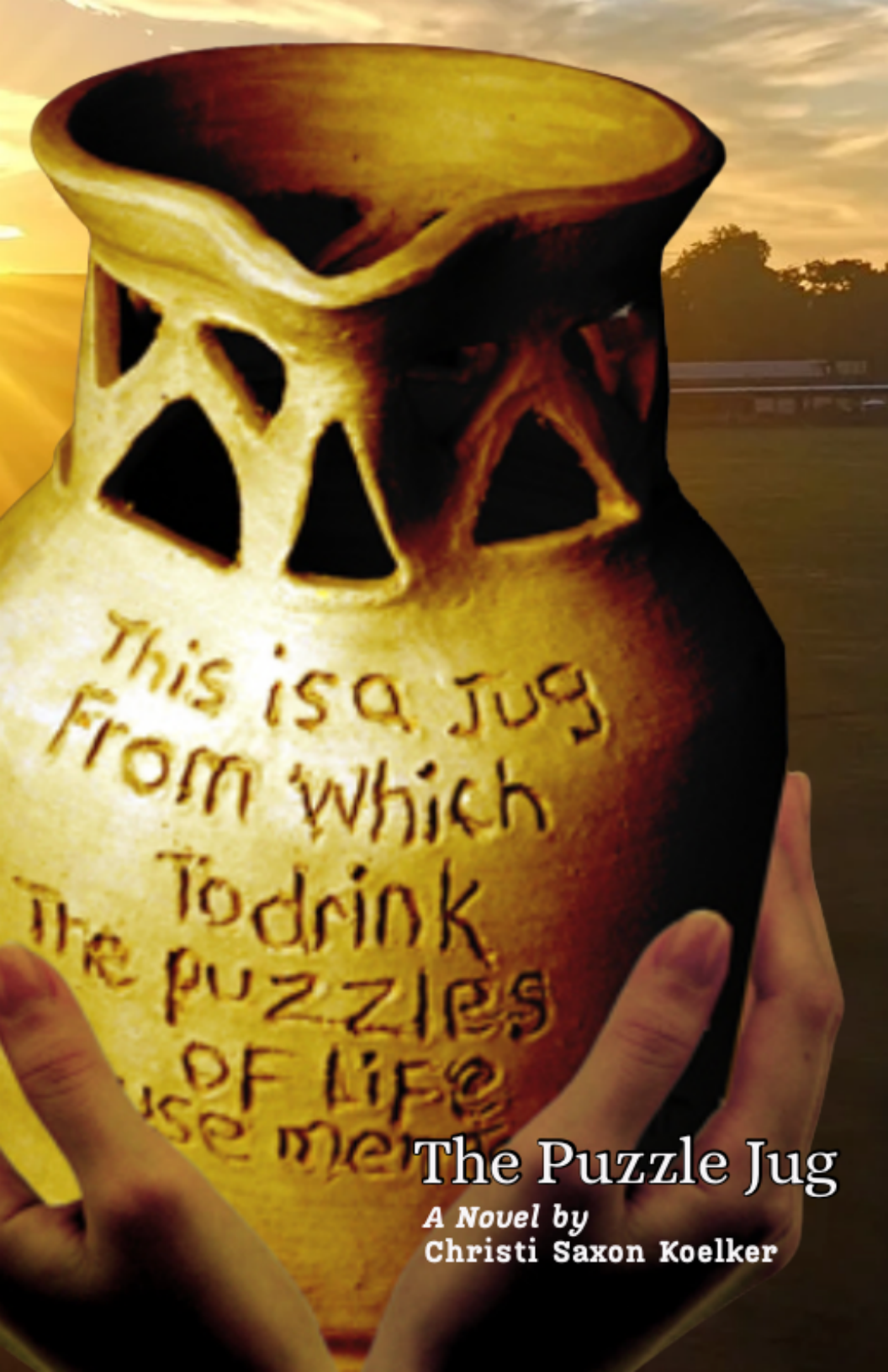




This is a Jug
From which
To drink
The puzzles
OF LIFE
use men's

The Puzzle Jug

A Novel by
Christi Saxon Koelker

THE PUZZLE JUG is based on historical facts that occurred between November 1856 and December 1858. Many of the characters were real people who lived in the Horse Creek Valley area of South Carolina, along the banks of the Savannah River. The names of some of the characters are found in records stored at the Edgefield Archives.

This story is dedicated to the timeless Granny Venus, a guiding spirit for me since I was nine years old. I didn't find out her name until 2011 but it was always her determination and love that walked beside me on this journey.

She is the true author.

Christi Saxon Koelker

August 4, 2026

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Part One

July 4, 1856 to December 14, 1858

CHAPTER ONE: THE CHANGING CEREMONY

11:04 AM. FRIDAY, JULY 4, 1856. THE LAMAR SWAMP
PLANTATION VILLAGE.

Beads of sweat broke from Hannibal's forehead like a gator's breath bubbling up from the dark waters of Horse Creek. The sun bore down on him, squeezing his head and shoulders and wrenching the water from his body like it had a mind to wring him dry. The heat burrowed all the way through his scalp, making the skin on his head seem tighter than a stretched deer pelt. But this fire wasn't only searing his outsides. It drilled down deep and steadily stoked the burning in his belly that started before he even put his feet on the floorboards this morning. A coal of doubt. A tooth of fear. From the moment he opened his eyes, the dread gathered, growing by the hour, as if it meant to eat him up from the inside out.

He might have heard a voice he didn't recognize say, "Don't do this." Was it a real thought or the devil tempting him to cave in to his fear? Every notion he had, that had once been separate, now mixed up together and fooled with his resolve to cross over the invisible line between the boy he was and the man he was to become.

Hannibal stood at the bottom of the steps to her cabin like his uncles told him to. This was the first in the

series of instructions his uncles had schooled him in over the past three months. They'd promised him if he showed up at this very spot, on this day, at this exact moment, it would set the gears in motion for the Changing Ceremony to begin. Up until last night, he was looking forward to it.

Now, standing here with his insides squirming, Hannibal balked. Was he ready to be a man? If running away would solve anything, he'd high tail it to his best hidey hole next to the creek. But where could he go that his shame wouldn't follow? For all time, in the Village, the name Hannibal and the word coward would carry the same meaning. No, there wasn't a place to run to where his disgrace wouldn't follow him and that his uncles wouldn't spit in the dirt when they saw him. He'd rather die than disappoint them.

When he heard the wooden door creak on its hinges, he wondered why he couldn't feel the dirt path below his feet anymore. He mustered up just enough grit to let his own voice rise up to combat the devil's doubts.

"Stand beside me Jesus!"

This time the voice was his but he couldn't tell if he'd said it out loud.

A prickling sensation like fire ants marched up into his mouth, but no tears came. He was somewhat pleased he hadn't jumped up in a start like he might have done only ten minutes ago. Or hollered like a surprised baby. He wasn't no baby anymore. He wouldn't cry. Not now.

The door swung open all the way and Granny Venus stepped onto the porch. Some of the Swamp Plantation folks claimed the old woman was over a hundred. Hannibal had heard a legend that she was much older than that. Maybe five hundred years he heard Aleck say one time. Others claimed she was older than the Swamp Village, older than the ruins of Fort Moore. That couldn't be true though. On any other day, she was his family. The one who made sure he had plenty to eat and helped him figure out all his troubles. All except this one. He'd been warned that no talk of the Changing Ceremony was allowed outside the uncle's cabins. It was a responsibility he'd accepted when he said he'd be the one this year.

Hannibal couldn't keep ahold of why her being that old was important even though his uncles had told him it meant something big in the ceremony. He couldn't remember and there was no telling. Just no telling.

The only thing he figured was that she'd been around here longer than anyone else. Longer than anyone's great-grandmother, longer than the oldest massas in Beech Island and Augusta. His uncles confided in him that the secrets she knew were the heart of this Changing Ceremony. Right now, Hannibal couldn't tease apart all the history they'd poured into him over the past months. So he stopped trying to think and let it drift into the dust behind him. He just looked at her like a riddle too hard for any boy to solve.

Her eyes hadn't landed on him yet. They were fixed on something far beyond him—something he couldn't, or wasn't, meant to see. Her tall body was as solid and alive as the oaks that divided the Village from the river. Even though he'd known her all his life, her expression was unreadable. What was she looking at? Hannibal fidgeted as the ants gained a bit of ground in his gullet. He was desperate for some sign, some gesture to let him know what was coming next. How many other boys had stood here, next to these same worn-out stairs on other ceremony days? Wondering. Waiting.

Venus remained silent.

The way she held herself was foreign to him. Her stillness made him feel even smaller than he was.

Finally, her head turned toward him and her eyes slid over to meet his for an instant. She'd filled this role, a character she'd created for herself, for exactly three score years as of today. Her soft spot for children, and for this one in particular, made her want nothing more than to gather him up in her lap. She longed to settle down in her willow rocker and dab the rivers of sweat off that fine head that her fingers knew every ridge and dip of. Since the day he was born, eight years ago. Since she had pulled him from the two days of being stuck in the sticky cocoon of his momma. She shaped that fine head herself into a perfect oval during his first few months of living. She yearned to scoop up the scared baby boy fretting before her over what was waiting next for him.

There was no giving in though. This space between them now was a particular rift in time. She was about to deliver a man into this Village as surely as she'd once birthed the babe. She sighed, a low moan of acceptance. Submitting to the inevitable, "Granny Venus" officially commenced the Changing Ceremony. Curling her lips up under her nose and narrowing her eyes, she focused her gaze on Hannibal. She took a step toward him, raising her hands with the deliberation of a woman bound by tradition and duty.

“What you doin’ botherin’ old Granny Venus this afternoon, Chile?” She said sharply. “I got important business to which I must attend.” She looked back toward the river, then up and down it, as if she was waiting on a steamboat to round the bend.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hannibal wince as if he’d been struck. The weight of it caught her right below her navel like a spasm during labor. The mother Venus had been, and would forever be, was the chink in her armor. Every time. She could do nothing else but soften her tone. Let a wee bit of tenderness trickle back into her face. Her heart had its walls and its moats yet she had no defenses when it came to pouring out her mercy on younguns.

Wrinkles gathered up around her mouth and eyes like folds of well-worn muslin. Not just from her age but from the shadows of the ghosts of all the boys who had stood here before him. She beamed assurance toward the figure frozen before her.

“I swan, my eyesight must finally be giving out.” She squinted, dramatically. “Seems I’m mistaken. I beg your pardon, sir. I see no chile on my front steps.”

Hannibal’s anguish refused to allow his senses to recognize her reprieve. The words flew past him like another hot breeze. He could only manage a slight

diagonal nod then second-guessed himself again. He wasn't sure if she was teasing him or testing him. Was he agreeing with Granny Venus's declaration that she was old? Had he entered into some strange realm where he was no longer eight?

Whatever had happened and wherever he was, the ceremony had commenced without him detecting a definite start to it. The fire ants pulsed in a unified shudder, stoking the heat in the center of his chest. How had this place that was so familiar - a place where he knew every dip in the path and every knothole on the posts - ominously shifted into a mire of unknown dangers? He suspected he wouldn't survive it. No way of knowing how many boys before him stood here and buckled. Who could've blamed them? Not him.

Anger flared low in his back, crawling up his spine, and Hannibal realized that his uncles had hoodwinked him on purpose. They'd filled him up with stories about their daring adventures but they never warned him to prepare himself for this moment when his innards nearly slithered out of his skeleton. They figured Hannibal might not accept the "honor" of being the runner for the Independence Day Ceremony if he knew the perils - although they did say a body had to choose it for themselves. And yet, despite it all, he detected some new version of himself was beginning to emerge. A

different creature peeled off of him. A mirror Hannibal wriggled out from the dread dashing around inside his small body. Even though panic still buzzed in his chest, this other Hannibal was stronger. Taller. It exited at the crown of his head, at the very point where the lit fuse should have blown. It had traveled from where his exasperation had seared him. Hannibal was momentarily encouraged, from this peculiar metamorphosis, that he might indeed survive.

The sting of the stiff pats, delivered by his uncles last night on his way into his cabin, now stung his back as distinctly as when they'd been dispatched. The outlines of the handprints on the surface of his skin were materializing into impossible apparitions that sprung up and walked beside this other version of himself. Whatever was happening didn't necessarily make sense but there was good in it. It felt fitting.

Granny Venus descended the cabin steps slowly, each footfall heavy and deliberate. Hannibal kept his eyes on her, afraid to blink, afraid to miss any sign that might guide him through the rest of this ceremony. She moved like a bobcat or a fox. Each step she took shook loose something inside him. Despite tumbling into the chasms of his internal chatter, he never took his eyes off of Granny Venus. The possibility he might miss a veiled sign from her, signaling him to play the part he'd been

carefully coached to perform for the last three months, kept the old version of himself attentive to her gestures.

The wood uttered a raw, low groan as her foot fell upon each of them. The sound called forth the mirror Hannibal to completely untether from the boy. Above the line of cabins, the wooden grumble reverberated across the cotton fields; traveling the snaking curve of Horse Creek and echoing back to him from the hollows next to the river. He struggled to stay focused on Granny Venus but the sound was as compelling as it was ineffable. He couldn't identify which one of the Hannibals followed the deep bellow to the roots of a 90-foot pine from the boards upon which she tread. They'd once been bound up together, underground, moored as one thing with their mother cone until they reached the sun.

Gusts of air stirred the roughly-woven skirt as it passed his face, drying the sweat on his body, fluttering in front of his vision like thousands of brown and white sparrows. His breathing halted in his throat. He might have died and, oddly, he could accept that. Never had he imagined any person could move so that each silent footfall thundered, drumming out an invitation for all living things to convene in this moment; demanding their attention. Summoning their presence.

Holding onto the rail, she continued her descent, methodically pacing her steps until she stopped at the center of the Village's earth-packed alley that separated two rows of cabins. She turned toward the breathless boy as Venus, fusing the ancient vessel she presently inhabited with the girl who forever lived inside it with Granny. Their shared agony, joy, passion, loss, grief and creation drew them closer together, reminded her of swamp crane's wings when they'd brushed their feathers too close to her face. Both settled into the timelessness side-by-side. Venus called all of her selves back to the life that needed attending to here. Over the last sixty years, she'd fashioned the ceremony from mythology books she'd read and barely understood stories told to her in the strong African accent of Thomas Peters. They'd buoyed her throughout her too many years and would last for as long as it took to see this calling through. Venus allowed the first outline of a smile to pull her lips tight and motioned with a hand for Hannibal to approach her.

By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, Hannibal could barely breathe. Now his feet were rooted in the dirt, as though the earth itself was holding him in place. The air around them seemed to hum with tension. She stopped, her gaze landing on him at last.

“Come on, chile,” she said, her voice a low rumble. “It’s time.”

Hannibal swallowed the fire ants again and took his first step forward. His legs, unsteady and unsure, felt longer than they had moments ago, as though they’d grown while he stood there. Each step was intentional, slow, like learning to walk all over again. Did his newly sprouted man’s legs need time to dry out like a chick’s that has freshly pecked out of its shell? Cautiously, he slid one out onto the dirt and pulled the other behind him without lifting either of them. Hannibal tried them and stood up unsteadily from the cabin step. Sorely wanting to bend down to meet the changeling who approached her, Granny Venus half curtsied. “I beg your pardon. Have we met, sir?”

She’d still have time to hold him later, after all this was done. When the initial awe wore off him a bit. She well knew the days of gathering him up to rock him in her lap were already passed. Venus had traveled alone, through this valley of transformation, for almost three score years. The Buckra knew her as “Granny”. Her Swamp Villagers knew her as the “Kisisage” by rite of passage from her learning with Granny Massey. It was a title her father had once explained means “the bringer of the sun”.

Only Venus knew she had conquered ninety winters. That she was but a year younger than the fat oak that spread it's alligator bark arms above their heads, officiating this occasion, once again. Let the folks speculate about how many sunrises she'd seen on earth.

Time was not her master.

She had none.

She stay here in the Swamp Plantation Village until she was finished with her work.

CHAPTER TWO: STORM BRANCH WATER

11:48 AM. FRIDAY, JULY 4TH, 1856. THE LAMAR SWAMP
PLANTATION VILLAGE.

Hannibal was still having trouble deciphering her meanings but he didn't stop trying to understand what she meant for him to do. He'd arrived at the point in this mystical dance when the only remedy for tamping down his anxiety was moving forward to the next part. He clung hard to the blessings of that realization. However poorly he believed he was performing his part, he put one foot in front of the other while watching Granny Venus' face.

The old woman looked down at her skirt pocket and patted it three times.

"This is it." Hannibal's innards churned with recognition at long last. He finally knew where they were in the ceremony. She is going to produce the "mystic bag" the uncles told him about. Venus slid her hand down inside her apron pocket, from which she fished out a braided cord attached to a smooth, brown leather bag.

"There it is! It's real!" The younger version of himself alerted the older one. He could hardly look at it. The legendary artifact was handed down and revealed to boys only during their Changing ritual. He quickly caught hold of his thoughts before they were dragged away from him again. "Lord, help me." He pleaded

silently. He couldn't be certain how much time had passed while his flailing baby brain tried to sidetrack him. He willed himself to keep his focus on Granny Venus' face, continuing to pray she hadn't noticed his flight of attention.

"This Kisi bag here was Granny Massey's. She brought it here to us from the Mother herself, who still lives in our heart's home across the great and deep waters." Venus's voice finally found its foothold within her traditional July 4th sermon.

The Kisi Bag floated toward him, its cord looped over Granny Venus' weathered forefinger. As it moved closer, it was a dull burgundy from years of handling. Hannibal's eyes followed it from side-to-side, as it dangled, trying to work out where the magic might be lodged inside the object that would seal his transformation. The bag looked a little like some old item one or two of his uncles used for snuff. Nothing but an ordinary thing most folks had lying around their cabins. It wasn't made out of shiny metal or velvety material.

As Venus filled his ears with primeval incantations, the cleverness of his ancestors dawned upon him. They were hiding their most powerful talisman in plain sight! A nosy buckra would never figure

which old bag was magic and which one was full of snuff. If royalty disguised themselves as beggars, they were less likely to lose their kingdoms. Hannibal marveled at this emergence of his new abilities as a man. Like pulling a curtain back and seeing what was hiding behind it. The bag was already working on him. Venus watched Hannibal's face integrate the introduction of the bag into the story he was telling himself about this ceremony. As he raised his gaze from her hands, back to her eyes, she smiled fully this time.

The light that radiated in the child's expression illuminated the darkness of the hallowed cave she kept for herself: private and located directly below her breasts. It lingered there, sparkled for an instant, then dimmed. She gave in and bent her knee to the eye level of the boy. His scent was musky: marinated in both dread and delight. She reached out, took his small hand and turned it over to form a waiting cradle. She then loosed the leather knot and let a bit of the contents drift onto the surface of his sweaty, pink palm.

"Efo tete," she whispered over the dried, brown flecks as they landed on his open hand.

These bits of weeds were non-impressive at first glance but now he knew better. Younguns are partial to colorful sweets and bright trinkets. He allowed himself a

wisened chuckle. Magic in the mundane once again. A substance revealed to a select few and only on this single day of the year. Its outward appearance was intentionally ordinary, making its true power known only to those initiated into the inner circle that was now opening to him. His uncles hadn't hinted at exactly what would be contained inside this mythical pouch. Yet, neither the bag nor the contents inside yet answered the tangle of questions he had coiling around his head. He assumed he was the one who was still ignorant of the particular sorcery at play here. He didn't have all the facts yet.

“We all trusting you are grown enough to get this there in time.”

Hannibal left off his trying to find the sorcery hidden in the torn leaves.

“Are you the man for this mission?”

Her question caused his head to snap up to meet the serious tone of her question. Another revelation crept over him, calling the hair on his body to attention and he was instantly reminded of the gravity of the task before him. Shaking off the numbing effects of being bound by pure honesty, Hannibal nodded his head. The old woman inched closer as she slipped her hand under his chin, whispering his instructions just inches from his

ear. “Hasten to take this satchel of Efo Tete here yonder to your Uncles. They’re waiting for you at the pit. They can’t proceed until this is delivered.”

Hannibal closed his hands around the bag.

Granny Venus continued, “Listen to me with both ears, sir. On your way up the hill, you must stop beside the church.” She let go of the the braided, hide strings, allowing the bag to slide from her fingers and into his cupped hand.

“Yonder, there’s a water bag hanging on the peg, by the door.” Granny Venus pointed towards her porch. “Fill it up with Storm Branch Creek water that still holds the spirit of our ancestors. Only that water mixed up with these herbs they brought when they was stolen from Africa can come together at the pit.”

Hannibal glanced towards her porch, looked back at her, then stood waiting for the next set of orders. When she remained silent, he understood her final commandment had already been issued. The time had come for him to leave the Village, setting into action the next part of the old story.

He backtracked his path to the steps leading up to Granny’s cabin, tripping a little as his boy-to-man legs animated themselves. They were, for certain, bigger than when he’d arrived. While he’d been busy trying to

remember everything his uncles had told him, his body had changed. Hannibal tried to position this honor bestowed upon him into some kind of timeline where he would still remember who he was before. But he could not. While he unwillingly contemplated the enormity of this event internally, he was surprised to find himself standing before the water bag on Granny Venus' porch. How he'd gotten there was a solitary mystery.

He decided not to ask himself anymore questions and pushed himself up on his tiptoes to lift the straps of the water bags off the peg.

Venus studied to see if her handiwork was growing roots in the boy. Sure enough, every measured movement Hannibal made toward her porch signaled a rhythm of ticking gears inside that perfectly shaped oval noggin.

This time was different. This child was one apart from all the others. Even amidst the trials of his birth, this baby boy had dragged a guardian out of the beforetime with him. He'd staked his claim on her from the first moment she laid eyes on him. She swallowed down the deep sigh before it surfaced to trigger the ragged remembering.

“Let it alone Venus.”

She knew better than to slip down into the dark well of the past and broke the spell it meant to cast on both her and the boy by clapping her hands together. The sound cracked like a snap of a branch in the space between them.

“Well... get on with it, man!” she ordered.

The fracture in the silence, brought Hannibal back to his chore. He freed the water bag from the peg, slid it over his head and tried to gauge the next part of his mission. He had finally defeated the ants he imagined were stuck in his craw earlier. With another glance toward Granny Venus, he leapt down the cabin stairs in one bound and ran to attend to his first task at the church house by Storm Branch Creek. He felt that his senses were sharper than ever before. It was as if there had been a milky film over his eyes and like his ears had the wax cleaned out of them. The sun tried to poke its beams through the Spanish moss but the light landed in shiny speckles on his skin. The skittering of the insects amongst the palmetto fronds sounded like quick, heavy banging in the corn crib. The rickety bridge over Horse Creek, just fifty feet or so to where it flowed into the Savannah River, appeared to him like a portal to an entirely unknown world. He didn't stop and fiddle around as he usually did on the bridge, dangling stinky chicken necks over the edge on a string to catch crawdads.

Hannibal did slow down a little past the bridge to rub the back of his hand over his chin and poke his forefinger under his nose to figure if whiskers were sprouting from his face. By the time he finally reached the pit, he doubted his uncles would recognize him as the same person who climbed out of his bed this morning.

A weathered clapboard structure came into view and grew larger as he approached it. This was as far up the hill as he'd been allowed to venture before today. Sunday services and the occasional itinerate preacher holding revival meetings had brought him and most of the members of the Swamp Plantation Village up here regularly. All except two of his uncles who would never darken the door of a church. Ned and Jack didn't say prayers neither. They didn't get in dutch and nobody ever expected them to. Hannibal used to wonder why but he intended to be like them in the future. He hated being preached at about sins he hadn't even thought about doing.

He may have been conjured into a blooming man by Granny Venus, but his boy body was complaining to him that it hadn't quite made the entire shift yet. His uncles told him there were times when a grown-up has to push himself hard through his tasks. If he couldn't finish this job, this day for celebrating the "independence" on both sides of Horse Creek would be

ruined. Hannibal had been told the word itself meant a type of freedom and every year the buckra massas from plantations around Augusta, Aiken, Hamburg and Edgefield got together at the white house, up top the hill, to eat smoked hogs and make long speeches about the meaning of it to each other. He'd even been up there one time when he was about two or three years old. All he could remember was a blur of buckra ladies with their white faces swaddled in red and blue ribbons. He recalled they looked like wrens bobbing up and down watching for a hawk.

Picking up his pace again across the church house grounds, Hannibal reached the building and pulled himself up to peer through one of the stained glass windows. Looking through the cobalt blue section, the sanctuary appeared as an icy, serene haven to any man-boy burdened with a chore as great as the one before him. The temptation was powerful. He could imagine himself, in his barely breathing baby brain, giving in to his miseries: the exhaustion in his legs; the humidity that wrung the sweat out of him; the anxiety plaguing him. He was familiar with all these irritations, and plenty more. His worry was magnifying them into demons that were hounding him. No doubt though. He would face any devils before he'd shame himself, or

anyone in his village, by acting so selfishly as to tarry here any longer.

He lowered himself back down back to the ground and worked at centering himself when a voice behind him made him startle.

“There it is Hannibal! Storm Branch Creek,” Granny Venus said.

He whipped his head around. No one was behind him. He was completely alone.

How was he hearing the voice of Granny inside his head? As though she were following him? Talking over his shoulder? She might was the sort of spell caster he’d heard his uncles talk about. But they were always saying hoo doo was done by much younger women. He, right quick, tried to erase that idea from his mind. Just in case she could hear his thinking voice like he could hear hers.

“Time’s a wastin’ Hannibal. Fetch the water.” She said.

A gully was carved where the creek flowed near to the church. During heavy rains, he’d seen it breach its banks. Today it looked like it had boiled away into steam in the heat. It was so low that there were plenty of places to wade out to a spot where he could lean over to reach the stream. Hannibal knelt down. Before

opening the water bag, he wrapped the straps around his wrists. He'd never be able to face any Swamp Plantation person, or white house master for that matter,, if he let the current of Storm Branch snatch this sacred vessel from his hands as he filled it.

He tried to catch a glimpse at his reflection in the water like he always did after Sunday services. He was nervous but thought maybe he should see his man-face before he startled his uncles at the pit. If he was prepared, he'd reassure them he was aware of just how much he'd changed since they saw him last night. The rapid water swirled around half-submerged rocks. They threw off thousands of ripples that thwarted his efforts to see himself in the creek. A turtle sunned itself about ten feet away on a tiny island of sand while observing the boy with suspicion. Hannibal glared at it.

The stern voice of Granny Venus cut through his dawdling.

“Time’s a wastin’ boy.”

Hannibal rose in one movement, lifting the saturated bag up to his chest and cradling it in his arms like a piglet. The unchanging expression on the turtle’s face implied judgement and the boy growled in its direction, “That’s right! I’m a man now. So wipe that stupid look off of your stupid turtle head!” He spit in its

direction and, with an angry whoop, spooked the turtle off its island. With a bit of effort, he slung the sopping bag over his shoulder. The coolness of the water seeped into his body, delivering an unexpected dose of resolve.

Hannibal had a fairly steep ridge to climb to the pit. All of a sudden, he remembered when he'd seen over the top of the ridge before. It was when he'd been carried over it in his momma's arms. He tried to go faster but the water bag sloshed against him with such force that it completely knocked him sideways. He was reduced to stoically striding towards the pit and the white house beyond it.

He continued to fret: had he taken too long? Had he forgotten exactly what his uncles had taught him to say? Did he have enough gumption for what would come next? What if the Independence was already over and done? What if he'd failed in the task he's been turned into a man for. This ceremony was supposed to bind him to all the people who were gone and the ones who were going to be born. Forever.

What if his tarrying had already ruined it all?

CHAPTER THREE: THE UNCLES AT THE PIT

12:22 PM. FRIDAY, JULY 4TH, 1856. THE BELL ROAD.

Hannibal was deeply absorbed in what proved to be his final self-flagellation when the scene he'd played out so many times in his waking moments, and his dreaming ones as well, floated up before his eyes. The tableau laid out there in front of him didn't look real. Tiny figures sloshed around in the distance as if they were blue and red foam in a bucket. The yard in front of the white house was boiling over with more people than he'd ever seen gathered together in one place. Massa Lamar and Misses Sarah lived there.

"I stay up at the massa's." He heard his mother say, up close to his ear. "It be called Woodlawn Plantation." The big white house had its own name like it was a living person. Hannibal remembered his momma told him that one time. She used to stay up here too, at Woodlawn Plantation, tending to their younguns. Unbidden, her voice and hands and breath came flying towards him, riding on the back of dangerous emotions.

Hannibal's recollection etched the outline of her lips as she spoke. He'd slipped into a chasm where he met his mother's ghost and realized she'd told him the name of this place so she'd be with him right now. Today. His feet stopped moving as his mother's face

materialized more solidly, overlaying the scene before him. He wasn't unaccustomed to her visits. She was known to come on him like that sometimes: strong and insistent. He wanted to honor the gravity of her appearance as encouragement to raise him up during these last few yards of his sojourn. But missing her now, in the deep way that sometimes brought a black curtain down on him, was going to hobble his Man's Mission. He closed his eyes, asked her ghost to return later when he could find a private piece of time to sink into remembering her properly.

Up here, on this hill, she'd waited for him to come. Being raised up as a child to a man in only a day was bound to bring her back to him. She knew he couldn't cry now. She retreated and as she did, he promised her that the top of this rise where they could view the past and the future together, would be where they'd meet from now on.

The covenant made, Hannibal strode more calmly than he thought he would into the fog of smoke created by smoldering coals and fire-blistered pork skin. A familiar odor of perspiring men was hovering in there too, supplying the final injection of fortitude he needed. He was grateful for it. Sidestepping the densest clouds of smoke, Hannibal beheld his first glimpse of the annual ceremony into which he was being initiated. His

four uncles lined one side of a giant split in the field that was partially shaded by a massive oak. Probably bigger than any he'd ever seen before. The elders, each who'd spent the past months preparing Hannibal for this rite of passage, were looking over the four or five foot deep crevice from which a mixture of low pops and fizzles emanated.

Two young men, not yet twenty, stood on the other side of the pit poking at the coals. He knew them very well. He recognized their faces better than his own. They were brothers to him. The Swamp Plantation Village was a tightly-woven family of about thirty souls who were intimately acquainted with the demeanors and natures of their own.

Yet, he now saw those very faces that he'd watched contort while wrangling livestock, crumble when sorrowing over the loss of kin, wince while hauling timber to the steamboat woodyard, laugh when fooling on each other, swell with fever and lock up with bitter cold standing like drivers alongside the smoldering slash of earth. Both of them were stripped naked to the waist save for, what looked like, a leather skirt tied across their groins. He studied them but still barely recognized them. Emblazoned in the center of each tanned wrap they wore was an odd cipher that Hannibal made out to be one bowl with a wedged-shape chunk

removed from the middle of it, balancing atop another mirroring its outline.

His eyes searched the sweating, stone masks their familiar faces had become as they turned towards him. The fire ants returned and rose up in his gut in response to an ancient fierceness coming out of them. The revelation of it nearly dissolved the legs beneath him. He deemed it possible his body would soon lie headless next to the hogs he'd named Crackle and Honey, presently halved from neck to tail. He'd been charged with raising them since Christmas. That was the day Granny Venus had held him on her lap in her willow rocker and began telling him the story of Thomas Peters.

No stories could have prepared him for the scene he was beholding.

At the precise moment his worn out knees finally failed to support his body from there up, his Uncle Ned caught him under his elbows.

"All's us men here been where you be right now son"

Ned's assurance didn't banish all the dread pushing down on him but he leaned in towards what was offered. He tried to force his mind back to the evenings he'd spent with his uncles Ned, Gilbert, Jack

and James. They were generally comfortable gatherings where the men drilled deep into details of what their lives had been like when they were young men.

The cabin walls would dissolve as they told about the Georgia woods across the river with trails that led to the villages of the Chickasaw and Creek. The men filled his imagination with visions of places that seemed impossible to have ever existed, where white, black and Indian folk stood blood kin to each other and spoke three or four languages all mixed together. His uncles used the entire inside of the cabin to act out the dramas of their near-deadly encounters with creatures and men as they roamed all the way from the old Silver Bluff trading post down to the ocean. Their eyes would glisten as they remembered being gone for two months at a time from the Swamp Village. Sometimes more. They'd float their massa's goods down the river in poleboats to the ports of Savannah where their cargo was loaded up on wagons and transferred to huge ships bound for lands across the sea.

Laced within those recollections of high adventure were the grievous reports of unlucky men who were rounded up in one of those foreign places only to be crowded into a pen in one of those ships that took the goods out to be cargo themselves. His uncles saw some women, and even young uns too, driven like

livestock down the streets of Savannah. They'd have metal collars around their necks with chains attaching one of them to another. They never even saw animals treated so poorly. Or so piteously. Their skin pulled over the outline of their bones.

All those folks had lived with their uncles and mothers and kin in a land called Africa, where the Swamp Plantation Village people had first come from. Where Thomas Peters, in Granny Venus' story came from too. Uncle James learned some words from their language. He knew the words for "water" because they were all very thirsty but nobody could help them without worry of getting strapped or caught up by mistake to be sold to white men.

Those sad folks wasn't all from the same villages. They came from lots of different ones but got rounded up somehow to end up on the same ship together.

Uncle James knew a word for "food" too.

Those folks be our folks.

The only difference between the ladies, passing in their carriages with their lace hankies held to their noses to block out the sickening smell that came along with 400 humans packed like sausage in the casing or the men that prodded them onto the pier, was their skin color. That's what his uncles said every time they

finished those stories about the slaves. White folks came here free to roam all over the country from one end to the other. Brown folks can't go where they want to because their skin color gives them away. They got massas keeping them fearing for their kin, telling them what they gonna do and when it gonna happen.

His uncles made Hannibal say, "Everybody got a right to be free."

"In-de-pen-dent," is what they call it.

His uncles prepared him that the sight he would witness when he topped the hill where the white house was in view was the past, present and future tied up into one celebration called "Independence Day". This particular day, when he carried the spices brought from Africa and the water of the ancestors to the hog cooking pit was about those people who wasn't independent. They were - we are - slaves. Slaves meant everyone Hannibal loved, those who looked after him and protected him, was like a dog with a rope around its neck. All of them. All of us. Not able to go where we want and forced to stay put in the Swamp Village, wedged in between Horse Creek and the river. It was their home and they was tied to it whether they chose to be or not. Choice has a lot to do with independence.

Hannibal hardly knew where he began and ended except that parcel of dirt and water.

Now, though, through his recently created man's eyes, he began to perceive a different sort of outline taking shape.

He'd traveled farther today than ever before in his life. Whatever was outside the triangle formed by the back pasture of the Village, Horse Creek and the river, except for Sunday meetings at Storm Branch with Granny Venus, had been strictly off limits to him. Everyone, including his Momma, had filled his head up with tales of Mami Wata and the Boogy Man. He was warned he'd be shanghaied away from the Village and until this day, it was a prospect that haunted his imagination. Now, that he'd crossed over, traveled the forbidden path to witness the rituals of his brothers and uncles, a sensation rose in him that scattered the demons. He wanted to know what was inside the massa's Woodlawn house. Boards nailed together that had a name like a man does must also be hiding something wondrous inside it. The idea spread out from there like ripples on the creek.

He suddenly craved to wander farther past it. To see the forest across the river. To learn to speak the jumbled languages of the Indians. To board ships bound

for strange and mysterious places. The notions descended all at once, sending a tremor through his entire body for which he had no comparison.

Hannibal's gaze shifted up from the smoldering slash of blistered earth to the bustling tumble of noisy, white people cackling against the backdrop of Woodlawn. In a whisper, indistinguishable from a puff of wind, he heard a chorus made up from the voices of Granny Venus, his uncles, the wooden steps and his mother ask, "Wonder what's out there, beyond the massa's house?"

The dye had been cast. The nail was set. Hannibal had caught it. The ambition to be free was now etched into his soul, past the curtain of his flesh; deep in his bone and in spite of the afflictions it may be subject to endure.

It awakened in him a creeping curiosity.

Hannibal inhaled his first breath, steeped with the ache of its intrigue. He brought the smell of it into his lungs. Just as they did.

The men's attention was squarely on the the boy. Sloshed Storm Branch Creek water had baptized him into the brotherhood with each step up the hill from the church to the pit. There were years when their course of careful preparation didn't take. They'd have to make the

gamble then stand here and merely hope, as they surveyed the face of the boy they'd chosen to make the ultimate determination that no transformation caught him. They hadn't celebrated a Liberty Ceremony for six July's. Not since Amos was of age. He hadn't caught it although he'd made it this far and, bless his soul, he was a willing learner. They never failed to see a promising spark in Amos' eyes. He was enthralled by their stories of being free and of the years they roamed the woods and the river without worry.

Amos had progressed well through all the sacraments: receiving the Efo Tete from Granny Venus, fetching the Storm Branch water, showing up exactly at the appointed time. Yet no spark caught. No revelation. No ripening.

That was a hard day. Harder, in fact for the uncles, than having no Liberty Ceremony at all. It wasn't Amos' fault though. They couldn't blame him. They constantly struggled to find the right balance between expressing their compassion and acknowledging the harsh reality of the cruelty they were enduring in silence. This was the commandment from Granny Venus who had lived all the pieces of it: joy, loss, violence, humiliation, love and liberty. It was she who raised them to know how to unite the unyielding, sucking swamp mud and the domination of white men

with every living thing's right to mercy and might. The boy chosen for the Changing Ceremony could only grasp that moral steadiness through a constant demonstration of loving kindness, as deep and unwavering as the river itself.

In all, it'd been 9 years since Liberty had caught. That had been Caleb who stood with them right now, dressed in his hog leather loin cloth that was branded with the Fawodhodie.

James, Ned and Jack searched each other's expressions, making sure what each of them suspected was true. Like the instant between a jump and a landing, they were all suspended in the bright realization. Finally, Ned silently mouthed, "He caught it!"

CHAPTER FOUR: THE HOUSE WITH A NAME

1:09 PM. FRIDAY, JULY 4TH, 1856. WOODLAWN PLANTATION
BARBECUE PIT.

This boy had caught it sure as shootin’.

Every eye of every man around the pit was fixed on Hannibal.

Finally, James broke the spell. He grabbed ahold of their runaway astonishment in an attempt to move into the next phase of the ceremony.

“What you up here to the pit, son?”

Hannibal blinked himself back to the present, he fumbled to unwrap the leather strings of the bag of herbs from around his neck. Finally, managing to untangle the soaking bundle, he offered it up to his uncle.

James gently grasped the bag from his surprisingly, steady open palms. He let the dripping bag dangle, suspended from his two fingers by its drawstrings.

Then he cackled, “Reckon, you done saved us a step sir! “This Efo Tete already baptized in Branch water.”

As his Uncle James swung the drenched bag back and forth in front of the boy’s eyes, he broke into the snorting laugh for which he was famous. Immediately, the tremendous weight of this otherworldly

wizardry Hannibal had lugged all the way up the hill from the Swamp Village to the pit drained out of him like warm milk from a crack in a jug.

James passed the bag around to the other men. The younger ones left their stations by the pit to, in turn, partake in handling the seldom-seen bag and its contents. Each pulled out a pinch of what had been reduced to a soggy, grey tobacco-like mass. They sniffed it, inspected its condition and murmured to each other.

Ned placed a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, motioning with this head for the boy to follow him over to the edge of the hog pit.

"You don't divine no aroma 'lessen you fire up the Black Jack oak."

Ned moved his hand through the dove-colored smoke. Jack's eyes teared to witness the mystical marriage of the Black Jack wood, Storm Branch Creek water and the Efo Tete herbs.

"Black Jack hisself done long crossed over to the land of the spirits. But we has to 'member his teachin's in our own land. He in our midst everyday 'cause we name at least one fella Jack in each generation so we won't forget what he say to us. Black Jack say when

you take these leaves from Africa and you mix them all up with the holy water from Storm Branch Creek...”

With a brassy smirk, James abruptly halts the sermon for his flock by turning his eyes toward Hannibal, “you did stop by the church on the way up here, didn’t ya?”

The boy was still hugging the sopping, leather water bag hanging around his neck in full view of the men. Some of the younger men in the branded wraps point their long barbecue spears toward the bag.

Disentangling a drawstring from one of his ears, his knees made good on their earlier promise to buckle and he knelt down still cradling the water bag.

James bent to help as a shock of reverence shook him. Laying his hand on the wet leather, he could hear the song of a thousand souls—on both sides of the veil—whose salty sweat and sour tears had mixed with the waters of Storm Branch Creek, washing over their shredded flesh, torn by the cotton boll, whip, separation, childbirth and accident, singing a chorus of endurance and survival. Now the tears did flow from his own eyes. A full decade had come and gone since a boy caught the ghosts as profoundly as this child in front of him.

“Hope nor human don’t get birthed unless the roots beckons it hither.” Granny Venus had raised up every man present at this Independence Day ceremony on that proverb.

In ground trodden and packed by countless footsteps, evidence of decades of preparing feasts for parties held by masters, men whose backs and arms bore similar scars had excavated a crater for an intention the distant party-goers could never have imagined.

The pit was a well-structured indentation in the earth. It was a full twenty feet from end to end, five feet wide and at least three feet deep. The planed logs placed parallel to the incision in the ground supported straight pieces of sturdy, wooden poles upon which the headless and legless pork sides rested. Carefully tended Black Jack oak coals steadily roasted the meat and glowed orange whenever an occasional breeze came in contact with them.

Raising the water bag over his head, James invoked the ancestors to gather around the men to sanctify the Ceremony. Old Joe had crossed over from “sumption” only two months ago. He’d been the only Summoner James had ever known since he, himself, had caught the ghosts forty one years ago today. This

was his first time to take Old Joe's place and his spirit was close. He emptied the smaller bag's gooey contents into a soup-sized, wooden bowl that was stained with the confirmation of numerous prior Ceremonies. Gripping the neck of the bag, as his Summoner had taught him, James let the water trickle over the greenish-brown pile. Jack produced a grey stone implement, mixing them together until they merged into one liquid element.

When the blending of the Storm Branch Creek water and the Efo Tete herbs was complete, James spoke the Summoner's words for the first time as he poured some of the mixture from the bowl onto the coals with each declaration.

"Fawodhodie ene obre na enam. We are free men. We are independent men. We are kings of all we behold."

Clouds of steam infused with a scent Hannibal had no name for rose into the air. Each one of them inhaled the droplets of the ineffable merging of a past and a future that dwelt in their skin, their bones, their blood.

He held his breath until his Uncle Jack whispered to him, "Don't hold it in 'til you pass out there, man!" The boy released the trapped air inside with a long sigh.

Jack winked towards him as Ned approached, and bending down to Hannibal's eye level, slipped a smooth, black object into the child's hand.

"Now you take this on over there to Massa Thomas at the white house. Don't tarry none."

Uncertainty flickered in Hannibal's eyes. His uncles hadn't told him about this part of the Ceremony. Or had he forgotten it somehow in the excitement of all the ritual?

"You'll do just fine, son. The massa 'specting you."

Ahead of him, on the lawn in front of the big house with a name, a sea of celebrants bubbled up among a vignette of red roses halted in full bloom, white daisies and royal blue bunting. Hannibal wove his way through the picnic guests, still uncertain of his destination.

From the columned porch, An and Juny, two house servants dressed in starched, white aprons were making gestures to him. They pointed excitedly toward a raised platform where plantation owner, Thomas Lamar, addressed the crowd.

"May I have your attention, please?"

The sporadic laughter and uneven murmurs of the party goers quieted.

“Sarah and I couldn’t be in a happier state of mind this afternoon than to share our home with all of you, our friends and fellow farmers, who have gathered with us today to celebrate the moment in destiny that marks the auspicious time when we became a sovereign nation.” Thomas’ eyes scanned the faces before him to find his wife so he could point her out. Sarah was not visible to him so he continued.

“This is a day that denotes our liberation from the tyranny of foreign shackles and our freedom to be the masters of our own fates,”

Hannibal inched his way towards the back of the platform as An and Juny’s eyebrows lifted in cadence with the affirmative nodding of their heads. Finally, An raised her palm, indicating he’d reached the spot where he should stop to wait for Massa Thomas.

“Good afternoon to Mr. and Mrs. Pickens over there by the punch bowl and we’re also honored to have Senator Hammond celebrating with us today, accompanied by his lovely wife, Catherine.” The identified gentleman accepted their recognition as their wives demurred. “I’m going to officially start off the festivities by inviting one of our dearest community members up here to lead a prayer of thanks for our many blessings before we partake in the main course.

He's the man who has more than proved to us that we don't need to carry our cotton all the way up North. A man who imagines a future where South Carolina stands on its own, supplying the nation with our own goods manufactured in our own mills. His vision is not just about profits but about the strength of the South and his efforts are making our economy stronger. His Graniteville project is an absolute wonder of our industrial future."

Sporadic applause was offered as bonneted heads and Leghorn hats pivoted towards a middle-aged man standing in the center of the crowd milling around below the platform with his thumbs tucked in his vest pockets.

"Willam Gregg, if you'd be so kind, we'd be honored if you would lead us in a word of prayer, giving thanks for our bountiful mercies on this fine Independence Day."

A middle-aged man dressed in a starched white shirt nodded toward Thomas as the party goers opened up a path for him to make his way to the decorated dais. As Thomas held out a hand to assist Gregg up, he caught sight of the stoic child peering up at him from the rear of the platform. Hannibal lingered: half in shadow and half out creating an odd effect. He nodded towards

the boy, and after getting the older man headed in the right direction, raised a finger to let him know that he should stay put right where he stood.

“Well Thomas, I’m humbled to stand up here with you, and in front of so many, on the anniversary of this monumental day that celebrates the founding of a new nation. Our ancestors fervently believed their progeny would overcome oppression. And we surely have.”

This time the applause was more earnest.

“God has seen fit for our ventures to prosper. He has bestowed upon us a bountiful land for us to till; a crop that clothes our people both here and abroad. And one that also supplies our families with all our needs.”

He was speaking to no one in particular, but waved his hand over the imagined landscape from Edgefield to Silver Bluff. He’d shrunk the countryside into a miniature model to accommodate his purposes in his speech. Gregg stopped to survey the upturned faces, his mouth creasing a bit at the corners. Thomas was satisfied that Gregg would keep the audience’s attention for a few minutes so he quietly descended the steps towards where Hannibal waited. The overheated boy looked like a cut-out, paper doll glued over an illustration in a storybook. His eyes were wide and Thomas could see he was overwhelmed with confusion.

He approached Hannibal carefully, holding out his open palm and bending down to his eye level when he reached the spot where the boy stood.

Gregg continued his speech with a little apology. “By the way, it’s a little early for me to be stumping for my campaign to be the next candidate to represent us here in Edgefield County, so please don’t think this is one of those canned political speeches.” Almost half of the people gathered responded with a light, non-committal chuckle.

“I mean it when I say, there are more mercies inhabiting our lives here than punishments. Astonishing, to be frank, when one studies the arc of history. Ours is a golden era, charged with opportunities for prosperity and prospects for expansion. Let us take just a moment of silence to reflect on one or two encouraging aspects in which we can show gratitude. Let’s quietly reply, ‘thank you’ as we acknowledge the sacrifices made in our name, by our forefathers, that we might enjoy these rewards today.”

The head dressings on the crowd below Gregg that were initially all pointed toward the ground in reverence slowly became as animated as kingfishers diving for sticklebacks as the aforementioned reflecting continued on for a bit too long.

Under the dais, Thomas smiled broadly at Hannibal hoping he could alleviate some of the boy's anxiety. "So it's you this year, young fella. I expect congratulations are in order!"

Hannibal raised a closed fist towards the man he vaguely recognized. He had seen him before, but not in quite a while. In return, Thomas grasped the small, sweaty balled up hand between both of his shaking it gently. Hannibal opened his fist, depositing an arrowhead inside Thomas's hands. Thomas examined it, positioning the sharpened flint piece between his thumb and index finger.

"A fella name of Minko Choba gave this point to my great, great grandfather more than a hundred years ago over at Galphin's Trading Post." He moved it close to Hannibal's face and, for the first time, the boy got a good look at the object he'd held so tightly it practically drew blood.

"He was an Indian chief who lived on this very land here where you and me are standing. A Chickasaw he was." Thomas opened his other palm and let the arrowhead rest in it. Hannibal couldn't look away from it.

"He gave it to my grandpapa, his name was Thomas Lamar too, as a token to keep the peace between them. None of this story was helping Hannibal

understand anything that had gone on for this whole day. In fact, it was confusing him even further.

“But I can’t possibly accept this fine token from you,” Thomas’ face was solemn.

An ache of disappointment worked its way up Hannibal’s throat as his bewilderment increased. The damnable fire ants resumed their march and he blinked hard to keep the water contained inside his eyelids even though tears were threatening to spill out.

Thomas reached in his vest pocket and hurried up his explanation to ease the tension in the boy’s face. “See, I have to give you something in return.”

He produced a mottled silver-grey piece of metal upon which were embossed letters all around the outside edge. The only part of the coin Hannibal could really make out was where arrows were gathered up in a bunch and held together by something or other.

“And here’s what my grandpapa Tom gave an Indian king in trade. It’s a Spanish dollar. This is my part of the trade,” he explained offering it in the same hand that had previously held the arrowhead. “It’s for you to take back to your uncles.”

The boy stared at it. He stood still and made no gesture to take it from Thomas. He didn’t know exactly

what it was but it was apparently the next step in the Independence.

Thomas smiled again, pushed the coin into Hannibal's hand and headed back up to the platform. An clasped the boy's shoulder, then led him back towards the porch as the voice of Massa Thomas announced to the crowd that the main course was now being delivered to the serving table.

Looking past An's arm, Hannibal saw the same young men - who had less than a half-hour before - been clad in hide skirts as the Black Jack oak wood, the herb and the holy water was sprinkled in the pit. Now they were dressed as they usually were, in their homespun long breeches and shirts. Between them, they carried the long, flat boards piled high with steaming hog meat that had been separated from the bones.

CHAPTER FIVE: SARAH

1:51 PM. FRIDAY, JULY 4TH, 1856. WOODLAWN PLANTATION.

Thomas wouldn't find her in the faces as he ran his eyes across the crowd outside. She was not there. She was in their bed with the curtains drawn tight against the intensity of the sun and the exuberance of the party goers.

Sarah was seven months gone with this child she was carrying.

Last year at the celebration, she was carrying another one in her arms. His older brothers rolled hoops in-between the ladies' skirts working together to get the best of the Glover children in tug-of-war and beat the Rainsford boys in the three-legged race. Robbie had been the mirror for her joy and if she had none, he created it out of thin air. Dark hair. Darker eyes. A disposition that was more temperate and more affectionate than any baby she'd ever encountered. Lots of mothers called their children angels but Robbie was the best of the heavenly host come to earth. As such, she was left to assume that he was only here for a brief loan.

Sarah knew she was expecting the afternoon in March when a fever descended upon Robby, from out of nowhere. No one else was ailing. Not another child around them. Not even an old man. No one. It took him

in less than twelve hours from start to finish leaving her, Thomas and the older boys, unable to take in the actuality of his leaving this world.

One day he was giggling at the silly faces his two-year old brother, Dunny, made at him and the next he was lying still in her arms; drained of the indescribable essence that animated him. Four months later, Sarah still couldn't force her mind to accept his departure. She hadn't left this room to watch as his small body was committed to the ground. She hadn't ever visited his grave. No one had been successful in convincing her it would help her come to grips with Robby's death.

If she stayed holed up here, in the bed, she was free to picture him next to her. She mentally examined every buttery fold of his olive-skinned body; the creases on the back of his plump knees; the little pad of fat under his chin; the black curls standing out from his head like dark clouds rising up over the cotton fields before a storm, Sarah only felt some semblance of being in one piece when her older boys came to her and curled up beside her. On the few occasions when she was coaxed out of her den, the sound of her body rattled in her ears like hollow glass. Her leg bones moved while the rest of her was left strung out across the floor.

There was one way Sarah could gather herself up into a mother who looked toward the future: She convinced herself that the baby growing inside her was Robby, that he'd only retreated back into his former cocoon to get his strength back and would reemerge in a matter of weeks. She imagined him opening his almond eyes and meeting hers again. "There you are," she'd say to him when the midwife laid him on her breast. "I've been waiting for you to come back."

This fantasy was a space of solace she inhabited. In fact, she was dwelling there even now. Picturing his tiny, developing fingernails resting against his fleshy, cherub thumbs. Growing again to the size and the time when he would emerge, gluing her back together once more. Then she'd rise from the bed. Then she'd cradle him in her arms, certain that her agony had been a necessary by-product of this horrific, ancient, changeling process she neither understood nor questioned.

"Sarah? Love?" A faint voice somewhere in the room drifted towards her but she decided, as she always did, to ignore it.

"All the guests are gathered outside for the party," the sound was getting louder. Closer.

“Do you think you’d like to just take a little look out the window darling?”

Closer.

“The trimmings are lovely. Of course, the day is sweltering but the hands are bringing the barbecue to the table as we speak.”

Closer.

The sheets were pulled away from Sarah’s face. The smell of her own mother entered her awareness. She turned away.

“It’ll make you feel better to just sit up a bit. Stretch yourself out Sarah. That little one you’re harboring there could use some fresh air.”

Surprisingly, even to Sarah, that suggestion made sense. Hadn’t Robby squealed at the blue ribbons snapping in the breeze that seemed to spit and start last year? She recalled how wildly they whipped and how delighted he was.

“Alright mother, help me stand.”

Frances nearly said, “ Well law Sarah! It’s about cotton pickin’ time!”

But she didn’t.

CHAPTER SIX: THE HONORABLE WILLIAM GREGG

7:14 AM. MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1856. COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA.

The occasional leaf that clung to William Gregg's clothes might well have served as heralds for the recklessness he was about to witness today in the General Assembly. A puzzling folly that would cling to his mind, as the fall leaves did to his pant leg, and linger there long after the session had ended.

He fostered a soft spot in his heart for Columbia. The steady commotion of its growth exhilarated him. This town had sprouted energetic tendrils in the last thirty years. Houses were steadily creeping past the railroad and their porches would soon overhang the banks of the river. When he started his own business as a greenhorn silversmith and clockmaker here in the twenties, Columbia was quieter, rougher around the edges, a young frontier town teetering on the brink of adolescence.

This was where the skills his Uncle Jacob taught him began to work to his advantage. Fine craftsmanship was the foundation upon which he built a clientele that catered to the Southern elite. Relying upon the abilities forged into him by Jacob, he designed whatever fine items the prosperous folk might imagine they needed to be encased in silver. His practiced gentility eventually

steered him closer toward his indefinable ache to be a part of their world.

Walking in Columbia this morning awakened the much younger version of himself who had retreated into a room at the very back of his mind, It was in this city where he started to understand the peculiar interplay between time and circumstance and saw they could be yoked together for his own purposes. Gregg took advantage of opportunities to quietly slide into the sphere of the wealthy. Then he studied them, with as much attention as he had the skill of watchmaking. He met James Jones, who had garnered the rank of a general in the South Carolina militia, although he never saw the battlefield. Their upbringing was very different, yet they shared a few interests that resulted in Gregg being invited to the Watson Plantation, James' mother's ancestral homestead. It had been a long time since he'd thought about his strategy to become rich and how it had turned into unparalleled good fortune when he met the General's younger sister, Marina. Her fine features, mellow green eyes and silky, black ringlets belied her boldness. When she accepted his marriage proposal he believed, for the first time, that there might actually be a God existing somewhere. Although he was unprepared for her forthrightness, she was his cornerstone. It was Marina who convinced him to sell the shop here and

buy the Vaucluse Mill in the Edgefield district. How had he found the one woman who could fish the visions he sheltered for years out of the grey depths of him? Still, to this very day, she knew him from the inside out.

Gregg worked like a man possessed to turn that flailing mill around in a little more than a year. It taught him lessons he hadn't been able to implement then. It took him away from his little boys and Marina for too many, long nights. They decided together to sell the mill and move to Charleston. It was hardly fair of him to keep them cooped up in Edgefield where weaving pettiness into every encounter was considered a worthy art.

Gregg opened his shop, with the Hayden brothers on King Street and for fifteen years he and Marina had hob-nobbed with the urban plantation class who embraced their inherited titles as if they were, indeed, royalty. It was the society his wife enjoyed and he didn't judge her for her leisures. She'd grown up out in the middle of a cotton field in Ridge Spring. The glitter of Charleston was intoxicating and Gregg, himself, had fallen under its spell more than once. Ultimately, though, he was a craftsman; never quite their equal even though he could buy and sell them many times over and he tired of their fussings easily. Eventually, he'd impressed upon his wife that their sons would be the heirs of a kind

of security that no plantation owner could ever achieve. He rolled out his plans to build a mill complex that would illustrate the future clearly. The Gregg family would endure both financially and socially if they invested their energy in lifting the plight of the common man up rather than playing in the parlors of false grandeur.

The enslavement of black people was quietly problematical to them both. Marina and Gregg shared their misgivings privately but politely nodded along at parties and dinners when the planters complained about their human property. They quietly paid a family of negroes to help with the boys, tend the large garden and keep their house in order. “No work without wages,” Gregg told them. Yet they all assumed their roles in the antiquated institution, believing slavery would soon be outlawed, as it had been in Europe. It was not sustainable unless the South was willing to take up arms. For as much as the Southern privileged loved to flap their gums about “independence” from England, every single one of them would crawl on their belly like a reptile if Queen Victoria deigned to dub them Lord This or Lady That. They wouldn’t want to be looked upon as backward bumpkins forever.

Gregg breathed in the musty scent of the damp leaves, slowing his cadence to consider the arc of his transformation from a young silversmith to the most

unlikely of industrialists. He found his evolution nothing short of astonishing.

He unconsciously marked off the beat of his steps from the Congaree House Hotel to the congressional chambers in his road-weary boots. Gregg had to swallow a chuckle. This obsession with the tempo of life both fascinated and troubled him. His aging body had adopted the copacetic rhythm of one of his timepieces, ceaselessly moving him forward. He chose to walk the quarter mile between the hotel and the state house, instead of taking a carriage, just so he could watch his old calf skin boots measure out the distance. He doubted he'd keep his promise to Marina to visit a cobbler for a new pair while he was in Columbia. She had grown quite weary of his "ridiculous notion" that he'd somehow be insulting his old King Street friend, J.J. Cohen, if he traded this pair in for fresh ones.

"Gregg, these shtivl will last you a lifetime!"

Cohen had promised him, peering over his thick, half glasses. "Treat them as you would one of your children. Keep them clean. Gently massage tallow into them at least once a week. This is what allows the baby cow hide to cradle your tired feet like the kid glove caresses your hands."

Adjusting his waistcoat, the best he owned and one he never wore anymore, William Gregg appreciated that it afforded him easy movement. Simple in its lines and woven of fine wool, it too had been made by the persnickety, alas now deceased, Mr. Cohen. Each crease and fold of the layered fabrics - the stretched fibers of the cotton, the velvet fleece of the wool, the support of the leather - had shaped themselves around his form.

The teapots, forks and spoons he'd pounded out of melted coin silver were woven into the threads. It was unthinkable to toss them aside because of some momentary fashion fad.

He tightened the cravat at his throat. His pulse thrummed louder inside his ears as he picked up his pace. How would he mask his "I told you so" pride when an ever-independent South emerged out of the rows of sweaty souls who, up until now, were ceaselessly banging mud clods into dust. Yet the prospect of progress did nothing to ease the thread of concern that cinched tighter in his gut every day he was away from home. It was a stitch he couldn't ignore nor was he likely to want it to be clipped. The tightening intensified when he considered any small problem that might happen during his absence and be hidden from him. As if he wouldn't know if one of his sons played hooky,

lallygagging the afternoon away under a shady tree by the creek. The anxiety it stirred in him was pervasive. So much so that he doubted he'd put much effort into the election for State Senator next year. Even though Gregg appeared to most people he interacted with as riveted to the petty goings-on of this political movement or that soapbox rambling, the truth was that he was passionate about only one thing: the kingdom he had built in Graniteville.

He raised up his vision from a neglected hillside tangled in cat's claw vines and veiled by poplars and briars; a wilderness traveled only by possums and alligators on their way up from Horse Creek. He had turned that tumble into the finest time piece he'd ever created. Because of him, looms ticked and shuttles hummed. His people: Living inside the smart houses built for them and drawing paychecks from work he invented for them were weaving centuries of their rented souls back together with each beat of the reed. The bolts of shirting and sheeting were their proof of redemption as much as his.

In each waking or sleeping moment he was nudged by a ceaselessly swaying pendulum that decided if his feet landed in his office or on the mill floor and whether his hands were holding an ink pen to

record his daily entries or setting right a spool for a weaver.

At the age of ten, an orphaned William was apprenticed to his Uncle Jacob and immediately immersed in the trades of silversmithing, clockmaking and the construction of spinning machines. These crafts offered a strange and unorthodox comfort a boy with a fallow field where his heart should beat. From the moment uncle directed his nephew's gaze towards the bright silver chasm where the minute machinery of the watch was magnified through a jeweler's loupe, William was mesmerized. He wasn't facinated so much by the mechanics as he was by the ineffable energy that compressed time into a single, visible point. The internal anatomy of a watch, when disassembled, functioned no better than a dismembered leg or head. It, like a man, was powered by a transcendent dynamism that no minister or saint had yet adequately defined for him. Although never able to verbalize what sort of sorcery he was witnessing, William stayed confounded as to the reason his uncle said nothing to him about the strange, yet obvious phenomenon.

When they'd relocated to Georgia from Virginia, on account of Mr. Madison's War, his Uncle Jacob bought a cotton mill. Stepping inside that place, the monotone sketch of Gregg's desolate childhood broke open with

the percolating colors of life. Inside there were people animated with a shared purpose, rhythmically moving their bodies back and forth and sweeping to and fro from spool to loom like the hands of a clock. Gregg would never be able to describe what he witnessed occurring on the floor of that mill. The people were the gears that allowed all the pieces of humanity to fit together to create something bigger; some force, like time, that kept the planet spinning. The wooden jennies, in which he fitted the dowels for his uncle, stretched out the fibers as the women mill workers plucked the endless thread like a harp string. The music that resulted transformed one disconnected thing into whole matter. As time does to turn a boy into a man or an idea into a movement.

The very notion that the silent millisecond in-between the tick and the tock prophesied potential for a man actively transversing a space outside a clock would have been beyond preposterous to Jacob. There was little argument that his uncle was a master craftsman himself, but he focused solely on the object and its specified function in the present. Gregg couldn't tell whether his uncle had no awareness of the pulsing cosmos inside the metal mechanics of a time piece or if he simply chose to ignore it. Certainly, his silver watches were handsome, impeccably crafted and

reflected the social standing of the men who fished them from their vest pockets. Clocks simply ticked off the passage of time that had already occurred, not the possibilities crouching in the corners of the weeks, months and years they had yet to chronicle. Fine, silver watches were meant to mark off the hours and minutes of men's lives in precise increments. Boys were destined to tick off the weeks of their childhood - not with frivolous dreams of spinning cotton into cloth with new-fangled machinery. People in a mill were human cogs who had to work to eat with an eye firmly on the grave as their time ran out.

A boy, a watch and a mill worker were merely tools, granted exquisitely built ones.

That was the falsehood Uncle Jacob operated under and one that Gregg had spent the last forty years setting right.

When he'd moved on to finish his apprenticeship under Mr. Blanchard, Gregg began to tinker with the barely perceptible engines of time itself while peering through his jeweler's loupe: He experimented with unlocking a minuscule portal into the backdoor of eternity. The revelations he saw from standing on that threshold permanently shifted his focus. Later, in Charleston, after learning from the mistakes he'd made

at the Vaucluse mill, he assembled the disconnected pieces that were buried in the soul of the orphan boy he'd once been. They were still down there. Still breathing. Held in stasis in that silver tunnel, waiting for him to gently grasp any future he chose with his fine-tipped tweezers and set it down where ever he pleased.

Gregg had christened his mill village, "Graniteville" because the ground upon which it stood was supported by an unyielding bed of stone, revered in both myth and proverbs as the true "Rock of Ages". The waters of Horse Creek ran directly through the center of it: a constant, natural source of power that seemed to him to need direction. For Gregg, his metaphor was tethered as closely to the geology of the land as it was to the manifestation of his vision. He trusted that the material he quarried from the earth, the abundant flow of Horse Creek and the faults he saw in his visits to Northern mills, were nothing if not the perfect alchemy. Although Graniteville was not the first mill village, it was the only one of its kind to be self-sustaining, equitable and as productive as it was innovative. His mill and village were one mechanism, a timekeeping masterpiece in which the hands marched forward, ticking toward a better way of life that would elevate the South out of the Dark Ages. Graniteville sat amidst a sea of stagnating fields that were either sharecropped farms tended by disillusioned

and exhausted white men or Old World plantations tended by underfed, unwilling and unfree black laborers. Cotton, the fruit of their sweat, had to be expensively bundled and carted to the train or river docks for shipment off to the North. This reality ultimately rendered them all as puppets, beholden to Yankees.

Gregg offered small farmers a new paradigm: Graniteville Mill bought the cotton they loaded from their fields right from the back of their wagons at the end of their picking day. Poor white men didn't have to live in fear of being booted out of their shacks. And if the pressure of sharecropping bothered the plantation owners, something Gregg heard them gripe about during the monthly meetings of the Beech Island Agricultural Club, then those men were free to work on the other side of the process. They'd turn the raw material that used to flay the skin off their fingers when they wrenched it from the stems into whole cloth fine enough to fill the shelves of the shops in New York City. Those pitiful families, used to sleeping on hay and dirt floors, would finally have something more to look forward to other than eternal misery: a clean, safe home surrounded by a garden plot for vegetables and a school to prepare their children for their future jobs in the mill.

Graniteville stood as living proof of Gregg's unwavering conviction that commerce, balanced with compassionate paternalism, would raise humans up to embrace the divine aliveness that powered the whole of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSAL

8:01 AM. MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1856. THE SOUTH CAROLINA STATEHOUSE IN COLUMBIA.

Most mornings, before the sun caught up with him, Gregg climbed to his usual place in the village cemetery situated on the ridge overlooking his town. He'd stood there for countless mornings, ignoring the predawn swarms of summer insects, peering past the low-lying fog rolling off Horse Creek and squinting through wind-whipped ice flurries. The soles of his boots had worn a bare spot next to the final resting place of a friend he hadn't met until after his death. Gregg always found his place next to the grave of a child who had been discovered, alone and feverish, when the train stopped in the village. Finding no papers or family about him and, despite the efforts of the Mill doctor, he succumbed within a day, without ever regaining his senses. The passing called up the leftover grief for all the children lost through accident, illness or otherwise in the Graniteville population. Together they mourned the boy along with their own purloined kin; deeply and profoundly. After much consideration given to his final resting place by a group of grief-scarred mothers, they settled on nestling him in the same earth that held what was remaining of their own. They also set to carving a cedar cross with the inscription, "The Little Boy". It was

a commemoration that constantly reinforced its pathos. For two years he'd been lying up there, looking down in death on a village he never saw in life. The Little Boy and Gregg had become bound together as two orphans abandoned by their parents. Neither of them could remember where they were headed before their folks vanished. Only that this square of dirt, where they met each morning, was the place the unnamable force running the engine of time arranged for them.

Several hours before Gregg took his position on the ridge, oil lamps were already glowing in the kitchens of the millworkers' houses. No matter how early he arrived to stand watch in the morning, others—overseers and machinists—were already at work inside his monstrous mill: organizing daily tasks, lubricating gears, inspecting carding machines, and aligning the thread on the spinning frames. The doffers cleaned away the ever-present lint and dust that threatened to fuel a fire capable of annihilating the mill. The firemen lit the steam boilers, carefully gauging the pressure as it built to power the mill. By the time the rest of the workers arrived, Gregg's grand project was ticking along, just as he had envisioned.

Clockwork.

He wanted his mill workers to understand that each one was worth more to him than merely laborers; they were families, with children who needed schooling and wives who wanted more for their boys than a never-ending row to pound. So, he built homes for his people that were simple yet sturdy, arranged in straight lines on either sides of a well-maintained road. William Gregg had discovered that dignity began at the doorstep when he trailed after Uncle Jacob in hopes of finding one with his name on it. He constructed a church in which they could attend to their spiritual needs and instituted laws that kept alcohol out of the mill village. This wasn't charity. It was his shared inheritance for them. One that he'd earned from years of picking away inside his tiny silver mines for the bourgeois of Charleston.

Next month would mark eleven years since Gregg had secured the charter from this very same General Assembly to establish his Graniteville Manufacturing Company. He had opened his pitch by describing the appalling conditions of white workers in Northern mills—locked in overcrowded, unsanitary hellholes, packed like sardines into filthy tenements, exploited until they expired, only to be replaced by another hapless soul. He watched as pity flickered on the edges of the legislators' mouths, creeping to their eyes before their hands began to fidget restlessly on the table.

“Gentle sirs,” he asked, his voice heavy with reproach, “how can we be complicit in these atrocities heaped upon our fellow men?”

Before they could scramble for an answer, he relieved them of their discomfort, unveiling his vision for a model mill village in Graniteville. Gregg painted a picture of hope, stressing how their support would uplift poor whites—if not their economic equals, surely their brethren in Christ. He offered them a simple path to redemption: invest in his plan, and they could transform luckless dirt farmers and idle men into productive citizens, working in a clean, well-constructed factory, with housing, schools and a decent square of land for their families.

As a final flourish, he appealed to their pride. “For those Yankee mills enslave white men while they heap shame upon us for our labor practices. South Carolina can become the beacon of progress, the state all others look to for guidance, as we forge a new model of prosperity rooted in our Southern values.”

His persuasive arguments and detailed plans convinced the legislators that the true strength of his Graniteville lay in his self-appointed guardianship of these people.

As he finally reached the steps of the State House, he paused for just a moment before he entered as one

of them. For the first time, he'd be on the other side. He'd cast his lot with some and argue with others. Gregg's thought of the planters, men he had sat beside, hosted at dinners and conferred with at the Agricultural Club. They were hot with ideas about expansion, about adding more fields and more slaves, convinced that more hands in the dirt meant more wealth. Even now, a decade later, they couldn't really imagine the South that he was birthing, even now, in Graniteville. They were blind to the very thing that could set them free. More bodies in chains was not the answer. They still didn't see how the mills could change everything, didn't understand that wealth wasn't just in land but in what could be built upon it. He realized his real work was only starting but at least he had a dynamic example of a South that could rise on its own legs.

A smartly dressed Negro attendant opened the door for Gregg, greeting him with a polite "Welcome" and "Good morning."

The hall buzzed with newly elected regional representatives from across the state. Gregg, assuming he was early, was startled to find it already packed to overflowing. Scanning the room, he spotted newspaper reporters mingling with the crowd, seated in spots clearly meant for delegates. Their presence was unmistakable. Though they fancied themselves blending

in among the assemblymen, their rumpled suits betrayed them as scavengers sniffing out gossip rather than giving space to legitimate business. Gregg took their “reporting” with a grain of salt and a healthy dose of skepticism.

Several had staked out the front, scribbling into notebooks or sketching the chaos of the gathering. On closer inspection, Gregg noticed a few wore badges or ribbons identifying them as “Press,” granting them access to the Assembly. Behind him, one reporter moved with intense focus, scanning faces as if weighing their worth, leaning in to snatch bits of whispered conversation. It was clear the pack was jockeying for the best vantage point.

Then Gregg spotted Richard Yeadon, his longtime friend and the only newspaper man in South Carolina he trusted.

After the frenzy of preparing the mill, his harried train ride from Aiken to Columbia and the flood of memories the capital city stirred in him, Gregg had completely forgotten Richard would be here. He felt a twinge of embarrassment—he’d been so caught up in his own business he hadn’t fully prepared for the public service role he’d been elected to.

The two hadn't yet had the chance to talk about the uproar surrounding Edgefield's "gift" to the U.S. Congress: Preston Brooks. Gregg disliked Brooks intensely. He was a bully who cried "duel" at the slightest offense, only to back out before facing his opponent. Last May, Brooks had nearly killed Senator Charles Sumner, bludgeoning him unconscious on the Senate floor. For this, he'd been celebrated in the press, even receiving new canes as gifts—likely from the same journalists now occupying the delegates' seats.

Besides a few hastily written letters, Gregg and Yeadon had been out of touch for nearly a year. It had been a decisive one at that.

They'd first made each other's acquaintance during a barbecue at Middleton Place in the early forties. Gregg wandered away from the larger crowd looking for shelter from the ravings of the electric-haired senator, John C Calhoun. The old man's spooky countenance was a perpetual cold, unemotional one, ringed by a corona of wiry hair. Calhoun wore his nickname as "The Haunted Prophet" well. When Gregg ducked behind a ligustrum that had been fashioned into either a swan or a dragon, he couldn't tell which, he immediately recognized Richard Yeadon as the publisher of the Charleston Daily Courier who was hiding behind the leafy creature as well. Yeadon's broad-minded Unionist

perspectives appealed to Gregg and he found his newspaper's reporting more informative than the one-sided rhetoric of the Mercury. Despite Calhoun's maniacal diatribes droning in the distance, neither Yeadon or Gregg distrusted the North. From that very first meeting, Gregg and Yeadon had been engaged in an ongoing conversation about the many reasons the South was failing to achieve the economic heights of the North. They lamented in their shared beliefs that the South would be left behind if agriculture overshadowed industry. Poor whites all over the state were on the verge of revolution, streaming out in droves to Northern factories over the reality that slavery suppressed wages and choked off job opportunities for free laborers.

After Yeadon built his summer house less than a quarter mile from Gregg's KalmiaLand mansion on the hilltop in Aiken, they'd spent many evenings strategizing about the ways in which Gregg's village might bust up the elite caste system by employing only free, white laborers at his mill.

In a strange twist of fate, Yeadon was elected to represent St. Philip's and St. Michael's parishes at the same time as Gregg was selected for Edgefield. The 42nd General Assembly was a first either of them had attended.

Gregg, waved his handkerchief over the heads of the men and called out loudly, "Yeadon! Yeadon! Over here!" Yeadon spotted him and, with equal enthusiasm, motioned for him to proceed as he animatedly pointed to a chair over which he'd spread his waistcoat.

Sliding in between the shifting congregation, Gregg finally reached the area on the right side of the room where Yeadon had saved a seat for him.

The two friends heartily embraced each other, "It's wonderful to see you Yeadon!

Shooing off a younger man over to the next seat, Yeadon slapped him on the back.

"William, I knew you'd be here and you probably had no idea it would be this crowded," Yeadon said.

"You know me too well," Gregg laughed. "I was dawdling along, taking in the progress of this city such an extent that I must have completely lost track of the time. I can't believe I'm late."

Yeadon moved close to Gregg and his face rearranged itself in an expression that was both amused and resigned.

"You're not late, my friend. The line to get in here started coalescing hours ago on the porch."

"Why? What's going on?" Gregg asked.

"You really don't know do you?"

The look Gregg shot him left Yeadon with no doubt. It was true that hadn't been privy to the tavern and club gossip. That wasn't a surprise as he rarely knew William to take a drink. He'd set out thinking this was a meeting like any other where elected officials convene and, occasionally, discuss the affairs of their state. Gregg had arrived exactly at the appointed time, only to be faced with a clamoring horde and a surplus of reporters occupying every seat.

Yeadon pulled Gregg into him and they sat together. "You'll find the Governor's speech exceedingly interesting."

"Oh? How do you mean?" Gregg asked.

"On the other hand, probably more distressing than not since it will surely position South Carolina as a seething pool of fire-eaters and soul drivers. Even more than we actually already are."

Deep furrows gathered above Gregg's eyebrows. He hadn't expected this. No, more like it, he'd been completely obsessed with the management of his mill and hadn't really taken the social temperature of his district. He'd cast his vote three weeks ago for Buchanan instead of Frémont. He knew he wouldn't be able to justify backing a fully abolitionist agenda against the rustic beliefs of his constituents. He naively believed

their thinking would be pulled forward by the natural progress of evolution.

“I don’t know why I thought the election of Buchanan would buy us some time for the insanity of this year to calm to a slow boil,” Gregg said, shaking his head.

The crowd quieted as Governor James Adams, a Yale-educated planter wearing a full white beard and a too-tight cravat appeared at the front of the hall. He always looked to Gregg as if he was wearing the hair that was supposed to be growing on the top of his head on his face instead. Adams seemed unusually flushed for a cool day in late November; as if the combined heat and squirming of the men gathered before him had raised his internal temperature to that of a fever. Gregg could make out the beads of perspiration dancing on his forehead and running in one single rivulet past his left ear.

The governor stepped up on the platform, flanked by two aides and seem to gain a little bit more confidence as he nonchalantly dabbed his bald head before laying the papers in his hand down on the lectern. He was looking all in the world like a country preacher getting ready to deliver his Sunday sermon. “Honorable Members of the Assembly, the time has come for us to convene and deliberate on the matters of

this state,” Adams relaxed into the practiced formalities of calling a session to order and the formerly unsettled crowd settled into a strangely silent lull.

“From the looks of this chamber, I can surmise the gist of the proposal I intend to announce today has already circulated among some of you, who have most certainly confabulated about it before arriving here at this epicenter of legislative parlay.”

Gregg shifted his eyes toward Yayden. “Apparently, I am the last to know.”

Yayden lifted his eyebrows and shoulders simultaneously in concert with his famous one-sided smile.

“So let us get right to the meat of the subject, shall we?” Adams took the opportunity to bask in the “Here, here’s” and the “huzzas” that overtake the room before raising his hand to request quiet.

“We are in assembly here today in a time of profound uncertainty for our beloved homeland and the Providential institution that sustains our very existence”. Adams brushed his fingers across his eyebrows as if he was delivering a eulogy instead of a state address.

“The consumption of our cotton has steadily increased and will, in a few years, exceed our ability to supply that need. This sad situation does not proceed

from want of land on which to grow it... but from want of able hands to cultivate it.”

The truth is, gentlemen, that the South is under siege from the North. They profit from our cotton and labor while criticizing us for the system that provides the goods enriching them.”

Gregg slid his eyes sideways to Yeadon who stared between his knees at the floor.

“I don’t see a moral outrage from them about the exploitation of the East Indies, where fertile lands are worked by cheap, coerced labor. Nor do they seem eager to criticize France for promoting agricultural expansion in Algeria under similar conditions.”

Adams wandered out from behind the podium leaving the safety of his structured outline behind.

“I present this query to you,” Adams thrust his neck forward, scanning the faces of the crowd like a sea captain checking the horizon. “If these practices are accepted globally to sustain economic growth, why should the South be vilified for seeking to strengthen its labor force?

A rumble of either agreement or opposition buzzed around the room. Gregg couldn’t tell which.

“Yet across our territories, abolitionists assault our particular brand of society when they say nothing about

how labor results in profits around the world. They have no conception our lot stems from the union of two unequal races we inherited and blossoms into the fine lives they enjoy.” The fevered look had returned to Adams face.

“They cannot conceive that we have embraced the role bequeathed to us by our ancestors to civilize and Christianize the savages in our midst. They do not leave their fine abodes to visit our homes or step off their pristine brick roads to walk the fields of our plantations. They merely pontificate from their hollow, white-washed buildings in Philadelphia and Boston and send out assassins to murder settlers seeking a new life on the lawless plains of Kansas, where scoundrels like John Brown hack to pieces the innocent in the name of false righteousness.”

“It was this very hypocrisy that spurred our own Preston Brooks to reply to Sumner’s insult to our honor with the business end of a gutta-percha cane.”

More “huzzas” reverberated throughout the hall at the mention of the attack, with a few shouts of “beat him again” and “beat him everyday” coming from the back of the room.

“Agriculture is the foundation of our lives here. It is our birthright. Let us, therefore, act decisively to ensure

that this foundation is fortified by every necessary measure.”

The governor’s hands were now sweeping out dramatically from the vicinity of his heart in a timed waltz to accompany his words.

“We shall be bold in our mandate to exalt the South itself to higher hopes and purposes. It is perhaps our most sacred obligation to press it forward to a perpetuity of progress. This oath of ours can be accomplished in but one way and in one way alone.”

Gregg quickly turned around to gauge the responses of the men behind him. Some of them maintain a flattened expression, not betraying any real opinion behind their faces. A few others were nodding solemnly. The majority were obviously holding their enthusiasm in check until Adams lets go with a final punchy finish.

The governor narrowed his eyes and allowed himself the luxury of an exaggerated pause. Then, straightening up his body and raising his head towards the ceiling he continued, “Gentlemen, I propose that the way forward for us is to reopen the African slave trade.

Fully half of the crowd jumped to their feet in support of the Governor’s startling statement. The hall was a cacophony of competing sounds as a few men

slap each other on the back and the reporters nearly scale anyone or anything in their path to be the first to break the story.

Even though Gregg knew full well the path Adams was treading, the shock of hearing the words spoken aloud in this hall of law registered plainly on his face. Yeadon, meanwhile, continued his unbroken staring contest with the floor, just as he had been doing since the speech began.

Gregg stood and began searching the faces of what he estimated to be well over a hundred men, trying to discern whether they were truly behind this madness or merely reacting in shock. He noticed the young man Yeadon had earlier told to move along now seated beside him. They had skipped pleasantries and the usual introductions, both swept up in the frenetic atmosphere.

The man was much younger than Gregg or Yeadon, with a full head of reddish-blond hair. He sat silent and still, his eyes closed as if in prayer. As Gregg observed him, so youthful in appearance he seemed barely out of his teens, an abrupt feeling struck him—like staring down the familiar silver tunnel of time. His bones stiffened, and he could hear the blood rushing in his temples. The young man lifted his head, opened his

eyes, and revealed a blue so piercing, Gregg's breath caught in his throat. Within them, Gregg saw the future —his own sons trapped in this mire of stagnation, his grandchildren clawing to survive inside those eyes.

The only response Gregg could manage was a sharp, whispered exclamation: "He CAN'T be serious!" The young representative let his head fall, solemnly examining his fingernails, as Gregg sank back into his chair.

"Oh, but I'm afraid the governor is quite serious, sir," the young man replied.

Gregg looked around the room again. A few men were gathering their belongings, ready to leave. Others were casually offering cigars.

The boy-representative-stranger turned his striking blue eyes toward Gregg again, stood and began loading a few papers into a worn leather satchel. Gregg, caught between dimensions, hung in the space where Yeadon remained frozen in his downward stare and this impossibly young man was distilling the entire speech into a bitter truth.

"The Governor of the State of South Carolina just proposed we ignore a Federal law and engage in international piracy," Gregg said, his voice heavy with disbelief. "I cannot accept that any man who really

considers this ‘suggestion’ would actually carry it forward in reality!”

“Oh just you wait and see, sir,” the impossibly blue-eyed youth said as he turned to walk off into the boiling crowd. “One day—and I don’t imagine it’ll be too far in the future—some foolish lickspittle will take the Governor’s call to action as his personal invitation to extract as many souls from Africa as he can cram on his death ship.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE ENDLESS ROAD OF WATER

4:48 AM. TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1858. THE STEAMBOAT AUGUSTA.

The cold was just one more thistle in his flesh.

The Ingleses Bazungu demanded the captives lay themselves down as flat as possible on the bottom floor of this strange vessel with giant rolling paddles that slapped the water to move it forward. It seemed to Sundiata that there was no end to the types of floating prisons the Ingleses could devise.

Chained inside the giant winged nkanu ship, he was certain he'd never catch one more gulp of air that didn't have the stench of five hundred years of boiling piss or fill his mouth with the metal taste of blood. Down there, all the shackled bodies moved together as if they had merged into one organism. Every weary exhale was followed by a stifling inhale that never brought the satisfaction of breath to their hungry lungs. In the heat of that inferno, he would have welcomed the numbing of his toes, his fingers and his ears. Instead the wet chill now creeping over him had a different effect. It worked to pry open a door behind which the boy had locked up the vastness of his misery ever since he was dragged away from Boubacar's shop.

His perception of time was the first of his senses to buckle under. When Sundiata tried to force his mind to

construct a sequence of events, it seemed possible that Samir and Karim might have snatched him out of his bed a few minutes ago or a thousand lifetimes ago. He'd come to realize that in a ceaseless nightmare such as this one, time and the order in which things happened are twisted all out of shape. Home never was a real place. The next gulp of air is the only matter. All that is left is breathing in and breathing out.

At mass, Father Mateo was famous for his little stories to try to explain the words of God to the village people. All the Christians in Boma sat together on the sagging benches in the mission to listen as he translated the confusing passages from the Biblia into tales teeming with people just like them. The old priest told them about them they were living in a world without end, Amen. Sundiata now knew, without a doubt, that was true. He was caught up in the passageway called "purgatory". Father Mateo warned his flock about this place many times. He patiently explained it was created by God as punishment for sorry souls who had not been successful in requesting absolution of their forgotten sins from the Virgin. Sundiata knew his transgressions against the Spirit of the Living Water were great but he had no idea of how to be forgiven because he didn't remember which sins he had committed. He'd spent most of the time, since his abduction, trying to pinpoint

exactly what he had done to deserve this punishment with the hope that if he recalled the sin, he might be released from his sentence. He was not a cruel child nor was he selfish. He'd tried his best to obey the commandments taught to him by the priest and his adoptive father, Boubacar. He faithfully went to mass. He repeated his Ave Marias before he went to sleep each night so he would go to heaven when he died. It was evident, though, he'd failed in some important way to protect his immortal soul.

Was there ever an end to this road of water upon which he'd been traveling since he was taken? Was there a place where there awaited a crown of thorns for his head and a wooden cross upon which he would be nailed? From the evidence he'd already gathered, it wouldn't surprise him in the least. Sundiata was expecting it, dreading it, since Father Mateo had been right about purgatory. His biggest regret was that he'd somehow used up all his chances to repent. He simply hadn't expected he would lose his life this quickly.

The kisika in Boma, where he'd lived with the merchant Boubacar, was the only place villagers could buy religious statues and holy relics from distant lands. Boubacar would drag his ink-stained finger across the dotted lines on the parchment map he kept unrolled on the big teakwood table to show Sundiata how far people

traveled to get to them. "Here," tapping on the rust colored dot labeled Ikipita. "This is where they worship their bird gods inside giant triangle-shaped buildings as tall as mountains." Then Boubacar would look up and narrow his eyes to underscore the mysterious part of the story, "Yet, there is not one living soul who knows who built them in the first place. So instead, they believe gods from another world conjured them out of the stars."

He explained to Sundiata that the people who lived at each of the places he pointed to on the map made up their own peculiar beliefs about what sort of god might have been responsible for creating them. Every village had artists who worked diligently to carve likenesses of the god the villagers worshiped from their imaginations. Boubacar believed there was only one power that was both invisible and formless. In some mysterious kind of wizardry, it planted its seed into every thing, from the rocks beneath his feet to the sun above his head. He told Sundiata that men were foolish to try to fashion pretend deities by carving away on all kinds of earthly materials. Yet the fact they attempted to make the gods real fascinated Boubacar all the same. Sundiata spent a long time examining the faces, arms, legs and genitals of the supreme beings dreamed up by the potters and sculptors from those colored dots on the map. He wondered about how each village decided what their

particular god looked like? There must be a very good reason why one tribe of people believed their god had eight blue arms and another that was a man with the head of a hyena.

One of Boubacar's favorite sayings was, "Humans are all baked from the same flour." He would sometimes shorten it to "luzingu lumu" which meant "same flour" in Kikongo, the language of his mother. Once when a rowdy Inglese trader, with a dirty, leather patch over one eye was angry about the price Boubacar was offering for the goods he was selling he screamed, "You mongrel son of a black whore!" He rushed at Boubacar and grabbed his arm. The merchant met his attacker with a *faca pontuda* to his throat drawn expertly from the sheath in his belt.

"Luzingu lumu," Boubacar whispered through clenched teeth in the trader's grimy ear.

Sundiata, who was only about seven years old then, witnessed the scuffle from behind the curtain that separated the front area—where customers and traders milled about—from their private space in the back. Later, worrying for the safety of his guardian, he cried in Boubacar's arms.

Boubacar said, "These men were once little boys, like you, my cub. They travel many weeks from those

different colored dots on the map to bring their goods here, to us, in our kisika, at the center of the world. It is a strange place to them and they are often frightened. That is why they act the way they do.”

He dried the boy’s tears with the sleeve of his kimono, cocked one side of his mouth up, and pushed his felt hat further back on his head. “No one has yet discovered the reason all men were spread out across the map to be separated from each other by oceans and mountains. In spite of that fact, my cub, we’re all luzingu lumu.”

Boubacar had settled on the practice of Christianity because it seemed the most sensible to him. Yesu Kristu was a man, like him who also had a puzzling relationship with his father. He respected Yesu’s extraordinary ability to see through the folly of human beings, especially men. The merchant concocted his own blend of beliefs, borrowing what he liked from his Portuguese father’s Islamic and Catholic rituals and his mother’s Kongo ancestor worship of Nzambi Mpungu.

At the entrance of the shop there was a small, bamboo basket which sat on a Wenge wood table. In it was a tangle of ironwood rosaries, strung with olive wood beads. Sundiata often peeked around the edge of the curtain to watch the local women handle the

rosaries and stroke the smooth surface of the cross. If they lingered long enough and held the beads in a way that demonstrated their devotion to him, Boubacar would raise his forefinger to his nose and tap it gently. This was their silent signal for the boy to descend into the nzo ya ntoto below to retrieve the pale pink and lapis blue stone rosaries and bring them into the light for only the most devout.

The merchandise of greatest value was stored in the nzo ya ntoto. From the most exquisite herbs to the finest ivory pieces, the excavated basement area was reserved for the rarest inventory Boubacar had collected. It was also Sundiata's refuge. His adoptive father told him that was the reason he placed the boy's sleeping mat down there.

"You are by far the best purchase I have ever made, meu filhotinho! My little lion boy!"

Sundiata retreated down into the damp coolness of their ntoto during the hottest part of the Boma summers to hide away. He liked to lay on his mat and drape the cold rosary beads over his face and wind them around his neck.

Perhaps that was one of the serious spiritual crimes for which he was now being punished?

It was also in the shadows, by the flickering light of a candle, where he studied the gruesome injuries dug out of the ivory in the statues of Yesu Kristu stored next to the rosary beads. He would try to figure out which mortal sin was associated with which puncture or slash. Boubacar told him the priests believed the blood of Yesu was imbued with magic so if a person came in contact with even one drop of his blood, it would instantly counteract the ill effects of any sin he committed. Sundiata had stared at the red paint applied to the wounds. He had poked his finger deep into the gouge in between Yesu's bony ribs for good measure. There was a lot of bright crimson color in that particular spot. Of course, now, he realized it hadn't been enough to save him. It was just red paint after all and not a real pardon for the sins he'd committed. Touching the bloody spear hole hadn't saved him.

Boubacar often shooed him away from spying on the interesting characters that passed in and out of the kisika to take up his studies downstairs. The merchant had spent decades, before he bought Sundiata, quietly excavating the nzo ya ntoto under the shop. He quietly removed basket after basket of earth and stealthily dumped them at different places around the jungle. The walls of the ever-widening pit were reinforced with mahogany to support the floor of the shop above as

Boubacar gradually transformed his first mud and wattle hut into the respectable fortress that stood today, finished off with iron bars set into sandstone walls. Boma was a dangerous village with plenty of wicked drifters who would steal anything of value. The ntoto was a cleverly engineered safe space known only to them. That's what they both thought until the night Karim and Samir stole him. Sundiata and Boubacar would die rather than reveal its existence.

When Sundiata was old enough to start asking Boubacar so many questions that he couldn't attend to his business, the merchant created a proper place for him to read and write. A length of wood was arranged over two shipping boxes to serve as his desk. Boubacar supplied him with an oil lamp and made a comfortable seat out of a half barrel stuffed with well-worn tapestry pillows. Descending into the nzo ya ntoto felt like escaping into a world of his own populated only by Sundiata, the characters in the papers the missionaries dropped off and the mythical beings from a place called Rome. The boy would sink into his seat and allow his imagination to be driven by the intricate, color illustrations in the Biblia. His favorite story was the epic fight between the giant called Goliath and the boy named David. It had taken him looking at the graphic picture a few times to fully understand that what David

was holding in his hand was the black curly hair attached to the severed head of the giant. Blood trailed behind the triumphant David as he held high his prize from the battle. He'd won using only a slingshot and a single rock to lay the giant low.

Several times a week, Boubacar expected Sundiata to engage in the more practical task of tallying up his sales of goods by recording them in a leather-bound ledger. After they locked up the kisika for the day and ate their evening meal, he and Boubacar would check his arithmetic for errors. This was their routine. Boubacar had no wife to give him a son of his own to instruct in the art of becoming a merchant. He was teaching Sundiata because one day the shop would be his.

Boubacar would hug his gift of a son and say, "The Creator floated you to me in a basket on the Nzâdi River, cubby boy, just like Moses was found by the pharaoh's daughter in the Nile. Moses was in line for the throne and so are you in line for my kingdom."

Was Sundiata being tormented for a sin he'd committed during the life he'd had before Boubacar made him a Christian? He barely remembered his father and just a bright flash or two of his mother. At least, he thought the memory in his mind of a woman must have

been his mother. Since his capture, he considered the idea that he was being punished for a transgression he'd committed before Boubacar saved his life and made him a Christian. That theory made the most sense.

He had a few real memories of seeing his father while he was fishing. He thought he had been held in the arms of his mother watching as many village men worked together to pull a creature that was much bigger than him out of the river. The echoes of their excited and anxious shouts to each other were still lodged somewhere inside him. The wet scales flashed in the sunlight like hundreds of silver coins as the huge m'benga came up out of the swirling water. It writhed like a snake and its lion-sized teeth snapped to latch onto the first piece of flesh that came close enough to bite.

Sundiata gathered and added up any evidence he could think of that weighted against him just as he had done with the columns of numbers in Boubacar's shop ledger. The unceasing element of water was a key part of the punishment he was now suffering. That much he knew.

Boubacar often recounted the story of Sundiata's "second birth" as he lifted his shoulders and laughed, "I

didn't have any idea what I would do with a little cub like you. But when I looked down into that basket and you raised your skinny little arms for me, I realized my son had arrived."

According to Boubacar's memory, Sundiata was about three years old when a drunk, Portugese slaver stumbled into his shop, took the lid off a bamboo basket and exposed what was huddled inside. As a last resort, he was trying to interest the merchant in buying a tiny child before he gave up and dumped it in the jungle to die or be eaten by animals. The near-toothless purveyor of people had tired of feeding it and didn't have the patience to wait for it to mature into someone he could sell.

"Your second birth was when you emerged from the bottom of a bamboo basket, delivered to this lonely merchant by a man who had willingly traded away his soul to Mammon."

Since the child either wouldn't speak or didn't know the name his parents had called him by, Boubacar decided he would call him "Sundiata" in honor of the king of the Mali Empire. Sundiata means "son of a lion".

"Lions are kings of the jungle but are far wiser than men," Boubacar explained. "Men kill for sport and destroy for spite. The lion only takes what it needs for

itself and its young. You survived those who would destroy you. You have the strength of a lion cub.”

They had lived together inside the trading post kisika for the past seven years and over that time he had repeatedly warned the boy of the real dangers of being recaptured. He was to never leave the kisika without being accompanied by Boubacar. When they went to mass, or occasionally locked up to breathe the air that was unsullied by the odors of the village, Sundiata was dressed in the disguise of a Muslim female to fool the slavers who constantly roamed around the ports of Boma searching for boys to snatch. Boubacar teased Sundiata that he had done such an excellent job of caring for him that he’d become a prime catch now.

“You would fetch a good price my cub! You must be on your guard day and night for the wretched people hunters.”

CHAPTER NINE: THE CROWN OF THORNS

5:26 AM.TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1858. THE LAMAR
PLANTATION WOODYARD.

Although the Ingleses were no longer able to buy and sell Africans legally, Boubacar told him about the metal cages hidden in the jungle behind the kisika holding African captives inside them. Sometimes they would hear the echoes of sorrowful moans in the distance, beyond what they could see from between the bars that were firmly embedded and locked on the shop windows. Boubacar said the people had been captured in tribal wars, as Sundiata, himself, probably had been or they were simply snatched away from their villages by mercenaries who fought for any side that hired them for the money. The slavers randomly grabbed a few of the people they hadn't slaughtered for the same reason. Those unfortunate souls were being hidden away in the cover of the thick jungle so they could be loaded onto the waiting nkanus when the dark came. Dugouts were camouflaged in the heavy foliage on the banks of the Nzâdi, waiting for their cohorts to haul the slaves out of the jungle and transport them to nkanus anchored further down the river. Then those larger, utility nkanus, loaded with ivory, rubber and other goods gathered up from all over Africa unloaded everything into a bigger

nkanu that sailed off to a colored dot on the parchment map that was far away from Boma.

“The huge nkanus are called “ships”,” Boubacar explained. Then he crossed one wrist over another and hooked his thumbs together to form wings with the fingers of his hands.

“This is how the Ingleses and Portuguese nkanu ships fly like birds across the sea on gigantic white mababa ma maswa. The white wings made out of cloth are called “velas” by the Portuguese and the English called them “sails.” Boubacar marked their location in Boma on his map by placing a smooth green stone over it. Then his flapping bird hands came to rest on a tan portion of the map that reminded Sundiata of a chicken with its already-fried drumstick trailing after it.

“The ships fly on their sails here to América do Norte e do Sul where they sell the African merchandise they carried over the oceans to the filhos dos Ingleses. It is an ugly business, cubby.”

As usual, Boubacar had been precisely right. Even though Sundiata obeyed his adopted father and never went out alone, not even the savvy Boubacar would have suspected that the two local boys he had known for years, who he payed to procure goods for him at the docks and supplied their kisika with a daily delivery of

dried fish and fruit would be the ones to rob him of his lion son. Yet it was so.

Karim and Samir, like Boubacar, were very light-skinned with eyes of green and grey. They spoke to Boubacar in the language of their fathers. Sundiata understood most of the words in Portuguese but he also liked the challenge of puzzling out the meaning of new ones when traders came into the kisika to barter. Hiding himself out of sight behind the curtains, he'd listen to their exchanges while trying to guess what manner of exotic wares they had spread out before Boubacar on the teakwood table. Later he'd bother his adoptive father about the words he hadn't figured out until the merchant would smile wearily and finally write them out for Sundiata to study.

Samir was the younger of the two. He might have been only five or six years older than Sundiata. He was well aware that Sundiata lived in the back of the kisika and constantly under the watchful protection of the merchant. His older companion, Karim, was an angry fellow who consistently treated Samir badly. Maybe they were half-brothers or not related at all. Sundiata didn't know exactly where they originally came from. Only that they worked on the docks and were the offspring of some Portuguese sailors and village women, as was Boubacar. Being half-African and half-Ingleses, they

lived in relative safety from being abducted by slavers since, it seemed, they had some sort of common bond and unspoken rules regarding who was for sale and who wasn't.

Sometimes Samir quietly slipped past the curtain to talk to Sundiata about scenes he'd witnessed on the river. Sundiata was always careful to place the rug over the wooden door that led down to the nzo ya ntoto. He took pity on Samir since he was always hungry, finding food and shelter wherever he could around the docks. He tried to teach him to recognize a few words in the books Boubacar loaned him but Samir was too fidgety to sit still and learn. Samir had only one dream and it was the single focus of his being. All he thought about or talked about was climbing onto one of the nkanus he watched sail down the Nzâdi to a place called Banana Point. Samir eavesdropped on the conversations of the sailors and traders passing through Boma. Their stories filled his mind with legends of a heaven where the Nzâdi met the sea and beyond. The men whispered between them about the huge, winged nkanus anchored only a little ways off the shore. The ships were waiting to load up the slaves and goods gathered by the traders from all over Africa. Samir and Karim carefully hid between the clay pots stored next to the brothel that held palm oil to listen in on the sailor's fantastic stories about the

golden lands where the winged nkanu ships finally landed. They heard the men brag about the great fortunes they'd already made and the piles of money they were going to make in the future in "America". In Samir's imagination, this country was a paradise with land free for the taking, decorated in cool, blue lakes and full of delicious things to eat everywhere you looked. It was a place where any man had the chance to be a king if he chose to. Samir and Karim were convinced that their lives would be perfect in the world that waited across the water. It consumed their thoughts day and night.

All a man needed was to have the courage to start the journey and the stamina to live through the difficult crossing. "América do Norte" was where Samir was certain he would never be hungry or be abused by the sailors for their pleasure ever again.

Only two days before they took him, Samir had slipped past the curtain to outline the plans with Sundiata that he and Karim had made for leaving Boma. They had gained passage aboard one of the giant nkanus from América do Norte that was waiting off Banana Point. A sailor who had stopped in Boma to load up his river vessel with goods promised to ferry them down to Banana Point if they could deliver to him

something that was more valuable and rare than just palm oil or snake skins.

Samir tried very hard to convince Sundiata to come along with them, reiterating the stories of the boundless riches that awaited them there. Sundiata watched Samir's vision drift off from the present moment to glimpses the treasures he believed were waiting for him in América do Norte. Sundiata agreed with Samir that his upcoming adventure would be exciting and hoped everything he wished for in that place would come true. He did his best to feign disappointment that he was not free to leave the adopted father who had saved him from death. He must stay and pay his debt if he were to be an upright, Christian man.

The truth was that Sundiata wanted nothing more than to know everything about the thousands of marvels safely nestled inside the reinforced walls of their trading post *kisika*. Why would he choose to expose himself to the thousands of dangers his adoptive father had warned him about? Why would he face the terrors he had read about in holy books when all the wonders of the world were delivered to their *kisika* everyday in baskets and boxes?

He sent Samir on his way by wishing him sincere good luck on his travels.

Lying on the cold deck of this paddle wheel nkanu, Sundiata, once again, ran the details of his abduction through his mind. A rough hand was clasped over his mouth and nose as the point of a knife blade was pressed into his back. Karim navigated the stairs silently as the stunned Sundiata was swiftly dragged up and out the back door. Once away from the kisika, they crammed him inside a large woven basket and Karim made the warning clear to him: if Sundiata made even a tiny sound, the blade against his back would pierce through his heart to end him. The finish of his happy life had fallen upon him like a reckless timber from the sky. As Sundiata was loaded onto the waiting dugout, he could only make sense of the situation as a nightmare he was dreaming. This feeling of his mind being detached from his body was familiar to him when he dreamed. He observed himself being loaded onto the craft from a vantage point located far above the basket. From then on, he drifted in and out of his skin trying to intentionally wake himself up so he could climb the stairs to sit by Boubacar's bed as he often had done when he had nightmares. But the prickly, damp vines that stunk of hot fish scalded him with the reality that he was not on his mat in the cool basement surrounded by the safety he had come to take for granted. He prayed as he'd never done before with more focus and more

contriteness. He beseeched Jesu to wake up and come with his mother, Maria, to help him devise some sort of plan for escape.

When daylight finally began to stream through the cracks in the basket, the lid was removed. A bearded man, with a hat made from the hide of a crocodile, stared down at Sundiata. Then he roughly dragged him up by the neck of his sleeping shirt as if he weighed no more than a cat. The pirate's beard was matted against his head and appeared to be some form of fungus or mold clinging to his scarred face. He spun Sundiata toward the back of the nkanu so he could get a good look at the faces of Karim and Samir. They were looking back at him without the support of their shoulders. Their heads had been hacked from their bodies and propped up on what was left of their necks with expressions that shot both stupid surprise and complete regret back at Sundiata.

Numbed to his core by that impossible sight, time came to an end for Sundiata. His eyelids were paralyzed as he watched the crocodile-skin hat man lob Samir's head over the side of the nkanu like it was no more than a bad coconut. Then he scrambled across the deck to catch Karim's lifeless head as it rolled toward Sundiata before launching it into the water to keep Samir company. After that, Sundiata

acknowledged there were divisions between dark and light. Between terror and relief. Sickness and hunger. Thirst and death. Yet all the sensations that had once been distinct were shredded. In the shelter of Boubacar's shop he was whole. Now he was torn into pieces and those scraps floated along on one ceaseless stream of water that delivered the small nkanus to the big ones.

His mind wriggled around in this pocket of his memory over and over because inside there, he still believed, there existed a crevice where he would grow to be a man under the protection of Boubacar. He would still learn the languages his adoptive father so effortlessly juggled, switching from the guttural patois of the grizzled traders to the sharp tongue clicks of the finely dressed wives of tribal chiefs. He would once again watch as their rainbow-colored turbans, wrapped so high that they brushed the lintel when they stepped through the shop door, bobbed while they prattled and gossiped. He would still discover the value of every single item on every shelf and in every box. He would know which merchandise was desired by whom before they even knew themselves. He would be the one to watch over Boubacar as he grew older. He would protect him and they would piece together the stories of the world the old man had heard from all the traders

who traveled from the colored dots on the big map on the table.

Sundiata's entire universe still existed inside Boubacar's mud walls. He had never wished for anything more than the life he was already living, never imagined leaving the man he loved, maybe even more than his real father. Why hadn't the Virgin warned him before Samir and Karim carried him off? He could have called out to Boubacar if he'd only had a moment's warning.

He wished his head had been tossed over the side into the Nzâdi River with those of Samir and Karim. It turned out they had been the fortunate ones for this most surely was the hell for sinners Father Mateo warned him about. Better to be a head eternally in search of your body than writhing between the half-dead, locked in chains slick with vomit and shit in the steamy guts of a winged nkanu ship. And now waiting, as the frost crawled upon your skin, to find out what new torments his unrecognized sins had in store for him.

Perhaps Samir and Karim would be waiting to meet him when he reached the end of the water. Maybe they were already crucified on a wooden cross. Surely, they'd committed even worse sins than Sundiata ever had when they stole him away from Boubacar. They had

to bear the responsibility of sentencing an old man to a lonely death with no wife or son to care for him.

Imagining Boubacar dying alone was almost worse than the weeks of torture the boy had endured.

“We’re all we’ve got my cub,” Boubacar would say as he lay himself down on his bed of old tapestry at the end of the day.

“But that is more than enough. Go on to bed. Fall asleep with the name of the Virgin on your lips and we will meet again in the morning.”

Some combination of those were his final words to Sundiata each night before the boy would wander through the darkness of the shop, finally free to run his hands over the shapes of the objects displayed for sale on the wooden shelves. Each night he double-checked every iron lock on the windows and both doors before going down the steps into the ntoto. His mat was nestled in-between the pots filled with the fine, expensive oils like Frankincense and under a hanging shelf where the delicate spices that couldn’t stand the heat were tied in bundles. Their mingled scent signaled the smell of sleep to him.

Samir and Karim were already hiding back there, in the darkness, waiting for him to finish saying his prayers and drift off. He could never figure out when they’d

slipped into the kisika but they must have lain in wait for many hours.

Sundiata was lost in wondering if his kidnappers must first retrieve their heads before they could stop swimming around and move on to a proper hell when the paddle wheel slowed down to a stop. The mumbles of the captives lying close to him lightly ruffled throughout the dark cabin and alerted him. They stole any opportunity to stretch or change positions slightly while the white Bazungu were otherwise occupied with the workings of the vessel. When this kind of nkanu stopped, wood was brought aboard to be burned by fires of the rotating mechanism that scooped the river water through it. In some way the smoke fed the paddlewheels moving the nkanu forward. Sundiata had watched closely as two men, one white and one brown, fed wood into a box that glowed orange with the heat of the fires.

Whenever the wheel stopped turning completely, the white Bazungu walked between the Africans on the deck with their guns out of their belts and held in their hands. Any slight movement or sound made by one of the many captives surrounding him in the dark resulted in broken fingers or toes when the wheel was turning again, the screams would be covered up by the slap, slap sound of the paddles. The slaves were repeatedly

warned to lay as close to the floor as possible since they'd boarded this vessel from the beach where they'd been put out of the big winged nkanu.

Inside the belly of that ship, Sundiata had been iron roped to a man who had cried for a long time before he finally stopped. Sundiata counted the passing of the days and nights by the rhythm of the poor man's sobs. His heart even began to beat along in time with the cadence of his bawling. Sundiata had tried to comfort him but his response came back in a language so foreign that there was no way to figure out what he was saying. It wasn't until the bazungas unshackled them to lead them up from inside the belly of the winged nkanu and into the light that he finally got a good look at the man's face.

Burned onto his cheek was a mark that resembled bird wings. All his teeth were filed to a point like those of a cat. Even though he was certain his chain-mate was a full grown man, he stood no taller than Sundiata was at ten years old. The boy, along with a group of about fifty other kidnapped Africans, saw the outside expanse in which the winged nkanu was flying. In every direction was blue water that washed up into blue sky until Sundiata believed the ship was floating inside a gigantic blue bottle. This realization shattered the stories the priest told him about the fires of hell. Now he knew

those came later. All Father Mateo had gotten right was the stifling, dead air inside the ship where they all would soon be chained to the walls again. Close enough, Father Mateo.

Up on the outside deck, when his sobbing chain-mate clamped his lips closed and refused to eat, the Bazungu put a metal funnel into his mouth. They forced mashed rice into his throat until he swallowed. It was no use though. Almost as quickly as it had gone in, it came spewing out again causing the poor fellow to start wailing once more. Another captive tried to calm him by patting him firmly on the back, but two of the white Bazungu grabbed the sad man's elbows, dragged him to the edge of the craft and threw him over the side without another word between them.

Every single African who witnessed this event, up in the blue light surrounded by blue water, ate anything that was put before them. Not a one of them cared to find out what greater horror might await the soul who was tossed over the edge of the giant winged nkanu ship.

This paddlewheel vessel was not moving and there was no wood being loaded onto it. This was a different kind of stop than all the others along this river they'd been traveling for the past two days. Sundiata sensed

the tension of the people he lying all around him. When they had been taken off the winged nkanu in the night, where the sea ended in a river of sand, they'd been allowed to walk without chain ropes and sit next to a fire pit. That was the first time, and the last time, Sundiata felt a sprig of hope. Maybe the story Samir had told him about the land across the great water being a promise land for those strong enough to survive the perils of the journey to the other side might be true. Maybe Samir and Karim had been trying to take him along with them as a friend but they'd been killed for spilling the secret.

There were holes in this explanation but perhaps the worst was over. He'd passed the test. The Africans had been allowed to wash the filth from their bodies with clean water. A white medicine Bazungu looked in his mouth, his ears, his eyes and all over his body and after being naked for months, they were given garments made out of rough cloth to cover themselves. Sundiata started to believe the unspeakable torments were over. His hair had grown back after being shaved off by the crocodile-hat pirate on his dirty nkanu. That had happened right before the boy was tied by a rope, hoisted up on the deck of the winged ship and burned by a hot metal stick on his back. Maybe the fact that he survived at all was evidence that he'd receive some reward in this foreign place.

On that sandy island, several African men approached in a wagon filled with unshucked corn and dumped it all out on the ground. It was the most food they'd seen since they'd been swallowed up by the ship at Banana Point. Several of the captives heard one of the African men by the wagon speaking their home language. They ran to him, kneeling and crying. Sundiata had no idea what he said to them. It was not Portuguese or Kiboma or Kikongo. They seemed to calm down a little bit as he spoke to them. Eating his fill of the corn, Sundiata had even started to think he might be able to send for Boubacar, although he knew the old man wouldn't survive the torturous passage winged ship flying through the blue bottle world. If he discovered he had to go back to Africa the same way he got to America to get Boubacar, Sundiata decided he would find a way to kill himself as soon as possible. That is if he wasn't already dead.

Drifting out of the present was a recent skill Sundiata had honed to the point of being an expert. He learned how to float his mind back across the sea and back up the Nzâdi River to the banks of Boma. He would use the roots poking out of the mud to hoist himself up until he saw the village and run until he was through the doors of the shop. He wouldn't care who saw him or if fancy women were shocked to see a

naked boy streak past them. Boubacar would stop whatever bargaining he was in the midst of to embrace Sundiata. With tears streaming down his face he would wrap the boy in the bright red and yellow fabric lying folded by the window as he thanked Jesu and the Virgin for the safe return of his little lion boy.

A kick to his ribs brought him back to his current fate. It was not as hard a kick as had been delivered to his body before by the Bazungu, but it carried enough force to drag him out of the bliss of Boubacar's embrace. Sundiata realized that most of the other Africans were up on their feet although in the light of the oil lamp swinging back in forth in the hands of the fire-feeding man, he saw about a dozen bodies were still lying, motionless, on the deck. One of them was a girl about his age named Sazi who appeared to have no life in her. Next to her was a tall boy Sundiata had tried to befriend but because the fellow never made any sound, they had devised a language of hand signs to talk to each other. Neither of them roused. Sundiata decided to go to where they were lying using a sideways maneuver that appeared to the bazungas as if he was following their commands while he was actually inching toward the motionless children.

The Bazungu barked sharp words at the captives as they pushed the frightened people toward the edge

of the wheeled nkanu. It was black dark in the distance beyond but the voices of America men came echoing back in response. When he reached the place where Sazi lay, Sundiata could tell she was unconscious. Inside this white Ingleses prison nkanu hell, having a body that didn't move meant even if the soul wasn't gone from it yet or not, it was vanished from sight.

Sundiata crouched down to pick the girl up. She was hot with fever and so light that when he lifted her in his arms, she weighed no more than a basket of grain he'd often brought up from their nzo ya ntoto. Her skin warmed the chill out of Sundiata's bare arms.

His silent friend opened his eyes to a squint. Sundiata motioned with his head for the boy to pull up and lean on him too. Together they melted into the larger group now being herded toward the darkness at the edge of the vessel.

CHAPTER TEN: AIN'T SEEN THE LIKE OF IT
5:43 AM. TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1858. THE LAMAR
PLANTATION WOODYARD.

“You’re sittin’ on the front row, Walter!”

Walter’s father slapped his son on the back somewhat softer than usual as he was almost swooning with the gravity of the event unfolding before them. “His’try happ’nin right there boy!”

Walter thought his father was close to tears. Something he’d never witnessed during his entire nine years of interactions with him.

“They ain’t been a load of real Af’cans come here since my granddaddy’s day.” Walter’s father scratched one of the larger callouses on his forefinger over the stubble poking out of the red speckles on his chin. “‘Bout ’26, I reckon,” his watery, blue eyes crawled up to look towards his receding hairline as it attempted to locate the date he was referencing and dig it out as evidence that what they were witnessing was, indeed, a historical occurrence they were sharing with their ancestors. When he was satisfied with his findings, he corroborated the veracity of them. “Er, right along that time anyways.”

Walter squinted his eyes so he wouldn’t miss even one second of this momentous occurrence. But all he could make out in the darkness of this early morning

was a few ghostly outlines of shoulders and heads that were illuminated by the oil lamps. It was just about the same time as he saw the first few heads of the Af'cans topping the hill when a crippling stench hit him. He instinctively covered his nose with the crook of his elbow as his stomach folded over on itself.

Walter's father sharply pulled the boy's arm away from his face. "No son, don't you hide from the smell!" Walter held his breath anyway as the heat and steam of his father's breath bubbled up on his face. "Ya gotta use times like these to get ya-self strong. Them slaves been penned up like animals. Animals stink. Human animals reek more than any pig or pole cat yu'll ever cross."

Walter's father put his wet lips up against the boy's cold ear. "Listen here boy. If ya ever gonna be a man that's gonna get anywheres in life, ya gotta be able to put up with the stink of humans. Don't matter if they're livin' or dead. Time the smell don't make ya retch yer guts out, ya know ya become a man."

He pulled back quick once he saw Walter was going to be sick.

Walter didn't say anything back to his father. He was grateful just to be able to jerk his head quickly away from him and vomit behind the stump he was seated on. His father snorted as he slapped him firmly on his back.

“Ain’t no shame in it boy. One a these days it won’t bother ya no more than hitchin’ up yer horse.”

Walter was pretty sure he’d never be able to get used to the stench of penned up people or dead ones neither.

Sundiata had never heard a whisper as loud as the finger-breaking bazunga insisted on using when he talked to the captives.

“Git on up there, you jungle varmits!”

Sundiata had become so acquainted with this red-faced, bone-snapping bazunga that he could tell when the creature merely turned his head towards them. If one of the captured people cried or made a sound that rankled him, he stomped towards them, put his red hands around the backs of their necks and held their face hard to the wooden floor of the paddle nkanu.

Now he whisper-shouted, and although Sundiata couldn’t see his face in the shadows of the paddle nkanu, he knew exactly which shade of red this bazunga’s skin was turning. Sundiata and the boy who did not speak supported Sazi’s limp body between them. The darkness of the early morning helped them conceal how sick she actually was. When Sundiata had been ailing back at home, Boubacar had sent for the most skilled healer woman in Boma. Her name was Nyoka Aissatou. Once he’d been burning with a fever.

That night, as he lay in Boubacar's big bed, covered with a tower of imported tapestries, Sundiata had been shivering more than he was on this cold morning on this desolate hill by the river. Nyoka Aissatou wrapped his chest with sina leaves soaked in kinkeliba. He wished he'd pretended to be sick more since Nyoka Aissatou always brought her granddaughter, Amisi Kesi, with her when she was called to heal. Amisi Kesi was nearly the same age as Sundiata. The sparkle in her eyes always made Sundiata think of the way the water droplets looked to him on the leaves when the sun shone on them after a rain.

"Bakulu, be na nge ma lukunga, be na nge ma lukaya," Nyoka Aissatou chanted as the smoke from the white mpemba clay burned on the sacred healing alter she lit in the brass bowl she brought with her. She once spent some time explaining to Sundiata that the words she recited were specialized and mighty prayers incanted aloud to get the attention of particular ancestors who helped her heal her patients. These beings were known as the Bakulu. They had been alive as humanpeople once, living their lives with kindness and purpose. When they died, they became the holy departed ones and constantly floated around her in another, invisible world. They were just waiting to help her if she sang the songs that called to them while

burning the mpemba clay in the manner and order she had learned from her own mother. Amisi Kesi assisted Nyoka Aissatou during the healing ceremony so she would learn and one day step into her grandmother's role in the village.

"Bakulu be na nge, sambila beto!" The girl would say in response to strengthen her mother's prayers for the holy ancestors to intercede.

As Sundiata pulled both the silent boy and Sazi up the slippery mud hill, he wondered if he could summon the Bakulu himself. He wanted to plead to them to bring an end to their hellish journey. Either by good fortune or by quick death. He quietly intoned as much of the prayer as he could remember as the salt of his tears found their way to his tongue.

"Bakulu, be na nge ma lukunga, be na nge ma lukaya. Bakulu be na nge, sambila beto!"

Suddenly a pain blazed into Sundiata's face just above his left eye, illuminating his brain with a light as bright at a Boma morning. He lost his footing and tumbled backwards, over the edge of the wooden plank they'd been using to get from the paddle nkanu to the bank of the river.

He was the happiest he'd been since he lay in the cool, dampness of the nyo ntoto, with the pink quartz and blue lapis stone rosaries draped over his face. He'd

meet with Jesu and whichever Bakulu spirit who had answered his song. Maybe he had thrust his finger far enough into the wooden slash in Jesu Cristo's wound. "Shut up yer incantations ya godless heathen," the red-faced bazunga snarled.

Sundiata recognized he had fallen in the water. Black water that didn't seem wet at all. It was the coldest, the softest bed he'd ever slept upon. He could stay here. He would rest here for a long time. His death was to be delivered by drowning.

"This is perfect."

Gratefully, he sank into the gelatin arms of the mud and water, cautiously waiting to see which one of the gods on Boubacar's shelf came to meet him.

But he was rising again toward the surface. Sundiata was being pulled back up. He kicked his feet and tried to find a big rock or a branch to wrap his toes around. He wouldn't go back. Not now. In spite of it all, he was being raised by the neck of his potato sack shirt exactly as he had been lifted out of the basket by the moldy-headed pirate.

Within seconds, his legs dangled in the air as his lungs tried to take in air without his permission.

"Git back up here you son-of-a-black-bitch," spat out the white bazunga holding him aloft like a smelly fish.

Even though Sundiata didn't know exactly what the man said, it entered his ears like the snarl of a dog or the grunt of an angry sow. He understood that the words meant that the beautiful promise of death the Bakulu had dangled so close was now being denied to him.

In this moment, the only question on Sundiata's mind was, "what manner of gods did these bazungas believe in that every supplication they uttered was instantly granted?"

It was those gods, whatever their color and whatever shape they took, were the only ones he wanted to offer up prayers to from now on.

CHARACTERS PRESENT IN THIS TELLING:

All enslaved characters in *The Puzzle Jug* bear the names of real people recorded in the December 15, 1862, inventory of Thomas Gresham Lamar II's estate.

HANNIBAL — (1850 - 1943) An eight-year-old boy standing at the threshold between childhood and manhood. He has been chosen as the bearer of a philosophy that is the bedrock of the Lamar Swamp Plantation Village.

“GRANNY” VENUS — (1768 -) The matriarch of the Lamar Swamp Plantation Village who has shaped the deeply connected character of the people over nearly a century of memory and ceremony.

NED, GILBERT, JACK and JAMES — Hannibal's “uncles”. Men who may or may not be connected to him by blood but who serve to carry out the rituals of independence as Granny Venus has taught them over their decades of life on the Swamp Plantation Village.

HANNIBAL'S MOTHER — She is deceased but appears to Hannibal either in his dreams, imagination or as a spirit to comfort and encourage him.

THOMAS PETERS — (1738 - 1792) Thomas Peters was a Black Loyalist who came through South Carolina.

He became a politician and one of the "Founding Fathers" of the nation of Sierra Leone in West Africa.

GRANNY MASSEY — Her name is listed alongside Venus' name in the December 15, 1962, inventory of Thomas Lamar's Swamp Plantation Village after his death.

AMOS — Amos is the boy who was chosen six years before Hannibal to be mentored to undergo The Changing Ceremony. Unfortunately, he was not able to complete the entire transformational process.

CALEB — Caleb was the last boy who successfully came through The Changing Ceremony nine years prior to the Independence Celebration in 1856, He is 18 years old and one of the transformed "men" standing at the pit that Hannibal recognizes from the Swamp Plantation Village.

AN — An is listed as one of the house servants on the Thomas Lamar Inventory Papers of December 15, 1856. She helps to guide Hannibal to his place to wait for Thomas Lamar's addition to the final part of The Changing Ceremony.

JUNY — Juny is also listed as one of the house servants on the Thomas Lamar Inventory Papers of December 15, 1856. She is with An at the plantation

house, Woodlawn, to meet Hannibal and direct him to his place to wait for Thomas Lamar.

THOMAS LAMAR (1826 -1862) The current master of Woodlawn Plantation. He has inherited the land from several generations of men before him and believes himself to be a steward of the previous order.

SARAH DUNBAR LAMAR (1828 - 1904) Married to Thomas. She is, presently, tortured by the ability of her body to give new life and considering that the recent loss of the child she loved may destroy her.

FRANCES DUNBAR (1804 - 1872) Mother of Sarah Lamar.

WILLIAM GREGG (1800 - 1867)

Industrialist, silversmith and state representative for Edgefield County for one term. He imagined he could revolutionize the backward ideas of slavery, while failing to see his participation in the embedded system.

GOVERNOR JAMES ADAMS (1812 - 1861) The 66th governor of South Carolina from 1854 to 1856. He called, publicly, for the revival of the African Slave Trade into South Carolina in 1856.

RICHARD YEADON (1802 - 1870) Lawyer, turned editor of the Charleston Courier. Outspoken opponent to South Carolina nullification and secession. He was a

state representative for a Charleston district at the same time as his friend, William Gregg.

SUNDIATA — A 10 year old boy ripped from his beloved adopted father, Boubacar, and home in Boma, Africa. During his horrific trip across the Atlantic Ocean in the belly of the Wanderer, and later on the steamboat to the Lamar Swamp Plantation, he attempts to save his sanity as all meaning - and time itself - have disappeared.

FATHER MATEO — Village priest in Boma who is kind but taught the stories in the Bible as literal truth to his congregation. As a result, Sundiata believes his capture and bondage into slavery is his punishment for an unremembered sin.

BOUBACAR — Merchant who owns the biggest, and most successful, trading post in Boma, Africa. He rescued Sundiata by buying him from a slave runner who was about to dispose of the child. Boubacar became an adoptive father and mentor to Sundiata and was educating him to take over his trading business. Boubacar is a man who understands the world through trade and a compassionate philosophy about its shared humanity.

SAMIR — An orphaned boy who, with Karim, survives on the fringes of the coastal village of Boma. Samir is close to Sundiata's age and tries to convince him to run away to America with him.

KARIM — An older orphaned boy of the docks. Possibly the older brother of Samir. He makes a deal with a nefarious slaverunner to deliver Sundiata to him in return for his and Samir's passage on the Wanderer to America.

NYOKA AISSATOU — Bantu healer summoned by Boubacar to help Sundiata when he was ill with a fever in Boma.

AMISI KESI — Granddaughter of Nyoka Aissatou. She accompanied her grandmother and recited prayers during her healing rituals.

MOLDY-HAIRED SLAVE RUNNER — Ruthless man who talks Samir and Karim into kidnapping Sundiata and then kills them. He delivers Sundiata to the Wanderer slavers.

WALTER — A nine-year-old white boy brought to the banks of the Savannah River by his father to watch the African captives be unloaded at the Lamar steamboat wharf.

WALTER'S FATHER — A thirty-something, southern farmer who is excited to have secret information about the arrival of the Wanderer captives in Horse Creek Valley.

RED-FACED Bazungu — A cruel white slaver who enforces a cadre of punishments aboard the Steamboat Augusta as it travels up the Savannah River carrying captives from the sea to the Lamar Swamp Plantation.

THE SILENT BOY — One of the captured children Sundiata has met since the landing of the Wanderer at Jekyll Island. The two communicate through a system of signs since neither speaks the other's language.

SAZI — A 13 or 14 year old African captive who is fully unconscious as the Steamboat carrying the captives docks at the Lamar Plantation woodyard. The Silent Boy and Sundiata try to protect her from being "disposed of" by carrying her limp body between them.

CHARACTERS REFERENCED IN THIS TELLING

BLACK JACK — Black Jack is an enslaved ancestor from Africa who was brought to the Lamar Plantation in the late 1700s. His ceremonies, name and teachings are deliberately preserved by the Uncles to be incorporated into the final part of The Changing Ceremony.

OLD JOE — The recently deceased Uncle who lead the chanting and order of the Independence portion of The Changing Ceremony.

MR. AND MRS. PICKENS — At the 1856 Lamar Plantation 4th of July picnic, Francis Pickens, the future secessionist governor of the State of South Carolina, and his second wife, Marion, are recognized as honored guests by Thomas Lamar.

SENATOR HAMMOND AND CATHERINE HAMMOND — At the 1856 Lamar Plantation 4th of July picnic, Francis Pickens, the Senator John Henry Hammond (“Cotton is king”) and his wife, Catherine, are recognized as honored guests by Thomas Lamar.

MR. BLANCHARD — Following the War of 1812, Jacob Gregg could not longer afford to support young William and apprenticed him to his friend, Mr. Blanchard, a master watchmaker in Virginia.

GENERAL JAMES JONES (1805 - 1865) Brother-In-Law of William Gregg who was a partner in his first mill venture in Vaucluse mills.

MARINA JONES GREGG (1811 - 1899) Married to William Gregg and sister to General James Jones. She is ultimately the grounding force in William Gregg's life who supports his dream of building Graniteville and the mill village powered by Horse Creek.

MINKO CHOBA — In the Chickasaw language, minko' (often spelled minko) is the traditional title for a leader or person of high rank within the community. Minko Choba, is the legendary chief who traded an ancient spear point for a Spanish dollar, also known as pieces of eight, from the first Thomas Lamar in the 1600s. Over the centuries, the ceremonial trading of the two objects merged into certain holiday celebrations.

ROBBIE LAMAR (1854 - 1856) Deceased son of Sarah and Thomas Lamar.

JACOB GREGG — William Gregg's uncle under whose care he comes when his parents die and leave him orphaned. Uncle Jacob teaches William watchmaking and silversmithing. He buys a mill in 1812 which inspires William's desire to create his perfect version of a mill village.

J.J. COHEN — A merchant who had a shop close to William Gregg's silversmith establishment on King's Street in Charleston. He crafted both the suit and the boots Gregg's is wearing to the congressional meeting in November, 1856 in Columbia, SC,

SPECIALIZED TERMS IN THIS PART OF THE STORY:

KISISAGE:

A sacred bundle carried and protected within the Swamp Plantation Village. It holds objects whose meaning comes from memory, ancestry and the ceremonies in which the bundle is used.

KISI / KISI BAG:

A small protective bundle containing objects believed to carry spiritual power. Within the Swamp Village, the bag connects its bearer to the ancestors and to teachings preserved across generations.

EFO TETE:

A leafy green vegetable, similar to spinach or amaranth, used in West African cooking and healing traditions.

BUCKRA:

A word used in Gullah and other African American speech for a white person, particularly one associated with wealth, authority or the slaveholding class.

THE CHANGING CEREMONY:

The Swamp Village ceremony through which a chosen boy is tested, instructed and recognized as a man. It preserves the teachings of Black Jack and prepares each generation to carry the community's philosophy forward.

THE LIBERTY CEREMONY:

The final portion of The Changing Ceremony, performed alongside the plantation's Fourth of July celebration. While the Lamars celebrate the liberty of white Americans, the people of the Swamp Village enact their own understanding of independence, memory and responsibility.

FAWOHODIE:

An Akan Adinkra symbol representing freedom, independence and emancipation. Its teaching is expressed in the phrase “Fawohodie ne obre na enam” —freedom comes with responsibilities and struggle.

MAMI WATA:

A powerful water spirit found in many African and African diasporic traditions. She may bring beauty, wealth, healing or protection, but can also represent danger, seduction and the unpredictable power of water.

LEGHORN HAT:

A hat made from fine, pale plaited straw originally associated with the Italian port of Leghorn, now called Livorno. Such hats were fashionable in Europe and America during the nineteenth century.

SHTIVL:

A Yiddish word for a boot or heavy shoe covering part of the leg.

GUTTA-PERCHA:

A tough, rubber-like material made from the hardened

sap of trees native to Southeast Asia. During the nineteenth century, it was used for items including tool handles, walking sticks, ornaments and electrical insulation.

HUZZAS:

Loud cries of celebration, approval or triumph, similar to “hurrahs.”

WENGE:

A large tree native to Central and West Africa whose dense, dark wood is valued for carving, furniture and ceremonial objects.

AVE MARIAS:

Prayers to the Virgin Mary. The name comes from the Latin opening meaning “Hail, Mary.”

YESU KRISTU / JESU CRISTO:

Names for Jesus Christ spoken in different languages encountered around Boma. “Yesu Kristu” is used in several African languages influenced by Christian missions; “Jesu Cristo” reflects a Portuguese form.

FILHOS DOS INGLESES:

Portuguese for “children” or “sons of the English.” The phrase may also refer more broadly to the descendants of English-speaking foreigners.

AMÉRICA DO NORTE:

Portuguese for “North America.”

AMÉRICA DO SUL:

Portuguese for “South America.”

KIBOMA:

A name connected to Boma and used to express belonging to, or identification with, that place.

BAKULU, BE NA NGE MA LUKUNGA, BE NA NGE MA LUKAYA:

An appeal to the ancestral spirits to remain with a person through the waters and across the lands.

BAKULU BE NA NGE, SAMBILA BETO:

“Ancestors, be with us and pray for us.” An invocation asking the departed to remain near and intercede for the living.

MASSA:

A spoken form of “master” used for a white male enslaver or another white man exercising authority. Its appearance in the story reflects the language imposed by slavery, not affection or willing respect.

MISSES:

A spoken form of “mistress” or “Mrs.,” used for a white woman who held authority within a slaveholding household.

CHILE:

A spoken form of “child.”

YOUNGUNS:

A spoken form of “young ones,” meaning children or young people.

POLEBOAT:

A shallow-draft riverboat moved by people pushing long poles against the riverbed. Poleboats carried passengers and freight along inland waterways before and alongside steamboat travel.

PATOIS:

A regional or community form of speech shaped by the blending of languages, pronunciations and local expressions. The word was often used by outsiders to describe speech they considered different from a formal or dominant language..

Bazungu (pl.):

A word used by Sundiata and Boubacar to name the white men who hunted, captured and trafficked human beings. Not a formal term from any single dialect. It referred not simply to Europeans but to a specific kind of man who moved along the rivers and coasts, taking people as cargo. It means both hunter and pirate to them.

BAKULU:

The Bakulu are ancestral spirits found in the religious traditions of Bantu-speaking peoples of Central and West Africa, particularly among groups like the Bakongo people of the Congo region. The Bakulu are the spirits

of deceased ancestors. They exist in the realm of the dead but maintain a connection to the living, particularly their descendants. They act as intermediaries between the living and higher spiritual forces.

FACA PONTUDA: Portuguese words meaning “pointed knife” or “sharp-pointed knife”.

INGLESE/INGLESES: White people who originated in one of the European countries. Also used to describe Americans or mostly light-skinned traders or travelers.

KIMONO: The loose, robe-like garment Boubacar wears. He acquired it through one of the trading shipments that passed through Boma and adopted the style as his own.

KISIKA: The word used by Sundiata and Boubacar to refer to the trading post in which they worked and lived.

LUZINGU LUMU: The phrase Boubacar used to explain to Sundiata that all people are “baked from the same flour”. It meant to him that everyone is the same inside and shaped by their particular cultural influences and specific life experiences.

MAMMON: In biblical tradition, the embodiment of wealth and greed, often treated as a false god that draws devotion away from what is sacred.

MBENGA: A large, predatory river fish of the Congo, feared for its powerful body and rows of sharp, lion-like teeth.

MEU FILHOTINHO: Portuguese for “my little child,” a tender term of affection used to express care, protection and deep familial love.

NZAMBI MPUNGU: The supreme creator god in Kongo cosmology, the source of all life and the spiritual force that governs the universe.

NKANU: A word Boubacar, used, drawn from a blending of tongues he had heard along the coast near Boma, to name the great foreign vessels. It was not from any single language, but shaped in the crossings of trade, capture, and rumor. Sundiata took up the word from him. An nkanu was not simply a ship, but a moving enclosure that carried the taken away from their land. In their use, the word held both the vessel itself and the fate bound to it.

LOCATIONS MENTIONED IN THIS SECTION OF THE STORY:

BANANA POINT (1858): A river port near the mouth of the Congo River where ocean vessels, traders and human cargo entered and departed the African interior.

BOMA (1858): A river port town on the Congo River and a center of regional trade where European and African merchants exchanged goods and the illegal traffic in enslaved people continued through its networks.

IKIPITA: A word used to point out distant lands on a map, spoken by Boubacar as he showed Sundiata the faraway country of Egypt.

NZO YA NTOTO: The sacred earth in Kongo belief—the living ground that holds the ancestors and binds the physical world to the spirit world. Boubacar also used it as the name for the large, hidden space he spent twenty years excavating beneath the trading post, where he kept his most valuable merchandise.

NZÂDI (1858): The Kongo name for the great river known to Europeans as the Congo. Meaning “river,” or “the river that swallows other rivers,” **Nzâdi** carried people, goods and human lives between the African interior and the Atlantic world.

LAMAR SWAMP PLANTATION: The Lamar family’s plantation in South Carolina and the principal setting of

this telling, where the lives of the Lamar family and the people they enslaved remain bound together.

THE SWAMP PLANTATION VILLAGE / SWAMP

VILLAGE: The community of cabins occupied by the enslaved families of Lamar Swamp Plantation—a place of labor and confinement, but also of kinship, memory and ceremony.

WOODLAWN PLANTATION: A neighboring plantation whose owners, workers and social gatherings connect it to the people and events of Lamar Swamp Plantation.

WOODLAWN BARBECUE PIT: The outdoor cooking ground at Woodlawn Plantation where meat was prepared over an open pit for large gatherings.

HORSE CREEK: A tributary of the Savannah River that runs through the Horse Creek Valley and connects the plantations and mill communities of the surrounding countryside.

STORM BRANCH CREEK: A smaller waterway in the Horse Creek region that serves as a natural landmark through the wooded countryside.

THE BELL ROAD: A local road traveled between the plantations, settlements and waterways of the Horse Creek region.

GRANITEVILLE: A South Carolina mill village established along Horse Creek, where the growing

textile industry brought the machinery and discipline of industrial labor into the plantation countryside.

COLUMBIA: The capital of South Carolina and the center of the state's political life, where the arguments over slavery, secession and Southern power gathered force.

SOUTH CAROLINA STATEHOUSE: The seat of South Carolina's government in Columbia, where the state's lawmakers have debated and shaped the policies that affected both free and enslaved people.

THE STEAMBOAT *AUGUSTA*: A riverboat carrying passengers, freight and news along the Savannah River, linking the plantations and river landings to Augusta and the wider world. Used to sneak the Wanderer captives onto the Lamar Plantation Woodyard at dawn on December 14, 1858.

LAMAR PLANTATION WOODYARD: The plantation's landing on the Savannah River, where steamboats stopped to take on firewood and where people, goods and news passed between the plantation and the river.

SAVANNAH RIVER: The great river separating South Carolina from Georgia and a major route for steamboats, trade and travel between the inland plantations and the Atlantic coast.

HISTORICAL FIGURES MENTIONED IN THIS SECTION OF THE STORY:

PRESTON BROOKS: The South Carolina Congressman who, in 1856, brutally caned Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the United States Senate after Sumner delivered an antislavery speech.

SENATOR CHARLES SUMNER: The abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts whose condemnation of slavery and its supporters provoked Preston Brooks's violent attack upon him in the Senate chamber.

JOHN C. CALHOUN: The deceased South Carolina statesman and fierce defender of slavery and states' rights whose influence continued to shape Southern politics long after his death.

JAMES BUCHANAN: The Democratic candidate who defeated John C. Frémont in the presidential election of 1856 and became the fifteenth President of the United States.

JOHN C. FRÉMONT: The celebrated western explorer and first presidential candidate of the newly formed Republican Party, who ran in 1856 on a platform opposing the expansion of slavery.

JOHN BROWN: The militant abolitionist who fought proslavery forces in the Kansas Territory and believed

slavery could be destroyed only through armed resistance.

QUEEN VICTORIA: The reigning Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, whose name came to define the customs, culture and moral expectations of the age.