Our Lord Jesus is both challenge

and adventure. I cannot tell you how hopeful...

The priests gathered round, commenting as duplicity scrolled from my pen. I paused and appeared to think, listening to their prattle. One said to another, "This one attempted the sign of the cross when you threw that brat to the convicts." I thought kindly of the letter in my shirt.

By now many of the boys had clustered about. "You say *all* of these Jews can read and write?" asked Norte. "Even the girls?"

"All," I said, and gestured to the children. "Every one."

He addressed another priest. "Why did we not know this?" They conferred together. "You may write letters in future days," he told us. "Thus we can assess your ability to learn." I felt sure every child listening knew the meaning of that—likely the priests would find our literacy a disadvantage; possibly they might find it daunting.

That night, a large and arrogant youth who behind his back we called Golem, appropriated the bundle of the boy thrown to the convicts. "Don't take that," I told him. "It's not yours."

"None of your business," he said. "I can sell these clothes to the girls." By the candlelight he began to sort through the bundle. "That kid will be dead by morning."

Golem was the son of the rabbi from Spanish Vigo. After fleeing a purge there three years earlier, the family settled in our community. The father hoped to teach in our synagogue, but our congregation did not welcome him, and the man reverted to his leathersmith trade, occasionally delivering sermons on the street in front of the synagogue and stalking our warren in his crazy manner. Golem, because of his size, foreign manner of speaking and family dishonor, found himself shunned by the other boys. Certainly not stupid, he could argue Talmud as ably as any.

"They murdered his father with mine," Germo reminded everyone. "The rabbi killed two or three soldiers and that knight before they ran him through." Under us the ship heaved and groaned, carried south by a tumult of wind that howled through the rigging. Las Palmas lay ten leagues

behind.

“To take the boy’s property dishonors your father’s memory,” I said to Golem who was much too big for any of us to fight. “Your father’s bravery gives us all courage.” I wondered how much bravery the Saddiq must have. Must he fight with bare hands against armed oppressors?

“The kid’s as good as dead,” Golem said with lessened conviction.

Though my hands shook, I stacked the boy’s belongings on the bundle cloth and pulled it toward me. “In the morning if he’s dead, you may sell these. But last I saw he dwelt with the living.”

He bunched his fists. “I don’t like you, Saulo.”

“I am sorry about your father,” I replied. Golem retreated to the shadows.

By now the priest assigned to us that night sat snoring in the corner. I chanced a peek at my letter. The paper was stained, the writing faded, but to my relief, legible. Seeing my father’s familiar Hebrew script made my eyes brim with tears.

My father wrote of his love for Leah and me, his and Mother’s sorrow at our criminal separation, and of our religious traditions: *Survive my son of bravery, keep our heritage alive in your heart. Despite distance, persecution, or passage of time, your resolve must never falter.* What followed filled me with dread: *I fear the seizing of Lisbon’s children is only the first treachery by this accursed monarch, João. Everyone hoped the tyrant would not strike here, but soon he may steal our goods and expel us from Portugal.*

This I have never revealed: Grandfather Marcel’s gravestone has a deep recess cut into its underside. There, packed safely behind a dirt stopple, I will leave notice of our whereabouts. Even if expelled, I can maintain a record. A trusted friend in Christian Lisbon will do this for me. With this knowledge and God’s help, you, Leah, our family, will be reunited.

We are told letters are not permitted, but no matter, I

will write. I and your mother hold... there the writing faded. I read the cherished words again, wondering if the authorities had released my father. Would this be the last I would ever hear from him? And what was the name of this gentile friend—a person of trust my father had never mentioned? I retrieved my sister's gold chain from its hiding place and folded it within my father's letter. I returned the precious package to my shirt yoke, hiding it close to my heart.

Next morning an astonishing sight greeted us. The boy from yesterday, wrapped in ragged blankets, played jackstraws with a convict as several of his companions looked on. Golem appeared beside me and dropped the boy's bundle over the fence. "You might need this," he called. When the kid glanced over, the convict withdrew a straw. "He moved it," another convict growled. The boy whirled with reproach. The man raised a grimy hand and replaced the straw.

Fr. Norte arrived. "It seems hell hath a visage unforeseen," he said, opened the gate and withdrew the boy who protested he'd not finished the game. Norte treated him gently at first, but when another priest appeared, he dragged the boy roughly and said, "I see pointless games command your attention and piety does not. We will devise a more effective punishment." With this the boy scurried into our midst, cringing as he remembered the rough deeds from the day before. The convicts glared and muttered.

During our morning meal I saw Golem talking through the fence to one of the girls. As restrictions against this exchange had slackened, I'd earlier taken the opportunity to ask about my sister. "I last saw her at the warehouse," a girl told me. "All girls with infants too sick or young to travel stayed in Lisbon." I prayed this meant Leah was again with my parents.

While we assembled for morning doctrine, Golem showed me a list of names written in charcoal on a square of cloth—names of our dead who dwelt in the eternal sea. "Tonight we will offer kaddish for each of these," he said,

and hid the list within his clothing. “The girls will offer also.” Thus he became our rabbi, fulfilling the treasured role denied his father.

That night when the priests were gone, Golem brought out a tallith he’d made from an old shirt—fashioned with a knife, fringes ragged and dyed black with ink. Wrapping it across many shoulders we whispered kaddishim for our dead. Afterwards he said, “I hear the name that everyone calls me, a name that could otherwise offend. My family and I saw things in Castile to freeze one’s blood. *Our* situation perils us in like manner. Until we are free of these accursed priests, they shall know me as Golem.”

As he folded the tallith and hid it away, I said, “If they find that, they will kill you.”

His eyes misted, likely thinking of his father. “Not before I kill some of them.” Then Golem began to cry, something I thought I would never see. He noticed my look—well, all of our looks—and angrily wiped the tears with the back of his hand. “Never thought you’d see your rabbi cry, gentlemen?” He turned to me, but so the others could hear. “Rabbi, Saulo? Do you know how dear my father held that title? Do you know how much he wanted the community to call him that?” No one answered; we us just looked down. “Don’t worry, gentlemen. Oh, it was the same in Vigo. My father usually spoke out when he should have kept silent. Always an outcast, the Jewish community there considered him a madman. And his size made him so visible. Everyone feared him, yet the Christians teased and threw rocks, and often the soldiers taunted my father. He couldn’t fight the whole country; and any outburst against a Spaniard—” Golem’s eyes glistened in the candlelight. “Well, even if justified it meant the rack or death... Enough, enough,” he said, and turned away.

...

One evening after Vespers, Fr. Norte came to sit with me. We stared across the ocean into the setting sun. Norte was awkward of carriage, tall and gaunt with a hawk-nosed face, the youngest of the priests. Below us an occa-

sional porpoise ran silently in the bow wave, its back flashing golden. “The sea can be quite beautiful,” he said. “I never tire of—”

“Each day takes me farther from my home.”

He turned silent, then removed a book from his vestments and began to read, his lips moving with the words. Finally he said, “It is God’s will, Saulo, that we are here.”

“What book do you read?”

“I read only one book, the Holy Scriptures. This is Genesis.”

“Genesis?”

“Yes. Where we go may be nearly as unspoiled as Eden. I myself have never been to São Tomé. I read Genesis for guidance.”

“May I see it?”

He responded slowly, then cast an eye to the sea, afraid I might share his treasure with the porpoises. “You do not know Latin.”

Norte showed me the worn opening leaf revealing beautiful lettering, words straight, uniformly scribed and well rounded. “In The Beginning God created the ...,” I read.

“No. I do not believe it.”

“I have the Pentateuch in memory. We call it The Torah. By eighteen, most of our men can quote Old Testament word for word.”

As the evening fire fell over the edge of sea, a forktail bird flew out of the sun. Following it eastward, I saw land for the first time in many days, a low thrust of hills lit yellow against the sky.

“Africa!” cried the stargazer from the high deck. “Africa!”

A world away, I thought, and pictured my family at our last dinner together. My loneliness overwhelmed me.

Chapter 3

Two days later we entered a bay south of Cabo Branco and anchored off Arguin Island. A cluster of grass huts stood near its shore. The inhabitants looked especially poor. The sailors told us they were fisherman and called them “heathen Moors.” When the scrawny blacks spotted our ship, they fled with their children and old people to a far shore, scrambled into their canoes and paddled away. The sailors laughed at the sight. One said, “We killed a bunch of those devils our last time here.”

We unloaded all but the large animals onto the island. Some of the children, fearful that this was São Tomé and not believing the priests’ explanations, screamed in protest. The next morning the captain ordered we older boys and some convicts back to the caravel. The ship sailed a few leagues to a place on the mainland where a ramp made of stones and logs sat at the bay’s edge. The boat glided between two poles jutting from the water and nosed into the ramp. Using the net webbing, we clambered overboard. Golem, Geremo, and I waded on shore, setting foot for the first time in Africa.

The ramp had been built for ship repair by earlier generations of Portuguese seafarers. As we prepared to pull the caravel onto it, a large group of savages—ones different from those on Arguin—emerged from behind a sand hill. They approached us cautiously, then removed their stalked headdresses and prostrated themselves facedown at the captain’s feet. He acknowledged and motioned them to stand. With great ceremony the natives produced gifts of

ostrich eggs, crocodile skins, and vests and caps of feathered knitwork. De Caminha must have expected them; he gave their chieftain two knives and a bag of religious coins. They watched us fasten the ropes and pulleys, then helped haul the caravel from the water. The captain ordered Golem and Geremo to scrape the ship's hull and work with the cleaning crew. He considered me for a moment. "Go with the sailors. They will teach you to hunt seals."

Here I saw an opportunity to get to know some of these men, and had hoped that a boy or two my age from the crew would go with us; but de Caminha held these younger ones back with the hull-cleaners. As far as the sailors on the hunt were concerned, I was surplus baggage.

In two boats we rowed down the coast to a rocky island named Heron. We saw seals on the island that did not seem afraid, moving only after we came within a few feet of them, the animals large, brown, and much bigger than the gray ones in Lisbon harbor. We beached our boat behind a low hill and crept to look down at a noisy group on the shore below. As we waited for the other boat to round the corner, a sailor near me pointed farther down the beach. "There's what we want, those elephant-looking ones. They'll make two casks of oil each."

They didn't look much like elephants, but were certainly the largest seals I'd ever seen—many times the size of the ones below us. The other boat came into view and rowed to where the big animals rested. The men got out and killed several of these giants before we made it down the slope. The remaining animals milled frantically, bellowing in protest, struggling to regain the water. These immense creatures died a slow death, even when lanced through the heart. They bled into the wet sand, pleading to the end. One rolled over an iron lance and bent its shaft like a green twig.

Though some of the animals still clung desperately to life, we carved large sections of skin and blubber from them, stacking the pieces in the boat. Sailors brought the other boat around and we loaded both to the gunwales.

Canoes with the same savages from this morning came round the island. They helped with the butchering, started a fire in the beach wood and began to smoke the meat, curing it with seawater. The blacks also butchered the heads, extracting the dog teeth for ivory. The dripping fat sputtered in the fire and filled the air with its uncommon smell. We ate the cooked meat which tasted much like the cow we'd eaten two weeks before. Stuffed with food, we stacked slabs of red flesh on top of the blubber and labored slowly back to the caravel. Once there, we spent the night on the beach. The captain, sailors, and convicts dined on seal meat, roasted seaweed, and shelled worms cleaned from the caravel's hull. "Try one," a convict said, drawing the worm's raw body from its shell and swallowing it whole.

Golem shook his head. "No thanks."

"Go on," a sailor said mockingly, "they're a delicacy."

Golem, talking Hebrew, turned to face me and the other boys. "I've never heard of these, but shelled creatures are abominations, excluded in Leviticus." That was agreeable with me.

De Caminha glared across the firelight. "The devil language. What did you say?"

I hoisted a piece of seal meat. "A prayer of thanks, honored captain. For the seal meat, for the souls of us all."

"Not for the worms?"

Meat in hand, I crossed myself. "To the worms."

The air turned cold and we slept close to the fires. In the night more fires appeared down the beach—the savages had returned. At daylight they helped us float the caravel. Towing the two laden boats from the day before, we reached Arguin late that morning. We spent the next days rendering oil into casks, smoking seal meat and feasting. Everyone got involved, including the nuns and little children. Dogs from the village begged about. For sport, the sailors shot several with their crossbows. They also killed two goats who wandered in from the sand hills, adding their meat to the smoke fires. On the third day, as we

loaded the caravel, a canoe of villagers paddled by. The sailors goaded them by setting their huts afire.

This troubled me, and I asked Golem, “Why do they hate the fisherman but not the ones on the beach?”

He gave me a weary look. “The beach savages play for the captain, wear crosses and grovel. You saw them. That’s what we’ll have to do.” He stared at the flaming village. “When we were tarring the ship, Saulo, I thought I might run away, follow those blacks across the sand hills into the Wilderness. Like the Biblical Jews with God’s magic to guide them.”

“We need to stay together.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “That, my friend, is why I’m still here.”

We sailed into the dusk, a fair breeze at our heels, the fires of Arguin our guide to deep water. Free of land, the compass squire took readings by his lamp and counted down the hourglass.

As our journey continued south, the polestar each night fell closer to the north edge of earth. From the dark the stargazer sang the headings, his chant rising to the fading North Star, to Africa, to the unknown sea:

Regiment of the North, guide our way

Stella Polaris, The Savior’s gift

Sentinel of the night

Coax forth God’s Cross from the southern sea.

• • •

In the week following, our ship rounded Cape Verde and our heading turned from south to east, sailing always within sight of land. Throughout the journey the sun had set starboard; now it set to the ship’s stern. A priest told me, “We sail along the earth’s equator.” I did not know what to expect, but longed to set foot on land again, any land—after weeks at sea with only Arguin to break the ocean’s sameness, I would welcome even unknown São Tomé.

One day we spotted a two-masted caravel much like our own. At sight of this Portuguese voyager returning home

from Africa, Captain de Caminha and his crew cheered with great excitement. Our vessels hove-to a short way apart; their captain and two others crossed over in a small boat. De Caminha greeted the men with great salutations and clasping of hands. One, an immensely fat, serious-looking man, wore a gold jacket and a cumbersome white hat made from winding cloth. His skin had the color of vino tinto, a complexion I'd never seen.

Immediately after the greetings, this strange man expressed an interest in examining us. In the company of de Caminha, he spent brief moments with the girls and small children, then entered our enclosure. For some reason the captain pointed at me. The visitor came close. "Remove your breeches," he ordered. This demand left me aghast. Because of his thick pronunciation, I feigned misunderstanding and turned away.

De Caminha grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. "Do as he says!"

As the captain moved to strike me, Fr. Norte came between us and said, "Saulo, he merely wants to see your privates. His culture practices circumcision, and we told him that Jewish males are thus disfigured. He wants to see for himself."

I tightened the knot at my waist. "No." My heart pounded, every eye settled on me. The boys exchanged glances and laughter. De Caminha beckoned a sailor who strode forward with his whip. "Lower your breeches or I will beat you and every Jew on this ship within an inch of his life." The boys turned silent.

I closed my eyes tight, my legs began to tremble; I wanted to run. In this terrible instant Great-Grandfather Marcel appeared, smiling as ever. "Teach them," he said.

"How?"

He inclined his head. "By your compliance, you save your fellows. Their derision turns to respect." With these words I undid my waistcord and exposed myself. My face flamed with humiliation.

I jumped back and drew up my breeches when the evil

visitor reached to touch me. He spoke to the captain in his thick Portuguese, displaying yellow teeth. "One should respect these Jews. They come from a culture possibly more venerable than your own." The captain glared, reached to his waistband and pulled a dagger from its sheath. Everyone gasped. The visitor turned his back to the threat, put an arm over my shoulder and walked me along the fence. "Your captain will endure my insults because he needs me for his enterprise. Besides, my brother is the overseer of his plantations on São Tomé." As I tried to wriggle free, the man tightened his grip. "I was on my way to visit your country when we encountered this vessel. De Caminha plans a call in Porto Novo to purchase slaves. That city, young man, is my place of business—I am a famous broker of slaves." He eyed me. "And you are called?"

"Saulo. Marcel Saulo."

He offered his hand. "I am Nasic. I have seven wives, many concubines, and live in a palace by the ocean. Would you like to see it when we stop in Porto Novo? Have you ever had an African woman? I will give you the gift of one."

Again I tried to escape his grasp. "No."

"Very well then. Although I have heard of your people, young Saulo, you are the first I've met. But I am sure to meet more. According to the captain, that King João of yours intends to populate Tomé with young Jews. Or should I say those who survive conversion? What have they told you of the island?" I shrugged. We turned to walk back along the fence. "It is a dreadful place which I refuse to visit. Tomé has a pitiless fever that afflicts everyone—slave, master, and soon your people. You will do well to remain with me in Porto Novo. I can arrange it with de Caminha, an extra slave or two." When I offered nothing in response, he left and returned to the captain on the high deck. The two parleyed, looking my way.

I went to sit with Germo and Golem, the former staring fearfully, Golem laughing. "That man is a slave trader," I told them. "He will sail back with us to a place called Novo

where de Caminha plans to buy slaves.” Golem’s laughter grew louder. “*What?*” I demanded.

“You, Saulo. I have never seen anyone get into trouble like you. First you’re friends with that gargoyle, Norte. Then you drop your britches so everybody sees your tsaatsooa. Next the captain draws his dagger. Now you’re adopted by a tent head.” Germo and the others rolled with laughter.

“Silence!” De Caminha shouted from the high deck and thrust a fist at us.

Nasic remained while his boat went to the other ship. On its deck, tethered and roasting in the sun, lay slaves—a tortured pile of anguish. Soon the little boat returned with Nasic’s baggage and his personal slave. The black, taller than any man I’d ever seen, wore a white robe and head wrapping. He also wore a heavy chain around his neck with a short piece like a braid to the middle of his back. Clearly visible on the man’s forehead was a brand shaped like a horseshoe, a depressed scar. I touched my own forehead and winced at the thought.

As we watched Nasic’s boat unload, Germo said, “Marcel, ask Farther Norte to send our letters home.” His request stabbed my heart, knowing what tragedy his family suffered. I sought out the priest and he agreed to do so. As they completed unloading Nasic’s goods, Norte waved our letters wrapped in hide leather and announced they were heading home. Our two camps, boys and girls, cheered.

With the transfer complete and sails raised, we tacked east. Nasic, standing near the rudder pole, saluted me. Ignoring his wave, I stood at the rail as we neared the other ship and pondered the miserable lives of slaves, their desperate eyes. I imagined each forehead with the loathsome horseshoe, wondering if they would brand us in like manner. Something thrown from the home-bound vessel splashed in the water. When we neared, my spirits sank into the sea. “Our letters,” I whispered, and glanced at my two friends. Sorrow in their eyes told me they had seen it

too.

Three days later we dropped anchor at Porto Novo. Before Nasic went on shore he again suggested this port as my new home. I told him I'd decide before we left. I wondered which prison, Colony Tomé or Porto Novo, could I more easily escape? In my view from the ship, Porto Novo appeared a hateful place, some low grass huts, a long wooden building, and a slave enclosure of stacked logs topped with woven thornbushes. Fires blazed day and night around the enclosure. Guards marched endless vigils on its circumference. Though I could see nearly a league along the shore in either direction, Nasic's castle was nowhere in sight.

Around noon the second day, boats loaded with slaves began to arrive. All of us watched with growing apprehension. Would this to be our fate as well? Was there no limit to the cruelty of this voyage? On the shore, guards with prods and whips herded a dozen Africans at a time from the enclosure. Nasic and the captain sorted through them, segregating the few of de Caminha's choosing. The guards then drove the others back to their prison. Those selected for our ship and not yet branded immediately received the burning horseshoe on their forehead. Though nearly a hundred yards from shore, we clearly heard their howls and pleadings, and smelled the execrable odor of cautery. Once on board, many of the new arrivals continued their lamentations.

The slaves occupied the forward deck with the convicts. In preparation, the sailors erected another fence, dividing the space in half and crowding the convicts to port. With their chains re-fitted and much shortened, they protested loudly. As the slaves arrived, sailors goaded them off the boats and up the rope webbing, first detaching the gang chain so that one slip would not drown them all. The slaves were very fearful. Even those not freshly branded shook and begged as they ascended the web.

I watched two slaves fall from the net, one into the boat, the other into the sea. The man who fell into the boat hurt

his back and remained in the bottom of the craft. The one who fell into the sea sank from sight, dragged under by his leg iron. He surfaced and struggled to climb into the boat. He did so with help from the sailors, but not before the most terrifying fish came after him, a demon three times the size of a porpoise with an immense gray head, long slash of mouth, rows of jagged teeth, and eyes like dull pewter. The monster lunged through the water at the thrashing man, twice missing him.

“Hakifi! Hakifi!” the Africans screamed as the fish continued to prowl around the boat, a terrible shadow in the water. The boatmen shouted and poked the creature with their oars, but failed to drive it off.

As the last slaves worked their way up the web, the sailors hefted the injured man to his feet from the bottom of the boat. Nasic stood looking down from our ship’s rail, encouraging the slave in his native tongue to climb. But the unfortunate African, even with assistance, could not stand. After the man’s vain attempt at the web, Nasic made a dismissive gesture. The sailors removed the black’s leg iron and threw him overboard. He must have expected this fate; with dignity he chanted quietly—perhaps a death chant—moving his arms in a circle to stay afloat. The giant fish took him silently from behind, dragging him under in an instant.

Of all the death we had seen, this was the most horrible, made more so by Nasic and de Caminha who watched with indifference. As the final swirl of bloody water closed over the man, the slave broker removed a book from his purse, made a notation, and showed it to de Caminha.

Females made up the last boatload, and included girls much younger than Leah. Except for scant adornments, they wore no clothing. I had never seen a woman without clothes before. As they came on board I felt ashamed, but watched anyway. They chained the females on the fore deck closest to the rail, separating them a short distance from the males. These young girls and women were most pitiful, many just branded—their blistered horseshoes the

same shape as the iron crooks sunk into the deck to anchor slaves.

I did not need Great-Grandfather Marcel to help me choose São Tomé over Porto Novo—in this there was no choosing: Stay with my comrades. At the first opportunity I told Nasic. I did so in a courteous way, believing that if angered he might force me, with de Caminha's blessing, to stay in Porto Novo. I had become fearful of the captain since the day he threatened to beat me. "I am disappointed," said Nasic, but he accepted my decision. Though I did not understand his friendly treatment, I realized I might someday benefit from knowing this evil man.

That evening they gave us bananas, the first fresh fruit we'd tasted in weeks, and we savored every bite. Along with other supplies, bunches of the fruit had been brought on board in the afternoon. We lay the night at anchor while a strong breeze blew from the north, salting the heavens with constellations I had never seen before. The slaves just over the fence lamented in their strange and haunted tongue. In the night, as waves washed against the ship and slaves whispered sorrows, I saw three convicts escape over the side. Their chains had been fastened in error that afternoon.

At dawn the sailors discovered the missing and frantically searched the ship. "How could they risk the hakifi?" I asked Golem. "They prefer that peril to São Tomé?"

"They know what we must learn," he said.

De Caminha grew furious at the escape. He directed the sailors responsible stripped naked and whipped without mercy. With the captain's lash and moans of beatings ringing in our ears, we set sail. The wind bore us away from Porto Novo, slaves silent and wide-eyed, convicts cursing those fled, beaten sailors in a bloody pool of seawater thrown on them for their wounds, and we Jews fearful at what awaited. Only the priests, captain, and nuns seemed to understand the purpose of this unhappy voyage. Just five days to the south, Tomé waited.

On the third day the wind failed and left us in a lifeless

calm. At the time no one considered it a problem—we had been so burdened before, usually for less than a day. But as the second noon crept by, everyone became restless—in Porto Novo we had stocked food and water for only a week. The sailors began to talk of the dullens, a windless condition that could last a month.

In the midst of this the slaves fell ill, then the convicts. The illness went unnoticed for two days, since no one except Nasic, who'd stayed in Porto Novo, spoke the slave language; and everyone considered the Africans complaining by nature. The convicts also remained silent, knowing the likely fate of any found ill. Soon almost the entire company had the ruinous malady, some much worse than others.

Upon consideration, my affliction was mild, certainly so when compared to those who died. I had a terrifying headache, burned with fever, and could not rise for three days. In my fever-madness I prayed to see Great-Grandfather Marcel—if I were to die, he would guide me. Marcel did not come; instead the devil priest appeared and cursed all Jewry. I became Samson. The devil fled before my sword.

My illness did not produce the purple skin spots that afflicted many who came to their end on this death ship. When I had nearly recovered, a priest came to me and said, "You will assist the barber and bleed sick Jews." While this method for treating the ill was contrary to our custom, I complied because we had nothing else available. It seemed nearly all our number were sick, some far beyond help. The boy who survived the night with the convicts was among the first to die. This child, so courageous in life, lay dead next to a boy in fever-madness and covered with skin spots. As we worked over the living and gave comfort to those we might save, I whispered kaddishim for the dead. By now we had been in the calm for seven days, the hard sun upon us. They doled food and water in short allowance. As I further recovered from my illness, hunger and thirst overcame me.

During this time—despite warnings of deadly punishment—most of us ate from the animal grain crib and secretly provided this coarse sustenance to the girls. The sailors petitioned de Caminha to butcher the goats, but he forbade it, saying these animals were brood stock for Tomé. We the living dropped our dead overboard with only the slightest ceremony. Hakifi circled and fought over the spoils, worrying the bodies in mindless frenzy. Except for those demons, this ocean seemed void of life.

I'd not seen Fr. Norte and asked another priest about him. "You will see him in due time," he said. "He is not ill."

On the afternoon of the eighth day a drenching storm appeared. Heavy rain fell and we stayed the night on deck to wash the sick and collect the blessed rainwater for ourselves and the animals below. Sometime in the night another blessing appeared—dozens of flying fish stranded themselves on our deck. These beautiful winged creatures, called little angels by the sailors, were common during our journey and often littered the deck after a storm. We always gathered them for cooking. On this daybreak the slaves shouted and whistled as we collected the fish, showing with pride they could eat the fish raw. Several of us tried. First we stripped the skin with our teeth as the Africans did, then gnawed meat off the bones. Certainly eating uncooked fish, though I could not cite the exact stricture, violated our dietary laws for the thousandth time on this infernal voyage. But their bluish flesh tasted better than anything I ever remembered. In early morning with clear skies, our sails gathered a fresh breeze and carried us on.

With the wrathful illness laying waste the ship's persons, I took stock. Of the original twenty slaves, eleven lived. Following the Porto Novo escape, seven convicts remained on board. Of these, only one had died. The ship's compliment, originally sixteen, now totaled twelve. Of the four priests, one had died. Two of the four nuns had perished, with another so ill on deck that no one expected her to live. Upon leaving Lisbon, we stolen Jews numbered

thirty-four, fourteen boys, thirteen girls, seven children. Five died before we reached Porto Novo; after the illness only nine boys, ten girls, and three children lived. I said many prayers to God in silence, asking over and over, Why are innocents punished like this? I could not reason it out, so I thought to ask Norte. Perhaps his God had an explanation.

I remembered our intense sorrow at the first deaths among us. Now, surrounded by dead and dying, we'd become sadly accustomed. Poor Germo was still too ill to rise; his skin eruptions and fever would not yield. The barber bled him daily, but it seemed of no help. Golem and the few others who had not taken ill helped with great zeal. During the illness the fence stayed open between the girls and us and no one moved to close it. Neither de Caminha nor the ship's officers had the illness. I continued to worry about Fr. Norte—I had not seen him for over a week.

The second midday after the cleansing storm, we saw the first hint of São Tomé, a column of smoke that rose from the sea. The two priests walked among us. "There lies our destination," said one. "Norte thought it The Garden, but in truth it burns with the fire of Hades." At end-of-day the wind quit. Tomé had risen from the edge of ocean to reveal a long, low-shrouded mountain, smoke rising several times the mountain's height. Indeed it could be hell—how does an island burn?

With no wind, de Caminha raised a smudge fire in the cooking pit in hopes someone on the island would notice and send boats to tow us. By night they set pitch torches in the rigging. The sailors prepared the two small boats for towing. If our sails found no wind by sunrise, we would start the tow. Here the ocean current flowed against us and pulled our little ship away from Tomé. The distant island became a frightful vision; orange fires burned from beneath its smoke and serpent tongues of lightning struck along the mountain backbone.

Next morning Fr. Norte, his wrists locked in chains, sat inside our enclosure, resting his back against the fence.

Scatched on his cheek was a bloody M for Marrano, or pig, a term used for Jews of failed Catholic conversion. I brought a cloth and water to cleanse him. "It seems inquisition reaches even to Africa," he said. He stared blankly as I dabbed his face.

"You?" I asked. "How could this be?"

"The priests, the nuns, the captain, they all accuse me. They say my friendship with Jews brought the sickness. I must confess or be put to the stake."

"Can you stay in São Tomé?" This priest was my only hope among these Catholics.

"No Saulo, I am corrupt, forbidden to leave the ship. They will return me to Portugal for trial."

Two boats were now in the water in an effort to tow. Though the sailors strained at the oars for hours, the island appeared no closer. In the afternoon de Caminha came to us, pointing. "Time to save your rotten skins and ours too. You boys can relieve the rowers." While I had never rowed a boat, it seemed an agreeable task, made all the more interesting when we found ourselves teamed with slaves and convicts also pressed into service.

A sailor who acted as both coxswain and slavemaster directed us to our seats, four rowers along either side, each with his own oar. At first I enjoyed this new chore. An hour later rowing became torment; my shoulders and arms ached as never before. They gave us leathers to protect our hands, but mine were soon blistered and bleeding. I drenched my handcovers in seawater, though it did not help. The convicts and slaves were much better rowers—few of us boys had ever done labor of this sort. Even work in my father's brickyard had not prepared me for this. How could I ever be a farmer in some alien land?

More than a mere maker of bricks, I had hoped to be a mason, perhaps someday a builder. In Lisbon, Leah and I admired the buildings, the churches and universities. Foolishly I imagined myself in service to the João Court, their designer of great Portuguese churches and public buildings—the first Jew of that position. The Court of

Castile had master builders who were Jews, some even with the title of Architect. We'd heard they were forced to convert. What insults did they suffer? Worse than on this damnable ship? And you, Saulo, now you are the servant of torment, your hopes in ashes, your only task to survive until the Catholics allow rest for your bloody hands and aching shoulders.

After what seemed forever, we returned to the ship. With my hands aflame, my body in agony, I could barely climb the web. Fr. Norte, his chains removed, attended to my hands, smearing them with lard. Another breach of Law, but otherwise comforting. In the night we talked while others of the crew labored in the small boats. Across the sea, the island glowed its hellish hue, the mountain crowned with lightning. "That does not look like Eden to me," I said to Norte.

"Nor to me, Saulo. And the fires are not of Hades, simply fields burned after harvest, customary in the agriculture of sugar. Though I do not doubt the lightning's intent—I believe it is God's displeasure at what we do."

We took care of Germo who was little improved, and Golem and another who had grown ill while rowing. I went below to sleep, not knowing what to do with my throbbing hands. Around midnight a change in the ship's creak woke me. The calm had broken. The ship began to move.

Just past first light we dropped anchor in a shimmering cove, our destination before us. In the near distance I saw a brown-sand beach edged with palms. A rough track led inland where I could see a church and buildings of russet stone. Behind the town rose thick clouds of smoke, a curtain that hid the long mountain. The jungle seemed to dominate everything in view. Following a prayer of thankfulness on the high deck, Captain de Caminha, the officers and priests went on shore. A group of men, which included waiting priests, greeted them. On the beach another ceremony and the staking of a cross.

They first unloaded the animals. Men ferried a long ramp out to the ship and we put it into the hold. We prod-

ded the goats, horse, and the two remaining cows up to the deck. Sailors had removed a section of rail at mid-ship and they bullied the protesting animals overboard. The men in boats waited, took ropes and swam the beasts to shore. I had no idea farm animals could swim, but each did. These creatures had been our companions on this long voyage, and we looked after them with well-wishes, wondering as to our own fate. Supplies and personal goods went next, along with the large sail which needed mending.

As they prepared to unload the slaves and convicts, de Caminha returned to oversee— and to deliver his ominous message. “I will allow only those healthy to go on shore. The rest will stay shipbound to either recover or die.” Anger swelled in my chest. Earlier with great care they had moved the sick nun to shore. I wanted to speak to this unfairness, but feared de Caminha.

Golem, who had weakened during the night, wheezed, “If I could only swim I’d—”

The captain’s words broke in. “We will anchor a half-league off shore to keep those tainted from befouling our colony.” He turned to Norte. “*You*, traitorous priest, you will vicar this floating spittle house. I will reclaim my vessel in a fortnight when I must prepare for voyage. Those who are recovered will join my colony. For the others who remain ill, God in his wisdom has chosen to maintain their affliction. They will be disposed into the sea.”

At de Caminha’s direction the sailors sorted through the convicts, chained the sick together, and prepared the others to depart. Many of their sick struggled to stand and pleaded to go on shore. To stay, they knew, meant death. The slaves understood and began their own protest, helping the ill among them rise. A second gang of sailors moved quickly to quell the disturbance and separate the sick.

After transport of the convicts and slaves, we Jews suffered the fateful sorting. The sailors went through the girls and children first, leaving the sad few who still had the sickness. They helped or carried those not sick down the rope web into the waiting boats. The ones left looked on

hopelessly as their comrades were rowed to shore. The boats returned with supplies of food, water, and wood for fuel. We boys helped unload, pulling baskets of goods up to the deck and putting them in place. The supplies seemed meager for our number, but did include bread, black sugar syrup, dried fish, and a basket of oblong fruit I'd not seen before.

"I will see that everyone is well cared for," said Norte.

I did not feel assured—I had spoken these same words to Germo so many weeks before. Now it was time to say good-bye to Germo and Golem, to the two sick girls and a small boy who remained ill. Golem stood shaking at the rail. Germo, his fever-eyes filled with tears, could only signal farewell, a frail smile from where he lay.

Marcel came to me. "The bad luck of this," he said and made a cup of his hands, first offering it to São Tomé, then to Germo—a confounding gesture. "Your cup overflows with opportunity."

"What opportunity?" I asked. He vanished with my words.

Since the wind blew directly landward, two large boats with rowers stood off-bow for towing. My companions lined at the rail, ready to depart. The barber went among them, cut close their hair and clipped their sidelocks. As the newly shorn climbed down the web to the boats, I became terrified at leaving. I summoned my courage and approached the captain. "Captain de Caminha, sir?"

He was giving instructions to the few crewmen who would set the ship for its fortnight's stay. He turned to glare. "This upstart boy again. What do you want?"

"I wish to stay with Father Norte. To care for the sick."

"I should have left you to Nasic. He would have taught you manners."

Gesturing to the remaining Jews and the souls chained on the fore deck, I said, "You have toiled these many weeks to bring us here. The more who live, the more will benefit your colony."

He glared at Norte. "You put him up to this."

“No captain, but an extra hand would be most helpful.”

De Caminha eyed the barber and pointed to me. “You are a slick-tongued Jew who mocks civility and corrupts our priests. Take your place with the others and—”

He looked to the island. With a shift of wind, dense billows of smoke carried the smell of burning fields, the ship’s rigging rattled, a twilight settled. The captain studied the remaining sail tied to the yardspar, then me. “It seems providence has brought a favorable breeze,” he said. “I will honor your petition, though I distrust it.” He directed the sailors to mount the small sail and sent a man forward to wave off the rowers. “When you return,” he told the crew, “bring both rowboats. I want no pestilence on our shores.”

We sailed a ways from the island, passing through smoke to open water and clear skies. The crew dropped anchor, reefed the sail, and abandoned us in their little boats—their scornful laughter drifting back on the wind. Fr. Norte and I watched them depart, the long mountain before us, resplendent green above the smoky gloom of São Tomé.

Norte looked pleased. “Well done, Marcel. It appears you may keep your hair a while longer.” He turned to the sick. “Come, Saulo, God calls us to His task.”

Chapter 4

During the evening of our first day, Gerمو’s illness reached a dreadful intensity. I cradled him through the night while his body burned with fever. Minutes after sunrise and without waking, his breathing ceased. This was the saddest moment of my life. Gerمو, perhaps the last of his family, his history lost to eternity. Norte tried to comfort me, but I could not accept it.

“It is because of you accursed Catholics my friend is dead. And all of us lost in this foreign sea.”

“He is with God, Saulo.” Norte made the sign of the cross.